

## Faithful Citizenship

### Principles and Strategies to Serve the Common Good

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## Catholics and American Politics

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### Introduction

[1] Religion has always played an important role in American political life, as a factor in shaping popular understanding of citizenship, as a moral force shaping debates about important public issues, and sometimes as the basis of organized efforts to shape public policy. Catholics have shared that experience while they and their church have had their own distinctive role as participants, and sometimes as problems, in American political life.

### Republican Catholicism

[2] The few Catholics in the early republic were heavily invested in American politics. Centered on a highly successful but politically excluded planter community in Maryland, they actively supported the revolution and enthusiastically welcomed religious freedom and disestablishment. After two centuries of exclusion from English politics, America's Catholics could now participate in public life and practice their faith openly. Led by America's first bishop, John Carroll, Catholic leaders shaped a conservative style of Catholic politics marked by acknowledgment of civic duties, emphasis on the public interest, and care to avoid antagonizing the Protestant majority. At home in America, the Carrolls and many of their native born successors were sincere patriots always alert to the need to avoid even the appearance of being outsiders, foreigners, or "papists." Contending with anti-Catholicism at

home and the anti-republican zeal of revived Catholicism in Europe, they consistently affirmed religious liberty and church-state separation, and never favored the formation of clerically dominated Catholic political parties so common in Europe. Placing no religious barriers in the way of their people's political participation, Catholic leaders sought a secure and respected place for the church in American society.

### **From Republicans to Immigrants**

[3] This moderate, Republican style of Catholic politics was overcome by thousands of European Catholic immigrants who came to the country between 1820 and 1920. Irish and German Catholics made the Catholic Church America's largest denomination by the middle of the nineteenth century. Increasing numbers of Catholics aroused nativist movements, blending hostility to immigrants with longstanding anti-Catholicism. In the 1840s and 1850s local, state and national Native American parties tried to control education and limit immigrant political participation, leading immigrant leaders to make more assertive claims to their rights as Americans. These conflicts, often shaped in religious language, tended to unite Catholics, despite their ethnic diversity, and solidify their support for the Democratic Party, which often championed their cause. Archbishop John Hughes of New York defended his people against attacks, used the conflicts to strengthen Catholic loyalty, and tried unsuccessfully to persuade them to become more politically independent, throwing their support only to parties and politicians who would respect their interests.

### **Politics from the Bottom Up**

[4] Immigrant Catholics proved skillful in building networks of mutual support that found expression in voluntary associations, ethnic parishes, parochial schools and a bewildering array of social service institutions. Irish and Germans, then French Canadians, Poles, Italians and many eastern Europeans dotted the urban landscape with Catholic churches, all built by working class families. The same bottom-up, self-help approach informed immigrant politics as community leaders brokered relationships with elites and in some cases took control of urban party organizations. Machine politics meeting popular needs mirrored the self-interest organizing impulse behind ethnic societies and America's non-ideological trade unions. Such political realism – with group interests shaping public actions in America's political, religious and economic marketplaces – was at odds with the disinterested concern for the common good that informed republican Catholicism, and with the principled effort to carry Gospel mandates into the common life long associated with evangelical Protestants and later to appear among more Americanized Catholics.

[5] From the Civil War on, Catholics tended to support the Democratic Party in many urban areas, while voting patterns often reflected state and local conflicts over education, temperance and language. Yet these same urban Catholics were not attracted to the populist message of William Jennings Bryan, three time Democratic nominee for President, and that rural-urban, Catholic-evangelical Protestant split came to dominate the Party during the 1920s. Catholics also came into conflict with progressives whose educational and social reforms were sometimes aimed at ethnic groups and local political machines. Catholics tended to be supportive of reforms aimed at greater security for working people, but they were often conservative on civil liberties and suspicious of liberal proposals dealing with

education, the family and sexuality. During the New Deal, President Franklin Roosevelt overcame these divisions, in part by paying respect to the Catholic Church while supporting policies attractive to working class voters of all religions. From that point until 1972 Catholics remained a fairly reliable component of the “Roosevelt coalition” that enabled the Democratic Party to dominate national politics.

### **Political Legacy of Immigrant Catholicism**

[6] Three important things can be said about the political experience of immigrant Catholics: First, the Church placed no barriers in the way of full participation in political life. Indeed, as pastors worked to build religious and educational institutions to serve community needs, they often lent their support to independent non-denominational parties, unions and community organizations. Backed by papal encyclicals American church leaders backed unions, “bread and butter” reforms of wages, hours, and working conditions, and, later, social welfare legislation implemented through decentralized public-private partnerships in which church-related agencies could and did participate.

[7] Second, Catholics’ faith and practice gave legitimacy to immigrant and working class aspirations. Churches and schools built by the people were designed in part to preserve “folk memories” and defend communal values, but also to pursue new aspirations, especially for children. In the United States pastors and teachers restricted counter-cultural condemnations of modernity to personal, especially sexual, morality, but they not only affirmed efforts for economic and social mobility but they accompanied their people as they moved from urban neighborhoods to automobile suburbs, where the social cement of ethnicity and minority status no longer reinforced Catholic solidarity. Freedom, education, economic security and social status were real goals whose pursuit was assisted by parishes, schools and social networks. Their achievement was for many families an experience of liberation.

[8] Third, Catholic practice helped shape American working class politics, where concern for family values and respect for ethnic heritage were quite as important as economic interests. For the immigrant generations democratic politics turned on power, which in turn required organization, without which markets and those with the resources to dominate them would control the conditions of life. The legacy of that “Catholic realism” continues to be found in the congregation-based community organizing so strong in many urban and Latino communities.

### **From Cities to Suburbs**

[9] After World War II Catholics became steadily more independent, and more politically divided, in their voting, but older patterns remained surprisingly persistent. At least since the 1890s Catholics and their bishops were progressive on economic issues, conservative on cultural issues and divided on foreign policy. Similarly they combined affirmative participation in the politics of a democratic and religiously pluralist society, a republican approach like that of John Carroll, with promotion of their own distinctive interests, including moral interests, an interest group approach practiced by John Hughes. The republican approach required emphasis on shared responsibility as American citizens. The interest group model, grounded in the immigrant working class experience, also served as a

form of identity politics, allowing civic action which was clearly Catholic, clarifying boundaries in the pursuit of power and respect in the public square.

[10] The *republican* approach found its home in the aspiring Catholic middle class of the twentieth century. John Kennedy, the nation's first Catholic President, exemplified this approach in his famous Houston speech during the 1960 campaign. It was given theoretical force by the work of John Courtney Murray and official recognition in Vatican II's "Pastoral Constitution on the Church and the Modern World." Political participation is a civic responsibility, the common good is a genuine good, and the community of faith is a community of conscience. *Interest group* politics continued to find support in the experience of urban, ethnic, working class Catholics and in the concrete needs of the institutional church. Its staying power is associated with persistent bottom-up community building and the renewed concerns about the unity and integrity of the community of faith.

[11] The tension between citizenship and self-help, between shared responsibility, interest group participation and specifically Catholic concerns, long shaped the history of the American Catholic subculture. They exploded in the 1960s when the Vatican Council at last affirmed religious liberty and the separation of church and state. In dealing with public issues, the American church claimed now to have no political agenda of its own but to engage the public with a moral voice affirming human dignity, defending human rights, and seeking to build the unity of the human family. On that basis the bishops condemned racism and supported civil rights, offered a sharpening moral critique of the Vietnam war and the nuclear arms race, and persistently supported economic and social policies giving first priority to the poor. A series of impressive pastoral letters on controversial topics sought to affirm the duties of citizenship, focus on the demands of the common good, and speak for those without a voice.

### **Evangelical Catholicism**

[12] The events of the period also sparked another voice in American Catholic politics. Committed Catholics were often dissatisfied with the public-interest tone of the republican approach and the self-interest orientation of traditional working class politics. Some were convinced that racial injustice, endless war in Vietnam, nuclear weapons, and abortion, affirmed by the Supreme Court, all required a more principled response and evangelical witness. A Catholic peace movement took dramatic action against war and weapons, while a broad based pro-life movement challenged the country on abortion. This *evangelical* approach was a Catholic version of the social Gospel, and it directly challenged the standard political approaches that had dominated American Catholic history.

[13] The evangelical style takes a stand on issues regarded as "fundamental" to the community's integrity and requires a discipleship that places Christian commitments beyond the claims of citizenship and group self-interest. The evangelical style involves a direct move from religious judgment to political prescription; it is the sharp end of identity politics, demanding discipleship, devaluing citizenship, and practicing, at least in language, what Max Weber called a "politics of ultimate ends." It challenges the domination of republican categories and calls into question the acceptability of interest group negotiations. Yet, grounded in the pastoral experience of the now Americanized church, it seems likely to persist as a powerful voice in American Catholic politics.

### Toward “Faithful Citizenship”

[14] Three developments since the 1980s have dominated Catholic politics. First, the decline of unreflective Catholic Americanism and the rise to dominance of sub-cultural and counter-cultural language and strategies associated with the right-to-life movement has drained the republican approach of its strength and support. John Coleman and others have pointed out that, for a pluralist democracy to work, its citizens must love it. The common good must be a genuine good. Its public square is not naked but a common achievement allowing all to flourish. In the absence of Americanism, the bilingualism required by pluralist democracy becomes simply indecisive in the whiplash between civil religion and supposed Christian/Catholic discipleship. It seems to involve a surrender to the secularism which is the dominant concern of the Papacy at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

[15] Second, the abortion issue, along with related life questions, has strengthened the position of those concerned primarily about the integrity of the American church. The growing coalition around a new seamless garment of “non-negotiable” issues includes key figures in the Vatican, evangelical Catholics of the left, and pro-life Catholics inclined to conservative positions on domestic and foreign policy questions. For those who love their church, counter-cultural advocacy on the life questions becomes an expression of commitment and evidence of integrity.

[16] Third, the decline of moderate republican Catholicism associated in recent years with Cardinal Joseph Bernardin and the appearance of serious divisions among American Catholics should not obscure the persistence of the republican approach. Catholic teachings on war, poverty, capital punishment, international development, even peace that were once considered “liberal” or “progressive” are now incorporated into the Catechism of the Catholic church. In more concrete terms, most Catholics (by polls), and certainly most bishops, agree with the whole span of issues mentioned in the Bishops message on “Faithful Citizenship” in 2004 and 2007.

### 2004: The Quest for the Catholic Vote

[17] During the 2004 Presidential campaign the Catholic question was back, but in an entirely new form. For John F. Kennedy in 1960 the Catholic question was about overcoming America’s deeply rooted suspicion of Catholics. In 2004 the question for Presidential nominee Senator John F. Kerry was not whether he would be accepted by non-Catholics but whether he would be denied communion by a Catholic priest. In 2003 the Vatican had encouraged bishops to call pro-choice Catholics to account and one bishop, James Burke of La Crosse, Wisconsin, denied communion to a prominent Catholic politician, Congressman David Obey, drawing intense media interest. Democrats never figured out how to deal with their Catholic question. The Republican Party, in contrast, made an unprecedented bid for Catholic votes. Advised by Catholic conservatives, President Bush mastered Catholic friendly “culture of life” and “compassionate conservative” language. The GOP also built its Catholic (and other religious outreach) strategies around evidence that Christians who went to church regularly were apt to vote Republican. The party developed a superb organization for reaching Catholic voters in key states while independent Catholic groups assisted, blanketing the country with the message that “non-

negotiable” issues of human life should define Catholic political responsibility. The bishops issued their usual nonpartisan voter guide, in which they gave clear priority to abortion amid a broad range of peace and social justice issues that also merited consideration. Unfortunately, given the heat of partisan conflict, the American church’s silence on the Iraq war, and a remarkable decline in public advocacy of the consistent ethic of life, the bishops’ texts seemed indecisive, and were widely ignored.

### **Catholic Political Traditions**

[18] What can be said, therefore, about Catholic approaches to politics in the United States? The three approaches will surely persist. The interest group model was well known by the American founders, and it encompasses economic, sectional, ethnic, ideological and religious groups and multiple institutional interests. Catholics have been good at it and value its practical use and realistic consideration of effectiveness. Similarly, the evangelical model – best known for its ever renewed question, “What would Jesus do?” – has fueled reform movements throughout American history. Its advocates value principle and witness over self-interest and compromise: discipleship trumps citizenship. The republican model persists because even those who speak for self-interest must pay homage to the public interest, and faithful citizens must make their case in civic terms if they are to persuade those who do not share their faith.

[19] The question that faces Catholic advocates of faithful citizenship is not the integrity of the church but the seriousness of politics. Is the common good a genuine good and is the quality of public life and public policy genuinely a matter of religious significance as well as shared responsibility. If not, the moderate reliance on conscience, conversation, and compromise necessarily seem wishy-washy. The Catholic may be a citizen of two cities, to use a well worn phrase, but often it seems that one of those cities, the church, is more important than the other – the civil community. Yet war, violence, grinding poverty, racial and religious repression, are important, important enough to compel both commitment and engagement. The church today values participation, but participation means difference, conflict and the need for restraint, dialogue, compromise, for a republican willingness to share responsibility with others while remaining faithful to one’s own religious tradition.

### **Thinking About American Catholic Political Responsibilities**

[20] So I leave with ten suggestions for a Catholic approach to American politics.

1. The common good is a genuine good.
2. Citizenship is always in tension with discipleship, but democracy requires an effort to define citizenship as discipleship.
3. American Catholic history is not a story of “secularization” but a story of liberation.
4. Liberation brings shared responsibility: the first thing for Catholics to say about American society is that it is their own.
5. Love turns responsibility into solidarity.
6. Solidarity, being at one with “the joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties of the men and women of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted” (*The*

- Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, Vatican II) informs Catholic justice seeking and peace making.
7. The journey from margins to mainstreams, anywhere, moves Christian discipleship from resistance to responsibility.
  8. Catholic thinking about politics requires a preferential but not exclusive option for the laity.
  9. It also suggests the priority of pastoral ministry, and a stance of accompaniment for ministry.
  10. Responsible and faithful citizenship will require love for the world, and thus a good word for Catholic Americanism.

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