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Faith in Politics

Teagan Sebba

The United States has one of the lowest voter turnout rates in comparison to all other countries that directly elect their representatives. 58.2 percent of eligible voters turned out to vote for the 2012 presidential election and while it is important to analyze why almost half of the American population did not vote, it is equally important to discover the motivations driving the half that did vote.¹ The United States is unique in all aspects of demographics, ranging from race, economic status, age and religion. The United States is seen as a mix of varying cultures and religions, and for many, religion is a core value that impacts their daily life and the decisions that they make. Due to this, it can be argued that religious values, specifically Catholicism, provides a basis for increased voter turnout and a question arises from this as to what methods of Catholic advocacy can be used to best help increase turnout.

Currently in the United States, 20 percent of citizens identify as Catholic.² From that 20 percent, 40 percent then self-report that they attend Mass or church services on a weekly basis. This statistic is important to understand the Catholic electorate because it has been proven that those who regularly attend some sort of civic event, church services included, are more likely to be involved in the political process and vote in elections. Political scientists Fowler and Dawes studied a relationship between genetics and civic engagement, and while their study was not entirely significant, their research found that even though genes may not directly predict turnout, religious attendance does. Their study reinforced that “religious groups might stimulate political

¹ McDonald, Michael P. "Turnout in the 2012 Presidential Election." The Huffington Post. Accessed December 2, 2015. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-p-mcdonald/turnout-in-the-2012-presi_b_2663122.html.

² Ghose, By Tia. "By the Numbers: Who Are Catholics in America?" LiveScience. 2015. Accessed December 2, 2015. <http://www.livescience.com/52236-who-are-american-catholics.html>.

activity directly or as byproducts of their tendency to increase civic skills, political interest, feelings of efficacy, access to political information, and a sense of civic duty.”³

The studies show that individuals who attend church regularly are active in their communities and then are more inclined to take the time to understand current elections and get out to vote. In numbers, that amounts to a 15.1 percent increase in likeliness to vote for individuals who attend weekly church services versus individuals who do not.⁴ In a population where only a little more than half of Americans cast their ballot, this 15 percent could potentially make a huge difference. History has shown that it has through the election of John F. Kennedy in 1960.

However, current studies show that the Catholic community has become unsure of its own identity and now more than ever it is not the title of “being Catholic” that matters, but the actionable items such as understanding biblical texts and attending church events.⁵ Catholics that voted for Kennedy in 1960 could possibly not be as active in current political elections because they are not as active in their own religious sphere. This is evidenced in Kerry’s campaign for President in 2004. John Kerry is a practicing Catholic also, but the Catholic vote that turned out for Kennedy did not come through for Kerry. “What happened between 1960 and 2004 was that religion began to loom larger in U.S. politics -- not religious affiliation, whether

³ Fowler, James H., and Christopher T. Dawes. "Two Genes Predict Voter Turnout - James H. Fowler." Accessed December 2, 2015. http://jhffowler.ucsd.edu/two_genes_predict_voter_turnout.pdf.

⁴ "WikiSummary, the Social Science Summary Database." Summary of Rosenstone and Hansen: Mobilization, Participation, and American Democracy. Accessed December 2, 2015. http://wikisum.com/w/Rosenstone_and_Hansen:_Mobilization,_participation,_and_American_democracy.

⁵ McCarthy, Sarah. "CatholicPhilly.com: News from the Archdiocese of Philadelphia." Many Factors Seen Affecting Increasingly Lower Voter Turnout in U.S. Accessed December 2, 2015. <http://catholicphilly.com/2014/11/news/national-news/many-factors-seen-affecting-increasingly-lower-voter-turnout-in-u-s/>.

you are a Protestant or Catholic, but religious observance, whether you are a regular or an occasional churchgoer.”⁶

Taking this data further, one can analyze the current importance of the impact when Catholics are actively engaged in their religious community, they are then more likely to be actively engaged in a political community as well. However, in 2015, it is necessary to synthesize this statement alongside Rosenthal’s original findings one step beyond simple religious attendance. In a Catholic News Service study addressing the factors affecting low voter turnout, the concept of “religiosity” is addressed.⁷ Americans no longer live in a period where they identify as simply “Catholic,” “Jewish” “white,” or “black,” but take pride in identifying various different backgrounds that make up who they are. Birdsong writes that an individual’s church attendance can no longer be the strongest indicator but “‘their religiosity -- so how much they believe in the Bible, if they believe it’s ... the literal word of God (and) how often they attend (church)’ is a stronger signifier.”

From a modern day standpoint of the Church, not just having the numbers but engaging and mobilizing Catholics is crucial to supporting their own political agenda. Due to this, Catholic organizations have made the connection between a moral duty and a civic duty. By creating a relationship between Catholic engagement and civic engagement, elections can be swayed and public policy can be impacted. To perfect the Catholic connection between being a good Catholic and voting along a Catholic value system is as increasingly powerful opportunity for the Catholic Church to greatly influence the political sphere.

⁶ Schneider, Bill. CNN Political Ticker RSS. Accessed December 2, 2015.
<http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/category/bill-schneider/>.

⁷ McCarthy, Sarah. "CatholicPhilly.com: News from the Archdiocese of Philadelphia." Many Factors Seen Affecting Increasingly Lower Voter Turnout in U.S. Accessed December 2, 2015.
<http://catholicphilly.com/2014/11/news/national-news/many-factors-seen-affecting-increasingly-lower-voter-turnout-in-u-s/>.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) is attempting to teach American Catholics how to mobilize themselves and others. The USCCB recently released an online piece entitled “Voter Education and Voter Registration.”⁸ The article outlines how to educate one’s self as a Catholic voter and how to educate others. The piece details how to apply Catholic principles to modern day issues and teach others to “use their faith as their guide for political choices.” An entire section is dedicated to applying Scripture in order to present a foundation of values to analyze political candidates and current issues.

The USCCB speaks on the importance of being a Catholic who votes by promoting ways to help individuals become educated and active, but the organization also warns on what happens when Catholics do not mobilize. The same way in which the USCCB believes that being engaged in the political process helps to promote Catholic values, they also advocate that inaction is effectively action in the other direction. They strive to connect the act of not voting with giving up an individual’s voice to an opposing side. The USCCB states on their website that to “vote, and the choice is yours. Don't vote, and the choice is theirs.” This connection with the choice becoming “theirs,” is important because it identifies an enemy to Catholic values and creates an increased urgency for Catholics to become engaged.

Church teachings, interest groups, and connections between moral obligations and civic obligations all contribute to providing strong ties to political involvement and voter turnout. Perhaps an environment that combines church teachings while also promoting critical thinking and openness to other opinions could provide the best form of increased civic engagement for the purpose of promoting Catholic ideals. An environment that combines all of these things is a diverse college campus of today.

⁸ "United States Conference of Catholic Bishops." United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Accessed December 2, 2015. <http://www.usccb.org/>.

In a self-produced survey study, 100 individuals were recruited through means of social media interaction and voluntary participation. The aim of the study was to venture off of the basis of Catholic groups mobilizing and creating links between moral and civic obligations, and to understand if attending a Catholic university has an impact on an individuals' civic engagement. In actuality, the research set out to prove that the majority of students who attended a Catholic university reported that religion, faith or morals was their motivator to get out and vote. However, the results proved that was not the exact case.

The survey was designed to be anonymous to help prevent any sort of bias and was only four questions in length to try to combat fatigue. 62 percent of respondents reported to be currently attending a Catholic institute and an additional eight percent said to have attended one in the past. For research purposes it is important to note that this study does leave a 30 percent margin of respondents who answered questions regarding faith and civic engagement without having attended a Catholic school. However, the survey still attempts to obtain information about religious faith by asking follow up questions regarding a candidate's faith.

With 20 percent of survey respondents having stated that a candidate's faith does impact their decision to vote, the previous statistics are even more relevant in today's political landscape and even channel historic Presidential elections in American history where minority groups were able to band behind a single representative figure. While this information is important in order to understand the "who" of Catholic students vote, it does not answer the "why." Survey respondents said that a candidate's faith could impact who they choose to vote for, but did not respond saying that their own faith impacts their decision to vote.

From the data collected that presented the original results of 20 percent of respondents voting depending on some influence from a candidate's declared faith, only one person who

participated in the survey stated that religion itself motivated them to vote. That is one percent out of a 62 percentage of Catholic school attending respondents. On the reverse side of this statistic, 78.1 percent reported back that instead of religion, a “civic duty” motivated them to vote. It is important while analyzing these results to keep in mind that a mixture of self-reporting and a possible eagerness to please the researcher could have combined to create a response bias. The survey was presented as a “Voter Turnout Survey” and respondents could have believed that the answer of “civic duty” was the more “desired” response.

Despite the overwhelming majority of “civic duty” answers, the open ended “other” option cultivated some interesting responses as well. A slight majority of individuals reported in their own words a variation of responses that described an analysis of a specific candidate’s platform or the current political issues at hand. A specific response stated that the respondent was motivated to vote because they want to “make a difference and try my best to make sure someone who has the same values and views as me gets elected.” The emphasis of shared values and morals is illustrated in this specific response also, even though the respondent did not specifically answer that as their main motivator.

Other responses to “What Motivates You To Vote” included ad hominem attacks, further proving a common fact of modern day voter apathy. In order for the surveyed individual to take the time to answer the political questions in a non-serious way, shows a real disconnect between that individual and the importance of voting. Other free responses following a trend of repeated “civic right,” “discontent with Republicans,” and finally a flattering “Teagan Sebba.”

While the data is substantial in numbers and responses, synthesizing this data possibly only leave more questions. The connection between Catholic Universities and a moral obligation to vote is not evident in the survey. However, this could be part of a hypothesized bigger

picture. It could be that the connection between Catholic Universities and the moral obligation to vote is not witnessed in the survey, because it is not even witnessed among students themselves.

Seton Hall University is a private Catholic University with the strong majority of its students being of Catholic faith. For the rest of the population of all other backgrounds, both religious and non-religious, students are subjected to the equivalent of three “CORE” classes that focus on religious studies and applying them to literary works and daily life. These classes are required for Seton Hall students to pass in order for them to graduate, and every student is in the same boat with the readings, the course requirements and the class projects. The routine of the “CORE” classes has worked its way into everyday Seton Hall life, and subsequently worked into the typical student’s mindset.

While addressing the topic of predominant Catholicism at the University, the admissions office of Seton Hall addresses that “while about 70 percent of [Seton Hall University] students are Catholic, the University fosters universal values such as service, integrity and compassion and creates an environment that encourages dialogue, acceptance and respect.”⁹ These values of service, compassion and respect still remain foundational Catholic values, whether the students who develop them at Seton Hall realize it or not. This differentiation between exhibiting Catholic values while aware or not aware is important. It can be argued that while being exposed to repeated ideals of service, integrity and community, students develop a value for civic engagement without realizing that a large part of the credit could be derived from the fact that they attend a Catholic university.

⁹ "Undergraduate Admissions - Seton Hall University, New Jersey." Undergraduate Admissions - Seton Hall University, New Jersey. Accessed December 2, 2015. <http://admissions.shu.edu/>.

The Department of Student Life at Seton Hall pays for a yearly subscription to the services of TurboVote at the request of the Student Government Association. TurboVote is a non-profit organization dedicated to increasing civic involvement of youth voters through the means of simplifying the process of voter registration.¹⁰ Seton Hall's contract with the company proves an interest in the political process and in students getting their chance to vote. More importantly, the TurboVote data shows a consistent success among private Catholic universities. Among the top 50 university ranking on TurboVote's voter registration "Leaderboard" is Seton Hall University alongside other private, Catholic universities that promote liberal thinking and diversity.

While Seton Hall does outperform other universities when it comes to voter engagement, in the self-conducted survey from earlier, the data received showed that less than half of respondents reported that they "always vote." As addressed earlier as well, this could possibly be another case of response bias in order to please the surveyor or desired survey response. However, this number is relatively reflective of the United States population, especially when analyzing the younger generation of voters, and the predominant majority of the group surveyed. Due to the reach of the Seton Hall University social media sites that the survey was shared on, it is likely that the respondents were mostly 18-24.

This data stems from many different aspects and draws different, even contradicting conclusions. The original question set out to analyze whether attending a Catholic University helps to increase voter turnout, and in a way, it definitely can. Proven by TurboVote and their work with Seton Hall, Vassar, James Madison, Brown and DePaul, voter registration is significantly high among Catholic Universities. However, a disconnect remains between the number of those registered and the percent that then acts and votes. Perhaps correlates to the

¹⁰ "TurboVote." TurboVote. Accessed December 2, 2015. <https://turbovote.org/>.

findings earlier that illustrated a distance between Catholics who self-represent as religious, but then exhibit varied levels of “religiosity.” The connection, however, is a Catholic University community that provided or encouraged civic processes.

Despite this, from a political analytic viewpoint, the Catholic Church could do more to mobilize and influence the Catholic electorate, specifically the generation of younger Catholics. The continued use of Catholic teachings and interest groups working to connect the relationship between fighting for the poor, sick and vulnerable and then voting for those values and holding elected officials to those values could secure a huge political victory for the Catholic Church. Additionally, in a political climate that houses so many Catholic candidates, the chances for a Catholic impact are that much greater.

As always, the underlying power to greatly impact the United States lies in the hands of the individual voter. As evidenced by high voter registration numbers among Catholic Universities, but then a similar percentage of active voters as that representative of the whole nation, the Catholic Church and Catholic universities can only do so much. The power to influence the American political process remains in the hands of Americans themselves, and today, there is potential for that power to lie specifically in the hands of American Catholics.

