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A Catholic Shift to Obama?

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By E. J. Dionne Jr.

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It has become commonplace in American politics: Certain Roman Catholic bishops declare that the faithful should cast their ballots on the basis of a limited number of "nonnegotiable issues," notably opposition to abortion. Conservative Catholics cheer, more liberal Catholics howl. And that is usually the end of the story.

Not this year. Catholics, who are quintessential swing voters and gave narrow but crucial support to [President Bush](#) in 2004, are drifting toward [Barack Obama](#). And this time, some church leaders are suggesting that single-issue voting is by no means a Catholic commandment.

In an interview yesterday, Gabino Zavala, an auxiliary bishop in the [Los Angeles Archdiocese](#), said his fellow bishops have long insisted that "we're not a one-issue church," a view reflected in their 2007 document "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship."

"But that's not always what comes out," says Zavala, who is also bishop-president of the Catholic peace group Pax Christi USA. "What I believe, and what the church teaches, is that one abortion is too many. That's why I believe abortion is so important. But in light of this, there are many other issues we need to bring up, other issues we should consider, other issues that touch the reality of our lives."

Those issues, Bishop Zavala said, include racism, torture, genocide, immigration, war and the impact of the economic downturn "on the most vulnerable among us, the elderly, poor children, single mothers."

"We know that neither of the political parties supports everything the church teaches," he added. "We are not going to create a culture of life if we don't talk about all the life issues, beginning with abortion but including all of them."

Zavala was careful to say that he did not want to take issue with any of his fellow bishops. But his view contrasts with that of others in the hierarchy.

This month, for example, Bishop Joseph F. Martino of the Scranton (Pa.) Diocese [issued a letter](#) warning that "being 'right' on taxes, education, health care, immigration and the economy fails to make up for the error of disregarding the value of a human life." He added: "It is a tragic irony that 'pro-choice' candidates have come to support homicide -- the gravest injustice a society can tolerate -- in

the name of 'social justice.' "

Bishop Zavala's desire to speak out with an alternative view is a sign of how much has changed in four years: Progressive Catholics are now as organized as conservative Catholics were in 2004. At Web sites such as <http://ProLifeProObama.com>, they are arguing that the abortion question does not trump all other concerns.

The impact of the new Catholic politics could be substantial. Catholics are often a decisive electoral group partly because church membership ranges from upscale to working-class whites, a large group of Latinos, and a significant number of African Americans.

Catholics typically make up about a quarter of the electorate, and they are strategically located. White (non-Latino) Catholics are important in such swing states as Ohio, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, while Latino Catholics make up a notable share of the populations of New Mexico, Colorado, Nevada and Florida.

Polls have varied in measuring the Catholic shift toward the Democrats, but Obama seems to be running ahead of [John Kerry](#)'s performance in 2004. According to the network [exit polls](#), Bush carried 52 percent of the Catholic vote to 47 percent for Kerry. By contrast, a mid-October [Pew Research Center](#) survey showed Obama leading [John McCain](#) among Catholics by 55 percent to 35 percent.

Post surveys over the same period have found more modest Catholic gains for Obama. A [Post tracking poll](#) released yesterday showed Obama and McCain splitting the Catholic vote at 48 percent each. Obama's Catholic share probably stands somewhere between the Pew and Post numbers. But even a split among Catholics could mark a sufficient improvement over Kerry's performance to tip key states the Democrat's way.

In many respects, Catholics simply reflect the country as a whole in moving toward the Democrats because of frustrations with the economy and the Bush years. But the Catholic debate entails a very particular argument over what counts as a commitment to life. To an unexpected degree, this election could hang on the struggle of Catholic voters with their priorities and their consciences.

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