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Issue Brief

### *Catholicism and the Latino Vote*

#### **Key Words:**

Latinos, Voting Behavior, Catholicism, Republican Party Values, Democratic Party, Religiosity

#### **Description:**

This brief focuses on Latinos and how Catholicism might influence their voting behavior. A large majority of Latinos are Catholic and a key indicator of how they cast their ballots is how closely a candidate or policy reflects traditional Catholic values. The Republican Party shares so many of these values which makes it attractive to Latinos, however, because of a recent absence of strong “Catholic rhetoric” in the Republican Party, not only are more Latinos joining the Democrats, they are becoming less religious.

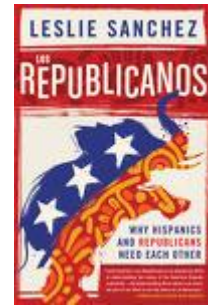
#### **Key Points**

- About 70 percent of Latinos are Catholic; however, this number is shrinking.
- Hispanics share many of the values of the Republican Party.
- In 2004 the Republican presidential candidate received 41 percent of the Latino vote whereas in 2008 the party candidate only received 31 percent.
- Approximately 57% of Hispanic registered voters now say they are leaning to the Democratic Party or they are indeed Democrats while only 23% align themselves with the Republican Party.
- Religious influence on Latino voters has proved highly significant when concerning policies that reflect traditional church values.

Latinos, who are for the most part deeply religious people, are estimated to be made up of 70% Roman Catholics. They are increasingly displaying more influence in the electorate and it seems likely that in a few decades the Latino population will reach approximately 25% of the U.S. population. Surveys often reveal that they oppose abortion and attend church more regularly than the overall population. Latinos are also considered the most family-oriented group. In 2006 a Gallop Poll revealed 64 % of

Latinos believe that couples should marry if they plan on living together. This traditional family ideology forms the base of the Catholic Religion and it is also what made the Republican Party so attractive for Latinos.

Traditional family values are at the core of the Republican Party. Leslie Sanchez, president of the Republican communications research firm the Impacto Group asserted, “There is no doubt Hispanics share many of the values of the Republican Party.” Historical voting results affirm the potential of Latinos aligning themselves with Republicans who share similar values. Ronald Reagan garnered the largest percentage of the Hispanic vote of any national Republican candidate because of his strong emphasis on family values. More recently, the most significant Bush gains in the 2004 presidential election were in the Hispanic communities where 41 percent of Hispanics voted to re-elect the President because of his conservative position. Bush was also the first sitting president to attend a papal funeral. Emphasizing the importance of this type of rhetoric, it is even possible that in 2008 the Republican Party sought Sarah Palin because McCain was uncomfortable articulating a pro-life, pro-family view.



Although the Republican Party has previously demonstrated strong Latino support, the right Democratic candidate has the potential to swing the Catholic vote, thus swinging Latinos. John F. Kennedy, a devout Catholic, won a tight election in 1960 because he garnered 83 percent of all Catholic votes cast. These election results reflect how Catholicism can affect voting behavior.

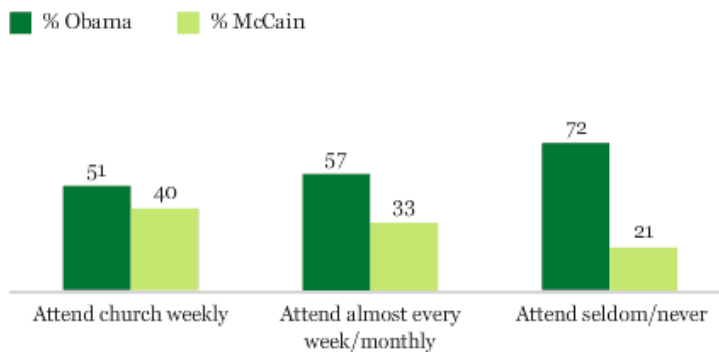
The Church cannot endorse a particular candidate directly; however, it can remind believers to consider the importance of higher values when deciding their vote. For these reasons we see websites sprouting up like [www.votocatolico.com](http://www.votocatolico.com) which features videos and prayer material for Latinos who live in this country and are registered to vote. The Catholic Church uses its many resources to affect the voting for candidates and policies that share its same ideology.

Religious influence on Latino voters has proved highly significant when deciding on policies that reflect these values. A clear example of this impact was revealed recently in California where the state considered proposition 8; a law that states that a marriage is only valid if it is between a man and a woman. A breakdown of the vote revealed that those Latinos who attended church services weekly overwhelmingly voted for the measure, while those who rarely or never attended services voted against it. In a state that clearly has a majority of conservative Latinos, the measure passed. It seems that high or

low levels of religious orthodoxy will have a strong impact on voting behavior.

In another example religiosity was studied before the 2008 presidential election. Latino voters who attended religious services weekly supported Obama, a Democrat, by a 51% to 40% margin, compared to a 57% to 33% margin among those who attend nearly every week or monthly, and an overwhelming 72% to 21% margin among those who seldom or never attend church. This study revealed that those Hispanic voters that were most religious supported the Republican McCain, while those who were least religious were likely to vote for Obama. Unfortunately, because McCain could not build a Catholic Latino following like his predecessors, in the end the Latino vote was 67% for Obama, while only 31% for John McCain. This outcome illustrates the Republicans losing the Catholic Latino.

*Hispanic Support for Presidential Candidates, by Religiosity*



Gallup Poll Daily tracking, Oct. 1-19, 2008

GALLUP POLL

Not only are Republicans losing, the Church is losing. In 2007 an article in the NY Times suggested that the Latino population was slowly being secularized. The Roman Catholic Church was experiencing the greatest exodus and while some sought new religious identities; many just left the Church altogether. Perhaps, the absence of traditionally valued rhetoric in candidates like John McCain has contributed to this exodus.

In a recent Pew study data suggests that approximately 57% of Hispanic registered voters now say they are leaning to the Democratic Party or they are indeed Democrats while only 23% align themselves with the Republican Party. It seems quite possible that because the Republican Party could not effectively express its “Catholic rhetoric” on a national level we are seeing simultaneous shifts in religiosity as well as party affiliation.

## **General references**

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## **Websites**

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[polltrack.com](http://polltrack.com)

[hispanicprwire.com](http://hispanicprwire.com)

[pewhispanic.org](http://pewhispanic.org)

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