

GOP, Catholics are split on immigration reform

St. Louis Post-Dispatch (Missouri)

April 23, 2006 Sunday, FIRST EDITION

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Section: NEWS; Pg. A2

Length: 675 words

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Dateline: NEW YORK

Body

The national **immigration** debate is muddying Republican relations with Roman **Catholics** -- coveted swing voters who comprise about one-quarter of the electorate.

While **Catholic** bishops and many Republican politicians share opposition to abortion, they're often **split** over the specifics of **immigration reform**. Church leaders are challenging -- and in some cases even vowing to defy -- the tougher enforcement proposals by **GOP** lawmakers.

The issue highlights the roadblocks that the **Catholic** worldview sets up for Republicans and Democrats. **Catholics** are generally conservative on personal issues such as marriage, but tend to be liberal on social justice problems, limiting the appeal of both major parties and leaving **Catholics** "politically homeless," said the Rev. James L. Heft, president of the Institute of Advanced **Catholic** Studies at the University of Southern California.

"I'd like to see more pro-life Democrats," Heft said, "and social justice Republicans."

Immigration is not the first issue to **split GOP** and **Catholic** leaders.

Pope John Paul II opposed the U.S.-led war on Iraq and the death penalty, for example. But these latest differences have emerged only months before much of the Republican-controlled Congress is up for re-election, and when the **GOP** and **Catholics** had seemed closer than ever.

"Right now, a higher proportion of **Catholic** voters (than in the past) would identify with the Republican Party, or some of the themes that the Republican candidates have been using," said David Leege, a professor emeritus at the University of Notre Dame and an expert on **Catholics** and politics.

Shifting loyalties

Catholics, once solidly Democratic, have been moving toward the Republican Party for the last 25 years or so. When struggling **Catholics** established themselves financially, they started voting less according to religious ties and more according to economic interests. The Democrats' embrace of abortion rights also drew them to **GOP** candidates.

President George W. Bush, a Methodist, won the 2004 **Catholic** vote 52 percent to 47 percent over Democratic nominee John Kerry, who is **Catholic**. Leading up to the election, bishops had warned **Catholic** lawmakers they risked "cooperating in evil" if they voted for candidates supporting abortion rights. Church leaders insisted their position was nonpartisan, yet the timing of their statements was clearly a boon to Republicans because Kerry backs abortion rights.

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But now, many of these same bishops are accusing **GOP** lawmakers of lacking compassion for illegal migrants. St. Louis Archbishop Raymond Burke, who said in 2004 he would refuse to give Holy Communion to Kerry, was among many church leaders who organized recent rallies in favor of giving undocumented workers a chance at citizenship. Burke noted that American **Catholics** were immigrants themselves.

'A moral obligation'

Rep. James Sensenbrenner, a Republican from Wisconsin, galvanized **Catholic** opposition by sponsoring legislation that the House passed in December that would make it a felony to be in the country illegally and a crime to help illegal immigrants.

Los Angeles Cardinal Roger Mahony said his priests would disobey such a law. Successive popes, including John Paul II, have stressed that nations with the resources to accommodate people fleeing persecution or economic hardship have a moral obligation to do so -- regardless of legal status. About 30 percent of the nearly 65 million U.S. **Catholics** are Hispanic, and the church has an extensive social service network for migrants.

Catholics in AP-Ipsos polling were more likely than Protestants and white evangelicals to support allowing immigrants to be temporary workers and to oppose making it a serious crime to be in this country without documentation.

Leonard Leo, the Republican National Committee's co-chairman for **Catholic** outreach, called Mahony's remarks overly harsh and argued that Bush "has done a very good job of describing where the Republican Party ought to be on the issue and I think that his vision is very consistent with where a lot of **Catholics** are."

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: **CATHOLICS** & CATHOLICISM (95%); CHRISTIANS & CHRISTIANITY (93%); US REPUBLICAN PARTY (92%); RELIGION (92%); CLERGY & RELIGIOUS VOCATIONS (91%); POLITICAL PARTIES (90%); VOTERS & VOTING (90%); US DEMOCRATIC PARTY (90%); **IMMIGRATION** (89%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (89%); SOCIAL JUSTICE (89%); ABORTION (89%); POLITICS (89%); US CONGRESS (89%); ABORTION LAWS (89%); POLITICAL CANDIDATES (89%); CITIZENSHIP (78%); ELECTIONS (78%); MIGRATION ISSUES (78%); CONSERVATISM (78%); CAMPAIGNS & ELECTIONS (78%); LIBERALISM (78%); **IMMIGRATION** LAW (78%); PROTESTANTS & PROTESTANTISM (77%); **CATHOLIC** POPES (73%); FOREIGN LABOR (73%); RESEARCH INSTITUTES (69%); CAPITAL PUNISHMENT (69%); COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS (68%); IRAQ WAR (67%); FELONIES (50%)

Organization: UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA (56%)

Industry: ABORTION LAWS (89%); COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS (68%)

Person: JOHN KERRY (79%); F JAMES SENSENBRENNER JR (58%)

Geographic: CALIFORNIA, USA (79%); UNITED STATES (93%); IRAQ (79%)

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Load-Date: April 23, 2006

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