

The View from Mainstream America:  
The Catholic Voter in Summer 2004

Executive Summary

A National Opinion Survey of  
Likely Catholic Voters

Conducted for  
Catholics for a Free Choice

July 2004

## Introduction

Over the past three decades, the attitudes of Catholic voters across the United States have been a reliable indicator of the attitudes and preferences of the nation as a whole concerning politics in presidential elections. From 1972 through 2000, Catholic voters as a voting group have swung from one party to another to support the candidate who received the most votes nationally.

As one quarter of the electorate, American Catholics represent more than an important voting group. They consistently present us with a snapshot of mainstream American public opinion. That was true when Catholics for a Free Choice (CFFC) asked Belden Russonello & Stewart (BRS) in October 2000 to conduct a national survey of Catholic voters. It remains true in July 2004, as we report the results of BRS' 2004 survey of Catholic voters, again conducted for Catholics for a Free Choice.

This year's survey investigates many topics, including Catholic voter attitudes toward the war in Iraq, domestic issues that matter to voters, presidential preference, social issues such as abortion, stem cell research, and marriage of same-sex couples, as well as what these voters think about Catholic bishops' involvement in political issues. Some questions track attitudes from our 2000 survey.

The 2004 survey, conducted from June 2 through 11 among 2,239 Catholics who are likely voters, includes an oversample of Hispanics (366 total Hispanics). The survey has a margin of sampling error for the entire survey of plus or minus 2.1 percentage points at the 95% level of confidence. The margin of error for results of the Hispanic subsample is plus or minus 5.2 percentage points. Knowledge Networks carried out the survey's sampling and interviewing using the random digit dial method to create a sample that then administers the questionnaire online.

## Summary Analysis

The Catholics for Free Choice 2004 Catholic Voter Survey reveals a Catholic electorate in America that is more complex than many observers have noted and, at the same time, retains its special place as a key swing voting block and an indicator of presidential preference for the entire nation.

The Catholic vote is defined by special characteristics:

- The Catholic vote is more Hispanic (15%) and less African American (two percent) than the entire electorate: four percent of the national electorate is Hispanic and 10% are African American.<sup>1</sup>
- The Catholics vote is more urban, more northeastern, and less southern, and it is somewhat more identified with the Democratic Party than is the rest of the country. Thirty-six percent of Catholics are Democrats, compared to 31% of the nation.<sup>2</sup>
- It is more a cultural voting group than a religious one. Catholics are making their political choices based on a candidate's position on the war in Iraq, terrorism, and family security issues such as jobs and health care. As a group, they mirror the nation's generally prochoice position on abortion and support for stem cell research and the death penalty. They are not taking their political cues from the Catholic bishops.

Catholics represent a quarter of the national vote and for the last three decades their overall preference has changed several times between the Democratic and Republican candidate for president. But as Catholic voters have swung, so has the nation. Candidates who win the popular vote win the Catholic vote. They are an extremely important group to watch carefully.

Five broad points stand out from the Catholic Voter Survey of 2004.

**1. Catholic voter preference in the presidential election is evenly divided, and resolving the situation in Iraq drives the Catholic vote.**

- Six months before the presidential election in November 2004, the presidential race is dead even among likely Catholic voters: 40% for

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<sup>1</sup> Numbers for the electorate taken from exit polling by VNS 2000.

<sup>2</sup> ABC News Poll; June 3, 2003.

President George W. Bush, 40% for Senator John Kerry, 2% for Ralph Nader, and 18% undecided.

- The race is even among Catholic voters in a block of key swing states: Florida, Pennsylvania, Arizona, Arkansas, Iowa, Michigan, Ohio, Minnesota, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Wisconsin, Oregon, Tennessee, and Washington.

At this point, the best predictor in determining Catholic voting intentions is level of confidence in President Bush's ability to resolve the conflict in Iraq.

As the US hands back governing power to Iraq, Catholic voters are divided but lean more toward keeping US troops "in Iraq as long as necessary to establish democracy and stability" (54%) than toward "bringing the troops home within six months, even if democracy and stability are not established" (45%).

Similarly, Catholics are divided over whether President Bush is up to the job of resolving the situation in Iraq. Catholic voters' confidence in the president to resolve the war mirrors their division on policy: 54% have confidence in Bush to resolve the war in Iraq (30% great deal, 24% some), while 46% are not confident (24% very little, 22% not much) in the president. Hispanic Catholics are among the most likely to want the troops home (54%) and to lack confidence in the president on this issue (59% have "not much" or "very little" confidence.)

Confidence in the president to resolve the war in Iraq overshadows all other predictors of the vote.

92% of those who say they have a "great deal" of confidence in Bush on this issue are intending to vote for him.

87% of Catholics who have "very little" confidence in the president intend to vote for Kerry.

## **2. The Catholic vote is secular and does not take direction from the Catholic bishops.**

By several measurements, Catholic voters make it very clear that they do not mix religion and politics. For example, the survey shows:

- By more than two to one (70% to 30%), Catholic voters say the views of Catholic bishops are not important to them in deciding for whom to vote. Looking at those who feel strongly, seven percent say the views of the

- bishops are “very important” to them, while 40% say they are “not at all important.”
- Eight in ten (83%) Catholic voters do not believe that politicians who are Catholic have a religious obligation to vote on issues the way Catholic bishops recommend.
  - Three-quarters (76%) disapprove of Catholic bishops denying communion to Catholics who support legal abortion and nearly eight in ten (78%) believe that politicians who are Catholic and who support legal abortion should not be denied communion.

### Closer look at church-goers

Taking a closer look at the four in ten Catholic voters (39%) who attend church at least once a week adds further evidence that the Catholic vote is more cultural than religious. A plurality – but not a majority – of these active Catholics call themselves politically conservative, and they often take more conservative positions on issues than the rest of the Catholic electorate. For example, they are somewhat less pro-choice on abortion and more supportive of President Bush.

When we consider both church attendance and political ideology together, we find it is political beliefs that are driving attitudes on the election and on issues, not attendance at Mass. Catholic frequent church-goers who call themselves political conservatives make up 18% of the Catholic vote overall, while frequent church-goers who call themselves moderates are 15%, and those who identify as liberals count six percent overall.

Political ideology is a better predictor of presidential preference than is church attendance. Of those who are frequent church-goers, President Bush is winning among Conservatives (72% Bush, 15% Kerry, 12% undecided), but challenger Senator John Kerry currently leads among both moderates (42% Kerry, 29% Bush, 28% undecided) and liberals (78% Kerry, 8% Bush, 11% undecided).

### **3. Catholic voters continue to support legal abortion and to depart from church positions on other issues.**

Catholic voters part company with the position of the Catholic church on a number of issues. For example, majorities of Catholic voters hold prochoice views on abortion.

- Six in ten Catholic voters (61%) agree that it should be legal for a woman to have an abortion. Over half of Catholic voters (53%) describe themselves as “prochoice.” Three-quarters (74%) do not believe Catholics have a religious obligation to vote against candidates who support legal abortion.
- Just over one in 10 (13%) of all likely Catholic voters feel strongly opposed to legal abortion and would definitely vote against a candidate who favored legal abortion. On the other side, one in 10 (10%) Catholics feels strongly that abortion should be legal and would definitely vote against a candidate who disagreed on this issue.

Looking at the attitudes of Catholic voters on a number of other social issues reveals they represent mainstream American thinking. On some issues, majorities will depart from the positions of the Catholic church, while on others they will find themselves in agreement.

- Majorities of Catholic voters disagree with the church on several issues covered in the survey: allowing scientists to use stem cells from very early human embryos to find cures for diseases (72% support), the death penalty (71% support), and physician-assisted suicide (53% support).
- Catholic voters, however, are more in line with the church on the issues of gay marriage, school vouchers, and school prayer. Six in ten (64%) of Catholic voters oppose making gay and lesbian marriages legal. Three-quarters (74%) support school prayer and over half (56%) support school vouchers to help parents pay for the cost of tuition to private or religious schools.

#### **4. Catholic voters’ priorities are security, jobs, and health care.**

The priorities of Catholic voters reflect concerns about protecting the US from terrorism and resolving the war in Iraq, as well as bread and butter issues of personal economic security.

The issues Catholic voters want the next president to address include protecting American jobs, protecting Social Security, and improving health care. Catholic voters next place a high priority on improving education, improving Medicare, promoting moral values in the country, fighting crime, cutting taxes, protecting civil liberties, and protecting the environment. Of less salience to Catholic voters are advancing gay rights, abortion, and promoting human rights around the world.

The importance of Social Security, Medicare, and education to Catholic voters is underscored by their more than two-to-one support for canceling some of the recent tax cuts to preserve Social Security and Medicare (74% support canceling tax cuts; 26% oppose) and to improve education (68% support canceling tax cuts; 31% oppose).

## **5. Catholic Hispanic voters defy easy labels.**

The Catholic Hispanic vote represents millions of Americans and is a growing force in American political and cultural life. In many ways these voters are quite similar to other Catholic voters in their thinking, but in many other ways they have their own characteristics.

As a group, Hispanic Catholics are younger, likely to have fewer years of formal schooling, and have lower annual incomes than Catholic voters overall. Politically, Hispanic Catholics identify more with the Democratic Party, but they are less likely to become politically involved. The Hispanic Catholic vote is primarily a large city vote.

In the presidential race, Hispanics support Kerry over Bush 47% to 30%, with 20% undecided.

On Iraq, Hispanic Catholic voters want to bring US troops home more so than does any other demographic group.

Like other Catholics, they are highly concerned about terrorism, but they elevate two issues – improving health care and public education – above other issues, including jobs and social security. They place cutting taxes lower on their list of priorities than do other Catholic voters.

Hispanic voters reflect the overall Catholic voter sentiment on a number of social issues: they are just as supportive of legal abortion (62% agree), in favor of stem cell research (71%), opposed to legal marriage for same sex couples (63%), and supportive of prayer in public schools (73%).

Hispanic Catholics are less supportive of the death penalty (58%) and doctor assisted suicide (42%) than are other Catholics. On the other hand, Hispanics are more likely to favor the US providing assistance to developing countries (69%), including funding voluntary family planning in developing countries (49% support).

Just like other Catholics, healthy majorities of Hispanic Catholic voters reject the idea of the Catholic bishops influencing the positions of political candidates,

their own decisions on issues such as abortion, or the denial of communion to Catholics who disagree with church views.

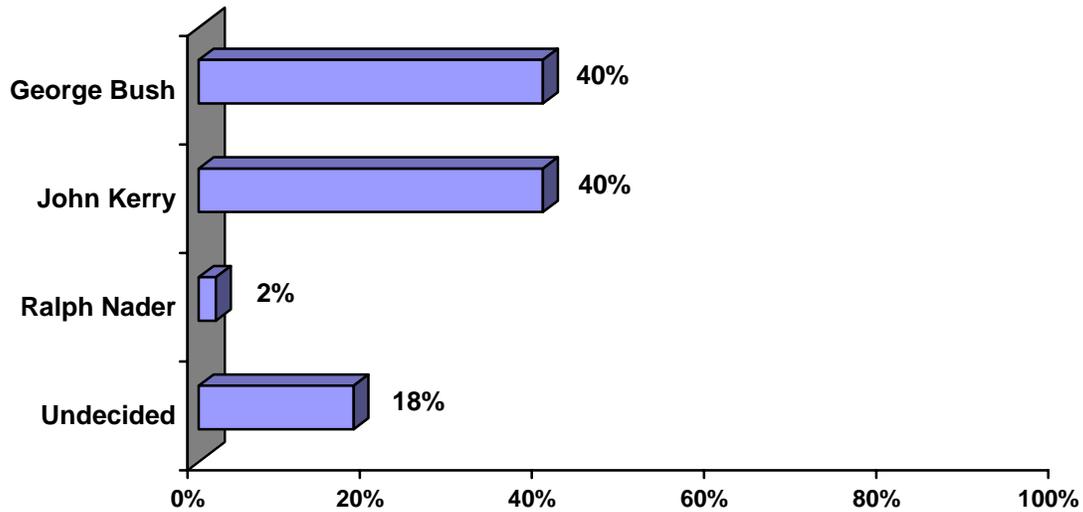
In summary the 2004 survey reveals an overall Catholic vote that is reliably mainstream – highly concerned about the war in Iraq, divided about the best course of action, but also feeling strongly about the need for our leaders to concentrate on jobs and health care, Social Security, and public schools. It is a vote that is prochoice, but sees little urgency to make this an issue for the next president.

Catholic voters may listen to the words of the bishops on Sundays, but they do not want those words influencing policies or behaviors on the first Tuesday in November. Nor do they approve of the church using the sacrament of communion as a lever for political issues.

Like many other Americans, their political identification as conservative or liberal will predict what they decide on issues and on their choice for president. Moderate Catholic voters will be predictably less predictable. Watching these voters make up their minds as they weigh the issues and candidates will tell us a great deal about where American public opinion as a whole is headed.

## Selected Charts

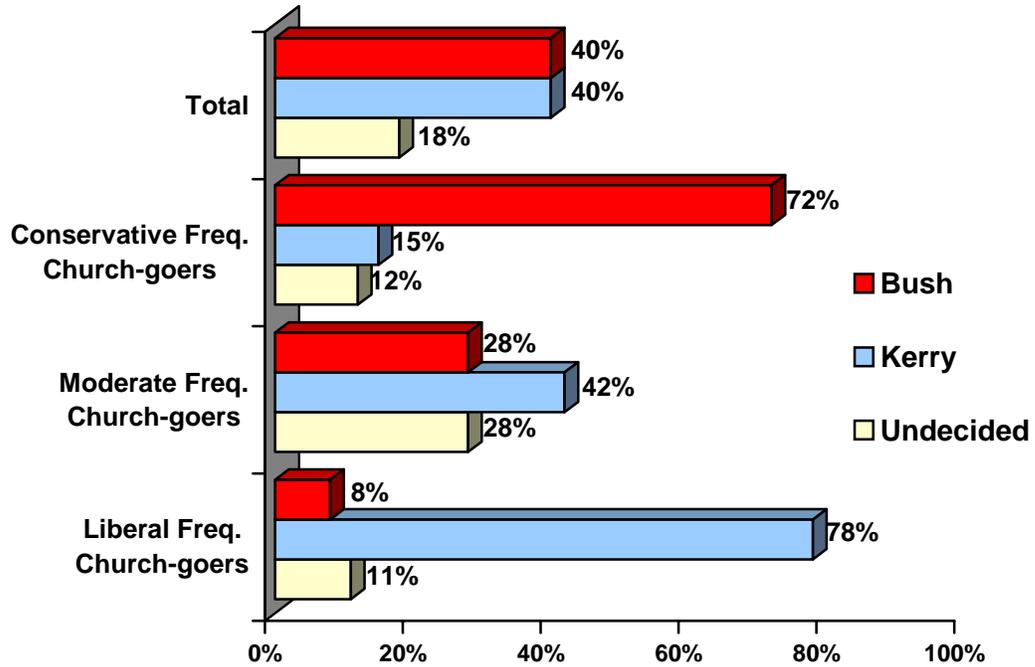
Catholic Likely Voters' Presidential Preference



Q1. If the election for president were held today, would you vote for: the Republican George W. Bush, the Democrat John Kerry, Green Party candidate Ralph Nader, or are you undecided?<sup>3</sup>

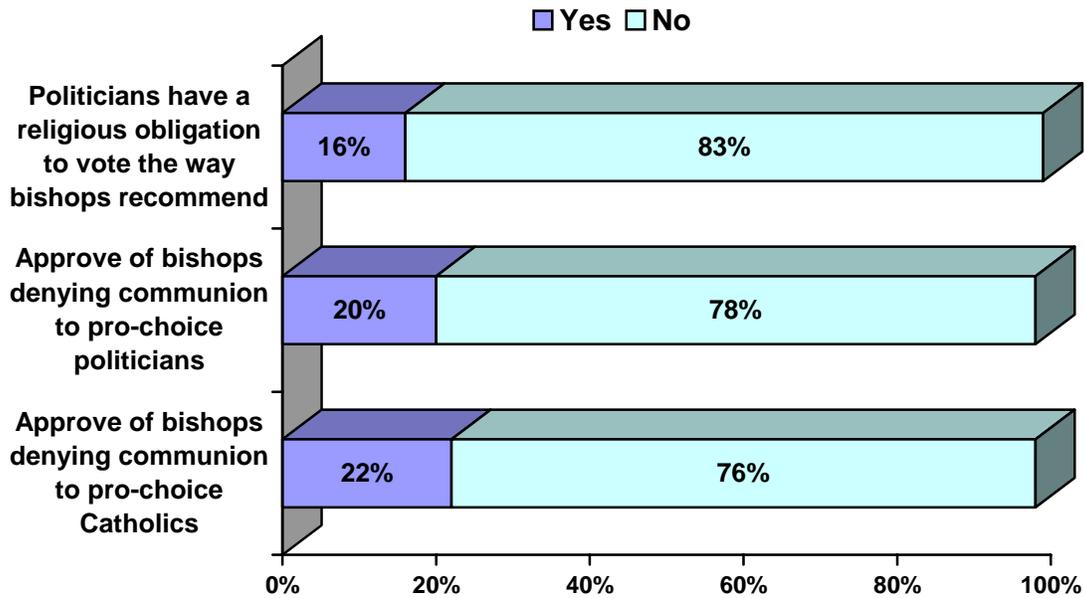
<sup>3</sup> The Green Party decided not to endorse Ralph Nader after the fielding of this survey.

### Catholics' Presidential Choice: Ideology by Church Attendance



Q1. If the election for president were held today, would you vote for: the Republican George W. Bush, the Democrat John Kerry, Green Party candidate Ralph Nader, or are you undecided?

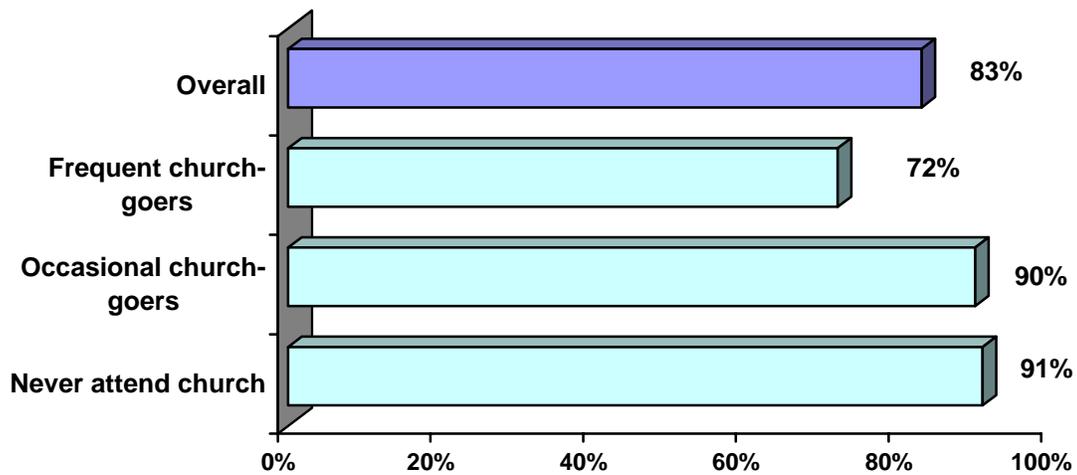
### Catholics Views on the Influence of the Church



Q19. Do you believe that politicians who are Catholic have a religious obligation to vote on issues the way Catholic bishops recommend? Q21. Do you believe that politicians who are Catholic and who support legal abortion should be denied communion? Q22. Do you approve or disapprove of Catholic bishops denying communion to Catholics who support legal abortion?

### Should Catholic Politicians Vote on Issues the Way Bishops Recommend?

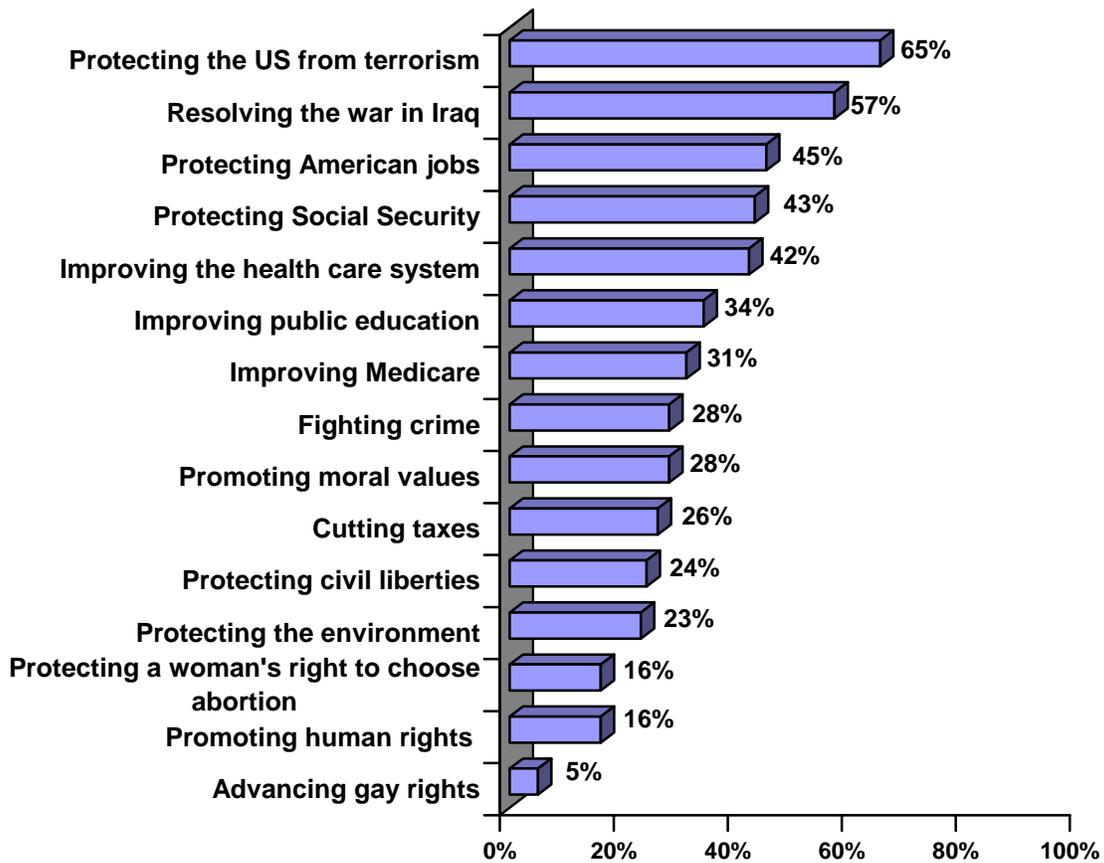
(Percent saying "no")



Q19. Do you believe that politicians who are Catholic have a religious obligation to vote on issues the way Catholic bishops recommend?

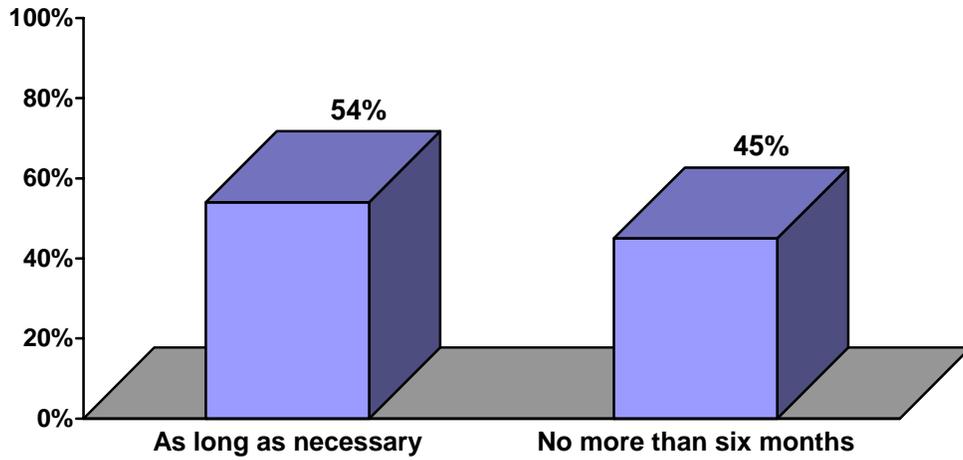
### Priorities for the Next President

(% saying "7" highest priority)



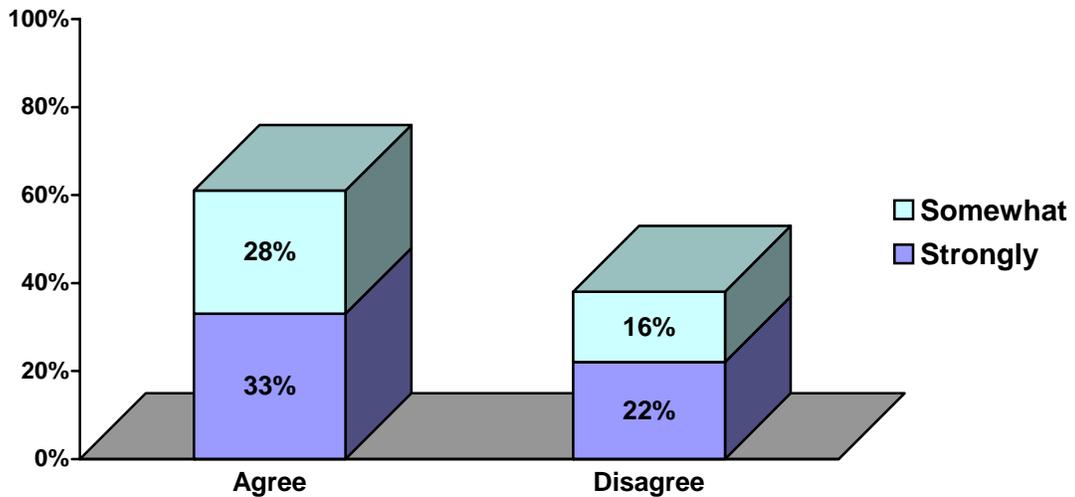
Q3a-o. Using this 1 to 7 scale, how high a priority would you personally want the next president to give to each of these issues? (1 means lowest priority and 7 means highest priority)

### Troops Should Stay in Iraq...



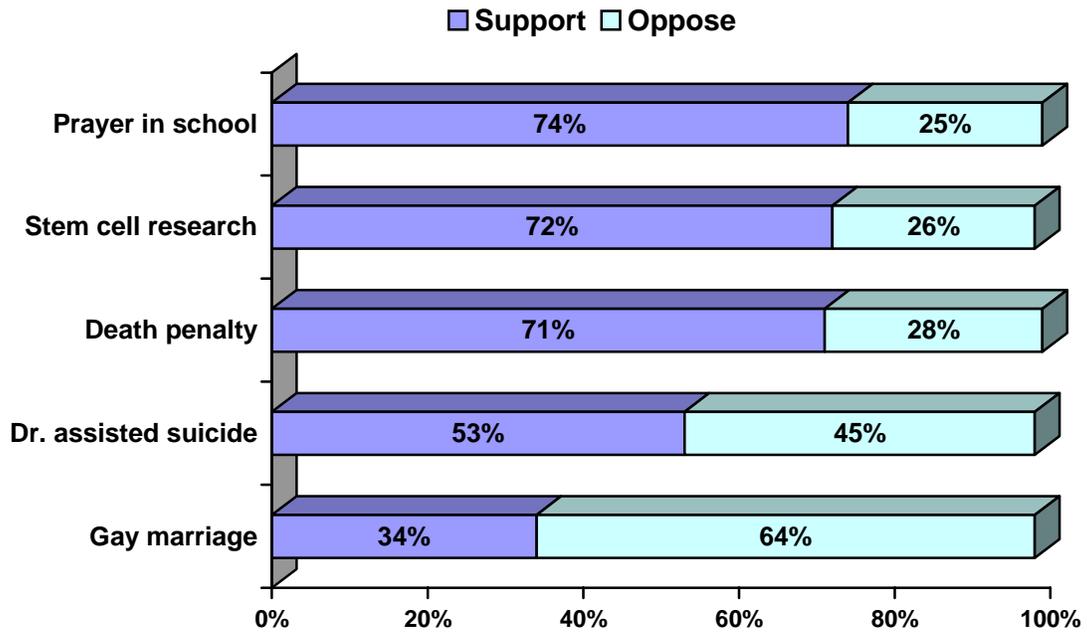
Q5. Even if you do not agree completely with either of these two statements, which one better describes your view: A) US troops should stay in Iraq as long as necessary to establish democracy and stability; or B) We should bring the troops home within six months, even if democracy and stability are not established.

### Abortion Should Be Legal



Q6. Do you agree or disagree that it should be legal for a woman to have an abortion?

### Other Social Issues



Do you support or oppose each of the following? 7. The death penalty for persons convicted of murder. 9. Making it legal for doctors to assist in the suicide of a terminally ill patient. 11. Allowing public schools to start each day with a prayer in the classrooms. 15. Making gay and lesbian marriage legal. 16. Allowing scientists to use stem cells obtained from very early human embryos, to find cures for serious diseases such as Alzheimer's, diabetes, and Parkinson's.

Survey of Catholic Likely Voters  
For Catholics for a Free Choice

Interviewing conducted June 2 through June 10, 2004.

N = 2,239 Catholic registered voters, likely to vote in 2004 presidential election

Margin of sampling error is  $\pm 2.1$  percentage points.

Margin of sampling error for Hispanics is  $\pm 5.2$  percentage points.

The data have been weighted by race and age.

Percents may add to 99% or 101% due to rounding.

\* indicates less than 1%, - indicates zero.

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S1. Are you registered to vote at your current address?	Yes	100%
	No	-
	DK/REF	-

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S2. Not everyone has a chance to vote in every election. Thinking about the presidential election in November, what would you say are the chances that you will vote in the election? Will you:	Definitely vote	87%
	Are you very likely to vote	13
	Will you probably vote	-
	Probably not vote	-
	Definitely not vote	-
	DK/REF	-

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1. If the election for president were held today, would you vote for: [ROTATE BUSH AND KERRY]	The Republican George W. Bush	40%
	The Democrat John Kerry	40
	Green Party candidate Ralph Nader	2
	Undecided	18
	DK/REF	*

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2. [IF UNDECIDED OR DK/REF, BASE N=411] Are you leaning towards: [ROTATE BUSH AND KERRY]	George Bush	41%
	John Kerry	48
	DK/REF	11

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COMBINED PRESIDENTIAL VOTE	George Bush	47%
	John Kerry	49
	Ralph Nader	2
	Undecided/DK/REF	2

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3. Using this 1 to 7 scale, how high a priority would you personally want the next president to give to each of these issues? (1 means lowest priority and 7 means highest priority)  
[RANDOMIZE Q3a-o]

	Lowest						Highest	DK/ REF
	Priority	1	2	3	4	5	6	
a. Improving public education	1%	2	3	13	20	26	34	*
b. Protecting the environment	1%	2	8	20	24	21	23	*
c. Fighting crime	1%	1	4	16	26	23	28	1
d. Improving the health care system	1%	1	3	9	18	26	42	*
e. Protecting Social Security	1%	2	3	10	18	22	43	*
f. Improving Medicare	2%	2	6	15	21	24	31	*
g. Promoting moral values in the country	4%	6	8	17	19	17	28	1
h. Cutting taxes	4%	5	8	19	21	16	26	*
i. Advancing gay rights	42%	13	14	13	8	4	5	2
j. Protecting American jobs	*	1	2	8	18	26	45	*
k. Protecting a woman's right to choose abortion	24%	9	10	16	14	10	16	1
l. Promoting human rights around the world	4%	7	12	26	22	13	16	*
m. Resolving the war in Iraq	1%	1	1	6	12	21	57	*
n. Protecting the US from terrorism	*	*	1	3	10	20	65	*
o. Protecting civil liberties	1%	3	7	21	24	20	24	*

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4. How much confidence do you have in President Bush to resolve the war in Iraq?	A great deal of confidence	30%
	Some confidence	24
	Not much confidence	22
	Very little confidence	24
	DK/REF	1

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5. Even if you do not agree completely with either of these two statements, which one better describes your view: [ROTATE A AND B]	A) US troops should stay in Iraq as long as necessary to establish democracy and stability; or	54%
	B) We should bring the troops home within six months, even if democracy and stability are not established.	45
	DK/REF	1

6. Do you agree or disagree that it should be legal for a woman to have an abortion?	Strongly agree	33%
	Somewhat agree	28
	Somewhat disagree	16
	Strongly disagree	22
	DK/REF	*

Do you support or oppose each of the following? [RANDOMIZE Q7-Q16]

	Strongly support	Somewhat support	Somewhat oppose	Strongly oppose	DK/REF
7. The death penalty for persons convicted of murder	40%	31	15	13	1
8. School vouchers, which give parents money from tax revenues to help pay tuition costs, for their children to go to private or religious school instead of public school	24%	32	22	21	1
9. Making it legal for doctors to assist in the suicide of a terminally ill patient	18%	35	21	24	1
10. The US providing funding for voluntary family planning in developing countries	9%	32	32	27	1
11. Allowing public schools to start each day with a prayer in the classrooms	39%	35	16	9	1
12. Canceling some of the federal tax cuts and using the money to protect Social Security and improve Medicare	34%	40	16	10	1
13. Canceling some of the federal tax cuts and using the money to improve public education	27%	41	18	13	1
14. Allowing children of parents who are in the US illegally to attend public schools	15%	29	27	29	1

Do you support or oppose each of the following? [RANDOMIZE Q7-Q16]

	Strongly support	Somewhat support	Somewhat oppose	Strongly oppose	DK/REF
15. Making gay and lesbian marriage legal	13%	21	18	46	1
16. Allowing scientists to use stem cells obtained from very early human embryos, to find cures for serious diseases such as Alzheimer's, diabetes, and Parkinson's	34%	38	14	12	1

17. If a candidate for president took a position different from yours on each of these issues, would it: [RANDOMIZE a-e]

	Definitely make you vote against him	Maybe make you vote against him	Would it not change your vote	DK/REF
a. The death penalty	12%	40	47	1
b. Taxes	20%	50	30	1
c. Abortion	27%	38	34	1
d. Marriage of gay and lesbian couples	29%	34	37	1
e. Situation in Iraq	27%	47	26	1

Here are some questions about Catholics and elections.

18. How important are the views of the Catholic bishops in the US for you in deciding whom to vote for?	Very important	7%
	Somewhat important	23
	Not very important	30
	Not at all important	40
	DK/REF	1

[RANDOMIZE Q19-Q22]

19. Do you believe that politicians who are Catholic have a religious obligation to vote on issues the way Catholic bishops recommend?	Yes	16%
	No	83
	DK/REF	2

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20. Do you believe voters who are Catholic have a religious obligation to vote <u>against</u> candidates who support legal abortion?	Yes	24%
	No	74
	DK/REF	2

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21. Do you believe that politicians who are Catholic and who support legal abortion should be denied communion?	Yes	20%
	No	78
	DK/REF	2

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22. Do you approve or disapprove of Catholic bishops denying communion to Catholics who support legal abortion?	Approve	22%
	Disapprove	76
	DK/REF	2

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Now thinking about another topic:

23. Are you generally in favor or opposed to the United States giving economic assistance to help other countries?	Very much in favor	11%
	Somewhat in favor	44
	Somewhat opposed	32
	Very much opposed	12
	DK/REF	*

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24. Do you agree or disagree that the United States has so many needs at home right now, we should cut back on the humanitarian assistance we give to developing countries?	Agree	69%
	Disagree	29
	DK/REF	1

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## Demographics

25. Which of the following best describes the place where you live:	Large city	25%
	Small city	23
	Suburb	25
	Town	16
	Rural area	11
	DK/REF	*

26. Are you:	Married	61%
	Living with a life partner	3
	Widowed	5
	Separated	2
	Divorced	9
	Single, never been married	20
	DK/REF	1

27. Do you generally think of yourself as prolife or prochoice on abortion?	Pro-life	45%
	Pro-choice	53
	DK/REF	2

28. Do you consider yourself to be a Democrat, a Republican, an Independent, or something else?	Democrat	36%
	Republican	35
	Independent	27
	Something else	1
	DK/REF	1

29. [IF INDEPENDENT OR SOMETHING ELSE, BASE N=636] Do you lean more to the Republican Party or more to the Democratic Party?	Democratic Party	34%
	Republican Party	29
	Neither	35
	DK/REF	2

30. In terms of your political outlook, do you usually think of yourself as: [ROTATE ORDER]	Very conservative	9%
	Somewhat conservative	28
	Middle of the road	41
	Somewhat liberal	18
	Very liberal	3
	DK/REF	1

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31. How often do you attend religious services?	More than once a week	6%
	Once a week	33
	A few times a month	14
	A few times a year	36
	Never	11
	DK/REF	1

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32. [IF MORE OFTEN THAN NEVER, BASE N=1952] When you go to mass do you receive communion:	Almost always	60%
	Some of the time	19
	Not very often	20
	DK/REF	1

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33. In the last five years, have you ever volunteered for, donated to, or contacted a political official or candidate?	Yes	31%
	No	68
	DK/REF	*

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34. Are you Hispanic or Latino?	Yes	15%
	No	84
	DK/REF	1

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35. Would you say you are:	White	79%
	Black or African American	2
	Hispanic	15
	Asian or Pacific Islander	3
	Something else	1
	DK/REF	*

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36. Were you born in the United States, or in another country?	United States	92%
	Another country	8
	DK/REF	*

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37. [IF HISPANIC/LATINO, BASE N=366] Now I want to ask you about your family's heritage. Are your ancestors: [ALLOW MULTIPLE RESPONSES]	Mexican	52%
	Puerto Rican	14
	Cuban	7
	Dominican	5
	Salvadoran	2
	From another Central American country	4
	From another South American country	9
	Spanish	8
Other	7	
DK/REF	3	

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38. In what year were you born? [IF REFUSED ASK CATEGORIES]	18-29 years	17%
	30-39 years	22
39. Are you between:	40-49 years	25
	50-59 years	14
	60+ years	22
	DK/REF	*

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40. What was the last grade of school you completed?	Did not complete high school	5%
	High school graduate or GED	23
	Some college or associate degree	34
	College graduate with four-year degree	22
	Postgraduate study	15
	DK/REF	*

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41. Which category contains your <u>total household income</u> before taxes in 2003? Your best estimate is fine.	Less than \$15,000	7%
	Between \$15,000 - \$29,999	12
	Between \$30,000 - \$49,999	22
	Between \$50,000 - \$74,999	23
	Between \$75,000 - \$99,999	15
	\$100,000 or more	13
	DK/REF	7

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GENDER	Male	49%
	Female	51

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REGION	Northeast	29%
	South	27
	Midwest	24
	West	20

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