

White Catholics: Swing Voters Redux?

By Ally Brodsky

A shift by white Catholics toward Hillary Clinton raises the question of whether this traditional swing voting group may return to its previously decisive political role.

White Catholics who are registered to vote split 51-45 percent between Clinton and Donald Trump in the latest ABC News/Washington Post poll, reversing their preference – 54-35 percent, Trump-Clinton – in July.

Historically, white Catholics have been a key swing group in presidential elections, voting with the winner steadily in exit poll results from 1976 through 2004. But the group broke its streak in the last two contests, favoring John McCain over Barack Obama by 5 points, then Mitt Romney by 19, while Obama won.

Their influence this year could be critical. Romney won whites overall by 20 points in 2012, yet lost the election, a result suggesting Trump will have to exceed that this year (unless turnout among nonwhites falls, which would run counter to the nation's changing demographic makeup). To win whites by more than 20 points, Trump almost certainly will need a strong performance among white Catholics, who accounted for a quarter of all whites in the 2012 election.

Trump was there earlier this season, leading Clinton among white Catholics by a wide 64-28 percent as he wrapped up his nomination victory in May. But the margin in this group has been quite variable – Trump ahead by 27 points in March, 36 in May and 19 in July, vs. +3 in June and -6 in the latest ABC/Post poll, produced for ABC by [Langer Research Associates](#).

	Vote preference (white Catholic reg. voters)	
	Clinton	Trump
8/4/16	51%	45
7/14/16	35	54
6/24/16	45	48
5/20/16	28	64
3/7/16	29	56

Trump does much better among many other whites, leading Clinton by 76-18 percent among evangelical white Protestants and 55-38 percent among white Protestants who aren't evangelicals. Those two groups, moreover, make up a plurality of whites, 42 percent. Again, though, to win whites by 20+ points, Trump will want white Catholics in the mix.

In our most recent data, Trump does about the same on personal attributes among white Catholics as among other whites; Clinton, though, does better with white Catholics than with non-Catholic whites. Sixty-two percent of white Catholics see her as qualified for office, compared with 48 percent of other whites. Forty-seven percent of white Catholics say they'd be comfortable with her as president, vs. 33 percent of other whites. And 41 percent of white Catholics see her as honest and trustworthy, vs. 26 percent of non-Catholic whites. This is the case even though there's no substantive difference in partisanship or ideology.

Whether or not white Catholics return to swing voter classification, they may never regain their past clout in U.S. elections – a result of changing demographics and religious affiliation alike. Per exit polls, white Catholics made up 28 percent of all voters in 1976. Given both a lower percentage of whites and fewer Catholics, that declined to 18 percent by 2012.