THE REACTION OF PENNSYLVANIA VOTERS TO CATHOLIC CANDIDATES

By DARYL R. FAIR*

For centuries men have been concerned with the relation of religion to politics. The forms which this concern has taken have changed over the years, but the concern has remained. During the Middle Ages the concern was with supremacy, that is, the question of who should be supreme, pope or emperor. The “two swords” doctrine provided an answer of sorts to this question throughout the period, but not a definitive resolution of the controversial issue. Later, with the coming of the Reformation, the overriding problem became that of established or state religions. Various nation-states resolved this question in various ways. The nature of the choice made by the United States has helped to determine the nature of the concern Americans have since felt over the relation of religion to politics.

The course of action chosen in the United States has been, by and large, that of separation of church and state. This choice, with respect to the federal government, is often expressed in terms of Jefferson’s “wall of separation” doctrine, even though it is not clear that the First Amendment was intended to erect any such wall. Thus the rhetoric surrounding the choice actually made has colored discussion of the relation of church to state, possibly as much as has the choice itself. Furthermore, the doctrine of popular sovereignty has also served to give direction to concern about the relation of church to state. The forms that this doctrine took during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries seem to have been grounded to some extent in the thought of John Stuart Mill. That is, the citizen to whom the Populists and especially the Progressives would have given (or “returned”) power seems to have been the ideal-type envisioned by Mill; he was seen to be

a rational decision maker who, after having considered all the facts, chose the course of action that was in the public interest. It is perhaps ironic that middle-class reformers such as the Progressives and economic interest groups such as the Populists should have stood on such a severely individualistic platform.

As has been pointed out, the popular sovereignty doctrine is (or at least certain portions of it are) highly individualistic and rationalistic. The natural rights doctrine upon which the "wall of separation" is built is also of an individualistic nature. After all, it is concerned with the natural rights of the individual citizen. Both of these philosophical bases of American politics have led to a concern on the part of many citizens lest the church (especially somebody else's church) "interfere" in matters political. Often this concern has been directed toward the activities of the clergy. More recently there has been concern about the existence of religious blocs of voters. Actually, that a citizen's religious predilections should at times have some influence on his behavior in the voting booth should surprise nobody. What a citizen does is a product of what he is, and he is, among other things, either religious, anti-religious, or areligious, with various subdivisions and degrees of intensity within each. It is not surprising that the religious factor should occasionally seem relevant to the voting decision of the individual, for there is no neat line that separates the religious from the political.

The influence of religion on voting behavior has been long recognized, and politicians have long attempted to exploit this interrelationship. More recently scholars have begun to study this interrelationship and to attempt to measure, explain, and predict it. This study is an attempt to measure the relationship of religion and voting behavior in three recent elections in Pennsylvania. Two of these elections were Presidential (1928 and 1960), and one was gubernatorial (1958). In all three elections a Roman Catholic candidate was pitted against a Protestant. By the use of gross election returns, this study will attempt to measure the reactions of counties of varying proportions of Catholic population to the two candidates. Clearly this method is less satisfactory than the use of scientific survey data, but the latter method is im-

1 Doubtless there are other reasons for this concern, but the two discussed here seem to be peculiarly pertinent to the American experience.
possible for this comparative study, for such data do not exist for all of the elections involved. Thus we shall be forced to be content with the use of gross election returns and the discovery of gross trends and tendencies.

The Election of 1928

The defeat of Al Smith in 1928 certainly was the result of more factors than merely his religion. But it seems certain that Smith's Catholicism affected the outcome of the election to a considerable extent. While the circumstances, issues, and personalities of this election are of such a nature as to be impossible to duplicate in any other, nevertheless, comparison of elections and the outcomes thereof should not be ruled out; for even in the much-extolled physics laboratory each experiment is unique. The difference is one of degree. Admittedly comparison of gross election returns is a much cruder method than even the most elementary physics experiment, but control of and allowance for as many factors as possible can make even this crude method valid for limited purposes.

Al Smith was the first major-party presidential nominee who was a Roman Catholic. Smith's religion inevitably became a subject of discussion, for American politics had experienced a period during which the nativistic, anti-foreign, anti-Catholic Know-Nothing party had had a good deal of strength in many parts of the country. Smith's candidacy aroused speculation as to whether or not this anti-Catholic spirit would arise again. Furthermore, his candidacy did arouse some anti-Catholic spirit, as well as some serious discussion concerning the compatibility of Roman Catholicism with the office of the Presidency. What things can gross election returns tell us about the differential reactions of Catholics and non-Catholics to Smith's candidacy? Table 1 shows the percentage-point difference between the "normal" Democratic percentage of the two-party vote and the Democratic percentage of the two-party vote in 1928 according to groups of counties with

---

2 "Normal" here indicates the average of the Democratic percentages of the two-party vote for 1920 and 1924. This definition of "normal" was used because, by and large, it was the division of the electorate established by "normalcy" and "Republican prosperity" against which Smith had to do battle.
varying proportions of Catholic population. It is evident from these data that the more non-Catholic counties tended to give Smith a smaller proportion of their votes than they “normally” gave Democratic Presidential candidates, and that the more Catholic counties tended to give him a larger proportion. Furthermore, the relationship is fairly consistent, with 20% of the population Roman Catholic as a “breaking point”; that is, above 20%, the more Catholic the county, the greater the percentage-point increase, and below 20%, the less Catholic the county, the greater the percentage-point decrease. Thus, it would seem that religion did affect voting behavior in 1928 in that Roman Catholics tended to vote for their co-religionist while non-Catholics tended to vote for his opponent.

TABLE 1

Percentage-point difference between “normal” Democratic percentage of the two-party vote and the Democratic percentage in 1928, by counties of varying proportions of Catholic population.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% of Population Roman Catholic</th>
<th>Number of Counties</th>
<th>Mean Percentage-Point Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>40 and up</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>+19.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>+13.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-29</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>+14.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-19</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>−1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-9</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>−11.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Normal” indicates the average of the Democratic percentages of the two-party vote for 1920 and 1924.


That this should have been the case in Pennsylvania in 1928 is

4 The data available on church membership are notoriously suspect and should be regarded with a healthy skepticism. They are, at best, a rough indicator of actual church membership. It would be well to keep this in mind throughout this study.

5 The chi-square test on a binomial table distributing counties into the categories increase or decrease in the Democratic percentage of the two-party vote and 0-19 or 20 and up percentage of the population Roman Catholic yields a result near the 0.1% level of significance, but the categories are too gross for one to place too much reliance on this result.
REACTION TO CATHOLIC CANDIDATES

not surprising. James Reichley has written the following about the commonwealth:

Pennsylvania . . . has long been the special stronghold of this kind of Protestantism and this kind of Republicanism [that is, the anti-Rum, Romanism, and Rebellion variety]. It is the land of the Masonic order, the Sunday blue-laws, the YMCA, the prohibition of gambling that keeps horse-racing out of the state, the personally owned family dwelling . . . [] the evangelical Protestantism that George Whitefield brought to Philadelphia in 1739, impressing by his eloquence so prosaic a doubter as Benjamin Franklin.6

Reichley's observation may help to explain the behavior of the non-Catholic voters of the commonwealth, especially the Protestant voters, but other of his remarks do not seem to square with the behavior of Catholic voters as revealed by Table 1. He says of the Catholic community in Philadelphia, and perhaps in the whole of Pennsylvania, that it has had "surprising docility." By this, however, he means that the church has stayed clear of politics unless its interests have been directly affected. Thus the voting behavior of individual Catholics could easily be influenced by events not sufficient to arouse a somewhat apolitical church.

But what of the effect of urbanization on the outcome of the election? It has been pointed out that the Roosevelt Revolution of 1932 was in a sense the Smith Revolution of 1928 writ large.7 Could it be that what we have measured were the effects of urbanization and not of Catholicism? It is clear that in some degree they were. The more Catholic counties in Pennsylvania in 1928 were, by and large, urban counties, as the numbers in parentheses in the cells of Table 2 indicate. But Table 2 also reveals that with one exception the 1928 Democratic percentage of the two-party vote was less than "normal" in the less Catholic counties at all levels of urbanization, and more than "normal" in the more Catholic counties at all levels of urbanization (using 20% as the "breaking point"). However, the table shows that

---

7 Ibid., p. 76.
TABLE 2

Percentage-point difference between "normal" Democratic percentage of the two-party vote and the Democratic percentage in 1928, by counties of varying proportions of Catholic population and degrees of urbanization.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% Urban</th>
<th>0-9</th>
<th>10-19</th>
<th>20-29</th>
<th>30-39</th>
<th>40 and up</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>76-100</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51-75</td>
<td>-12.6</td>
<td>-0.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>+18.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-50</td>
<td>-13.1</td>
<td>-4.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>+9.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-25</td>
<td>-6.0</td>
<td>+1.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>+4.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The entries in the cells indicate the mean percentage-point difference between the "normal" Democratic percentage of the two-party vote and the Democratic percentage in 1928. The numbers in parentheses indicate the number of counties falling in that cell.

Sources: Those used for TABLE 1; and U. S. Bureau of the Census, Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930.

no neat relationship exists among the proportion of Catholic population in a county, the degree of urbanization of a county, and the rate of increase or decrease in the Democratic percentage of the two-party vote. Only gross trends are visible here, but they seem to substantiate the conclusions drawn from Table 1. Thus religion had an influence on the vote independent of the influence of urbanization.

THE ELECTION OF 1960

How do the election returns for 1960 compare to those for 1928? Table 3 presents the data for 1960, using the same categories as Table 1. It is readily discernible that the tendencies were the same, but that the reaction was less violent than in

"Normal" here is the Democratic percentage of the two-party vote in 1948. The elections of 1952 and 1956 have been called "deviating elections." (See Angus Campbell et al., The American Voter [New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1960], pp. 537-538.) If this be so, the results of the 1948 election would seem to be typical of what one might expect with the given division of party preference in the electorate, since the extraordinary factors present in 1948 were not extreme.
REACTION TO CATHOLIC CANDIDATES

1928. Again, what was the effect of urbanization on the outcome of this election? Table 4 shows that with one exception, the more Catholic counties turned in Democratic percentages of the two-party vote greater than "normal," while the less Catholic counties returned smaller than "normal" Democratic percentages, this relationship holding true at all levels of urbanization. The data presented thus far indicate that while there may not be precommitted blocs of Catholic and non-Catholic voters, Catholics tend to support other Catholics at the polls and non-Catholics do tend to support other Catholics at the polls and non-Catholics

TABLE 3
Percentage-point difference between "normal" Democratic percentage of the two-party vote and the Democratic percentage in 1960, by counties of varying proportions of Catholic population.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% of Population Roman Catholic</th>
<th>Number of Counties</th>
<th>Mean Percentage-Point Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>40 and up</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>+ 6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>+ 5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-29</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>+ 0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-19</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>- 1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-9</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>- 5.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

"Normal" indicates the Democratic percentage of the two-party vote in 1948.


However, our data seem to indicate that over the years this tendency has become weaker. That is, the reactions of both Catholics and non-Catholics to the candidacy of Governor Smith seem to have been more pronounced than their reactions to the candidacy of Senator John F. Kennedy. Our data do not show this conclusively, however. That is, the division of the electorate into the Democratic and Republican camps may have corresponded more nearly to the division of the population into the Catholic and non-Catholic groups in 1960 than in 1928. Thus, with most Catholics com-

31 The chi-square test, using the same categories as those used for the 1928 data, indicates a better fit with what one might expect, however, given the tendencies we have noted for Catholics and non-Catholics, than in 1928. The result for the 1960 data is well beyond the 0.1% level of significance.
TABLE 4
Percentage-point difference between "normal" Democratic percentage of
the two-party vote and the Democratic percentage in 1960, by counties
of varying proportions of Catholic population and degree of urbanization.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% Urban</th>
<th>0-9</th>
<th>10-19</th>
<th>20-29</th>
<th>30-39</th>
<th>40 and up</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>76-100</td>
<td>-2.4</td>
<td>+8.5</td>
<td>+8.2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51-75</td>
<td>-8.6</td>
<td>-0.5</td>
<td>+0.8</td>
<td>+2.2</td>
<td>+3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-50</td>
<td>-5.0</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-25</td>
<td>-1.8</td>
<td>-1.0</td>
<td>+1.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The entries in the cells indicate the mean percentage-point difference be-
tween the "normal" Democratic percentage of the two-party vote and the
Democratic percentage in 1960. The numbers in parentheses indicate the
number of counties falling in that cell.

Sources: Those used for TABLE 3; and U. S. Bureau of the Census,
County and City Data Book, 1962.

mitted to the Democrats already and many non-Catholics com-
mittted to the Republicans, the percentage-point differences noted
in 1960 would necessarily have been smaller than in 1928, even
though the psychological reactions aroused by Senator Kennedy
may have been just as strong as those evoked by Governor Smith.

THE ELECTION OF 1958

The two elections with which we have dealt thus far were both
Presidential elections. Do the findings drawn from them apply
as well to other elections of lesser importance in Pennsylvania? In
1958 a Catholic ran for the governorship of the Common-
wealth for the first time. What were the reactions of Catholics and
non-Catholics to his candidacy? Table 5 shows the percentage-
point variation from "normal"\(^{11}\) of the 1958 Democratic per-
centage of the two-party vote for counties of varying proportions
of Catholic population. The same tendencies that showed up in

\(^{11}\) "Normal" here indicates the average of the Democratic percentages of
the two-party vote for 1950 and 1954.
TABLE 5

Percentage-point difference between “normal” Democratic percentage of the two-party vote and the Democratic percentage in 1958, by counties of varying proportions of Catholic population.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% of Population Roman Catholic</th>
<th>Number of Counties</th>
<th>Mean Percentage-Point Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>40 and up</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>+0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>+0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-29</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>−1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-19</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>−2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-9</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>−2.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Normal” indicates the average of the Democratic percentages of the two-party vote for 1950 and 1954.


Furthermore, it appears that we may be dealing here with urbanization rather than the religious factor. Table 6 shows that the degree to which a county is urbanized emerges clearly as a key factor in this election. That is, regardless of the proportion of the population of a county that was Roman Catholic, there was a decrease in the Democratic percentage of the two-party vote in 1958, except in those counties most urbanized, at which level there were Democratic increases at all levels of Catholic proportions of the population. Religion may have had an independent influence in this election (e.g., the most-urban, most Catholic counties registered greater Democratic increases than the most urban, least-Catholic counties), but such influence does not seem to have been very great. Urbanization seems to have influenced the outcomes of the elections of 1928 and 1960 as well, but in those elections the independent influence of religion emerged much more clearly than in the present case. Nevertheless, religion seems to

12 The chi-square test, using the same categories as for the Presidential data, indicates that the distribution of counties in this election was not statistically significant.
have been a slight influence on the outcome of the election of 1958, even though it was a much greater influence in the two other elections with which we have been concerned.

Why should the religious factor have been stronger in 1928 and 1960 than in 1958? No explanation can be given, in the scientific sense of the word. Some guesses can be made, however. It is possible that the greater importance of and interest in the two

**TABLE 6**

Percentage-point difference between "normal" Democratic percentage of the two-party vote and the Democratic percentage in 1958, by counties of varying proportions of Catholic population and degrees of urbanization.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% Urban</th>
<th>0-9</th>
<th>10-19</th>
<th>20-29</th>
<th>30-39</th>
<th>40 and up</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>76-100</td>
<td>+ 0.4</td>
<td>+ 0.5</td>
<td>+ 3.2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51-75</td>
<td>- 3.2</td>
<td>- 3.5</td>
<td>- 0.4</td>
<td>- 0.8</td>
<td>- 3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-50</td>
<td>- 2.4</td>
<td>- 2.2</td>
<td>- 2.4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-25</td>
<td>- 2.7</td>
<td>- 4.4</td>
<td>- 1.4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The entries in the cells indicate the mean percentage-point difference between the "normal" Democratic percentage of the two-party vote and the Democratic percentage in 1958. The numbers in parentheses indicate the number of counties falling in that cell.

Sources: Those used for TABLE 5; and U. S. Bureau of the Census, *County and City Data Book, 1962.*

Presidential contests caused more people to regard religion as relevant to their voting decisions in those elections than in the gubernatorial contest. In addition, it is likely that the religious affiliation of Mayor David Lawrence was common knowledge to a far lesser extent than were the religious preferences of Governor Smith and Senator Kennedy. Furthermore, the name of Mayor Lawrence's opponent sounded far more like the name of a Roman Catholic than did his own, thus confusing the issue. (Lawrence's opponent was Arthur T. McGonigle, a Lutheran.)
REACTION TO CATHOLIC CANDIDATES

Conclusion

The data presented in this study seem to support the conclusion that religion played a role independent of other factors in determining the voting behavior of Pennsylvanians in 1928 and 1960, and probably in 1958, to some extent. Specifically, the data show that Roman Catholics tended to vote for their co-religionists in those elections, while non-Catholics tended to vote for the non-Catholic candidates. This relationship did not emerge clearly in the gubernatorial election of 1958, but the data suggest that it may have been present to some degree. The relationship between religion and voting was definitely less strong in 1958 than in 1928 and 1960; neither Catholics nor non-Catholics reacted very strongly for or against the Catholic candidate, respectively. This fact suggests the hypothesis that the religious factor plays a more prominent role in elections that are seen to be of great importance. However, we are not justified in stating this as a conclusion; a more extensive study would be required to test this proposition. Finally, it seems that the reactions for and against Senator Kennedy were less extreme than those for and against Governor Smith. As has been noted above, however, it is possible that the psychological reactions were similar, but that the expression of these reactions was impossible because the “normal” Democrat-Republican cleavage of 1960 precommitted large numbers of Catholics to the Democrats and large numbers of non-Catholics to the Republicans. This conclusion must therefore be offered with the above reservation.

That religious affiliation should affect political behavior is not surprising. If an individual belongs to or identifies with a group, he undoubtedly is concerned about the welfare and prestige of that group. If it seems to him that he can enhance the welfare and prestige of that group by making a certain choice in the polling place, we should not be surprised if he makes that certain choice. Furthermore, it should not be surprising that an individual might choose his political leaders from among those with whom he is most familiar and with whom he can identify. Thus, religious affiliation, along with various other group affiliations and identifications, can scarcely not be an influence upon political behavior. As we have seen, religion has been an influence on the voting behavior of Pennsylvanians in the recent past. Had it not been, this would have been a more surprising discovery than the finding that it was.