

Catholics tune out bishops' voting guides

by [David Gibson](#) in the [October 4, 2011](#) issue

Every four years, the U.S. Catholic bishops publish a detailed statement about how Catholics should think about key political issues in light of church teachings. And every election cycle, activists on both sides of the Catholic political spectrum argue passionately about what the statement really means, whether it supports their position and why it needs to be overhauled if it doesn't.

But what if nobody actually reads it? A new poll of U.S. Catholics shows that just 16 percent have ever heard of the bishops' document, "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship," and just 3 percent say they have read it.

Most worrisome for the bishops may be that three-quarters of those who were even aware of "Faithful Citizenship" say the document had "no influence at all" on the way they voted in 2008; 71 percent said it would have made no difference even if they had known about it.

Overall, just 4 percent of adult U.S. Catholics say the statement from the U.S. hierarchy either was a major influence, or would have been if they'd known about it.

"Those who think the bishops have too much influence on Catholic voters may be relieved by these findings," said Peter Steinfels, codirector of Fordham University's Center on Religion and Culture, which sponsored the survey. "Those who think that the bishops have too little influence or have influence of the wrong sort may be distressed."

Steinfels presented the poll findings at a conference September 6 at Fordham's Manhattan campus which featured John Carr, a longtime staffer at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops who has worked on "Faithful Citizenship" for the past 35 years. Also participating were Robert George, a leading conservative Catholic intellectual from Princeton University, and Stephen Schneck, director of the Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies at the Catholic University and an influential liberal Catholic supporter of the Obama administration.

American Catholics are the ultimate swing voters, switching between Republican and Democrat alike. Representing approximately one in four U.S. voters, Catholics make up the largest single religious voting bloc in American politics.

Carr said

"Faithful Citizenship" has never been an actual voter guide like those put out by interest groups hoping to steer voters toward one candidate or another. In recent years, and most notably in the 2008 version, the 36-page document has focused increasingly on the larger principles at stake in elections and how Catholic voters should exercise "prudential judgments" in choosing how to vote when none of the options is ideal.

Conservatives,

however, have complained that such language is too vague and that the bishops should be more direct in telling Catholic voters that they cannot vote, for example, for a candidate who supports abortion rights.

Deal

Hudson, president of Catholic Advocate and an adviser to Republicans on lobbying Catholic voters, is pressing the bishops to sharpen the language in "Faithful Citizenship" when they gather in November to vote on the statement.

"If the bishops republish the 2008 version of 'Faithful Citizenship' for the 2012 election—without changes—they will be providing Catholic voters another carte blanche to cast their vote for any proabortion candidate they want," Hudson and Catholic Advocate

vice president Matt Smith wrote in an open letter to the hierarchy.

Observers say the bishops are unlikely to make substantial changes to "Faithful Citizenship" when they meet in November.

The status quo, however, may not please many liberals either. They often complain that the statement's focus on opposing abortion rights and same-sex marriage can provide an escape hatch for conservative Catholics who don't want to take into account other church teachings about caring for the needy, welcoming immigrants and providing adequate health care for all.

Whether any document could make a difference—even if more Catholic voters heard about it or read it—is an open question.

Catholics have gone from being a solid Democratic bloc in the days of John F. Kennedy (the first and only Catholic president) to a swing vote whose members are numerous enough to mean the margin of victory in key battleground states.

Catholic demographics are changing, too, and each group within the church—from blue-collar whites to immigrant Latinos—has a different agenda. Moreover, the transformation is happening at a time when economic concerns trump all other issues.

All of which leaves Catholic voters as divided as any other segment of the American people. Carr opened the Fordham event by saying he was just happy to be out of Washington—"a more polarized, dispirited place you can't imagine." But, he added, "that polarization is creeping into our ecclesial life, I'm afraid." —RNS