H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Mark D. Brewer. *Relevant No More? The Catholic/Protestant Divide in American Electoral Politics.* Lanham: Lexington Books, 2003. xviii + 161 pp. $55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7391-0513-9.

Reviewed by Elizabeth Pollard-Grayson (Austin, Texas)
Published on H-AmRel (June, 2004)

Does Religion Still Matter at the Polls?

In recent months, the media has raised questions surrounding Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry's membership in the Catholic Church. Kerry has faced inquiries about how he can support abortion rights as a politician while simultaneously being a pro-life Catholic. Members of the Catholic hierarchy have even stepped forward threatening to deny Kerry Holy Communion for his campaign stances. However, Kerry's religious affiliation and personal beliefs have received far less attention than that of previous presidential candidates such as Al Smith in 1928 or John F. Kennedy in 1960. It also remains to be seen how both Catholics and Protestants will react to Kerry's positions on major ethical issues in the upcoming elections.

Mark D. Brewer's book *Relevant No More?* focuses on this last issue: how Catholics have responded at the polls in the later half of the twentieth century. Brewer builds his book on the premise that Catholics remain far more likely to vote Democratic than Protestants despite the assertions of political analysts that Catholics have left the Democratic party in droves. Through numerous tables and analysis of information from the American National Election Studies Cumulative Data File, Brewer proves his hypothesis and then sets out to show that this theory holds true even when taking into consideration the converging social attitudes of Catholics and Protestants on many issues such as contraception, divorce, and church attendance. Brewer then tackles the monumental task of explaining why Catholics are so much more likely to vote Democratic, arguing that the Catholic worldview lends itself to a Democratic position.

A well-researched introductory chapter on the history of Catholic-Protestant relations in the United States establishes the foundation of religious hatred that thrived in this nation in the nineteenth and the early-twentieth centuries. Brewer concisely informs readers how this animosity played out into political associations, leading white Catholics to primarily become Democrats while Northern Protestants usually became members of the Republican party in the days following the Civil War. Brewer then argues that the Catholic social thought born out of the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century social justice movement greatly influenced continuing Catholic membership in the Democratic party. This Catholic social justice supported the poor and downtrodden, the laboring class, and immigrants. This ethic was very much in-line with the stance of the Democratic Party, especially FDR and the New Deal policies in the 1930s, and helped connect Catholics to the Democratic party.

After presenting the history of Catholics and the Democratic party, Brewer moves on to provide a fairly comprehensive analysis of Catholic voting patterns in the second half of the twentieth century. Noting that no such study exists that includes data beyond the 1970s, Brewer quickly limits his analysis to white Democrats. He argues that removing Protestant African Americans from the voting statistics drastically changes the differences between Catholics and Protestants because so few African Americans are Catholic, yet they are highly likely to vote Democratic (p. 37). With his primary statistics established, Brewer proves that while Catholics have been slowly leaving the Democratic party in recent decades, the defections are not as radical as other studies have suggested. However, he explains those departures by examining the influence of ideology (especially in relation to controversial issues like abortion) and socioeconomic status.

The most monumental task in this book is Brewer's attempt to find the reasons that Catholics remain so much more likely to be Democrats than Protestants. He spends a chapter exploring the influence of demographics such as age, gender, and Hispanic ethnicity on party affiliation. Brewer discovers that these characteristics influence Catholics in affiliating themselves with the Democratic Party, but they alone are not enough to explain

the statistical differences. Thus, Brewer explores other possible explanations including religious salience (how religion influences the everyday lives of believers) and church attendance. Finally, Brewer arrives upon an explanation based on religious worldview. He claims "that certain characteristics inherent in Catholicism and the worldview it produces, characteristics that are absent or less dominant in Protestantism and the Protestant worldview, result in Catholics being more supportive of the Democratic Party than Protestants" (p. 88). The "Catholic Ethic," Brewer argues, is one built on a culture of sharing and duty towards others through good works. This exists in opposition to the worldview of Protestantism which sees salvation as an issue of each individual's faith. When one aligns these different worldviews with the principles of the American political parties, one finds that the Catholic worldview coincides more with the Democrats and the Protestant worldview with the Republicans. Brewer argues that it is ultimately because of these belief systems that Catholics remain more likely to be Democrats.

Catholics clearly are the primary focus of Brewer's research; Protestants serve as the counterpoint to his argument and therefore get far less attention. Brewer acknowledges early in his book that Catholics comprise the largest single denomination in the Unites States, but that they are a minority when considered against Protestants as a whole (p. 2). This lumping together of all Protestant denominations creates the largest fault in the book. I found myself continuously asking, "can Protestants really be considered a unified group as Brewer is presenting?" It is only two-thirds of the way through the book that Brewer addresses this issue and acknowledges the divisions among Protestants. He devotes less than five pages to this topic wherein he separates Protestants into two groups, Mainline Protestants and Evangelical Protestants. Upon dividing the groups, Brewer presents three tables which he uses to justify his position that the two Protestant groups can be considered as a unified whole. Yet his argument that they should be united is less than convincing. Examining his statistics, one finds that in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, the party identification among Protestants was not as cohesive as Brewer asserts. For example, in the 1960s, 67 percent of white Catholics identified themselves as Democrats compared with 43 percent of the Mainline Protestants and 60 percent of the Evangelical Protestants. In the 1980s, even as these numbers drew closer together (54 percent, 38 percent, and 45 percent, respectively), the Protestant groups were still not as unified as Brewer maintains (p. 81). Had Brewer done a more thorough job throughout the entire book of examining the political positions of different denominations of Protestants, his argument would have been far more convincing. Furthermore, the premise of the book would have been greatly strengthened by comparisons of Catholics and specific denominations of Protestants whose liturgy, theology, and organizational structure are similar; Episcopals jump immediately to mind.

Overall, Brewer's book accomplishes its task of demonstrating that Catholics are more Democratic than Protestants as a whole. His explanation of the Catholic worldview offers a plausible explanation for this continuing pattern despite conundrums such as the Democratic party's support of abortion rights in opposition to the Catholic Church's condemnation. Brewer leaves his readers with a call for future studies to find a better way to examine religious worldviews and their impact upon modern electoral behavior.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Elizabeth Pollard-Grayson. Review of Brewer, Mark D., *Relevant No More? The Catholic/Protestant Divide in American Electoral Politics.* H-AmRel, H-Net Reviews. June, 2004.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9515

Copyright © 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.