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# The Politics of Denying Communion to Catholic Elected Officials

**Abstract:** In his 2004 presidential campaign, John Kerry, a Catholic, was threatened with being denied Holy Communion because of his pro-choice voting record. This article investigates the extent to which communion denial impacted Catholic elected officials and analyzes public attitudes regarding communion denial for Kerry. The results of our analysis suggest that, despite heavy media coverage, few bishops endorsed the communion denial and few pro-choice Catholic officials were threatened. While the data also indicate there are meaningful political implications for public attitudes on communion denial, the tactic does not command support from many Catholics.

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## Introduction

A half century ago, then-Senator John F. Kennedy (1998, p. 140) promised a roomful of skeptical Protestant ministers in Houston, Texas, that “if the time should ever come... when my office would require me to either violate my conscience or violate the national interest, then I would resign the office... .” Making such an extraordinary promise during the last 2 months of his campaign demonstrates the degree of difficulty Kennedy encountered concerning his Catholic faith. Three years earlier, William J. Brennan faced a similar level of skepticism during his confirmation hearing for the so-called “Catholic seat” on the Supreme Court (Clark 1995, pp. 109–111). Unlike Kennedy, Brennan promised that should his religious values conflict with the law, he would act in accordance with his oath of office and uphold the Constitution.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> While Kennedy’s approach to a potential conflict between conscience and public duty may have assuaged enough Protestant voters, Brennan’s pledge angered some Catholic leaders. The former dean of the Notre Dame Law School, Thomas Shaffer, has argued that when a Catholic judge privileges the Constitution above his faith, he has committed a form of idolatry (as cited in Levinson 2003, p. 215).

Catholics have played an important if occasionally controversial role in American political history, from the development of the labor movement, the welfare state, and Prohibition to more recent debates over abortion and same-sex marriage (Appleby and Cummings 2012). Political science studies have demonstrated that Catholic legislators (Tatalovitch and Schier 1993) and judges (Blake 2012) tend to reflect their religious values in their votes. Catholic leaders have stated that Catholic public officials have an obligation to act in accordance with their faith. During the pontificate of John Paul II, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (2002) issued a proclamation stating that Catholic elected officials would be ineligible to receive communion if they supported pro-choice policies on abortion, a precedent that he continued as Pope (Benedict XVI 2007).

During the 2004 presidential campaign, this issue came to a head when John Kerry became the first Catholic nominee since Kennedy. In 2003, Archbishop Sean O'Malley of Boston stated that Catholic elected officials who support abortion rights should refrain from seeking communion of their own volition. Raymond Burke was installed as bishop of the Archdiocese of St. Louis just days after Kerry had won the nearby Iowa caucuses. One of Archbishop Burke's first public statements in his new position was that he would deny communion to Kerry (O'Connor 2004). Bishop Michael Sheridan of Colorado Springs, widened the issues to include euthanasia, gay marriage, and stem cell research. Lawrence Cunningham, a theology professor at Notre Dame, described these tactics as "the functional equivalent of excommunication" (as cited in Deam and O'Connor 2005).

Pro-choice Catholics have been active in American politics for decades. What, then, is the strategy of communion denial hoping to accomplish? The communion denial movement can be seen from a number of different perspectives. First, it could represent a strategy on the part of Catholic leaders to build their political influence by inserting themselves into the narrative of a political campaign involving a pro-choice Catholic candidate. Second, even if making threats over communion denial is unlikely to change the candidate's political behavior on issues such as abortion, the communion denial strategy could be a strategy to prime Catholics (or even conservative Christian voters from other denominations) to elevate issues like abortion within their electoral calculus. Third, even if the communion denial strategy is inconsequential in terms of changing the vote-share of American Catholic voters, it could have agenda-setting implications, either externally, in terms of public policy, or within the internal dynamics of the American Catholic Church.

Finally, it could represent an attempt to be even-handed in the Church's expectations of both Catholic political leaders and Catholic voters. The US Conference of Catholic Bishops (2007, p. 11) has also published a document urging Catholics to vote according to their religious values. This guide gives voters some discretion as to how to translate Catholic doctrine into platform planks or policy proposals. On some issues,

however, the voter guide limits the political options of Catholic voters. It states, “A Catholic cannot vote for a candidate who takes a position in favor of an intrinsic evil, such as abortion or racism, if the voter’s intent is to support that position.”

On the surface, the denial of communion represents a threat to the salvation of Catholic politicians, but the real import of this controversy is the degree to which it affects voter perceptions of these candidates. This phenomenon and its political implications are under-studied within political science. How many bishops advocated communion denial? How many elected officials were targeted? Is there a strategic dimension to either of these choices? This article performs a content analysis of media coverage of the communion denial controversy, and it analyses public attitudes on communion denial as they related to John Kerry’s presidential campaign in 2004.

## Assessing the Extent of Communion Denial

We begin with a content analysis of media coverage of communion denial stories. We performed a Lexis-Nexis Academic search that spanned the beginning of 2004 to the end of 2012.<sup>2</sup> Over that time-period, there were 786 different newspaper and newswire stories that chronicled communion denial threats made to 17 elected officials. Of the 17, 11 were state and local officials. They included a state trial court judge, three state senators, one Republican mayor in Rudolph Giuliani (R-NY), and Governors Andrew Cuomo (D-NY), Gray Davis (D-CA), Mike Easley (D-NC), Jim McGreevey (D-NJ), Martin O’Malley (D-MD), and Kathleen Sebelius (D-KS). Former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), Congressmen David Obey (D-WI) and Patrick Kennedy (D-RI), and Senators Bob Casey (D-PA), John Kerry (D-MA), and Claire McCaskil (D-MO) round out the list.

There are some seemingly strategic patterns to the communion denial phenomenon. These Catholic elected officials hail from 14 different states representing every region of the country. Several of these Catholic leaders had statewide constituencies in states that have recently been considered “battle-ground states” or states where Democrats have historically had a difficult time winning. As third in the line of presidential succession, Nancy Pelosi was one of the most recognizable figures in the Democratic Party until the election of President Obama.<sup>3</sup> Senator John Kerry and Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, of course, were

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<sup>2</sup> The search was performed in the US Newspapers and Wires database with the terms “Catholic AND (denied OR denial OR deny) W/5 communion.”

<sup>3</sup> Oddly enough, since John William McCormack became the first Catholic elected House Speaker in 1962, six of the last nine speakers have been Catholic, including the incumbent John Boehner.

presidential candidates when they encountered controversy with communion denial, and Governor O'Malley is a rumored presidential candidate for 2016.

However, there is also evidence that this movement never gained much momentum. Only a handful of bishops spoke out in favor of communion denial and some did so very reluctantly, after the issue had been forced into the national agenda. Some of the communion denial threats were made not by bishops but by priests at parishes where Catholic elected officials attended. According to Father Thomas Reese of the Woodstock Theological Center (as cited in Mulligan 2009), "In 2004, a large majority of bishops tried to persuade the minority not to do this: using Communion as a weapon." After the 2004 campaign, communion denial lost most of its momentum. Of the 17 politicians threatened with communion denial, only six received their first threats after 2004, and the stories in 2004 accounted for 57% of the coverage in our sample.

## Public Attitudes on Communion Denial

American Catholics embrace an interesting cross-section of political attitudes. Early studies in policy attitudes (Williamson 1974) found that Catholics were more likely to support greater efforts to aid the poor compared to Protestants, which could be a historical consequence of the heavy concentration of American Catholics within the urban manual workforce (AllinSmith and AllinSmith 1948). Of course, these demographics may have changed over the past half century or so. Theologian Martin Marty has argued that the GI Bill helped elevate many American Catholics to the ranks of the middle class (Perry 2008, p. 164), and as Latinos become more active in American politics, the ethnic background of Catholic America is changing as well. On the other hand, Catholics are much more conservative in their abortion attitudes than mainline Protestants (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2013).

Catholics have traditionally been a key part of the Democratic Party coalition (Burnham 1965), but recent presidential candidates have not fared as well among Catholic voters. According to exit polling data, the only Democrat to win more than 50% of the Catholic vote since 2000 was Barack Obama, but only in 2008 and only as a result of his overwhelming support among Latino voters. John Kerry actually performed the worst among recent Democratic candidates, winning only 47% to George W. Bush's 52% (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2012). Bush's showing among Catholics may also be a result of his high standing with the Latino community (Pew Research Hispanic Trends Project 2012).

There are theoretical reasons to expect that the issue of communion denial would generate political repercussions among other religious communities, even

though communion denial has never been an issue in any Protestant denomination. Interdenominational religious conflict, especially antipathy directed at Catholics, was once the defining cleavage in American religious life. Since World War II, however, religious conflict has been much more of a function of competing doctrines within individual denominations (Wuthnow 1989). Simply put, we hypothesize that public attitudes on communion denial are much more likely to be shaped by underlying political and ideological viewpoints, rather than a simple reflection of American religious affiliation. In particular, because the communion denial controversy has mainly taken place within the context of abortion, we expect to find a close correlation between predictors of anti-abortion attitudes and support for communion denial.

To test our hypotheses, we accessed the 2004 Religion and Public Life Survey, conducted by the Princeton Survey Research Associates International.<sup>4</sup> Using a random digit sample of telephone numbers, 1512 adults were surveyed between August 5 and 10, 2004.<sup>5</sup> The respondents had an average age of 48, have had “some college” education, earned \$50,000 to \$60,000 a year, were 79% White and 52% female, though each of the models below were executed with the weighting variable included in the dataset.

Concerning our variable of interest, respondents were asked: “Do you believe that it is proper or improper for Catholic church leaders to deny communion to Catholic politicians whose views on abortion and other life issues go against church teachings?” Twenty-two percent of respondents indicated it was proper, 64% improper, and 14% did not know. The variable was recoded so that those considering this action proper were assigned a “1,” those declaring it improper a “0,” and the “don’t know” answers were coded as missing.

One of our aims is to understand the individuals who believe this practice to be improper. A quick look at bivariate relationships between the communion variable and other demographic/political items shows an interesting pattern of results. As may be expected, there is a significant relationship between political ideology (self-reported on a 5-point scale, with higher numbers indicating more conservative) and support for communion denial ( $r=0.24$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), such that one is more likely to think it is proper to deny as one moves toward the conservative end of the ideological scale. The relationships between standard religiosity

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<sup>4</sup> The data were downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives, [www.TheARDA.com](http://www.TheARDA.com) on October 28, 2013, and were collected by Pew Research Center for the People and the Press.

<sup>5</sup> For information on methodology and weighting, see <http://www.people-press.org/2004/08/24/gop-the-religion-friendly-party/2/#about-the-survey> or <http://www.thearda.com/Archive/Files/Descriptions/RELPUB04.asp>.

variables and communion denial are also not surprising. The more important religion is in one's everyday life (measured on a 3-point scale of not very important, fairly important, very important), the more likely one is to support communion denial ( $r=0.18$ ,  $p<0.001$ ).

A very similar effect is found for frequency of church attendance ( $r=0.18$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and being "born again" ( $r=0.19$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), though the latter is interesting in that Catholics do not typically consider themselves born again, indicating that evangelicals may have an opinion on this issue that occurs outside of their faith communities. There are no significant bivariate relationships between communion denial attitudes and age, income, or education, though gender demonstrates a small effect in that men are more likely to support communion denial ( $r=-0.12$ ,  $p<0.001$ ).

Using the entire sample, we employed a logistic regression on communion denial attitudes with demographic, religiosity, and partisan covariates. The results are displayed in the first column of Table 1. The bivariate relationships hold when controlling for all other variables, such that the odds increase that one will support communion denial if one is male, more conservative, considers religion important in life and attends services more frequently. Interestingly, the odds decrease if a respondent considered himself a Democrat, even though most communion denials should occur among Democrat candidates who are both Catholic and pro-choice. The story from this model suggests that conservatism and higher levels of religiosity are predictive of views on church involvement in this political matter.

It is also possible that several of these variables are merely proxies for conservative attitudes on abortion. In order to control for this, we added a variable to the second model (in column 2 of Table 1), which asked respondents – on a 4-point scale – the importance of the issue of abortion on vote choice. There is a significant bivariate relationship between communion denial attitudes and the abortion variable ( $r=0.20$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), but it is certainly not a high correlation nor akin to placing the same measure on both the right and left sides of the regression equation.

When abortion attitudes are included, gender and the religiosity variables are no longer significant predictors, though the sample size is cut in half, as the abortion question was not used in the entire sample. As expected, the more important abortion is to the individual, the greater the odds that they will support denial of communion to pro-choice candidates. Conservative ideology and non-Democratic party identification remain significant positive predictors as well. Looking at the predictive probability of ideology, a person scoring a "5" or "very conservative" is twice as likely to support communion denial as an individual who is "very liberal" or a "1."

**Table 1** Logistic regression of support for denial of communion on religiosity, political orientations, and demographics.

|                       | All               |         | All               |         | Catholics         |         | Evangelicals      |         |
|-----------------------|-------------------|---------|-------------------|---------|-------------------|---------|-------------------|---------|
|                       | Odds Ratio (S.E.) | p-Value | Odds Ratio (S.E.) | p-Value | Odds Ratio (S.E.) | p-Value | Odds Ratio (S.E.) | p-Value |
| Age                   | 0.993 (0.005)     | 0.135   | 0.989 (0.007)     | 0.092   | 0.993 (0.015)     | 0.639   | 1.006 (0.010)     | 0.569   |
| Education             | 1.094 (0.092)     | 0.285   | 1.159 (0.142)     | 0.227   | 0.811 (0.222)     | 0.445   | 1.265 (0.260)     | 0.252   |
| Female                | 0.580 (0.093)     | 0.001   | 0.830 (0.192)     | 0.420   | 0.577 (0.266)     | 0.232   | 0.690 (0.247)     | 0.300   |
| Ideology              | 1.643 (0.174)     | 0.000   | 1.937 (0.304)     | 0.000   | 1.955 (0.475)     | 0.006   | 1.738 (0.473)     | 0.042   |
| Democrat              | 0.508 (0.094)     | 0.000   | 0.568 (0.152)     | 0.034   | 0.556 (0.299)     | 0.276   | 0.356 (0.163)     | 0.024   |
| Income                | 0.964 (0.032)     | 0.261   | 0.913 (0.044)     | 0.060   | 0.951 (0.109)     | 0.661   | 0.933 (0.069)     | 0.352   |
| Religious importance  | 1.435 (0.218)     | 0.018   | 1.033 (0.222)     | 0.881   | 2.407 (1.123)     | 0.060   | 0.934 (0.419)     | 0.878   |
| Religious attendance  | 1.158 (0.080)     | 0.034   | 1.110 (0.105)     | 0.270   | 0.966 (0.187)     | 0.859   | 0.942 (0.142)     | 0.693   |
| Abortion              |                   |         | 1.389 (0.153)     | 0.003   | 1.064 (0.213)     | 0.756   | 1.257 (0.238)     | 0.226   |
| Constant              | 0.055 (0.033)     | 0.000   | 0.025 (0.021)     | 0.000   | 0.026 (0.056)     | 0.240   | 0.098 (0.172)     | 0.185   |
| Pseudo R <sup>2</sup> | 0.105             |         | 0.117             |         | 0.145             |         | 0.105             |         |
| N                     | 1205              |         | 586               |         | 156               |         | 173               |         |

To pare down the analysis amidst religious traditions, we performed the same model on the Catholic sub-sample and what we deem an evangelical sub-sample – those that indicated they were both Protestant and “born again.” The results are displayed in the last two columns of Table 1. Among Catholics, ideology and religious importance ( $p=0.06$ ) are the only variables that significantly predict communion denial attitudes, such that the more conservative one is politically and more importance one places on religion in day-to-day living, the greater the odds that one will support denial of communion. While holding all other variables at their means, the predicted probability of supporting communion denial doubles as one moves from selecting “not very important” (0.151) or “fairly important” (0.113) to “very important” (0.307).

In the evangelical sub-sample, only the political variables were significantly associated with communion, again with conservative ideology and non-Democratic party identification increasing the odds of supporting denial. These results confirm a cross-sectional finding: 35% of evangelical Protestants support communion denial, making them the most supportive religious sub-group.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, only 23% of Catholics support communion denial. While the communion denial controversy is taking place entirely outside of their religious community, evangelicals support communion denial, most likely because it seems a way to show religious disapprobation for support of abortion rights, a salient issue in that community.

Next, we were interested in testing whether notions of communion denial would influence participant perceptions and support for Kerry. We used two items to assess this relationship: an indication of whether individuals would vote for Kerry in the upcoming election and a four-point favorability rating (the items correlated at 0.73,  $p<0.001$ ). These items loaded on one factor, using a principle components analysis, and a Cronbach’s alpha-derived score was created using both variables to account for the shared variance ( $\Theta=0.85$ ).<sup>7</sup> Our aim here is not to provide a full explanation of Kerry vote share or favorability but rather to assess whether our variable of interest demonstrates a relationship with these measures.

In the first column of Table 2, religiosity, political, and demographic variables were regressed on the support for Kerry variable detailed above.<sup>8</sup> Unsurprisingly, ideology and party identification were significant predictors, with the largest effects in the model ( $\beta=0.117$  and  $0.367$ , respectively). Religious importance, attendance, and communion denial attitudes also were significantly related to Kerry support, though all three effects are very low ( $\beta=0.062$ ,  $0.064$ , and  $0.087$ ,

<sup>6</sup> An ANOVA revealed a statistically-significant difference of groups at the  $p<0.05$  level.

<sup>7</sup> Through Stata, we created the variable by “alpha viewkerry votekerry, gen (kerryiness).”

<sup>8</sup> Effect sizes were computed separately from the models and are not reported in the tables.”



**Table 2** Support for Kerry regressed on communion denial attitudes, religiosity, political orientations and demographics.

|                       | All            |         | Catholics      |         | Evangelicals   |         |
|-----------------------|----------------|---------|----------------|---------|----------------|---------|
|                       | Coeff. (S.E.)  | p-Value | Coeff. (S.E.)  | p-Value | Coeff. (S.E.)  | p-Value |
| Age                   | 0.000 (0.001)  | 0.832   | -0.001 (0.003) | 0.767   | -0.001 (0.002) | 0.806   |
| Education             | 0.038 (0.025)  | 0.125   | 0.078 (0.049)  | 0.115   | -0.033 (0.046) | 0.472   |
| Female                | -0.013 (0.048) | 0.779   | -0.018 (0.095) | 0.849   | 0.068 (0.082)  | 0.409   |
| Ideology              | -0.110 (0.028) | 0.000   | -0.110 (0.050) | 0.029   | -0.103 (0.050) | 0.041   |
| Democrat              | 0.675 (0.051)  | 0.000   | 0.671 (0.099)  | 0.000   | 0.832 (0.093)  | 0.000   |
| Income                | -0.021 (0.010) | 0.035   | -0.028 (0.020) | 0.164   | -0.008 (0.017) | 0.651   |
| Religious Importance  | 0.083 (0.039)  | 0.034   | 0.160 (0.080)  | 0.046   | 0.092 (0.105)  | 0.380   |
| Religious attendance  | -0.042 (0.019) | 0.030   | -0.029 (0.040) | 0.477   | -0.030 (0.034) | 0.379   |
| Communion             | -0.164 (0.056) | 0.003   | -0.301 (0.112) | 0.008   | -0.025 (0.086) | 0.773   |
| Constant              | 1.207 (0.156)  | 0.000   | 1.043 (0.321)  | 0.001   | 0.961 (0.373)  | 0.010   |
| Pseudo R <sup>2</sup> | 0.209          |         | 0.242          |         | 0.281          |         |
| N                     | 1150           |         | 295            |         | 352            |         |

respectively). The latter two were negatively related to support for Kerry, in that higher attendance and support for denial of communion resulted in lower levels of support. Surprisingly, religious importance was positively related, such that increased importance is associated with more support for Kerry.

While additional analysis would be required to substantiate this theory, this last finding may demonstrate how differences in church attendance rates among religious denominations impact electoral behavior. John Kerry went on to win 52% support from exit poll respondents who attended religious services only a few times a year (National Election Pool 2004). Thus, once a model controls for ideology and frequency of religious attendance, the religious importance variable may capture the attitudes of mainline Protestants or other infrequent churchgoers, who nonetheless consider religion to be important to them.

Next, we performed this model on our religious affiliation sub-samples, as displayed in the last two columns of Table 2. Ideology and party identification have similar, significant predictive power and effect sizes as in the model on the full sample. Among Catholics, however, religious service attendance is not significant, and the effect sizes of religious importance (0.118) and communion denial attitudes (0.157) are still small but larger than in the full sample. None of the religiosity variables were significant in the evangelical sub-sample.

Again, with these small effect sizes, we are not suggesting that agreement or disagreement with communion denial had a demonstrable and sizable influence on the likelihood of voting for or favoring Kerry, but it is interesting that even with the presence of the traditional covariates, communion denial attitudes

contribute to the explanation of Kerry support. It is worth noting that the effect of communion denial attitudes on support for Kerry is not a result of priming and question ordering. The support for Kerry questions were asked at the beginning of the interview, while the communion denial questions were asked later. Thus, for those respondents who had not heard about the controversy, they could not utilize the knowledge gained from the interviewer to formulate their attitudes towards Kerry.

## Conclusion

Archbishop Raymond Burke enjoyed a great deal of support from Pope Benedict XVI, which might be expected, given that the communion denial doctrine that Burke acted upon was written by Benedict. In 2009, the then-pontiff appointed Burke to a key Vatican post that assisted in the appointment of American bishops. Burke became the second-highest ranking American in the Vatican. The installation of Pope Francis has, in a short amount of time, brought a significant change in direction for the Catholic Church. The new Pope has lamented the Church's recent "obsession" with abortion and other cultural issues. His attitudes on communion eligibility are also markedly different from that of his predecessor. He (as cited in Goodstein 2013) stated: "The Eucharist, although it is the fullness of sacramental life, is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak."

In order for communion denial to reemerge as a source of religious and political conflict in American life, it would seem a Catholic would need to become the standard-bearer of the Democratic Party in order to galvanize the issue onto the national agenda. In addition, such a reemergence would likely require support from more American bishops, as well support from the Vatican itself. Such support is unlikely from the current pontiff, given both his words and his actions. The story of Archbishop Burke has, in a way, come full circle. In December, 2013, Pope Francis removed him from the Congregation for Bishops (Religion News Service 2013).

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