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WHAT'S HAPPENED TO THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY?

The American people are weary of the 1984 Presidential campaign, yet we are only midway toward its finale on November 6. Articles are beginning to appear suggesting that the cause of public disaffection is that the primaries impose artificial and repetitive contests on the selection process.

However, the reason for the light turnout in Democratic primaries does not necessarily indicate that anything is wrong with the primary election system. It may simply indicate that Democratic voters are voting for "none of the above."

Traditionally, the Democratic Party was "home" for the majority of American Catholics. According to a recent Lou Harris poll, now only 40% of America's 23 million Catholics are Democrats, 25% are Republicans, and almost a third are independent.

The Democratic Presidential candidates this year have no significant differences of opinion on issues that are important to Catholics. Walter Mondale, Gary Hart, and Jesse Jackson stand united in supporting abortion, abortion funding, and gay rights legislation, and in opposing tuition tax credits and prayer in public schools.

This aggressive stance on social issues by Democratic leaders started after the 1968 Democratic Convention when Senator George McGovern led a commission that rewrote the party's rules. In addition to establishing racial quotas, the new rules decreed that half the delegates at future national nominating conventions must be women.

The new rules altered the make-up of Democratic National Conventions by tilting it away from old-time politicians such as Chicago Mayor Richard Daley and toward special-interest groups. They also made it easier for George McGovern to capture the Presidential nomination in 1972.

Rita Radish, executive director of National Pro-Life Democrats, says that the new rules gave power in the Democratic National Convention to the militant feminists who have been responsible for the inclusion of abortion rights in the Democratic platform ever since. Al Barkan, former national director of COPE, the political arm of the AFL-CIO,

agrees with this interpretation.

"When I was head of the labor movement," Barkan recently told a reporter for a Catholic newspaper, "I urged staying away from social issues. I told our people to concentrate on bread and butter issues: collective bargaining, social security, minimum wage. But the feminists prevailed, generally over my opposition, and they promoted abortion rights and lesbian rights. They should have concentrated on issues that united members."

Ann Lewis, political director of the Democratic National Committee, defends her party's espousal of the feminists' planks and is unconcerned about its effect on Catholic Democrats. She thinks that the Democratic Party's promotion of a nuclear freeze and attacks on the Reagan Administration's Central American policies are attractive to Catholic voters. Others think that Ann Lewis has mistaken the views of some liberal Catholic Bishops for millions of mainstream grassroots Catholic voters.

In Minnesota, Louisiana and Michigan, pro-life Catholics have waged a strong battle to elect and reelect pro-life Democrats to Congress. They argue that the right to life is not a partisan issue or the special province of one political party or the other.

It's a bit hard to maintain that position, however, in the face of the fact that no candidate who has any possibility of being nominated at the 1984 Democratic Convention in San Francisco is anti-abortion. Even Jesse Jackson did an about-face and switched from pro-life to pro-abortion in the February 11 Iowa debate.

Prior to that date, Jackson had insisted that life "is really a gift from God; therefore, one does not have the right to take away [through abortion] that which he does not have the ability to give." But when he decided to try for the Presidency, Jackson caved into the pro-abortion orthodoxy of the Democratic Convention delegates.

In Congress, only 37% of Democratic Congressmen voted for the Hyde Amendment to prohibit taxpayer funding of abortions, as compared to 78% of Republican Congressmen.

Mark Shields, a syndicated columnist and former campaign director for Edmund Muskie, Ted Kennedy, and Morris Udall, recently expressed concern about the Democratic Party's apparent rejection of the values of Middle America. He wrote that the Democratic Party's "vision must appeal -- beyond limited overtures to narrow groups like Transvestite Teamsters Against MX -- to a greater national interest."