

## Rallying the Catholic Left

By Patrick J. Reilly

*Summary: The 2012 race for the White House may depend heavily on the Catholic vote. Catholics significantly contributed to President Barack Obama's election in 2008, but neither Democrats nor Republicans can claim their loyalty. If the embattled president again attracts Catholic support despite recent disputes with Catholic leaders, the cause will largely be a network of Catholic leftists, university faculty, union organizers, and Democratic Party strategists. They are determined to prove the Left's appeal to Catholics, especially after the embarrassing defeat of the liberal Catholic Sen. John Kerry in his 2004 presidential bid.*

Two organizations—Catholics United and Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good—are the most powerful groups hoping to damage Republicans in 2012 by appealing to Catholics' traditional concern for the poor while trying to defuse concern over abortion. The latter issue has been problematic for the groups, because they must convince pro-life Roman Catholics to support mostly pro-choice Democrats by making the dubious claim that expanded federal welfare programs will reduce abortions among the poor.

These groups enjoy the assistance of a host of activists with ties to financier George Soros, the Tides Foundation and its affiliated Tides Center, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), and the Democratic Party. Behind the curtain, they have support from

such influential Democratic-leaning groups as Faith in Public Life and John Podesta's Center for American Progress.

These activists' preferred battlegrounds are in the media and at highly secularized Catholic



**Catholic Democrats founder Eric McFadden (shown in mugshot above) was convicted of charges related to promoting an underage prostitution ring in Columbus, Ohio in 2009.**

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universities because liberal reporters and professors lean heavily in their favor.

The 2004 presidential campaign for Kerry—a Catholic who dissented from his church on key moral issues including abortion and marriage—awakened Democrat strategists and activists to the need for Catholic-left organizations that would do battle against the bishops and conservative laymen. But despite concerted outreach to “religious voters” by the Kerry campaign and the establishment of a new group called the Catholic Voting Project, Kerry lost both the Catholic vote and the election.

The Democrats learned their lesson. Expanding and improving upon their efforts in 2004, Catholic-left groups played a major role in President Obama’s election in 2008. Now firmly established after eight years of groundwork, they are prepared to support the president in a tough reelection campaign, even while the Catholic Church defends its religious liberty from oppressive regulations stemming from President Obama’s health

care bill. Whether such challenges can be overcome will significantly test the Left’s political strength among Catholics.

## Catholics United

When Congressman Paul Ryan (R-Wisc.) agreed to speak at Georgetown University in April, the stakes were high. As a leading deficit hawk and Catholic legislator, he intended to present his argument for federal budget discipline and conservatism in the context of his understanding of Catholic social teaching on “subsidiarity,” the principle that the simplest form of organization—beginning with the individual and then the family—should be responsible for human welfare whenever possible. Ryan knew to expect opposition at the nation’s oldest Catholic university, which in recent decades has become a bastion of “politically correct” orthodoxy and dissent from Catholic teaching.

Not surprisingly, about 90 members of Georgetown’s staff and faculty signed a public letter to Ryan, aghast that he would cite Catholic social teaching in his opposition to heavy federal spending on welfare programs and high federal taxes.

But it was the group Catholics United that made a spectacle of what was supposed to be a serious conversation. “Were you there when they crucified the poor?” read the 50-foot Catholics United banner outside the event. The group denounced Ryan’s budget as “immoral” and “an outrageous slap in the face to our nation’s poorest and most vulnerable citizens.” Together with the protesting staff and faculty, Catholics United captured media attention and distracted Americans from Ryan’s argument.

But what may have appeared to be grassroots concern for the poor was nothing of the sort. Catholics United is a front for Democratic politics, co-founded by Christopher Korzen,

whose Catholic Voting Project sought to counter religious conservatives during John Kerry’s 2004 campaign. The Project set out to oppose Catholic Answers, an educational group that emphasized pro-life issues over economic concerns in its 2004 “Voter’s Guide for Serious Catholics,” and to denounce the “personal theological opinion” of then-Archbishop Raymond Burke of St. Louis, who likewise told Catholics to emphasize moral issues like abortion and same-sex marriage when voting.

The original director of Catholics United, Korzen brought a hard-nosed tenacity to the organization, probably drawing on his earlier career as an organizer for SEIU and activist for the Catholic peace lobby Pax Christi. Last year he moved to Maine to establish Maine’s Majority, a grassroots political action group, leaving Catholics United in the hands of co-founder James Salt.

Salt is a close ally of Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius. Until 2005 when Catholics United was launched, Salt was the director of “faith outreach” efforts for the Democratic Party in Kansas and did “messaging work” for Sebelius, who was then governor. He has also worked with left-leaning Catholic groups including Pax Christi and NETWORK, and he was on the “launch team” of Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good (CACG).

His ties to Sebelius are significant for Catholics. As head of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, she recently required many charitable religious institutions to provide insurance coverage for abortion-inducing drugs, sterilizations, and contraceptives, thereby provoking Catholic bishops to file a flurry of lawsuits and decry the Obama administration’s violation of religious liberty. Sebelius, although Catholic, has long been a supporter of abortion, a stance

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**Editor:** Matthew Vadum

**Publisher:** Terrence Scanlon

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### Address:

1513 16th Street, N.W.  
Washington, DC 20036-1480

**Phone:** (202) 483-6900

**Long-Distance:** (800) 459-3950

### E-mail Address:

[mvadum@capitalresearch.org](mailto:mvadum@capitalresearch.org)

### Web Site:

<http://www.capitalresearch.org>

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that led her bishop in Kansas to ask that she not present herself for Communion.

Such baggage persuaded many Catholics, including some outspoken bishops, to oppose President Obama's 2009 nomination of Sebelius to lead HHS, but Catholics United responded with an aggressive "Catholics for Sebelius" campaign. Declaring her a "woman of deep faith" with a record of "reducing the abortion rate in Kansas," the group sought to soften her image among Catholics. A public letter supporting her nomination was signed by professors from major Catholic universities, many of whom had endorsed President Obama's election the prior year.

More recently, Catholics United has challenged the bishops over Sebelius's health insurance mandate, urging Catholics to see a "silver lining" in the violation of their conscience rights: "Although we recognize the authority of Catholic teaching on the issue of contraception, we also acknowledge that ... increased access to contraceptive services will dramatically reduce the incidence of abortion in America." That's an old argument used to calm pro-life voters, but it's based on a dubious claim that runs counter to Americans' experience since the Sexual Revolution.

It also reflects the gentler side of Catholics United, which in May erupted with a fierce response to the American bishops' announcement that more than 40 Catholic dioceses and organizations would be suing the Obama administration to halt the HHS contraceptive mandate. Calling the bishops' religious liberty concerns an "insult" to Christians who are persecuted in other countries, Salt said the church's leadership "is more interested in playing politics than it is in providing for the common good."

Salt should know about politics. Catholics United has taken a number of positions on public policy issues, generally in defense of government welfare programs and in support of Democratic politics. It has opposed Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker's cost-cutting measures, encouraged the "Occupy Wall Street" protestors, and backed President



HHS Secretary Kathleen Sebelius with "Sesame Street" character Elmo at an event unveiling a children's health program, May 2009.

Obama's health care law and regulations.

Designated by the IRS as a 501(c)(4) membership organization that is permitted to lobby for legislation, Catholics United's annual financial forms are not publicly available the way that reports for 501(c)(3) educational nonprofits are. But we know it has received grants from the Tides Foundation, a \$170 million slush fund used by foundations and others to support leftist organizations; for example, Tides provided \$35,000 in 2008 and \$15,000 in 2010 for media outreach.

### **Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good**

CACG is the larger cousin of Catholics United. Both organizations were established

about the same time by some of the same political operatives, but CACG appears to have a much larger budget and broader support, perhaps because of its 501(c)(3) status. Its annual income has fluctuated depending on whether the year was a federal election year: \$1.1 million in 2006, \$829,000 in 2007, \$1.1 million in 2008, and \$686,000

in 2009 (the latest year for which records are available).

CACG's financial reports also seem to reveal something about its role in helping Catholics United. The 2007 statement shows that CACG paid Korzen \$84,821 for a 40-hour-per-week position, even though Korzen was identified as executive director of Catholics United throughout that period.

CACG's founding director was Alexia Kelley, who worked as the Kerry campaign's religious outreach coordinator while Korzen was leading the Catholic Voting Project. Kelley's task was to turn Catholics' attention to Kerry's liberal economic positions—which traditionally have attracted Catholics to the

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Democrat Party—and away from moral issues like abortion. Kelley had previously worked nearly a decade at the bishops' Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD), a controversial grant program that gave more than \$7 million to the now-disgraced organization ACORN on Kelley's watch.

The political orientation of CACG and its ties to the Obama administration are impossible to hide—indeed, President Obama made his regard for CACG perfectly clear with his 2009 selection of Kelley to direct the Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships under HHS Secretary Sebelius. He also tapped the founding chairman Elizabeth Frawley Bagley, a leading donor to Democrats and the 2008 Obama campaign, to a position at the State Department concerning interfaith relations around the globe. (Bagley is perhaps most notorious for hosting a society bash in 2000 to display Cuban refugee Elian Gonzalez after the boy was seized at gunpoint on orders from President Clinton's Attorney General Janet Reno.)

Kelley's successor as executive director, Victoria Kovara, is a former community organizer for the Gamaliel Foundation in Chicago, which played a significant role in President Obama's rise to political power.

Co-founder Tom Perriello went on to serve one term as a Democratic congressman and is now president of the Center for American Progress Action Fund. CACG's chairman, Fred Rotondaro, is a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress, which is led by former Clinton White House chief of staff John Podesta and vigorously backs President Obama's "progressive" agenda.

CACG has interesting ties to organized labor, which historically has had close relationships to the Catholic Church and the Democratic

Party. Board member Edward McElroy was president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) when the union endorsed both Kerry and Obama for president. (AFT, of course, is one of the nation's strongest opponents of any education reform that would aid Catholic parochial schools.) The CACG advisory board includes Tom Chabolla, assistant to the president of the SEIU; Tiffany Heath, national organizer for the AFL-CIO; and Steve Callahan, a former AFL-CIO coordinator of labor organizing campaigns.

CACG has also tapped deeply into Catholic universities, well aware that its message is especially welcome at institutions like Georgetown and Notre Dame. The Rev. William Byron, a Jesuit priest who has been president of the Catholic University of America and the University of Scranton, serves on the CACG board. So does Steve Schneck, director of the Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies at Catholic University. The advisory board includes the president of the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities, as well as several theologians and other professors from Boston College, Georgetown University, and elsewhere.

Schneck has been particularly vocal in support of CACG's agenda. He signed the statement supporting Notre Dame's honorary degree to President Obama as well as Catholics United's letter supporting Sebelius's nomination to head HHS. He was quoted recently in the *New York Times* defending Georgetown's choice of Sebelius as a graduation speaker; the article deceptively identified him as a professor without disclosing his political activism. Last year Schneck organized a conference at Catholic University on the Catholic Church's relationship to labor unions that featured Alexia Kelley and AFL-CIO president emeritus John

Sweeney, who used the occasion to accuse the university of unfair labor practices that violate Catholic teaching.

Also last year, Schneck organized Catholic professors to sign a letter opposing the policies of House Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio), who had been invited to deliver the commencement address at Catholic University.

"From the apostles to the present, the Magisterium of the Church has insisted that those in power are morally obliged to preference the needs of the poor," complained the professors in their letter to Boehner. "Your record in support of legislation to address the desperate needs of the poor is among the worst in Congress. This fundamental concern should have great urgency for Catholic policy makers. Yet, even now, you work in opposition to it."

## Politics of Compassion

Perhaps CACG's most important and infamous action was its August 2008 release of a study by Professors Michael Bailey of Georgetown University and Joseph Wright of the University of Notre Dame, claiming to have discovered evidence that abortion rates could be driven down by redistributive policies aiding low-income Americans. The theory was that financial hardship causes most abortions—a powerful argument for Catholics, if only it were true. Three months after the report's release, CACG was forced to abandon the study because of faulty research, and Georgetown's Bailey declined to put his name on a revised study finding far less of a benefit to wealth redistribution. But the Obama campaign had already benefited significantly.

Just prior to releasing that report, CACG had joined with the Catholic lobby NETWORK to organize a Philadelphia convention for the



“Common Good,” but with a clearly partisan aim. Sponsored by a number of Catholic-left groups and the AFL-CIO, the event included a discussion of how to “mobilize for action for Election 2008.” Later Katie Paris, a leader at Faith in Public Life (a nondenominational religious-left group funded overwhelmingly by George Soros and the Ford Foundation), would tell the far-left *Nation* magazine that CACG had been “very aggressive in this [2008] election cycle.”

Soon after President Obama’s election, CACG publicly defended his selection as a commencement speaker and recipient of an honorary degree at the University of Notre Dame, despite public opposition from 83 bishops and more than 367,000 Catholics who signed the Cardinal Newman Society’s online petition. CACG purchased a full-page advertisement in the *South Bend Tribune* with signatures from Catholics supporting Notre Dame’s defiance of the bishops.

This year, CACG is back with a voter’s guide for Catholics that predictably highlights leftist concerns while undermining the bishops’ positions on abortion and religious liberty. On the latter topic, CACG embraces the Obama administration’s proposal to force insurance companies or third parties to pay for sterilization and abortifacient coverage of employees at objecting Catholic institutions. The Catholic bishops have rejected the proposal because it still forces Catholic employers and employees to participate in insurance coverage that violates Catholic morality. Indeed, many Catholic employers, such as the Washington, D.C. archdiocese, self-insure and thus *are* the insurance company that would be faced to pay for the conscience-violating coverage.

The CACG voter’s guide attacks Tea Party activism as “rooted in explicitly anti-Christian

teachings” and describes conservatism as allowing “no room for Christ and no room for human love.”

In order to protect exorbitant tax cuts for the super-rich, some advocate terminating social programs that promote the poor and middle class, both at home and abroad, often in ways that are profoundly anti-life. Many have sought to deny the basic rights of workers to organize and collectively bargain. In the strongest possible terms, we denounce this new ideology as un-Christian, un-Catholic, and, indeed, as a perversion of America’s own best traditions.

Funding for CACG’s efforts comes from sources that are not often Catholic-friendly.

The atheist George Soros has donated to CACG through his philanthropies, giving \$100,000 through the Foundation to Promote Open Society (2009) and \$300,000 through his Open Society Institute (since 2007).

The Tides Foundation has contributed \$190,000 to CACG since 2007. Tides, incidentally, is heavily funded by Soros. His Open Society Institute has given at least \$25,776,623 to Tides and its affiliated Tides Center since 1999. The Foundation to Promote Open Society, has given at least \$9,844,312 to the Tides network since 2009.

The Arca Foundation, tied to former CACG chairman Elizabeth Frawley Bagley, made \$200,000 in grants since 2007.

Teresa Heinz Kerry, wife of Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.) has given \$45,000 to CACG

through the Heinz Family Foundation since 2006.

## Catholic Democrats

Catholics United and CACG represent the new model of left-wing political outreach to Catholics which claims the mantle of Catholic orthodoxy even while emphasizing redistributive policies over fundamental moral teachings.

Their approach stands in contrast to the older model exemplified by Catholics for Choice (formerly Catholics for a Free Choice), which is a Ford Foundation-supported front group for the abortion-rights lobby. Although Catholics for Choice embraces policy goals very similar to its newer rivals, it makes no pretense of agreeing with the Catholic church on abortion or contraception and is not concerned with economic issues. There is some evidence of conflict with the newer organizations: when Catholics for Choice director Jon O’Brien opposed CACG founder Alexia Kelley’s appointment to HHS because of her on-the-record support for restricting abortion, Catholics United’s Korzen publicly accused Catholics for Choice of “increasing irrelevance” and the “inability to offer any real solutions to the challenges of our day.”

Catholic Democrats, founded in 2005, is more of the newer model—albeit with less clout because of serious scandal involving its founder, Eric McFadden. In 2009 he was convicted of charges related to promoting an underage prostitution ring in Columbus, Ohio. McFadden was a significant leader among the Catholic Left: he founded Catholics for Kerry during the 2004 presidential campaign, the next year served as president of a group called Catholics for Faithful Citizenship, was a spokesman for CACG in 2006, was Hillary Clinton’s top organizer for

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Catholic outreach during her 2008 campaign, and directed the Office of Faith-Based Initiatives for Ohio Gov. Ted Strickland.

Today the president of Catholic Democrats is Dr. Patrick Whelan, a Harvard physician who was co-director of Catholics for Kerry and has served on the Faith Advisory Council for former Gov. Howard Dean's Democratic National Committee. Whelan has continued to lead Catholic Democrats much in the same manner as McFadden, with aggressive partisanship and disdain for bishops perceived to have a conservative bent.

The group sponsors Catholics for Obama-Biden with the obvious mission of promoting President Obama's 2008 campaign and his re-election this year. The website features a welcome message from Catholic actor and activist Martin Sheen and a book-length missive by Whelan on *The Catholic Case for Obama*. Whelan writes:

Barack has lived a life consonant with the Catholic Social Tradition, and in the process suffered the insults of those who thought he was too close to the Catholics—and now of some conservative Catholics who think his vision is too distant from theirs. But his message of reconciliation—in U.S. relations with the world, amidst the longstanding battles over abortion, between people of different races and economic levels—is one that hasn't been heard in a generation, and rings true now for people across the political spectrum and from all the American religious traditions.

Perhaps trying to improve on the flawed effort of CACG in 2008 to provide evidence that welfare programs significantly reduce abortions, in 2010 Whelan published a study

claiming that abortions declined in Massachusetts after 2006, when then-Gov. Mitt Romney signed a universal health care law. Catholic Democrats was vocal in support of Obamacare, even urging Catholic members of Congress to give up partisanship for Lent in order to approve the health care law by Easter 2010. The prior year, Whelan accused Rhode Island Bishop Thomas Tobin of interfering in the health care debate because the bishop had written then-Congressman Patrick Kennedy (D-R.I.) a private letter years earlier, asking that he stop receiving Communion because of his public dissent from church teachings.

Also in 2010, Catholic Democrats sought to influence mid-term congressional elections with a Catholic voter's guide and a media campaign focused on so-called social justice issues.

The organization has interesting ties to Voice of the Faithful (VOTF), which was established to lobby for changes in the church following revelations of sex abuse by Catholic priests. Although not overtly political, VOTF has tended to attract "progressive" Catholics and many who dissent from Catholic teaching. Steven Krueger, national director for Catholic Democrats, was the first executive director of VOTF from 2002 to 2004. Whelan also recruited Suzanne Morse, former communications director of VOTF, to help lead the group.

The board also has ties to the legendary family of Catholic Democrats, the Kennedys. Members include former Maryland Lt. Gov. Kathleen Kennedy Townsend and Victoria Reggie Kennedy, widow of Sen. Ted Kennedy. So it was no surprise that Catholic Democrats responded strongly when Vicki Kennedy was disinvited from the commencement ceremony this year at Anna Maria College in Worcester, Massa-

chusetts. Local Bishop Robert McManus had expressed concern about her fidelity to Catholic teaching on abortion.

"These bishops have one standard for Democrats and another standard for Republicans," complained Krueger, while delivering 20,000 petition signatures to Bishop McManus in support of Kennedy. "They are politicizing the faith."

## Whose Politics?

The irony, of course, is that these Catholic-left groups are often quite overtly partisan, and they frequently abuse Catholic teaching—even to the point of undermining the Catholic bishops—for political aims.

But they also know that the average American, perhaps even the average Catholic, does not understand distinctions between Catholic teaching on issues like abortion—which the church teaches is always wrong—versus teachings on war, social justice, the economy, and so on. The latter topics involve questions of right and wrong that vary by particular circumstances (for instance, wars may be just or unjust), and so on those issues debate between liberals and conservatives within the Catholic fold is legitimate. As Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger wrote to the American bishops before he became Pope Benedict XVI, "There may be a legitimate diversity of opinion even among Catholics about waging war and applying the death penalty, but not however with regard to abortion and euthanasia."

What is government's role in promoting social justice? How does one morally balance the value of social programs with the danger of a growing national debt? Catholics won't find answers to these questions in their catechism, but groups like Catholics United and CACG suggest the answers are written in stone.

President Obama told Catholics at Notre Dame in 2009 that he sought respectful dialogue on such issues:

It is beyond our capacity as human beings to know with certainty what God has planned for us or what He asks of us, and those of us who believe must trust that His wisdom is greater than our own. This doubt should not push us away from our faith. But it should humble us. It should temper our passions, and cause us to be wary of self-righteousness. It should compel us to remain open, and curious, and eager to continue the moral and spiritual debate that began for so many of you within the walls of Notre Dame. And within our vast democracy, this doubt should remind us to persuade through reason, through an appeal whenever we can to universal rather than parochial principles, and most of all through an abiding example of good works, charity, kindness, and service that moves hearts and minds.

Moving hearts and minds is most certainly the objective of Catholic-left organizations, but the leading groups focus much more on media campaigns and political protests than dialogue. While the political loyalties of the Catholic bishops are never easy to determine, the partisan leanings of CACG, Catholics United, and of course Catholic Democrats are readily apparent.

In this context, one easily appreciates the frustration of Archbishop Charles Chaput, who in 2008 presided in Denver, Colorado. One month prior to the election of President Obama, Archbishop Chaput had enough of the partisanship and distortions. He told a crowd that “the work of Democratic-friendly

groups like Catholics United and Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good” had “done a disservice to the Church” and “confused the natural priorities of Catholic social teaching.”

As we approach the 2012 presidential election, it would seem not much has changed, except for one thing: the Catholic-left groups have had time to grow and prepare. What impact they might have on the election remains to be seen; it could bring about the demise or the continued growth of such political advocacy groups.

*Patrick J. Reilly is president of the Cardinal Newman Society and a former editor at Capital Research Center.*

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Your contribution to advance our watchdog work is deeply appreciated.

Many thanks.

Terrence Scanlon  
President

# Briefly Noted

What could *possibly* go wrong? Former senior **ACORN** official **Joe McGavin**, now a director at the **Illinois Housing Development Authority** (IHDA), has been put in charge of \$445.6 million in taxpayer funds from a federal foreclosure relief program. McGavin was “Chicago Operations Manager” at **Affordable Housing Centers of America** (AHCOA) from November 2008 through January 2011, as **Judicial Watch** discovered. Until two years ago, AHCOA was called **ACORN Housing**. The non-profit corporation renamed itself after undercover activists caught ACORN employees offering helpful advice about starting a prostitution ring on video in 2009. **Richard M. Daley**, the gun-grabbing mayor of Chicago from 1989 to 2011, happens to be “Of Counsel” at **Katten Muchin Rosenman LLP**, the same law firm at which IHDA chairman **Terry E. Newman** is a partner. All just coincidences, we’re sure.

While we’re on the topic of ACORN, a new ACORN-inspired group called the **Leadership Center for the Common Good** (LCCG) has sprung up in Washington, D.C. The board of the tax-exempt 501(c)(3) nonprofit group is chaired by **Kathleen Kennedy Townsend**, a former Maryland lieutenant governor and left-wing activist. The LCCG “embraces a strategic opportunity to fill, at the national level, the void left by the dismantling of ACORN,” according to one of its funders, the Seattle-based **Marguerite Casey Foundation**. The group will apparently focus on training community organizers to rage against capitalism.

A left-leaning “527” political action committee called **Emerge America** has reportedly lost its tax-exempt status. Three of **Emerge America’s** 501(c)(4) affiliates were also denied tax-exempt status. The group made no bones about its partisan objectives, a big no-no as far as the **IRS** is concerned. Its website described Emerge America as “the premier training program for Democratic women.” It said, “We inspire women to run, we hone their skills to win. Our goal is clear: to increase the number of Democratic women in public office.”

New York mayor **Michael Bloomberg** is at it again. Fresh from proposing a local crackdown on large servings of soda pop, now his charity, the **Bloomberg Family Foundation**, is offering \$5 million in cash for new nanny-state proposals aimed at forcing Americans to become healthier. “If you look, the federal and state government seems to be paralyzed, and they work at a policy level,” Bloomberg was quoted as saying. “So we are trying to find out what’s the best ideas each mayor could maybe have, a different idea that may be transferable to another city.”

Corporations, especially financial institutions, never seem to learn that the activist Left can never be appeased. In that vein the **Bank of America** just unveiled a 10-year, \$50-billion plan for underwriting money-losing, hopelessly inefficient green energy programs. The bank plans to fork over \$100 million in grants to activist groups promoting low-carbon projects this year. This is a calculated public relations move intended to help the bank shake its image as a friend of the coal industry.