

# Time Out!



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FRIDAY, APRIL 15, 2005

## The Vatican Already Has The Nuclear Option

by Michael in New York on [4/15/2005 05:58:00 PM](#)

Maybe Frist is taking his cues from the late pontiff John Paul II. I'm currently reading "Heirs of the Fisherman: Behind the Scenes of Papal Death and Succession" by John-Peter Pham (Oxford Univ. Press). It's a great primer for the conclave beginning Monday that will elect the next Pope of the roughly one billion Catholics in the world.

JP II was already disappointingly conservative to me and of course I despair of a liberal Pope coming out of a conclave where 99% of the voters were put there by him. But as if that weren't safeguard enough, I find out that "in a radical departure from previous legislation" JP II instituted the nuclear option.

Fiddling with the rules of the conclave is a perennial pastime of pontiffs, but one long-term tradition is that the Pope must receive a vote from two-thirds plus one of the cardinals present. So if there were 90 voters, they'd keep working at it until 61 voted for one candidate. But JP II changed that. If after 10 to 12 days of voting a new Pope hasn't been elected (not an unusual amount of time for this process, by the way), then a simple majority of 50% plus one will prevail.

This change from a "super-majority" to a simple majority has all the pitfalls in a Pope that we've considered for a Supreme Court Justice -- rather than switching to a candidate that has broader support, a core group of a simple majority can potentially elect someone who is vehemently opposed by almost half of the people present.

Knowing this, of course, cardinals might be far less willing to compromise -- why bother when they can have their way if they just wait long enough, even if it means electing an extremely divisive pontiff?

In the past, a dragged out conclave usually meant a compromise candidate -- ie less extreme -- was going to come to the fore. Now it means the exact opposite. So the longer it takes, the more worried moderate, Vatican II loving Catholics like myself will be.



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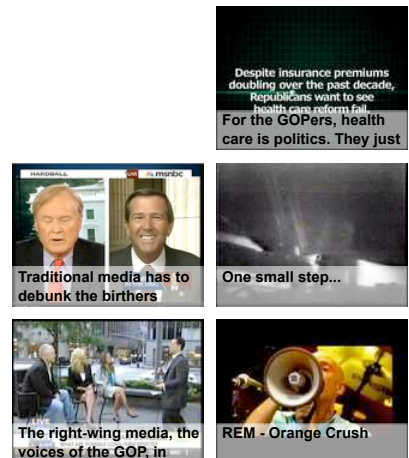
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