News



U.S. Senate candidate Amy McGrath rallies with supporters during a campaign stop at Woodland Park in Lexington, Kentucky, Aug. 25. (AP Photo/Bryan Woolston)



by Melinda Henneberger

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The death of U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg — and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell's decision to move forward with a confirmation hearing within weeks of the national election — has brought renewed attention to the Senate race in Kentucky, where McConnell is being challenged by Libertarian Brad Barron and moderate Democrat Amy McGrath.

McGrath is a former Marine Corps fighter pilot, mother of three and a Catholic. First seen as a long shot, she has been gaining on McConnell, with the most recent polls showing her down by seven points, 41% to McConnell's 48%.

She grew up Irish Catholic in Kentucky, with parents who had briefly considered religious life and priesthood. Her father taught at a Catholic high school, and Amy attended Catholic schools, where the sisters who taught her inspired her to live a life of service. Her Catholic faith was an important grounding during tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, she said.

McGrath is a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, where she later taught in the political science department, and has a master's degree in global security from Johns Hopkins University. She served as a congressional fellow, advising a senior member of the U.S. House of Representatives Armed Services Committee on defense and foreign policy, and later was a Marine Corps liaison to the State Department and other federal agencies.

She told NCR freelance writer Melinda Henneberger that she sees her campaign as about corruption in Washington, not about abortion politics or the Supreme Court nominee.

"I don't know that people should be questioning people's personal faith," McGrath said about nominee Amy Coney Barrett. "When you question somebody, it should be on their interpretation of the laws. Whether they respect precedent. What their qualifications are. That's where I think we should go.

What follows is a lightly edited Q&A with McGrath about her faith, her Senate race and her concerns about the country.

***Henneberger*: What was your first reaction when you heard that Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg had died?**

McGrath: Oh, sadness. Sadness for our country. She was a giant. I mean gosh, I look back and I wouldn't have even had the jobs I had in the last 25 years if it wasn't for her. She was such a strong voice of dissent at times when that was needed.

So sadness, but also how great she was and how much of an American patriot she was. She's the kind of person that makes me proud to be an American.

I know someone whose daughter took off for Kentucky to volunteer for your campaign after she heard the news. How has the push to fill Justice Ginsburg's seat changed your race?

Sen. McConnell sees this as a chance to play politics again because he is the ultimate partisan. He sees this as an opportunity to divide us yet again. Justice Ginsburg was confirmed 96 to 3 in an era when Mitch McConnell *wasn't* the leader. He has built a system and a Congress — he has built it! — that is so polarized that the Supreme Court is now a weapon, [which] is so against what we should be doing and what has worked in our country for the last 200 years.

Let's put the political games aside and focus on this country, focus on the common good.

> 'When I was stationed all around the world, living in tents or air stations, it was going to Mass that connected me to home. It was a connection to what I knew, and what I knew to be true.'
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That's such a Catholic concept, the common good. Talk a little bit about your life as a Catholic.

I grew up in Northern Kentucky, Irish Catholic family on both sides. My father was in seminary for a year. He left, which was good ...

Luckily for you, yeah.

And my mother had also considered the convent. That didn't work out. My parents were devout, very faithful, every Sunday we'd go ...

Wait, did that not work out because they met?

No, they knew one another before Dad went into the cemetery — *seminary*! Seminary. They knew each other in high school, but they were just friends. He after a year decided that that was not for him. Mom actually did the convent for I think about a week. It didn't work out is pretty much what she says. My mother has always been someone who was going against the grain, particularly as a woman.

She had contracted polio at the age of 10, became handicapped and was able to overcome that, and that gave her a lot of confidence. She was very smart, and ended up being one of the first women to graduate from the University of Kentucky Medical School. She became a medical doctor.

But both Mom and Dad, Catholic faith was really important to them, and they instilled that in all of us. I'm the youngest of three. We went to church every week, we went to Catholic schools, Dad taught at a Catholic high school, [was] an English teacher at Roger Bacon [in Cincinnati] for over 40 years and his colleagues were the brothers and the Franciscan priests. Dad *loved* the Franciscans.

I was taught initially by the Sisters of Mercy and then the Sisters of Notre Dame, and they taught me so much [through] how they lived their lives. They call it the vow of poverty, but it's really a vow of service. They cared for others, and that was how I grew up, with this being something that we do.

And when I went into the military, my Catholic faith was a way for me to connect back home. When I was stationed all around the world, living in tents or air stations, it was going to Mass that connected me to home. It was a connection to what I knew, and what I knew to be true, if that makes sense.

It does. How would all of that be reflected in your service as a senator?

As I look at the Senate right now being so dysfunctional and so partisan and so just vicious and basically unprincipled, I want to bring to the Senate just a basic "common good" attitude. My faith is a personal thing; I don't try to impose it on others.



Amy McGrath at an event in Los Angeles Dec. 14, 2019 (Flickr/Louise Palanker)

[But in] Catholic social teaching, it's so important that everybody deserves health care, that people deserve the dignity of work, that the interests of business in lining the pockets of CEOs don't constantly override the interests of economic justice in this country. That we continue to tackle things like racism. That on immigration, we

treat everybody with dignity and respect. That we care for the environment. These are fundamentally Catholic principles.

Before the Affordable Care Act, there was not a single insurer in Kentucky that would cover maternity care! I had 'em while I was in the military, so thank God, I didn't have to pay $15,000 just to have my child. Is that right?

How worried are you about our democracy?

I'm extremely worried. If the events of the last few weeks don't make you worried about our democracy, I don't know what will. You have a man who has no ideology, no moral compass. Principles of conservatism basically out the door. The McConnell Rule on the Supreme Court in 2016 is "Let the people decide," then he changes it in 2020.

Everything is transactional, which is really hurting our democracy. People don't believe that our government can even work. Everything from health care to Supreme Court justices to *wearing a mask* is politicized. Yes, I'm very worried, and I do not believe it's going to get better until we get the people who are there out, which is why I'm for term limits and some other structural changes.

What is your prayer about your race?

That's a great question. My prayer is that this race makes a difference for our country. Yes, I want to win, but it's not all about winning. If someone were to say to me, "Amy, you're going to run this race, you're going to have $60 million in attack ads spread about you to smear your name by your opponent and at the end of the day you're going to win and we're going to get Mitch McConnell out, but you're not going to be a senator," I would still be OK with that, 110%. Because to me, making a difference for our country is getting the one man out who is literally hurting our democracy, is perverting it right now, and has been for a long time. That's just the way I feel.

How do you feel Democrats should question Trump's Supreme Court nominee Amy Coney Barrett about her faith?

I don't know that people should be questioning people's personal faith. What anyone, Democrats or Republicans — and frankly, I wish your question had been Democrats or Republicans — when you question somebody, it should be on their

interpretation of the laws. Whether they respect precedent. What their qualifications are. That's where I think we should go.

How [do] they feel about things like labor rights, dark money, the balance between the freedom of speech and the super PACS that are literally corrupting our democracy. Where's the balance? Those are things we really need to delve into.

The corruption in Washington has gotten worse and worse, and a lot of that is because of all the money in politics in a post-*Citizens United* world. There are entities that can pour millions of dollars into races to lie to the public in their ads, and no transparency as to who these individuals [are.] That's what I would be focused on.

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How is the abortion issue playing out in your race?

Obviously, I'm someone who's Catholic, who grew up and was educated in the church. My husband and I have three small kids. I don't believe the job of government is to legislate Catholic doctrine for everyone to follow. I don't believe the government should be making personal and family decisions like that.

We have reasonable restrictions on abortion as outlined in *Roe* v. *Wade*. We need to look at lots of different issues pertaining to life: health care, tackling poverty, making sure that we have jobs and labor laws. It's not just one issue. That's kind of where I'm at, and I think many Kentuckians feel the same way.

The Republican talking point is that Amy McGrath and every other Democrat wants to make sure that a woman can get an abortion right up until the moment she gives birth. How do you answer that?

That's not true! We already have reasonable restrictions under *Roe* v. *Wade*. There [are] only extreme situations that are medical crises [where such late-stage abortions are performed.] It's just false and wrong and as the mother of three small kids, it's a slap in the face to tell people that I would somehow be for what my opponent says about me, this 100% ninth-month stuff. It is offensive, and should be offensive to every single mother out there who's voting, that you would hear that

from these guys.

This is what McConnell does; he has to lie because he doesn't want to talk about health care and poverty and unions and investing in families and criminal justice reform. He doesn't want to talk about unemployment in Kentucky, and people losing their health insurance because their health insurance was tied to employment and they don't have any other options.

He doesn't want to talk about any of this, so he has to make things up. He does it all the time, and is doing it right now with the racial protests around the country. He makes things up.

I always ask groups when I talk to them, does anybody even think Mitch McConnell has a plan [on how to respond to COVID-19]? Look at what he's done. He has the highest level of classification of any member of Congress. He got security briefings on the coronavirus back in January. He didn't do *anything*. He didn't even tell us about this coronavirus until the stock market crashed.

> 'Mitch McConnell ... has built a system and a Congress — he has built it! — that is so polarized that the Supreme Court is now a weapon.'
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And now we're eight months into this thing and we still don't have a national plan. He took vacation when we needed more aid. He wouldn't negotiate; he just walked away. I mean, Kentucky is hurting right now. But boy, I'll tell you, he'll go to bat to ram through a Supreme Court justice.

What do Kentucky voters ask you about abortion?

They might think that it's wrong, but many, many Kentuckians do not believe government should be that deciding factor. I understand that it is a touchy thing. It's hard. It's hard for me. [But] the Supreme Court isn't just about one issue.

The first issue that's going to come up is going to be the repeal of the Affordable Care Act, and the guy that I'm running against tried to repeal this, and throw 250,000 Kentuckians off their health insurance. That's so important as a Catholic for me, that we make sure we work towards helping people get health care.

What's the hardest question you've gotten from a voter?

[No one question, but it's hard seeing the despair of voters who have given up on all politicians, which is something she had never planned or hoped to be.]

I wanted to serve my country, I wanted to be a pilot, I wanted to be in the military, I wanted to be a mom someday. I did my flying stuff before I was a mom, thank God, and I want to go [to the Senate] to make a difference, because I learned a lot about leadership in the United States Marine Corps, and those traits of basic leadership I learned in the military, we don't have 'em in Washington right now and we certainly don't have 'em under Mitch.

Something I ask myself every day, given everything that's going on in this country, is why are the Republicans, from Donald Trump to Mitch McConnell, still doing as well as they are?

There is a lot of misinformation. People don't know what to believe. You have somebody who lies all the time and people don't necessarily know the difference between that and the truth anymore.

But I fundamentally believe in our country and that's why I'm running. We can fix this [but] we have to stand up and say Kentucky can do better, and believe we can do better. And I do, obviously.

Well thank you so much ...

You know, when I was in the military, my father gave me a subscription to the National Catholic Reporter.

Mine gave me a subscription to Human Events. I think you got the better deal!

[Melinda Henneberger is a columnist and editorial writer for the Kansas City Star and writes a monthly column for USA Today.]

This story appears in the **Election 2020** feature series. View the full series.