News



A parishioner prays at St. Peter the Apostle Catholic Church in Reading, Pa., on June 16, 2024. (AP/Luis Andres Henao)

Luis Andres Henao

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Religion and politics frequently overlap in Reading, an old industrial city in one of the most pivotal swing states of this year’s presidential election.

In Pennsylvania, there is early precedent for this kind of thing. The state began as a haven for Quakers and other European religious minorities fleeing persecution. That includes the parents of Daniel Boone, the national folk hero born just miles from Reading, a town where the Latino population is now the majority.

Today, the Catholic mayor is also a migrant — and the first Latino to hold the office in Reading’s 276-year history. Mayor Eddie Moran is keenly aware of the pivotal role Pennsylvania could play in the high-stakes race, when a few thousand votes in communities like his could decide the future of the United States.

“Right now, with the growing Latino population and the influx of Latinos moving into cities such as Reading, it’s definitely an opportunity for the Latino vote to change the outcome of an election," Moran says. “It's not a secret anymore.”

A community of spirituality — and Latinos

In Reading, the sky is dotted with crosses atop church steeples, one after the other. Catholic church pews fill up on Sundays and many stand for the services. Elsewhere, often in nondescript buildings, evangelical and Pentecostal congregations gather to sing, pray and sometimes speak in tongues.

Outside, salsa, merengue and reggaeton music (often sung in Spanglish) blast from cars and houses along city streets first mapped out by William Penn’s sons — and that now serve a thriving downtown packed with restaurants proudly owned by Latinos.

This is a place where, when the mayor is told that his town is 65% Latino, he takes pride in saying: “It’s more like 70%.”

They believe in their political sway. A recent Pew Research Center survey found that eight in 10 Latino registered voters say their vote can make a difference.

On a recent Sunday, Luis Hernandez, 65, born in Puerto Rico, knelt to pray near the altar at St. Peter the Apostle Catholic Church. Later, walking out after Mass, Hernandez said he’ll vote for Trump — even on the very day of the former president's criminal convictions related to hush money for a porn star.

“Biden is old,” Hernandez says, and then reflects on how Trump is only a few years younger. “Yes, but you look at Trump and you see the difference. ... Biden’s a good man. He’s decent. But he’s too old.”

In the weeks after he spoke, many more Americans would join in calls for Biden to withdraw from the race after his debate debacle, which crystallized growing concerns that, at 81, he’s too old.

Immigration is a key topic on people's lips

It’s not just about Biden’s age or debate performance. It’s also, Hernandez says, about the border crisis. He says too many immigrants are arriving in the United States, including some he considers criminals. And, he adds, so much has changed since his Dominican-born father arrived in the 1960s — when, he says, it was easier to enter and stay in America.

For some, there are other issues as well.

“It’s the economy, immigration and abortion,” says German Vega, 41, a Dominican American who became a U.S. citizen in 2015. Vega, who describes himself as “pro-life,” voted for Trump in 2020 and plans to do so again in November.

“Biden doesn’t know what he’s saying. He doesn’t know what he’s doing, and we have a country divided,” Vega says. Trump is “a person of character. ... He looks confident. He never gives up; he’s always fighting for what he believes.”

Of course, there are some here who just don’t favor taking sides — except if it’s for Jesus. Listen to Pastor Alex Lopez, a Puerto Rican who cuts hair in a barber shop on the first floor of his home on Saturdays, and preaches on the second floor on Sundays.

“We're neutral,” he says. “We just believe in God.”

Advertisement

A city with deep industrial roots resurges

Reading was once synonymous with iron and steel. Those industries cemented the creation of the Reading Railroad (an early stop on the Monopoly gameboard) that

helped fuel the Industrial Revolution and became, in the late 19th century, one of the country's major corporations.

Today, the city of about 95,000 people, 65 miles northwest of Philadelphia, has a fast-increasing population. However, it is one of the state’s poorest cities, with a median household income of about $44,000, compared to about $72,000 in Pennsylvania.

Reading is 67% Latino, according to U.S. Census figures, and home to high concentrations of people of Dominican and Puerto Rican heritage — as well as Colombians and Mexicans, who own restaurants and other businesses around town.

Political candidates are taking notice of Reading's political and economic power. The 2020 presidential election in Pennsylvania was decided by about 82,000 votes, and — according to the Pew Research Center — there are more than 600,000 eligible Latino voters in the state.

It’s true that Reading still leans mostly Democratic — Biden crushed Trump in the city by a margin of about 46 percentage points in 2020. However in that election, voting-age turnout in the city (about 35%) was significantly lower than the rest of the state (about 67%).

But the Trump campaign doesn’t want to miss out on the opportunity to turn it around. It recently teamed up with the Republican National Committee and Pennsylvania GOP to open a “Latino Americans for Trump” office in a red-brick building near the Democratic mayor's downtown office.

Moran has made a plea to Biden and other Democrats to take notice and visit Reading before the election. It's crucial, he says.

“I think that it’s still predominantly Democratic,” he says. “But the candidates need to come out and really explain that to the community.”

One development, Moran says, is that religious leaders are now less hesitant to get involved in politics.

“Things change, even for churches,” he says. Clergy “realize the importance that they hold as faith-based leaders and religious leaders and they’re making a call of action through their congregations.”

The message: Get out and vote

A few blocks from St. Peter's, a crowd gathers inside First Baptist Church, which dates to the late 19th century.

In a sign of Reading's changing demographics, the aging and shrinking congregation of white Protestants donated the building to Iglesia Jesucristo es el Rey (Church Jesus Christ is the King), a thriving Latino congregation of some 100 worshippers who have shared the building with First Baptist for nearly a decade.

Pastors Carol Pagan and her husband Jose, both from Puerto Rico, recently led prayer. At the end of the service, microphone in hand, the pastors encourage parishioners to vote in the election — irrespective of who they choose as the president.

"The right to vote is," Carol Pagan says before her husband chimes in: "a civic responsibility."

After the service, the congregation descends to the basement, where they share a traditional meal of chicken with rice and beans.

"I believe the principle of human rights have to do with both parties — or any party running," Carol Pagan says. "I always think of the elderly, of the health system, of health insurance, and how it shouldn't be so much about capitalism but more rights for all of us to be well."

Both of the Pagans make clear that they won't vote for Trump. They're waiting, like others, for circumstances that might lead Biden to withdraw, so they can support another Democratic candidate.

"It's our duty to shield that person with prayer — it doesn't matter if that person is a Democrat or a Republican," Carol Pagan says. "We owe them that."

This story appears in the **Election 2024** feature series. View the full series.