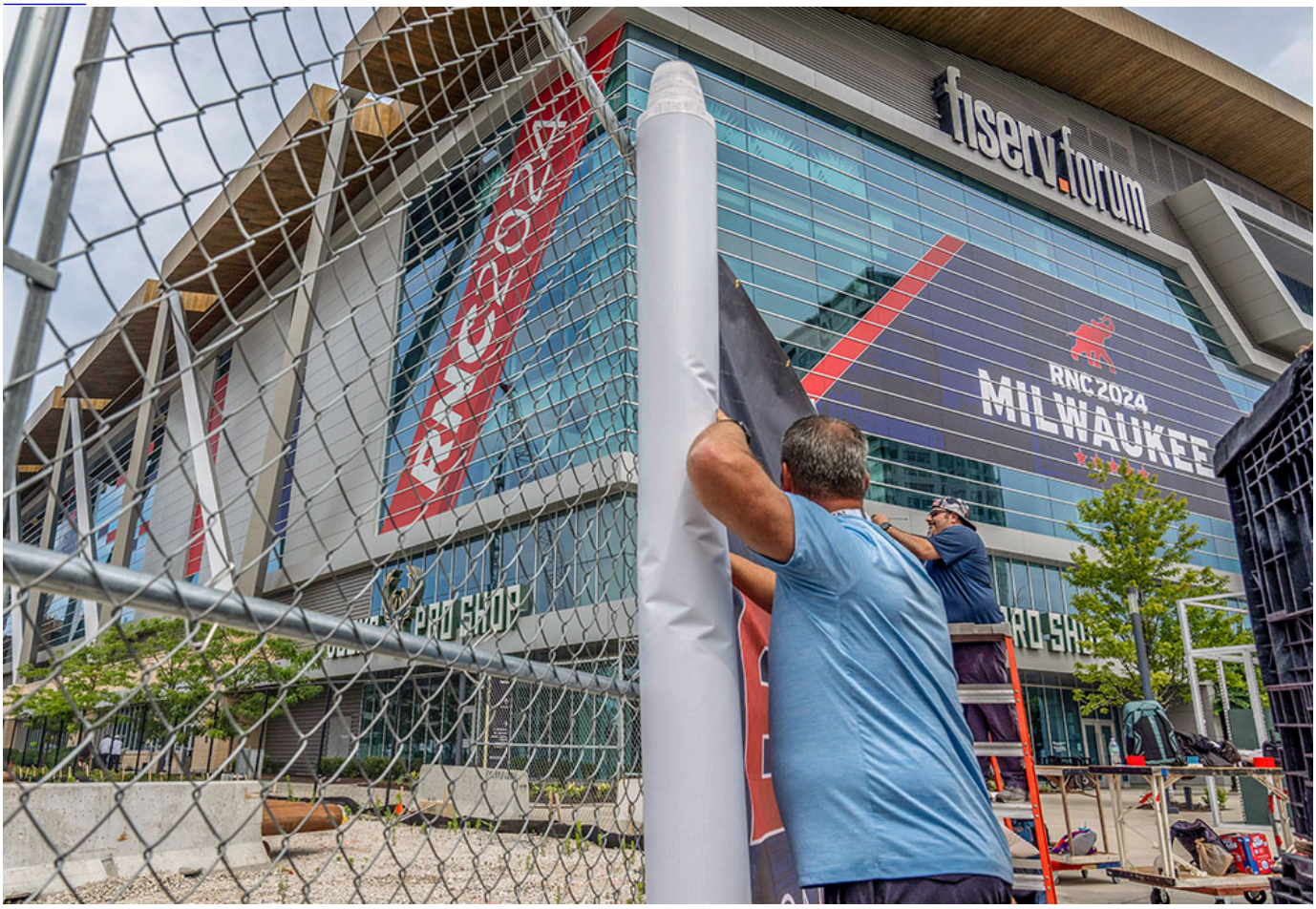
News



Workers attach signage to security fencing on July 10, ahead of the 2024 Republican National Convention at the Fiserv Forum in Milwaukee. (AP/Alex Brandon)



by Heidi Schlumpf

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During his presidency — and throughout his two previous presidential campaigns — Donald Trump has been surrounded by Catholic advisers, financial backers and supporters. This third campaign is no different. In fact, Trump may have a Catholic at his side as his vice presidential pick: Three of the eight people said to be on his shortlist are Catholics.

While much has been made about the influence of evangelical Christians on Trump, including as his "faith advisers," a number of high-profile Catholics also have ties to, and influence on, Trump. They are expected to be seen at the exclusive parties, meetings and photo ops during the Republican National Committee convention July 15-18 in Milwaukee.

Some Catholics previously close to Trump, however, are likely no longer as close. He has had public fallings out with folks like former Attorney General William Barr, who once said Trump shouldn't be near the Oval Office but who now has said he will vote for him, and Marjorie Dannenfelser, head of the powerful pro-life Susan B. Anthony lobby, who has criticized his softening views on abortion. Former GOP presidential candidate and New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie has been a harsh critic since Trump refused to concede the 2020 election. In February, he said he would not vote for Trump "under any circumstances."

At least two Catholic supporters are busy with legal woes: Former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani, a member of Trump's legal team, is facing bankruptcy and indictments related to attempts to overturn the 2020 election. Former Trump strategist Steve Bannon is serving a four-month sentence in federal prison for contempt of Congress.*

Here is a brief overview of some of Trump's key Catholic advisers and supporters:

J.D. Vance

The junior senator from Ohio is best known for his best-selling memoir, *Hillbilly Elegy*, but is quickly making a name for himself in politics, though he has only held office for about 18 months. Although initially part of the "Never Trump" movement in 2016, Vance has become a staunch supporter of the former president's conservative populism.



Sen. J.D. Vance, R-Ohio, smiles during the National Catholic Prayer Breakfast in Washington Feb. 8. (OSV News/Leslie E. Kossoff)

Trump endorsed Vance in his 2022 Senate race against Democrat Tim Ryan and is said to be considering him as a vice presidential running mate.

Raised as a conservative evangelical, Vance converted to Catholicism in 2019 because, he said, he "became persuaded over time that Catholicism was true" and he was inspired by Catholicism's intellectual tradition, specifically by St. Augustine's *Confessions*.

Vance also has said his political views "are pretty aligned with Catholic social teaching." He opposes abortion, even in cases of rape and incest, and has called for a federal ban. He is also opposed to gay marriage and has praised Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban for encouraging married couples to have children.

At a conference hosted by the Franciscan University at Steubenville, Ohio, in 2022, Vance blasted the "ruling class" that he said is corrupt and despises working-class people. Although Vance once admonished Trump for his anti-immigrant views, Vance

has supported Trump's wall at the southern border and has said immigrants leave the country "poorer and dirtier."

Related: Reporter's Inbox: Catholic US senator calls for mass deportations

Born and raised in rural Ohio, he attended public schools, served as a Marine in the Iraq War, then graduated from Ohio State University and Yale Law School. He worked as a venture capitalist in San Francisco before writing *Hillbilly Elegy*, which has been praised as a populist voice of the estranged white underclass, but also criticized for stereotyping both rural Americans and urban "coastal elites." He and wife, Usha Chilukuri Vance, and three children moved back to Ohio for his Senate run.

Marco Rubio

Sen. Rubio has represented Florida since 2011, having previously served in the state's House of Representatives, including as speaker. He ran for president in 2016 but dropped out after losing to Trump in the Florida primary. Rubio is among those Trump is said to be considering as a vice presidential nominee.

Although he previously has called Trump a "con artist," who is "wholly unprepared to be president of the United States," Rubio eventually endorsed Trump in 2016 and is now seen as squarely in the former president's camp.



Florida Sen. Marco Rubio arrives before former President Donald Trump speaks at a campaign rally at Trump National Doral Miami July 9 in Doral, Florida. (AP/Rebecca Blackwell)

A Cuban American, Rubio grew up Catholic and was baptized, confirmed and married in the church. When he was 8 and his family moved to Las Vegas, they attended a Mormon church, though they eventually returned to Catholicism, "mostly at my instigation," Rubio has written. Later as an adult, Rubio attended Christ Fellowship in West Kendall, Florida, which is affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention.

Some see his dual identities as a Catholic and an evangelical as political maneuvering, or as representative of the larger trend of Latino American Catholics becoming evangelicals. In a 2016 profile, Rubio is described as "fully aligned with the Catholic Church," but someone who "expresses himself in evangelical terms." He is said to attend Mass in Florida and Washington, D.C.

Rubio says he believes life begins at conception, and has supported anti-abortion bills with and without exceptions for rape and incest. He supports a national ban. He

also has sponsored bills to protect Americans "from radical woke activism in all its forms," including critical race theory.

Rubio lost significant support from the Tea Party because of his 2013 call for comprehensive immigration reform. More recently, Rubio has said he supports Trump's plan for mass deportations of recent immigrants. Rubio's parents immigrated to the U.S. from Cuba; his father worked as a bartender and his mother as a hotel maid.

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Earlier this year, Rubio demanded that President Joe Biden address the "dramatic increase in attacks on Catholic churches across America," which Rubio said were "part of a larger trend of fanatical activists targeting religious institutions."

A former high school football player, Rubio graduated from the University of Florida and the University of Miami School of Law. He and his wife, Jeanette Dousdebes, a former Miami Dolphins cheerleader, have four children and live in West Miami.

Elise Stefanik

Considered someone on Trump's vice presidential shortlist — along with Vance and Rubio — Stefanik, at age 39, would only be four years over the minimum age for the vice presidency. When she was elected as the U.S. representative for New York's 21st Congressional District in 2014, she was not only the first woman to occupy that seat, she was also, at 30, the youngest woman elected to Congress.

Although initially seen as a moderate Republican and critical of Trump in 2016, Stefanik has moved considerably to the right.

She opposed Trump's impeachment in 2019 and endorsed him in 2022, before he announced his candidacy and at a time when most Republicans were blaming him for GOP failures in the midterms. She promoted lies about the 2020 election and supported a lawsuit to overturn Biden's victory. After Jan. 6, 2021, she voted to reject some of Biden's electoral votes.

With Trump's endorsement, she was elected chair of the House Republican Conference in 2021 after Liz Cheney was removed for her opposition to Trump. Most

recently, Stefanik gained national prominence for her intense grilling of university presidents during the televised congressional hearing on antisemitism.



New York Rep. Elise Stefanik, chair of the House Republican Conference, speaks on Capitol Hill in Washington, April 17, 2023. (OSV News/Reuters/Amanda Andrade-Rhoades)

Although she lists her religion as Catholic, Stefanik rarely talks publicly about her faith. (She was not married in the church.) On "key issues" according to the conservative CatholicVote.org, she receive all positive ratings, except for her two votes in favor of federal gay marriage bills. She currently has 100% ratings from both the National Right to Life Committee and the Susan B. Anthony Pro-life America, two anti-abortion groups. She supports a 15-week national abortion ban, with exceptions for rape, incest or and life-threatening physical conditions.

Although she opposed Trump's "Muslim ban," she praised his executive order to detain and separate families at the border. She has made several controversial comments about immigrants.

She grew up in Albany, New York, where her parents owned and ran a wholesale plywood distribution business. After graduating from Harvard University, she served in the George W. Bush administration as a staff member for the U.S. Domestic Policy Council.

She and her husband, Matthew Manda, and their son live in Schuylerville, New York. Manda works for the National Shooting Sports Foundation, a trade association of firearms manufacturers.

Leonard Leo

Leonard Leo, the legal activist and former vice president of the Federalist Society, has been called "the No. 3 most powerful person in the world." He is also known as the architect of the current U.S. Supreme Court, working behind the scenes to facilitate Trump's appointment of three justices that resulted in the decision that overturned *Roe* vs. *Wade*, the case that legalized abortion.



Leonard Leo, pictured in an undated photo (CNS/Courtesy of the Federalist Society)

As NCR reported earlier this year, Leo is moving to instill traditionalist values throughout the wider culture, through a network of Catholic organizations, nonprofits and "apostolates" that have all benefited from Leo's connections and money.

Leo is being investigated by the Washington, D.C., attorney general, who is looking at relationships between Leo's nonprofit and for-profit organizations. He also has been subpoenaed by the Senate Judiciary Committee as part of its probe into ethics controversies surrounding the U.S. Supreme Court.

The Catholic organizations with whom he is affiliated include: the Napa Legal Institute, the National Catholic Prayer Breakfast, the Ethics and Public Policy Center, the Catholic University of America and its Busch School of Business, the Catholic Association (which ran campaigns opposing the legalization of same-sex marriage), the Knights of Malta and the Papal Foundation. Other associations are with groups focused on religious liberty and pro-life issues, such as Students for life and Students for Life Action, and the Becket Law Fund.

Related: Leonard Leo, architect of conservative Supreme Court, takes on wider culture

Leo was raised Catholic in New York and New Jersey; his father died when he was young and his mother remarried. He graduated from Cornell University and its law school, where he first got involved with the Federalist Society. He and his wife, Sally, have seven children. Their oldest, Margaret, was born with spina bifida and died in 2007. Leo has said her life and death has had a "profound impact" on his faith life and on his sense of patriotism.

Kellyanne Conway

Republican strategist Kellyanne Conway was Trump's campaign manager in 2016 (the first woman to manage a successful presidential campaign) and served as a senior adviser in his administration until 2020. Her tenure was riddled with controversies, from her coining of the phrase "alternative facts," to violations of the Hatch Act for political activity during her work as a federal employee, to personal issues with one of her daughters, who publicly criticized her and Trump.

Conway now serves as a Fox News contributor and works for Club for Growth, which is lobbying against the bill to ban TikTok. She is said to be considering joining Trump's 2024 campaign team.

Conway has spoken and written about her Catholic faith. She opposes abortion and supports a 15-week ban with exemptions for rape, incest and threats to the mother's life, urging "concession and consensus" on the issue. A recent GOP memo urging Republicans to support in vitro fertilization, however, cited research from Conway. She has said that the Democratic Party is losing voters of color because it is "hostile to religion."



Kellyanne Conway, then special counselor to President Donald Trump, waves before speaking at the annual March for Life rally in Washington Jan. 27, 2017. (CNS/Tyler Orsburn)

Born in New Jersey, her parents divorced when she was young and she was raised by her mother, grandmother and aunts. She attended Catholic high school and graduated from then-Trinity College in Washington, D.C., and George Washington University Law School. She founded her own polling firm, which did work for a number of Republican politicians, including Newt Gingrich and Mike Pence.

Conway has four children with George Conway, who was one of the founders of the Lincoln Project, a conservative organization that opposed Trump's re-election. Both Conways stepped down from their positions in 2020, after their then-15-year-old daughter went viral for her anti-Trump views and for criticisms of her family. The daughter now identifies as queer and has reconciled with her mother. The Conways announced last year that they are divorcing.

Kevin Roberts

Kevin Roberts is president of the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank that has positioned itself to "institutionalize Trumpism" in a new administration. Its 1,000-page handbook, called "Project 2025," details how a second Trump presidency would dismantle the federal government by gutting what they call the "deep state." It also suggests fighting what they term "the woke agenda."

Roberts has said that Trump is a flawed person, but he also believes that "the country's on fire" and Trump is the best person to put it out. He continues to insist that the 2020 election was stolen from Trump.

Before joining Heritage in 2021, Roberts was CEO of the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a conservative think tank in Austin that promotes fossil fuels and fights climate action. While there, he became a top adviser to Gov. Greg Abbott, who is also Catholic.



Kevin Roberts, president of the Heritage Foundation, speaks with attendees at Turning Point USA's AmericaFest in Phoenix in December 2022. (Flickr/Gage

Skidmore)

Roberts was born in Louisiana, where his grandparents helped raise him after his parents divorced. His teenage brother took his own life when Roberts was 9. Roberts credits his grandfather's patriarchy and piety, especially during the hard times of the oil industry bust, as a foundation to his conservatism.

As president of Wyoming Catholic College, Roberts led the institution to reject Title IX grants and loans in 2015, citing religious liberty reasons. "It allows us to practice our Catholic faith without qualifying it," he said, prompting The New York Times to describe the school as practicing "cowboy-style Catholicism." Roberts has since embraced the "cowboy Catholic" label.

Earlier in his career, Roberts founded John Paul the Great Academy, a K-12 Catholic classical school in Lafayette, Louisiana, where he served as president and headmaster for seven years. He and his wife, Michelle, have four children and belong to a parish in Springfield, Virginia.

Matt and Mercedes Schlapp

Matt and Mercedes Schlapp met while working in the George W. Bush White House, and have been a D.C. power couple ever since. Together they founded Cove Strategies, a lobbying and public relations firm whose clients have included Koch Industries and other tech, pharmaceutical and retail corporations.

Matt is now chair of the American Conservative Union, where he allegedly called in a priest to conduct an exorcism after low-paid employees quit in 2022. The group organizes the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC). He was co-chair of Catholics for Trump and made false claims about voter fraud after the 2020 election.

Mercedes, who is known as "Mercy," served as director of strategic communications in the Trump administration and worked on his 2020 reelection campaign. She has also worked as a lobbyist for the National Rifle Association. A Cuban American, she had done communications and political commentary for English- and Spanish-language media.



Matt Schlapp, chairman of the American Conservative Union, speaks with his wife, Mercedes Schlapp, during the Conservative Political Action Conference in Oxon Hill, Maryland, March 2, 2023. (AP/Jose Luis Magana)

Three allegations of sexual assault by Matt have been made by male staffers, two by employees of the American Conservative Union and one by a political strategist on the Herschel Walker's U.S. Senate campaign. The latter later dropped his lawsuit after a nearly half-million-dollar settlement.

Mercedes grew up in Miami; her immigrant father was once held as a political prisoner in the 1960s by the Fidel Castro regime. After graduating from Florida International University, she earned a master's in public administration from George Washington University.

Matt grew up in Wichita, Kansas, where he attended Catholic schools and as a top-ranked tennis player taught Charles Koch's son how to play. He graduated from the University of Notre Dame, where he started a conservative student magazine, and earned a master's degree in public policy from Wichita State University. He is also a

member of the Order of the Knights of Malta.

The couple have five daughters and are parishioners of St. Mary's Catholic Church in Old Town Alexandria, Virginia.

***Editor's note**: This story has been updated to reflect Steve Bannon's status.**

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