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Panelists participate in Georgetown University's public dialogue on "Faith and the Faithful and the 2024 Presidential Election: Political Realities and Catholic Social Teaching" in Washington Sept. 11, 2024, hosted by the university's Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life and the Institute of Politics and Public Service. From left to right are: Kristen Soltis Anderson of Eschelon Insights, E.J. Dionne of Georgetown University, Kim Daniels (moderator) of the Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life, Nichole Flores of the University of Virginia and Sohrab Ahmari of Compact magazine. (OSV News/courtesy of Georgetown University, Leslie E. Kossoff)

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Amid an unprecedented U.S. presidential election cycle, Catholic voters should reflect on fostering key principles of Catholic social teaching — such as respect for human life, solidarity and the common good — through dialogue and civic engagement, panelists said at a discussion event Sept. 11 hosted by the Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life at Georgetown University.

Kim Daniels, director of the initiative and an adjunct professor in the Jesuit university's theology and religious studies department, noted that Pope Francis has recently warned about the global "retreat from democracy" and has stated that "democracy always requires the transition from partisanship to participation, from 'cheering' to dialogue."

"So this is a very Catholic and Jesuit idea, that dialogue, engaging with others with respect, with humility across differences, can help us enrich our understanding, learn from each other, and better inform our actions," Daniels said.

Panelists explored the political and religious dynamics of a tumultuous U.S. presidential election year — one that saw the attempted assassination of former President Donald Trump, the Republican presidential nominee, and the withdrawal of President Joe Biden from the race and subsequent nomination of Vice President Kamala Harris as the Democratic presidential candidate in his stead.

Recent polls of the contest show a "genuinely, unbelievably razor thin" margin between Harris and Trump, said panelist Kristen Soltis Anderson, founding partner of

the opinion research and analytics firm Echelon Insights.

Fueling an air of polarization, Anderson said, is a sense of being unheard or misunderstood among a significant share of voters. Contrary to some narratives, she said, the data shows most voters do not entirely subscribe to the views of one major political party, which can contribute to this sense.

"At my firm, we did a survey, where we asked people about 20 different questions on issues, economic and cultural, and asked people where they stood," she said. "And it turns out a lot of people choose a little of 'Column A' and a little of 'Column B.'"

Anderson said "people are very complex" and "very few, if any, people picked all of the conservative responses to all 20 questions or all of the progressive responses.“

"So when we talk about polarization, we think of it as everybody's on opposite sides, and they don't feel heard, because they don't think that there's a party that agrees with them all the way," she said. "That's not what it is."

E.J. Dionne, a professor at Georgetown's McCourt School of Public Policy, Washington Post columnist and senior fellow at The Brookings Institution, said many Catholics feel a sense of being "cross pressured" in their political choices.

Some, he said, "are somewhat more conservative on social issues — abortion, obviously, is the obvious one — but quite progressive, particularly on labor and social justice issues."

"That's more complicated now, I think, than in the past," he said. "But I think that's always been a reality."

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Nichole M. Flores, an associate professor of religious studies at the University of Virginia who studies the relationship between Catholicism and democracy, said some of those tensions are evident in the discernment process when choosing between coalitions in which there isn't necessarily full alignment.

"Some of the people most committed to the thriving of my children, and creating a space for me to be a Catholic mom, are people who also advocate for no restrictions

on abortion," she said, to illustrate the tension that people with pro-life convictions may experience with respect to some Democratic candidates.

But Sohrab Ahmari, a founder and editor of Compact magazine, said he is "actually very optimistic about the prospects for the United States long term."

"I do think a new center is emerging — notwithstanding our partisan fury and notwithstanding the just utter ugliness of accusing one specific migrant community of eating cats, which was just disgusting," he said. Ahmari was alluding to a viral, refuted claim — repeated by Trump during the debate Sept. 10 watched by 67 million people — that falsely alleged Haitian migrants (a largely Catholic population) are kidnapping and eating pets in Springfield, Ohio.

"I think for Catholics, we should seek to build the center, no matter which side of the aisle we're on," he said. "That is when we see either party going into this solidaristic direction, reasserting the importance of the common good, reasserting the primacy of politics over markets, we should cheer them."

He added that "when we see either party going in the wrong direction, whether it's our own side or the other," that should be cause for criticism.

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