News



Republican presidential nominee and former U.S. President Donald Trump appears on stage July 18 to deliver his acceptance speech on the fourth and final day of the Republican National Convention at the Fiserv Forum in Milwaukee. (OSV News/Reuters/Mike Segar)



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Editor's note: *This is Part 1 of a two-part series focusing on Catholic groups' involvement in the 2024 presidential election. This story focuses on groups that support former President Donald Trump. Part 2 explores groups supporting Vice President Kamala Harris.*

The candidate who called himself the "best [president] in the history of the Catholic Church" during the 2020 campaign once again has the support of several Catholic-associated groups.

The difference now is that these groups — and the individuals who lead them — are supporting former President Donald Trump after his involvement in the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection and his 34 felony convictions. Their support also comes despite Trump's and the Republican platform's softening on issues like abortion and in vitro fertilization. While the former president's pivot has angered some pro-life activists, others argue that the Democrats are worse on the issue.

Trump also chose a Catholic as his running mate in JD Vance, who has previously spoken at events at conservative Catholic institutions, such as the Franciscan University at Steubenville, Ohio, and the Napa Institute. Vance has also been associated with Catholic "integralists" or "post-liberals," who want to overthrow what they perceive as the corrupt "liberal ruling class."

Trump now considers himself a "nondenominational" Christian, no longer identifying with the Presbyterian Church he was confirmed in. He is not a regular churchgoer, but surrounded himself with evangelical leaders as advisers during his term as president. He often misspeaks when quoting the Bible or trying to speak about God. Most Americans don't believe Trump is personally religious, yet a majority of Republicans believe he stands up for people with their religious beliefs, according to a survey from the Pew Research Center.

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Last month, Pope Francis described both Trump and his opponent, Vice President Kamala Harris, as "against life" and said voters must choose "the lesser of two evils." To be sure, a number of former Trump supporters, including many prominent Republicans, have publicly called Trump unfit for office or announced that they will support Harris.

Although one recent survey showed Catholics favoring Harris, most polls show Trump ahead among Catholic voters, especially white Catholics, although the lead is slim.

Below is an NCR snapshot of some of the most notable Catholic-led groups and organizations supporting Trump:

Catholics for Trump

Executive director: not announced

Type of organization: official campaign committee

Mission: "The Catholics for Trump Coalition is committed to safeguarding the vital principles of religious liberty and the sanctity of life that President Donald J. Trump has ardently championed. ... Catholics for Trump stands with President Trump to continue building a nation where the rights of every individual to practice their faith freely is protected. Together, we have the opportunity to secure a future that honors the principles of freedom, faith, and life that are integral to our American heritage."

The Trump-Vance campaign officially launched its "Catholics for Trump" coalition Sept. 4, with a press release that quoted nine members of the group. Among them were D.C. power couple Matt and Mercedes Schlapp; Joe Grogan, Trump's former assistant for domestic policy; and former Pennsylvania Sen. Rick Santorum.

An executive director for the group had not yet been announced as of press time.

The group's website, located at the same web address as its former iteration in 2020, lists "President Trump's Accomplishments for Catholics." The list emphasizes religious freedom and mentions that he was the first president to address the March for Life. It does not cite his role in appointing the U.S. Supreme Court justices who helped overturn *Roe* v. *Wade*.

OSV News reported that an original version of the website featured an image of Trump and his wife, Melania, under a mural by alleged abuser Fr. Marko Rupnik. The image was later changed to a picture of the then-first couple at the Vatican.



A screenshot of the Catholics for Trump website (NCR screenshot)

The site also offers "Catholics for Trump" merchandise, including a $24 yard sign, a $25 coffee mug and three buttons for $12. Also for sale at the Trump merchandise site are "Catholics for Trump" bumper stickers, T-shirts, hoodies, tote bags, hats and beverage coolers.

Other members quoted in the press release include former U.S. Rep. Tim Huelskamp, a Republican from Kansas; political commentator Michael Knowles of The Daily Wire; Brian Burch, president of CatholicVote (see below); George Glass, former U.S. ambassador to Portugal; and Callista Gingrich, former U.S. ambassador to the Holy See.

The Schlapps are controversial political lobbyists. Matt was co-chair of Catholics for Trump in 2020 and made false claims about voter fraud after the election. Mercedes served in the Trump administration as director of strategic communications and worked on Trump's reelection campaign. Three allegations of sexual assault against

Matt have been made by male staffers; one was later dropped after a settlement. Matt is now chair of the American Conservative Union, which organizes the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC).

CatholicVote

Founded: 2008

President: Brian Burch

Headquarters: Madison, Wisconsin

Types of organization: 501(c)3, 501(c)4 and PAC

Annual revenue: $9,356,285 (as of 2022)

Mission: "To inspire every Catholic in America to live out the truths of our faith in public life."

In July, Trump specifically praised the organization CatholicVote on social media for its campaign against Harris, whom the group had described as "anti-Catholic."

"CatholicVote.org is doing GREAT work getting Voters to the Polls," Trump wrote on Truth Social. "All Catholics should join this incredible cause!"

This is quite a shift for an organization that originally was a "never Trumper" back in 2016. These days, CatholicVote is busy with an anti-Harris ad campaign about transgender surgeries.

CatholicVote.org originally began as a project of the Catholic Alliance, which was a branch of the Christian Coalition. CatholicVote later became part of the Fidelis Center for Law and Policy, founded by Burch in 2005.



A screenshot of the CatholicVote website (NCR screenshot)

Fidelis still operates CatholicVote's educational and legal arms. The "CatholicVote Education Fund" publishes the daily newsletter, The Loop, to more than 350,000 subscribers, while "Edify" produces videos, e-books and podcasts "to help American Catholics and all concerned citizens better understand difficult questions through the lens of authentic Catholic social teachings, science, philosophy, art, and law." The public interest litigation program coordinates, funds and engages in litigation "to promote the sanctity of life, civil rights, and the family."

Fidelis' most recent tax documents, from 2022, indicate revenue of $9.4 million — up from $4.8 million the previous year. In 2022, Burch reported nearly $230,000 in compensation from the organization.

CatholicVote also includes a 501(c)4 lobbying organization, which can make political endorsements, and a political action committee or PAC.

In 2016, CatholicVote did not endorse Trump, saying he was "problematic in too many ways to receive our endorsement." Burch even signed a manifesto against Trump, saying he was "manifestly unfit to be president of the United States."

But by 2020, Burch and the organization had changed their tune and endorsed him. The organization also launched a $10 million project to target Catholic voters, using geofencing, which captured Massgoers' cellphone data to send them political ads, as NCR reported.

During this election's primary, CatholicVote hosted a rally for Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, which was featured on the organization's annual report. But by January, CatholicVote had endorsed Trump, emphasizing that he was "not merely our reluctant choice."

Catholics for Catholics

Founded: September 2022

CEO: John Yep

Headquarters: Phoenix, Arizona

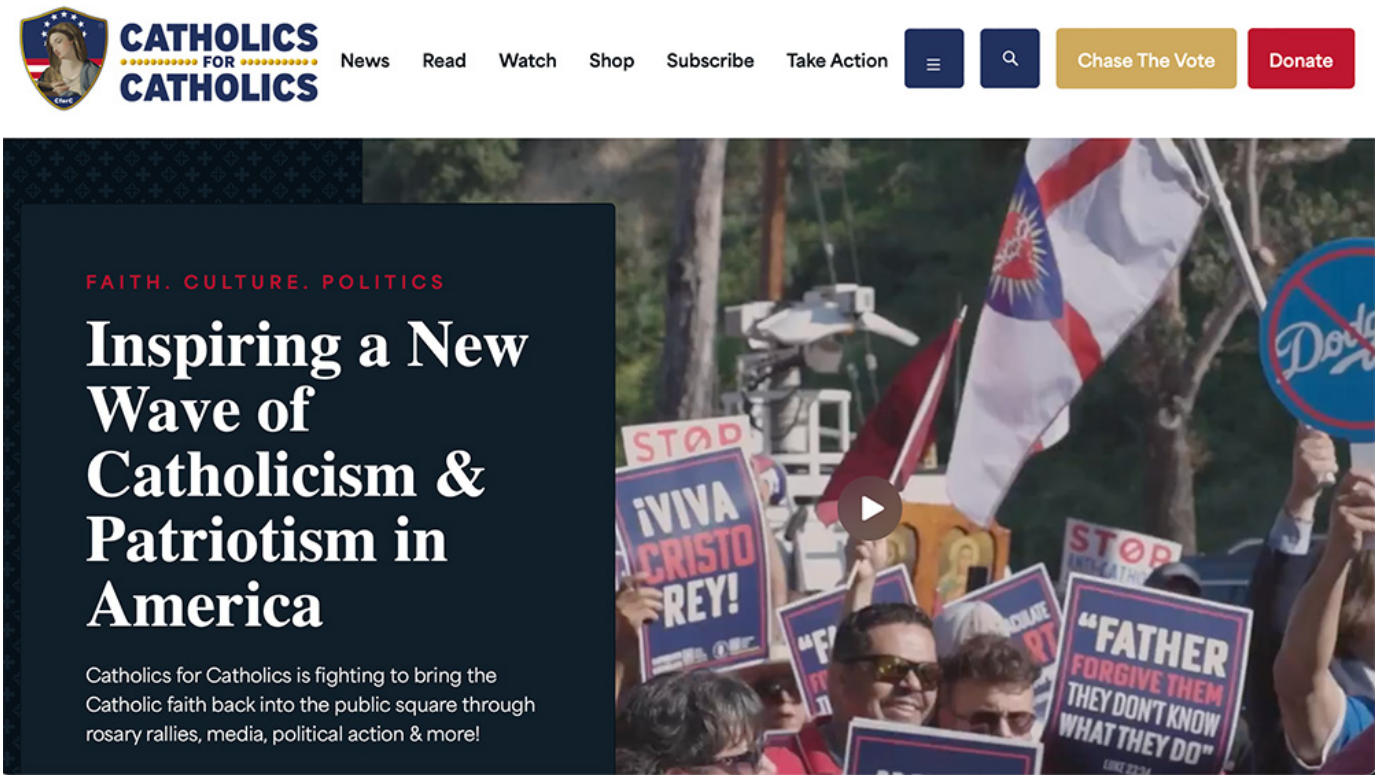
Type of organization: 501(c)4

Annual revenue: A 2022 tax document shows just under $200,000 in revenue for its first three months of existence.

Mission: "We are a group of Catholics who love God & our Country. Our Catholic faith impels us to make our voices heard in the public square as Jesus Christ instructed us not to keep our light under a basket."

Catholics for Catholics is a relative newcomer, but it has already made waves in its two-year history. The group was founded in 2022 by John Yep, who served as the Arizona state director for CatholicVote during the 2020 election.

In March, the group hosted a "Catholic Prayer for Trump" event at Mar-a-Lago, the Palm Beach, Florida, resort owned by the former president. Speakers included conservative lobbyist Roger Stone and U.S. Army Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn, who served briefly as Trump's national security adviser. (Trump did not attend.)



A screenshot of the Catholics for Catholics website (NCR screenshot)

Around Trump's birthday, June 14, Catholics for Catholics then launched a campaign to have 2,024 Masses said for the GOP nominee before Election Day in November. As of press time, 1,013 Masses have been said, according to the group's website.

Yep is a former Phoenix diocesan official who said he spent 14 years discerning the priesthood with the Legionaries of Christ. He also was involved in a Phoenix group that promoted James Altman, the Lacrosse, Wisconsin, priest removed from ministry for his political and anti-Pope Francis comments.

Catholics for Catholics has also hosted events with Bishop Joseph Strickland, the firebrand leader of the Diocese of Tyler, Texas, who was "relieved" of his position by Pope Francis in November 2023. While a livestreamed "consecration to St. Michael" with Strickland occurred before the bishop was dismissed, a "Christmas blessing" with him happened afterward. Strickland also was part of a protest against an LGBTQ drag group outside Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles; the protest was co-sponsored by Catholics for Catholics. (CatholicVote was another co-sponsor.)

In August, Catholics for Catholics launched its "Defend Us in Battle" national billboard campaign in battleground states, with more than 30 billboards featuring

the image of St. Michael. The group also has a "Chase the Vote" project, in which door-knockers visit voters who have already received mail-in ballots to encourage them to complete their ballots and make a plan to vote.

Susan B. Anthony Pro-Life America

Founded: 1993

President: Marjorie Jones Dannenfelser

Founder: Rachel MacNair

Headquarters: Arlington, Virginia

Type of organization: 501(c)4

Annual revenue: $22,120,154 (as of 2022)

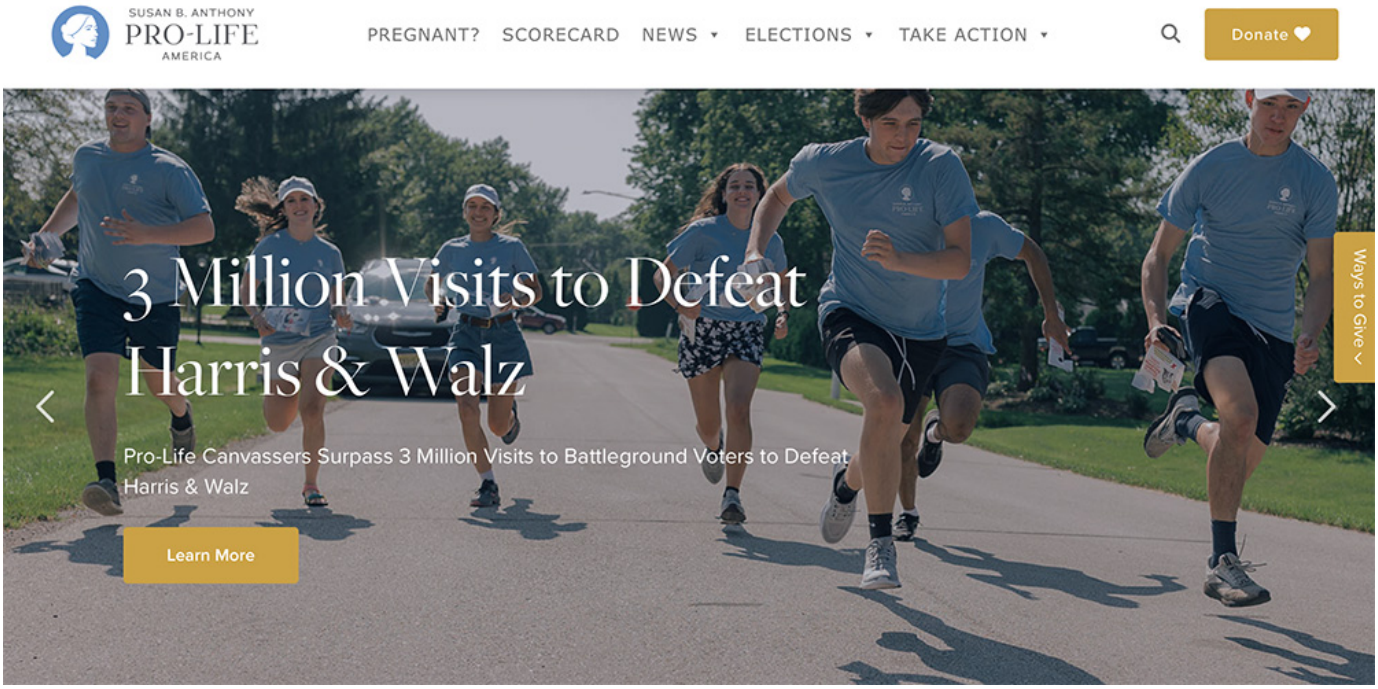
Mission: "To end abortion by electing national leaders and advocating for laws that save lives, with a special calling to promote pro-life women leaders."

In the days before the Republican convention in July, a behind-the-scenes kerfuffle was brewing about changes to the party's platform on abortion. Trump wanted to remove language about federal restrictions and instead leave those decisions to the states in the wake of the *Dobbs* decision that overturned *Roe* v. *Wade*.

Marjorie Dannenfelser, president of Susan B. Anthony Pro-Life America (SBA), issued a public statement just days before the platform committee meeting: "If the Trump campaign decides to remove national protections for the unborn in the GOP platform, it would be a miscalculation that would hurt party unity and destroy pro-life enthusiasm between now and the election."

The committee did indeed remove a previous call for a federal 20-week abortion ban. "We will oppose Late Term Abortion, while supporting mothers and policies that advance Prenatal Care, access to Birth Control, and IVF (fertility treatments)," the new platform says.

Despite her earlier protestations, Dannenfelser immediately praised the new platform, saying, "The Republican Party remains strongly pro-life at the national level."



A screenshot of the Susan B. Anthony Pro-Life America website (NCR screenshot)

Originally founded as the Susan B. Anthony List — in response to the abortion rights group Emily's List — the organization was rebranded in 2022 as Susan B. Anthony Pro-Life America, as a parallel to NARAL Pro-Choice America. Part of the rebrand was to include expansion of the group's state-affairs team to work for pro-life policies once *Roe* was reversed. The organization's research arm, the Charlotte Lozier Institute, founded in 2011, filed an amicus brief in the *Dobbs* case in support of the state of Mississippi.

SBA includes a PAC, a candidate fund, a pro-life women's caucus, the research/educational institute and a directory of "pregnancy and life assistance" organizations.

Dannenfelser, a convert to Catholicism, served as co-chair of "Pro-Life Voices for Trump" during the 2020 election, when SBA committed to spending $52 million to reelect Trump and Republicans in the U.S. Senate.

Shortly after Trump's defeat, SBA joined with the American Principles Project to create a "voting reform campaign" that opposes voting rights legislation and supports stricter voting laws.

SBA is a member of the advisory board of Project 2025, the collection of controversial right-wing policy proposals from the Heritage Foundation to be enacted should Trump win the election. Trump has tried to distance himself from Project 2025.

Valor America

Founded: 2014

Founder and president: Joseph Arlinghaus

Headquarters: Houston

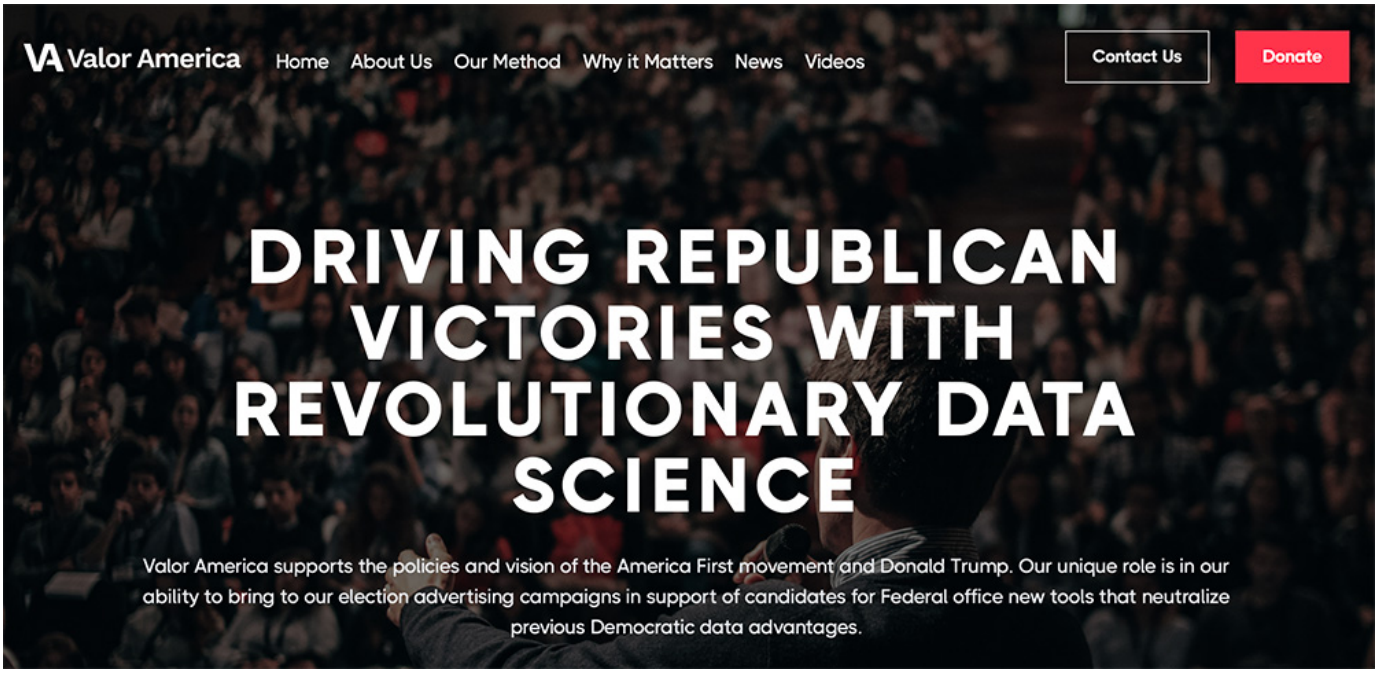
Type of organization: super PAC

Mission: "Driving Republican victories with revolutionary data science"

According to its "2024 Plan," Valor America has announced that it will spend $10 million in advertising to bolster Trump's presidential campaign and to work to defeat six Democratic senators. That would be five times the amount the super PAC spent during the 2020 election cycle. They say such an increase is possible thanks to 7,500 new small donors and 500 larger donors.

Originally founded in 2018 by Catholic pro-life activist Joseph Arlinghaus, Valor America pioneered new anti-abortion messaging to Hispanics who traditionally voted Democratic. This year, they are focused on voters who have never voted Republican before but who share values with GOP candidates.

The plan is to target 3 million voters in six states, with an estimated 3% likely voter increase. The website frequently mentions that its tactics are ones previously only used by Democrats "to manipulate election processes to their advantage."



A screenshot of the Valor America website (NCR screenshot)

"In this year of massive attacks on Republoicans [sic] over abortion, we have the largest body of existing research data on what works and what does not in pro-life messaging against Pro-abortion democratic attacks," says a fundraising appeal on the website.

Arlinghaus worked on political campaigns while he was a student at the University of Dallas, but quit after observing opportunistic staffers on the Pat Buchanan 1992 presidential campaign who did not really believe in the candidate's ideas. Arlinghaus then got involved in a $1 million pro-life campaign to defeat Democrat Wendy Davis in her race for Texas governor against Republican Greg Abbott by targeting Democratic Hispanics who opposed abortion.

After serving as a special assistant to the president of the Susan B. Anthony List (Marjorie Jones Dannenfelser) for a year, Arlinghaus founded Valor America. He was an early supporter of Trump, despite concerns from some in the pro-life movement.

After Trump lost in 2020, Valor America launched an "election integrity" project called the Caesar Rodney Election Research Institute to study "election manipulation by liberal think tanks." Researcher William Doyle and Arlinghaus have accused the "Democratic election-industrial complex" of winning races not on the issues but because of unscrupulous "voting rights" activism and tactics such as so-called "ballot harvesting."

Read this next: These Catholic-led groups are supporting Kamala Harris in the 2024 election

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