News



U.S. Vice President and Democratic presidential candidate Kamala Harris, and Republican presidential nominee and former U.S. President Donald Trump, greet each other before taking part in the presidential debate at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia Sept. 10. Catholic voters in Pennsylvania are split nearly evenly over the U.S. presidential race, according to the NCR Poll of swing-state voters. (OSV News/Reuters/Brian Snyder)



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Catholic groups on both sides of the political divide are descending on Pennsylvania just two weeks before Election Day.

Those organizations are calling and sending postcards to Catholic voters, canvassing neighborhoods and buying advertising on television and billboards to convince Catholic voters to turn out in favor of either Kamala Harris or Donald Trump.

The 2024 presidential election will likely be decided by the slimmest of margins – perhaps decisively in Pennsylvania — which has the most electoral votes of the seven battleground states and where Catholic voters are evenly split between Harris, a Democrat, and Trump, the Republican nominee.

Interviews with Catholics who participated in the NCR Poll of swing-state voters are as equally divided as other Pennsylvanians. The poll showed voters are evenly split.

Mickey Kelly, 34, a Catholic who lives in Philadelphia, is supporting Trump for economic reasons. "As someone who started a new job with some overtime options, I back Trump on the idea as it will help my paycheck look better and also end unnecessary taxes that are hurting hard-working Americans," Kelly said.

But Lea Lynch Hyland, a 49-year-old Catholic who lives about 40 miles west of Philadelphia, is backing Harris. "I have two daughters and I see the abortion issue as leading to a slippery slope to further restrictions on women's decision making and civil rights," Hyland said.

> 'I don't see any path to 270 [electoral votes] for either candidate without winning Pennsylvania.'
> —Geoffrey Layman
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Nineteen electoral votes are up for grabs in the Keystone State, where mail-in voting is already underway. The Democratic and Republican campaigns have made a combined 46 stops in Pennsylvania since March, and both Harris and Trump have upcoming appearances in the state.

"I don't see any path to 270 [electoral votes] for either candidate without winning Pennsylvania," Geoffrey Layman, the chairman of political science at the University of Notre Dame, told the National Catholic Reporter, referring to the number of electoral votes needed to secure victory.

"Mathematically, you could lose Pennsylvania but still win the presidency," Layman said. "But given it's the largest of these seven battleground states in 2024, and given how close the polls have been, how closely the state has been contested in the two previous elections, I just think it's very unlikely either candidate wins without winning Pennsylvania."

Several recent polls indicate that Pennsylvania remains a tossup. Most show either Trump or Harris with single-digit percentage point leads, all within the margins of error.

A new poll, commissioned by NCR, shows Harris leading Trump among Catholic voters in Pennsylvania by just one percentage points, 49% to 48%. The poll has a margin of error in Pennsylvania of plus or minus 7.43%.

The poll shows Harris performing well among young adult Catholics ages 18-24; 75% said they intend to vote for Harris. In contrast, 54% of Catholic voters over age 55 said they intend to vote for Trump.

The NCR poll also indicates the presence of a gender gap: 57% of female Catholic voters say they intend to vote for Harris while only 38% said they will vote for Trump. But among male Catholic voters, 57% said they intend to vote for Trump and only 41% will vote for Harris.

In a contest that is razor-thin, political analysts say voter turnout will be critical for both sides.

"The Latino vote, the Catholic vote, the evangelical vote, all those voters are going to matter," Layman said. "The turnout game better be strong for both candidates if they're going to have any chance to win."

Joshua Mercer, the political director of CatholicVote, a politically-conservative nonprofit that has endorsed Trump's bid to return to the White House, told NCR that his organization has a regional field coordinator and close to 100 volunteers in Pennsylvania. He said volunteers have sent more than 500,000 handwritten postcards to Catholic voters throughout the state.

"We feel there are so many advertisements that it's hard to cut through the clutter in anyone's mailbox if they're in a swing state," said Mercer, who suggested that people would rather receive a handwritten note than a telephone call from a campaign volunteer.

"We thought this would be an effective way to reach people, to let them know that their vote matters," Mercer said. "In an age of artificial intelligence, it's nice to get a handwritten note every once in a while."

Mercer added that CatholicVote has also paid for advertising in Pennsylvania, including a series of 30-second television ads that ran there and in other battleground states that accuse Harris of supporting taxpayer-funded sex-change operations for transgender minors. LGBTQ advocacy groups criticized the ads for using misleading claims and inflammatory terms.

Kevin Hayes, a cofounder of Catholics Vote Common Good, a group that is supporting Harris, told NCR that his organization has a database of 5,000 Catholic voters in Pennsylvania that it is using to send postcards and emails to counter what he described is a conservative narrative that would have Catholic voters believe that the only issue they should be considering on Election Day is abortion. The U.S. Catholic bishops have described abortion as the "preeminent" issue for Catholic voters in the 2024 elections.

"We start from a standpoint of, 'Hey, let's look at the common good and view the candidates through the prism of Catholic social teaching,' " Hayes said. "When you do that, you see that there are equally sacred issues that a Catholic who wants to be involved in the political process should be considering when they're looking to support a candidate, such as treatment of the poor, access to health care, the death penalty, protecting God's creation. Those issues matter too."

Hayes said Catholics Vote Common Good for the last six months has held statewide virtual meetings, canvassed neighborhoods, distributed lawn signs and organized

weekly phonebanks staffed by volunteers from other states. The organization is also paying for billboard advertising in Pittsburgh, Philadelphia and Erie.

As the Pennsylvania state director for Catholics Vote Common Good, Hayes said he expects that the election results in the state will be as close if not closer than the results in 2020, when President Joe Biden bested Trump by more than 80,000 votes in Pennsylvania. In 2016, Trump carried the state by more than 40,000 votes over Hillary Clinton.



A woman casts her ballot at a polling station in Detroit as Democrats and Republicans held their Michigan presidential primary Feb. 27. (OSV News/Reuters/Dieu-Nalio Chery)

"Pennsylvania has representative demographics," Hayes said. "There are poor, middle class and wealthy people of all ethnicities in Pennsylvania. We have our two large cities and a lot of rural areas. From that standpoint, the state shapes up as a little bit of a national bellwether."

With two major urban centers — Pittsburgh and Philadelphia — and smaller cities surrounded by large swaths of rural territory, Layman said Pennsylvania "looks a lot like America." The state has traditionally leaned toward the Democrats, but recent political developments have made the traditional "Blue Wall" Democratic stronghold of Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin more competitive for Republicans.

"Trump, because of his appeal to the white working class, his even stronger appeal to white rural voters than Republicans have traditionally had, has made all three of those states competitive and pushed them much farther to the Republicans," Layman said.

Much like their counterparts in other swing states, Pennsylvania Catholics who were surveyed in the recent NCR poll identified the economy, immigration, health care, taxes and affordable housing as their most important issues in the election.

Alongside the economy and immigration, the state's Catholics also identified reproductive rights as a "deal breaker" that would prompt them to reject a candidate whose views did not align with theirs. The NCR poll indicates that 57% of Catholic voters in Pennsylvania believe that abortion should be legal in all or most cases.

Hyland, the mother of two daughters who lives in Chester County, is a lifelong Catholic Democrat and believes the Democratic Party's platform "aligns with much of Catholic social teaching." She added that she believes Trump to be a "literal threat to democracy."

"I think the current iteration of the GOP must be destroyed electorally. This is far beyond political issues like tax rates. It's a moral issue in my opinion," Hyland said.

Meanwhile, Kelly, who lives in Philadelphia, said he is partly supportive of Trump because "there were no wars" during his tenure in the White House. "He was taking the steps he needed to maintain peace through strength," Kelly said.

Getting like-minded voters to the polls on Election Day will be critical for both campaigns, Layman said.

"I think there is no group that can be taken for granted," Layman said. "There's no turnout effort that can be taken for granted at this point."

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