News



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

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Nationally, Catholic voters have been closely divided in recent presidential elections. This year, in the vital state of Pennsylvania, they'll likely comprise at least a quarter of the electorate — and thus play a pivotal role in deciding the overall outcome.

There's been a see-saw effect in the state. Donald Trump beat Hillary Clinton by about 44,000 votes in 2016; Joe Biden defeated Trump by 80,000 votes in 2020.

John Fea, a history professor at Messiah University in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, said he believed Biden — an Irish-American Catholic and regular Mass-goer — connected with some Catholics as being one of their own.

"I don't think most working-class Catholics thought Biden was a perfect candidate, but he was one of them," said Fea, who studies the interaction of religion and politics.

Now Trump, a nondenominational Christian, is back atop the Republican ticket, with JD Vance — a Catholic — as his running mate.

The Democrats have a ticket without a Catholic, headed by Kamala Harris, who is of Black and South Asian heritage and is from a Baptist tradition with a strong social-justice orientation, and running mate in Tim Walz, a white Lutheran.

Fea said some voters in the counties around Scranton, where Biden was born, may have voted for him in 2020 because of the Catholic connection but might not vote for Harris.

"You could make an argument that as goes those counties … so goes Pennsylvania, so goes the nation," Fea said.

As an ardent opponent of abortion, Nikki Bruni of Pittsburgh says she could never vote for Harris. Trump has her vote even though she's dismayed he's backing away from the GOP's traditionally staunch opposition.

"I did consider not voting, but Pennsylvania is a swing state," said Bruni, who directs People Concerned for the Unborn Child, a local anti-abortion group. "I have to do what I can morally to keep the evil from taking over completely."

For Catholics supporting Harris, there's a similar sense of urgency — that in a state where more than a quarter of voters in 2020 were Catholic, the entire election might

hinge on a handful of their fellow believers.

One group, Catholics Vote Common Good, recently put up billboards around Pittsburgh and Erie, urging Catholics to consider the “common good” — an array of vital concerns in Catholic social teaching — not just the single issue of abortion.

“If you’re going to be pro-life, you need to be more than anti-abortion,” said the group’s Pennsylvania chair, Kevin Hayes. “Immigration has a pro-life component. Health care has a pro-life component. Providing adequate support to young families and young mothers with kids has a pro-life component.”

He also said Trump, with his verbal attacks on the judicial system and calling critics “ enemies from within ” poses a threat to democracy.

Even as both campaigns court Hispanic Catholics' votes, most of Pennsylvania’s Catholic population is descended from white European immigrants, many of whom worked in the mines and mills of the state’s industrial heyday. They’ve decreased in number amid the decline in industry and scandals in the church, but many still remain, their legacy by marked by steeples and onion domes throughout the state.

“That demographic should not be overlooked,” said Hayes, who is among Catholics urging the Harris campaign to pay closer attention to them.

To be clear, there is no “Catholic vote” as there might have been in past generations, when Catholics could be expected to support their own as a voting bloc.

But there are Catholic voters — lots of them.

In 2020, 27% of Pennsylvania voters identified as Catholic, according to AP VoteCast, and neighboring swing states of Michigan and Wisconsin also have ample Catholic populations. A Franklin & Marshall Poll survey in October suggested there could be a competitive race among Catholics in the state.

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Pennsylvania Catholics, who are overwhelmingly white and non-Hispanic, supported Trump over Biden by a 55%-44% margin that year, whereas the national Catholic vote, with a much larger Hispanic share, was about evenly split.

Vance, now the only Catholic in the race, has been strongly influenced by conservative Catholics. He has nonetheless supported Trump's efforts to downplay abortion as a central issue, even as Trump still claims credit for Supreme Court appointees who helped reverse Roe v. Wade and turn the issue over to the states.

Groups like CatholicVote are supporting Trump and courting the Catholic vote.

Hayes and other Harris supporters have urged her campaign to pay more heed to Pennsylvania's Catholics, and they've taken their own steps.

A group of Philadelphia-area Catholics recently traveled by bus to Wilkes-Barre, near Scranton — stopping for Mass at a Polish Catholic shrine along the way. They went door to door on behalf of their candidate before holding an evening campaign rally.

An organizer of the tour, Steve Rukavina, said the group was reaching out in particular to Catholics and others with ancestry in Poland, Ukraine and other Eastern European lands, including those in NATO.

He cited concerns that Trump has questioned NATO's mission and repeatedly taken issue with the Biden-Harris administration's sending of U.S. aid to Ukraine. Trump has made vague vows to end the war and praised Russian President Vladimir Putin.

"I believe that a significant number of Polish and Ukrainian Americans will switch and vote for the Democratic ticket in 2024 because of the NATO and Ukraine issues, coupled with the character issue," Rukavina said.

U.S. Catholic bishops, in their guide to Catholic voters, declared opposing abortion "our pre-eminent priority because it directly attacks our most vulnerable and voiceless brothers and sisters."

They also cited concerns that fit neither party's platform entirely, including pro-LGBTQ+ issues, religious freedom threats, migrant suffering, racism, wars and access to healthcare and education.

Fewer than half of Catholics named abortion as a "very important" issue in deciding their vote, according to a late-summer survey by the Pew Research Center. More than half cited gun policy, foreign policy, Supreme Court appointments and health care, while two-thirds or more cited immigration, violent crime and the economy.

Trump supporter James Karamicky raised some of those concerns after leaving a recent Mass at St. Paul Cathedral in Pittsburgh. He criticized the Biden administration for its border policies and for sending many billions of dollars in aid to Ukraine.

“It’s too much money,” he said. “There’s people in this country that are suffering, homeless people, the vets.”

Tatiana Rad, Trump supporter and a Ukrainian Catholic immigrant, said the former president is the clear choice.

Rad grew up in the former Soviet Union, where Catholics were persecuted, and she sees Republicans as more favorable to religion. She backs Trump’s crack down on illegal immigration and believes he will make good his assertion that he'll stop the war in Ukraine.

“If America will be strong, the whole world will be looking upon America,” she said. “They need to see a strong leader.”

Brandon Friez, a University of Pittsburgh student who supports Harris, said her presidency would be the best bet for preserving democracy. He also sees moral issues with the Republican Party and Trump.

“The long-term suffering of the poor is not something that should be allowed,” he said. “I feel like the Republican Party doesn’t do enough to alleviate the suffering of the poor.”

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