News



Supporters hold a sign before Republican presidential nominee former President Donald Trump arrives to speak during a campaign event Sept.12, 2024, in Tucson, Ariz. (AP/Alex Brandon, File)



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Hispanic Catholics are moving away from the Democratic party, even as a majority of them still voted for Kamala Harris in 2024, a new post-election analysis reveals. The shift among Hispanic Catholics is even larger than that of white Catholics, or Hispanic voters overall.

But the much-trumpeted shift of Catholic voters overall toward Donald Trump may have been greatly overstated in exit polls as Trump's 53% of the vote was a mere 3 percentage points higher than 2020 and one point higher than 2016.

These are some of the findings of a new study by the Public Religion Research Institute.

"I'd be really cautious about making sweeping generalizations about massive realignment, but it's clear that Trump made inroads with many groups," said Melissa Deckman, chief executive of the research institute.

The data offer fresh insights into a much-discussed phenomenon of the Catholic voter in the 2024 election. Despite their sometimes exaggerated role, Catholics' influence remains a matter of interest and continues to dominate political discussion of electoral politics in America. Because of the importance of the issue in public debate, the National Catholic Reporter has named the Catholic voter its Newsmaker of the Year.

Some of the largest Hispanic Catholic gains for Trump came from counties on the southern border, such as Maverick County, Texas. Voters there chose a Republican for president for the first time in 50 years. The county is 95% Hispanic and predominantly Catholic, with three parishes in its boundaries. It is home to Eagle Pass, a small border town where deaths of migrants trying to make their way to the United States by crossing the nearby Rio Grande River have been concentrated.

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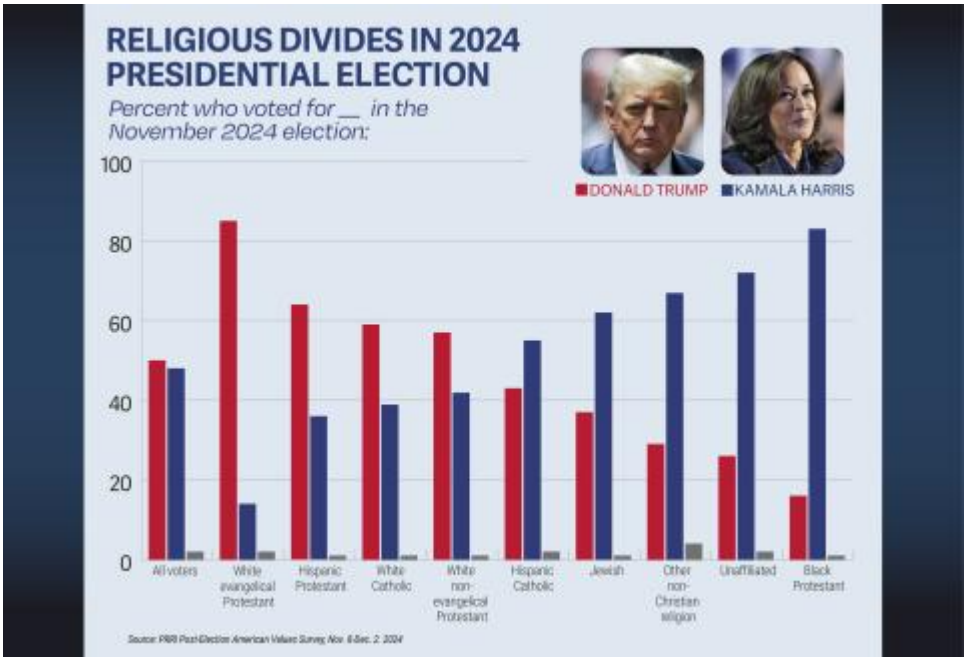
Such towns are full of working-class Hispanics, who may have been convinced by Trump's economic populist messaging, analysts said.

"We can't underestimate the economy as a factor in shaping the outcome of the election," said Dylan Corbett, executive director of HOPE Border Institute, a Catholic group that serves refugees and migrants. "They've borne the brunt of the COVID-19 pandemic, the housing affordability crisis, rising food prices and the overall economic inequality we can't seem to kick as a country."

In this year's presidential election, 55% of Hispanic Catholics voted for Harris, according to the study by the Public Religion Research Institute. By comparison, an earlier Pew Research Center study showed 66% support among Hispanic Catholics for the Democratic candidate, Joe Biden, in 2020 — a double-digit shift in four years.

Overall, the presidential race was still very close, and while Trump won the popular vote, he did not break the halfway mark. But small changes in voter turnout can have major consequences — and the shifts among religious Hispanic voters were more than small.

The Public Religion Research Institute's survey primarily confirmed previous patterns, said Deckman, chief executive of the institute. Ultimately, white religious voters — including white Catholics — were a deciding factor for Trump.



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"Religious lines are pretty clearly drawn when it comes to voting behavior," Deckman said. "White people of faith tended to back Trump overall, while religious people of color tended to support Kamala Harris."

The only exception is Hispanic evangelicals — two-thirds of whom supported Trump in 2024.

The numbers for white Catholic voters are far from the 85% of white evangelicals who supported Trump, but the trend over decades continues to show growing support among white Catholics for the Republican Party.

Yet a shift among Catholic voters overall toward Trump may have been overstated in exit polls. The research institute's data for Catholics overall — with 53% of Catholics saying they voted for Trump — is only 3 points higher than 2020 and 1 point higher than 2016. Additional "verified voter" data available in the spring tends to be more accurate, analysts say.

Still, white Catholics "are slowly but surely becoming a clear base of support for Republicans," Ryan Burge, an expert on data about religion and politics, noted even before the election.

Burge has analyzed the counties where Trump made the largest gains since 2020 — and found a correlation between counties with a higher concentration of religious people and bigger gains for Trump. (The full analysis will be published on his Substack in January.)

A list of top counties where Trump improved by 10 points or more is particularly interesting: Every single one is in an area that is predominantly Catholic, and all are in counties where eight in 10 residents are Hispanic. Six of the nine counties are in Texas, along the Mexican border.



Migrants who crossed the Rio Grande and entered the U.S. from Mexico are lined up for processing by U.S. Customs and Border Protection Sept. 23, 2023, in Eagle Pass, Texas. (AP/Eric Gay)

The largest gain was in Maverick County, where Trump received nearly 60% of the vote. This is not only a significant increase from 2020, it represents a 36-point shift in the last two election cycles, a swing Burge calls "unbelievable in the modern landscape."

Shifts among Hispanics, many of them Catholic, in those border counties must be about immigration — not abortion — Burge concludes. By comparison, he said, there weren't comparably sized swings in non-border cities such as Houston or Dallas.

"The most logical, simplest explanation is that this is about immigration," said Burge, an associate professor of political science at Eastern Illinois University.

While it might seem obvious to assume that immigrants would support immigration, voting patterns suggest that is not always true. Some researchers have found that

established, successful immigrants oppose immigration because of fears that newly arrived migrants will contribute to negative stereotypes about all immigrants.

The Catholic Church supports immigration reform and opposes mass deportations, the opposite of Trump's positions. Pope Francis has been especially vocal about the plight of migrants. However, the U.S. bishops have been significantly more outspoken about "culture war" issues such as abortion or transgender rights — the latter a theme that Trump picked up on in his campaign.

Other surveys of Hispanic Catholics indicate only a slight increase in affiliation with the Republican Party over the past decade, while also seeing a corresponding increase in affiliation with the Democrats (offset by a decline in those identifying as independent). Hispanic Catholics are also less likely to identify as conservative today as they were a decade ago.



A parishioner prays at St. Peter the Apostle Catholic Church in Reading, Pa., on June 16, 2024. The Reading Eagle reported in November that Trump captured nearly 35% of the vote in the city, which is 67% Latino. A majority of Hispanic Catholics voted for Kamala Harris, but Latinos are part of the story of how a shift in the Catholic vote

contributed to Trump's win. (AP/Luis Andres Henao)

That, combined with data showing Hispanic Catholics do not support many GOP policies, leads Deckman to suspect they moved toward Trump in 2024 because of concerns about inflation and the economy. In counties like Maverick in Texas, more than one in five lives below the poverty line, according to the U.S. Census.

"The economy is the most important issue for most Americans, but it is disproportionately important for Hispanic Americans," Deckman said.

Harris also failed to draw a strong contrast on the issue of immigration, running on a platform that included getting tough on the border, Corbett said.

"This should be a wake-up call that we need urgently a politics that addresses the needs of working class families, puts effective policies in place to manage migration at the border, and offers a legalization program for the millions of undocumented essential workers keeping our economy going," he said.

How else to explain the paradoxical results of Hispanic voters moving toward Trump? Some clues may be in the contrast between Hispanic Catholics and Hispanic evangelicals — a 21-point difference in support for Trump, according to the research institute study.

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Polarization has led to political parties differentiating themselves based on religious identities, so that to be evangelical is to be Republican, according to Efrén Pérez, who studies race, ethnicity and politics at the University of California at Los Angeles, where he is a professor of political science and psychology.

"That convergence between partisan identity and religious identity is part of what's happening with this change in the patterns of the Latino vote," Pérez said during a webinar about the PRRI data. "They're sort of just picking the right team, so to speak."

It's possible that as Catholic identity is also increasingly associated with Republicanism, the same pattern may happen with Hispanic Catholics.

Yet Pérez wonders how durable the 2024 results may be, given Trump's uniqueness as a candidate. Latinos also tend to be low-propensity voters who don't pay significant attention to politics, he said.

"It could be that we are talking about voters who are kites in the air, where they are highly responsive to the messaging that comes their way during campaigns, because they're still trying to get their political moorings."

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