News



Catholic priests in Illinois are almost evenly split between Democrats and Republicans in who they give campaign money to, illustrating the deep political divide not only in society, but among clergy. (Chicago Sun-Times photo illustration/Brian Ernst)



Robert Herguth

View Author Profile

Chicago Sun-Times

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

September 9, 2025
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Fr. Albert Heidecke, pastor of St. Joseph Catholic Church in west suburban Downers Grove, contributed $1,900 to campaign funds benefiting Republican Donald Trump during his successful presidential run last year.

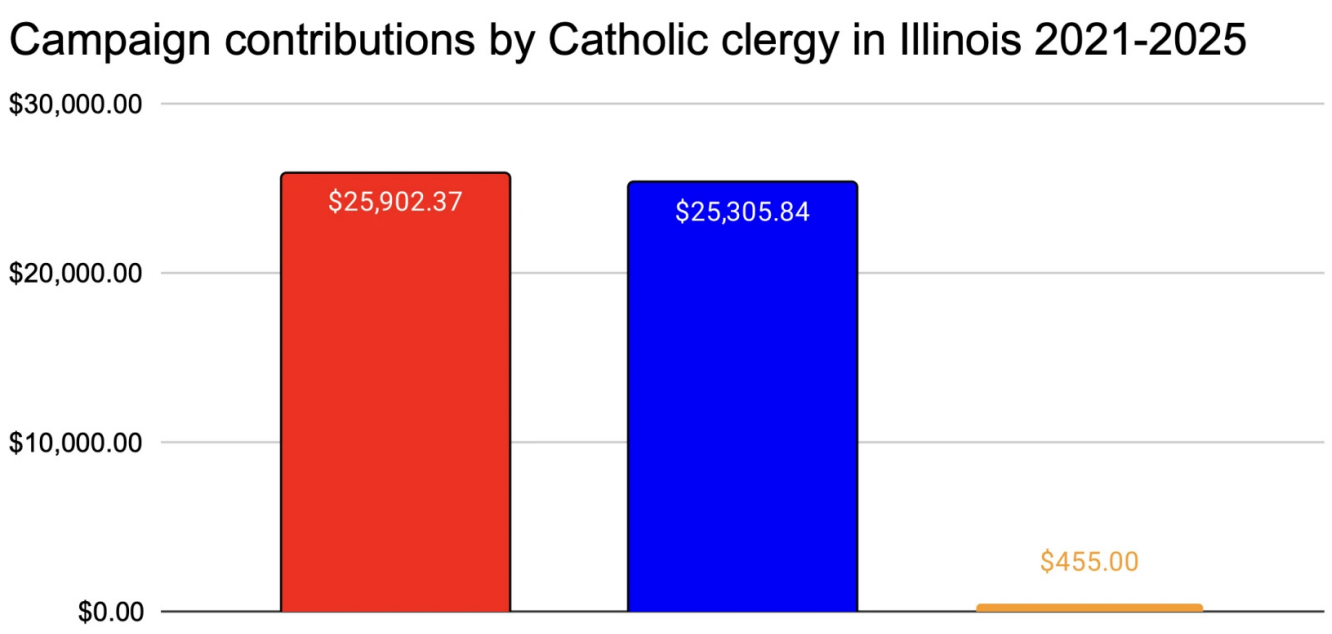
Fr. Mark Krylowicz, pastor of St. Anthony of Padua Catholic Church on the Far South Side, gave $200 in campaign money to a fund benefiting Trump's vanquished Democratic rival Kamala Harris in 2024.

Fr. Dan Deutsch of St. Patrick Catholic Church in far west suburban St. Charles made 12 campaign contributions last year totaling more than $1,000, all benefiting political funds backing Trump. Fr. Brian Bricker of St. Pius V Catholic Church in Chicago's Pilsen area made 10 donations totaling $64.82 to Democratic campaign committees, including one called Stop Trump.

While Catholic priests may all see eye to eye over Jesus' teaching about not taking an eye for an eye, they don't all view partisan politics the same way, according to a Chicago Sun-Times analysis that found Catholic clergy in Illinois are deeply divided politically, at least as reflected by their campaign contributions.

The analysis found more than 70 Illinois priests gave money to political campaigns since 2021 — the vast majority to federal campaign funds. Of that total, 37 gave to Democratic committees and 33 to Republican groups, while the partisan status of one donor's recipient was unclear.

The donations totaled more than $50,000 — with just over half, about $26,000, benefiting GOP figures, including Trump for his 2024 run, and the other half going for Democrats, including Harris.



GOP recipients are in red. Democratic recipients are in blue. Political affiliation unknown/unclear in orange. (Chicago Sun-Times graphic)

The Sun-Times also found that over the last several years:

- Heidecke was among the top Illinois priest donors to federal campaigns, all Republican. He made 16 contributions totaling nearly $8,500, not only to funds such as the Trump National Committee but also to committees benefiting U.S. Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., U.S. Sen. Ron Johnson, R-Wis., and U.S. Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, R-Ga., who after Pope Francis' death caused a stir by saying Catholic bishops are "monsters" and "controlled by Satan."

Heidecke didn't return calls and emails.

- Among Democratic donors, Fr. Jack Clair was among the biggest, making nearly 180 contributions totaling more than $5,400, with beneficiaries including an Evanston group called Stop Republicans, a committee for LGBTQ candidates and causes, ex-U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., and campaign funds for Democrats who unsuccessfully challenged U.S. Sen. Josh Hawley, R-Mo., and Greene. Clair oversees Misericordia Home, a Chicago-based Catholic institution for people with developmental disabilities.

Clair said, "I don't get locked into one issue, unless it's about the children at Misericordia."

He added, "I don't give that often, at least from my point of view. I've only given to candidates I've met" and who resonate with him, including Lucas Kunce, whom Hawley beat in November.

- Fr. Donald Gibbons, pastor of St. Cecilia Catholic Church in downstate Glen Carbon, part of the St. Louis metro area, made 51 contributions totaling roughly $2,000 to campaigns directly or indirectly benefiting Trump. At least 28 of the 33 GOP donors are diocesan priests — those reporting to local bishops as opposed to being part of a religious order — and 16 of the 28 are from Chicago area dioceses. Of the 33, 16 priests gave at least once to Trump.

Gibbons declined to comment.

- Fr. Ronald Stake, who works in the canonical affairs office for the Archdiocese of Chicago and its leader Cardinal Blase Cupich, made 13 campaign contributions totaling $1,640 to several Democratic funds, including $750 for Harris. Among the 37 Democratic priest-donors, 20 appear to be diocesan and 17 belong to orders. Almost all of the men live in the Chicago region, and 14 made at least one contribution to Harris, including South Side activist-priest Michael Pfleger.

Stake declined to comment.

- Fr. James Halstead, a longtime colleague of Pope Leo XIV in the Augustinian religious order's Chicago-based Midwest province, made six donations totaling $64 to ActBlue, a Democratic fundraising platform. Some of that money was earmarked for the campaign fund of U.S. Sen. Adam Schiff, D-Calif.

Halstead couldn't be reached for comment.

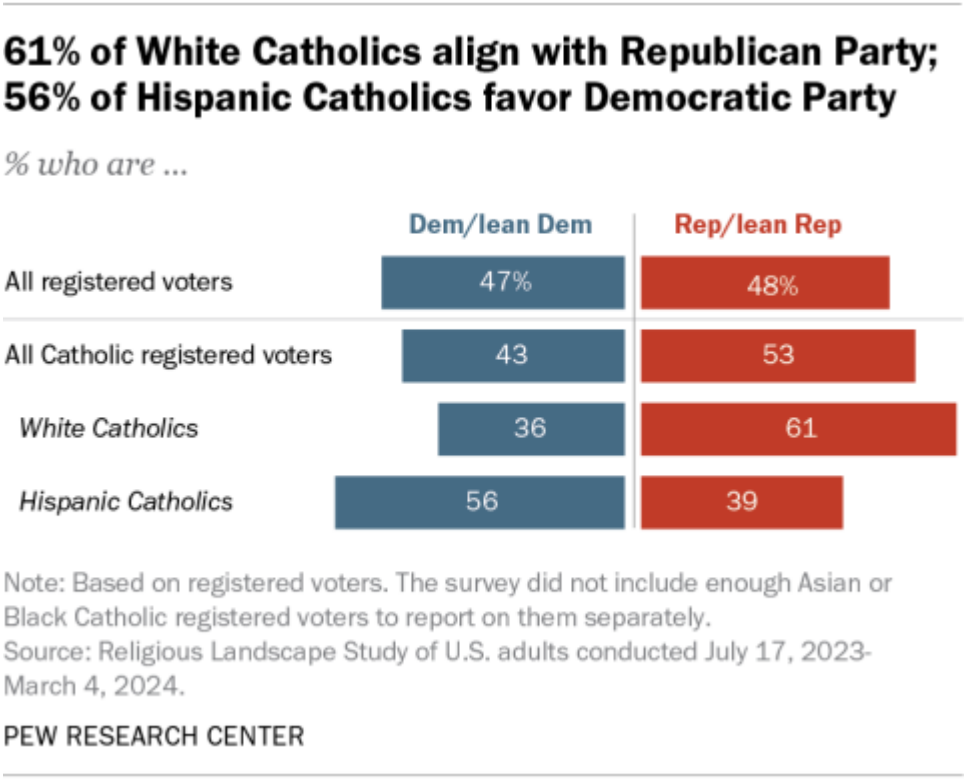
Advertisement

Though the overall amount given is a pittance compared to the big money in play in American politics these days, most priests don't get paid much, some take vows of poverty and many are loath to enter the public sphere since they represent politically diverse flocks as part of what's supposed to be a nonpartisan organization.

The Sun-Times examination likely represents an undercount, since donors to campaigns sometimes omit their professions and employers on disclosure records or describe them in varying ways that don't always make their job titles clear.

Either way, the findings illustrate the divisions in the Catholic church as more members nationally appear to be moving away from the Democratic Party, and the church leadership in the U.S. does battle with the Trump administration over, among other subjects, his policies that are seen by critics as heavy-handed toward immigrants — many of whom are Latino from heavily Catholic countries.

While evangelical Christians are probably the most powerful religious force in politics today — they've been a huge part of the Trump base in all of his runs — the Catholic Church is the largest single faith group in the country, with more than 60 million members and an active voice in public affairs through the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and other organizations.



Click for full-size graphic

In 1976 — 13 years after the death of the first Catholic president, Democrat John F. Kennedy — roughly 64% of American Catholics identified as Democrats, according to

one survey. Today — with the second Catholic president, Democrat Joe Biden, out of office this past January — it's around 20 percentage points less, according to the Pew Research Center.

A study of Catholic clergy in the U.S. within the past few years spearheaded by researchers from the Catholic University of America found younger priests "are much more likely than their older peers to describe themselves as politically conservative or moderate."

With Catholic leaders teaching that abortion is evil, that explains some of the movement by Catholics to the Republican Party, which generally is much more opposed to abortion rights than the Democratic Party.

But reasons for clergy giving to candidates and causes of both parties are often more nuanced.

Fr. Adam Stimpson, a Downstate priest who contributed about $50 to Trump, pointed to a criminal election interference case against Trump, and a civil case alleging the value of Trump assets were fraudulently inflated.

"The specific motivation of that donation was to participate against what I believed was an unjust weaponization of the legal system against a candidate for office," said Stimpson.



President Donald Trump, then the Republican presidential nominee, speaks on a panel of the National Association of Black Journalists convention in Chicago July 31, 2024. (OSV News/Reuters/Vincent Alban); Democratic presidential nominee and then Vice President Kamala Harris takes the stage during the Democratic National Convention in Chicago Aug. 22, 2024. (OSV News/Reuters/Brendan Mcdermid)

Krylowicz said he donated to what was then the Biden-Harris campaign — even though abortion "does upset me" and Harris backs abortion access — "at the beginning of her campaign mostly because I really did feel the Democratic Party represents a more truly 'pro-life' stance" when taking into account an array of issues, such as poverty, child care, the death penalty, immigration and war.

But as the race progressed, Harris seemed less pro-choice and more "pro-abortion," Krylowicz said, adding that was one of several disappointing aspects of her campaign that led him to ultimately not vote for her or Trump. "I voted, but not for president."

Fr. John Titus, a Downstate priest who gave $100 to the Draft DeSantis 2024 campaign that supported Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis' brief run for president, was one of several priests in Illinois to give campaign money to alternative Republican candidates to Trump, with several also giving to former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley.

"I saw DeSantis" — who is Catholic — "as a very electable alternative to other contenders," Titus said. "Very in tune with Catholic social teaching," including on "the life issues."

As for Deutsch, like other priests contacted by the Sun-Times, he emphasized his campaign activity involved his own money and was apart from his formal role in the clergy, saying:

"These personal contributions are entirely separate from my priestly ministry and the mission of the church ... I strive to maintain the proper balance of obedience to the church and its teachings, while still exercising my right to participate in the public square."



Then-Cardinal Robert Prevost, now Pope Leo XIV, smiles as he arrives to celebrate Mass at St. Jude Church in New Lenox, Ill., Aug. 7, 2024. (OSV News/Handout via Reuters/Augustinian Province of Our Mother of Good Counsel)

The current pope, a Chicago native formerly known as Robert Prevost, has voted Republican in past primaries from a New Lenox address, according to published reports. But he's apparently also shared social media posts critical of Trump and Vice President JD Vance, who is Catholic, over their migrant policies.

Priests, and clergy of other faiths and denominations, have always maintained their individual legal rights to vote, donate money to political causes and otherwise speak their mind in the U.S. But they've generally been restricted from overt partisanship in the context of their congregations if their organizations wanted to keep their nonprofit tax-exempt status with the IRS.

Or so was the thinking.

The IRS just recently said it's now fine with religious congregations endorsing political candidates — something Catholic leaders quickly signaled they wouldn't be doing.

Beyond endorsements, church leaders have long regarded the emphasis on love and charity in the Bible as practical concepts in the private and public sphere.

As Pope Paul VI wrote in 1967, "Since the Church does dwell among men, she has the duty 'of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel.' "

Alden Loury contributed to this story.

This story was originally published at Chicago Sun-Times.

A version of this story appeared in the **Sept 26-Oct 9, 2025** print issue under the headline: Not all priests view partisan politics the same way.