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Red birettas and rings are pictured at a consistory led by Pope Francis for the creation of 13 new cardinals in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican in this Nov. 28, 2020, file photo. (OSV News/Vatican Media)



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No one likes to think about getting old and dying, but both are an inevitable part of life, for those we love and for ourselves. It is especially true of world leaders, which has led to debates about whether President Joe Biden, age 80, and the presumed Republican challenger Donald Trump, age 77, are too old to be president. If elected next year, they would be 84 and 81, respectively, at the end of their presidency.

Meanwhile, Pope Francis, already 86, will turn 87 on Dec. 17. Lucky for him, he does not have to go through the brutal physical burdens of an election campaign, but during his [recent trip to Mongolia](#), he admitted that he will have to limit his travels in the future. On the up side, he shows no indication of slowing down mentally. He continues to give talks and interact with people with ease.

Seeing the [pope in a wheelchair](#) is disconcerting, but we should remember that Franklin Delano Roosevelt led the country through the Great Depression and World War II [from a wheelchair and crutches](#).

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Yet, the pope himself is not blind to the inevitable. He has been preparing for the next conclave by appointing cardinals who will select his successor. With his latest consistory on Sept. 30, he [will have appointed 99](#), or 72%, of the 137 cardinals under 80 years of age, who are allowed to vote in a papal conclave.

Francis has broken with tradition in these appointments by ignoring archbishops who occupy sees that traditionally had cardinals — Milan, Venice and Los Angeles among them — and instead appointing bishops from little-known dioceses around the world, such as Mongolia, Sudan and San Diego.

In making cardinals, Francis has looked for bishops who are pastoral and close to the poor and marginalized. These men are firmly committed to the social teaching of the church, without necessarily being liberal on hot-button issues of concern to progressive Catholics in the West.

Because of these choices, Francis has dramatically changed the geographical breakdown of the electoral college. At the 2013 conclave that elected him, 24% of the electors were Italian. After the September consistory, only 11% will be Italian, the lowest percentage ever, the same percentage as the combined U.S. and Canadian contingent.

Likewise, the European proportion of the electors has been reduced from 52% at the last conclave to 39%, the lowest percentage ever.



Cardinals enter "Pro Eligendo Pontifice" Mass at the St Peter's Basilica on March 12, 2013, at the Vatican. (RNS/Andrea Sabbadini)

The winners under Francis have been Asia, whose representation in the consistory has risen to 17% from 9%, and Africa, up to 14% from 9%. All together, the Global South will now make up half the electors. Surprisingly, Latin America's percent of the electors has remained almost the same. Unlike Pope John Paul II, who favored Eastern Europe, Francis, an Argentine, has not favored his part of the world when creating cardinals.

Now that Francis' electors will control at least 72% of the next conclave, many presume they will vote for continuity and elect someone like Francis. This certainly happened after the death of John Paul with the election of Pope Benedict XVI.

But there are other conclaves that produced surprises: for example, the elections of Francis, John Paul and Pope John XXIII.

One of the disadvantages of Francis' diverse and dispersed electors is that many of them do not know each other, as most cardinals did when they were mostly Italian or European. Under John Paul especially, the cardinals got to know each other through a series of special consistories called by the pope for consultation on particular topics. Francis has not done this, preferring to rely on the synod of bishops for advice.

Some cardinals, too, get to know the other cardinals through travel. Karol Wojtyła, before he became John Paul II, visited the Polish diaspora around the world. Cardinals from the Global South also travel to richer countries begging for money to support their churches. However, they rarely visit each other for the express purpose of discussing church policy.

It is the curial cardinals who know the other cardinals best, since every cardinal comes to Rome to meet with the pope and curia officials. As a result, when it comes time for a conclave, electors will turn to curia cardinals for information about papal candidates. Curial cardinals have had an outsize influence at every conclave.

Cardinals also turn to the media for information, which could be dangerous with an ideologically divided media landscape. There are even rumors that conservative groups are doing opposition research on cardinals they don't like. Watch for stories about how a cardinal is a bad manager, unsophisticated in theology, bad at dealing with sex abuse or even of questionable morals.

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As in every election, the cardinal electors will have to sift through the noise and make judgments about who they can trust.

Each elector will also ask how a prospective pope will be received in his country if he is elected. Cardinals from the Global North want someone who has dealt well with sex abuse, who is ecumenical and has not said anything stupid about women or Jews. They do not want someone who will make their lives more difficult.

Cardinals from the Global South want someone concerned about religious freedom, refugees, famines, neocolonialism and the negative impact of globalization. They do not want a pope who is only concerned about the church in wealthy countries.

And most importantly, each elector asks, how will we get along if he becomes pope? Will he listen to me? Does he speak my language?

Because the cardinals do not know each other well, there is a danger that the conclave system will force them to decide too quickly. Conclave rules, with up to four votes a day, pressure the cardinals to elect a pope as soon as possible. These rules are a reaction against long interregnums in the 13th century, one of which went on for three and a half years. This led to the system in which, once they begin voting, the cardinals are locked in the conclave until they finish their job.

There is also psychological pressure on the cardinals to do their work quickly since the whole world is watching. They don't want the people to think they are divided and incapable of agreeing on who should be pope.

In recent years, conclaves have been short. The last conclave [to last more than five days](#) was in 1831; it lasted 54 days.

Granted that the current electors do not know each other well, there is a need to change our attitude toward short conclaves. It is better to take a couple of weeks to pick a pope than to vote quickly with insufficient knowledge. The church can survive a few weeks without a pope as long as the best possible candidate is eventually selected.