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This combination image of two file photos shows then-President Donald Trump, left, and then-Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden during a presidential debate Sept. 29, 2020, at Case Western University and Cleveland Clinic in Cleveland. (RNS/AP/Patrick Semansky)



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With the 2024 presidential election predicted to be very close, American Catholics could be the deciding voters in the election.

Catholics are a significant voting bloc, almost evenly divided among Republicans and Democrats (though white Catholics tend to be Republican and Hispanic Catholics Democrats). Because they reside in significant numbers in battleground states such as Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin and Nevada, they have all the more power to decide who will be the next president.

All these demographic facts make Catholics a good weathervane, and indeed they tend to vote for the winner in presidential elections. If you win Catholics, you probably win the country.

Catholics were once dependable members of the Democratic coalition. Beginning in 1928, they began voting Democratic when Protestant and Republican operatives smeared New York Gov. Al Smith, the first Catholic to run for president, with anti-Catholic propaganda.

Catholics went on to support Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, breaking ranks with the Democrats only to reelect Dwight Eisenhower to his second term in 1956. They reverted to form in 1960 and '64, voting for John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, both Democrats.

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Richard Nixon was the first to recognize that Republicans had a chance of wooing Catholics to their party. By 1968, white Catholics had joined the middle class and moved to the suburbs. They were paying more taxes, and some objected to affirmative action and the integration of schools through busing. The bond with the Republicans was deepened by Ronald Reagan, who switched his stance on abortion

to pro-life in an appeal to both Catholics and evangelical Christians in 1980.

Today, Donald Trump appeals to the same nativist prejudices against immigrants that were directed at Catholics in the first half of the 20th century. That many white Catholics respond to this appeal shows how ignorant they are of what their grandparents and great-grandparents experienced. But many feel abandoned by the Democrats, especially working-class white Catholics in the Rust Belt who have suffered from factory closings.

The Catholic bishops have tended to ally with the Republican Party, as they have made the abortion issue [preeminent](#). Though Trump has changed his position on abortion numerous times, when it mattered most he appointed justices to the U.S. Supreme Court who overturned *Roe v. Wade*. But on issues such as health care, immigration, the environment and help for the poor, the bishops have been critical of Republican policies and supported Democratic programs.

This is reflected in their election-year document, "[Faithful Citizenship](#)," which is strongly pro-life but also concerned for the poor. Sadly, it has [not been updated](#) to reflect Pope Francis' concern about global warming and the environment.

[Related:](#) [Catholic bishops reprimand Trump as often as they praise him](#)

Unlike some prominent evangelical leaders, Catholic bishops have avoided endorsing candidates and parties. You would never see a group of Catholic bishops praying over the president in the Oval Office. As a result, according to the [Pew Research Center](#), Catholics are less likely to hear political messaging from the pulpit than other denominations. There are some rogue bishops and priests who get a lot of media attention, but most prefer to avoid politics.

The truth is that few Catholics are influenced by what the bishops say, even on abortion. Most laypeople have already made up their minds. Political parties are bypassing the bishops and appealing directly to Catholics through political action groups supporting their candidates.

If this election is going to be as close as the pundits are predicting, Catholics in swing states could make the difference. Neither party has a lock on these voters. A few percentage points one way or the other could determine the election.

Will anger and frustration encourage them to turn to Trump, or will his authoritarian tendencies scare them off? Will they continue to complain about inflation and the economy or will they not want to change horses while progress is being made? Will they blame our problems on the president or the "do nothing" Congress?

This story appears in the **Election 2024** feature series. [View the full series.](#)