

# CATHOLICS AND POLITICS IN THE UNITED STATES

**Blandine CHELINI-PONT**

*The emergence of ultraconservative currents in the United States should not overshadow the vast plurality of political views among American Catholics. Revisiting history can help explain this trend, and particularly the upheaval of the 1970s and the mounting concern about “societal” issues that greatly polarized opinions. The recent election showed a rebalancing of the Catholic vote. This article asks whether there is a compromise to be had between such polarized attitudes.*

**I**n its July–August 2017 issue, the Italian Jesuit journal *La Civiltà Cattolica*, “barometer” of the Roman Catholic Church according to its editor Father Antonio Sparado, published a particularly incisive and alarming article, entitled “Evangelical Fundamentalism and Catholic Integralism in the USA: A Surprising Ecumenism.” This article described the tendency of a radical Catholic fringe that had joined the neo-Pentecostal movement of “dominionist”<sup>1</sup> inspiration in “an ecumenism of hatred” and in the service of an “apocalyptic geopolitics,” nourished by conspiracy and prophetic Manichaeism that appeared to have emerged from similar sources as the narrative that underlies Islamist fundamentalism. Its activists describe Pope Francis as the figurehead of the satanic forces of globalism (in the words of Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, former Apostolic Nuncio to the United States and an active protagonist of this trend), claiming that the Pope succeeded to the Throne of Saint Peter thanks to occult Masonic networks of liberal, or even pedophilic tendency, that seek

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1. To understand the nature of these “new generation” evangelicals, see André Gagné’s enlightening research, *Ces évangéliques derrière Trump. Hégémonie, démonologie et fin du monde* (Labor and Fides 2020).

the destruction both of the Church and of the United States.<sup>2</sup> These “RadCaths” or Reactionaries were Donald Trump’s most fervent supporters.

The “RadCaths” monopolize digital media coverage of American Catholicism to the point of obscuring the reality of the Catholic vote, which consists of a relative balance between right and left thanks to a rich historical, ethnic, and social diversity, and in turn gives rise to visions and political interests that are equally diverse. It is indeed difficult to assert that American Catholicism forms a monolithic political block, as is the case for white evangelicals, of whom over 80 percent have voted Republican since the 1980s. Despite their progressively right-wing stance and the emergence of this extreme tendency verging on dystopian paranoia, that is described by *La Civiltà Cattolica*, a strong contingent of Democrats has been maintained among white Catholics in the United States. The other Catholic communities (African American, Asian, African, and Latino), who form 40 percent of the total Catholic population, continue to vote Democrat at a rate exceeding 70 percent.

In fact, the era of Donald Trump’s mandate seems to have affected the conservative polarization of Catholics at the national level: the brutal decisions of this mandate, the benevolent pastoral vision of Pope Francis, the upheaval caused by the management of the pandemic and of the *Black Lives Matter* movement have all contributed to a significant reversal among Republican Catholic voters in favor of the Democrats and of Joe Biden and his compassionate Catholicism. This was evident from the 2020 presidential election results. But will this reversal be sustained? Or will the theo-political polarization of American Catholics continue and increase? This paper puts forward some hypotheses.

## The rightization of American Catholicism

### Sociological change

Representing 23 percent of the national population, American Catholics are the most diverse denomination in terms of skin color, social background, church attendance and practices, and their sense

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2. Kathryn Joyce, “Deep State, Deep Church: How QAnon and *Trumpism* Have Infected the Catholic Church,” *Vanity Fair*, October 30, 2020.

of belonging. What makes them unique is perhaps that they often find themselves in tune with the presidential majority: sometimes in favor of the Democratic candidate (Bill Clinton and both of Barack Obama's presidential terms), and sometimes in favor of the Republican candidate (Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, both of George W. Bush's terms, and Donald Trump). To understand the political history of this denomination, we need to go back to the 1960s. At that time, they were voting almost unanimously for the Democratic Party, peaking in the election of John F. Kennedy. Catholic social structures were typically centered on the parish, with the church providing a strong framework, and a relatively close-knit society that had been fostered by past distrust of American society. The 1970s turned things upside down. During this time, their political homogeneity and their strong sense of community were shattered. Catholics were part of the new distribution described by sociologist Robert Wuthnow,<sup>3</sup> where party identification was redrawn along lines that were both ethnic (whites versus others) and moral (Christian values versus sexual liberalism). The "1970s crisis years" divided Catholics, accelerating both the secularization and the declericalization of some and the resistance of others to this very secularization. Above all, the legal revolution and social acceptance of the liberalization of sexual and family values changed their political identification. Catholics of European origin transferred their vote to the Republican Party, which transformed itself into a party of believers, of moral and family values such as the rejection of legal abortion. Their social tradition was diminished in the cultural war that followed, although without entirely disappearing.<sup>4</sup> Catholics belonging to ethnic groups remained Democrat, apart from the Latino population in Florida. Although Catholic representation in Congress was still predominantly Democratic, strictly observant white Catholics voted Republican (from 48 percent to 64 percent depending on the election) while other Catholics, either from ethnic groups, less observant, or secularized, voted Democrat (65 percent to 75 percent).

« Strictly observant white Catholics voted Republican »

3. Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II* (Princeton University Press, 1988).

4. Amandine Barb, "Catholic Patterns in the American Left," in *Catholics and US Politics after the 2016 Elections. Understanding the Swing Vote* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), 23–41.

## Episcopal favor

The Republican turn of some Catholics was linked, then, to the emergence of Christian political causes, in the face of the legalization of abortion, sexual liberty, same-sex marriage and, to a much lesser extent, feminist and gender activism or, perhaps, the public perception of it. During this reversal, the Democratic Party confirmed its support for the process of liberalization, a stance which did not erode the confidence of ethno-religious minorities (including Catholics), nor of adherents of Christian socialism.

However, between 1980 and 2010, at a time when they seemed to have lost internal authority on these matters, many bishops of the “John Paul II generation” publicly urged the faithful to vote Republican on the grounds of moral and sexual issues. This began while Catholics still identified as Democrats. Several bishops, including the Cardinal of Philadelphia, Archbishop John Krol, appeared alongside candidate Ronald Reagan at campaign rallies. Two decades later, other bishops, such as then-Archbishop Raymond Burke of St. Louis and then-Archbishop Charles Chaput of Denver, campaigned publicly in favor of Republican candidates. The Cardinal of Philadelphia, Archbishop Justin Rigali, used the pulpit to proclaim that Catholics have the duty to vote for a pro-life candidate. The idea that you cannot vote Democrat if you are a good Catholic had begun to spread.

From 1975, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops also began to publish teaching documents in the run-up to elections; examples include *Living the Gospel of Life* (1998), *Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility* (2003) and *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* (2007). Abortion is described in these texts as the intrinsic evil of American society. In 1984, Archbishops John Joseph O’Connor of New York and Bernard Law of Boston denounced the Catholic running mate of the Democratic presidential candidate, Geraldine Ferraro, for her pro-choice position. Secular organizations were also formed to provide voting guides for “serious” Catholics, such as the Californian *Catholic Answers*, which reminded voters to check the positions of the candidates on five topics: abortion, euthanasia, embryonic stem cell research, human cloning, and gay marriage. Ten million of these guides were distributed during the 2004 campaign and could be found in parish contexts, sometimes even included in parish bulletins.

This situation fueled a national inter-episcopal debate on the refusal of Communion (and the subsequent memorandum issued by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger) on the grounds of the applicability of Canon 915 to Catholic politicians. Faced with the hesitancy of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, the bishops took the decision concerning whether (or not) to refuse Communion to Democratic candidates upon themselves, which happened on numerous occasions to John Kerry in 2004 and, to a lesser extent, to Joe Biden in fall 2019 and in 2020.

### The “Christian right”

The Republican turn among Catholics also gave rise to the birth of an intellectual, media, educational, and judicial trend that in turn contributed to the formation of political conservatism and the establishment of the American “religious right,”<sup>5</sup> in the form of coalitions including Moral Majority, Christian Coalition, and then Evangelicals and Catholics Together. These coalitions strongly influenced the Republican machine and altered the profile of candidates at all electoral levels. The religious right has thus played a major role in the formation of the “God gap” between Republicans and Democrats. The role of the religious right was recognized in 1994 when the “Contract with the American family” was integrated into the platform of the Republican Party. The alliance of the Republican Party with the Christian right continued unabated in the following years. In terms of rhetoric, the positions held by Christian conservatives contributed to the progressive Catholicization of the Republican Party, while the Democratic Party officially embodied the culture of disbelief.

In the 2000s, during George W. Bush’s presidential years, Catholic thinkers formed the intellectual backbone of the conservative movement, and their ideas were strongly reflected within the President’s entourage. Throughout his two terms of office, Bush was careful to demonstrate his closeness to the Catholic religion. The welcome he extended to Pope Benedict XVI, who visited the

« In the 2000s, Catholic thinkers formed the intellectual backbone of the conservative movement »

5. Blandine Chelini-Pont, *La droite catholique aux États-Unis* (Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2014).

United States in April 2008, was memorable: the Supreme Pontiff's magnificent birthday reception at the White House brought together two hundred and fifty guests, including figures from the Conservative Catholic intelligentsia, such as George Weigel, Michael Novak, and Father Richard John Neuhaus.

### **Electoral unanimity**

In the 2012 Republican primaries, three candidates typified the new Catholic profile of Republican politicians: Rick Santorum, Newt Gingrich, and Paul Ryan, Romney's chosen running mate. During the 2016 primaries, Donald Trump did not really fit this profile. In fact, in March 2016, George Weigel and Robert Peter George published an appeal in the *National Review*, signed by more than thirty conservative intellectuals and lobbyists, denouncing Trump as "manifestly unfit to be president of the United States."<sup>6</sup> Drawing attention to Trump's racist prejudices, his vow to punish the families of terrorists, and his sudden U-turn on the issue of abortion, the signatories urged responsible Catholics not to vote for him in the primaries. Despite this position of principle, an even more conservative group rallied around Trump. Before her death in September 2016, Phyllis Schlafly argued his case in her latest book, *The Conservative Case for Trump*. Her website published a counter-list of thirty-three other Catholic leaders who agreed to rally for candidate Trump, including Rick Santorum<sup>7</sup>. Influential supporter and founder of the National Catholic Prayer Breakfast, Joseph Cella became the Trump campaign's main liaison that summer for Catholic affairs. The list goes on to include Catholic magnates such as Robert Mercer, former supporter of Ted Cruz, financier of Breitbart News, and owner of Cambridge Analytica. Another of the 2016 members of Trump's advisory board was Father Frank Pavone, a well-known anti-abortion activist, who, just days before the election, staged his support for the future president by displaying an aborted fetus on an altar.

Trump won in 2016 by mobilizing the support of the whole of the religious right and its public: the predicted evangelical vote

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6. Robert P. George and George Weigel, "An Appeal to Our Fellow Catholics," *National Review*, March 7, 2016.

7. Catholic New Agency, "Struggling with Catholics, Trump Taps Conservative Catholic Advisers," September 23, 2016.

rose to unprecedented heights (80 percent),<sup>8</sup> while white Catholics gave him more than 60 percent of their vote.<sup>9</sup> According to Robert Wuthnow's study of the vote distribution, the most religiously observant Americans voted for Trump. While 56 percent of regular weekly church attenders voted for him, only 40 percent voted for his Democrat rival.<sup>10</sup> The Catholic vote of the three former democratic states of Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania—the very ones then lost by Trump in 2020—tipped the balance of the vote in favor of Trump. The era of Trumpist national Christianity that followed profoundly transformed the ideology of the Christian right.<sup>11</sup>

## A democratic and social rebalancing in 2020

### Polarization within Trumpism

Donald Trump's 2020 presidential campaign sought to replicate the "miracle" of 2016. Every opportunity was taken to remind voters that Trump was the only truly Christian and even truly Catholic president to date.<sup>12</sup> The only president to have chaired a United Nations assembly on religious freedom or to have made a personal appearance at the March for Life. The only one to have filled much of his government with good Catholics like Steve Bannon, Kellyanne Conway, or Attorney General Bill Barr. The only one to have defunded family planning or created the State Department's Commission on Unalienable Rights, which used the doctrine of natural law recognized by Catholicism to devalue LGBTQI+ rights. The only one to have overhauled the composition of the Supreme Court by appointing three conservative justices, including two strong Catholics, with the help of the highly influential Leonard Leo, vice president of the Federalist Society. At the opening of the Republican Convention, a prayer was

8. Philip S. Gorski, "Revisited: Why do Evangelicals Vote for Trump?" *The Immanent Frame*, October 4, 2016.

9. Mark J. Rozell, "Introduction: The 'Catholic Vote' in the USA," 1–19; Douglas W. Kmiec, "The Catholic Vote in the Election of Donald J. Trump," 129–159; Mark M. Gray, "Catholics and the 2016 Elections," 209–219, in *Catholics and US Politics after the 2016 Elections: Understanding the "Swing Vote,"* eds. Blandine Chelini-Pont, Marie Gayte, and Mark J. Rozell (Palgrave MacMillan, 2018).

10. Jessica Martínez and Gregory A. Smith, "How the Faithful Voted: A Preliminary 2016 Analysis," Pew Research Center, November 9, 2016.

11. Samuel L. Perry and Andrew L. Whitehead, *Taking America Back for God. Christian Nationalism in the United States* (OUP, 2020).

12. See Austin Ruse, president of the Center for Family and Human Rights, and his volume *The Catholic Case for Trump* (2020).

said by a “Catho-Trump” supporter, and at its closing an *Ave Maria* was sung from the balcony of the White House. In true presidential style, commentator John Zmirak announced that, “This is the most Catholic moment in American history.”<sup>13</sup>

During the 2020 campaign, Trump made more and more promises. During the National Catholic Prayer Breakfast and amid the pandemic, he announced that he would sign the “Born Alive” decree requiring federally funded hospitals to provide medical care to fetuses surviving an abortion. He promised to help struggling church schools. During the election period, at the traditional Al Smith Dinner in October 2020, a major charity fundraising event organized by the Archdiocese of New York, he declared himself the best President in the entire “history of the Catholic Church.” He added: “[Catholic schools] needed hundreds of millions of dollars nationwide, and I got it for them. Nobody else. [. . .] I hope you remember that on November 3rd.”<sup>14</sup>

Finally, Trump and his supporters castigated Biden as a false Catholic and even as an anti-Catholic—Biden would “hurt the Bible, hurt God”—according to the campaign rally cry of the conservative lobby CatholicVote, where Brian Burch accused Democrats of fostering a “climate of hatred” against Christians and their symbols (statues, churches, etc.).<sup>15</sup> Certain bishops agreed with him. For example, on the announcement of Biden’s appointment to the Democratic Caucus, Bishop Thomas Tobin of Providence (Rhode Island) tweeted: “First time in awhile that the Democratic ticket hasn’t had a Catholic on it. Sad.” Cardinal Raymond Burke told Fox news that no practicing Catholic could vote for a pro-choice politician and that pro-choice candidates like Joe Biden should be refused Communion. Father Ed Meeks of Townson (Maryland) preached an anti-Biden sermon on YouTube called “Staring into the Abyss,” which has been viewed over two million times. In addition to publishing messages on abortion and religious freedom, the “Catholics for Trump” campaign movement hosted Zoom sessions, calls to prayer, weekly rosary prayer sessions, and priests prayed for Trump’s victory. The Minnesota-based Freedom Club launched a website called [www.anticatholicticket.com](http://www.anticatholicticket.com).

13. Doug Mainwaring, “Ave Maria at the White House,” *Lifesite*, August 28, 2020.

14. “Remarks by President Trump to Guests at the Al Smith Diner,” White House Archives, October 1, 2020.

15. Tish Durkin, “The Catholics Who Hate Joe Biden—And Pope Francis,” *The Atlantic*, October 21, 2020.



Well-known “RadCath” media figures joined in the fight. At the end of August 2020, celebrity priest James Altman of Wisconsin predicted, in an inspirational soundtrack video, that Catholics voting Democrats must repent or “face the fires of hell.”<sup>16</sup> According to YouTuber Taylor Marshall,<sup>17</sup> the election represented the final choice between Trump and the true defenders of the faith, in defiance of the false Pope Francis and his apostate sidekick Joe Biden.<sup>18</sup> The former Nuncio to the United States, Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, who shot to fame following his call for Pope Francis to resign in August 2018, published a letter to the President in June on LifeSiteNews, a platform that supports the idea that the pandemic is a conspiracy, passionately exalting the Great Reset and the huge economic gains to be drawn from a compulsory vaccine made from embryonic cells. Viganò boldly describes himself as the equivalent of Trump, his ally in the final battle of the soldiers of Christ against the Deep State and the Deep Church, which he claimed are committed “to globalism, to aligned thought, to the New World Order.”<sup>19</sup> Trump retweeted Viganò’s letter with a glowing commentary, which he repeated on the Catholic television network, EWTN. A lengthier description of these initiatives would merely be tiresome.

### Depolarization of the ballot boxes

The huge number of Catholics votes for Trump did not produce the expected result. The religious right splintered during the last presidential elections because Catholic voters supported other arguments. As Ryan P. Burge wrote in the September 20, 2020, issue of *Christianity Today*, to be reelected, President Trump could afford to lose evangelical votes, but not to lose Catholic votes.<sup>20</sup> But lose them he did, and in quite high numbers.

According to the National Election Pool and the Associated Press VoteCast exit polls,<sup>21</sup> Trump won 81 percent of the white evangelical vote, roughly the same as in 2016. On the other hand, while 64 percent

16. Father James Altman, “You Cannot be Catholic & a Democrat.” Youtube video, 9:58, September 2020.

17. Author of *Infiltration: The Plot to Destroy the Church from Within* (2020).

18. Taylor Marshall, “Why is Pope Francis Against Trump”, Youtube video, 39:29, August 11, 2020.

19. *Open letter to President Donald Trump from Archbishop Carlo Viganò on the spiritual forces at work in the riots in the US*, June 6, 2020.

20. Ryan P. Burge, “Trump Can Afford to Slip Among White Evangelicals, but Not White Catholics,” *Christianity Today*, September 20, 2020.

21. NPR “Understanding the 2020 Electorate: AP VoteCast Survey,” November 3, 2020.

of white Catholics had voted for Trump in 2016, only an average of 57 percent voted for the outgoing President in 2020. In the key states of Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania, this number of white Catholics that voted for Trump drops a little further (54 percent). These differences helped swing those states in favor of Biden, who also won the entire non-white religious vote there. Nationally, Latino communities voted 67 percent for Biden and other ethno-religious minorities were even more pro-Biden, although Florida's Latino population voted Republican. The Catholic vote returned to near parity between Trump and Biden, with Biden taking a slight lead.

There are several important reasons behind this reversal, besides the repellant nature of the bogus, conspiratorial, and apocalyptic arguments of “Catholics for Trump.” Several fundamental issues weighed in against the still-influential issues of the rejection of abortion,<sup>22</sup> gay marriage, and the promise that these would be denied legality. The Democratic agenda and Catholic pastoral communication have become realigned over major causes: the reception of migrants and refugees, the opprobrium of racial discrimination, concern for the common good (in terms of health, social welfare, social redistribution, education including higher education), the climate emergency, respect for the environment and the ecosystem, and financial regulation. These causes were given a platform, on the one hand, by the decentering of Catholicism that Pope Francis spearheaded and voiced in his most recent encyclical, *Fratelli tutti*, which greatly challenged American conservatives over the rebalancing of their priorities;<sup>23</sup> on the other hand, those same causes were championed in the repeated and severe warnings, issued by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and certain bishops, on the sin of racism, the shameful treatment of illegal migrants, the closure of borders to refugees, climate change denial, the freedom to carry weapons, the federal death penalty, the increase in social fragility, and the absence of health solidarity. Finally, on an individual level, Catholics—with their spiritual and family tradition as well as their living memory of a past of poverty, immigration, and discrimination—also voted with their conscience against the direction taken by their country and their

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22. Half of Catholic voters seem to finally accept it, according to Dalia Fahmy, “8 Key Findings about Catholics and Abortion,” Pew Research Center, October 20, 2020.

23. Massimo Faggioli, *The Liminal Papacy of Pope Francis: Moving Toward Global Catholicity* (New York: Orbis Books, 2020); Christopher Lamb, *The Outsider: Pope Francis and His Battle to Reform the Church* (New York: Orbis Books, 2020).

society under the Trump presidency. Incidentally, to represent their party, the Democrats had chosen the person who was apparently the most religiously compatible, moderate, and compassionate of all its candidates, namely the Catholic Joe Biden.

## Is the compromise a Catholic one?

Much has been written about Joe Biden's Catholicism, about the fact that it has been both highly contested and, on the other hand, highly regarded across the American Catholic spectrum, and that his religious affiliation did not count in the way it did when 80 percent of Catholics voted for John F. Kennedy. Biden's Catholic identity has been both widely questioned and championed: he regularly attends church and has demonstrated his fondness for the rosary; he speaks of the strength drawn from his faith during the trials of his life; he cites Catholic prayers, songs, and poems in his speeches, and offered up a real victory sermon in the aftermath of the election results, asking for healing and unity for his country and invoking the kindness and decency of his people<sup>24</sup>. At the same time, Biden has repeatedly promised that he will defend the legality of abortion and the rights of LGBTQI + people.

Ultimately, Biden reminds the American Church that its dual code of ethics—split between the altruistic and the bio-sexual—can be seen as a political lever, in a society that is structurally liberal but also predominantly Christian. Beyond the consequences of disaffection and internal division, politically favoring one side of this ethical balance to the detriment of the other is likely to foster political instrumentalization and polarization. The failure to champion the two sides together reduces the chances of winning over a broad spectrum of society and of participating in the process of democratic alternation. Should the Catholic Church rejoice or lament that such a promising icon of the Democratic left as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez publicly

« Biden's Catholic identity has been both widely questioned and championed »

24. Alexis Artaud de la Ferrière and Blandine Chelini Pont, "Anointing the Nation: How Joe Biden's Catholic Faith Permeated His Inaugural Address," *The Conversation*, February 4, 2021

displays her commitment to her Catholic faith?<sup>25</sup> Even if the polls show that Catholics pay little attention to their bishops, the collective attitude of the latter toward Biden, his public demonstration of his faith, and his right to take Communion will be crucial in helping to defuse the internal war that has been triggered by political polarization, and also in maintaining the distribution of the Catholic vote in the future. The bishops' stance will give credit to the religious inspiration of many democratic causes and will reaffirm their tradition of protecting minorities and respecting pluralism, even though the Democrats are also the party of the growing numbers of non-believers. Divisions among the American bishops over how to react to Biden's victory led their Conference President, the Hispanic Archbishop José Gómez of Los Angeles, to make an initial expression of measured opinion, balanced between celebration and reserve, in statements issued ten days apart.<sup>26</sup> This balancing act—supporting all that is positive within each party and, at the same time, denouncing all that is not in terms of Catholic ethics, while reminding Catholics that to vote or to engage in politics is an act of conscience—would perhaps be the best way, in the future, of respecting the political maturity of Catholics and—according to Mgr Gomez—of preserving their “special duty to be peacemakers, to promote fraternity and mutual trust.”

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25. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, “Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez on her Catholic Faith and the Urgency of Criminal Justice Reform,” *America*, June 27, 2018; Peter Feuerherd, “AOC Credits Her Catholic Faith for Positions on Health Care, Environment,” *National Catholic Reporter*, October 27, 2020.

26. United Conference of Catholic Bishops, Archbishop José Gomez statement on the 2020 presidential election, November 7, 2020.