Opinion
Editorial

A voting sign is posted in front of St. Mark the Evangelist Catholic Church, a polling location in Hyattsville, Md., on Election Day in 2024. (NCR photo/James Grimaldi)

by NCR Editorial Staff

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December 26, 2024
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In the endless drama of post-presidential election analyses this year, one performer consistently has been written into the script — not a star, but more of a ubiquitous supporting actor on the national stage.

The Catholic voter has played a role in 2024 that in some ways has upstaged the leading actors. That role this year is remarkably similar to the one the Catholic voter played in elections of recent decades, a kind of everyman character who rolls with the winning side, not by a great deal, but by enough to attract interest that sometimes can take on an inflated role.

Given the power and potential of the Catholic vote, and the importance the Catholic electorate has played in the discussion of the outcome of the 2024 national election, the National Catholic Reporter is naming the Catholic voter its Newsmaker of the Year.

The fascination in the Catholic voter is warranted. By sheer number — approximately one in four voters is Catholic — the implications of a unified Catholic vote is awesome. Should the Catholic community ever in fact become united enough again in political purpose or opinion, it could prove an overwhelming force.

So we turn the spotlight to the Catholic voter not only to get a more detailed closeup of a political force, but, importantly, to examine what the persistent split is in the Catholic vote today and what the majority vote for this year's winner portends for the Catholic community.

An underlying intrigue is always inherent in questions about the Catholic voter: What moral underpinning, what element from the church's exhaustive social teaching tradition might be motivating the Catholic voter?

The answer to most of those questions, not just in current terms but also historically, is not much at all. That is certainly the case today. The latest data showing 53% of Catholics voted for Trump may simply affirm what has become a familiar and unremarkable trend. Catholics, particularly white Catholics, have become an indistinguishable part of the culture, successful at all levels of civil society and protective of that status.

> The Catholic voter may have helped decide things in civil society this year, but that vote raises deeply unsettling questions within the Catholic world.

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As such, they have also become, as a political entity, a fairly reliable bellwether. Catholics have voted for the winner in presidential elections in all but two since 1960.

So, in one sense, this year's news about the Catholic voter was not unusual. The candidate who won their votes, however, was anything but usual. By his public and private conduct, through criminal and civil proceedings, Donald Trump has shown himself to be a man without a moral core. He is, in that regard, an unprecedented spectacle in presidential politics.

His authoritarian bent and desire to overthrow an election while inciting an insurrection demonstrate an approach to public life that Catholic social tradition as well as the U.S. Constitution would deem repugnant. The Catholic voter may have helped decide things in civil society this year, but that vote raises deeply unsettling questions within the Catholic world.

Self-interest at the core

In his masterful work *American Catholicism*, historian Msgr. John Tracy Ellis established that Catholics in the United States, from the very earliest, voted their personal and group interests regardless of the wishes of hierarchy. Perhaps the most notable of the "wise precedents" set by John Carroll, the first archbishop in the United States, was "his insistence that the Catholic clergy should hold themselves aloof from politics," Ellis wrote.

That was pretty much the case until the time of the book's publication in 1955. That predated the U.S. bishops' decision to promulgate election guidance for Catholics under the title "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship." It was before the bishops essentially aligned themselves with the Republican Party by elevating the issue of abortion in that document to a "preeminent priority."

While those early American Catholics voted as a bloc, the interests motivating their politics were not the venal individual concerns that can skew today's elections. They

emerged from the needs of immigrants desperate to make a way in a new culture that was often quite hostile.

That their motivation also sometimes emerged from less-than-noble purpose is evident in their alignment with those opposed to the abolition of slavery. In the main, however, they voted for the party that opposed those who expressed hatred for Catholics, they voted for the party that extended a hand to immigrants, and they voted for the candidate who appeared most likely to help them become integrated into and prosper in their new culture.

Perhaps the greatest display of unity in a vote occurred in 1960 was the election of John F. Kennedy, the first Catholic president.

Since then, a gap has grown in the Catholic vote. Columnist and Catholic intellectual E.J. Dionne's 2000 essay for the Brookings Institution was headlined with the phrase that has become a definitive, indispensable analysis: "There Is No 'Catholic Vote.' And Yet, It Matters." Translation: Catholics no longer vote as a bloc but they most often help decide the winner.

> 'Being a Catholic liberal or a Catholic conservative inevitably means having a bad conscience about something,' E.J. Dionne wrote in 2000. Even that seems not to be the case today.
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In that essay, Dionne quotes a Republican pollster describing Catholics as "the most maddening electoral group in American politics" and "the demographic bloc that drives pollsters, pundits and politicians of all stripes to distraction."

Self-interest can, at times, take on a moral cast, further complicating the analysis. For conservative Catholics, abortion has been an issue that has gathered them in support of Republicans even when most of the rest of the party platform would pose a challenge to Catholic teaching.

Liberal Catholics find refuge in the Democratic Party and can take its greater alliance with a host of Catholic teaching, abortion excepted, as a kind of moral rationale.

"Being a Catholic liberal or a Catholic conservative inevitably means having a bad conscience about something," wrote Dionne.

Even that seems not to be the case today. NCR columnist Michael Sean Winters, author of the 2008 book *Left at the Altar: How the Democrats Lost the Catholics and How the Catholics Can Save the Democrats*, tackles the Catholic dilemma in his end-of-year analysis of 2024. Winters found a connection between two electoral events: Abortion-rights forces won the day in seven of 10 state initiatives on the November ballot and the victory of a Republican ticket that included Vice President-elect JD Vance, a recent convert to Catholicism, who spread vicious, and easily provably false, tales about immigrants.

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"It is remarkable to me that the two issues, abortion and immigration, which unite something like nine out of 10 U.S. bishops, are matters on which the church has lost whatever influence it once had," Winters wrote.

NCR senior correspondent Heidi Schlumpf came to a similar conclusion in her post-election report on exit polls from the November election: "Two sobering trends about politics and religion are becoming clear: Religion doesn't seem to motivate Catholic voters, nor do views about abortion, an issue Catholic Church leaders have made a priority for decades."

Is there a Catholic witness?

The Catholic voter no doubt will continue to be an essential, if maddening, consideration for pollsters and analysts into the foreseeable future. How long it will be a relevant consideration could eventually become a question, given the church's changing demographics, including the continuing loss of young people.

For now, though, with history as precedent, we should drop all expectations that the Catholic voter will somehow be a harbinger of some moral or religious purpose. Much of the recent analysis pins the Trump win on economics, not abortion or even concern for the preservation of democracy.

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The bracing challenge is in realizing that for the result of that recent vote, there is no historical precedent. While the analysis is that Catholics have increasingly over decades drifted into the Republican Party, this year's election was not about what was historically the Republican Party. Informed by his first term, this year's election was an endorsement of Trumpism.

The bitter irony is that Trump, a person of privilege since birth who lives in his own oceanside resort and has kept company with the wealthiest of the wealthy for decades, managed to connect with the fear and anger of those most alienated in society. Not a small portion of his strategy involved stoking fear, spreading lies about immigration and immigrants, demeaning those who dispute him, and promising vengeance against opponents.

We know from the first term that he is like an acid poured onto the soft tissue that binds what we've come to realize is a fragile democracy. He also has a fondness for authoritarian strongmen, U.S. enemies among them, and an expressed disdain for some long-term loyal allies.

In the face of all of that, the question becomes not about what the Catholic voter represents but whether the Catholic citizen can make a difference. At what point does complicity in this destructive Trump phenomenon become an uncomplicated betrayal of Catholic teaching and democratic ideals? At that point, will Catholics find common cause beyond the interests that drove their votes?

While foreboding, it also seems inevitable that we will find out whether the common and predictable role of the Catholic voter can become a robust and uncommon Catholic witness in the unscripted and perilous democracy drama that is about to begin.

This story appears in the **Election 2024** and **Trump's Second Term** feature series.