

[Opinion](#)
[Guest Voices](#)



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



Thomas Reese

[View Author Profile](#)

Follow on Twitter at [@thomasreeseSJ](#)

Religion News Service

[View Author Profile](#)

[**Join the Conversation**](#)

July 18, 2023

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

Since he was elected in 2013, Pope Francis has been remaking the College of Cardinals in preparation for the next conclave that will elect his successor. He has made the college more international, less European, less curial, more pastoral and less ideological.

Like every pope before him, Francis has been looking for men who reflect his priorities for the church.

For John Paul II, this meant prelates who were loyal to the Vatican and opposed changing the church's teaching on birth control, sexual ethics, married priests and women priests. John Paul also liked strong personalities who were willing to take on political and cultural elites on abortion, gay marriage and other issues.

Benedict also appointed cardinals who were loyal and defenders of traditional church teaching, but he preferred his cardinals to be more academic than culture warrior.

Francis, on the other hand, has looked for bishops who are pastors to their people and prioritize the poor and marginalized.

During his 10-year reign, Pope Francis has had a significant impact on the College of Cardinals, and that continues with the 18 newly appointed cardinal electors (those under 80 years of age who can vote for a pope in a conclave).

[Related: Pope Francis appoints men and women to build a synodal church](#)

After the next consistory on Sept. 30, 72% of the 137 cardinal electors will have been appointed by Francis. Since it takes a two-thirds vote to elect a new pope, the Francis cardinals could elect someone even if all the other cardinals voted against him.

Only 7% of the electors are hangovers from the papacy of John Paul II; 21% were appointed by Benedict. These are not necessarily cardinals at odds with Francis and his vision. At least some of these cardinals probably voted for Francis in the last conclave. In any case, by the end of January, five more of the cardinals appointed by his predecessors will age out. Another five will be over 80 by the end of 2024.

It is therefore highly likely the next pope will be in sympathy with the direction Francis has been leading the church, but in conclaves there are no guarantees. Certainly, there have been surprises in the past, such as John XXIII, John Paul I and John Paul II. On the other hand, no one was surprised by the elections of Pius XII, Paul VI and Benedict XVI.

Advertisement

But Francis' impact on the College of Cardinals is greater than just numbers. He has also dramatically changed where the cardinals come from.

Prior to Francis, certain sees — such as Venice and Milan — were considered cardinalatial, that is, their archbishops automatically became cardinals. Francis threw this tradition out the window and has appointed cardinals from far-flung dioceses that had rarely, if ever, had a cardinal.*

Nixing the practice of appointing cardinals from the traditional sees — mostly large and wealthy, often European — freed Francis to skip people who historically would have been appointed but who were not in line with his priorities.

As a result of Francis' appointments, the geographical representation in the college has changed dramatically in favor of the developing world. After the consistory, about half of the cardinals will be from the developing world, as compared to 35% at the 2013 conclave that elected Francis.

Surprisingly, Francis has not heavily favored his home turf. Latin America will go up slightly to 17.5% of the college in September, compared to 16.2 at the 2013 conclave. The real winners are Asia (up to 16.8% from 9.6%) and Africa (up to 14% from 9.6%).

Francis' impact on the College of Cardinals is greater than just numbers. He has also dramatically changed where the cardinals come from.

[Tweet this](#)

The losers in this geographical transformation are Italy (down to 11% from 24%) and Eastern Europe (down to 5% from 9.4%). Remember, John Paul had increased the Eastern European representation during his papacy to 10.4 % of the electors.

As a result, the European contingent among the cardinal electors has dropped to 38.7% from more than half (52%) in 2013.

The U.S. contingent has dropped slightly to 8% from 9.4%.

Europeans will still have a significant voice at the next conclave, but the voice of the Global South is getting stronger.

Finally, although Francis made cardinals of his top appointments in the Vatican Curia, he has reduced the percent of cardinal electors who are from the church's bureaucracy. At the conclave that elected him, 35% of the cardinals were from the Curia. After the September consistory, they will make up only 22.6% of the electors.

It is too early to predict the outcome of the next conclave, but Pope Francis has set the stage through his appointments. The votes from Europe and the Roman Curia have been reduced; the voice of the Global South has been increased. The conclave will be made up primarily of pastors who, like Francis, remember the poor.

This does not mean a liberal reformer will be elected as the next pope. Progressives should remember that cardinals from the Global South do not necessarily have progressive views on the rights of women and gays. They can be economically liberal and cultural conservatives.

[Related: The legacy of a decade of Pope Francis](#)

Many, myself included, believe that some cardinals at the 2013 conclave thought they were electing a theological conservative when they voted for Jorge Mario Bergoglio.

Because they come from all over the world, many of the cardinals at the next conclave will not know each other very well. Since the conclave rules and recent tradition encourage a quick election, cardinals will have to go through the equivalent of "speed dating" to get to know one another.

With no leading candidates at this time, we could be in for another surprise. The Spirit breathes where it will.

***Correction:** *An earlier version of this column mistakenly reported that Malaysia had never before had a Catholic cardinal. The late Cardinal Anthony Souter Fernandez, appointed by Francis in 2016, was the country's first cardinal. We apologize for the error.*