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Republican presidential nominee former President Donald Trump acknowledges the crowd as he exits the stage after speaking at the Israeli American Council National Summit, Thursday, Sept. 19, 2024, in Washington. (AP/Evan Vucci)

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[Former President Donald Trump](#) recently reissued his loyalty test to religious Americans, declaring that he can best protect their freedoms while preemptively blaming members of certain faiths should he lose the presidential election in November.

[Jews](#) and [Catholics](#) can vote for him and ace the test, but those who don't, he says, "need their head examined." If he loses, Trump added, "Jewish people would have a lot to do with the loss."

Among the Jewish leaders appalled at Trump's remarks was Rabbi Rick Jacobs, president of the Union for Reform Judaism — an umbrella group for more than 800 Reform synagogues in North America.

"Your words preemptively blaming Jews for your potential election loss is of a piece with millennia of antisemitic lies about Jewish power," Jacobs said in a social media post. "It puts a target on American Jews. And it makes you an ally not to our vulnerable community but to those who wish us harm. Stop."

Trump's speeches for years have hewed to divisive "us" versus "them" messaging, but tying those themes to specific religious Americans who oppose him is out of line and even dangerous, according to rhetoric experts, religious leaders and academics.

"Non-Jews shouldn't express public opinions about what is or isn't good Judaism and non-Catholics shouldn't express public opinions about what is or isn't good Catholicism," said Steven Millies, a public theology professor at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago.

"Not only is it bad form, but it's also an ignorant waste of oxygen."

Asked to respond to criticism from Jewish leaders, Trump campaign press secretary Karoline Leavitt sent statements from herself and several of Trump's Jewish supporters. The statements didn't directly address the potential blaming of Jews for a Trump defeat; rather, they depicted Trump as a stronger supporter of Israel than President Joe Biden and Trump's Democratic opponent, Vice President Kamala

Harris.

“Jewish Americans and Jewish leaders around the world recognize that President Trump did more for them and the State of Israel than any President in history,” Leavitt said via email. “The bottom line is that Kamala Harris and Joe Biden cave to Far-Left extremists and terrorists while President Trump will protect Jewish Americans and put American citizens first.”

Trump’s latest provocative comments came in a span of four days. His warnings about Jewish voters were in Sept. 19 speeches to Jewish donors and the Israeli-American Council in Washington. His remarks about Catholics came on Sept. 22 in a post on Truth Social.

Matthew Boedy, who studies religious rhetoric as a professor at the University of North Georgia, said Trump has adopted spiritual warfare rhetoric, which is commonplace in certain Christian circles.

“Those who gave him that rhetoric saw Satan or evil as the enemy. Now that enemy is anyone — Jew, Christian, Muslim — who stands in his way,” Boedy said via email, calling it dangerous to democracy and religion.

“Trump always makes his religious followers — especially Christians — choose. They have to choose him over pluralism, over morality, over evangelism,” said Boedy, a Protestant.

“If God is already on your side theologically, it’s not a far leap to say he should be on your side politically. That isn’t new to American politics,” Boedy said. “Trump is only making that divide advantageous to him. He’s furthering that which was there, but he is also adding his own weight to it. Making it worse.”

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David Gibson, director of the Center on Religion and Culture at Jesuit-run Fordham University, said that in past elections, “for a non-Catholic like Trump to be setting himself up as the savior of Catholics, or Jews for that matter, would have been political insanity.”

“But it’s Trump, and conservatives who would attack a Democrat for such language are cheering for the Republican nominee,” Gibson added in an email. “There are many reasons, the most obvious is that they like Trump more than they heed their own church.”

Gibson also suggested that Trump’s tough stance on immigration, which includes calls for mass deportations, is at odds with Catholic teaching.

“Catholics listening to the increasingly Nativist rhetoric on immigration from Trump and even his running mate, JD Vance, who converted to Catholicism in 2019, ought to have their hearts examined if they support that,” Gibson said.

Professor Jennifer Mercieca, a historian of American political rhetoric at Texas A&M University, said typical politicians seek to connect to voters based on shared policy beliefs, not by demanding religious loyalty.

“But Trump isn’t a typical politician, and he’s very concerned about loyalty,” she said. “He divides the world up into ‘us’ versus ‘them’ and tries to use those divisions to gain power.”

“It’s especially dangerous to attempt to divide people based upon religious identity,” said Mercieca, author of “Demagogue for President: The Rhetorical Genius of Donald Trump.” “The kind of language Trump is using here is more like that used by an authoritarian personality cult leader.”

Trump’s recent comment about blaming Jews if he loses came at an event that also featured Jewish megadonor Miriam Adelson, widow of the late casino magnate Sheldon Adelson. She introduced Trump as “a true friend of the Jewish people.”

Among the pro-Trump statements provided to The Associated Press by Leavitt was one from Ellie Cohan, who served during the Trump administration as deputy special envoy for combating antisemitism.

Trump “is absolutely correct in challenging our assumptions about voting on auto-pilot and failing to comprehend that the Democrat Party, which has been hijacked by its far-left base, is no longer a home for the Jewish people,” Cohan’s statement said.

Adelson and Cohan represent the portion of U.S. Jews that strongly supports Trump. In 2020, he received about 30% of Jewish Americans’ votes compared to

70% for Biden, according to AP VoteCast.

The criticism of Trump's recent remarks came from the center as well as the left of the national Jewish community.

The American Jewish Committee — a prominent advocacy group that strives to broadly represent Jews in the U.S. and abroad — issued a sharply [critical statement](#). It took issue with Trump's suggestion that if 40% of the U.S. Jewish electorate voted for him, "That means 60% are voting for the enemy."

"Setting up anyone to say 'we lost because of the Jews' is outrageous and dangerous," the AJC said. "Thousands of years of history have shown that scapegoating Jews can lead to antisemitic hate and violence."

"Some Jews will vote for President Trump and some will vote for Vice President Harris," the AJC added. "None of us, by supporting the candidate we choose, is voting for the enemy.'"

To the left of center, a harsh denunciation of Trump came from Lauren Maunus, political director of [IfNotNow](#) — an organization of U.S. Jews that has accused the Israeli government of oppressive policies toward Palestinians and protested Israel's military offensive in Gaza.

"Trump doubled down on his longstanding pattern of scapegoating Jews," Maunus said. "Make no mistake: This is a clear and flagrant instruction to his fanatical base of extremists to target Jews with retributive violence if he should lose."

Some Jews found a positive twist to Trump's remarks, as Betsy Frank of Mattituck, New York, conveyed in a letter published Sept. 23 in The New York Times.

"As a proud Jewish woman who believes in Israel's right to defend itself but supports the United States and everything it stands for even more, I would not vote for Donald Trump for any office," she [wrote](#). "If he loses the election, I will gladly take the blame."

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