



From left: Sen. Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn., Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., Chuck Schumer D-N.Y., Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., and Sen. Tammy Baldwin, D-Wis., gather on Capitol Hill Dec. 3, 2024, in Washington, after Senate Democratic leadership elections for the next session of Congress. (AP/Mark Schiefelbein)



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Can Catholics save the Democrats? Only if the Democrats first admit that they need saving.

The [four candidates](#) to lead the Democratic National Committee sound like technocrats trying to figure out why a computer program isn't working. Russell Berman [at The Atlantic](#) argues that the Democrats didn't really do so badly — Trump's popular vote margin has shrunk to 1.5%, and they picked up a seat in the U.S. House.

Time for a reality check. A convicted felon beat the sitting vice president. In the past four weeks, the National Catholic Reporter has published my election-defeat autopsy essays. I looked at the need for Democrats, and the cultural left generally, to stop [heresy-hunting](#); nix their reliance on [scientism and credentialism](#); regain a sense of [history, humility and humor](#); and reclaim the mantle of [economic populism](#) that built the party of Franklin Roosevelt.

The Democrats had fair warning. John Judis and Ruy Teixeira's book *Where Have All the Democrats Gone: The Soul of the Party in the Age of Extremes* (reviewed [here](#) and [here](#)) analyzed how the Democrats had hemorrhaged white working-class voters over the previous decades through a combination of neoliberal economic policies and extremist approaches to cultural values. They concluded: "America needs a Democratic Party that is liberal on economic issues and moderate or conciliatory on cultural issues."

Cultural sociologist James Davison Hunter's book *Democracy and Solidarity: On the Cultural Roots of America's Political Crisis* (reviewed [here](#) and [here](#)) offered a similar warning from a different perspective. Among Hunter's many keen insights, he observed, "The institutional carrier of progressive politics moved from labor unions to universities and its chief advocates shifted from working-class liberals and socialists to middle- and upper-middle-class college students, professors, and administrators."

Apparently, no one at the DNC or the Biden or Harris campaigns bothered to read either book, or if they read them, they did so defensively. Besides, the donor class

wasn't interested, and the young people working on the campaigns were the product of the new politics of the faculty lounge.

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So, we return to the big question: Can the Catholics save the Democrats? It is not a new question. I wrote a book about it in 2008: [\*Left at the Altar: How the Democrats Lost the Catholics and How the Catholics Can Save the Democrats\*](#). There was overlap in my diagnosis then with the assessments from Judis, Teixeira and Hunter this year. But Catholic social teaching contains a moral imperative that more secular diagnoses lack: The Gospel compels us to stand with the marginalized and to be at least suspicious of the wealthy and the powerful. In 2024, it became painfully obvious that the Democrats are now the party of the well-to-do and the privileged, and that is no place for a Christian.

The Democrats talked a lot about the marginalized. They presented themselves as the allies of Black Americans and Latino Americans and LGBT Americans and Native Americans. Trump realized, however, that professors and MSNBC talking heads speaking on behalf of these groups often speak in ways that the people they claim to represent find unintelligible or offensive.

A classic example is the word "Latinx," designed to overcome the binary fact that Spanish is a gendered language. "Latinx" offered a nonbinary alternative, thus signaling an acceptance of contemporary gender ideology. Problem was, most Latinos didn't use it or like it. A 2020 [Pew study](#) found that only a quarter of Latinos had heard of it, and only 3% used it.

In 2021, Arizona Democratic Rep. Ruben Gallego said he forbade his staff from using the term, [tweeting](#), "When Latino politicians use the term it is largely to appease white rich progressives who think it is a term we use." Gallego is now Senator-elect Gallego, and his [vote tally](#) was 7 points ahead of Vice President Kamala Harris in Arizona.

So, Catholics, do you want to stand with those who claim to speak for the marginalized, or do you actually want to identify with the marginalized?

What is more, Catholic social teaching provides a morally coherent set of ideas and beliefs that would help the Democrats embrace more liberal economic policies and

avoid more extreme cultural ones. Pope Francis [famously said](#) that neoliberal economics is "an economy that kills."

So, Catholics, do you want to stand with those who claim to speak for the marginalized, or do you actually want to identify with the marginalized?

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The pope has also made clear that Christians cannot harbor any animus to anyone, that the church must welcome everyone. He is well-known for [hosting transgender sex workers](#).

But he also has condemned gender ideology. Welcoming someone does not require subscribing to their ideology. The Democrats' problem on the transgender issue was not really with people who are transgender. It is with the way academics and others demand that people discuss, or not discuss, issues surrounding transgender ideology.

The Democrats would never embrace the pope's fierce opposition to abortion, but they might recognize that someone of his moral seriousness should have all of his moral convictions respected, even if they can't be shared. Nor, in America, could we embrace the fullness of Catholic social teaching's understanding of how an economy should work. But we could move in that direction. Same for [just war theory](#).

I have said it before but will say it again. There is no issue in American political life that is not leavened by an encounter with Catholic social teaching.

The ability of Catholic thinkers to help the Democrats, however, is even more foundational.

Hunter noted, "Most Americans still believe in God or a higher power, yet our public culture is overwhelmingly and aggressively secular in character." The lack of a shared national mythos is at the root of our cultural polarization.

The Catholic Church from before the 1962-65 Second Vatican Council might not be of much help in building a national mythos broad enough to enlist the support of most Americans. But 60 years of interreligious dialogue since the close of Vatican II has provided at least some Catholic thinkers with the ability to engage those with

different theological and ideological starting points, and build common understandings.

Here, then, are the essential ingredients for a Democratic Party that can win national elections:

- Articulate an economic populism that appeals to voters and craft policies that will improve the economic prospects of working-class Americans.
- Moderate its hardline, academic-driven approach to cultural issues.
- And help fashion a national narrative that is capacious enough to embrace the hopes of all Americans.

They need all three.

The question remains: Can the Democrats bring themselves to really change?

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