



A voting sign is seen at St. Patrick Church polling station in Norcross, Georgia, on Election Day Nov. 3, 2020. (OSV News file/The Georgia Bulletin/Michael Alexander)



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NCR's [poll of Catholic voters in the battleground states](#) revealed many interesting things about Catholics' political views. What was most striking to me, however, was what the poll revealed about issues that entail cultural and ecclesial ideas as well as political ones.

We asked Catholic voters in seven pivotal swing states, "What values are most important for a candidate to have?"

The list of options — respect for life, care for creation, honesty, care for the poor, human dignity and the common good, equality, justice — are all mainstays of Catholic social teaching.

Only one option, "concern to protect America's way of life," was less about Catholic social teaching and more about the mood of the country. Both Democrats ("We're not going back") and Republicans ("Make America Great Again") speak to this latter concern, which does not fit neatly into Catholic theological categories.

The answers were illustrative of how deeply Catholic values permeate the Catholic electorate.

More than three-quarters of Catholic voters chose honesty, an acknowledgement that personal virtue is necessary to the success of democratic political institutions. Concern for human dignity and the common good, the cornerstone of Catholic social teaching, came in second, with two-thirds of Catholic voters citing it as an important concern. About the same percentage of Catholic voters voiced protecting America's way of life.

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Respect for life and justice were ranked 58% and 59% respectively. Regrettably, only half cited concern for the poor as a principal motivator in their choice of candidates. [Matthew 25](#) — "whatever you do for these the least of mine" — is still competing with America's consumer capitalism as a generator of values.

Whether U.S. Catholics have sufficiently absorbed Catholic teaching, their Catholic identity is vitally important to them. Almost nine in 10 surveyed said their Catholic

identity was very or somewhat important to them. I wonder what that number would be for other faith groups? How would you even phrase a similar question about the "identity" of the "nones," those with no particular religious affiliation?

Catholic identity is as much cultural as it is behavioral. Only a quarter of survey respondents said they attend Mass weekly or more often, while a third attend Mass "less often than monthly." Prayer does better outside of Mass: Half of all Catholics reported praying daily.

The lack of regular Mass attendance is not atypical, even for Catholic cultures.

Voters draw their values from many sources, but our poll showed very few U.S. Catholics look to clerics for political direction.

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Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, the late archbishop of Chicago, used to tell the story of going to his ancestral town in the north of Italy to celebrate his becoming a cardinal. There was a Mass of Thanksgiving in the village church followed by a great festival with lots of food and wine.

Toward the end of the banquet, Bernardin said to those assembled he would be celebrating Mass the next day for them. The people looked around at each other, no one daring to speak. Finally, one of the grandmothers had the courage to say, "Io Catolico, non fanatico!" — "I am Catholic, not a fanatic!" They were happy to have a Mass of Thanksgiving, but daily Mass, even with a local son leading the liturgy, was a bridge too far.

Catholics also tend to think more highly of their local parish than of religious influence in the abstract.

When NCR asked Catholic voters if religion had "contributed to" or "helped overcome" divisions in the country, they split almost evenly, 46% to 54%. But when we asked the same question about divisions in the community, two-thirds said religion had "helped overcome" those divisions. Locally, religion is less about abstract ideas and more about the parish food pantry, Lenten fish fries and organ recitals.

Voters draw their values from many sources, but our poll showed very few U.S. Catholics look to clerics for political direction.

Only 13% said their parish priest was "very influential" in their discernment process, and another quarter allowed he was "somewhat influential."

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Bishops may have more influence in the realm of ecclesial politics, but even less when it comes to shaping secular politics: Only one in 10 Catholic voters said their political views would be "very" influenced by their bishop and two in 10 said the bishop was "somewhat influential." Pope Francis' influence was similar.

Thirteen percent of Catholic voters said they had read the bishops' quadrennial document "[Forming Consciences of Faithful Citizenship](#)." I think they are lying. I am not sure 13% of bishops have read that overly long text.

Happy to see that "Jesus and his teachings" fared better, with six out of 10 Catholic voters acknowledging his influence.

The poll's findings on abortion were complicated, just as the issue itself is. More than one-third — 36% — of Catholic voters said "reproductive rights/abortion" was an important issue for them, but only 13% said that the issue was so important that "if a candidate did not align with your view, you would not vote for them."

On the other hand, only two issues tracked higher on this "nonnegotiable" question: the economy and immigration. I would have thought the "nonnegotiable" option on abortion would have been higher because the issue is framed in such categorical terms and the debate is shaped by well-funded interest groups that hold to extreme positions.

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Similarly, on immigration, Catholics feel no compunction about ignoring church teaching. After poll questions mentioned [Pope Francis' comments](#) about the "lesser of two evils," in which the pope cited former President Donald Trump's position on immigration as "against life," three-quarters of all Catholics supporting Trump said that his immigration stance was one of the reasons they were supporting him. Only

8% said they were supporting him "in spite of" his immigration policies.

What does it all mean about the elusive "Catholic vote"? Three things stand out.

First, Catholics straddle the electorate. Unlike white evangelicals who are disproportionately Republican, or Black Protestants who are disproportionately Democratic, Catholics mirror the electorate as a whole. Within the category Catholic, there are significant [differences between white and Latino Catholics](#), but on the whole, get-out-the-vote messaging should be sung in a Catholic key.

Second, and closely related to the first point, the Catholic faith, as opposed to Catholic teachings, is capacious enough to accommodate people of wildly different political ideologies.

Third, this election is going to be very close, and so the old adage about the Catholic vote looks like it will still prove true: There is no Catholic vote, and yet the Catholic vote will decide the election.

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

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