



Catholic Votes Key to Trump Win, Despite Pro-Life Losses

Catholic voters proved essential to Donald Trump's clear victory in the November 2024 U.S. presidential election, even though pro-abortion initiatives won in seven of the ten states where abortion was on the ballot. How to explain this apparent paradox?

Democratic Party presidential candidate Kamala Harris ran on a pro-abortion message by calling for a return of the rule of *Roe v. Wade*, which had been overruled by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (2022). *Dobbs* returned regulation of abortion to the states and the people. While the abortion issue is being fought out in the states, Harris and Democratic Party leaders have called for Congress to nationalize abortion law. The Democratic Party leadership in Congress has promoted the Women's Health Protection Act, which failed to pass in 2022 and again more recently in May 2024.

In her campaign, Harris came out full-throated in support of this national legislation as necessary to restore women's reproductive rights. She hoped that pro-abortion initiatives placed on the ballot in ten states would translate into Democratic straight-ticket votes. This did not happen, as Trump won decisively in both the Electoral College and the national popular vote, taking every swing state.

During the campaign, Trump stayed away from the abortion debate by stating that abortion should be a state issue. This disappointed some pro-life leaders, but in the end, he won anti-abortion voters in sizeable numbers. *Trump won 56 percent of the Catholic vote, while Harris received only 41 percent*, according to an exit poll published by the *Washington Post* on November 5.

Although many commentators have marveled at Trump's success in picking up votes in a variety of demographic categories, little attention has been paid to his gains among Catholics. The significance of the Catholic vote should not

be underestimated. It helped Trump win the presidential election, especially in swing states such as Michigan, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Arizona and Nevada. In Arizona, so-called reproductive-rights activists won a state initiative that overturned a legislative ban on abortion after the first 15 weeks of gestation, but Trump carried the state.

The national shift in the Catholic vote has other important consequences. If Trump's election in 2024 is to effect an ongoing party realignment in the next election cycle, keeping the Catholic vote will be critical. The durability of this shift in the Catholic vote will depend on the success of the Trump administration in its first 100 days.

A Dramatic Shift

In the 2020 election contest between the incumbent President Trump and Joe Biden, the Catholic vote was almost evenly split between Biden and Trump. In 2024, Trump won the Catholic vote by some 15 points over Harris—the largest margin of any presidential candidate since the dawn of exit polling in 1972.

The Trump presidential campaign carefully cultivated the Catholic vote, while the Harris campaign appeared to go out of its way to alienate Catholics. Harris's campaign strategy can best be described as politically dumb since Catholics account for 21 percent of the entire electorate. The evangelical Christian vote makes up about 23 percent of the electorate. In other words, Roman Catholics and evangelical Christians make up a combined 44 percent of the electorate.

The Trump campaign understood this and made a point of demonstrating that Trump was pro-Christian. His social messaging praised Catholic heroes and signaled his respect for Catholicism and Catholic prayers. For example, a couple of weeks before the election, Trump tweeted, "This Saturday, October 19th, 2024 is the 40th Anniversary of the

Martyrdom of Father Jerzy Popieluszko, a truly great Catholic priest, who was the source of tremendous spiritual strength for the Polish Solidarity Movement, and, indeed, the entire nation of Poland, in the 1980s.”¹

In addition, Trump signaled respect for Catholicism and the Catholic tradition by having the familiar Schubert “Ave Maria” performed at his rallies and sharing media posts about the Virgin Mary, St. Michael, and All Saints Day. Of course, *he also showed respect for Catholics when he selected the Catholic convert JD Vance as his running mate.* Vance is a committed Catholic, traditionalist in outlook and sincere in his beliefs. Nobody can accuse him of being a CINO (Catholic in Name Only), a category that many politicians fall into once in office.

A Catholic Convert as VP

Vance brought his faith as a Catholic to the campaign. His conversion to Catholicism became national news.² He came to Catholicism in 2015, after years of considering conversion. In Cincinnati, where he had recently moved, he began instruction with Fr. Henry Stephan, a Dominican friar at St. Gertrude’s Church. For months, they read works in theology and moral philosophy and often went to coffee and lunch together. The Dominicans are known for their emphasis on private instruction in the faith.

In 2019, the 35-year-old Vance was baptized into the Church. Vance chose as his patron St. Augustine, author of *The City of God*. As Vance explained, *The City of God* is “the best criticism of our modern age I’d ever read.”³ The fifth-century treatise, he said, offers a critique of “a society oriented entirely towards consumption and pleasure, spurning duty and virtue.”

Vance found that the Church’s teachings on social justice aligned with his own views of public policy and his belief in the importance of family and fatherhood. He saw in his faith ways of being a better husband, a better man and a better father. He explained that “my basic view is that if the Republican Party, if the conservative movement stands for anything—and I’m running as a politician trying to advocate what we stand for—the number one thing that we should be is pro-babies and pro-families.”⁴

Trump reinforced his respect for the Church by attending the Al Smith Memorial Dinner in New York City on October 17. At the annual white-tie dinner to raise funds for Catholic charities, historically attended by politicians of

both parties, he took center stage, showing humor and even being self-deprecating (a trait rarely seen in Trump on the political stage). He came across as presidential, respectful of his hosts and colleagues and, above all, affable.

Following the attempted assassination of Trump at a rally in Butler, PA on July 13, both Trump and Vance publicly declared that God had intervened to save Trump’s life. Vance told the press, “You will never convince me that the last-second turn of the head was anything but a miracle.”⁵ Trump reaffirmed this belief that he had been saved through divine intervention.

Trump’s opponent Kamala Harris’s focus on unfettered “reproductive freedom,” expressed in her speeches and campaign advertising on television and social media, was bound to estrange religious voters. Her hope was that the magic words “reproductive freedom” would translate into votes, even though abortion was not a high priority for most voters. Suburban voters, like many others, ranked inflation and border security as their biggest concerns.

Harris Alienated Catholics

Harris declined to attend the Al Smith dinner in October, claiming that the event conflicted with her campaign schedule.

Shortly thereafter, the crowd at a Harris rally at the University of Wisconsin–LaCrosse mocked two Christian college students who were escorted from the rally for shouting such things as “Christ is King.”⁶ The jeering crowd was not a good look for the Harris campaign, but she made it worse by quipping that the two students were at the wrong rally. The implication was that those who are religiously devoted should be attending a Trump rally.

The two college juniors, Grant Beth and Luke Polaske, gained national attention by sharing their deep religious faith as young Catholics.⁷ They reflect the growing number of young men who have joined or rejoined the Church.

Harris’s thin appeal to Catholics was not helped by the swing-state Democratic governor of Michigan, Gretchen Whitmer, who created an appallingly tasteless video in October depicting the governor placing a Dorito chip on the tongue of a kneeling female Instagram influencer in an apparent parody of the Catholic sacrament of Communion. Bishops in every Catholic diocese in Michigan signed a letter denouncing the travesty, after which Whitmer apologized and denied any intention to offend. (The

context of the video was the governor's promotion of the federal CHIPS Act providing subsidies to domestic manufacturing of computer chips.)

Abortion Won in 7 States, Lost in 3

Harris lost the election decisively to Trump. Her messaging on reproductive rights did not pay off for her, but on the state level abortion activists won considerably more ballot measures than they lost. In 2024, ten states featured ballot measures to embed abortion rights—and other reproductive rights—in their state constitutions.⁸ In seven of these ten states, reproductive rights won clear victories.

So why did the Harris campaign fail in its messaging on abortion, while abortion activists won on the state level? Apart from Harris's obvious weaknesses as a presidential candidate, an easy answer is: Money. On the state level, abortion activists spent an astronomical amount of money convincing voters to support abortion rights.

One state, Nebraska, featured an anti-abortion measure that passed. In two other states, Florida and South Dakota, abortion rights failed. In the seven other states—Arizona, Colorado, Maryland, Missouri, Montana, Nevada and New York—voters placed abortion protections in their state constitutions. These states join California, Michigan, Ohio and Vermont in having state constitutional amendments to protect abortion.

By late October, pro-abortion forces had raised a whopping \$160 million. This is nearly six times what their pro-life opponents raised.⁹ In Missouri the ratio of spending by the pro-abortion and anti-abortion forces was 10 to 1, according to Missouri Right to Life.

The big money advantage of the pro-abortion side did not always buy victory. In Florida, where the most money was spent, a constitutional amendment to guarantee abortion rights in the constitution failed. Pro-abortion ad buys cost \$60 million, compared to \$27 million by opponents. The amendment would have overturned a ban on most abortions after the first six weeks of gestation, signed by Governor Ron DeSantis in 2023. The measure failed to gain the requisite 60 percent voter approval, but just barely. Governor DeSantis took a strong public stand against it, and he was joined by other prominent Republicans in the state.¹⁰ *Florida's supermajority vote requirement for amending the constitution was critical to defeating the amendment.*

South Dakota provided another victory for anti-abortion activists, even though Planned Parenthood and Illinois Governor Jay Pritzker's Think Big America nonprofit 501(c)(4) organization poured money into the state. The pro-life side proved effective in its messaging that the measure went too far, and the measure failed.

The success of the pro-abortion activists can be seen in the percentages voters gave the seven winning amendments:

- Arizona voters passed a ballot measure providing an avenue to challenge the state's 15-week ban by establishing a fundamental right to abortion, by a vote of 61 percent to 39 percent.
- Colorado approved Amendment 79 to maintain the state's current unlimited abortion law, 62 to 38 percent.
- Maryland approved Amendment 1, guaranteeing the right to "reproductive freedom" in the constitution, 74 to 26 percent.
- Montana passed Constitutional Initiative 128 to enshrine abortion rights up to and after fetal viability, 57 to 43 percent.
- Nevada voters approved the expansion of abortion rights beyond 24 weeks, 63 to 37 percent.
- New York passed the Amendment to Protect Against Unequal Treatment, prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity and reproductive health care, 62 to 38 percent.¹¹
- Of the seven pro-abortion amendments that passed, only Missouri's Amendment 3 was a close vote: 51.6 to 48.4 percent.

The Case of Arizona

Arizona illustrates how pro-abortion activists outspent and out-messaged opponents of Proposition 139, which passed with overwhelming voter support, even though the Trump-Vance team won the state 52.2 to 46.7 percent. Arizona voters passed the pro-abortion constitutional amendment by about 22 percentage points. The pro-abortion forces under Arizona for Abortion Access raised \$17.4 million compared to the modest \$488,714 raised by the anti-abortion group It Goes Too Far.

Top donors for the pro-abortion amendment included Arizonans Fed Up with Failing Healthcare (an SEIU PAC), Planned Parenthood Federation of America, the ACLU, and Soros's Open Society Action Fund. In addition, Arizonans for Abortion Access received support from individual

donors, including one who gave the organization \$750,000 and another who gave a quarter of a million. Six other donors gave from \$50,000 to \$150,000 each. The anti-amendment organization's top donor gave \$30,000.

The pro-abortion side flooded the airwaves and social media with a simple message: Keep politicians out of abortion. Abortion is an individual woman's decision and should be left to women and healthcare professionals.¹²

The pro-life side might have done better with an equally simple message such as "Don't believe in abortions for babies 8-9 months in the womb? Then vote NO on Proposition 139."

Lessons for the Future

There are lessons to learn from Arizona and other states where pro-abortion amendments were on the ballot. Political leadership is vital. The Florida amendment failed because Governor DeSantis and fellow Republicans took a strong stand, and because passing a Florida constitutional amendment requires a 60 percent majority. By contrast, Missouri's requirements to amend the constitution are unusually easy to fulfill, and its supermajority Republican legislature inexplicably failed to take action to stiffen those requirements in the past two years.

Laws banning abortions without exceptions are a risky political strategy. And, it takes a lot of money to counter misleading scare stories about abortion bans threatening medical care for miscarriages, ectopic pregnancies and other physical health complications.

While it is encouraging that pro-life voters prevailed in three states in 2024, and that the incoming U.S. president

and vice president have good pro-life records, *there is no sugar-coating the fact that nationwide, abortion supporters have regained much of the ground that they lost following the Dobbs decision in 2022.*

The solidly red state of Missouri, whose legislature previously passed a strict abortion ban, now has a constitutional provision allowing abortion until fetal viability, and even until birth for reasons of "health," defined to include mental health. (This language is similar to language added to a number of other state constitutions.) The ballot summary, imposed by Missouri courts, stated nothing about allowing abortion until birth for reasons of mental health.

The pro-life movement must regroup and consider new strategies to protect the unborn, particularly from the grisly reality of late-term abortions. We are fighting against a death cult.

¹ https://x.com/PJMedia_com/status/1854282756777197882.

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/25/us/jd-vance-catholic-church-conversion.html>; <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/258347/13-things-to-know-about-jd-vance-s-catholic-journey>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ <https://nypost.com/2024/10/20/us-news/christian-students-in-wisconsin-speak-out-after-kamala-harris-told-they-were-at-the-wrong-rally/>.

⁷ Beth told the press, "I was pushed by an elderly woman. We were heckled at, we were cursed at, we were mocked and that's the biggest thing for me personally. In reflection of the event, Jesus was mocked. You know, his disciples were mocked."

<https://nypost.com/2024/10/20/us-news/christian-students-in-wisconsin-speak-out-after-kamala-harris-told-they-were-at-the-wrong-rally/>.

⁸ <https://www.gutmacher.org/2024/11/abortion-rights-state-ballot-measures-2024>.

⁹ <https://apnews.com/article/abortion-amendment-campaign-spending-florida-arizona-539217e94f6f96200eff75e8917e525b>; <https://www.thomasmothersociety.org/news/life-on-the-ballot-in-2024-abortion-ballot-initiatives-in-review>.

¹⁰ <https://www.foxnews.com/media/pro-lifers-credit-rejection-floridas-pro-abortion-amendment-desantis-outspoken-opposition>;

<https://www.gutmacher.org/2024/11/abortion-rights-state-ballot-measures-2024>.

¹¹ <https://www.npr.org/2024/11/05/g-s1-32418/abortion-ballot-initiatives-2024-election>; <https://www.kff.org/womens-health-policy/dashboard/ballot-tracker-status-of-abortion-related-state-constitutional-amendment-measures/>.

¹² <https://www.arizonaforabortionaccess.org/>.

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