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## **POLARIZATION? IDENTIFYING WHAT DIVIDES AND UNITES AMERICAN CATHOLICS**

### **Abstract**

Polarization among American Catholics has been a subject of both scholarly and media attention. Using a nationally representative survey of over 1500 Catholics, the first part of this article explores the extent to which race, gender, generation, and commitment to Catholicism shape polarization among Catholics; these different characteristics affect Catholics' political and civic beliefs and practices to varying degrees. The second part of the article parses Catholics into their political party groupings – Democrat, Republican, and Independent – to determine the ways party affiliation affects Catholics' understanding of non-political religious beliefs and practices. The analysis reveals that political divisions are evident among some of the Catholic subgroupings, but that theological unity nevertheless prevails across party lines.

**Keywords:** Catholic voting, polarization, Catholic polarization, religion and politics, Catholic civic engagement, American Catholicism

*"Politics are the highest form of charity. Love is a political matter. Love is for everybody, and when love is not universal, politics fail in their intent." Pope Francis<sup>2</sup>*

*"In some ways, the most countercultural thing the Church teaches is not that all life's sacred or that the poor ought to come first or war is the last resort. It's that politics is a good thing and participation is an obligation."  
John Carr, Georgetown University, personal interview with author*

The historical roots of Catholicism in the United States run deep, predating the nation. The Catholic missions and Spanish saint names along the Southwest and Pacific coastline can be traced to the Spanish crown. Various European migrant groups arriving on the east coast showcase their legacy in the urban parish build-

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<sup>2</sup> "Charity is Fundamental to Politics, Pope Francis Tells Youth", <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/247728/charity-is-fundamental-to-politics-pope-francis-tells-youth> (accessed September 7, 2021).

ings that still stand today. Catholicism has influenced secular society through public institutions, such as parish schools, orphanages, hospitals, universities, relief societies, professional organizations, and labor and political associations.<sup>3</sup> And, although Catholicism's posture toward the wider American society has changed over time, it continues to remain deeply engaged in shaping its environs today.

Despite the Catholic Church's efforts at institution building and the desire to be a public influence, an increasing polarization among Catholics has been much observed.<sup>4</sup> Yet, at the same time, the contested nature of a singular American Catholic political outlook is not totally new, even at the level of the ordinary lay faithful. We can see the beginnings of political division among lay American Catholics in mid-twentieth century periodicals that were aimed at lay audiences, such as *Catholic Mind* and *Catholic Digest*. The earliest signs of political discord are seen in a 1956 *Catholic Mind* article discussing the problem clergy were having with fiscally conservative Catholics in their lack of acceptance of Catholic social teaching.<sup>5</sup> This article, published in the height of Cold War Catholicism, demonstrated that clergy were having difficulty presenting the Church's progressive economic teachings alongside anti-Communist teachings amidst the confusion or dissent evident among the laity. This contrast, perhaps interpreted by the faithful as ecclesial inconsistency, may well have concealed the slow rift that was beginning to separate Catholics, as dissenting conservatives could cloak their opposition to social teaching in anti-Communist rhetoric. Another article stated that Catholics could legitimately be conservatives, but that they needed to be wary that they not become "reactionaries, sometimes charter members of the lunatic fringe," while Catholics could be liberals as long as they did not become "radicals, leftists, pinkos, and even Communists."<sup>6</sup>

*Catholic Digest*, at this moment in history, leaned more to the political right. The periodical departed from, and at times abandoned, the Church's official teaching and promoted free-market capitalism as articulated by Senator Barry Goldwater: "One of the foremost precepts of the natural law is man's right to the possession and the use of his property. . . This attack on property rights is really an attack on freedom."<sup>7</sup> Although the content of this article is surprising given that it goes against Catholic teaching on the universal destination of goods,<sup>8</sup> the timing of this article makes its publication even more unexpected. At the time, Goldwater was running

<sup>3</sup> Jay P. Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience: A History from Colonial Times to the Present*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, 1992; David J. O'Brien, *Public Catholicism*, 2nd ed., Orbis Books, New York, 1996; Jay P. Dolan, *In Search of American Catholicism: A History of Religion and Culture in Tension*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2002; Charles R. Morris, *American Catholic: The Saints and Sinners Who Built America's Most Powerful Church*, Vintage, New York, 1997; Mary J. Oates, *The Catholic Philanthropic Tradition in America*, Indiana University Press, Indianapolis, 1995; Corwin E. Smidt, Catholics and the 2020 Presidential Election, *Politics and Religion Journal*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> For a general overview, see Mary Ellen Konieczny, Charles C. Camosy, and Tricia Colleen Bruce, *Polarization in the US Catholic Church: Naming the Wounds, Beginning to Heal*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, 2016. For the ideological division among Catholics on womanhood, see Maureen K. Day, From Consensus to Division: Tracing the Ideological Divide Among American Catholic Women, 1950–1980, *Journal of Media and Religion* Vol. 16, No. 1, 2017, pp. 129–140. For division on work and family, see Mary Ellen Konieczny, *The Spirit's Tether: Family, Work, and Religion among American Catholics*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph F. Donnelly, But They are not Dogmas!, *Catholic Mind*, 1956, pp. 265–267.

<sup>6</sup> Ralph Gorman, Can a Catholic Be a Liberal?, *Catholic Mind*, 1959, pp. 341–343.

<sup>7</sup> Barry Goldwater, The Conscience of a Conservative, *Catholic Digest*, August 1960, pp. 46–49.

<sup>8</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2403.

for the Republican nomination in the 1960 presidential election. To run this article so close to an election could be understood as a subtle endorsement for fiscal conservatism over John F. Kennedy, the Catholic nominee. But *Catholic Digest* was not alone in its socially conservative leanings. *The Wanderer*, a Catholic publication that turned conservative at the onset of the Cold War, went so far as to explicitly endorse Goldwater over John F. Kennedy.<sup>9</sup> And so, by the beginning of the Sixties and even prior to Vatican II, one can see the nascent division among American Catholics.

Moreover, Catholics have also undergone significant shifts in their voting patterns since World War II. In 1952, two-thirds of white, non-Hispanic Catholics, identified as Democrats and one-fourth were Republicans.<sup>10</sup> With the exception of their rallying around Catholic nominee John F. Kennedy in 1960 and Lyndon B. Johnson who succeeded Kennedy after his assassination, white Catholics gradually moved to the Republican Party until 1988. Nevertheless, despite this increased Republican identification, white Catholics continue to remain eight to twelve points more liberal than contemporary white Protestants.<sup>11</sup> On nearly every political issue – military spending, homelessness, welfare, and equal rights for women, minorities and same-sex relationships – Catholics are more progressive than Protestants.<sup>12</sup> So even amid Catholic gains for the Republican Party, white Catholics still lean left compared to white Protestants. When parsing Protestants into particular denominations, Catholics as a whole (not just white Catholics) appear very similar politically to a variety of mainline denominations and are much more progressive than evangelical denominations.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, the American Catholic population has grown more diverse than ever before, and non-white Catholics tend to vote Democrat. Looking at AP VoteCast's 2020 election data, 57 percent of white Catholics voted for Trump while 67 percent of Hispanic Catholics voted for Biden.<sup>14</sup>

Given these shifts in party affiliation, the increasing racial and ethnic diversity of the US Catholic population, and the increasing observations of polarization, an in-depth exploration of Catholic political commitments is in order. Using a nationally representative survey of 1507 self-identified Catholics, this article explores unity and diversity in the beliefs and practices of “everyday” lay Catholics. As the findings will demonstrate, Catholics are quite divided in their political beliefs, but they remain quite unified in their adherence to the Church's religious teachings. In other words, the polarization narrative rings true in the political data, but it ends there in that there is not the same sort of polarization evident in the theological realm.

<sup>9</sup> Michael W. Cuneo, *The Smoke of Satan: Conservative and Traditionalist Dissent in Contemporary American Catholicism*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1997, p. 52.

<sup>10</sup> Including Latinos increases the number of Democrats. William V. D'Antonio, Michelle Dillon, and Mary L. Gautier, *American Catholics in Transition*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, 2013, p. 126.

<sup>11</sup> E.J. Dionne Jr., “There Is No Catholic Vote – And It's Important”, in: *American Catholics and Civic Engagement: A Distinctive Voice*, Margaret O'Brien Steinfels (ed.), Lanham, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2004, p. 253.

<sup>12</sup> Morris, *American Catholic*. . . p. 303.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, party identification among various denominations in Michael Lipka, “U.S. religious groups and their political leanings”, 2016. Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2016/02/23/u-s-religious-groups-and-their-political-leanings> (accessed May 9, 2023).

<sup>14</sup> Elana Schor and David Grary, “Survey: Biden and Trump split the 2020 Catholic vote almost evenly”, available at: <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2020/11/06/catholic-vote-donald-trump-joe-biden-election-split> (accessed December 7, 2020).

## Data and Methods

The data for this article comes from a larger project that uses both survey and interview data. The survey team – William V. D’Antonio, Mary L. Gautier and Michele Dillon – conducted a survey of U.S. adult Catholics in April 2017 using a representative national sample of 1507 Catholics, including an over-sample of self-identified Hispanic Catholics. The survey was administered by GfK Custom Research (formerly Knowledge Networks), a polling company that conducts surveys online using appropriately screened internet-based panels of respondents. The questionnaire was available in either English or Spanish, depending on the respondent’s language preference. The survey contained questions on respondents’ political affiliation, voting habits, civic engagement, political identity (e.g., conservative or liberal), and attitudes on several political issues as well as a number of questions that are more closely associated with the religious realm (e.g., beliefs in the resurrection of Jesus and frequency of Mass attendance). This quantitative study has been conducted every six years since the late 1980s; the previous 2005 and 2011 waves are publicly available on the American Religion Data Archive for those interested longitudinal comparisons. The data were analyzed using SPSS statistical software and differences of ten percent or more can be considered substantive. When percentages do not total 100 percent, this is due to rounding.

Although the author was part of the interview team, this analysis will limit itself to the survey data. Also, the analysis that follows is intended to cover polarization and unity from a variety of angles, thereby compromising depth for breadth. In other words, the aim of this article is not to go into any one of these subgroupings (e.g., race) in major depth, but to offer an empirical analysis of where Catholics are, and are not, fitting into the polarization narrative. What follows is a descriptive analysis, as it will not engage in simultaneous multivariate analyses. By providing this broad overview, it is hoped that this article will stimulate others to launch their own research into accounting for the unity and diversity evident among Catholics within the American context.

## Examining Politics and Civic Engagement Among Subgroups

The analysis begins by exploring the ways different subgroups of Catholics – separated by race, gender, generation, and commitment to Catholicism – compare with one another in their political and civic patterns. Some of these groups, as in the case of gender, look very similar to one another. Other groupings, like race, show greater difference. The second part of this article examines the religious beliefs of Democratic, Republican, and Independent<sup>15</sup> Catholics, revealing much similarity, especially among Democrats and Republicans.

<sup>15</sup> Although there is no official “Independent” party, our respondents were classified as such if they indicated that they “do not identify with a political party” (22.3% of sample) or selected “other party” (1.1% of sample). Parenthetically, respondents were able to choose Republican, Democrat, Green, Libertarian, or Tea Party as responses. Further, all but two of the fifteen who chose “other party” wrote in “independent.”

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## Race

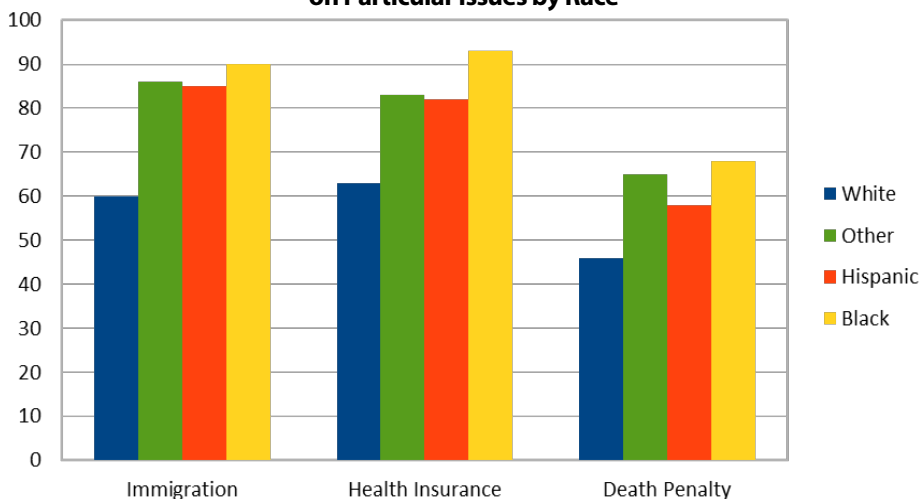
The survey asked respondents their racial or ethnic background according to the following categories: non-Hispanic white (hereafter “white,” accounting for 56% of the sample), non-Hispanic black (hereafter “black,” 3% of sample), Hispanic (35%), non-Hispanic Other (hereafter “other,” 5%), and two or more non-Hispanic races (this group is 0.7% of our total and so is excluded from the analysis). Although the black and other subgroups are few in number, there is little written on black and Asian Catholics’ political attitudes; hence, despite their small numbers, exploring their responses here may be helpful in framing future research.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, any conclusions drawn from the black or other group should be considered modestly.

The broad pattern is that white Catholics are the most conservative in their political attitudes, with “other” and Hispanic Catholics tending to be liberal-leaning moderates and black Catholics being the most politically progressive. We can see this pattern in Figure 1, when Catholics are asked whether they agree (strongly and somewhat agree combined) with the US bishops on three issues: making the immigration process easier for families, the provision of government-funded health care, and opposing the death penalty. As for making immigration easier for families, although six in ten white Catholics agree with the bishops, Catholics of color express much stronger support, with black Catholics (90%) expressing the highest level of support, followed by “other” (86%) and Hispanic (85%) Catholics. Similar levels of support are seen with respect to the bishops’ position that government-funded health care should be expanded. Here, 63 percent of white Catholics agree with the bishops, but Catholics of color again agree more strongly, demonstrated by agreement from 93 percent of black Catholics, 83 percent of “other” Catholics, and 82 percent of Hispanic Catholics. This demographic pattern continues with the bishops’ stance against the death penalty, but with a noticeable drop across all groups. Here, agreement with the bishops’ stance against the death penalty ranges from 46 percent among white Catholics to 68 percent among black Catholics, with “other” Catholics (65%) and Hispanic Catholics (58%) falling between white and black Catholics.

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<sup>16</sup> Although our survey did not disaggregate “other” from those who would otherwise identify as Asian, Pew Research data indicates that roughly two-thirds of those counted as other would have identified as Asian; their data show three percent of Catholics identifying as Asian and two percent as other. Pew Research Center, “Chapter 3: Demographic Profiles of Religious Groups, America’s Changing Religious Landscape”, available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2015/05/12/chapter-3-demographic-profiles-of-religious-groups> (accessed May 9, 2023).

**Figure 1. Agreement with Bishops' Positions on Particular Issues by Race**



However, despite these differences, it should not be mistakenly concluded that white Catholics are less open than their non-white counterparts to following the bishops' statements. Roughly two-thirds of each racial/ethnic group stated that they either "try to follow" the bishops' guidance on political positions or that they "consider" their statements, even while they ultimately make up their own mind, as large majorities of white (64%), "other" (67%), Hispanic (63%) and black (69%) Catholics claim such to be the case (data not shown). Given the relatively larger percentage of white Catholics who identify as Republican, we might expect white Catholics to express increased agreement with the bishops' statements that are more "Republican-friendly," such as statements on euthanasia, abortion, or same-sex relationships.

But this is not the case (data not shown). First, respondents were asked if "individuals who are terminally ill and in great pain should have a legal right to doctor-assisted suicide." A majority of all Catholics agreed with this, departing from the Church's position on this issue. But even with the "Republican-friendly" nature of this question, white Catholics were not the least likely to agree. Instead, 59 percent of both Hispanic and other Catholics agreed with this, followed by 67 percent of white Catholics and 75 percent of black Catholics.

Respondents were also asked what sorts of activities might bar someone from being a "good Catholic." On both abortion and same-sex relationships, a majority of all ethnic and racial groups said that you could disobey these teachings and still be a good Catholic. But, once again, there is variation along racial and ethnic lines. When asking about not "obeying the Church hierarchy's opposition to abortion," it was the "other" Catholics (54%) who were least likely to call these people good Catholics, followed by Hispanic (61%), white (66%) and black (76%) Catholics. There was even greater acceptance of those who were not "obeying the Church hierarchy's op-

position to gay/lesbian sexual relationships.” Here, Hispanic (67%), other (71%), and black (71%) Catholics were quite similar in the percentages claiming LGBTQ Catholics could still be “good Catholics,” with white Catholics actually being the most accepting (79%).

Thus, it appears there is not some simple red/blue binary that sorts racial and ethnic groups of Catholics and predicts their willingness to agree with or depart from Church teaching. Instead, Hispanic and other Catholics are most consistently in relative agreement with Church teaching (albeit with cases in which majorities still dissent), black Catholics are most consistently friendly toward Democratic positions, and white Catholics are most likely to dissent without reliably following any partisan expectations.

Overall, a relatively large number of Catholics identify as Democrats, although this varies across these racial/ethnic groupings. For example, as can be seen from Figure 2, roughly one-fourth of white Catholics identify as liberal, yet slightly more than one-third (34%) identify with the Democratic Party. Likewise, for each of the racial/ethnic groups examined, the blue “liberal” column is shorter than the red “Democratic” column, revealing that Catholics within each of the racial/ethnic groups are far more likely to classify themselves as Democrats in their partisan identifications than as liberals in their ideological orientations. Only among black Catholics does one find a majority who identify as a liberal. Thus, by and large, Catholics lean conservative, even while they lean Democrat.\

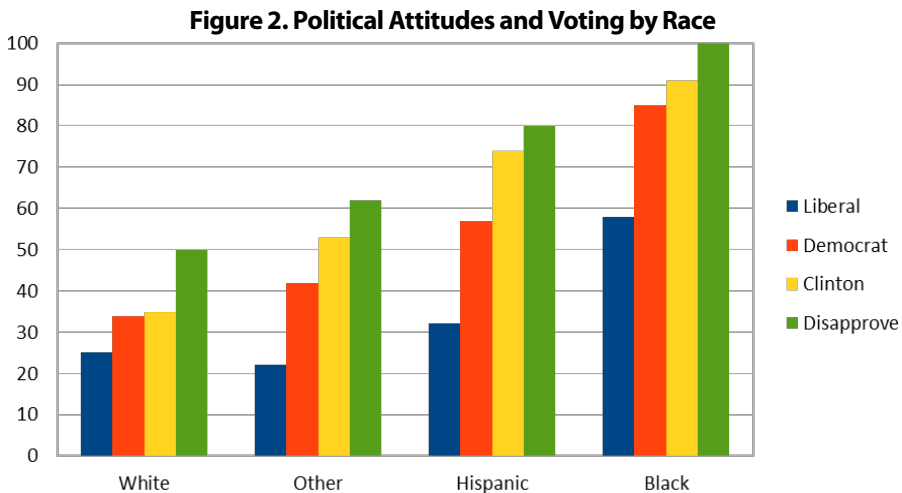
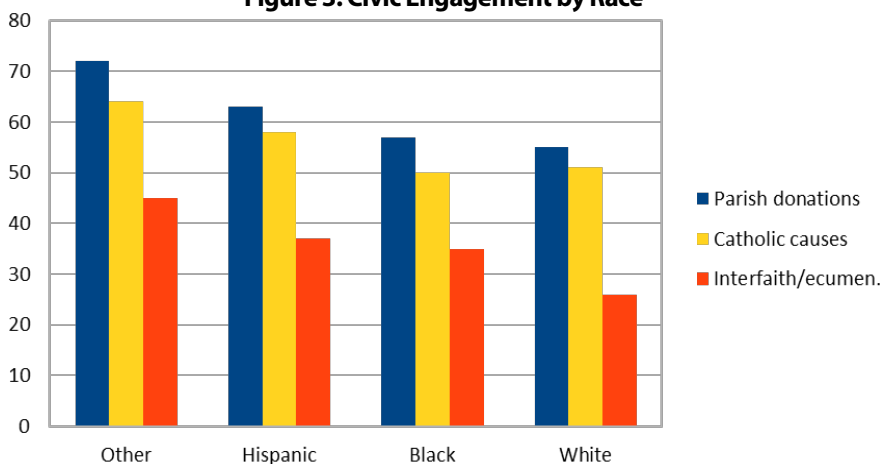


Figure 2 also examines voting choices among Catholics. When asked about their voting choices, there is a progression in Democratic support across the different racial and ethnic groups. Although less than 40 percent of white Catholics reported voting for Clinton in the 2016 presidential election, a majority of non-white Catholics did so. When asked about their approval of Donald Trump, most Catholics

expressed disapproval. Even half of the white Catholics did so, while there was re-sounding disapproval of Trump among Hispanic (80%) and black (100%) Catholics. The broader trend evident in Figure 2 is that, among Catholics, it is the white Catholics who are the most conservative, followed by those classified as “other” Catholics, then Hispanic Catholics, with black Catholics being the most liberal.

When asked about their parish and civic engagement, three of the six questions showed differences across the four racial or ethnic groups (see Figure 3). With regard to those who reported being regularly or occasionally involved, there was no substantial differences across the groups in terms of being involved in parish activities outside of Mass, volunteering in the community, and doing volunteer work with poor or vulnerable groups in society. Where racial/ethnic differences were apparent related to donating money to one’s parish, donating money to Catholic organizations or causes, and engaging in ecumenical or interfaith activities. Overall, with regard to these three specific endeavors, those classified as other Catholics were most likely to have engaged in these activities regularly or occasionally in the last six months, followed by Hispanic Catholics and then black Catholics, who slightly edged out white Catholics.

**Figure 3. Civic Engagement by Race**



*Gender*

Overall, gender had very little effect on responses to the multitude of political and civic engagement questions asked. In fact, only a handful of questions revealed a seven-percentage point or more difference between male and female responses. More women agreed with the Church’s position against the death penalty (56% of women compared to 47% of men). More men were Republican (32% compared to 25%) and more women identified as Independent (26% compared to 19%). Women were more likely than men to disapprove of the way Donald Trump was handling



the presidency (67% compared to 58%). Finally, women were more likely than men to have voted for Hillary Clinton in 2016 (53% of women compared to 43% of men), while men were more likely than women to have voted for Donald Trump (46% compared to 39%). Given this short list of exceptions, we can reasonably conclude that gender has very little effect on the political beliefs and civic habits of Catholics, even though there are some partisan differences based on gender among American Catholics.

### *Generation*

The data reveal that, in terms of generational differences,<sup>17</sup> Silent Generation Catholics are the most strongly tethered to Catholicism in that they are the most likely to consistently provide a response that aligns with the Church's position. But, if the Church's position happens to align with the Democratic platform, younger generations often surpass them in their enthusiasm. Sometimes there is a gradual shift across generations, whereas, at other times, Baby Boomer, Gen X and Millennial Catholics are nearly identical to one another. The iGen (also referred to as Gen Z elsewhere) Catholics often reverse the trend and look more similar to the Silent Generation group.

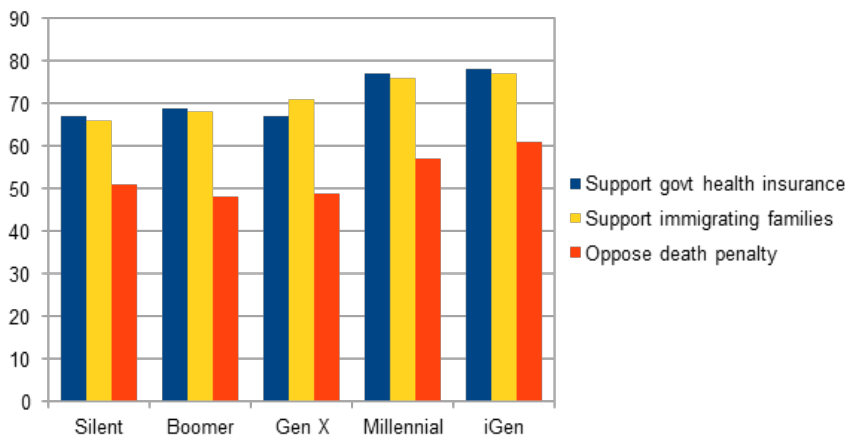
Two caveats, however, are in order when examining generational differences. First, the iGen sample is quite small (n=92, 6.1% of sample) and so should not necessarily be considered nationally representative. The 2017 survey was the first time any iGen members were over 18 years old and thereby eligible for inclusion within the survey, with the group ranging from 18-22 years old (having been born between 1995-1999). However, even with their small size, their aggregate responses are included here because it is the first time they are included in our Catholic surveys and having some sense of their beliefs and attitudes is important. But, due to their small sample size, their findings should be considered exploratory. Second, when looking at generation, it is important to keep in mind that this is not a straightforward generational analysis in that older generations claim a high percentage of white Catholics and younger generations have increasingly higher percentages of other racial and ethnic groups.

A lesson for understanding the impact of generation on Catholics is that generation makes a difference, but the general trends have numerous exceptions, providing no reliable rule (e.g., it is not the case that the oldest generation is always more aligned with Church teaching and responses become gradually less-aligned the younger the respondent). As shown in Figure 4, Catholics of all generations tend to agree with the bishops' positions on health insurance, immigration and the death penalty. Roughly two-thirds of Silent Generation, Baby Boomer and Gen X Catholics either strongly or somewhat agree with the bishops' position on expanding gov-

<sup>17</sup> In the analysis that follows, the Silent Generation are those respondents born 1940 and earlier, the Baby Boomer generation are born 1941 to 1960, the Gen X generation between 1961 and 1978, the Millennial generation between 1979 and 1994, with the iGen cohort being born between 1995 and 1999.

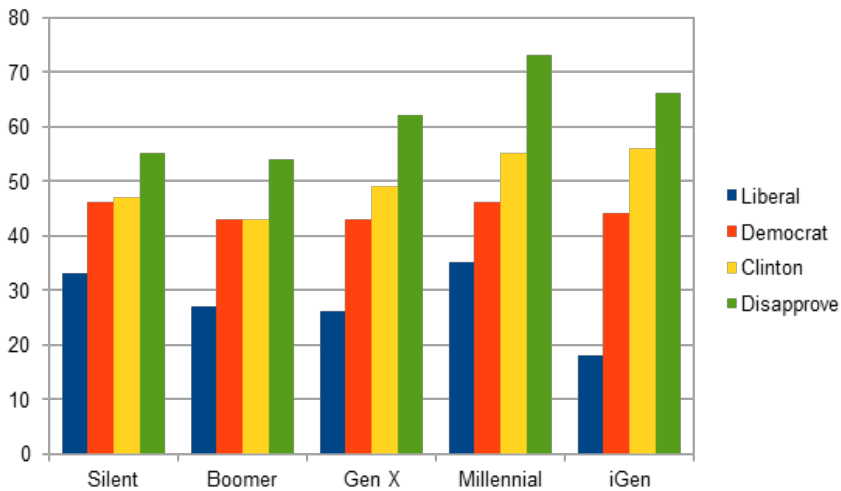
ernment-funded insurance and making immigration easier on families. This level of support increases substantially among Millennial and iGen Catholics, three-fourths of whom agree with the bishops here. Although overall support is lower with respect to opposition to the death penalty, a similar pattern across the generations is evident, with lower support among the three oldest generations and an increase among Millennial and iGen Catholics.

**Figure 4. Agreement with Bishops' Positions on Particular Issues by Generation**



Overall, as shown in Figure 5, the political orientations and voting choices across the generations do not lend themselves to the same clean patterns that grouping respondents by race does. However, each generation is more likely to identify as a Democrat than describe themselves as liberal, and each generation is more likely to report that they voted for Hillary Clinton in 2016 and disapproved of Donald Trump's handling of the presidency than identified as Democrats.

**Figure 5. Political Attitudes and Voting by Generation**

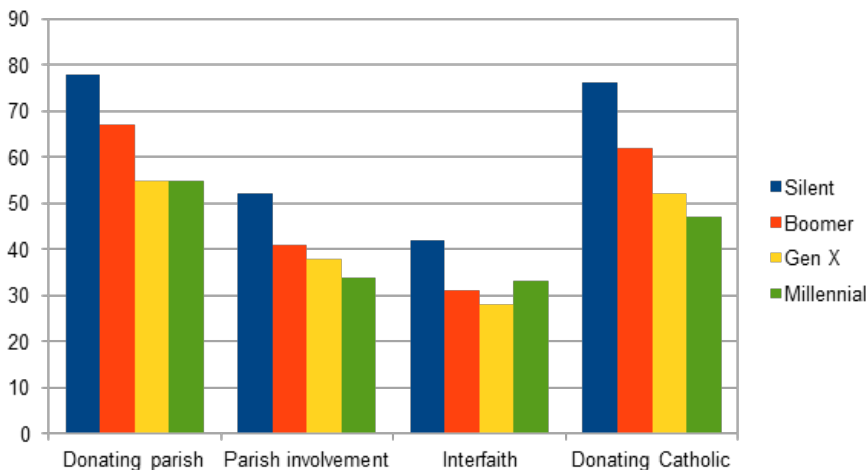


But the individual responses across the generations follow their own patterns. One-third of Silent Generation Catholics identify as liberal, and this decreases for the Baby Boomer and Gen X Catholics, only to rebound for Millennials and then drop precipitously for iGen Catholics.<sup>18</sup> The percentage of those identifying as Democrats is fairly consistent across the generations, with percentages ranging in the low-to-mid 40s. Votes for Hillary Clinton drop slightly with the Baby Boomer voters, and then rise steadily. The majority of Silent Generation and Baby Boomer Catholics disapprove of Trump’s handling of the presidency, with percentages in the mid-fifties. This climbs to sixty-two percent among Gen X Catholics, then seventy-three percent of Millennials, dropping to sixty-six percent of iGen Catholics.

There does not appear to be much of a generational difference in secular civic engagement.<sup>19</sup> Roughly half of Catholics from all generations regularly or occasionally volunteer in their community and percentages are in the mid-thirties for those who do volunteer work with poor or vulnerable groups (data not shown). But, once we look at civic practices with religious significance (see Figure 6), we see larger generational differences. The Silent Generation stands apart from the others as substantially more active by each of these measures. The Baby Boomers exceed the younger generations when it comes to donations to their parish or other Catholic organizations, but they are similar to younger generations in their parish involvement or ecumenical and interfaith activities.

<sup>18</sup> This iGen drop has much to do with the overwhelming percentage (51%) of these Catholics who identify as moderate; thirty-three percent is the second highest percentage of moderates among the other generations.

<sup>19</sup> The small number of iGen respondents are excluded here from the analysis; not only are they a small number, but some of their actions – such as volunteering – may have been university course requirements.

**Figure 6. Civic Engagement by Generation**

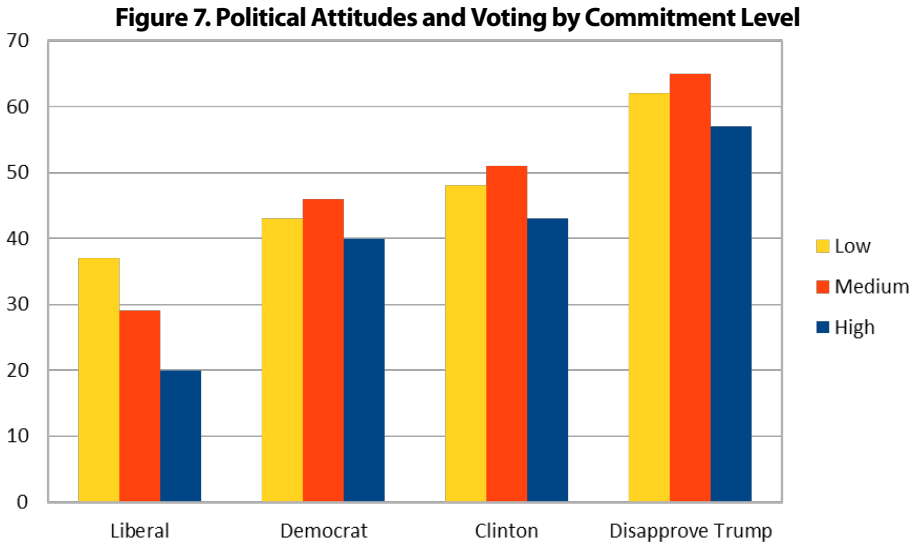
### *Commitment to Catholicism*

Given the wide media coverage of Catholics protesting against abortion or Catholic bishops denouncing same-sex marriage, it may be reasonable to think that highly committed Catholics would be more politically conservative than less committed Catholics. However, such an assumption misses the fact that Catholic teaching does not readily fit into the red-blue typology that characterizes American politics. On the contrary, several scholarly pieces reveal that Catholics' civic engagement as Catholics extends to a variety of issues across the political spectrum, not just those on the conservative side.<sup>20</sup> The findings presented here thus far reflect this range of political commitments, such that it may be more accurate to describe highly committed Catholics as being highly supportive of Catholic values in the political sphere regardless of whether they label themselves as politically liberal or conservative. To assess this possibility, a composite variable was created tapping commitment to the Catholic Church; this variable included one's frequency of mass attendance, one's likelihood of leaving the Catholic Church, and the personal importance of the Catholic Church in the respondent's life. Respondents were classified as low, moderate, and high commitment Catholics, allowing for an examination of the ways commitment to Catholicism might shape political attitudes and practices.

Levels of commitment to the Church were examined in relationship to the respondent's ideological orientation as a liberal, the respondent's partisan identification as a Democrat, voting for Clinton in the 2016 presidential election, and approval

<sup>20</sup> *American Catholics and Civic Engagement: A Distinctive Voice*, Margaret O'Brien Steinfels (ed.), Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, 2004; Sharon Erickson Nepstad, *Convictions of the Soul: Religion, Culture, and Agency in the Central America Solidarity Movement*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2004; Michele Dillon, *Postsecular Catholicism: Relevance and Renewal*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2018; Christian Smith, *Resisting Reagan: The U.S. Central America Peace Movement*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2010; Maureen K. Day, *Catholic Activism Today: Individual Transformation and the Struggle for Social Justice*, New York University Press, New York, 2020; Sharon Erickson Nepstad, *Catholic Social Activism: Progressive Movements in the United States*, New York University Press, New York, 2019.

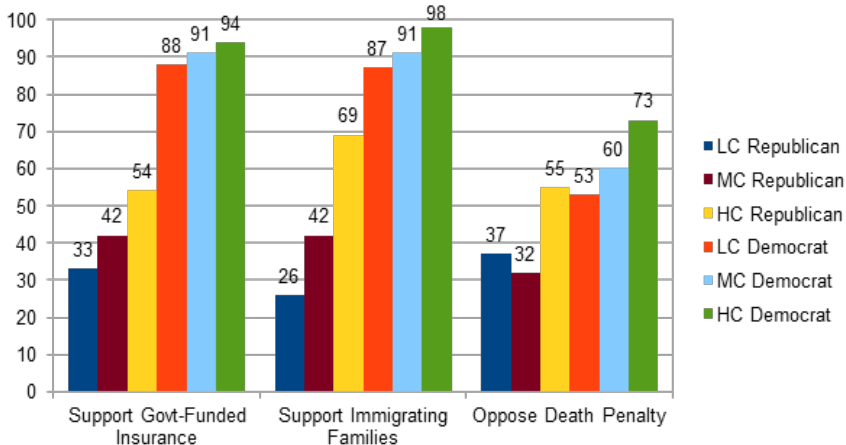
of Trump’s presidency (see Figure 7). In terms of picking an ideological label, a clear pattern emerges; the greater the respondents’ Catholic commitment, the less likely they are to describe themselves as liberal. However, with respect to the other three measures – identification as a Democrat, voting for Clinton in 2016, and approval of the Trump presidency – the percentages found among highly committed Catholics are similar to those found among the least committed. In fact, no substantial differences can be seen across these three groups, indicating that Catholic commitment does not play a relevant role in these political matters.



When looking at political attitudes by commitment levels more closely, many of the leaders we interviewed bemoaned the fact that Catholics tend to look at issues through the lens of their party and only secondarily, if at all, through a lens of faith. This is corroborated in the data, but with an important caveat: as commitment increases, faith plays a stronger role in a person’s deliberation. In fact, there are a handful of Catholics – nineteen percent of the total sample – who are counted as high commitment Catholics. These Catholics are much more likely to defect from their party when their party’s stance does not align with Catholic teaching (see Figure 8). Three questions asked about their agreement with the bishops’ positions on supporting government-funded health insurance, facilitating the immigration process for families, and opposing the death penalty. These questions all align with the Democratic Party, and we found a clear difference between Republican and Democratic Catholics here. However, we also see greater agreement with the bishops as commitment increases. This results in the majority of high-commitment Catholic Republicans – even exceeding two-thirds on the immigration question – departing from their party’s platform and agreeing with the bishops. The high-commitment

Catholic Republicans even nudge past low-commitment Catholic Democrats and approach moderately-committed Catholic Democrats in their opposition to the death penalty. This demonstrates that high-commitment Catholic Republicans are much more likely to assent to Catholic teaching on Democrat-friendly issues than their low-commitment counterparts. In other words, high-commitment Catholics are much more likely to defect from their party when the position conflicts with the teachings of their faith. This is also seen among progressive Catholics in other studies, with many disagreeing with their party on the abortion issue.<sup>21</sup>

**Figure 8. Agreement with Bishops' Positions, by Commitment and Party**

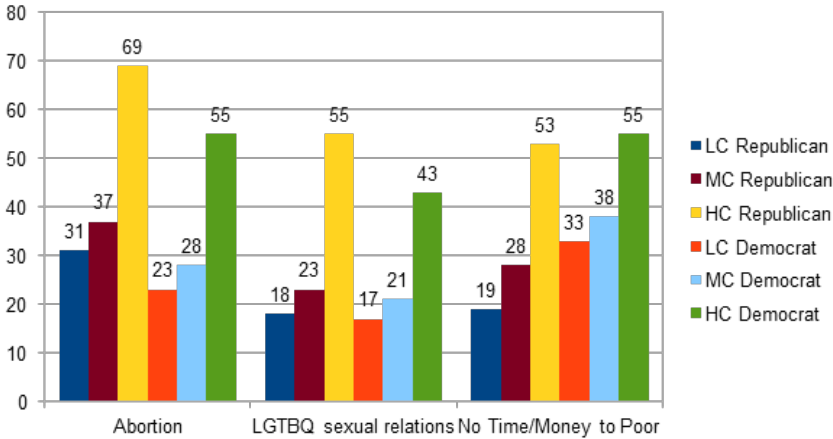


Similar findings emerge when examining Republican-friendly issues (see Figure 9). The survey asked respondents about activities that might prevent a person from being considered a good Catholic. Three questions have political implications: abortion (Republican aligned), same-sex relations (Republican) and giving time or money to the poor (while not specifying tax policies, this can arguably be seen as Democratically aligned). High-commitment Catholics, regardless of the political leanings that might be associated with the question, were much more likely than either low- or medium-commitment Catholics to follow Church teaching over their party's platform when the two were in conflict. Perhaps more interesting, a political gap in attitudes about giving time and money to help the poor is evident among low- and moderately-committed Catholics, it disappears among highly-committed Catholics. Such congruence among high-commitment Catholics may well demonstrate the centrality of caring for those in poverty within Catholicism. Moreover, collectively these questions demonstrate the importance of faith in shaping political commitments on a variety of issues. Even though this section has largely been examining political division within Catholicism, there are, when commitment is strong,

<sup>21</sup> Simon J. Hendry, "Ruined for Life: The Spirituality of the Jesuit Volunteer Corps", PhD diss., Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, 2002, p. 464; Michele Dillon, *Catholic Identity: Balancing Reason, Faith, and Power*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, p. 199; Day, *Catholic Activism Today*. . . p. 177.

areas of consensus regardless of political affiliation. Putting politics before faith may be the method for most Catholics, but not for those with high commitment.

**Figure 9. Attitude/Practice and Cannot Be a Good Catholic, by Commitment and Party**

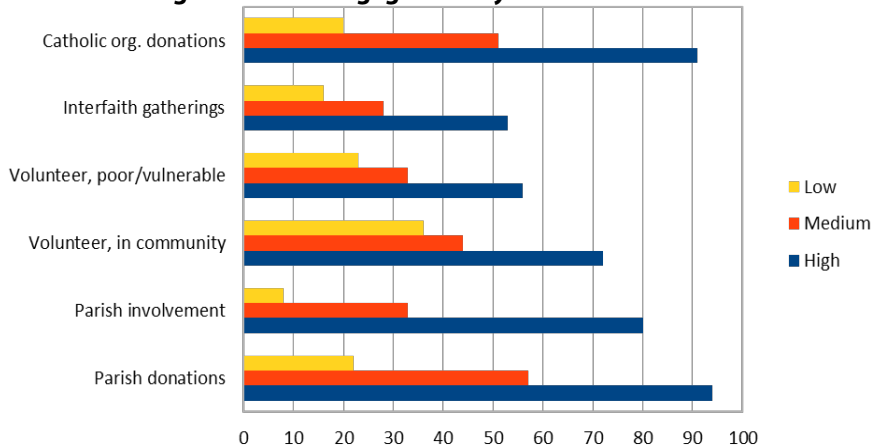


Finally, highly committed Catholics are more active in their parishes and communities. Although their increased involvement in parish life is expected, their greater secular engagement may be viewed as somewhat more surprising. However, sociologists have noted that some people tend to be “joiners” in that their increased involvement in one area of life begets greater involvement in another.<sup>22</sup> In other words, it is not that a particular commitment *pulls a person away* from another one; rather, belonging to one group typically *involves a person more deeply* in other groups as well. And studies have shown that those who attend church are more likely to volunteer at a local nonprofit, donate money to charitable causes, participate in hobby-focused groups, vote, and even throw more dinner parties.<sup>23</sup> This “more is more” pattern is also found among these highly committed Catholics. As shown in Figure 10, highly committed Catholics are more involved in these activities than those with lower levels of commitment. Granted, highly committed Catholics show an especially pronounced level of engagement when it comes to religious and Catholic causes, but such a difference also extends into the secular sphere. Moreover, Catholicism urges lay Catholics to pay special attention to public life, the common good, and the poor and vulnerable. As a result, this high level of involvement in secular society by highly committed Catholics may well be religiously motivated.

<sup>22</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1994, p. 327.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2000; Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2012; Pew Research Center, “Religion's Relationship to Happiness, Civic Engagement and Health Around the World”, 2019. Available at: <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/01/31/religions-relationship-to-happiness-civic-engagement-and-health-around-the-world/> (accessed December 17, 2020).

**Figure 10. Civic Engagement by Commitment Level**



### Party Influence on Questions Related to Catholic Beliefs and Practices

The previous section outlined some of the ways Catholics currently experience division, even while highlighting some possible unexpected areas of unity. The next section examines how partisan affiliation relates to one’s strength of Catholicity. It reveals how religious beliefs provide a basis of theological unity among politically divided Catholics in that being a Democrat or Republican does little to shape one’s commitment to the Church, its beliefs and practices, or what makes for being a “good Catholic.”

#### *Commitment to the Church*

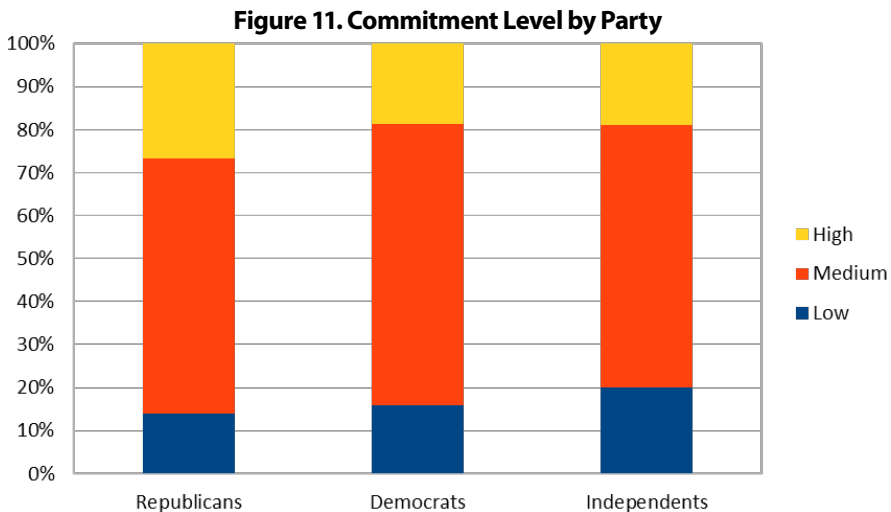
How then does party affiliation shape, if at all, the commitment Catholics express toward the Church? This commitment composite variable, as noted earlier, was composed of one’s frequency of mass attendance, one’s likelihood of leaving the Catholic Church, and the personal importance of the Catholic Church in the respondent’s life. When examining the three component measures separately, the pattern is one in which Republicans tend to express the highest level of commitment to the Church and Independents the lowest level of commitment. For example, when asked how personally important the Catholic Church is to the respondents, 40 percent of Republicans stated that the Church is the most or among the most parts of their life, compared to 36 percent of Democrats and 29 percent of the Independents (data not shown). Conversely, 11 percent of Independents say that the Church is “not very important to me at all,” compared to 4 percent of Republicans and 5 percent of Democrats.

When assessing their likelihood of remaining in the Catholic Church on a 1-7 scale, with one meaning they would never leave and seven indicating they might



leave, 70 percent of Republicans chose a 1 or 2, as did 60 percent of Democrats and 53 percent of Independents, although there was little party difference at the other end of the scale. Nor was there a major difference in mass attendance by party affiliation, as just under half of Republicans and Democrats reported attending mass monthly or more compared to 40 percent of those not identifying with a major party.

When these three variables are combined together (as shown in Figure 11) and divided into high, medium, and low categories of commitment, one finds that 27 percent of Republicans are high commitment Catholics compared to 19 percent found within the ranks of Democrats and Independents. Based on the cutting points used, Independents exhibit largest segment of “low commitment” Catholics (20%), followed by Democrats (16%) and then Republicans (14%).

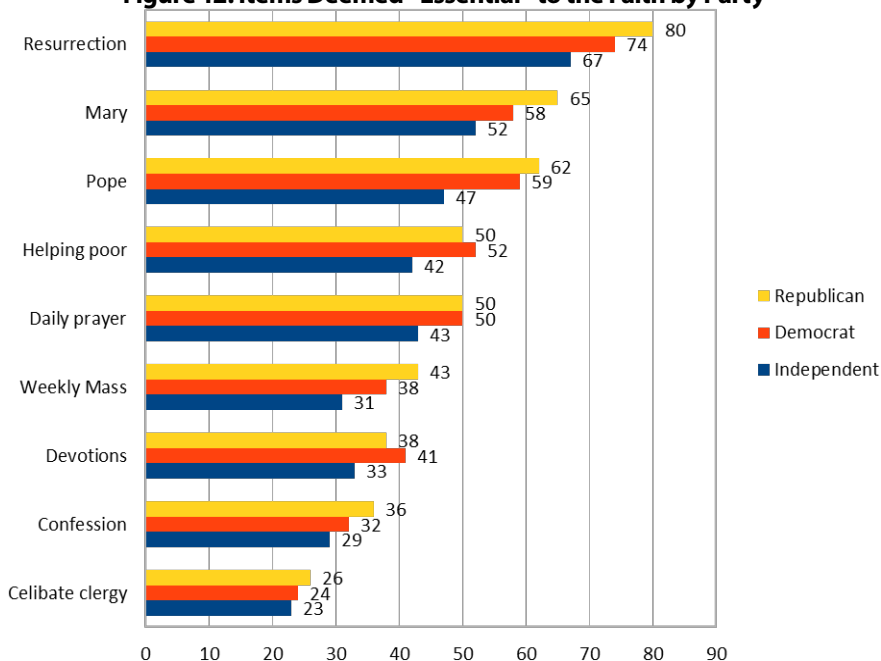


### *Beliefs and Practices*

One can also examine differences in adherence to specific religious beliefs or particular religious practices by the partisan affiliation of the respondents (see Figure 12). Clearly, depending on the particular belief or practice examined, the percentage of Catholics saying the belief or practice was “essential” varied considerably, with belief in the resurrection of Jesus being deemed the most “essential” to what it means to be Catholic. But, for each of the nine items examined, Democrats and Republicans exhibited larger percentages than Independents in deeming these beliefs and practices as being “essential” to their vision of Catholicism, including belief in the resurrection of Jesus, devotion to Mary the mother of God, the necessity of a pope, charitable efforts to help the poor, engaging in daily prayer, the obligation to attend mass weekly, participating in devotions, private confession to a priest, and having celibate male clergy. Thus, overall, one finds that Democrats and Republi-

cans look fairly similar, though, depending on the belief or practice, Republicans sometimes exhibited a higher percentage than Democrats in deeming the matter as being “essential,” whereas, at other times, the reverse was true. On the other hand, Independents tended to provide more institutionally-distanced responses. And so, for Catholics at least, institutional distance from political parties correlates with institutional distance from religious bodies.

**Figure 12. Items Deemed “Essential” to the Faith by Party**



Similar patterns were found when Catholics were asked if they either strongly or somewhat strongly agreed with regard to sacraments being essential to their relationship with God and whether it was important to the respondent that future generations of their family be raised as Catholics (data not shown). Whereas 78 percent of both Republicans and Democrats agreed that the sacraments are essential to their relationship with God, only 68 percent of Independents did so. Likewise, 78 percent of both Republicans and Democrats agreed that it is important to them that future generations of their family are raised Catholic, while only 67 percent of Independents shared this sentiment.

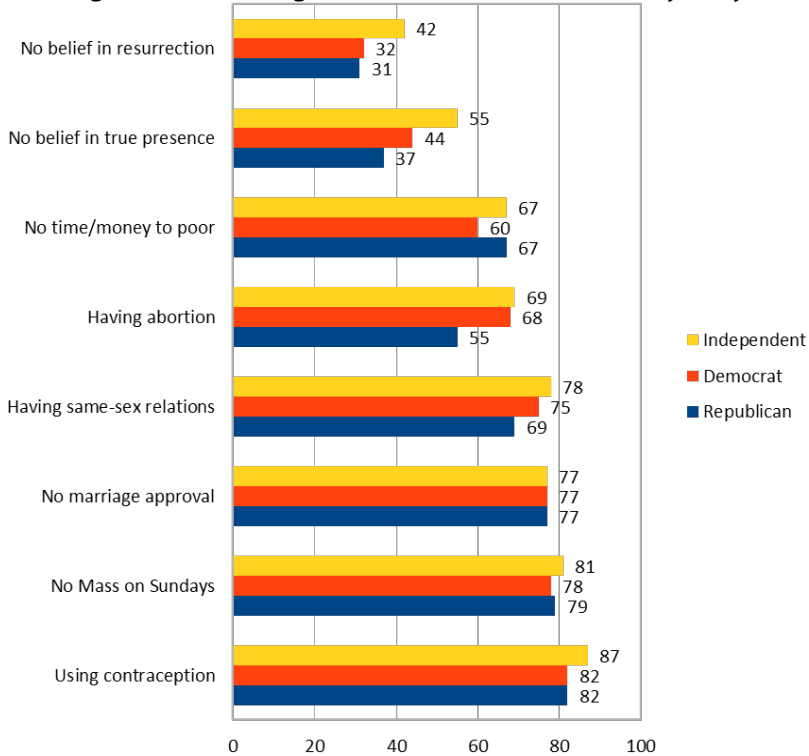
Thus, overall, substantial differences do not emerge between Catholic Democrats and Catholic Republicans in terms of those beliefs they deem “essential” to being a Catholic. Although there is some variation in the extent to which Catholics hold certain beliefs as essential to their faith, there is little difference in the percentage of Catholic Democrats and Catholic Republicans who assess that particular be-

lief or practice as meeting such a standard. Where differences emerge is between those who are Independents and those who identify with one of the two major parties.

### *What Makes a "Good Catholic"*

Respondents were asked what people can believe or do and still be considered a "good Catholic," revealing what is deemed to be the central aspects of the respondents' core understanding of Catholicism. Responses to these items are analyzed in terms of the party with which the respondents were affiliated (see Figure 13). Consistent with our past surveys, Catholics are the least likely to say that a person can be a good Catholic without believing either that Jesus physically rose from the dead or that in the Mass that the bread and wine really become the body and blood of Jesus; these matters have consistently been seen as more core to the faith than the other items examined. And, keeping with the pattern of greater institutional distance among Independents, Republicans and Democrats express higher expectations of orthodoxy on these issues than those without a party.

The next three questions of Catholicity have overlap with political issues – namely, care for those in poverty, abortion, and same-sex relationships. These reveal the expected influence that party identifications might have on the responses. Democrats (60%) are less likely than Republicans (67%) to say that a person can be a good Catholic without donating time or money to help the poor, with Republicans being less likely than Democrats in holding that a person can be a good Catholic without obeying the Church hierarchy's opposition to abortion (55% versus 68%, respectively) or without obeying the Church hierarchy's opposition to gay or lesbian sexual relationships (69% vs. 76%, respectively). Finally, with regard to the last three questions – on whether someone can be a good Catholic without having their marriage approved by the Church, without going to Mass every Sunday, or without obeying the hierarchy's opposition to artificial contraception – reveal that these factors are clearly peripheral to most Catholics, regardless of their party affiliation.

**Figure 13. Answering “Yes, Can Be a Good Catholic” by Party**

Nevertheless, on all nine matters examined in Figure 13, Independents either match or surpass the less “orthodox” position, revealing once again that Catholics who are Independents appear to be less tethered to a religious institution than those Catholics who identify with one of the major two parties. Perhaps, then, Catholic Democrats and Republicans feel a centering tug back from a party’s position by Catholic teachings, making their views more moderate on questions with religious and political overlap.

There is, however, some conflicting evidence that has emerged elsewhere. For example, Pew Research has more recently found that, although Catholic Democrats (31%) are more likely to say that abortion should be illegal in all or most cases compared to Democrats as a whole (21%), there is little difference aside from this issue between Catholics and non-Catholics within each of the two major parties. The Pew study found that Catholic Republicans did not differ from other Republicans nationally on the issue of abortion, and there was little to no difference when Catholic Republicans and Catholic Democrats are compared to other members of their respective parties on such matters as climate change, the building of a border wall, and whether government monies for the poor do more harm or good for the recipients.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Michael Lipka and Gregory A. Smith, “Like Americans overall, U.S. Catholics are sharply divided by party”, 2019. Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/24/like-americans-overall-u-s-catholics-are-sharply-divided-by-party/> (accessed April 18, 2022).

## Conclusion

We asked Catholics a variety of political questions to see how polarization may be manifested across different Catholic subgroups. The results show that generation and race both seem to influence Catholics' understanding of their political and civic beliefs in some way. While generation does shape Catholics' responses, it does not do so in any predictable or generalizable way.<sup>25</sup> Race has a strong influence, with white Catholics most in disagreement with Church teaching, black Catholics tending to align with Democratic positions, and Hispanic and "other" Catholics exhibiting the most agreement with Church teaching regardless of whether the position is Republican- or Democrat-friendly. As far as political identity goes, white Catholics were more politically conservative, with responses becoming more progressive as one moves from white Catholics to "other" Catholics, from "other" Catholics to Hispanic Catholics, and from Hispanic Catholics to black Catholics. Gender has relatively limited effects on political attitudes and behaviors, while highly committed Catholics appear to put their faith first and are more aligned with Church teaching, regardless of their party's platform on key issues.

We also asked Catholics non-political questions about how essential certain Church teachings were as well as what beliefs and practices were essential to being a "good Catholic," with responses examined in terms of the respondent's reported partisan affiliation. Overall, Republicans and Democrats showed the stronger and relatively equivalent connections to Catholicism in their responses when compared to Independents, who typically scored lower. While we cannot say for certain, Independents may well harbor a general institutional lukewarmness that Republicans and Democrats do not, resulting not only in looser political ties, but also in looser religious ties. When examining the teachings or practices Catholics could dissent from and still be considered a "good Catholic," we found that Independents were more likely to allow for a rejection of these than were Democrats or Republicans. Being Democrat or Republican affected responses in the expected ways on the questions with political implications (e.g., abortion or care for the poor) when not controlling for commitment to Catholicism.

Given the increasing polarization in the Catholic Church as well as in the United States broadly, there are three takeaways worth highlighting here. These have both academic and pastoral implications. The first relates to the divisions among contemporary Catholics. The talk about political polarization among Catholics is, according to our data, accurate. But most discussions tend to focus on polarization in a general way, concerning Catholics in the aggregate. These findings show that the strongest political divisions among Catholics, like the US population more broadly, follow racial lines. This means that Catholics will not only sense polarization in their midst, but also that those with whom they disagree will likely be of a different race or ethnicity than they are. This "double division," one that is both political and racial in nature, can exacerbate an already deep fissure and difficult tension<sup>26</sup> and provides certain "blind spots" when discussing political issues. An obvious example would be parish or diocesan groups

<sup>25</sup> Parenthetically, our larger dataset shows fairly reliable patterns for generation on other measures (attitudes more aligned with official Catholic teaching the older the respondent), it is only in this political realm where findings are less predictable. This probably has to do with the oldest and the two younger generations being most progressive.

<sup>26</sup> These racialized lines of difference are similar to what was found of evangelical Protestants in Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2001.

trying to get racial justice programs or advocacy off the ground. If more conservative Catholics – who are typically more reticent to begin such efforts – also happen to be white, this means that, when parishes are discussing the merits or needs for such programming, those most hesitant to start these programs (conservatives) do not have the first-hand experiences that might change their minds to do so (because their more privileged experiences as whites). Such cognitive blind spots matter not only in issues that are directly connected to race, but also in relationship to those issues that have more impact on communities of color, such as poverty, criminal justice, immigration, and others. Ministers facilitating such discussions should be aware of these blind spots and consider ways that these can be put on the radar and supplemented with stories from the faith community.

A second takeaway is the perhaps surprising way many high-commitment Catholics from both parties jettisoned their political inclinations in favor of their faith commitments. Because high commitment Catholics only make up 20 percent of our sample, the faith that undergirds their thoughts are often lost in survey analyses when political attitudes are compared across religions. In the aggregate, Catholics may not appear to have anything distinctly Catholic about them. But, these data show that for one in five Catholics, their faith is the foundation of their values. They do not think or act according to the rigid binary that the polarization narrative offers. This is not only academically interesting, but it this insight invites ministers to think through how Catholic spaces might serve to build bridges and offer opportunities for dialogue. Parishes might self-select into more conservative or liberal congregations,<sup>27</sup> but more moderate parishes or diocesan efforts to think through what a distinctly Catholic approach to ameliorating a social problem might look like could go far. Likewise, when Catholics foster friendships with those beyond their political circle, it also helps to mitigate polarization more broadly.

The third takeaway focuses on what unites Catholics even across party platforms, and that is key elements of their faith. Although they may disagree quite vehemently about politics, partisanship does not seem to affect Catholics' assent to non-political Church teaching, such as the core belief that Jesus physically rose from the dead. Other scholars have named the sacramental-liturgical tradition of Catholicism, the global presence of Catholicism, or the passing on of the faith as unifying spaces within the Church for those Catholics who might be characterized as being on opposite ends of the political, and in certain respects theological, spectrum.<sup>28</sup> The polarization narrative is certainly true, but it is not the whole of the story. Both political division and theological unity around core issues characterize contemporary Catholicism in the United States. And this is where the Catholic story departs from the general American story. Although polarization, racial differences in political attitudes, and other patterns noted here may reflect American life more broadly, the fact that certain sacred things are shared in common among Catholics provides a potential tethering point for Catholics on either side of the political aisle. Although Americans may likewise share certain common values, these are harder to identify in these polarized times. How might becoming more aware of what is commonly held as core to a community shape imaginations and strengthen affections? Future scholarship that explores the ramifications of such findings would be very fruitful for both scholars and practitioners.

<sup>27</sup> Trish C. Bruce, *Parish and Place: Making Room for Diversity in the American Catholic Church*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2017.

<sup>28</sup> Dillon, *Catholic Identity*... pp. 207-210.

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Морин К. Деј

## ПОЛАРИЗАЦИЈА? ИДЕНТИФИКОВАЊЕ ШТА ДЕЛИ А ШТА УЈЕДИЊУЈЕ АМЕРИЧКЕ КАТОЛИКЕ

### Сажетак

Поларизација међу америчким католицима била је у фокусу како научне тако и медијске јавности. На основу репрезентативног узорка од преко 1500 католика, први део овог чланка истражује колико раса, пол, генерација и посвећеност религији утиче на поларизацију међу католицима. Ове карактеристике различитито утичу на уверења католика. У другом делу чланка католици се анализирају кроз њихово политичко груписање – демократе, републиканци, и независни – с циљем да се открију начини како партијска идентификација утиче на католичког разумевање не-политичких али религиозних веровања и пракси. Анализа открива да су политичке поделе евидентне међу католичким субгрупима, али да теолошко јединство и даље опстаје.

**Кључне речи:** католичко гласање, поларизација, католичка поларизација, религија и политика, католички грађански активизам, амерички католицизам