

In battleground states, Catholics are a pivotal swing vote

by [David Crary](#) in the [October 21, 2020](#) issue



Churchgoers participate in a procession at the Holy Apostles Church in Milwaukee on September 12. (AP Photo / Morry Gash)

For decades, Roman Catholic voters have been a pivotal swing vote in US presidential elections, with a majority backing the winner—whether Republican or Democrat—nearly every time.

How they vote in the battleground states this year could well decide the outcome, and the rival campaigns are targeting them with fervent appeals to vote based on their faith.

The Trump and Biden campaigns are competing to win over people like Jeannie French of Pittsburgh, in battleground Pennsylvania, who is struggling with her decision. She's a member of Democrats for Life and loath to vote for Biden because of his stance on abortion—but dismayed by Republicans' positions on climate change, immigration, and economic issues.

In mid-September, French, a real estate consultant who volunteers at church, hadn't made up her mind and was considering voting for a third-party candidate. Now, with the Supreme Court vacancy, she's leaning toward Trump.

"A vote for Trump will mean that I need to work even harder for fair wages, environmental issues, penal reform, immigrant care, and other social concerns, but it also means that we get the opportunity to get things right on abortion as a nation," said French. "For this Catholic, it might just be the right call."

In battleground states Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Florida, more than 20 percent of adults are Catholic. Trump won all three in 2016, but recent polls show Biden with modest leads in each.

"The swinging portion of the Catholic vote swings more than other voting segments—that's the target-rich segment," said Brian Burch, president of the conservative advocacy group CatholicVote.org.

Burch believes Trump appeals to these voters with his antiabortion policies and his support for "school choice" that might benefit families that prefer Catholic schools. On September 22, CatholicVote.org announced a \$9.7 million campaign targeting battleground Catholics.

Several other groups are wooing these voters, including Catholics for Trump and Catholics for Biden. The NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice launched a virtual version of its Nuns on the Bus campaign with events targeting battleground states.

"Catholics cannot be true to their faith and vote for Donald Trump in November," said Simone Campbell, NETWORK's executive director. "President Trump is doing everything in his power to divide us, while our economy and health care systems collapse under the weight of the COVID-19 pandemic."

Comparable strategies and tough talk are coming from the other side as well.

Catholics for Trump is organizing state meetups, including one in Florida featuring Frank Pavone, a Catholic priest and antiabortion activist who calls the Democrats “the party of death.”

In September, James Altman, a parish priest in La Crosse, Wisconsin, declared during a diatribe on YouTube, “You cannot be Catholic and be a Democrat.”

In Pennsylvania, where Biden lived until he was ten, Republican state representative Frank Ryan believes Trump has the edge due to Catholics embracing his positions on abortion and school choice. He said priests in his region around Harrisburg are openly suggesting that politicians who support abortion rights should be denied communion.

However, US senator Bob Casey, a rare prominent Democrat who calls himself “pro-life,” said he and many other Catholics in Pennsylvania find greater moral value in Biden’s positions on other issues, including racial justice, immigration, health care, and support for low-income families.

Such voters, he said, “have a pretty broad view of what constitutes a good Catholic.”
—Associated Press