

To: Catholics for Choice

From: GBAO

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2020 Election Night National Survey Analysis

Catholics helped lift Democrat Joe Biden to a narrow victory over Donald Trump in this election and delivered small margins for Democrats in the House and Senate. In so doing, they sent a powerful message about support for abortion rights and access to reproductive health care among U.S. Catholics today, as well as the limited role they believe U.S. bishops should play in our electoral system.

A national survey¹ of Catholic voters in the 2020 election reveals a diverse group of voters who reflect many of the political and demographic divisions driving the broader political environment in this country, including significant differences based on gender, age, and race and ethnicity. While abortion dominates much of the media narrative about the Catholic vote, it is simply not a top priority for the vast majority of Catholic voters, whose votes were driven by concerns such as the economy and jobs, health care, retirement security, and the coronavirus pandemic. To the extent that abortion does play into their vote decisions, Catholics are nearly twice as likely to vote for a candidate who supports access to safe and legal abortion care rather than a candidate who opposes abortion and wants to make it illegal. A broad majority of U.S. Catholics say abortion should be legal, and they oppose efforts to overturn *Roe v. Wade*.

Looking at the relationship between the U.S. bishops and the country's political leaders, Catholic voters overwhelmingly disagree with efforts to deny Communion and other sacraments to those who support access to legal abortion. A broad majority of Catholic voters say Catholic politicians do not have an obligation to vote the way Catholic bishops recommend, and majorities similarly say they do not place much importance on the views of U.S. bishops when it comes to their own votes for President, Senate and House, or state and local government.

On a range of policy issues related to reproductive health, Catholic voters also oppose the positions taken by U.S. bishops, with majorities saying health insurance companies should be required to offer health plans that include birth control, expressing support for in-vitro fertilization and the use of embryonic stem cells to develop new vaccines and medical treatments, and agreeing that health insurance provided to poor women by state and federal governments through Medicaid should include coverage for abortion.

¹ GBAO conducted a representative national survey of 1,000 general election voters on October 26 – November 3, 2020. All respondents self-identified as Catholic. Approximately 57 percent of interviews were completed prior to Election Day among those who voted early, with the remainder conducted on Election Day among respondents who voted that day. Interviews were conducted online via a web-based panel. Survey results are subject to a margin of error of +/- 3.1 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level.



The questions in this survey that elicited the broadest agreement across traditional partisan and demographic lines were those focused on so-called ‘religious freedom’ issues and how government should weigh the religious beliefs of employers and providers of various services versus the constitutional rights of all Americans. More than 2-in-3 Catholics come down on the side of protecting individual rights and banning discrimination in each of the following instances:

- No individual should be denied health care because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.
- Companies or other institutions should not be allowed to use the owners' religious beliefs as a reason to deny their employees or customers access to specific services.
- Employers should not be allowed to deny birth control coverage to their employees and their employees' dependents because of the employer's religious beliefs.
- Gay and lesbian couples should be allowed to adopt or foster children, and religiously-affiliated adoption agencies or foster services should not be allowed to refuse to work with these couples.
- Catholic hospitals that take taxpayer dollars should not be allowed to use religious beliefs as a reason to deny patients access to certain medical procedures and medications.
- It should be illegal for a private school or university to fire an employee for personal conduct outside of their job that violates the institution's religious teachings, such as an unmarried employee becoming pregnant or an employee being in a same-sex relationship.

Taken as a whole, the findings in this survey paint a very different picture of the Catholic vote than the one that appeared in many pre-election discussions of this diverse but strategically critical audience. It is our hope that these findings can help inform a more thoughtful examination of Catholic voters and their clear support for keeping abortion legal, expanding access to safe and affordable reproductive health care, rejecting overt political influence from U.S. bishops, and protecting Americans from discrimination in the name of religious freedom.

Election 2020

Catholic voters are clearly frustrated with the direction of the country, as 63 percent say things are off on the wrong track, compared to just 37 percent who feel things are going in the right direction.

Partisan identification among Catholic voters is evenly split (46 percent each), but Biden managed to win U.S. Catholics by 4 points in this election (51 to 47 percent) by winning the small segment of Independent Catholics by the same margin (50 to 46 percent). Trump won a small majority of white Catholics (46 to 52 percent), while Latinx Catholics went for Biden by a much larger margin (57 to 42 percent). Within the Catholic Latinx electorate, we saw a significant gender gap, similar to what was revealed in exit polls among all Latinx voters; Biden won Catholic Latinas by 24 points while winning Catholic Latinos by just 4 points.

The race for Congress was fiercely contested across the country, and the Catholic vote was similarly divided in these races, siding with the Democrats by a slim 2 points (50 to 48 percent). These down-ballot Democrats matched Biden's performance among Latinx Catholics but performed slightly worse among Independent Catholics (46 to 50 percent).

Attitudes on Abortion

Asked about the issues driving their vote decision for President this year, Catholics identified five top issues – the economy, jobs, and wages; health care; Social Security and Medicare; the coronavirus pandemic; and national security. At the other end of the spectrum, abortion ranked next to last out of the 12 issues tested, with climate change slightly lower due to its low marks among Republicans. Abortion ranked last or next to last on the list of priorities with virtually every demographic subgroup of Catholic voters.

Looking at the fundamental question of whether abortion should be legal, 57 percent of Catholic voters say it should be legal, while just 37 percent say it should be illegal. Support for legal abortion is particularly high among Latinx voters under 50 (66 percent), Latinas (63 percent), and Catholics under 40 (61 percent). While support for legal abortion is predictably highest among Democrats (75 percent), a majority of Independents (52 percent) and a large share of Republicans (42 percent) agree.

By a slightly larger margin, Catholic voters also say the U.S. Supreme Court should not overturn its *Roe v. Wade* decision – just 30 percent support such a decision while 53 percent do not. It is important to note that nearly 1-in-5 Catholics are unable to offer an opinion when asked about *Roe v. Wade* without any context, underscoring again how peripheral this issue is for many Catholic voters.

Taking yet another approach to measuring Catholic attitudes on abortion we asked respondents, regardless of their own position on the issue, if they believe deciding to have an abortion could be a morally acceptable decision. Again, a majority (52 percent) concurred, while less than 1-in-3 Catholic voters (30 percent) rejected the idea. There was a large age divide on this question, with voters under 50 (56 to 29 percent) more likely to view it as a morally acceptable decision than older voters (49 to 30 percent); among Latinx Catholics, this gap was even larger – 58 to 24 percent among those under 50 and 44 to 30 percent among older Latinx voters.

Finally, we explored the electoral impact of abortion stances among Catholic voters. A clear plurality say they are more likely to vote for a candidate who supports women having access to safe and legal abortion care (46 percent), while the remainder are split between those who are more likely to support a candidate who opposes abortion and wants to make it illegal (27 percent) and those who say the issue simply does not make a difference in their vote (22 percent). Among Independent Catholics, support for abortion remains an electoral advantage (42 percent, compared to 27 percent more likely to support abortion opponent).

The Role of U.S. Bishops

One of the reasons that abortion remains so central to coverage of the Catholic vote in the U.S., despite consistent polling showing majority support for legal abortion among Catholics, is the disconnect between Catholic voters and the Conference of Catholic Bishops. Many members of the media and public commentators continue to cling to the idea that Catholic voters are closely attuned to the teachings and dictates of U.S. bishops, but this is simply not supported by the available data. In this survey, clear majorities say they do not place significant importance in the views of Catholic bishops in the U.S. when it comes to casting their own votes for President, Congress, or state and local government.

By a margin of nearly 2-to-1, Catholic voters say politicians who are Catholic have no obligation to vote on issues the way Catholic bishops recommend (30 to 58 percent). The intensity on this measure is noteworthy, with 36 percent of Catholic voters strongly rejecting this notion compared to just 14 percent who strongly support it. Interestingly, we see a significant age gap on this measure as well, but it is older Catholics who are most likely to reject the idea that Catholic politicians have any responsibility to follow the bishops in their voting decisions – voters under 50 reject the idea by 19 points (35 to 54 percent) while those 50 and older reject it by nearly twice as much (24 to 62 percent).

We also explored the idea of U.S. bishops withholding Communion and other sacraments from Catholics who support access to legal abortion. This question garnered more consensus than any other question in the survey to this point, with just 23 percent supporting the concept compared to 66 percent who oppose it, including 53 percent who strongly oppose it. Majorities across party lines reject this proposal – 81 percent of Democrats, 64 percent of Independents, and 51 percent of Republicans.

Reproductive Health Policy Questions

Beyond efforts to overturn *Roe v. Wade* and restrict access to legal abortions, there are a number of other policy debates related to reproductive health that will face the leaders elected this week across the country. This survey tested a number of these and found consistent support for protecting access to a range of reproductive health options and rejecting efforts to use government-funded health care to discriminate against lower-income families by denying them access to abortion services.

Reproductive Health Policy Positions		
<i>Now, you will see some statements about health care and reproductive health in this country. For each one, please indicate whether you agree or disagree with that particular statement.</i>	Agree	Disagree
Health insurance companies should be required to offer health plans that include birth control.	76%	18%
We should support the use of reproductive health technologies like in vitro fertilization, or IVF – a process in which an embryo is created outside a woman's body and then implanted in her uterus – for those who need help getting pregnant.	74%	14%
We should support the development of new vaccines and medical treatments using embryonic stem cells.	66%	19%
Health insurance provided to poor women by state and federal governments through Medicaid should include coverage for abortion.	52%	41%

Religious Freedom vs. Discrimination

A final theme we chose to explore with 2020 Catholic voters is the debate over religious freedom and efforts to use religion as a rationale for employers or service providers to deny the rights of those they would choose to discriminate against. Each of the statements displayed below tests different scenarios or circumstances, but the consistently huge margins on each demonstrate a clear lesson – Catholic voters have no tolerance for using religion as a weapon to discriminate against others.

Religious Freedom and Discrimination		
<i>Next, you will see some statements about religious beliefs and individual rights. After each statement, please indicate if you agree or disagree with that statement.</i>	Strongly Agree	Total Agree
No individual should be denied health care because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.	71%	90%
Companies or other institutions should not be allowed to use the owners' religious beliefs as a reason to deny their employees or customers access to specific services.	54%	75%
Employers should not be allowed to deny birth control coverage to their employees and their employees' dependents because of the employer's religious beliefs.	51%	72%
Gay and lesbian couples should be allowed to adopt or foster children, and religiously-affiliated adoption agencies or foster services should not be allowed to refuse to work with these couples.	46%	70%
Catholic hospitals that take taxpayer dollars should not be allowed to use religious beliefs as a reason to deny patients access to certain medical procedures and medications.	45%	69%
It should be illegal for a private school or university to fire an employee for personal conduct outside of their job that violates the institution's religious teachings, such as an unmarried employee becoming pregnant or an employee being in a same-sex relationship.	44%	68%

What is most striking in this entire battery of messages is the consistency across traditional partisan and ideological divisions. While we have sought to draw attention to important distinctions between groups on other measures, it is the majority agreement across virtually every subgroup and every statement in this exercise that is most noteworthy.