

Article

The Variable “Catholic” Influence on US Presidential and Abortion Politics

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Abstract: We demonstrate that, in comparison to religious groups showing reliable, contemporary voting tendencies (e.g., white evangelical Protestants voting Republican, Jews and Muslims voting Democratic), Roman Catholics show far less consistency in supporting one major party over the other. After reviewing relevant literature Catholic public political preferences and behavior, we delve into a basic overview of the history of the Catholic Church in the United States. We then analyze historical periods when the impact of the church seems consequential, such as effects of the “Catholic vote”. We summarize scholarship and opinion surveys concerning Catholic political views and behavior over the last several decades, focusing on attitudes toward abortion in the wake of the *Dobbs* decision. We then highlight differences and similarities between Catholic rank-and-file and the church clergy and hierarchy, some of which are well known in the religion and politics literature. In sum, we find that unlike past or more contemporaneous takes on the impact of Catholics and Catholicism on politics and policy, there is no longer (if there ever was) a single, identifiable Catholic impact, even as the Catholic vote remains a demographic for which politicians compete.

Keywords: Catholics in U.S. politics; Catholic voters; abortion opinion



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1. Introduction

When it comes to religious influence on public policy in the US, it is important to appreciate a basic determination by scholars about religion itself. In a nutshell: religion’s influence is variable (see the discussion in [Djupe and Gilbert 2009](#)). Indeed, there is no empirical evidence for a monolithic or deterministic religious influence in ordering public preferences and behavior. Human behavior is much more complex than reductionist explanations of identity frameworks might suppose. Religion certainly plays a role in how people think about their society and the political policies that come with it. Identities can be quite powerful in ordering political actions and views, as partisanship continues to demonstrate ([Leege and Kellstedt 1993](#)). Yet, religious identity—even one seemingly as dominant as Roman Catholicism—does not pack the same causal punch in determining political views and behavior.

Why, then, do scholars return to religion often as a source for understanding what people think and do politically? The answer is found partially in the role religion plays sociologically from a young age. [Durkheim’s \(1915\)](#) thesis that societies use religion to establish and inculcate norms and predictable patterns of interaction makes religion a powerful imprimatur of the “normal”. Since political institutions are part of a society’s bedrock of norms and structural premises, religion plays a logical, complementary function in mediating social meaning for the public in discharging their roles as citizens. More than a century after Durkheim’s observations, however, some of the conditions on which he based the theory of religious influence are different, at least in the West. First, religion does not have exclusive control in the norm-making process. In some cases, it may have no influence or even a negative one (e.g., where non-religious people intentionally think

and behave in what they perceive are opposite to religiously informed norms). Even more fundamentally, however, religious experiences and identities are not uniform in their effects on people—even those with the same religious identity or living in the same religious community.

At issue is the communication process inherent in all religion, whereby community members adopt teachings, norms, values, and associated content. Since people are free to receive, interpret, and act on the religious content to which they are exposed in modern pluralistic societies, the lack of direct link between “religion” and political preferences or behavior is not surprising, and may have been less obvious in eras where religious institutions exercised control over the political sphere, or where religious identity was practically uniform (as in pre-Reformation Europe). The relative size and scope of religious institutions in a society offers an opportunity to consider the question of faith influence on public policy across historical eras. Arguably, the Roman Catholic Church is the best example of such a religious institution. Both the Church’s global and national (i.e., US-based) role lends itself to our consideration of religious influence on politics and public policy. As such, we use the Church as our example for this study.

Our assessment progresses along the following lines. First, we review some of the key religion and politics literature as it concerns public political preferences and behavior. Then, we delve into a basic overview of the history of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States. From there, we segue into an overview of some of the main examples of times when historians associated the church with producing political effects of note. This includes an examination of the “Catholic vote” and support for Roman Catholic Democratic presidential candidates Al Smith and John F. Kennedy. We then provide a summary of some of the scholarship and opinion surveys concerning Catholic political views and behavior over the last several decades. Given the fresh examination of Catholic political influence in the wake of the Supreme Court’s *Dobbs* decision, we examine Catholic trends on abortion politics and policy. In doing so, we distinguish between the Catholic laity and the priests and bishops leading the institution. The result is a diverse story that captures the essence of religious (i.e., Roman Catholic) influence on public policy.

2. Roman Catholic Communication and Communicants

In looking at the Roman Church’s history, recall that, for centuries, the Church commanded standing armies in defense of the Papal States and other territories. This period may be the best example of a time when the Roman Church had a direct, demonstrable impact on the political activities of the time. In addition, though Catholicism was never temporally dominant in North America, Catholic adherents did develop a strong reputation as a voting bloc concerned with specific issues, and (presumably) easily swayed in making voting decisions based on advice from party and/or church leaders. Interestingly, however, the reputation behind the “Catholic vote” came long before the positivist revolution in social science and the development of modern surveying techniques. Historians’ and press accounts of Catholic political behavior and Church influence of the time may point to consistency in political posturing. The reality is that diversity within the Church and among Catholics may have existed long before issues like reproductive rights and abortion brought this question to the fore. It is perhaps the case, though also an untestable proposition, that the lack of systematic (i.e., representative survey) data before the 1950s meant that both political and religious leaders led largely by impressions of what the public preferred. This leaves us with the Roman Catholic Church in the United States as an interesting case study of religious influence on public policy. To the extent that there is an identifiable “Catholic” political tradition or pattern of behavior, it may be one largely based on a reading of historical impressions rather than clear evidence (to say nothing of our earlier point about a lack of determinism in religion’s influence more generally).

This is also an interesting time to take up the question of Catholic influence in US politics. Simply put, Catholics, as a whole, behave differently from other religious groups. Most notable is their lack of overt consistency in party preference. Unlike white evangelical

Protestants voting Republican, and Jews and Muslims voting Democratic, Roman Catholics are the US religious group with a large political standard deviation. In other words, there is a lot of variation in “the Catholic vote”. This underscores there is no single Catholic “influence” in US politics. As we will see, even the US Catholic bishops, supposedly of like mind in their preferences, offer differing views of church teaching on policies important to the Church and its mission. There remain, however, patterns or trends within the Catholic hierarchy and among adherents that may help us make clearer sense of what Catholicism brings to the question of religious influence on public policy.

Building on [Durkheim’s \(1915\)](#) fundamental theories, scholars across disciplines recognize religion’s clear function in human existence. [Maslow \(1943\)](#), for example, includes it halfway up his hierarchy of needs. Religion speaks to people’s need for belonging. Whatever individualistic emphasis some have in their religious belief and behavior, the collective experience of living out a faith is central to the function religion plays in what [Berger \(1967\)](#) described as “plausibility structures” to guide life. [Geertz \(1973\)](#) adds to this religion’s role of offering a set of symbols and traditions (i.e., a culture) for believers to draw on. What it means to exist in living out a religious identity is almost entirely known through the interpersonal experiences one has with coreligionists. Even assuming one firmly adheres to certain belief tenets or doctrines, there is always a social component to comparing one’s actions to a cultural (i.e., social or collective) norm. This sociological interaction is critical not only to the religious experience individuals have but in understanding the diversity of perspectives that come through the exposure, adoption, and application of religious teachings. Such diversity derives from religions the basic sociological qualities and establishes the dynamic for religion’s variable influence on politics (including, at times, its decided lack of influence).

It is religion’s social component that drives diversity among adherents. Even assuming (for argument’s sake) that all adherents receive and accept the institutional instructions their faith organization offers, there will always be an interpretative component in applying these instructions to daily life. This interpretation easily becomes part and parcel of the social interactions people engage in through their family, work, avocational, civic, and political associations. Be it through following a coreligionist’s example or partaking in deliberative exercises to arrive at a conviction of what is correct thought and behavior for adherents, the innumerable paths toward acting out one’s religion through social interaction makes the presumption of uniformity a difficult one to support; and, without uniformity, political and policy influence is also in doubt.

To put it bluntly: the sheer size of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States places the burden of proof on those arguing that the institution produces political uniformity among either adherents or its offices. This is because, as [Poteete and Ostrom \(2004\)](#) summarize, homogeneity of thought and action generally declines as organization size increases. Even assuming, for the sake of argument, that the Church effectively promotes its core theological teachings across the institution, consider the following statistics when evaluating how politically homogenous Catholics might be. According to 2020 data from the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, the US church has 16,703 local parishes across 144 territorial dioceses and 32 archdioceses. In total, 24,653 diocesan priests and 18,036 permanent deacons serve these parishes. There are 41,357 religious sisters and 3801 religious brothers. The estimate of parish-connected Catholics is 67.7 million. What is more, Pew’s 2018 statistics show a relatively even geographic distribution of Catholics across the US, although the number of northeast and Midwestern Catholics is shrinking, while the percentages in the south and west increase. Ethnically, just over half of US Catholics are white, just over one-third are Latinx, and the rest are distributed across Asian, African American, and other groups. The cross-cutting political cleavages of race alone should give pause to the notion of a uniform Catholic vote. Catholicism’s distribution of nationalities, though, has been quite heterogenous for the last century and a half. This begs the question: if US Catholics are such a diverse group, how did discussion of a “Catholic vote” get started in the first place? We argue the answer lies largely in the way Catholics

were perceived by non-Catholics during the period of mass immigration that started in the 1840s.

The rise of Catholics living in the US coincided with waves of immigrants leaving poverty and other challenging conditions in Europe. French Canadian and Mexican Catholics also found America's promise of opportunity and prosperity too strong to resist. Prior to the mid-19th century, the small number of Catholics in America were of English descent and generally of considerable means. By the end of the 19th century, however, the US Catholic population became substantially more diverse—constituting 17 percent of the nation's population and holding the distinction of being the nation's largest religious denomination. From the perspective of non-Catholics watching this immigrant flow, looking at these new arrivals as a monolithic religious group may have been tempting, if for no other reason than to target these immigrants for various forms of discrimination (Jelen 2006). Indeed, social identity theory shows that people are able to cognitively segment their world into group-centered categories with relative ease (Hogg and Reid 2006). Yet, it is more likely than not that the lived religious reality of Catholics from lands ranging from Ireland to Poland was not as uniform as it appeared from the non-Catholic perspective.

At the same time, the realities of a new life in a strange land provided some degree of homogeneity in terms of the local church's role in immigrant life. From shielding parishioners from anti-Catholic bigotry to finding work to learning English to building a social network to providing local schools for adherents, local parishes and dioceses became a vital center for the new arrivals (Dierenfield 1997; Marshall 2001). The ethnic neighborhoods that developed around local parishes serving specific immigrant communities did much to solidify both a Catholic identity among parishioners and in the perceptions of non-Catholic observers. Making the influence of a Catholic identity less monolithic, though, was the reality that the vast majority of these immigrants were of the same economic class. This means the economic and political discrimination facing Catholics of this era may not have been entirely (or even mainly) about their faith, but more to do with the perceived economic or cultural threat non-Catholics feared from the immigrant class and the individual identity as blue-collar workers these immigrants (who also happened to be Roman Catholic) developed. Therefore, separating a "Catholic vote" of the period from a working class or immigrant perspective, especially in the absence of social science data, is difficult.

Historians and political scientists have uncovered enough evidence to suggest that, due to some combination of their working-class status, recent immigrant background, and/or religious identity, Catholics in the US were generally aligned with the Democratic Party for most of the 20th century (Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2011). This is seen in four examples (Hanna 1979). First was the support of working-class Catholic immigrants for the local Democratic political machines in major eastern and midwestern cities (Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, with their Republican machines, were exceptions). Second was backing Democratic Party presidential nominee and New York State governor Al Smith in the 1928 presidential election (Smith was the first Roman Catholic presidential nominee for a major party). Third was support for Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal. Fourth was the overwhelming percentage of Catholics voting for John F. Kennedy in the 1960 election.

One reason the question about Catholic political influence lingers is that Church teaching on social, economic, and political issues (i.e., what the Church refers to as Catholic Social Teaching—CST) does not easily map on to the ideological cleavages in America's two-party system. As Gray and Bendyna (2008, p. 75) observe:

The Church opposes abortion, euthanasia, cloning, embryonic stem cell research, and the death penalty and supports immigration and immigrant rights, social welfare programs for the poor, and programs to provide affordable and accessible health care and housing.

In Cochran and Cochran's (2003) discussion of CST, the scholars pinpoint the incongruity between Church teaching and American politics as starting with CST's rejection of Enlightenment thinking about individual autonomy. This individualism forms the basis of both modern liberalism and conservatism. CST, by contrast, views individual freedom in relation to a person's responsibility to work for the collective good. The complication in

understanding the modern Church's influence on policy in American politics, however, is that CST and the views on individual Catholics do not automatically converge. In fact, this lack of overlap can be expected for any group enjoying the kind of increased economic and political clout Catholics did starting in the mid-20th century. Catholic assimilation and access to economic, social, and political resources lessened the need for adherents to think and act collectively in word and deed. Access to wealth and the halls of power offers members of all groups the luxury of entertaining preference differences that would be unthinkable when facing threats based on a nominal identity. Perhaps more than any other social group in the last century, Roman Catholics are the quintessential example of a once-maligned group finding its way to societal assimilation, and, eventually, political power (Dumenil 1991; Gillis 2020). Their new status in American life exposed both Catholic parishioners and the Church hierarchy in the US to the reality that increased societal status offers opportunities for dissenting voices to be heard alongside traditional views.

The assimilation of Catholics into America's political and economic halls of power complicate consideration of the long-referenced "Catholic vote". To the extent that voters who are Roman Catholic cast ballots in US elections, there will always be a "Catholic vote" in the literal sense. What is more important is whether Catholics vote similarly enough for certain candidates or political parties for their faith identity to matter as a political force. It is instructive to look at how Catholics have voted, particularly in presidential elections. Do they vote as a monolith, reflecting core values their church inculcates? This question reminds us of Hervieu-Léger's (2009) characterization of parochial civilizations and the Catholic Church's opposition to the decided autonomy that globalization offers from religion. In the US case, such autonomy is partially reflected in a dis-unified Catholic vote for presidential candidates, and, with the exception of the presidential campaigns of John F. Kennedy in 1960 and Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964, the Catholic vote has been variable and anything but monolithic. Table 1 displays a combination of results reported in Graziano (2017, p. 90) and a compilation of poll averages by researchers at Georgetown University. While much can be gleaned from this table, we focus here on a few key patterns.

First, of the nineteen presidential elections represented, the Catholic vote was split, with a majority of Catholics voting twelve times for Democrats, six for Republicans, and one which was effectively tied. It should be noted that the percentages displayed are averages of a series of polls, including exit polls, and display some variation with other sources. For example, Table 2 in Graziano's (2017, p. 90) shows that George W. Bush won the Catholic vote over Democratic nominee and Catholic John Kerry. At the same time, the Georgetown average of polls shows that Bush and Kerry basically tied. Second, there are three Catholic candidates for president reflected in the table, all of whom were Democrats. They are John F. Kennedy, who ran and won in 1960, John Kerry, who lost in 2004, and Joe Biden, who won in 2020. Each of the three Catholics won or tied with their opponent for the Catholic vote, but only Kennedy won it handily. Third, Democrats on average harvested about 10 percent more of the Catholic vote (53.8 to 43.1 percent) over the entire range of elections represented here, though Kennedy's 80 percent in 1960 skews those results slightly. If we remove 1960 from the analysis, the Democratic advantage tightens, but only by a little (52.3 to 44.4 percent). Still, note the movement back and forth between partisanship in presidential candidates. Catholics gave most of their vote to the candidate who ultimately won the election (regardless of party) in fifteen of eighteen elections, not including the "tied" 2004 contest.

Table 1. Partisan Based Catholic Vote (Average of Polls), 1948–2020 (Catholic candidates are in bold).

ELECTION YEAR	Democratic Candidate for President	Democratic Percent of Catholic Vote	Republican Candidate for President	Republican Percent of Catholic Vote	Candidate Winning Catholic Vote
1948	Harry Truman	65	Thomas Dewey	35	Truman
1952	Adlai Stevenson	54	Dwight Eisenhower	46	Stevenson
1956	Adlai Stevenson	49	Dwight Eisenhower	52	Eisenhower
1960	John F. Kennedy	80	Richard Nixon	20	Kennedy
1964	Lyndon Johnson	78	Barry Goldwater	23	Johnson
1968	Hubert Humphrey	55	Richard Nixon	38	Humphrey
1972	George McGovern	44	Richard Nixon	55	Nixon
1976	Jimmy Carter	57	Gerald Ford	41	Carter
1980	Jimmy Carter	45	Ronald Reagan	47	Reagan
1984	Walter Mondale	42	Ronald Reagan	58	Reagan
1988	Michael Dukakis	47	George H.W. Bush	52	George H.W. Bush
1992	Bill Clinton	47	George H.W. Bush	35	Bill Clinton
1996	Bill Clinton	55	Robert Dole	35	Bill Clinton
2000	Al Gore	48	George W. Bush	49	George W. Bush
2004	John Kerry	48	George W. Bush	48	Tied
2008	Barack Obama	55	John McCain	44	Obama
2012	Barack Obama	53	Mitt Romney	45	Obama
2016	Hillary Clinton	48	Donald Trump	47	Hillary Clinton
2020	Joseph Biden	51	Donald Trump	49	Biden

When the percentages do not add up to 100, there was a third-party candidate who garnered some of the Catholic vote. 1948 is from [Graziano \(2017\)](#), Table 2, page 90. The elections 1952–2020 are from a table compiled by Georgetown University and reflect an “Average of Polls” that include Gallup, American National Election studies, Media exit polls, Associated Press/NORC, and the GSS. The original post has been taken down, but see [Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate \(2021\)](#).

We might conjecture that the Catholic vote is becoming more divided in the 21st Century as party polarization, which has been expanding since the late 20th century, continues to define American politics ([Kalmoe and Mason 2022](#)). Indeed, partisanship may subsume the Catholic vote. For example, in the thirteen elections from 1948 to 1996, the average difference between the partisan-based Catholic vote (i.e., the absolute value of the difference between the Democratic Percent of the Catholic Vote and that of the Republican) was nearly 20 percent. If we remove the two elections most likely influenced by Kennedy and his Catholicism (1960 and 1964), the absolute value of the average difference is still substantial (about 12.72 percent). In the six elections from 2000 to 2020, the difference is only about a third of that (roughly 3.8 percent). Polarization may be muting the overall effect of the Catholic vote, even though Catholics remain a key voting demographic for which candidates compete.

Looking carefully at the trends, it is instructive to examine elections both before and after the United States Supreme Court in 1973 handed down its decision in *Roe v. Wade*, legalizing abortion across the country. Generally, Democrats supported abortion rights. Republicans espoused the “pro-life” position. Examining presidential voting illuminates whether American Catholics as a group voted with or against the Church itself on the abortion issue. Indeed, when *Roe* was handed down, only the Catholic Church opposed the decision, a battle it had been fighting since 1967 ([Graziano 2017](#), p. 107). By contrast, white evangelicals, who are now amongst the most consistent “pro-life” constituencies, were largely uncommitted on the issue in the 1970s ([Lewis 2017](#)).

The average Catholic vote for the Democratic candidate in the seven elections analyzed here (1948–1972) was nearly 61 percent, but with a huge standard deviation (a measure of how spread out the individual values are from an average). That deviation is nearly 14 percent. In the twelve elections since *Roe* was decided (1976–2020), the average was almost exactly 50 percent (49.67). What does this suggest? Basically, the average Democratic share of the vote did shrink in a statistically meaningful way before and after *Roe*. Again, though, one needs to account for the abnormally high percentage of Catholic voters who cast their vote for Kennedy and, as a legacy vote, Johnson in 1964. When we do that, the difference is much smaller. After we remove 1960 and 1964 as anomalies, the average Catholic vote for Democratic candidates before *Roe* was 53.4 percent, and the average after *Roe* was 49.7 percent. That much smaller difference is not statistically significant. So, in keeping with the general trend of the polling data analyzed above, the Catholic vote did not systematically go to Democrats or Republicans, though there were enclaves, particularly in urban midwestern cities, where the Catholic vote was heavily Democratic. Measured across the country, systematic differences generally disappear. Thus, the abortion issue taken as a whole did not differ substantially in either the pre- or post-*Roe* period.

This dynamic is most clearly seen in the Church's approach to abortion. The Roman Catholic Church has consistently stated that abortion is "gravely contrary to the moral law" (*Catechism* 1994, p. 547), but the Catholic rank-and-file is decidedly split on the issue. The debates over abortion, which preceded *Roe* in 1973 and the 2022 decision that reversed *Roe* (*Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*), brought into specific relief arguments that pit philosophical questions of when life begins, and abortion as extinguishing human life, and existential questions of morality, bodily autonomy, government control, women's health, and poverty.

Catholics are not alone in weighing these questions, but they do have an immediacy that often pits many rank and file Catholics against their clergy and the Church hierarchy more generally. Many Catholics and Catholic voters are out of step with the Church hierarchy, which offers a consistent perspective on abortion, which the US bishops tie to larger strains of Catholic social teaching. As one bishop of a large midwestern diocese told us in an original interview for this article:

We believe one of the principles of Catholic social teaching is the life and dignity of the human person. The difficulty is this. We say everybody has respect and dignity, and some people want to say "however . . ." Or there's always a "but". You know . . . 'We believe in the dignity and respect of every person . . . but . . . ' and when you start down that particular mode of thinking, we start qualifying who is actually worthy of this respect and dignity. And I think the Catholic Church is unwilling to make that qualification. Whether it's a person in an inner city setting, or a person living on 'Wealthy Road' . . . do we believe in the dignity and personhood of every human life. And the economics doesn't take away from that teaching, the circumstances of the home don't take away from that teaching, and this is the rub . . . even the circumstances surrounding the conception, which is a big rub because the "but" or "however" is always what about cases of rape or incest . . . and they're difficult cases. But if we believe in the dignity of the human person, and the sanctity of human life, either we believe it or we don't. And part of the challenge is to not go down the 'however' road. And that's a challenge.

(Interview, 29 July 2022)

In understanding Catholicism's influence on public policy, it is equally important to attend to the institutional factors that mediate how the Church as an organization functions. Here, the abortion issue is again instructive. Though church officials are vastly more consistent in articulating a "pro-life" view on abortion relative to the adherent community, as we discussed above, this does not mean that Catholic leaders are in lock step in promoting the official church view.

In fact, the religion and politics and sociology of religion literature have made considerable in-roads into understanding the dynamics in play when it comes to politics and the

Catholic hierarchy. Scholars argue that the most locally visible Church elites (parish priests) are not free to act in any way they choose when it comes to representing institutional policy preferences to parishioners (Calfano et al. 2014). While bishops disagree with each other over how to apply church teachings to the political realm (Byrnes 1991), the priests are the ones who must engage with Catholic adherents on a regular basis. This means potentially altering what they say to adherents about church preferences on issues like abortion (Calfano and Oldmixon 2018). As Calfano et al. (2017) demonstrate in a field experiment on Catholic priests in the US, priests are less sympathetic in response to a female parishioner wrestling with whether a Catholic can take communion while being “pro-choice” when the parishioner brings up the different views on the issue held by bishops and adherents more generally. Like any representative of a complex organization, the findings show that priests have discretion in how they mete out Church teaching. No doubt many priests attempt to draw on their ideological and theological preferences in determining how they represent church teachings to parishioners, reflecting a similar trend among mainline Protestant clergy (Guth et al. 1997); but the extent to which priests may do so faces constraint.

This is largely because attitudes of rank-and-file Catholics tend to diverge from the Church hierarchy, and in many cases, are part and parcel of the political field of battle. In November 2021, Catholic bishops overwhelmingly passed a directive that appears to let individual bishops and even individual priests to deny Holy Communion to politicians whom they perceive are at variance with the church’s position on abortion (Vann 2021). While the directive did not name any politicians directly, it was largely thought to be aimed at politicians such as President Joe Biden and former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi; but the public did not see it that way. For example, when asked if Biden should be allowed to receive communion, fully two-thirds (67 percent) said that he should (Pew Research Center 2021). That has not stopped others from imposing bans. Pelosi has been banned from receiving communion in at least four dioceses (Jenkins 2022) though she received it in the Vatican in late June 2022 (Pitrelli and Wang 2022). Yet, lest the Church be viewed as an institution without any sense of restraint in how it presents its “pro-life” perspective, the Church’s November 2022 laicization of Frank Pavone—long known for leading the Priests for Life organization—reminds us that the bishops are willing to mete out discipline to priests whose actions, even in tandem with Church teachings, become too extreme for the episcopacy. Among other charges against him, Pavone was accused of using portions of an aborted fetus in his video appeals and in proximity to the altar. The bishops also chastened Pavone for statements equating voting for the Democratic Party as sinful (Colton 2022). This action stands in contrast to the right-wing activism across the global Church we referenced above, and only adds to the complex political picture of Roman Catholicism.

These differences within Catholicism, even between bishop and priests on the church’s core political issue, are reminiscent of Gramsci’s observations of the Catholic Church a century ago. Though using Italian Catholicism as his backdrop, Antonio Gramsci’s view of the institution resonates with modern distinctions in the US Church

Every religion, even Catholicism (in fact, especially Catholicism, precisely because of its efforts to remain united superficially, and not to split up into national churches and social strata), is in reality a multiplicity of distinct and often contradictory religions: there is a religion of the *petit bourgeoisie* and city workers, a women’s Catholicism, and an intellectual’s Catholicism equally varied and disconnected (as translated and quoted in Forlenza 2021, p. 46).

3. Catholic Political Attitudes toward Abortion

The Pavone and denial of Holy Communion episodes underscore that abortion has long been the defining political issue for the Roman Catholic Church in American politics (Byrnes 1992). This perspective was reinforced by the Bishop of a large midwestern diocese, who said, “I was there and I heard it from the Holy Father’s mouth because it was on our every seven-year visit, when Archbishop Bowman from Kansas City, Kansas, brought up that issue, and I heard the Holy Father say, in his broken English, that abortion is the

preeminent issue (Interview, 29 July 2022). While some Church leaders might prefer to focus almost entirely on abortion as the Church's political *raison d'être*, it was US Cardinal Joseph Bernadin who is best remembered for his articulation of what became known as the "seamless garment" view of Catholicism's approach to political issues and policy influence. As quoted in Byrnes (1991, p. 17), Bernadin argued:

I am convinced that the pro-life position of the church must be developed in terms of a comprehensive and consistent ethic of life. . . . The principle which structures both scars, war and abortion, needs to be upheld in both places. It cannot be successfully sustained on one count and simultaneously eroded in a similar situation. . . . I contend the viability of the principle depends on the consistency of its application.

Taken in the context of the Cardinal's views, the "seamless garment" is not a contradiction to Church views on abortion; but it does promote focus on a wider array of policy issues that politically conservative Catholics may prefer to ignore, and it is the conservative wing of Catholicism globally that some scholars see as having the most pronounced, activist political stance (even to the point of support political violence in support of ideologically aligned governments—see Py 2021). What Bernadin advocated is consistency in both application of the "ethic of life" across issues and an elevation of other core political concerns for Catholics in the policy sphere. Perhaps because of this desire for consistency, or in spite of it, Catholic adherents are hardly of one mind on the salient political issues defining American politics (abortion being perhaps the most emotionally volatile). When Pope Francis was installed in March 2013, the world began to track the direction and path the new Pope would take. Many saw him as a more liberal and progressive pontiff than Pope Benedict, his immediate predecessor. Some were dissatisfied, though, with the continued steadfast opposition to abortion.

Francis was more progressive than many of his predecessors in several ways. For example, in November 2016, during what he ordained as the "Year of Mercy," he extended indefinitely the right of priests to forgive abortions. Previously, that right was largely reserved to those in the hierarchy, such as bishops, but his proclamation paved the way for priests to do so as well. While this was not universally greeted with open arms, it did further Francis's overarching goal to make the Church more forgiving and open (Hume et al. 2016). Yet, while abortion is closely tied to Church teaching, many Catholics have long held pro-choice views. In fact, studies by Pew Research in 2019 and again in 2022 showed that Catholics as a whole tend to exhibit attitudes toward abortion not unlike the rest of the population (Fahmy 2020; Smith 2022). We summarize some pertinent statistics in Table 2.

Those studies show, for example, that 61 percent of U.S. adults believe abortion should be legal in all or most cases, while 38 percent held that it should be illegal in all or most cases. Similarly, 56 percent of Catholics favored legalization in all or most circumstances. In fact, more than three-quarters of Catholics believe that abortion should be legal in at least some circumstances. Meanwhile, 70 percent (including 49 percent of Catholics who attend church once a week or more) believe that abortion should be legal if the life of the mother is in jeopardy, 66 percent support legal abortion in cases of rape (17 percent say illegal), and 50 percent say it should be legal if the baby is likely to be born with serious health or developmental issues. Far fewer say it should be illegal. For example, only 21 percent say it should be illegal with the rest answering that "it depends".

The 2019 survey juxtaposes Catholic attitudes with Protestants. Whereas 56 percent of Catholics favored legal abortions in some or all circumstances, only 43 percent of Protestants did so, with white Evangelical protestants the least likely group to favor some form of legalized abortions (20 percent). Non-Evangelical Protestants were similar to Catholics (60 percent). As might be expected, 83 percent of the religiously unaffiliated favored legalization.

Table 2. US Views on Abortion by Political Party and Catholic Identity.

Population	Abortion Should Be	Percent Agreeing
All U.S. Catholics	Legal in all or most cases	56
Catholics who attend Mass at least once per week	Legal in all or most cases	30
All U.S. Adults	Legal in all or most cases	61
All U.S. Catholics	Legal if life or health of the woman is in danger	69
Catholics who attend Mass at least once per week	Legal if life or health of the woman is in danger	49
Catholics who attend Mass less than once per week	Legal if life or health of the woman is in danger	76
All U.S. Adults	Legal if life or health of the woman is in danger	73
Partisanship		
Catholics who are or lean Republican	Legal in all or most cases	39
Catholics who are or lean Democrat	Legal in all or most cases	73
Non-Catholics who are or lean Republican	Legal in all or most cases	37
Non-Catholics who are or lean Democrat	Legal in all or most cases	82
Catholics who are or lean Republican	Legal if life or health of the woman is in danger	61
Catholics who are or lean Democrat	Legal if life or health of the woman is in danger	78
Non-Catholics who are or lean Republican	Legal if life or health of the woman is in danger	62
Non-Catholics who are or lean Democrat	Legal if life or health of the woman is in danger	85

Source: Adapted from [Smith \(2022\)](#).

It is not enough just to look at denomination, though. Religiosity (measured as the frequency with which one attends church services) plays a major role in determining attitudes among those who religiously affiliate. In total, 68 percent of Catholics who attend Mass at least once a week oppose abortion in most or all circumstances. Somewhat surprising, though, is that nearly one in three Catholics who attend Mass at least once a week feel abortion should be legal in all (4 percent) or most (26 percent) circumstances.

Partisan polarization also plays a role, perhaps even greater than religion. Nearly three-quarters (73 percent) of Democrat/Democrat-leaning Catholics support abortion rights, while 39 percent of Republican/Republican-leaners do. This largely tracks with partisan attitudes in general. Still, as Pew notes, there is a fair amount of dissent not only across but within partisan Catholic groups. Roughly one in four Democratic-leaners oppose abortion rights, while Republican Catholics are split 60–39.

How salient is the issue? That is, how much does abortion influence an individual's voting decision? The 2019 survey provides some answers. In total, 38 percent of the general population say abortion is "very important" in formulating their voting decision. Catholic numbers are essentially identical, with 39 percent saying the issue is very important in their vote. Indeed, two-thirds of Catholics felt that *Roe* should not be overturned at all.

Finally, and perhaps most interesting of all, is that while a majority of Catholics feel abortion is immoral (57 percent), nearly two-thirds feel it should remain legal. This is where the most striking juxtaposition comes in and, while Pew did not necessarily dig to find out why, it is here that the abortion legality/morality question is most likely confronted by other concerns, such as bodily autonomy, socio-economic status, and the like.¹

An equally important part of this consideration is that how observers, especially researchers, conceive of the abortion issue in measuring opinion may be ripe for a reassessment. As Steven Krueger, head of the organization Catholic Democrats, told us for this article, if religion is a source of complex (and perhaps inconsistent) views on policy issues, the measurement of said views for social science research should account for this diversity. For Krueger, however, the approach to understanding what the public, including Catholics, believe about abortion through survey measures often misses the mark.

Public opinion on abortion is more nuanced than opinion surveys have historically measured and must be interpreted with caution and care. For example, asking someone if they are pro-choice or pro-life does not allow them to share with the pollster the degree to which they have an overlapping identity of being pro-choice or pro-life to varying degrees.

An overlap in views on an issue so often characterized in binary, oppositional terms may appear on the surface to not coincide with how people, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, think about the issue. Krueger cited a 2011 survey by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) to elaborate on his perspective.

Catholic Democrats obtained PRRI's dataset and analyzed it for overlapping identities for a number of demographic groups. Our analysis shows that majorities of both all US adults and Catholics say that the terms "pro-choice" and "pro-life" describe them "very well" or "somewhat well. While these numbers have likely moved, this portrays a very different, more nuanced picture of the American public before the *Dobbs* decision. This analysis is a cautionary tale that it is prudent to look for the nuance in data even in today's more volatile, polarized environment.

Krueger is correct that this overlap is a measurement issue that deserves greater attention for the insights it may generate about a litany of issues for which the public holds competing views contemporaneously. At the same time, and as our examination here shows more broadly, there is much more about our understanding of the Roman Catholic Church and its political influence that needs additional focus.

Taken as a whole, the material we have highlighted suggests caution when it comes to proposing a clear sense of what Roman Catholicism means as a public or policy influence. Though there are Catholic adherents who think and act in lockstep with dominant representations of Church teachings on abortion (as meted through the USCCB), there are as many, if not more, who diverge from this representation in ordering their political preferences and behavior on the issue. This is exactly what we should expect from an institution that is both large and many of its members affluent. While the expectation of the Catholic Church as a political force in American politics may be the stuff of history, this does not mean that the millions of Roman Catholics whose votes are at least partially determined by their religious identity have no political consequence. At the same time, and reflecting Gramsci's view of the Church, we are reminded that the institution itself has varied internal constituencies and wings. This makes any type of deterministic "Catholic" influence on US presidential and abortion politics not be so easy to predict a priori. Given the distinction between the sacred and secular in modern life, this is perhaps what we should expect of religion and its institutions. Yet, it is not always an easy mindset to adopt given the long-standing popular conceptions of a "Catholic" vote in America.

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Note

- ¹ While we have examined attitudes toward abortion in-depth, similar trends showing Catholic rank-and-file being generally at odds with Church hierarchy are present in other areas of Catholic social doctrine, such as same-sex marriage. For example, a Pew survey found that 61 percent of U.S. Catholics think that same-sex couples should be allowed to legally marry, and 76 percent assert that same-sex marriage should be accepted by society. See [Diamant \(2020\)](#). For an analysis of attitudes toward capital punishment, see [Bjarnason and Welch \(2004\)](#).

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