



## **US Bishops and the January 6th Capitol Attack on Democracy**

*\*This article was written by Research Assistant [Adam Fefer](#).*

This caselet is about US Catholic bishops' responses to the January 6th Capitol attack. Why did some bishops denounce the attack as anti-democratic while others merely called for peace or stayed quiet? On the one hand, Catholic teaching on the sanctity and protection of life places bishops on the traditionalist side of issues like abortion and physician-assisted suicide. On the other hand, Catholic social and economic teaching places bishops on the progressive side of issues like universal healthcare, the living wage, debt reduction for developing nations, and immigration (Fichter et al. 2019). Bishops focused on so-called "life issues" (especially abortion) seem to have been less likely to view the attack as anti-democratic. By contrast, bishops who take a broader "seamless garment" approach to Catholic social and economic teaching seem to have been more likely to take a strong stand against the attack.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) occupies a unique role in American religion: no other denomination has an authoritative, ecclesiastical body like it. The temporal focus of this caselet is mostly January 2021, the month where many bishops issued condemnations of the attacks and of Donald Trump's incendiary behavior. The geographical focus is largely on archdioceses of the most populous US cities. The conclusion offers other examples of Catholic political activity that are relevant to pro-democracy organizing.

### **I. Catholics' Right Turn and Persistent Divisions**

The January 6th attack exemplified the US' increasing democratic backsliding, especially since 2016 (Williamson 2023). US backsliding is largely a Republican Party-led phenomenon. This is true nationally, where leaders like Donald Trump have undermined the integrity of elections and checks on executive power. It is also true sub-nationally, where Republican-led state legislatures have furthered voter suppression and racial gerrymandering (Grumbach 2022).

The US Catholic clergy and laity are divided on partisan lines (Audi & Rocca 2015). Roughly 48% of Catholic voters self-describe as Republican while 47% self-describe as Democrats (Smith 2020). These divisions are relatively new, tracing to the late 20th century. In the early 20th century, by contrast, Catholics supported the Democratic Party. For example, between 70-80% of Catholics voted for FDR in 1936 (Rozell 2022, Catholic University of America 2023). As a predominantly immigrant, working class bloc, Catholics were key beneficiaries of FDR's New Deal (McAndrews 2021). Official Catholic doctrine is also progressive on many issues: support for a strong welfare state and immigration as well as opposition to the death penalty and nuclear deterrence (Feldman 2006). During the early 20th century, the Catholic clergy was

relatively apolitical; parish-specific issues like education and spiritual guidance dominated the Catholic agenda (Sammon 2008).

By the mid-twentieth century, Catholics had more fully integrated into American society and the middle class (Massa 2021). These trends were exemplified by JFK's 1960 presidential campaign and the decline of overt anti-Catholicism. During this time, Catholic clergy and their upwardly mobile laity became more politically engaged (McAndrews 2021). For example, liberal Catholics spoke out against the Vietnam War and in favor of civil rights. Meanwhile, an increasingly vocal conservative clergy focused on issues of perceived moral decline, like abortion and contraception.

The 1973 Roe v. Wade Supreme Court decision was a landmark in US Catholic history (Sammon 2008). Catholic clergy and laity mobilized vigorously against the decision. In doing so, Catholics found common ground with Evangelical Christians in their mutual hostility toward abortion, school desegregation, LGBTQ+ rights, and feminism. Since then, conservative Catholic activists have worked to make abortion a “non-negotiable” part of Catholic political identification. This is especially the case among white, church-going Catholics (Feldman 2006). These changes upended previous patterns of Catholic support. For example, Reagan obtained between 54-61% of the Catholic vote in his 1984 reelection campaign (Prendergast 1999). Abortion has become a central part of Catholic politics.

Despite being split on partisan lines, Catholic majorities have consistently supported winning presidential candidates. This includes both Reagan campaigns, both Bill Clinton campaigns, and both Obama campaigns. However, these patterns break down when examining ethnicity, religiosity, and income (Gray & Bendyna 2008). For example, despite Donald Trump winning the Catholic vote, Hispanic Catholics supported Hilary Clinton by a margin of 67-26 (Martinez & Smith 2016). The Trump presidency energized many liberal Catholics, who detested his “Muslim travel ban” and anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric (Barb 2022). However, progressive Catholic interests are relatively marginalized in institutions like USCCB.

## **II. The January 6th Campaign and Catholic Bishops' Tactics**

The 2020 election campaign witnessed “unprecedented levels” of polarization among Catholic bishops and the US population writ large (Gayte 2022, 113). This culminated in the January 6th attack, which exemplified many Republican elites' disdain for a key tenet of democracy, namely that parties accept election results (Williamson 2023).

The bishops' pro-democracy responses to January 6th consisted of multiple tactics. These included [signed public statements](#), [declarations by organizations and institutions](#), [letters of opposition or support](#), and interviews with journalists.

It should first be noted that Catholic leaders and institutions outside of USCCB also spoke out against the January 6th attack. For example, Father James Martin wrote an op-ed denouncing the attack, while Catholic laity held commemorative vigils for January 6th a year later (Martin 2021, Jenkins 2022). The Leadership Conference of Women Religious (2021) released a newsletter denouncing the attacks. And the Catholic lobby NETWORK also issued a response (2021) to the

“violent effort by extremists to overthrow the United States government.” Finally, Catholic media including *America Magazine* (2021) and *National Catholic Reporter* (2021) also denounced the attacks.

We can begin our analysis of bishops with Los Angeles Archbishop José H. Gomez, also USCCB’s president. Gomez expressed that “peaceful transition of power is one of the hallmarks of this great nation. In this troubling moment, we must recommit ourselves to the values and principles of our democracy” (USCCB 2021a). Gomez’s response was noteworthy given his statements both before and after January 6, 2021. For example, on January 20, Gomez authored a letter stating, “that our new President [Biden] has pledged to pursue certain policies [related to abortion] that would advance moral evils and threaten human life and dignity” (USCCB 2021b). Gomez’s letter furthered divisions among US bishops. For example, Chicago’s Cardinal Blase J. Cupich authored his own letter in response, which called Gomez’s statement “ill-considered” and issued without other bishops’ prior consultation (White 2021). This exchange highlights the centrality of abortion politics in USCCB.

In Chicago, Cardinal Cupich lamented “the deliberate erosion of the norms of our system of government [and] violence in the service of a falsehood,” prayed for “the peaceful and orderly transition of power” and implored elected officials to “recognize threats to democracy, no matter their source” (Archdiocese of Chicago 2021). Philadelphia’s Archbishop Nelson J. Perez affirmed that “Regardless of political affiliation, we are united by democracy,” expressing his gratitude to those who “worked through a dark day in our history to ensure the peaceful transition of power” (Archdiocese of Philadelphia 2021). And in one of the most forceful statements, San Diego’s Bishop (now Cardinal) Robert McElroy said “We must be clear in identifying this moment as the logical trajectory of the last four years of President Trump’s leadership of our country...we have stood by without giving greater witness to the terrible danger that leadership rooted in division brings to a democratic society” (White 2021).

Other archbishops’ responses are noteworthy for their omissions. For example, New York’s Cardinal Timothy Dolan condemned “the man [Trump] who should be leading us...[for] stoking these flames” (Lavenburg 2021). Although Dolan omitted mention of the attack on democracy, his direct criticism of Trump was surprising in light of his behavior during the 2020 campaign. Indeed, Dolan had called Trump a great friend, “salute[d] Trump’s leadership” on Fox News, and gave a prayer at the 2020 Republican National convention (White 2020, Warren Davis 2020).

In addition to Dolan, San Antonio’s Archbishop Gustavo García-Siller, Dallas’ Bishop Edward J. Burns, and the Diocese of Austin all tweeted for “peace” without explicitly mentioning the attack on democracy (Gledhill 2021, Guidos 2021). Meanwhile, Houston’s Cardinal Daniel DiNardo and Phoenix’s Bishop Thomas Olmsted were noteworthy for their silence, unsurprising in light of their conservative views on social issues. These omissions cohere with Reese’s (2020) finding that across 160 USCCB press releases between 2019-20, bishops were unlikely to criticize Trump by name and instead make references to his “administration.”

What patterns can we glean from these varied responses? Consider first the bishops who diagnosed January 6th as an attack on democracy. One thing that stands out is their broad

political agendas that encompass more than just abortion. For example, both Bishop McElroy and Cardinal Cupich have been strong advocates for immigration, anti-poverty, and the environment, lamenting the church's narrow focus on abortion (O'Loughlin 2015). Archbishops Perez and Gomez also have strong records on immigration and poverty, although they seem content with the USCCB's prioritization of abortion (Gayte 2022). Looking at the neutral or silent responses, one finds bishops who are more singularly focused on abortion, including Cardinal DiNardo (Reese 2019).

### **III. Beyond USCCB and January 6<sup>th</sup>**

Looking beyond USCCB and January 6, there are several domains of Catholic political activity that may be relevant to pro-democracy organizing. To begin, bishops and parishioners have criticized prominent Catholic politicians with anti-democratic sympathies. Ron DeSantis in Florida and Greg Abbot in Texas have faced Catholic backlash, albeit more for their stances on immigration and capital punishment (Scanlon 2023, Guidos 2022, Nowlin 2020). It is crucial that Catholic organizers recognize the threats DeSantis and Abbot pose to democratic practices such as voting rights and lawful protests (ACLU 2023, 2024).

A second domain is higher education, where Catholic leaders at universities like Notre Dame, Fordham, and Villanova have denounced Donald Trump's immigration ban and racist rhetoric (Jenkins 2020). As with Catholic governors, university leaders could go further by identifying Trump's threat to democracy. Santa Clara University's Markkula Center for Applied Ethics (2021) was exemplary in this respect, providing a host of analyses that linked the January 6th attack to narrow self-interest, charismatic demagoguery, and disinformation.

Finally, Catholic podcasts have become important forums for articulating pro-democracy agendas and shaping parishioners' beliefs via [digital video and audio art](#). For example, *The Commonweal Podcast* and *Just Politics* have broadcast episodes entitled "Should Catholics Promote Democracy?" and "Actual Strategies for Saving Democracy," respectively. NETWORK, a Catholic lobby for social justice, has sponsored a three-part "[White Supremacy and American Christianity](#)" series. Organizing via podcasts and universities may help reach youth voters, a key demographic, yet one that is more religiously disengaged.

### **IV. The Future of Pro-Democracy Catholic Politics**

The USCCB's right-wing orientation that prioritizes abortion may generate pessimism that Catholics can be a pillar of democracy. However, there are several sources of optimism. First, Catholics are more liberal than Evangelicals --and many mainline Protestants-- on issues like immigration, affirmative action, and social welfare (Sammon 2008). Relatedly, the Catholic church is among the US' most racially integrated and diverse Christian denominations (Lipka 2015). This cluster of issues may serve to push Catholics toward politicians who emphasize inclusive, multiracial democracy.

A second reason for optimism is that Catholics are a key swing constituency. Because official church doctrine pushes them in opposite political directions, strategic political parties cannot expect unwavering Catholic support. In addition, Catholic voters are concentrated in midwestern

swing states. That Donald Trump courted fringe Catholic elites --like the conspiracist Carlo Maria Viganò-- during his 2020 campaign may serve to further push Catholics away from leaders who propagate conspiracies about elections (Anti-Defamation League 2023).

Finally, and concerning bishops specifically, Pope Francis appointed many bishops who wish to broaden USCCB's agenda and prioritize social and economic issues (Allen 2016). Although these bishops currently constitute less than a quarter of the USCCB, they have been outspoken in attempting to change the conference's priorities. Especially in the post-Roe environment, many USCCB bishops have taken a conservative hard line on issues like trans rights and the religious liberty to discriminate. So long as such issues continue to direct the conference's agenda, many bishops and parishioners may continue to support anti-democratic politicians.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Catholicism is a very hierarchical denomination. How might bishops best use these hierarchies to engage priests and deacons in pro-democracy activity?
2. In addition to abortion, some Catholic parishioners prioritize "culture war" issues (e.g., related gender and racial identities) over issues relating to US democracy. How might these priorities be reversed?
3. How might Catholic organizations educate more Catholics to consider issues beyond abortion when deciding who to vote for at the local, state, and national level?

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