



DEMOCRACY CORPS

C A R V I L L E ♦ G R E E N B E R G

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Conflicted Catholic Conservative Republicans *Report from Trump-GOP project focus groups*

One-fifth of Republicans are conservative or observant Catholics and look like the history of industrialized America that took pro-life, socially conservative, patriotic Catholics into the Republican Party, particularly in the Midwest and Northeast. That is why we conducted one of our focus groups for the Trump-GOP project among Catholic conservative men from Macomb County, Michigan.¹ The participants reflected that history: seven-in-ten were 50 or older, making them the oldest voters in the GOP base, and they held traditional blue color jobs in the auto-industry, mechanics, and construction.

Though they are Republicans, Catholic conservatives are decidedly economic populists, which is where they stand out from all other parts of the GOP base. They believe that this is an economy where jobs don't pay like in the past, that CEOs are greedy, and that trade agreements are killing American jobs. They are not yet conflicted between their economic populism and Trump because they cheer his moves on trade and how he is pushing for companies to build plants in America. They do not hear anything from the Democrats on economic issues. They feel at home with the GOP because Trump's economic nationalism is important for them, and they are socially conservative on abortion.

How might that be different if the GOP leader were not an economic nationalist chiding US companies or if the Democratic leader were an economic populist and critical of US corporations?

The Catholics are sharply fractured between what we call the *Fox News* Catholics and the Pope Francis Catholics. That division is real and plays out on immigration, multiculturalism, guns, and climate change. Half of the Catholic conservatives in this group were strong supporters of Donald Trump: they reacted with enthusiasm to his rallies and embraced the *Fox News* facts on issue after issue in his defense. Immigration was the top issue for these Catholic conservatives and they had some of the nastiest things to say about immigrants, were uncomfortable with multiculturalism, and found ways to defend the child separation policy. We had to hold these *Fox News* Catholics back when they disagreed with others in our group, reflecting their motivation to defend Trump in 2018 and beyond.

¹ *Democracy Corps* conducted a focus group of Republicans and Republican-leaning independent Catholic conservative and observant Catholic men who voted for Trump in 2016 from Macomb County on July 11, 2018.



The Pope Francis Catholics, on the other hand, did not think Trump was a good role model, believed he was dividing the country, and were open to centrist compromise on issues like immigration, the environment, and gun control. They seriously contemplated the worst-case scenario from the Mueller investigation and raised punishing President Trump or his campaign if appropriate.

With the importance of their pro-life position and President Trump addressing the trade issue, none of these voters entertained voting for Democrats in 2018, but many felt less motivated to keep Democrats out of power and to defend Donald Trump. In 2020, half said they would be open to voting for a third-party challenger if someone like John Kasich, who better reflects their Catholic values, ran against the president.

Socially conservative, the Supreme Court, and standing up for the flag

Catholic conservatives call the GOP home because of their social conservative views on issues like abortion and gay marriage and their deep patriotism. That gives them good reasons for supporting Donald Trump, in addition to the strong macro-economy and his efforts to get more companies to grow factories in the US.

These Catholic conservatives were excited that Donald Trump was getting the chance to appoint a second Supreme Court Justice because others were “trying to get rid of God.” But with the Kennedy vacancy, “the conservatives are in charge, [and] chances are they’re going to get their way” on cases like *Roe v. Wade*, which would be “a good thing.” They are also “against” Planned Parenthood because it “is primarily abortions.”

Catholic conservatives also value displays of patriotism and respect for the troops. Like Donald Trump, they were angry at *NFL* players for kneeling during the national anthem.

How much money are all these players getting paid to play a sport and make a living off of that. And then – with disregarding all the life’s that have been lost during all the wars, and all the conflicts. It’s an insult.

Not taking a knee is kind of like disrespecting the unity that the whole National Anthem is supposed to bring to the stadium and everybody that’s listening or watching the whole game or whatever, right?

But you’re spitting in the face of all our veterans, everybody that fought for you to get that right.

The thing that I take from that is how important it is for God, country, and liberty to be prevalent in the United States. And people that disrespect our flag, I have no respect for.

A major reason Catholics said they liked Trump was because he was “pro-America” and “patriotic.”



Many also considered him a better representative for American on the world stage than President Obama. While Obama “made us look weak” and bowed to foreign leaders “like we were beneath them,” Trump projects strength and pride. Another man argued that Trump’s business experience gave him an advantage dealing with foreign affairs: “I think Trump runs it more on a global level rather than Obama just running it on the U. S. level. Trump's got the business experience, the connections world-wide, Obama didn't.” In fact, what they liked most of all about Donald Trump was that he was “business-minded” and under him the “economy is better.”

When it comes to gay marriage, it matters a lot for some, but most were conscious things had changed. One said he was “not for it” and another said tepidly, “I don’t really support it,” but the rest had come to accept it. Some of them told stories of family members or friends coming out to illustrate how their opinions had evolved on this issue. “I did not support it whatsoever until my older brother came out,” explained one man, “and that showed a whole different light, yeah.”

Economic populism

The Catholic conservatives pushed back when we played a video of Donald Trump touting the job growth, stock market gains, and tax cuts at a campaign rally, saying these were not good paying jobs and that jobs don’t pay what they used to pay.

Some of the stuff is very positive. Speaking with [North] Korea is a fantastic achievement. 300,000 jobs back, though – if you're out there looking for jobs, what you're finding are not very good-paying jobs. And that's part of the problem. Those are part of the numbers and there are jobs out there that younger people need to start off with. But I was laid off from a good job eight years ago, and the jobs and the stuff that's coming back is a lot of the jobs that I was finding. They were \$9, \$10 an hour, and that was with zero benefits. And that's where a lot of those numbers are coming from.

They sounded like voters responding to videos of President Obama talking about the drop in the unemployment rate and saving the auto-industry back during the recovery.

They focused on wages and the cost of living, especially the cost of insurance.

I'm concerned with the costs of living as opposed to the wage increases. I just think it's getting way too out of hand. Back in the 80s, \$4 got you so much more than what 12 dollars nowadays will get you. And there's so much more back then. I was talking to my mother about this the other week. We didn't – they didn't have to deal with high water bills, high utilities, cell phones, multiple cell phone bills, the higher car insurance. Just on and on and on. We'll bundle for internet and cable – it's just how it stacks up.

Just insurance in general, car insurance. We have the highest rates of any state in the union.

Health insurance is the same.



They said explicitly that they had not received pay raises or started higher paying jobs.

When they heard the phrase “CEOs of large companies,” they blurted out that they are “very greedy” and receive “outrageous” bonuses, even when they run their companies into bankruptcy. One man recalled in detail the employment history and compensation of Bob Nardelli from *GM* to *Home Depot* to *Chrysler*, bewildered how someone could fail up so spectacularly.

When it came to trade, they said it was “time for negotiations” of NAFTA, which was “the biggest mistake out of the Clinton Administration.” They were glad that Trump was taking on this task.

The *Fox News* and Pope Francis factions

The Catholic conservatives are distinctly Catholic. Their pro-life stance has taken them on this journey with the GOP, and nothing happening now pulls them off. Nonetheless, they respond like Catholics on the role of government and regulations.

They talked easily about the need for regulations to achieve greater public safety, especially when it came to the environment. Concern for the environment and the duty to be good stewards of the environment were raised early in the evening.

I think our greatest threat is potentially the environment. If we're not careful with it, and if you don't protect the environment, then you don't have life on the planet. So it is a vitally important topic. So you gotta protect the trees and the water and the things that you actually need to exist on this planet. And without that, it's the end of mankind.

Most of these Catholic conservatives were also worried about the threat of gun violence and accepted gun regulations. Specifically, they agreed that “there should be limitations on people that haven't been scrutinized property not having [guns] accessible” and that there should be limits on the types of weapons people can purchase because “there's no need for an AK-47.”

Finally, they expressed great concern about the level of social division in the country. The resulting partisan polarization has seeped down to their communities, workplaces, social media feeds, and even their families.

While the group was united by an underlying Catholicism that deplored divisiveness and welcomed regulation that protected the environment and the world, they were divided along “*Fox News*” and “Pope Francis” lines and argued out their differences bravely.

Half praised Donald Trump for fighting back against the liberal Democrats attacking their values. They were the most enthusiastic about Donald Trump and his policies. They sounded like a GOP where Trump and *Fox News* are the defining dimension. This bloc did not just express positive views of *Fox News*, but also had *Fox*-crafted talking points ready when they needed to come to Trump's defense on everything from the Mueller investigation and immigration to Trump's treatment of women and kneeling *NFL* athletes. They were the ones that said the ugliest things



about immigrants and people of different races and religions. They did not just disagree with Democrats and President Obama, they said they were evil: “I think that the Obama Administration that was, it was the devil kind of party.”

Half believed both sides of the aisle were at fault for the conflict in the country and wished President Trump would be more respectful and less divisive. The “Pope Francis” Catholics condemned Trump for his treatment of women, wanted accountability if the Mueller investigation produced proof that Trump and his campaign team broke the law, and pushed back on issues like immigration and multiculturalism. Because the *Fox-News* Catholics were eager to contest them on all these points, it took a lot of courage for them to speak up about these things.

The argument over immigration & multiculturalism. For many Catholic conservatives, Trump getting tough on immigration was a major reason for supporting him and one of the best things about his presidency. This was the only group where people complained immigrants were unfair competition to American contractors and workers for jobs. “Statistically, they go get jobs we don't get, but it's stereotyping that they will work for less wages,” said one man who “just got outbid out of a roof deal a week ago because of Mexican undocumented people did the roof \$1,000 cheaper, but they wanted to use my workman's comp because they didn't have it.” Several had read a story on social media that “refugees get funding for starting businesses here in the U.S.,” and complained, “us Americans that already live here, born and raised here, don't get the opportunity.” That is one reason it was so important to them that immigrants come here legally:

There's paperwork and we know about some of them. The other ones, we have no idea about. There's a big difference.

And they take jobs away from us. That's just one piece of it, and create crimes and other things.

But legal immigration, the child-separation policy, and multiculturalism were flashpoints in these groups. The “*Fox News*” Catholic conservatives were uncomfortable with the growing diversity in the country, wanted less immigration period, and repeated the *Fox* lines about child separation. They are responsible for most of the ugliest quotes about immigrants and people of different races and faiths quoted in this memo. One man explained that Colin Kaepernick's girlfriend had instructed him to kneel during the national anthem, and if you do your research and “find out the nationality she is, she's Muslim.”

But the “Pope Francis” Catholics pushed back to defend legal immigrants, a vision of a multicultural America as a country of immigrants, and even advocate against Trump's child-separation policy. When asked about the threats facing our country, one of these men said we were threatened by “Too much immigration” and suggested we “export them all”; he immediately received push back from another man who said, “Illegal immigration. Immigration is good. We're [a country founded on] immigration.”

The separated families were top of mind for these Trump-conflicted Catholics: “Everybody's concern[ed] with the families being torn apart and the children not being with their maternal



parents and being displaced and the concern over how they're gonna resolve it.” After we played them a video of a Catholic bishop arguing against the policy on religious grounds, the two factions sparred over whether it was moral to divide children at the border from their parents or not:

There is a gray area with that, because you let them break the law. Other people are going to see that it's OK to break the law.

I mean, most people are humane. So, I'm sure these people at the border that are separating these families are doing the best they can.

Well they didn't just decide to do this. And you knew – and they knew they were coming over here that there was a chance that this was going to happen.

They're taking them until they know what's going on and these parents are, do they have any kind of diseases, stuff like that.

I totally understand what he was coming across with. And I consider it kidnapping. You know, to take a child a way from a mother or father whoever and put them somewhere where they're isolated away from their parents. That's just cruelty. I mean, the parents don't know where the kids are. The kids are crying because they don't know where the parents are. And like I say it's, if you did it it'd be kidnapping.

Well they do it here. I mean there is so many parents that are incarcerated for breaking the law, and their kids go to foster care.

The two factions also had a heated exchange over whether the child separation policy was “discriminatory” because “Canada is another border, [but] you don't see that happening there. It's only with Mexico.” The Trump-*Fox* Catholics rushed to respond that “that's bulls***” because “people aren't flooding across our [Northern] borders illegally.”

A *Coca Cola* Super Bowl ad featuring “America the Beautiful” sung in different language started a debate about the nature of the country and its future. Probably half thought it was too political, disagreed with it and said, they should learn English. It has changed because so many don't learn the language. It used to be we had a 2nd mass in Polish, but that's not the same. People are not assimilating and learning English.

It *was* the melting pot of the world because people are not melting or mend, they're bringing in their cultures with them and staying localized. Because in my opinion – In my opinion there is – yeah, brace yourself, people – but immigration without assimilation is tantamount to an invasion.

If you're going to come to America and just – that's the whole thing I don't agree with. Is you guys come here to America and you want to change our beliefs. But you guys came in *here*.



We ran into the issue with terrorism and that and people coming over here illegally. I say, I still think we have to be the country that accepts people – in under our laws. And assimilating is important. I don't – my family, when they came over and they had a green card and it took some time before, you know – we were all real hard-core Americans, but eventually it happened. That's what I think a lot of people are afraid of, not [happening].

A lot of this is wrapped up in not speaking English – or as one man said, “you should speak American.” These men complained they were being forced to adapt, rather than the other way around: “Now, you're changing, telling us that we're middle aged men and women that we have to be re-educated in a different foreign language in our homeland that we grew up as an American, our first language is English?”

But a vocal minority made an argument that America is defined and united by its immigrant history and not by the prevailing ethnicity or language of its people. “America's the melting pot of the world,” one man explained. “Is anybody in here Native American?” another asked, because, “Somebody came from somewhere, another country, and you have the right to live here.” Another man who “grew up in a Polish neighborhood” and attended “one of the masses in Polish on Sunday” raised his hand to push back against their opinion that “it's become a jigsaw puzzle” and not a melting pot: “I understand that culture tends to build a community together, whether it's Polish, Italian, Irish, what have you, and that's obviously going to be a part of peoples' ethnicity or whatever or their heritage.” They explain that “the times are changing” and “it's never going to go back,” so they might as well get used to the growing number of immigrants from Latin America and Asian countries “melting with the United States.”

The conflict over Trump's scandals. After viewing a video of Trump making offensive comments about other women while campaigning, most of the Trump-*Fox* Catholics excused it as just men being men.

We've all done or said similar.

Oh worse. Worse.

Yes, we're not any better or any worse than him, were males. We have it inbred in us. That's how we are. Maybe not to certain extents, give or take, but that's how we are.

Another found a way to implicate Hillary Clinton and Michelle Obama as well: “I think that works both ways. I'm sure if they dug up dirt on Hillary about her comments about men, or Michelle Obama I'm sure they would fine them.”

But the majority of the men believed Trump's comments were “demeaning to anybody that's a female.” Trump's comments about Heidi Cruz and Melania Trump especially offended their sensibilities as husbands.

Well I've been married 49 years, and I find that offensive.



My wife would know I'd – never say anything like that. Not a chance.

I think it's immature. I think it's immature at that his wife where he was at. He doesn't have to fight these kind of battles. He doesn't have to do that. And I wouldn't want to see any President doing that stuff like that. But I am just – there was no reason to attack somebody else's wife for that.

He's not even showing respect for his own wife. That's the part I can't understand.

This is the context in which listening to videos of Trump speak brings out their harshest criticism of his personality. They want a president to be a moral leader too: “We should be looking up to him. He's the CEO of this country. We should respect him and he should be setting an example for every other family.”

The conflict over Russia. Many in the conservative Catholic base also responded strongly to the implications of the Special Counsel's investigation. In open-ended associations, one person said that Robert Mueller had “been appointed to take care of a very important subject” and “somebody needs to find out” about what the Russians did because “we just can't let some people do things improper that affect elections.”

To be sure, most *Fox News* Catholics had their *Fox* talking points about the Russia probe down!

Had Hillary Clinton won we wouldn't have found out about all the corruption in the Department of Justice.

Most of the Democratic Party and the powers that are pushing this. I just don't see – I don't see how the Russians had any impact on me throughout any of this.

Well to me it goes bad when Obama was President before his second election, he was caught with his microphone saying to the Russians leader, wait till I get reelected we're really get things accomplished. And nothing was ever brought up about that except for that day or two. And I thought Hillary had off like a whole bunch of stuff tied to the Russians as well. So, and then there was all these dealings with was it Obama, trying to get Iran tons of money before he left the presidency. And I'm just like, where is all those investigations. I just feel like they really trying to push Trump out of office any way they can.

And a lot of people gloss over the fact that it was Rob Rosenstein recommended to Trump that he fire Comey.

But a small majority also took seriously a hypothetical scenario in which the Special Council indicts Trump's campaign leadership for conspiring with Russia and reports to congress that Trump obstructed justice, saying that if there was proof, then “let the currents fall where they may. It's about accepting responsibility,” including possible impeachment. That response even



came to include part of the Trump-Fox Conservative Catholics: “I wrote, proof, proof, proof. And indictments right now, are nothing more than party politics that I’m seeing. And if proof does come up, if these people were included at some point, Donald Trump Jr. Somebody’s got to pay for it, Manafort. There has got to be some jail time.” They said that if this were to happen, then “the congress needs to be honest.” So, like the moderates, some in this bloc of the GOP want leaders who will be a check on Trump in this regard.

2018 and beyond

None of these older, religiously observant, pro-life Catholic Conservatives will entertain voting for a Democrat in 2018. In fact, the Trump-Fox motivated Catholic conservatives are very eager to support Republicans in 2018 to defend Donald Trump and his agenda. They are excited by his base strategy and are the audience for his campaign rallies. But half of them are less motivated by the base buttons Trump is pushing. They see through Trump’s personality to the good news Trump is giving in his campaign speeches, but they cannot forget the other ways he divides the country and fails to set a moral example. They want to see Republicans who will be a check on Trump or some may be less interested in voting.

In 2020, when Donald Trump is on the ballot again, we may see the real divide. Half were open to a Third-Party candidate like Kasich who they say has accomplished a lot in Ohio but also “is Christian and moral.” One brave soul was already prepared to say he would never vote for Trump again because “President Trump has too many personal issues and beliefs that are negative and destructive to this country.” He explained that he just refused to compromise his “personal beliefs.”