



*Journal of  
Religion & Society*  
Supplement Series

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The Kripke Center

Supplement 23 (2021)

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## Religion and the New Politics

Edited by Ronald A. Simkins and Zachary B. Smith

### 9. U.S. Catholic Bishops' Discussion of President Obama vs. President Trump, 2014–2019

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#### Abstract

Scholars have noted shared priorities and organizational ties between American Catholic leadership and the Republican Party arising since the 1970s and continuing today. Does American Catholic leadership withhold clear criticism of Republican President Trump for fear of alienating allies in a way they did not for Democratic President Obama? To answer this question, we engage in content analysis of columns written by bishops to their local dioceses (local level) and U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' news releases (national level). We find that American Catholic leadership avoids criticizing Trump by name in a way that they did not for Obama and that this pattern exists only at the national level. We shed light on shared priorities between Catholic leaders and the Republican Party at the national level and demonstrate how this is facilitated through sex and gender issues and is challenged by immigration politics under President Trump.

Keywords: American Catholic bishops, politics, Republican Party, discourse, criticism

## **Introduction**

On July 30, 2019, a tweet went viral, especially among those interested in the politics of the American Catholic Church (Bayer 2019). The tweet focused on the politicization of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), the national body of U.S. Catholic bishops. It was written by Michael Bayer, who then-worked at the Archdiocese of Chicago. He discussed a pattern that he noticed while looking at USCCB news releases. His analysis was more informal and unsystematic, but he claimed there was a difference in how the USCCB used discursive maneuvers to soft-pedal criticism of President Trump in a way they did not do with President Obama. He argued that the USCCB omitted the word “Trump” when they were criticizing Trump Administration policies. Instead they referred vaguely to “the Administration” or “the federal government.” Bayer believed that this pattern did not hold for President Obama when he was president. For President Obama they clearly criticized “the Obama Administration” or “President Obama.” Bayer provides many examples from USCCB news releases to provide empirical support for this claim. Bayer also sought to explain why this pattern existed by saying:

It is not a secret that, as a cohort, the U.S. Catholic Bishops have allied themselves strategically with the GOP for the past couple of decades due to purportedly shared priorities on abortion, religious freedom, and same sex marriage . . .

. . . for the better part of a decade, the leadership of the U.S. Catholic Church was locked in an unambiguously adversarial relationship with the Obama Administration — and from Fortnights for Freedom to bulletin inserts — they made sure Catholics knew.

When the USCCB put out a statement opposing or condemning an Obama Administration policy, Obama was explicitly named. Now that Trump is in the White House, the name of the Administration is curiously omitted from all these letters and releases. That’s not an accident.

It is because many in the U.S. Catholic hierarchy seek good relations and influence with members of the Trump Administration/the GOP in the hopes of receiving pro-life judicial appointments and Executive Orders on things like conscience protections for healthcare workers.

For 8 years, Catholics heard ceaselessly that supporting Pres. Obama was incompatible with being Catholic. Now, when the Trump Administration issues policies at odds with Catholic teaching, the USCCB is providing cover for Catholic voters to disassociate it with Trump.

If the Church is to be a credible moral witness, we must be consistent and unyielding in our prophetic voice. If policies of a given administration are at odds with our Catholic teaching, we should state so unequivocally, and help Catholic voters better form their consciences.

Right now, the U.S. Catholic hierarchy is too beholden to one of the 2 major political parties, and it shows. Even though many individual bishops are deeply

uncomfortable with the Trump Administration and policies/rhetoric — they dare not state so for fear of alienating allies.

This isn't even going into the analysis of how, if the U.S. Bishops were to speak out more forcefully on issues like immigration/racism, they would alienate many of their wealthy, politically conservative donors whose support is counted on in the annual appeal (Bayer 2019).

In this project, we aim to test Bayer's general hypotheses from this tweet thread in a more comprehensive and systematic way with added nuances. Are bishops more unwilling to criticize Trump by name? Are bishops more unwilling to praise Obama by name? When bishops do criticize Trump, is it more often unnamed ("the Administration") rather than named ("President Trump")? We ask these questions at two different levels of analysis: (1) the local level of individual bishops communicating to the faithful in their local dioceses and (2) the national level of the USCCB news releases, which is the level at which Bayer initially looked. Are these discursive maneuvers that Bayer points to used and, if so, are they used similarly at both local and national levels?

We argue that, yes, American Catholic leadership does engage in discursive maneuvers in their discussion of President Trump in order to hold together a historical alliance<sup>1</sup> with the Republican Party at the national level. This sense of shared policy priorities is held together by a focus on issues of sexuality, such as abortion, contraception, same-sex marriage, and transgender rights. We find that this sense that one should not alienate an ally primarily exists at the national level and at local levels individual bishops seem more emboldened and less hesitant to criticize President Trump by name, sometimes with heated words. While this alliance is especially held together through a focus on sexuality issues, it is destabilized by a focus on immigration issues. Bishops at both the local level and national level have strongly heated words for President Trump's immigration policies, which they often soft-pedal through discursive maneuvers to take the attention off President Trump at the national level.

## Literature Review

### *Authority of American Bishop Communication*

The praise and criticism of presidents by U.S. Catholic bishops that our project examines are not just offhand comments by people who happen to be religious leaders, but rather have the weight of teaching authority. In the Catholic tradition, bishops are the recognized successors to the Apostles upon whom, together, Jesus bestowed unique teaching authority as leaders of the Christian community (Vatican II 1965, 2–3). Bishops are thus acknowledged as privileged teachers "in matters of faith and morals" (Vatican II 1964, 12). Since all bishops are ordained into the full episcopal college headed by the bishop of Rome, episcopal teaching

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<sup>1</sup> We use the word "alliance" in this paper, referring to a sense of common purpose and affinity between American Catholic leaders and Republican Party leaders in recent decades. We do not mean to imply an explicit or formal association between the USCCB and the Republican Party. The USCCB is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization under the U.S. Internal Revenue Code and is thus explicitly not allowed to endorse a political party. Rather, we lean on existing scholarship that has suggested American Catholic leadership and Republican Party leadership share a sense of common policy goals, informal organizational connections, and have sometimes acted as unofficial allies with one another.

authority is seen as unified insofar as it emanates from the single episcopal college (Vatican II 1965, 3–4).

This authority can be exercised in different ways by bishops (Gaillardetz 2018, 135–53). For this project, two important expressions of episcopal teaching authority are particularly relevant. First, teaching authority is expressed locally as each ordinary bishop serves as the “authentic teacher” of a local church, i.e., a diocese (Vatican II 1965, 11–12). Second, episcopal conferences are national or regional groupings of bishops who jointly exercise their episcopal teaching offices in response to national or regional issues (Vatican II 1965, 37–38). The USCCB is the episcopal conference that so convenes Catholic bishops of the United States. Its current form was created in 2001 after a merging of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, which focused on canonical issues, and the United States Catholic Conference, which focused on public policy (Sammon 2008, 13). Today, the USCCB is composed of bishops and, as of June 2020, “a staff of approximately 315 lay people, priests, deacons, and religious” (USCCB 2020a). All major religious denominations in the U.S. maintain an office in Washington, D.C., which “function as interest groups by representing the political interest of the denominations and coordinating their national advocacy efforts” (Olson 2002, 55). These offices lobby Congress, file amicus briefs on key judicial cases, and connect with social movement organizations to mobilize on key social issues. Thus, the USCCB is not only the episcopal conference that convenes Catholic bishops of the United States and provides pastoral direction to U.S. Catholics, but also is part of an organizational field of other religious groups seeking to influence public policy directly from its location in Washington, D.C.

Bishops’ teaching authority can also be exercised in varying degrees. For this project, these bishops’ local and national communications enact the level of Catholic Church teaching known as “provisional applications of Church doctrine, Church discipline, and prudential admonitions” (Gaillardetz 2018, 210). These teachings apply “binding moral principles” to circumstances and so provide Catholics with pastoral direction as they form their consciences about how to live (Gaillardetz 2018, 171). Such are neither doctrine nor dogma, which are more authoritative levels of Church teaching. (Gaillardetz 2018, 164–67). They must also be considered alongside other levels of magisterial teaching as well as truths discerned through reason, experience, Scripture, and the broader Christian community (Bretzke 2004, 21). Nevertheless, these teachings are owed “conscientious obedience” (Gaillardetz 2018, 210), i.e., “serious attention and consideration by Catholics” (National Conference of Catholic Bishops 1983, 10) in the applicable geographic area (i.e., diocese, nation, or region). Thus, the U.S. bishops’ individual and collective assessments of President Obama and President Trump that we examine in this project constitute prudential judgments that are seen as a legitimate expression of the episcopal teaching authority and call Catholics to incorporate them into conscientious deliberations.

To say bishops are authoritative teachers does not necessarily mean Catholics seriously consider or are persuaded by their teachings. Some scholars assume there is religious congruence among religious teachings and individuals’ religious beliefs and behaviors, when religious incongruence may be more common (Chaves 2010; Vaidyanathan, Khalsa, and Ecklund 2018.). Individuals regularly hear one thing taught in the pulpit and believe or behave in ways that counter those teachings when they get home. Cultural sociologists show us that individuals do not internalize fully coherent belief systems and values do not coherently

determine individual actions (Lizardo and Strand 2010, 205; Swidler 1986, 274–76; Swidler 2003, 132, 192–93). However, public culture does shape action in particular contexts by providing a “tool kit” of “symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views, which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems” as strategies of action (Swidler 1986, 273). Religious leaders can contribute to this cultural toolkit for individuals and political behaviors, from voting to social movements, have been shown to be a particular context in which this cultural toolkit shapes action (Williams 1996, 268; Pattillo-McCoy 1998, 768; Wood 1999, 308–9).

Further, there is particular evidence that suggests at least some Catholics are open to and moved by bishops’ teachings. For example, social scientific assessment of responses to the U.S. bishops’ 1983 pastoral letter *The Challenge of Peace* shows the document “most likely . . . stimulated an intense but short-lived reaction against military spending by American Catholics” (Wald 1992, 135, 132; see also Kari 2004, 94–95). Beyond the U.S. Catholic bishops’ conference, researchers found 35 percent of U.S. Catholics report being influenced by Pope Francis’s teachings on climate change — and among this subset, 53 percent report the pope’s teachings made them “moderately” or “much more concerned about global warming” (Maibach et al. 2005, 15–16). Additionally, liberal U.S. Catholic priests “seem to have a direct, liberalizing effect on their parishioners” in terms of ideology and select issue positions (Smith 2008, 72). In the 2004 presidential election, U.S. priests may have cultivated “religious attitudes, including religious particularism and willingness to accept political guidance from the Church” that cultivated relatively conservative political ideologies and translated into support for Republican priorities — including support for Bush (Smith 2008, 178).

In short, the influence of Catholic leaders’ teachings is by no means definite, lasting, or direct. However, U.S. Catholic leaders teaching both collectively and individually do have potential to influence U.S. Catholics’ approaches to and strategies of action in public life — including their perceptions of elected officials, legislative priorities, advocacy actions, and voting discernments. Whether or not what the bishops say actually matters to individuals or society more broadly, the quantity and quality of bishop communication and their authority of teachers within the Catholic Church suggests that they at least *intend* their words to matter in some way. What do these bishops’ communications tell American Catholics about praise-worthy and criticism-worthy actions of President Trump versus those of President Obama?

#### *American Catholic Leadership and the Republican Party*

Since the 1970s, Catholic individuals and the USCCB have shifted toward the Republican Party. There are many factors contributing towards this shift at both the grassroots and leadership levels. At the grassroots level, Catholic voters have moved toward the Republican Party since the 1960s because of (1) changing composition of Catholics and (2) partisan realignment in America. At the level of American Catholic leadership, priorities of the U.S. bishops, the Republican Party, and American conservatism have been increasingly aligned because of (1) increased bishop involvement in national-level politics, (2) a prioritization of abortion as the preeminent social problem, (3) conservative bishop appointments, (4) efforts by wealthy activists, and (5) USCCB staff coming from conservative institutions. Many of these factors are related to a growing prioritization of anti-abortion policies both among American Catholics and within the Republican Party. The Catholic Church has long opposed

direct abortion, which it sees as a grave and intrinsic evil that directly kills an innocent human life made in the image and likeness of God. Prioritization of anti-abortion policies has provided a common cause upon which to build relationships between Catholic leadership and the Republican Party.

At the grassroots level, Catholic voters have moved toward the Republican Party since the 1960s for two key reasons. First, there have been changing social characteristics of Catholics. Catholic voters used to be seen as a critical constituency in the New Deal coalition of the Democratic Party from the 1930s to the 1960s, stemming from their position as American immigrants who often found jobs in cities, joined labor unions, and were part of an underclass attracted to Democratic policies (Abramowitz 2011, 63). But by the 1970s, Catholics were increasingly second- and third-generation immigrants who had moved up the hierarchy in education and in professions, moved to the suburbs, accrued wealth, and became more attracted to the Republican Party and its emphasis on individual economic prosperity (Greeley 1989, 80–86; Prendergast 1999; Park and Reimer 2002, 735).

Second, Republican leaders saw a political opportunity for new voters, sparking a broader partisan voting realignment in America, especially over the issue of abortion. In the 1970s, President Nixon and his political strategists began to actively court two big voting blocs away from the Democratic Party and into the Republican Party: (1) Catholics through anti-abortion policies and rhetoric and (2) white Southerners through racist policies and rhetoric (Byrnes 1991, 64–66). Ronald Reagan courted Catholics (who were long opposed to abortion) and conservative Protestants (who were newly embracing anti-abortion stances) and rode their support to the White House (Ferree et al. 2002, 36; Danielsen 2019, 25–31; Byrnes 1993, 506). Beginning in the 1980s, Republican and Democratic party platforms began to diverge officially on abortion stances, with Republicans officially embracing a newly anti-abortion stance and Democrats officially embracing a newly pro-abortion rights stance (Putnam and Campbell 2010, 391–95). Some commentators argue that the Democratic pro-abortion rights stance made the party feel inhospitable to Catholics (Winters 2008, 165, 177), a perception that continues to be described today (Democrats for Life 2020). Beginning in the late-1980s and early-1990s, there has been a partisan realignment with abortion, in particular, becoming a core litmus test upon which millions of Americans based their voting patterns, shifting many anti-abortion Catholics into the Republican Party (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2011, 79–108).

At the leadership level, the priorities of the USCCB, the Republican Party, and American conservatism have been increasingly aligned for five key reasons. First, U.S. Catholic bishops have increasingly engaged in political action at the national level. The U.S. bishops have had a national organization since 1917, but Catholic bishops' political activities were more individual and local than collective and national prior to the Second Vatican Council from 1962–1965 (Sammon 2008, 11–12). Although their latter type of engagement increased following the Second Vatican Council — especially informed by the conciliar document *Gaudium et Spes, The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* — bishops' collective national political action significantly increased immediately following the 1973 U.S. Supreme Court *Roe v. Wade* decision which recognized a woman's legal right to abortion (Sammon 2008, 12–13; Byrnes 1993, 497–99). Since *Roe v. Wade* took abortion from local to national politics, the bishops following the ruling believed they had no choice to oppose abortion but to mobilize on this national level. Catholic leaders started “to organize, raise money, lobby members of Congress,

and address individual Catholics at the parish level” in national anti-abortion politics (Sammon 2008, 11).

Second, there has been a prioritization within American bishops of abortion as the most important social problem of our day, an issue that ties them most closely to the Republican Party. As Catholic theologian and law professor Cathleen Kaveny (2012, 191) describes in her analysis, “Over the years, the bishops have vastly increased the number of issues they wish voters to note while simultaneously reducing the number they wish voters to emphasize. In the most recent guide, abortion is far from the only issue, but it is clearly the dominate issue.” Since then, the bishops’ 2020 edition of “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship” declares that “the threat of abortion remains our preeminent priority” (USCCB 2020b, 6). As described, the bishops’ predominant strategy is and has been to outlaw abortion. Many Republican candidates and officials have not only affirmed the bishops’ concern for abortion but largely committed to enact this strategy (thus creating a relationship that is both ideological and practical). The shared priorities extend past just abortion into other issues related to sex and gender. Beyond abortion, Republicans and the U.S. Catholic bishops have prioritized opposition to same-sex marriage grounded in appeals to religious freedom — a value that also sustains the bishops’ priority implementation of opposition to artificial contraception.

Third, the number of individual U.S. bishops whose theological and political worldviews converge in the Republican Party appears to have increased. Pope John Paul II had a 27-year papacy (1978–2005) during which he appointed dozens of bishops who embraced his particular emphases on abortion and traditional sexual teachings — both of which are generally affirmed by the Republican Party — and relatively uncompromising “culture warrior” style (Schlumpf 2019). Many of his U.S. appointees were thus predisposed to resolutely embrace the Republican platform offered by Nixon, Reagan, and others, and seem to have actualized this predilection. In 1990, for example, 59 percent of U.S. bishops appointed by Pope Paul VI (whose papacy lasted from 1963–1978) were Democrats and 17 percent were Republicans; conversely, 38 percent of U.S. bishops appointed by Pope John Paul II were Democrats and 38 percent were Republicans (Gelm 1990). Subsequently, some observe that the U.S. episcopal appointments by Pope John Paul II’s successor, Pope Benedict XVI (whose papacy lasted from 2005–2013) “further loaded the ranks with culture warriors, obsessed with trumpeting against same-sex marriage, abortion and contraception” (Grossman 2013). Thus, 87 percent of Latin Rite U.S. bishops were appointed by popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI as of 2016 (Fichter et al. 2019, 17) and veteran bishop observer Thomas Reese, S.J., estimates one third of current U.S. Catholic bishops are “ideologically conservative” (Schlumpf 2019). This intuition appears supported by data: in 2016, 47 percent of U.S. bishop survey respondents identified the conservative Fox News Channel as their primary source of cable news (Fichter et al. 2019, 42).

Fourth, the USCCB has also shifted socio-politically to the right due to efforts by wealthy activists who have influenced bishops and non-episcopal USCCB leaders. John Gehring (2015, 19), a former USCCB staff member, reports that over the past four decades wealthy “activist Catholics on the right funded think tanks, partnered with conservative evangelicals, and built influential networks that brought together church leaders, Republican politicians, and wealthy philanthropists in common cause.” This network has influenced the content and implementation of the USCCB’s national agenda through, among other avenues, financial

support (Roberts 2017), exclusive events (Gehring 2017), and influence of some among the more than 300 non-episcopal staff who advise the bishops and make day-to-day programmatic decisions on behalf of the conference (Gehring 2015; USCCB 2020b).

Finally, USCCB staff has come increasingly from conservative institutions. For example, Thomas Quigley, a senior USCCB staff member for more than four decades, reports that USCCB staff has increasingly become dominated by young graduates of Christendom College in Virginia, a small Catholic college that is a symbol for political conservatives and anti-abortion activists (Gehring 2015, 88, 123). Relatedly, former employees of the Beckett Fund, Family Research Council, Augustine Institute, and other right-leaning socio-political organizations (both non-Catholic and Catholic) have recently assumed influential USCCB staff positions (Gehring 2015, 90–91; Winters 2012).

How is this historical relationship and sense of shared policy priorities with the Republican Party and American conservatism impacting American Catholic bishops' teachings to Catholics? Catholics are supposed to incorporate their bishops' teachings into their deliberations about public life. Leaving aside the question of whether or not individual Catholics' actions actually *are* impacted by their bishops' teachings, how partisan are those bishops' teachings? Do bishops' communications fall in lockstep with the Republican Party, with a greater unwillingness to criticize President Trump than they did President Obama? Do bishops selectively emphasize the issues that most strengthen their sense of alliance with Republicans and deemphasize issues that could challenge that alliance? Or are their openings for a potential challenge to this alliance?

## Data and Methods

### *Research Questions*

The primary research question of this article is: Are American Catholic bishops less willing to criticize President Trump by name than they were President Obama by name? Are they using discursive maneuvers, such as vaguely criticizing “the Administration,” to distance their criticism from Trump’s name in a way that they did not for President Obama? To add complexity to our findings, we also look at the flip side of criticism — praise — and seek to understand if American bishops also praise President Trump any differently, whether in frequency or in name, than they did President Obama. To further add complexity to our findings, we compare two different levels of analysis: (1) the local level of individual bishops communicating to the congregants in their local dioceses and (2) the national level of the USCCB news releases, the level at which Bayer originally looked.

A more exploratory secondary research question of this article is: What are the topics, or social problems, linked to the criticism of presidents Obama and Trump? Are there topics on which bishops carve out agreements or disagreements and how does this differ between President Obama and President Trump? What can this tell us more broadly about the shared priorities and stances of American Catholic bishops and a Democratic president versus a Republican president? This exploratory secondary research question helps us add more complexity to the findings from our primary research question. Thus, both the methods and findings from this secondary analysis are discussed after our primary research findings.

*Local Level Dataset: Bishops' Columns in Official Diocesan Publications*

To understand at the local level how U.S. Catholic bishops discuss President Obama versus President Trump, we examined 12,077 regular bishops' English-language columns in official diocesan publications from June 2014 until June 2019.<sup>2</sup> This large dataset was compiled by the three co-authors for a different project focused on bishops' discussion of climate change. These official diocesan publications are generally sent directly to all registered Catholics within that diocese. Some of these publications are sent monthly or weekly. Some are newspapers and others are magazines. Whether or not the individual makes it to Mass that week, this magazine or newspaper might be sitting on their kitchen table or in their email inbox. Official diocesan publications are thus key media through which information and messages from the dioceses are likely to reach individuals. They are also available in a more standardized way to us as researchers because they are often archived online or in a physical archive, unlike homilies that a bishop might give. Of the 178 dioceses in the United States, the vast majority (173, or 98%) have an official diocesan publication. Through much time and energy and help from diocesan communications staff, we have as complete of data as possible for 171 dioceses (99% of those dioceses with a publication). In all, this amounts to 12,077 columns of 171 dioceses across the United States from June 2014 to June 2019.

From this larger dataset of all U.S. bishops' columns over five years, we compiled the entire population of sentences that mention President Obama or President Trump by name. We also compiled all sentences that use the phrase "the Administration" to clearly refer to either president but without the name of Obama or Trump in that sentence. We excluded a lot of false positives. We excluded mentions of "Obamacare" rather than Obama the person. We excluded mentions of trump used as a verb, instead of Trump the person. We also excluded mentions of someone else with the Trump name, such as First Lady Melania Trump. Most mentions of "the Administration" were false positives, referring to "the administration of the sacraments" or "the administration of the parish," so we had to determine whether or not it was about a presidential administration based on context. We also only counted mentions from when they were president, so references to Obama after Trump's inauguration or Trump before he was inaugurated on January 20, 2017, were excluded. We focused only on the person's time as president since only then did the person possess formal political authority to take official positions and actions that the bishops might affirm or denounce. The 200 mentions of "Obama" in the entire set of columns yielded 129 sentences that mention President Obama by name during his presidency (see Table 1). The 260 mentions of "Trump" in the entire set of columns yielded 141 sentences that mention President Trump by name during his presidency. Out of 121 mentions of the phrase "the Administration," only 15 of them were used to describe President Obama or his policies, and 32 of them were used to describe President Trump or his policies.

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<sup>2</sup> The article was updated on 2/26/2021 to convey that our full dataset includes a sample size of 12,077 local bishop columns not 12,085 local bishop columns as originally described. This updated sample size does not change any findings or conclusions in the article.

*National Level Dataset: USCCB News Releases*

We also looked through all USCCB news releases from the same period as the bishops' columns, June 2014 to June 2019. Again, this is the same data that Michael Bayer was unsystematically looking at in the viral tweet. All USCCB news releases archived at <http://www.usccb.org/news/> were gathered, for a total of 1,004 news releases over 5 years. Again, we excluded the same types of false positives or mentions from before or after each was president. Interestingly, whereas most mentions of “the Administration” in the local-level dataset were false positives about “the administration of the sacraments” or “the administration of the parish,” we found no false positives of this type in the national-level dataset. All mentions at this level of “the Administration” were about a presidential administration, demonstrating how much more political the content of the USCCB news releases were than the individual bishop columns. In all, we have 185 sentences for USCCB news releases that fit our criteria (see Table 1). Between the two datasets, this article draws on the coding of a total of 502 sentences.

*Table 1. Population of Sentences Examined for Content Analysis*

|                                     | Local Level<br>Bishop Columns | National Level<br>USCCB News Releases |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <i>Named</i>                        |                               |                                       |
| President Obama                     | 129 sentences                 | 33 sentences                          |
| President Trump                     | 141 sentences                 | 58 sentences                          |
| <i>Unnamed “The Administration”</i> |                               |                                       |
| President Obama                     | 15 sentences                  | 28 sentences                          |
| President Trump                     | 32 sentences                  | 66 sentences                          |
| Total: 502 sentences                | 317 sentences                 | 185 sentences                         |

*Content Analysis Methods*

Because of challenges looking through 12,077 bishop columns and 1,004 news releases for criticism that is unnamed, and is thus harder to find, our methods are a little different from Bayer’s informal ones. We are extending Bayer’s general claims and seeking to answer the primary research question of: Do bishops separate the criticism from the name for President Trump in a way they did not do for President Obama?

Sentences are our key unit of analysis — sentences that either mention “Obama” or “Trump” or “the Administration” referring clearly to Obama or Trump. We coded each sentence for whether it had clear normative criticism in it. We also looked at the flip side of normative praise, even though that was not a focus of Bayer’s tweet. Many sentences had neither clear criticism nor praise.

To focus particularly on the coding of normative criticism, the key focus of our analysis, we coded as criticism anything that has a clear normative criticism (i.e., more than just a stating of facts) or any discussion of Catholic opposition/criticism to/of a policy/person. Saying

something is wrong or problematic was coded as criticism. Saying factually that Catholic leaders are fighting against the person's policy was criticism. Mention of a bishop or Catholic leaders urging the president to do something was interpreted as implicit criticism of what is currently happening, so it was coded as criticism. Factually discussing negative consequences of a policy was coded as criticism. Stating something factually without explicit criticism in the sentence was *not* coded as criticism, even if in our common sense we knew that the bishops are not supportive of the policy. So, if a bishop says something like "President Obama's policies require employer-funded contraception" — we knew from our own knowledge that they do not like that and likely criticize this policy elsewhere in the column, maybe in the next sentence. But because it does not have the explicit criticism in the same sentence, linked closely to Obama's name, it was not coded as criticism. If the sentence uses more emotionally charged or negative language, such as "President Obama's policies coerced employers to fund contraception coverage" then it was coded as criticism. Factually discussing others who are not explicitly Catholic leaders criticizing the president or president's policy could be interpreted as a stating of facts and was not coded as criticism. We erred on the side of it not being criticism. If it could reasonably be interpreted as a factual statement of something without a normative claim, then it was coded as not criticism.

The first author did all coding of the 502 sentences for criticism and praise. To ensure validation of our coding scheme, the second author also coded a 20% subsample (101 sentences selected with simple random sampling) so we could check intercoder reliability on our codes (see Neuendorf 2017). On our criticism code, we had 97.03% agreement (Cohen's Kappa: 0.9349, almost perfect agreement). On our praise code, we had 100% agreement (Cohen's Kappa: 1.0000, perfect agreement).

To be clear, we are not capturing all criticism or seeking to comprehensively compare all bishops' criticism of President Obama to President Trump. That is outside the scope of this project. Rather, we have a narrower goal of assessing bishops' willingness to closely link Obama and Trump's names to criticism. We are operationalizing this "close link" as the name is in the same sentence as criticism. We are obviously missing a lot with this narrow view. But in our minds this method does capture something about whether bishops are less willing to criticize Trump by name than they were Obama, and whether they are using discursive maneuvers, such as vaguely discussing "the Administration," to distance their criticism from Trump's name.

We test three hypotheses at both the local and the national level to examine how bishops criticized or praised President Obama versus President Trump.

*Hypothesis 1:* Bishops will be less willing to criticize President Trump by name than President Obama by name.

*Hypothesis 2:* Bishops will be less willing to praise President Obama by name than President Trump by name. This is not a claim in Bayer's tweet, but we wanted to see if the flip side of praise had any similar pattern.

*Hypothesis 3:* Bishops will have a greater percentage of criticism for Trump that is unnamed than percentage of criticism for Obama that is unnamed. This is the core of Bayer's hypothesis — that bishops are using discursive maneuvers,

such as referring vaguely to “the Administration,” to hide their criticism of Trump or to voice their criticism without closely linking that criticism to Trump’s name.

**Findings**

We find that none of our three hypotheses are supported at the local level of individual bishops’ columns in official diocesan publications. We read many individual bishops’ columns with quite explicit criticism of President Trump and we did not feel like they were muzzled in their criticism. This finding surprised us. We tested these same three hypotheses at the national level of USCCB news releases and found all three are supported. We find that the USCCB is less willing to criticize President Trump by name, less willing to praise President Obama by name, and more likely to have unnamed vague mention of “the Administration” when criticizing President Trump than they did President Obama. The fact that this pattern exists at the national level and not the local level suggests to us that this partisan informal alliance between American bishops and the Republican Party is a part of national level politics and might not hold as much power in local level politics.

*Local Level: Bishops’ Columns in Official Diocesan Publications*

First, we hypothesized based on Bayer’s tweet that the ordinary bishops would be less willing to criticize Trump by name than Obama by name when they were communicating to their congregants within their regular bishop’s column in the official diocesan publications. This hypothesis was not supported at the local level. Criticism for Obama was the same as criticism for Trump (28% versus 28%) (see Table 2).

Table 2. Normative Criticism and Praise of President Obama versus President Trump, 2014-2019

|                                     | Local Level<br>Bishop Columns |                        |                     | National Level<br>USCCB News Releases |                        |                     |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------------------|------------------------|---------------------|
|                                     | Total<br>Sentences            | Criticism<br>Sentences | Praise<br>Sentences | Total<br>Sentences                    | Criticism<br>Sentences | Praise<br>Sentences |
| <i>Named</i>                        |                               |                        |                     |                                       |                        |                     |
| Obama                               | 129                           | 36 (28%)               | 12 (9%)             | 33                                    | 12 (36%)               | 5 (15%)             |
| Trump                               | 141                           | 40 (28%)               | 9 (6%)              | 58                                    | 10 (17%)               | 18 (31%)            |
| <i>Unnamed “The Administration”</i> |                               |                        |                     |                                       |                        |                     |
| Obama                               | 15                            | 13 (87%)               | 0 (0%)              | 28                                    | 15 (54%)               | 4 (14%)             |
| Trump                               | 32                            | 16 (50%)               | 4 (13%)             | 66                                    | 41 (62%)               | 7 (11%)             |

Second, we hypothesized that the bishops would be less willing to praise Obama by name than praise Trump by name. This hypothesis was also not supported at the local level. We did find that praise for presidents was rarer than criticism. Praise for Obama is actually a little higher than praise for Trump, but just by 3%, which we did not think was a meaningful difference. We should note here that we are not discussing statistical significance or p-values here because we are not dealing with a sample. We have the entire population of sentences

written by bishops over 5 years of official diocesan columns. These are not estimates of a population based on a sample, but rather these are percentage differences that are real and observed in this population. But the question for us is, do we think this difference is meaningful? We do not think that a difference of 3% is all that meaningful.

We then focused on the claim by Bayer that bishops are using discursive maneuvers, such as referring vaguely to “the Administration,” to hide their criticism of Trump, to voice their criticism without closely linking that criticism to Trump’s name. So, third, we hypothesized that bishops would have a greater percentage of criticism for Trump that is unnamed than percentage of criticism for Obama that is unnamed. This is the core of Bayer’s hypothesis. It is not supported at the local level. Bishops at the local level seemed equally willing to criticize Trump by name as they were to criticize Obama by name. The number of critical sentences was similar for Obama and Trump (49 versus 56 sentences). The percentage of those critical sentences that were unnamed was also similar (27% versus 29%) (see Table 3).

Table 3. Percentage of Critical Sentences that are Unnamed

|                 | Local Level<br>Bishop Columns | National Level<br>USCCB News Releases |
|-----------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| President Obama | 27% (13 / 49 sentences)       | 56% (15 / 27 sentences)               |
| President Trump | 29% (16 / 56 sentences)       | 80% (41 / 51 sentences)               |

Overall, we do not find empirical support for Bayer’s general claims or any of our hypotheses at the local level of bishops’ official diocesan columns. Further, in reading bishops’ criticism of Trump, we did not get the sense that they were scared to criticize Trump by name at all as Bayer implied is happening with the USCCB at the national level. They were very explicit and sometimes almost mocking in their criticism. For example, the archbishop of Philadelphia said, “President Trump, with his baffling manner and lack of self-control, has earned a healthy portion of the blame” (Chaput 2017). The bishop of Orlando said, “The actions of President trump show the absence of mercy and goodwill, and a short-sighted vision for the future” (Noonan 2017). The bishop of Providence not so subtly said, “If President Trump wants to build his stupid wall, so be it” (Tobin 2018).

None of our three hypotheses are supported at the local level. When we started this research, we planned to only examine Bayer’s claim at this local level. But after these findings, we were surprised. It left us with two interesting but very different possibilities. The first possibility was that Bayer was wrong in his claims. Maybe he was just unsystematically analyzing the data because he is not a social researcher and just saw what he expected to see. Maybe his tweet went viral and us three co-authors paid attention because it fit with our common sense that the bishops are politicized and maybe we are all wrong. The second possibility is that Bayer was right in his claims but that it is only happening at the national level of the USCCB and not at the local level of individual bishops. Maybe the USCCB feels less free to explicitly criticize Trump by name at the national level but that individual bishops do feel okay explicitly criticizing Trump by name at the local level of bishops’ official columns to local diocesan congregants. That would also be an interesting possibility, because it would suggest that the politicization of the bishops is just at the national level of the USCCB, which

is allying with national Republican leadership. Maybe at the local level, individual bishops are a little more empowered to say what they really think. Given these two very interesting but very different possibilities, which seem to hinge on whether Bayer is right about what is going on at the national level, we decided we had to test Bayer's claims at the national level he examined.

*National Level: USCCB News Releases*

We find that there is something happening differently on the national level than the local level. Again, we first hypothesize again that the USCCB would be less willing to criticize Trump by name than Obama by name. This hypothesis was supported at the national level. At the national level, bishops were less willing to criticize Trump by name than criticize Obama by name (17% versus 36%) (see Table 2). This difference of 19% did feel like a meaningful difference to us. Also, interestingly, at the national level, bishops were even less willing to criticize Trump by name than they were at the local level (17% versus 28%).

Second, we hypothesized that the USCCB would be less willing to praise Obama by name than praise Trump by name. This hypothesis was supported at the national level. The level of praise for Obama by name was much lower than praise for Trump by name (15% versus 31%). While we found at the local level that praise in general was rarer than criticism, at the national level this is not a clear pattern. While praise for Obama by name was rarer than criticism, praise for Trump by name was more common than criticism.

We thus find that partisanship is being magnified at the national level primarily in how they discussed President Trump. Compared to the local level, at the national level bishops were more willing to praise Trump by name and less willing to criticize Trump by name. At the national level, bishops were similarly likely to criticize and praise Obama by name as they were at the local level.

Third, we hypothesized that the bishops would have a greater percentage of their criticism for Trump being unnamed than percentage of criticism for Obama would be unnamed. Again, this core of Bayer's hypothesis. While this was not supported at the local level at all, this is clearly supported at the national level. Overall, the bishops at the national level had a lot more sentences critical of Trump than of Obama, while at the local level the criticism of the two presidents was more equitable. Most of the criticism at the national level was aimed at an unnamed "the Administration" than a named Trump. The percentage of critical sentences that were unnamed was 56% for Obama and a whopping 80% for Trump (see Table 3). We believe this observed difference is meaningful.

To summarize again, *none* of the hypotheses derived from Bayer's viral tweet are supported at the local level, of bishops' official diocesan columns. At this local level, bishops do not seem to be hesitant to criticize Trump by name and are not using discursive maneuvers to hide their criticism of Trump. The core hypotheses derived from Bayer's viral tweet *are* supported at the national level, of USCCB News Releases. At the national level, bishops do seem to be hesitant to criticize Trump by name and are using discursive maneuvers, such as referring vaguely to "the Administration" to criticize Trump without using his name.

We also find the flip side of criticism — praise — there is also a difference at the national level. At the national level, bishops do seem a little less willing to praise Obama by name than

Trump by name, with only 5 positive sentences about President Obama and 18 positive sentences about President Trump. However, this did not seem to be where the main action was. We find that the starkest differences in bishops' treatment of President Obama versus President Trump were around differential criticism rather than differential praise.

*Exploratory Content Analysis of Topics of Criticism and Praise*

After we tested these three hypotheses at the local and national levels, we wanted to go deeper into understanding why this differential criticism and praise of President Obama versus President Trump existed. We decided to engage in a more exploratory analysis of the *content* of the criticism and praise. Over what social problems are the bishops praising or criticizing the presidents? Michael Bayer (2019), in his viral tweet, says: "It's not a secret that, as a cohort, the U.S. Catholic Bishops have allied themselves strategically with the GOP for the past couple of decades due to purportedly shared priorities on abortion, religious freedom, and same sex marriage." Does the criticism and praise of President Obama and President Trump reflect those priorities that Bayer identifies, with support for Republican presidential stances and not Democratic presidential stances? Further, over what social problems are they willing to criticize President Trump?

We found a total population of 242 sentences of criticism or praise, both named and unnamed, and at both the local and national levels. After reading all sentences with criticism or praise, the first author developed a coding scheme to categorize the topic being referenced. The criticism and praise sentences were all categorized into three topical categories. Usually the topic was clearly discernible by looking at the text of the sentence alone. For the 31 sentences that could not initially be coded into a category based upon the sentence alone, the original column or news release was examined to see the context of the criticism or praise to code into topical categories. To ensure validation and replicability of our coding scheme, the second author independently coded a 20% subsample (49 sentences selected with simple random sampling) so we could check intercoder reliability on the codes. We had 98% agreement (Cohen's Kappa: 0.9711, almost perfect agreement). The one sentence that we had a discrepancy in our coding was due to an error by the first author and not due to disagreement about the meaning of the coding scheme.

The first topical category included all sexuality issues (including abortion, contraception, and LGBTQ+ issues) and religious freedom (which was nearly always explicitly connected to religious freedom about sexuality issues). This represented 23% of criticism and 42% of praise sentences. The second topical category was anything related to immigration and this represented 55% of criticism and 20% of praise sentences. Overwhelmingly criticism and praise were focused on either sexuality/religious freedom issues or immigration issues. There were no other topics that came close to this level of attention. So, all other topics were grouped together in a third topical category, which represented 22% of criticism and 37% of praise sentences.

There are stark differences in what topics bishops focused criticism and praise of President Obama versus President Trump (see Table 5). Criticism toward President Obama, both named and unnamed, was commonly focused on sexuality/religious freedom issues (52% of criticism sentences, 65% of local-level criticism, 30% of national-level criticism), while President Trump received relatively little criticism on this topic (2% of criticism sentences, 0%

of local-level criticism, 4% of national-level criticism). Criticism towards President Trump, both named and unnamed, was predominantly focused on immigration issues (78% of criticism sentences, 82% of local level criticism, 73% of national-level criticism), although President Obama also received criticism over immigration in addition to his criticism about sexuality/religious freedom issues (24% of criticism sentences, 12% of local-level criticism, 44% of national-level criticism). Praise was overall rarer than criticism, so differences there were less stark. The most notable pattern is that 66% of praise sentences for President Trump were about sexuality issues, including both named and unnamed and both local and national levels. President Obama received zero praise sentences about sexuality issues at any level and whether named or unnamed.

Table 4. Social Problem connected to Praise or Criticism Sentences

|                                      | Criticism-Sexuality or Religious Freedom | Criticism-Immigration | Praise-Sexuality or Religious Freedom | Praise-Immigration |
|--------------------------------------|--|-----------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------|
| Local Level - Bishop Columns         |  |                       |                                       |                    |
| <i>Named</i>                         |  |                       |                                       |                    |
| Obama                                | 20/36 (56%)                              | 6/36 (17%)            | 0/12 (0%)                             | 4/12 (33%)         |
| Trump                                | 0/40 (0%)                                | 32/40 (80%)           | 4/9 (44%)                             | 4/9 (44%)          |
| <i>Unnamed</i>                       |  |                       |                                       |                    |
| Obama                                | 12/13 (92%)                              | 0/13 (0%)             | 0/0 (0%)                              | 0/0 (0%)           |
| Trump                                | 0/16 (0%)                                | 14/16 (88%)           | 1/4 (25%)                             | 1/4 (25%)          |
| National Level – USCCB News Releases |  |                       |                                       |                    |
| <i>Named</i>                         |  |                       |                                       |                    |
| Obama                                | 3/12 (25%)                               | 4/12 (33%)            | 0/5 (0%)                              | 1/5 (20%)          |
| Trump                                | 1/10 (10%)                               | 3/10 (30%)            | 15/18 (83%)                           | 1/18 (6)           |
| <i>Unnamed</i>                       |  |                       |                                       |                    |
| Obama                                | 5/15 (33%)                               | 8/15 (53%)            | 0/4 (0%)                              | 0/4 (0%)           |
| Trump                                | 1/41 (2%)                                | 34/41 (83%)           | 5/7 (71%)                             | 1/7 (14%)          |

We hypothesized before we began this exploratory secondary analysis that the bishops would be more likely to criticize President Obama than President Trump about sexuality/religious freedom issues because those issues are the basis for their historical alliance with the Republican Party and opposition to the Democratic Party. This hypothesis was supported. We also hypothesized that bishops would be more likely to praise President Trump about sex and gender or religious freedom issues because that is a key basis for their alliance with the Republican Party. This was also supported. At the outset, we were not sure about what topic bishops would be willing to criticize President Trump; but we assumed it would not be a part of the traditional alliance with the Republican Party, such as sex and gender or religious freedom issues. We found that the main topic of criticism for President Trump was immigration issues. Bishops were quite willing to criticize Trump about his overturning of

Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), turning away of refugees, deportation practices, and separation of families at the border. Bishops also criticized President Obama over similar policies, but criticized President Trump more heavily over this issue, named at the local level and unnamed “the Administration” at the national level. We found immigration to be the key area of difference that American Catholic leadership expressed with this Republican president.

## Discussion

Inspired by the more informal analysis that Michael Bayer did on USCCB news releases as discussed in his viral tweet thread in July 2019, we tested his general claims of a different willingness to criticize President Obama by name than President Trump and the use of discursive maneuvers to separate that criticism from President Trump’s name (such as referring critically to “the Administration”). We added complexity to his analysis by looking at both the *local* level of individual bishops and the *national* level of USCCB news releases that Bayer looked at, as well as by looking at both *criticism* and *praise* of President Obama versus President Trump. Our data is much more comprehensive than Bayer’s: all 12,077 individual bishops’ columns and 1,004 USCCB news releases over a five-year period (June 2014 to June 2019). Our analysis is also more systematic: using a standardized coding scheme with high intercoder reliability to analyze *all* sentences that mention President Obama or President Trump or a vague “the Administration” for criticism and praise. In our more extended analysis, we find strong empirical support for the basic claims that Bayer makes in his viral tweet: at the national level of USCCB news releases, bishops are more unwilling to criticize President Trump by name and when they do criticize, they are more likely to do so unnamed (“the Administration”) rather than named (“President Trump”) relative to what they did for President Obama.

However, in our more comprehensive and complex analysis, we find four interesting nuances to this pattern not discussed in Bayer’s viral tweet. First, bishops’ unwillingness to criticize President Trump and use of vague language to deflect the criticism from President Trump’s name only occurs at the national level of USCCB news releases. At the local level of individual bishops writing to their faithful in official diocesan columns, bishops seem to be much more emboldened to criticize President Trump sometimes in quite emotionally charged or mocking language. This suggests to us that this partisanship and fear of publicly criticizing a Republican president given a historical alliance with the Republican Party is only at the national level of bishop discourse, with the USCCB. Individual bishops in their own dioceses may be able to go off this script more freely without upsetting the alliance. This supports existing scholarly work that suggests partisanship and polarization is stronger among organizations than individuals and is stronger at the national level than the local level (Hunter 1991, 43; Abramowitz and Webster 2016, 18–21; Hopkins 2018, 134–36).

Second, we find that there was a greater disconnect between what bishops said at the national and local levels about President Trump than there was for President Obama. There was no discrepancy in the bishops’ normative discussion of President Obama between what they said to the faithful in their local dioceses compared to what they said in national level news releases that might get a bigger readership in political circles. However, there *was* a discrepancy between what bishops said about President Trump to their local dioceses versus

the national political stage. This discrepancy in discussion of President Trump that did not exist for discussion of President Obama suggests to us that there might be a bigger disconnect between their true views of President Trump versus their public face about President Trump than there was for President Obama.

Third, our exploratory content analysis finds different topical content of criticism and praise towards President Obama versus President Trump. Criticism towards President Obama was primarily focused on sexuality and religious freedom issues. There were zero praise sentences for President Obama on sexuality and religious freedom issues, whether at national or local level or whether named or unnamed. In contrast, the biggest focus of praise for President Trump was on sexuality and religious freedom issues. This suggests to us that sexuality and religious freedom issues continue to be the key basis of shared policy goals between American Catholic leadership and the Republican Party.

Fourth, our exploratory content analysis finds that the key issue of criticism toward President Trump is over immigration issues. When bishops do criticize President Trump, it is generally focused on immigration issues, whether at the national or local levels and whether named or unnamed. Bishops criticized President Trump for overturning DACA, turning away refugees, deportation policies, and the separation of families at the border. This suggests to us that the biggest challenge to the national level connection between Catholic bishops and the Republican Party is over immigration policies. However, the bishops *also* heavily criticized President Obama for similar policies. Thus, we do not suggest that Catholic bishops might be driven toward shared priorities with the Democratic Party over immigration issues. They criticized Democratic President Obama very heavily for both immigration *and* sexuality and religious freedom issues, whereas they only criticized Republican President Trump heavily for immigration issues. But we do suggest that as social problems rise and fall in political discourse, greater attention to issues of sexuality (such as abortion, contraception, same-sex marriage, and transgender rights) would serve to strengthen the connection between Catholic leaders and the Republican Party. Greater attention to the politics of immigration might serve to destabilize this sense of shared priorities.

American Catholic bishops' teachings to Catholics (even prudential judgments) are intended to be authoritative and individual Catholics are called to incorporate these teachings into their deliberations about public life — which might include voting choices. While American religious leaders are not allowed to engage in direct political action such as telling their congregants how to vote in an upcoming election, we know from existing research that religious leaders often do engage in direct or indirect political discourse (Chaves 2004, 94–126; Putnam and Campbell 2010, 420–26) and have potential to shape followers' political actions and sociopolitical perspectives (Wald 1992, 132, 135, 142; Maibach et al. 2005, 15–16, 33, 81; Leiserowitz et al. 2017, 24; Smith 2008, 72, 177–78; Williams 1996, 268; Patillo-McCoy 1998, 768; Wood 1999, 308–9). This is significant since we find that individual bishops and the USCCB convey much normative criticism and praise toward political leaders to their congregants. We also find disparities in that criticism and praise toward President Trump versus President Obama, which we interpret as being about more than just the presidents' individual policies and perhaps connected to their Republican versus Democratic affiliations. However, our data cannot speak to how individual Catholics interpret these statements and

whether it might impact their perceptions of and voting behavior toward presidential candidates or down-ballot candidates.

### Acknowledgements

The data for this research was gathered with the financial support from Louisville Institute's Project Grant for Researchers; George F. Haddix President's Faculty Research Fund at Creighton University; and the Kripke Center for the Study of Religion and Society.

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