News

Democratic presidential candidate and U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris speaks during the first presidential debate with Republican presidential nominee and former U.S. President Donald Trump at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia Sept. 10. (OSV News/Reuters/Brian Snyder)

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The right-wing political nonprofit CatholicVote has launched an ad campaign in several contested battleground states accusing Vice President Kamala Harris of supporting taxpayer-funded gender reassignment surgeries on children.

The 30-second ads that began airing Sept. 16, cite what they claim to be Medicaid and other medical data indicating that minors in Pennsylvania, Michigan, Nevada and Wisconsin have undergone procedures that included hysterectomies, breast removals and sex change operations.

In one ad, "amputation of penis" is highlighted on a spreadsheet alongside other medical procedures. The narrator says, "Penis amputations? Sound weird? Disgusting? It is, and you're paying for it."

The ads further accuse Harris, the Democratic presidential nominee, of supporting "child gender mutilation surgeries." The ads warn voters in those swing states that a vote for Harris is "a vote for medical experiments on kids."

In an interview with The New York Post, CatholicVote President Brian Burch described a "trans agenda being pushed on our kids" that he said is being supported by Harris "and her Democratic allies in the Senate."

The Harris campaign did not return a message from National Catholic Reporter seeking comment. CatholicVote, which has endorsed former President Donald Trump in the 2024 presidential election, requested and received a list of written questions from NCR, but did not respond to them before this story was published.

CatholicVote's ads were immediately criticized by LGBTQ advocacy organizations that accused the conservative nonprofit of using misleading claims and inflammatory terms for partisan political purposes.

> 'It is dangerously irresponsible for CatholicVote to be promoting statistics in a way that makes them seem to be the norm, rather than the exceptions,' said Francis DeBernardo, executive director of New Ways Ministry.
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"In this atmosphere of politically motivated attacks and organized campaigns of disinformation, people are having to travel long distances — sometimes hundreds of miles or more — to see a doctor, because of politicians that disregard medical expertise and demand to make choices best left to doctors, their patients, and their family," Laurel Powell, a spokesperson for the Human Rights Campaign, told NCR.

Francis DeBernardo, executive director of New Ways Ministry, an organization that advocates for LGBTQ Catholics, told NCR that "gender-affirming surgery is extremely rare for minors."

"It is dangerously irresponsible for CatholicVote to be promoting statistics in a way that makes them seem to be the norm, rather than the exceptions," DeBernardo said.

"Moreover, CatholicVote makes it appear that these few surgeries are conducted frivolously, when, in fact, no state would allow any sort of medical intervention for a minor unless it was approved, after extensive consultation, by parents and a team of doctors," DeBernardo added.

CatholicVote has courted controversy with past actions that include suggesting Catholic agencies are contributing to the "chaos" at the U.S.-Mexico border, and for harvesting churchgoers' cellphone data to mobilize them in the failed effort to reelect Trump in 2020.

A two-page explainer from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services says that gender-affirming surgeries are "typically used in adulthood" or on a case-by-case basis in adolescence. The procedures are rarely given to transgender youth, said a July study by researchers at Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health.

"The few surgeries done are most often as a last resort to help prevent major episodes of anxiety, depression, as well as the likely expectation of a suicide

attempt," DeBernardo said.

"More typical interventions for minors considering transitioning are changes in name, pronouns, clothing and outward appearance — what is known as social transitioning. In some cases, reversible puberty blocker medicines are prescribed, and after that, hormone treatment is possible. Parental consent and doctors' supervision are required for these interventions, too," DeBernardo added.

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Medical care for transgender minors has been a hot-button political issue in right-wing political circles. About two-dozen conservative-leaning states have passed laws banning gender-affirming medical treatment for transgender minors. In June, the U.S. Supreme Court agreed to hear an appeal from the Biden administration seeking to block the state bans.

The state-level push to prohibit gender-affirming care for transgender minors prompted the American Academy of Pediatrics in August 2023 to reaffirm its support for such care. Other organizations that support gender-affirming care for adolescents include the American Medical Association, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, and the World Health Organization.

"Health care for transgender people has long been supported by every major medical association and leading world health authority, across specialties and patient lifespan, because it is safe, long-studied and prescribed. This form of medical care is life-giving, even life-saving," Ross Murray, GLAAD Media Institute vice president, told NCR.

"Despite what extremists claim, this care looks different for each person," said Powell of Human Rights Campaign.

The Biden administration has voiced support for gender-affirming care for transgender minors, while opposing surgery for them. Harris' campaign website said she would support federal legislation to "enshrine anti-discrimination protections for LGBTQI+ Americans in health care, housing, education and more into law."

When she ran for president in 2019, Harris filled out a questionnaire from the American Civil Liberties Union where she said she would use her executive authority

to ensure that transgender and nonbinary people who rely on the state for medical care had access to gender-affirming care, including "all necessary surgical care."

"It is important that transgender individuals who rely on the state for care receive the treatment they need, which includes access to treatment associated with gender transition," Harris wrote on that questionnaire. As California's attorney general, Harris also noted that she had pushed the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation to provide gender transition surgeries to state inmates.

This story appears in the **Election 2024** feature series. View the full series.
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