



## What will Pope Francis say?

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As Capitol Hill buzzes in anticipation of the pope's speech to Congress Thursday — the first ever of its kind — the fever and fanfare ushering in the event is rivaled only by the suspense and expectation surrounding his ultimate message to lawmakers.

Francis is hardly one to shy away from politics, routinely infusing spiritual themes of a shared humanity with advocacy for bolder global action on issues as diverse as economic inequality, environmental degradation, abortion and the plight of migrants.

He'll enter a Capitol rife with partisan bickering amid a budget fight that touches on each of those topics, a dynamic likely to give both sides an opportunity to embrace parts of his message as they haggle over the cost of government under threat of a shutdown.

But political and religious experts predict that while Francis “will be true to himself,” in the words of William Galston, who served as an adviser to former President Clinton, he'll also frame his message in expansive terms that steer clear of the specific policy fights on Capitol Hill.

“He's a social conservative and an economic liberal, [so] both parties will have something that they'll like and something that will offend them,” said Marian Tupy, senior policy analyst at the Cato Institute. “[But] I'd be astonished if he was so undiplomatic to get into U.S. policy in any kind of specific way.”

That approach was on display Wednesday at the White House, where Francis, introduced by President Obama, gave brief remarks that teemed with political references and yet largely managed to avoid taking sides.

He deftly highlighted immigrants' rights, introducing himself as “the son of an immigrant family.” He vowed “to celebrate and support the institutions of marriage and families,” but without defining what constitutes them. And he stressed the importance of economic justice, calling on everyone “to protect the vulnerable in our world,” without getting more specific.

One exception to his general language stood out: Francis hailed Obama's anti-pollution efforts, warning that “climate change is a problem [that] can no longer be left to our future generations.”

Such comments have agitated many conservatives, Catholic or otherwise, some of whom have accused Francis of adopting politically liberal views.

But Rep. Xavier Becerra (Calif.), chairman of the House Democratic Caucus, said Francis's message is not so much political as it is an espousal of long-held Catholic tenets, of which protection of the earth is one.

"He is simply speaking as a disciple of Catholic teaching," Becerra, a Catholic, said Wednesday by phone. "It really adds gravitas to what he's saying on the issues."

The pope's spirited embrace of social causes has defined his papacy, and there's widespread expectation that those same themes will be the cornerstone of Thursday's speech to Congress.

Since his election two years ago, the pope has made the fight against income inequality a top priority, urging political leaders to adopt financial reforms that benefit the poor while demonizing unchecked capitalism and "trickle-down" economics in the harshest terms.

"How can it be that it is not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure," he wrote in 2013, "but it is news when the stock market loses two points?"

He has jumped head-first into the climate change debate, issuing an encyclical this summer that largely blamed human consumerism and exploitation of natural resources for rising global temperatures that he says threaten the poor most. That message led Rep. Paul Gosar (R), a conservative Arizona Catholic, to say he'll boycott Thursday's speech.

And Francis has championed the cause of migrants worldwide, calling last summer for an "urgent intervention" to protect those fleeing violence in Central America and, more recently, pressing European leaders to do more to rescue the tens of thousands of people crossing into the continent from the Middle East.

The issue is timely in the wake of the Obama administration's recent move to accept 30,000 more global refugees each year in response to the crisis in Syria, a number many human rights advocates deem too low.

"It's inconceivable that [Francis] will not call on our country and our government to do more to help those refugees," said Bill O'Keefe, vice president for government relations and advocacy at Catholic Relief Services.

Francis, for his part, rejects the liberal label.

"Some people might say some things sounded slightly more leftish, but that would be a mistake of interpretation," he told reporters Tuesday just before arriving in the United States.

But his embrace of certain liberal causes has not been overlooked by Democrats, who are pressing him to bring that message to Capitol Hill.

House Democrats this week issued a series of videos featuring more than a dozen lawmakers calling on the pope to use the platform to advocate for comprehensive immigration reform, helping the poor and slowing climate change. And Sen. Bernie Sanders (Vt.), a populist Independent running for the presidency as a Democrat, led a rally Tuesday for low-wage Capitol workers hoping Francis will adopt their cause.

“He is one of the great moral forces on earth today,” Sanders told The Hill. “When he speaks out about the injustice of income and wealth inequality, the fact that so few have so much and so many have so little, and that we can do much better as human beings, I think it will have a significant impact.”

Across the aisle, Republicans are also invoking the pope’s visit to press their own priorities, highlighting in particular his anti-abortion stance in their quest to ban abortions after 20 weeks of pregnancy.

“I think we know the pope’s views on this issue, and he’s right in that instance,” said Senate Republican Whip John Cornyn (Texas).

Political experts anticipate that the pope, while almost certain to be political, will be careful not to endorse specific policies.

Galston, the former Clinton adviser, said “a template” for Francis’s approach in Washington might be found in the pope’s visit last weekend to Cuba, where he advocated broadly for human rights without taking on the dictatorial regime directly.

“If he’s seen as being tougher on American policy and capitalism than he was on Cuban policy and communism, that’s going to give aid and comfort to his critics,” said Galston, now a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. “There has to be symmetry between the two trips.”

Still, even Catholic officials are quick to note a certain unpredictability in Francis’s public statements. They’re not ruling anything out for Thursday’s speech.

“The question is not whether he’ll say something, but how specific he’ll get [in addressing U.S. policy],” Kevin Appleby, director of migration policy at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, told The Hill this month, referring to immigration issues. “He’s known to surprise. He’s known to go off script.”

Whatever message Francis delivers to Congress — and however lawmakers choose to use it in the coming policy fights — experts overwhelmingly predict it will do little to erode the crippling partisanship of Capitol Hill.

“I expect absolutely zero impact on congressional politics,” said Tupy of the Cato Institute. “There are much more powerful forces at hand that have made Washington what it is.”