

A guide to Catholic voting

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“An authentic faith ... always involves a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to leave this earth somehow better than we found it If indeed ‘the just ordering of society and of the state is a central responsibility of politics,’ the Church, ‘cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice.’”

— Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, No. 183

This November, communities across the country will gather in schools and libraries, churches and city halls. They will stand in line and slip into voting booths, where they will help choose leaders at the national, state and local levels.

For many trying to live out their Catholic faith, discerning for whom to vote can be challenging. To help Catholics better form their consciences during this election year, Our Sunday Visitor walks readers through what the Church teaches — and why — regarding our civic responsibility.

Why should I vote?

Voting: It is one of our most important responsibilities as citizens. Indeed, the Church teaches (cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 2240) that there are three primary responsibilities of all citizens:

- to pay taxes
- to defend their country
- to vote

Each of these responsibilities asks us to put the good of society and our fellow citizens above our individual desires and needs. Thus, a primary question we must answer as Catholic voters is whether the needs of the weakest and most defenseless among us are being addressed. In the voting booth, we have a privileged opportunity to contribute to our nation and promote the common good by bringing the values and teachings of our faith to bear on the issues facing our society.

Does the Church tell me whom I should vote for?

No. The Church does not tell us whom to vote for when we enter the voting booth. It does not endorse an official list of candidates or tell us which party Catholics should join.

Instead, Catholics are to use their judgment and follow their consciences as they apply the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ and the core faith values to the choices they make in the voting booth.

As Catholics, following the challenging path of discipleship, we need to evaluate the issues and candidates in the light of our Catholic faith. Then, we are challenged to live out our faith by getting actively involved — by voting and engaging in other civic activities.

How does my Catholic faith help me to make these choices?

We are taught from an early age to form our consciences in the light of our Catholic teaching. “To follow one’s conscience” is often misunderstood as something that allows us to do whatever we want, or as following the “feeling” we have that something is right or wrong.

But our faith teaches us that “conscience is the voice of God resounding in the human heart, revealing the truth to us and calling us to do what is good while shunning what is evil” (from the U.S. bishops’ 2015 document, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, No. 17, hereafter referred to as FC).

It is our responsibility as Catholics to form our consciences by developing the virtue of prudence to discern true good in circumstances and to choose the right means of achieving it by maintaining a willingness and openness to seek what is right through studying Scripture and Church teaching by using our reason to study key issues in light of this teaching, and by prayerfully seeking to understand the will of God.

What about the separation of church and state? Can the Church ask me to vote according to my Catholic principles?

Our nation's founders sought to "separate church and state" in the sense of prohibiting the establishment of any particular denomination as the official religious body of the nation — not in the sense of forbidding religious organizations to address matters of grave importance to human welfare.

Building upon Scripture and the teachings of Church leaders and saints for centuries, our faith has clear principles for how best to achieve justice, peace and human dignity for all men and women. Moreover, the Catholic moral tradition rests firmly on the natural law binding upon everyone, not just Catholics.

Four key principles

Four principles of Catholic social doctrine are key to making practical judgments to do good and avoid evil in voting:

1. Promoting and defending the dignity of the human person
2. Supporting the family and subsidiarity in local, state and national institutions
3. Working for the common good where human rights are protected and basic responsibilities are met
4. Acting in solidarity with concern for all as our brothers and sisters, especially the poor and most vulnerable (Faithful Citizenship, Nos. 40-52).

Is there anything Catholics must always reject?

As Catholics, we "may choose different ways to respond to compelling social problems, but we cannot differ on our moral obligation to help build a more just and peaceful world through morally acceptable means, so that the weak and vulnerable are protected and human rights and dignity are defended" (FC, No. 20).

Our faith reminds us that we must always reject and oppose “intrinsically evil” actions of any sort. Acts such as the taking of innocent human life are so deeply flawed that they are always incompatible with love of God and neighbor.

This is why the Church so strongly opposes abortion and physician-assisted suicide (euthanasia). In each case, the lives of the weak and the vulnerable are endangered, and there can be no good reason to allow the taking of these innocent lives or to vote for legislation that would allow these evils to result. Likewise, our Church opposes other actions that both violate human dignity and are destructive of life, such as human cloning or the destructive research on human embryos.

The Church condemns genocide, torture, the targeting of noncombatants in acts of terror or war, and racism, for they, too, are severe violations of human rights and human dignity. Related concerns are excessive consumption of material goods, unjust discrimination and the “narrowing redefinition of religious freedom which threatens both individual conscience and the freedom of the Church to serve” those in need (FC, Introductory Note).

If all of these are priorities, what is most important?

All of these issues are important, but they are not all morally or ethically equivalent. “The direct and intentional destruction of innocent human life from the moment of conception until natural death is always wrong and is not just one issue among many. It must always be opposed” (FC, No. 28).

At the same time, issues such as war, the death penalty, racism and care for the poor and the immigrant are enormously important. “These are not optional concerns which can be dismissed” (FC, No. 29).

The moral teaching of our Church is about more than prohibitions. We Catholics are encouraged to respond to the basic needs of human beings – food, shelter, health care, education and employment. We are called to welcome refugees and immigrants, defend religious freedom, support marriage and family and protect the environment.

But if we must keep all of these principles in mind, is there going to be anyone we can vote for?

Unfortunately, we are often forced to choose between two inadequate and flawed political agendas. It can be quite difficult to find candidates who align with our consciences on all of the key moral issues.

This is why the virtue of prudence is necessary when approaching the voting booth. This virtue helps us deliberate over the choices before us — to determine, in light of Church teaching and our formed consciences, who is most deserving of our support. In other words, in a world of imperfect choices, we must strive to make the best choice possible.

Where Catholics must be in agreement is that fundamental moral obligation we share: To “help build a more just and peaceful world through morally acceptable means, so that the weak and vulnerable are protected and human rights and dignity are defended” (FC, No. 20).

Four steps before voting

- Inform yourself about the Church’s teachings. The Catechism of the Catholic Church is a great place to start. Consider gathering a small group to discuss Church teachings in relation to the candidates or policies.
- Inform yourself about the issues. Read the Catholic press and listen to the candidates. See where the candidates stand on critical moral and social issues.
- Seek input from Catholics you respect.
- Pray. Take your hopes, concerns and worries to the Lord and ask for his guidance.

If no single party or candidate in a given election conforms to our key Catholic principles, what are we to do?

It is clear that one absolutely may not vote for a “candidate who favors a policy promoting an intrinsically evil act, such as abortion, euthanasia, assisted suicide, deliberately subjecting workers or the poor to subhuman living conditions, redefining marriage in ways that violate its essential meaning, or racist behavior, if the voter’s intent is to support that position” (FC No. 34). But neither can one use a candidate’s opposition to such evils “to justify indifference or inattentiveness to other important moral issues involving human life or dignity” (FC, No. 34).

There may be times when a voter selects a candidate who holds an unacceptable position, but this can be done only for “truly grave moral reasons,” not just for partisan or personal interests. It may involve the prudential judgment that one candidate seems likely to do less harm or is more likely to pursue other positive priorities.

If, for a grave reason, we do vote for a candidate who holds positions contrary to fundamental moral goods, we have a duty to make our opposition to those positions heard. Writing letters, speaking up at forums and participating in local party political activities are ways to steadfastly assert our Catholic values.

There may even be occasions when some Catholic voters feel that they must take “the extraordinary step of not voting for any candidate” (FC, No. 36). This, too, is a serious decision that must be guided by one’s conscience and the moral teachings of our faith.

This seems hard.

In today’s political environment, voting as a Catholic is hard work. It takes serious reflection, knowledge of Church teaching and awareness of who the candidates are and where they stand on the issues.

The Church challenges us to vote for what is best for society and all of its members, particularly those least able to speak up for or defend themselves. The great privilege of democracy is that we, as citizens and religious believers, can have a voice in the direction of our country by voting for the common good; this is both a right and a responsibility. The great privilege of being Catholic is that we have a community of faith and a body of teaching, going back to Christ himself, that can help us make good decisions in the voting booth.