


In the Voting Booth

A Catholic's Guide



The Second Vatican Council exhorts the faithful "to perform their duties faithfully in the spirit of the Gospel. It is a mistake to think that, because we have here no lasting city, but seek the city which is to come, we are entitled to shirk our earthly responsibilities; this is to forget that by our faith we are bound all the more to fulfill these responsibilities according to the vocation of each one."

— Pope Benedict XVI

Why should I vote?

Voting: It is one of our most important responsibilities as citizens. Indeed, the Church teaches that there are three primary responsibilities of all citizens:

- to pay taxes
- to defend their country
- to vote (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, # 2240).

Each of these responsibilities asks us to put the good of society and our fellow citizens above our immediate desires and needs. As Catholic voters, the question we must answer is not whether we are better off than four years ago, but 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.

So 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 values of their faith to the choices they make in the voting booth.

As Catholics, 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 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’ 2007 document, *Forming Citizens for Faithful Citizenship*, #17, hereafter referred to as *FC*).

It is our responsibility as Catholics to form our consciences

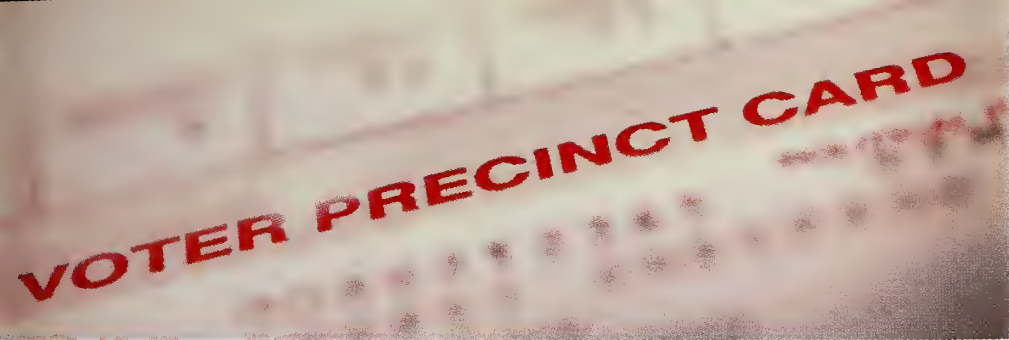
- by studying Scripture and Church teaching
- by using our reason to study key issues in light of this teaching
- by prayerfully seeking to understand the will of God.

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 the popes and saints for centuries, our faith has clear prin-





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ciples 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.

We are not single-issue voters

“As Catholics, we are not single-issue voters. A candidate’s position on a single issue is not sufficient to guarantee a voter’s support. Yet a candidate’s position on a single issue that involves an intrinsic evil, such as support for legal abortion or the promotion of racism, may legitimately lead a voter to disqualify a candidate from receiving support” (*FC 42*).

So what are the key principles that should be guiding us as we enter the voting booth?

First, we are obliged as Catholics to “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 20*). This states in the most positive terms what is asked of us as followers of Christ.

When we consider the issues in light of this obligation, our faith reminds us that, first and foremost, we are not allowed to support “intrinsically evil” actions of any sort, such as the taking of innocent human life. This is why the Church so strongly opposes abortion, infanticide, and 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



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violate human dignity and are destructive of life, such as the cloning of human beings or the destruction of human embryos, as in embryonic stem cell research.

It also condemns genocide, torture, and racism, for they too are severe violations of human rights and human dignity, as well as unjust discrimination or the targeting of noncombatants in acts of terror or war.

The moral teaching of our Church is about more than prohibitions, however. We Catholics are encouraged to respond to the basic needs of human beings — food, shelter, health care, education, and employment. We are called to defend marriage, welcome the immigrant, and protect the environment. These are all goods to be sought as we go about the work of building a more peaceful and just world.

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

All of these issues are important, but they are not all morally 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 28*).

Yet this does not mean other concerns, from war and the death penalty to racism and care for the poor and the immigrant, are not hugely important. “These are not optional concerns which can be dismissed” (*FC 29*).

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

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

This is why the virtue of prudence is necessary when approaching the voting booth. This virtue can help us deliberate over the choices before us — to determine, in light of Church teaching and our correctly 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.

In a world of prudential judgments, it is quite possible that well-formed and educated Catholics may differ on

what is the best choice to make in the voting booth. But we are called to draw upon the teachings of our faith in coming to our decisions, not party loyalty, self-interest, or political slogans.

Where Catholics must be in agreement is that fundamental moral obligation we share: To “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 20).

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 takes a position in favor of an intrinsic evil, such as abortion or racism, *if the voter’s intent is to support that position*” (FC 34, emphasis added). 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 34).

There may be times when a voter selects a candidate who hold 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 36). This, too, is a serious decision that must be guided by one’s conscience and the moral teachings of our faith.

Four steps to take before you enter the booth

1. **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 them in relation to the candidates.
2. **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.
3. **Seek input from Catholics you respect.**
4. **Pray.** Take your concerns, worries, and confusion to the Lord and ask for His guidance.



This seems hard.

In today’s political environment, voting as a Catholic can be hard work. It takes serious reflection, knowledge of Church teaching, and awareness of who the candidates are and where they stand on the issues. Our vote is a serious moral decision that will affect not only the future course of our country and many innocent lives, but our own salvation as well. We cannot intentionally support moral evils, or vote for a candidate specifically because he or she does — for that is also a form of supporting moral evil.

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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 can have a voice in the direction of our country by voting for the common good. The great privilege of being Catholic is that we have a body of teaching, going back to Christ himself, which can help us make the right decisions in the voting booth.

Where can I find out more?

Catechism of the Catholic Church

United States Catholic Catechism for Adults

Compendium: Catechism of the Catholic Church

Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church

Our bishops have issued a detailed reflection on Catholic teaching and political life, called *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*; www.faithfulcitizenship.org.

Also see www.osv.com for additional Catholic resources.

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