

Tough calls: discerning your vote as a Catholic

It is rare at this point that Catholic voters are offered truly Catholic alternatives in elections. Seldom do the positions taken by any one candidate or by any one party map perfectly onto Catholic social teaching. More often, each candidate and each party has adopted some positions that are reassuringly consistent with our thought, and others that are disappointingly contrary. And in an increasingly polarized world, our choices seem to be growing worse.

How to choose?



For Catholics the voting process should always be basically the same, whether our choices are good or bad. Really, it's only a variation of the process we should use in making all life decisions. We should always:

1. inform ourselves responsibly concerning (a) the teachings of the Church and (b) issues relevant to the election;
2. reflect prayerfully;
3. choose confidently; and
4. once the election is over, stay actively and respectfully engaged with those who have been elected - whether they are our own preferred candidates or not. This is important if we hope to improve the system.

Even when choices seem clear, we should neither ignore the process nor skip steps: we Catholics have both a civic duty to stay informed and a calling to seek God's help in choosing. Nor can we responsibly abstain, except in extreme and very clear-cut circumstances. If we don't vote, and don't stay engaged, how can we hope to improve things? And how, when we face judgment, will we explain the fact that we failed to do what we could to help build a world pleasing to God?

Informing ourselves



We Catholics should inform ourselves not only about those issues that affect us personally, but also those around us – including the poor and the marginalized, and those in distant parts of the world. It's a part of our Catholic call to charity, a part of what we will all be judged on, both as individuals and as nations. See, e.g., Chapter 25 of Matthew.

The first, indispensable step is to familiarize ourselves with Catholic Social Teachings. Not just one or two pet issues, but the full range of teachings. Among other things, familiarity with the full range of teachings helps prevent us from acting selfishly, in accordance with our own personal biases.

Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops: Voting as Catholics

“Exercising the right to vote means making informed and discerning judgments about the options available. There are times, however, when making a decision about who to vote for may prove very difficult.”

In making civic decisions, the Church teaches that we should consider each of four permanent principles of Catholic social teaching: the sanctity of life and human dignity; the common good, including the health of our planet and our environment; solidarity, or the principle that what happens to others affects us as well; and subsidiarity – the principle that individuals should be left to make decisions for themselves, whenever it's responsible for them to do so. A number of guides are available. The most authoritative include The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church and various Papal encyclicals and exhortations, such as The Joy of the Gospel, Rerum Novarum, and Laudato si', all of which are available at www.vatican.va. Further information is available from many Dioceses, including the Diocese of Saskatoon at https://rcdos.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/why_justice_peace.pdf, and on the Catholic Conscience website at <https://catholicconscience.org/CatholicCivics>.

The other half is to inform ourselves responsibly concerning issues that are prominent (or which should be prominent) in the election. Among other things, this means that we must learn about the positions taken by each candidate, and by each party offering candidates in the election, as well as parties' leaders and governing structures. The parties' platforms and other published documents are typically found on their websites; and comparisons of stated positions of the registered parties to the Church's teachings are available on the Catholic Conscience website at <https://catholicconscience.org/canada/ontario>.

Getting to know the candidates seeking to represent our own ridings is an effective way of not only coming to understand their positions on the issues, but also of letting them know that we care and are engaged. Among other things, in the very common event that the parties' platforms and public statements omit issues that should be important to us as Catholics, meeting with candidates personally presents an excellent opportunity to ask them where they and their parties stand.

It is also vital to keep up with the news at all times – before, during, and after elections. In this age of pervasive electronic media, keeping up with headline news is not difficult, but doing so responsibly requires a bit of effort. Relying on our friends' social media posts is not responsible.

The best practical approach is to identify two or three primary news sources, preferably of alternative political leanings, and to follow them daily. Doing so does not require a great amount of time, if a daily habit is developed – 15-20 minutes over your morning coffee can suffice, once one is generally current. It's also desirable to identify 2-3 monthly magazines or journals – again, of diverse points of view – to keep up with. Remember that forming your conscience is of infinite importance – particularly doing so based on facts and principles of the common good, rather than relying on personal inclinations – which can lead to errors born of pride and selfishness.

Another important way of informing ourselves is to converse regularly with those around us – especially with those of differing views. Our friends, neighbors, co-workers, and others have as many ideas as we have – exploring them as alternatives and new ideas – always respectfully, always in an attractive spirit of joy flowing from love of the Gospel and confidence in the love and power of Christ, is a great practice. Our goal is to seek truth.

Reflecting prayerfully



Prayer is a highly personal practice and can be approached in a wide variety of ways. We should all be conversing daily – preferably, moment by moment – with God, our guardian angels, and our patron saints. And we should not be shy about sharing our difficulties and our misgivings with them. Over time, this will lead to an awareness of oneself, and the feelings associated with various spiritual movements that can be associated with prayers for guidance. The writings of St Ignatius Loyola (available at www.ignatius.com) and St Alphonsus Liguori (www.Liguori.org) on the discernment of spirits can be helpful in making difficult decisions, including voting choices.

A recommended process is to focus the mind on God and the issues faced in the election, and the problems we are having in deciding our vote. This should be done continually during the information-gathering process. Invoke the Holy Spirit, lay the issues before God, and ask for guidance. Then, in that moment and throughout the day, watch and listen for answers: answers come in many forms, often in unexpected ways.

Pope Francis, the Joy of the Gospel

“People in every nation enhance the social dimension of their lives by acting as committed and responsible citizens, not as a mob swayed by the powers that be. Let us not forget that responsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a moral obligation.”

Asking the intercession of Mary, Seat of Wisdom and Queen of Heaven, is also a good idea. The Rosary is probably the best means at our disposal for contemplating problems in the context of the life of Christ.

Voting confidently



Having prayed sincerely and reflected devoutly throughout the process of informing ourselves, we are entitled to choose and vote with confidence, even if it seems our vote might be wasted. It's important to remember that:

- **God moves in ways we don't always understand**, sometimes even in ways that may seem bad to us at the time. Remember that God can make use of very bad events to bring about great good, sometimes many years later. For example:
 - Joseph, son of Jacob, was able to save his family and all Israel by behaving devoutly and appropriately for many years, even after his brothers sold him into slavery and he was wrongfully imprisoned.
- Joseph, foster-father of Christ, discovered that his betrothed was with child before their marriage had been consummated. Yet she bore for Joseph, and for all of us, the Son of the living God.
- Judas, one of Christ's twelve chosen, betrayed Christ to the Sanhedrin, resulting in his crucifixion –which, in turn, caused the apostles to be sent forth to make disciples of all nations.
- **Christ is the great multiplier**. Remember, for example, the miracles of the loaves, the fishes, and the crowds. We can never know what use God might make of a single conversation, or a single, properly-discerned vote, now or many years from now.

And remember that prayer –voting is a form of prayer, when approached properly – is to be done with confidence. By voting confidently, according to our best lights, with the realization that we cannot control everything ourselves, we assist God in his continuing act of Creation.

Staying involved



We are blessed to live in a democracy, with its privilege of self government. But we must maintain constant vigilance, and stay constantly involved, if we don't want to lose it. Voting is the bare minimum we can do: we must act - always in humility, and always seeking the wise and gentle path; leading, and never coercing or browbeating. We must act, each of us in accordance with the gifts, including freedom, that have been entrusted to us, in all spheres of life: home, work, neighborhood, city, region, national, and international. We are called to consider even direct participation in politics, by following up with candidates after they have been elected, or by offering ourselves as candidates and party members, and in writing to party leaders and editors; and we are called to involve ourselves with good causes, including organizations seeking to create positive change, giving our time and, where possible, money to support them.

And we should try to be a positive force in the lives of those God has placed in our immediate circles: our families, coworkers, fellow parishioners, those we pass on the street... and when we meet candidates or elected officials who have done good things, we should thank and encourage them.

“As far as possible citizens should take an active part in public life.”

Catechism of the Catholic Church, Section 1915