

# Faithful citizens

The church does not tell Catholics how to vote, but it does offer guidance on how to think about voting.



by Bernard Evans

“I have a right to vote!” is a common claim heard among citizens of the United States or any democracy. News media warn of voter suppression as some officials seek to make it more difficult for people to cast their ballots. People are concerned about protecting everyone’s right to vote. Equally important is everyone’s responsibility to show up at the polls: The right to vote comes with a duty to vote—and to do so in the most informed way possible.

Among the many resources available to Catholics in the United States as they prepare for an election are the church’s social teachings. These universal teachings receive a particular voting focus in the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ document “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship.” The bishops update the document every four years prior to the presidential election. They identify a number of issues for Catholic voters to consider. The specific suggestions are helpful, but perhaps the document’s greatest contribution is the general reminder of key principles from Catholic teaching that guide Catholic voting.

The document reminds us that the bishops “do not intend to tell Catholics for whom or against whom to vote,” just as the church does not tell Catholics how to vote. It does seek to guide its members in how to think about voting and form their consciences as they make political choices.

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*Bernard Evans is professor emeritus from Saint John’s University in Collegeville, Minnesota, where he served as associate dean for faculty in the School of Theology. His most recent publications include *Vote Catholic? Beyond the Political Din* (Liturgical Press).*

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### 3 reminders from Catholic social teaching

Catholic voters are responsible for knowing the church's values and what role faith plays in our political decisions. Morally responsible voting reflects appreciation of the common good, the various issues that support or hinder its realization, and the quality and character of the candidates who can help make this happen.

#### Focus on the common good

In Catholic social teaching the *common good* means “those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillments,” according to *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World). Which candidates will work for the common good? Which candidates will strive to secure decent living conditions for everyone, especially people with great needs? Common good thinking—and voting—goes beyond judging candidates on their political affiliations and beyond asking, “What will this candidate do for me?”

#### Consider all the issues

Catholics are not single-issue voters. Voters look at all issues facing the community, state, and nation. Then they decide which issues can be addressed at this time and by the office for which the candidates are contending. A responsible practicality guides issues assessment during an election season.

#### Evaluate the candidate's character

Beyond a general focus on the common good and an examination of the issues, evaluating the character of the candidates themselves can help make voting decisions. Political leaders leave a mark on the political culture and therefore on society itself. Accepting bad personal behavior invites bad behavior regarding state and national policies.

### 7 issues of importance

At any time and place, different issues are of varying importance and urgency in promoting the common good. In the United States right now, a number of issues deserve Catholic voters' attention when they go to the polls. While not a comprehensive list, the following seven issues are among them.

### Climate change

Every month new reports from members of the scientific community warn that the effects of climate change are developing faster than previously anticipated. News services tell of increasingly severe weather events along the eastern seaboard, more severe droughts and wildfires in western states, and rising ocean levels.

**“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.”**

—“Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship”

The Paris Climate Agreement is an international treaty focused on reducing global climate change. However, the United States has not been consistent in its contributions to these efforts, having withdrawn from the Agreement in 2020, before being restored in 2021.

Caring for the environment is everyone's responsibility. Acts leading to environmental destruction affect the quality of life for humans everywhere. They lead to hardship, especially for people who are poor and vulnerable.

The USCCB calls Catholics to address environmental challenges in its 1991 statement “Renewing the Earth.” Pope Francis, in his 2015 encyclical, *Laudato Si'* (On Care for Our Common Home), writes that climate change “represents one of the principal challenges facing humanity in our day,” stressing the need for an ecological conversion grounded in our relationship with Jesus Christ. The pope calls for changes in lifestyle that can bring “healthy pressure to bear on those who wield political, economic and social power.”

Another way to influence those power structures is through voting. Which candidates acknowledge that climate change is happening and that human activity is a major cause of this phenomenon? Who among the candidates seem willing to address this issue with meaningful programs and legislation?

## Racial justice

Protests against police violence following the killing of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer in 2020 rocked the United States. Cities across the country experienced large demonstrations of people calling for police reform and an end to racism.

Some local governments worked to reform their police departments, hoping to end the violent abuse of power, especially against Black people, by some law enforcement officers. Equally needed is a nationwide effort to confront the racism present in society that fuels individual acts like the one that killed Floyd. Although many Americans denounce individual acts of racism, more can be done to change the underlying culture of racism that gives rise to such actions and preserves white social privilege.

Catholic teaching opposes any form of discrimination. After the death of Floyd, Pope Francis warned that Catholic indifference to racism is not consistent with Catholic teaching on human dignity. “We cannot tolerate or turn a blind eye to racism and exclusion in any form and yet claim to defend the sacredness of every human life,” he said.

How might we address systemic racism in our society? Condemning discrimination is a start. Focusing on how we enable a culture of racism is a greater challenge.

Elected officials hold the keys to future policies, programs, and laws that will either dismantle or continue to tolerate structural, cultural racism. Where do candidates on every level stand regarding issues of racial justice?

## Culture of violence

The United States struggles with multiple forms of violence carried out on a daily basis.

Abortion continues to be an example of violence and death directed against human beings. With almost 50 percent of abortions taking place among people living in poverty, we might ask how we can support mothers who choose to give birth even when faced with limited resources.

Capital punishment remains another form of publicly sanctioned violence—a practice without legal, social, or economic benefit. Total executions are at a record low, and 23 states have abolished the death penalty. Still, executions continue. As recently as July 2020, the U.S. Department of Justice resumed federal executions for the first time in more than 15 years though a year later Attorney General Merrick Garland reinstated the moratorium on the federal death penalty.

Gun violence is another unchecked form of killing. Each year guns are used to kill more than 39,000 Americans. In 2021 there were nearly 700 mass shootings (in which four or more people were killed, not counting the shooter).

Catholic social teaching holds up the dignity of every human being against all acts of violence. In 1995 St. Pope John Paul II addressed the many forms of violence that threaten human life throughout the world. His encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (On the Inviolability of Human Life) speaks of the “culture of death” that marks societies and cultures. Today we can repeat the Holy Father’s warning.

Where are candidates on issues that contribute to a culture of violence? Do they recognize how seriously these acts of violence threaten the peace and well-being of communities? Can they grasp how blatantly the taking of another human’s life contradicts the Creator’s plans for life on this planet?

“A political commitment to a single isolated aspect of the Church’s social doctrine does not exhaust one’s responsibility toward the common good.”

—“Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship”

## Immigrants and refugees

Every nation has the right to control its borders, but the United States’ exercise of that right must be balanced against the responsibility toward people fleeing their own countries in search of safety or a better economic life. Our nation’s leaders have demonized immigrants, built a wall to keep them out, and separated children from their parents at the border.

Most citizens recognize the system is broken. As acknowledged by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and other trade groups, we need foreign workers. Our labor force cannot supply the needed workers in such areas as agriculture and food processing, the hospitality industry, and construction. Yet we remain stuck with immigration policies that don’t meet our needs, much less those of people desperately seeking a new life free of poverty and violence.

Catholic social teaching recognizes our duty to welcome refugees and develop immigration policies suited to our times. In their most recent version of “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship,” the bishops remind us of the “scriptural call to welcome the stranger among us—including immigrants seeking work.” It is difficult to recognize this biblical mandate in some of our nation’s responses to immigrants and refugees.

In his apostolic exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate* (Rejoice and Be Glad), Pope Francis insists that the challenge of working with immigrants and refugees is a primary issue, saying that Christians should “stand in the shoes of those brothers and sisters of ours who risk their lives to offer a future to their children.”

Which candidates recognize this issue as the important human rights matter that it is?

## Poverty

Thirty-seven million Americans live in poverty. The COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to this rising number, especially among traditionally marginalized groups (center city, rural, minorities, and single-parent families) within American society. The pandemic also has left local governments short on financial resources—revenue to assist people in poverty.

Globally the situation is even worse. A July 2020 report from the United Nations warned that the pandemic could add more than 130 million people to the ranks of those who are hungry and undernourished, for a total of 3 billion people worldwide.

The gospel calls followers of Jesus Christ to assist people who live in poverty and on the margins of society as well as those who are vulnerable in any way. Catholic social teaching adds to that challenge with its preferential option for the poor, which calls us to do more than respond to people’s immediate needs and work to change whatever causes them to be in such need. If there is a lack of access to medical services, seek changes in our health care system. If affordable housing is out of reach, make more available or seek increases in wages.

Catholics can bring attention to people who are marginalized and vulnerable during political campaigns by joining programs and organizations seeking to register low-income voters and even helping get them to the polls.

We can vote for candidates who will listen and respond to the needs of people living in poverty and who will work for necessary structural changes in

## 5 steps for discerning your vote this election

Catholic teaching challenges voters to consider the moral and ethical dimensions of public policy issues rather than partisan allegiances. This fall, as you consider how to vote, ask yourself if a candidate will do the following:

1. Support immigration policies that treat immigrant workers fairly, prevent family separation, offer a path to citizenship, and address the factors that compel people to leave their own countries.
2. Oppose policies that reflect prejudice, hostility toward immigrants, racism, or other forms of unjust discrimination.
3. Help families overcome poverty by ensuring access to education, decent work at fair living wages, and access to a safety net, both in the United States and internationally.
4. Support policies that prevent our nation and its citizens from turning to violence, whether war, the death penalty, assisted suicide, or abortion.
5. Exercise care for the Earth in a way that respects God’s creation, protects the world’s most poor and vulnerable, and ensures a sustainable future.

*Adapted from “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship”*

“As citizens, we should be guided more by our moral convictions than by our attachment to a political party or interest group.”

—“Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship”

society that bring benefits especially to people with the greatest needs.

### Health care

The 2022 election takes place within the COVID-19 context. Our nation—and the world—has been affected by the ongoing pandemic. COVID-19 reveals many shortcomings in our health care system. One is that more than 27 million Americans have no health insurance and therefore have difficulty seeking medical services for this virus or any other health need.

In the United States most private health insurance is tied to full-time employment, so millions of part-time workers do not receive this benefit. Further, in the past few months, more than 5 million full-time workers have lost their jobs and their health insurance.

The United States remains one of the few advanced nations today that does not provide some form of universal health care and that does not recognize medical services as a human right.

Catholic social teaching regards health care services as a right for all people. St. Pope John XXIII, in his encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (On Peace), states that since we regard all humans as having the right to life, we must also make sure people have what they need to live their lives in dignity. That includes access to needed medical services.

Which candidates reflect our church's teaching on the provision of health care services to all? Who among those vying for public office recognize health care as a human right and as a necessity for realizing the common good? Which candidates have the vision and skills to help our nation enact health care reform to benefit everyone, especially those with the fewest resources?

### International relations

For decades the United States has proven to be a world leader in promoting peace among nations, guiding multinational economic progress, and helping countries suffering from poverty and hunger. Our nation has not always maintained this leadership role, however. For a time the United States even withdrew from the Paris Agreement and the World Health Organization. At this time our economic relationship with China is uncertain and Russia has reemerged as a global threat to peace and democracy. Our nation has not always been willing to confront abuses of human rights on the part of these nations.

**"[Voting] decisions should take into account a candidate's commitments, character, integrity, and ability to influence a given issue."**

**—"Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship"**

## A prayer for an election

Loving God, creator of this world who is the source of our wisdom and understanding, watch over this nation during this time of election. Help us to see how our faith informs our principles and actions.

We give thanks for the right to vote. Help us to hold this privilege and responsibility with the care and awareness it merits, realizing that our vote matters and that it is an act of faith.

Guide us through this election as a nation, state, and community as we vote for people to do work on our behalf and on the behalf of our communities. Help us to vote for people and ballot initiatives that will better our community and our world so it may reflect the values Christ taught us.

Help us create communities that will build your kingdom here on earth—communities that will protect the poor, stand up for the vulnerable, advocate for those who are not seen and heard, and listen to everyone's voice.

We pray for this nation that is deeply divided. May we come together for the common good and do as you have called us to do—to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with you through creation. Help us act out of love, mercy and justice rather than out of arrogance or fear.

Loving God, continue to guide us as we work for the welfare of this world. We pray for places that are torn by violence, that they may know peace.

We pray for communities who are struggling with inequality, unrest, and fear. May we all work toward reconciliation with one another and with you.

Help us to listen in love, work together in peace, and collaborate with one another as we seek the betterment of our community and world.

*—Rev. Shannon Kelly, missionary for young adult and campus ministries for the Episcopal Church*

Catholic social teaching reminds us that we are one human family, that we are responsible for all of our brothers and sisters. Certainly we need to look out for the welfare of our own nation, but never in a way that denies our obligations to the global community.

In his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel), Pope Francis warns against a “globalization of indifference” that leaves us “incapable of feeling compassion at the outcry of the poor.”

In “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship,” the USCCB offers several corrections to the current trend in U.S. international relations. The United States should take a leading role in helping to alleviate global poverty, should offer political and financial support for international bodies effectively addressing global problems, and should provide asylum for refugees.

Which candidates are willing to help our nation reconnect with the global community as a leader committed to the welfare of all nations? Who among those seeking public office recognize the opportunities present for the United States to lead the world in alleviating global poverty and the human crises that cause so many people to abandon their homelands and become refugees and immigrants? Which candidates appreciate the benefits that come to our nation when it engages fully with the international community and promotes the common good?



In an attempt to bring needed systemic changes in any of these areas, there normally will be multiple options on the table to address the problem, including various legislative approaches. No doubt other issues could be included on this list as well, and the issues that attract our attention the most will influence our voting.

From a Catholic perspective, our choice of candidates should be guided by our best judgment about who is most likely to address those issues in a way that benefits the common good. The example of Jesus Christ as found in scripture, tradition such as that portrayed in Catholic social teaching, and guidance from the USCCB shared in the document “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship” tell us that Catholics should support the option that we believe brings the greatest benefits to those persons and groups with the greatest needs. To reach that conclusion we must examine the issues as well as the candidates—their effectiveness and their character. **USC**

“[We] bishops do not intend to tell Catholics for whom or against whom to vote. Our purpose is to help Catholics form their consciences in accordance with God’s truth. We recognize that the responsibility to make choices in political life rests with each individual in light of a properly formed conscience, and that participation goes well beyond casting a vote in a particular election.”

—“Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship”

## How Catholics should think about politics and government

By Stephen Schneck

**T**uesday, November 8, 2022, is election day across America. Because of our places along the spectrum of American voters, Catholics again have a pivotal role to play in these elections. How should we vote?

There are many excellent guides for Catholic voting. Recently, for example, the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops reissued its Forming Conscience for Faithful Citizenship document. For the most part, though, such guides focus at the policy level, identifying specific policies to be opposed or promoted. Tendentiously, some of these guides are written as if commandments from on high, listing five or nine “non-negotiables,” and so on.

As useful as such policy guides can be, they can get lost in specifics and not enlighten us about how Catholics should engage in political life more generally. Offered here, then, are seven reflections about good Catholic political engagement that address how we should vote.

#### **Reflection 1: Practice politics**

Traditional Catholic teachings recognize not only the necessity of government for human life but also its responsibility to promote the good for society. Unlike the negative conception Americans often have, perceiving politics as at best a necessary evil, the church sees political life as natural and ideally a noble activity for achieving what cannot be done by private individuals. Citizenship comes, therefore, with a moral obligation to be involved in public life. In a democracy where voting is a primary form of political engagement, *Catholic teachings insist on the importance of voting.*

#### **Reflection 2: Engage selflessly**

The basic Christian message has always been about overcoming the self in love of God and others. In politics, this gospel message means that we should engage not to advance “interests”—be they self-interest, special interests, or partisan interests—but rather to advance the common good of the whole community. The ideal here is not a politics of division and competition but one of solidarity and cooperation as citizens rise above selfish concerns to focus on what is best for the polity and all its parts. *In Catholic teachings citizens should vote in light of the common good.*

#### **Reflection 3: Discern the common good**

In practice, engaging in political life for the common good means putting the needs of the vulnerable, marginalized, and least powerful foremost. Who are the vulnerable, marginalized, and least powerful? They are those the gospels speak of as “the least” among us: the poor, the unborn, the oppressed, the abused, the migrants in the shadows, the sick, the imprisoned, children, those at the end of life, and even our abused planet itself. The measure for the common good is not military prowess, technology, or the Dow Jones Index; it is instead the quality of life of the least among us. *In Catholic teachings citizens should vote with the least among us foremost in their minds.*

#### **Reflection 4: Choose virtue**

To advance the common good means is to promote virtue. Promoting virtue is in many ways the stuff of true politics. Citizenship is not so much a matter of legal rules and birthright; good citizenship emerges from citizens’ formation in virtue. Character matters. It is crucially incumbent on voters to weigh a candidate’s virtue, but even more it is incumbent to vote for those whose policies inculcate virtue. *In Catholic teachings citizens should vote for the virtuous.*

#### **Reflection 5: Engage with humility**

As Catholics we understand how sin clouds minds and corrupts hearts, even our own. In contrast with ideologues who pridefully assume certainty about what is right and who self-righteously judge others, the gospels caution against pride and demand humility. Those in authority must govern humbly, practicing servant leadership. *In Catholic teachings citizens should vote for those who humble themselves as servants of the common good.*

#### **Reflection 6: Exercise prudence**

Prudence is the virtue of making wise choices about things that are not certain. St. Thomas Aquinas thought prudence was the essential virtue for politics and government. Unlike revolutionaries who would destroy the existing order and replace it with another, a prudent person takes her bearings for change from the existing order. So tradition, custom, precedent, due process, and rule of law are valued and respected. *In Catholic teachings, voting should be guided by prudence.*

#### **Reflection 7: Vote prophetically**

Truth is what the ancient prophets lifted up in times of falsehood and confusion. Prophets are those with the grace not be fooled by lies and the courage to bear witness to inconvenient truths. Prophets unmask the blinders of ideology, post-truths, partisanship, and mass opinion. Prophecy is speaking truth to power. With the resurrection, all Christians are called to be prophets. *In Catholic teachings, voting should be informed by the truth, should bear witness to truth, and should speak truth to power.*

With the pivotal place that Catholics occupy in American public life comes a weighty responsibility. For the sake of our nation and our fellow citizens, we are called to shoulder that responsibility with the guidance of the church’s moral and social teachings.

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