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## **Voting with a Catholic conscience**

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Over the last months, I have heard numerous people, many of them Catholic, express frustration at the current state of our nation's political life. We will make big decisions next month about the future leadership of the United States and of our state, and many are unhappy with the choices before us.

I could list a litany of flaws in each of our presidential candidates, but that is being done on a daily basis in the media. I won't repeat what we have already heard or read many, many times over. This should remind us, however, that there is no perfect candidate, and there is no perfect political party. No one candidate or party fully represents the Church's thinking on issues of public life.

For this and many other reasons, the Church does not endorse or identify with any particular candidate or party. To do so would limit our freedom to address and engage all people of all political persuasions.

But the Church does raise its voice on issues of public policy because the Church has a responsibility to promote human dignity, the care of creation, and the common good. For that matter, every Catholic and every citizen shares in that responsibility. This is why Catholics should be well informed and active in the public life of our community and our nation. Each of us has a contribution to make to the wellbeing of our fellow citizens and future generations.

As Catholics and as citizens, we also have a responsibility to exercise the right to vote and to do what we can to work for the common good. The realm of politics can be frustrating and disappointing, but it is that place where each of us can make a stand for what is right and good. As I have written before, there is a growing effort in our society to silence the public voice of believers and to thwart their involvement in the public life of the nation. All the more reason, then, to exercise our right to speak and act in accord with our most deeply held beliefs.

The issues in public life and in this year's election are increasingly complex, but fortunately, there are good resources to help us as we prepare to vote in November. The North Dakota Catholic Conference, which acts on behalf of the Catholic bishops of North Dakota in areas of public policy and social teaching, has issued "Your Faith, Your Vote." This resource offers pertinent questions to ask candidates regarding their positions on key issues, like the right to life, religious freedom, family life and care for the poor. It also gives us principles to follow as we discern how to cast our vote. "Your Faith, Your Vote" can be found on the NDCC website at [ndcatholic.org](http://ndcatholic.org).

The Catholic Bishops of the United States have also reissued their document "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship" (available at [uscbb.org](http://uscbb.org)). It too contains important principles of Catholic teaching that we should consider when voting, including the dignity of the human person, the common good, solidarity, and the formation of conscience.

The role of conscience is especially important in carrying out our public responsibilities. Conscience is a judgment of reason that helps us to recognize and seek what is good, and reject what is evil. As Pope Francis states, "This does not mean following my own ego or doing what I am interested in or what I find convenient or what I like" (Angelus address, June 30, 2013). We have an obligation to form our consciences; it does not just happen.

Conscience formation requires openness to the truth as it is found in Sacred Scripture and the teaching of the Church. It may be easier to base our voting choices on political ads or party affiliations, but rather than vote as members of this or that party, we should vote as Catholics. That means we submit our lives in faith to Jesus Christ and actually believe and act on what the Catholic faith holds to be true. A well-formed Christian conscience does not permit one to vote in favor of a program or law that contradicts the fundamental contents of faith and morals. But when voting for a person to hold office, one may morally choose even a candidate with imperfect behavior or principles, if there are no alternatives.

This can be done, positively, by seeking the greater good rather than the “lesser evil.” A faithful Catholic may also choose not to vote for a particular office if major candidates are unacceptable. This also can be an intentional act for the good in exceptional circumstances.

As responsible voters, we need to look at all the issues, but we must recognize that not all issues are equal in weight or priority. The Church even tells us that some principles are non-negotiable. The right to life is foundational to all other rights, and it cannot be counted simply as one issue among many. The integrity of marriage and family life are written in the law of God, and cannot be subject to political whim or expediency. The Second Vatican Council tells us that religious liberty is a fundamental right of the human person, and must be protected.

There are other issues of grave importance, like care for the poor and the elderly, the proper treatment of visitors and immigrants, and the decision of whether to go to war. These too are rooted in our faith, for Jesus told us, “Whatever you did to these least ones, you did to me.” There are, of course, many legitimate ways to serve and to care for those in need, so there can be legitimate diversity of opinion among Catholics about how to address these and many other issues.

This election will determine the course of our nation’s life for the next decade or more. So, as people of faith, we should pray for our nation, and we should pray deeply before we vote. Voting is serious business, and even when we are faced with imperfect choices, we cannot leave this responsibility to others, who might not share our faith in the divine law of God.

We must ask God for the wisdom and courage to choose what is right and good, what will be best for the people of this great country. The right to vote and to have a say in our nation’s governance was hard-earned and should not be taken for granted. Many people around the world would make great sacrifices to have such a right. Let us then be faithful citizens and do what we can to promote the Gospel of Christ and the common good for all our brothers and sisters.