

Voter's Guide for Serious Catholics

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DISCLAIMER: Nothing in this voter's guide should be construed as an endorsement of any particular candidate or political party.

HOW THIS VOTER'S GUIDE HELPS YOU

This voter's guide helps you cast your vote in an informed manner consistent with Catholic moral teaching. It helps you avoid choosing candidates who endorse policies that cannot be reconciled with moral norms that used to be held by all Christians. On most issues that come before voters or legislators, the task is selecting the most effective strategy among several morally good options. A Catholic can take one side or the other and not act contrary to the faith. Most matters do not have a "Catholic position."

But some issues concern "non-negotiable" moral principles that do not admit of exception or compromise. One's position either accords with those principles or does not. No one endorsing the wrong side of these issues can be said to act in accord with the Church's moral norms. This voter's guide identifies five issues involving "non-negotiable" moral values in current politics, and helps you narrow down the list of acceptable candidates, whether they are running for national, state, or local offices. You should avoid to the greatest extent possible voting for candidates who endorse or promote intrinsically evil policies. As far as possible, you should vote for those who promote policies in line with the moral law.

In many elections there are situations where all of the available candidates take morally unacceptable positions on one or more of the 'non-negotiable' issues. In such situations, a citizen will be called upon to make tough choices. In those cases, citizens must vote in the way that will most limit the harm that would be done by the available candidates.

In this guide we will look first at the principles that should be applied in clear-cut races, where there is an unambiguously good moral choice. These same principles help lay the groundwork for what to do in situations that are more difficult. Knowing the principles that are applied in ideal situations is useful when facing problematic ones, so as you review the principles you should keep in mind that they often must be applied in situations where the choice is more difficult. At the end of the guide we will offer practical advice about how to decide to cast your vote in those cases.

YOUR ROLE AS A CATHOLIC VOTER

Catholics have a moral obligation to promote the common good through the exercise of their voting privileges (cf. CCC 2240). It is not just civil authorities who have responsibility for a country. "Service of the common good require[s] citizens to fulfill their roles in the life of the political community" (CCC 2239). This means citizens should participate in the political process at the ballot box. But voting cannot be arbitrary. "A well-formed Christian conscience does not permit one to vote for a political program or an individual law that contradicts the fundamental contents of faith and morals" (CPL 4). A citizen's vote most often means voting for a candidate who will be the one directly voting on laws or programs. But being one step removed from law-making doesn't let citizens off the hook, since morality requires that we avoid doing evil to the greatest extent possible, even indirectly.

Some things always are wrong, and no one may deliberately vote in favor of them. Legislators, who have a direct vote, may not support these evils in legislation or programs. Citizens support these evils indirectly if they vote in favor of candidates who propose to advance them. Thus, to the greatest extent possible, Catholics must avoid voting for any candidate who intends to support programs or laws that are intrinsically evil. When all of the candidates endorse morally harmful policies, citizens must vote in a way that will limit the harm likely to be done.

THE FIVE NON-NEGOTIABLE ISSUES

These five current issues concern actions that are intrinsically evil and must never be promoted by the law. Intrinsically evil actions are those which fundamentally conflict with the moral law and can never be deliberately performed under any circumstances. It is a serious sin to deliberately endorse or promote any of these actions, and no candidate who really wants to advance the common good will support any action contrary to the non-negotiable principles involved in these issues.

1. Abortion

The Church teaches that, regarding a law permitting abortions, it is "never licit to obey it, or to take part in a propaganda campaign in favor of such a law, or to vote for it" (EV 73). Abortion is the intentional and direct killing of an innocent human being, and therefore it is a form of homicide. The unborn child is always an innocent party, and no law may permit the taking of his life. Even when a child is conceived through rape or incest, the fault is not the child's, who should not suffer death for others' sins.

2. Euthanasia

Often disguised by the name "mercy killing," euthanasia also is a form of homicide. No person has a right to take his own life, and no one has the right to take the life of any innocent person. In euthanasia, the ill or elderly are killed, by action or omission, out of a misplaced sense of compassion, but true compassion cannot include intentionally doing something intrinsically evil to another person (cf. EV 73).

3. Embryonic Stem Cell Research

Human embryos are human beings. "Respect for the dignity of the human being excludes all experimental manipulation or exploitation of the human embryo" (CRF 4b). Recent scientific advances show that often medical treatments that researchers hope to develop from experimentation on embryonic stem cells can be developed by using adult stem cells instead. Adult stem cells can be obtained without doing harm to the adults from whom they come. Thus there is no valid medical argument in favor of using embryonic stem cells. And even if there were benefits to be had from such experiments, they would not justify destroying innocent embryonic humans.

4. Human Cloning

"Attempts . . . for obtaining a human being without any connection with sexuality through 'twin fission,' cloning, or parthenogenesis are to be considered contrary to the moral law, since they are in opposition to the dignity both of human procreation and of the conjugal union" (RHL I:6). Human cloning also involves abortion because the "rejected" or "unsuccessful" embryonic clones are destroyed, yet each clone is a human being.

5. Homosexual "Marriage"

True marriage is the union of one man and one woman. Legal recognition of any other union as "marriage" undermines true marriage, and legal recognition of homosexual unions actually does homosexual persons a disfavor by encouraging them to persist in what is an objectively immoral arrangement. "When legislation in favor of the recognition of homosexual unions is proposed for the first time in a legislative assembly, the Catholic lawmaker has a moral duty to express his opposition clearly and publicly and to vote against it. To vote in favor of a law so harmful to the common good is gravely immoral" (UHP 10).

WHICH POLITICAL OFFICES SHOULD I WORRY ABOUT?

Laws are passed by the legislature, enforced by the executive branch, and interpreted by the judiciary. This means you should scrutinize any candidate for the legislature, anyone running for an executive office, and anyone nominated for the bench. This is true not only at the national level but also at the state and local levels. True, the lesser the office, the less likely the office holder will take up certain issues. Your city council, for example, perhaps never will take up the issue of human cloning but may take up issues connected with abortion

clinics. It is important that you evaluate candidates in light of each non-negotiable moral issue that will come before them in the offices they are seeking.

Few people achieve high office without first holding a lower office. Some people become congressional representatives, senators, or presidents without having been elected to a lesser office. But most representatives, senators, and presidents started their political careers at the local level. The same is true for state lawmakers. Most of them began on city councils and school boards and worked their way up the political ladder. Tomorrow's candidates for higher offices will come mainly from today's candidates for lower offices. It is therefore prudent to apply comparable standards to local candidates. One should seek to elect to lower offices candidates who support Christian morality so that they will have a greater ability to be elected to higher offices where their moral stances may come directly into play.

HOW TO DETERMINE A CANDIDATE'S POSITION

1. The higher the office, the easier this will be. Congressional representatives and senators, for example, repeatedly have seen these issues come before them and so have taken positions on them. Often the same can be said at the state level. In either case, learning a candidate's position can be as easy as reading newspaper or magazine articles, looking up his views on the Internet, or studying one of the many printed candidate surveys that are distributed at election time.
2. It often is more difficult to learn the views of candidates for local offices because few of them have an opportunity to consider legislation on such things as abortion, cloning, and the sanctity of marriage. But these candidates, being local, often can be contacted directly or have local campaign offices that will explain their positions.
3. If you cannot determine a candidate's views by other means, do not hesitate to write directly to the candidate, asking for his position on the issues covered above.

HOW NOT TO VOTE

1. Do not just vote based on your political party affiliation, your earlier voting habits, or your family's voting tradition. Years ago, these may have been trustworthy ways to determine whom to vote for, but today they are often not reliable. You need to look at the stands each candidate takes. This means that you may end up casting votes for candidates from more than one party.
2. Do not cast your vote based on candidates' appearance, personality, or "media savvy." Some attractive, engaging, and "sound-bite-capable" candidates endorse intrinsic evils, while other candidates, who may be plain-looking, uninspiring, and ill at ease in front of cameras, endorse legislation in accord with basic Christian principles.
3. Do not vote for candidates simply because they declare themselves to be Catholic. Unfortunately, many self-described Catholic candidates reject basic Catholic moral teaching.
4. Do not choose among candidates based on "What's in it for me?" Make your decision based on which candidates seem most likely to promote the common good, even if you will not benefit directly or immediately from the legislation they propose.
5. Do not vote for candidates who are right on lesser issues but who will vote wrongly on key moral issues. One candidate may have a record of voting in line with Catholic values except, say, for euthanasia. Such a voting record is a clear signal that the candidate should not be chosen by a Catholic voter, unless the other candidates have voting records even less in accord with these moral norms.

HOW TO VOTE

1. For each office, first determine how each candidate stands on each of the issues that will come before him and involve non-negotiable principles.
2. Rank the candidates according to how well their positions align with these non-negotiable moral principles.
3. Give preference to candidates who do not propose positions that contradict these principles.
4. Where ever candidate endorses positions contrary to non-negotiable principles, choose the candidate likely to do the least harm. If several are equal, evaluate them based on their views on other, lesser issues.
5. Remember that your vote today may affect the offices a candidate later achieves.

WHEN THERE IS NO "ACCEPTABLE" CANDIDATE

In some political races, each candidate takes a wrong position on one or more issues involving non-negotiable moral principles. In such a case you may vote for the candidate who takes the fewest such positions or who seems least likely to be able to advance immoral legislation, or you may choose to vote for no one. A vote cast in such a situation is not morally the same as a positive endorsement for candidates, laws, or programs that promote intrinsic evils: It is only tolerating a lesser evil to avoid an even greater evil. As Pope John Paul II indicated regarding a situation where it is not possible to overturn or completely defeat a law allowing abortion, “an elected official, whose absolute personal opposition to procured abortion was well known, could licitly support proposals aimed at limiting the harm done by such a law and at lessening its negative consequences at the level of general opinion and public morality’.”(EV, 73; also CPL, n.4)

Catholics must strive to put in place candidates, laws, and political programs that are in full accord with non-negotiable moral values. Where a perfect candidate, law, or program is not on the table, we are to choose the best option, the one that promotes the greatest good and entails the least evil. Not voting may sometimes be the only moral course of action, but we must consider whether not voting actually promotes good and limits evil in a specific instance. The role of citizens and elected officials is to promote intrinsic moral values as much as possible today, while continuing to work toward better candidates, laws, and programs in the future.

THE ROLE OF YOUR CONSCIENCE

Conscience is like an alarm. It warns you when you are about to do something that you know is wrong. It does not itself determine what is right or wrong. For your conscience to work properly, it must be properly informed—that is, you must inform yourself about what is right and what is wrong. Only then will your conscience be a trusted guide. Unfortunately, today many Catholics have not formed their consciences adequately regarding key moral issues. The result is that their consciences do not "sound off" at appropriate times, including on election day. A well-formed conscience never will contradict Catholic moral teaching. For that reason, if you are unsure where your conscience is leading you when at the ballot box, place your trust in the unwavering moral teachings of the Church. (The Catechism of the Catholic Church is an excellent source of authentic moral teaching.)

WHEN YOU ARE DONE WITH THIS VOTER'S GUIDE

Please do not keep this voter's guide to yourself. Read it, learn from it, and prepare your selection of candidates based on it. Then give this voter's guide to a friend, and ask your friend to read it and pass it on to others. The more people who vote in accord with basic moral principles, the better off our country will be.

ABBREVIATIONS: CCC Catechism of the Catholic Church; CPL Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, Doctrinal Notes on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life; CRF Pontifical Council for the Family, Charter of the Rights of the Family; EV John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* (The Gospel of Life); RHL Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on Respect for Human Life in Its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation*; UHP Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Considerations regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions between Homosexual Persons*

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