deliberate over the choices before us — to determine, in light of Church teaching and our 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. Where Catholics must be in agreement is that fundamental moral obligation we share: to “help 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 favors a policy promoting an intrinsically evil act, such as abortion, euthanasia, assisted suicide, deliberately subjecting workers or marriage in ways that violate its essential meaning, or racist behavior, 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 holds 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 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 Church teachings in relation to the candidates or policies.
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 hopes, concerns, and worries to the Lord and ask for his guidance.

This seems hard.

In today’s political environment, voting as a Catholic is hard work. It takes serious reflection, knowledge of Church teaching, and awareness of who the candidates are and where they stand on the issues. 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, as citizens and religious believers, can have a voice in the direction of our country by voting for the common good; this is both a right and a responsibility. The great privilege of being Catholic is that we have a community of faith and a body of teaching, going back to Christ himself, which can help us make good decisions in the voting booth.

Where can I find out more?

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

Catechism of the Catholic Church (USCCB Publishing)

United States Catholic Catechism for Adults (USCCB Publishing)

Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church (USCCB Publishing)

How to Defend the Faith without Raising Your Voice, Revised by Austen Ivereigh and Kathryn Jean Lopez (Our Sunday Visitor, 2015)

Landato St: On Care for Our Common Home, Pope Francis (Our Sunday Visitor, 2015)

Seek First the Kingdom: Challenging the Culture by Living Our Faith, by Cardinal Donald Wuerl (Our Sunday Visitor, 2012)

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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 (see Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2240).

Each of these responsibilities asks us to put the good of society and our fellow citizens above our individual desires and needs. Thus a primary question we must answer as Catholic voters is 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.

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 faith values to the choices they make in the voting booth.

As Catholics, following the challenging path of discipleship, 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.

What are the key principles that should guide us as we enter the voting booth?
Four principles of Catholic social doctrine are key to making practical judgments to do good and avoid evil in voting:

1. Promoting and defending the dignity of the human person
2. Supporting the family and subsidiarity in local, state, and national institutions
3. Working for the common good where human rights are protected and basic responsibilities are met
4. Acting in solidarity with concern for all as our brothers and sisters, especially the poor and most vulnerable (FC 40-72).

Is there anything Catholics must always reject?

As Catholics we “may choose different ways to respond to compelling social problems, but we cannot differ on our moral obligation to help 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).

Our faith reminds us that we must always reject and oppose “intrinsically evil” actions of any sort. Acts such as the taking of innocent human life are so deeply flawed that they are always incompatible with love of God and neighbor.

The moral teaching of our Church is about more than prohibitions. We Catholics are encouraged to respond to the basic needs of human beings — food, shelter, health care, education, and employment. We are called to welcome refugees and immigrants, defend religious freedom, support marriage and family, and protect the environment.

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