

The Church does not tell us whom we can and can't vote for, and here's why

The book claimed "Your Vote Can Endanger Your Salvation." The writer meant a vote for a pro-choice Democrat. Like, oh, Joe Biden. An influential Catholic writer tweeted more bluntly that "A Christian who knowingly votes for Biden risks going to hell. Good luck. Hell is forever."

I suspect both of them really meant "well," but even if they didn't, many Catholics say it on their own. Priests for Life national director Father Frank Pavone even tweeted that he would hear the confessions of people who voted for a Democrat, "but we are trained that in the absence of repentance, absolution has to be withheld."

It isn't true. The Church does not teach this. Just to start, anything you do can endanger your salvation, depending on why you do it. Even voting for a pro-life politician, if you do it to hurt others or to secure your own advantage at a cost to others.

What the Church does teach about voting is a little tricky, though. She teaches and defends eternal truths. But she does so thinking deeply about how to live them in a fallen world. How to do that isn't always obvious. That's where the challenge comes in.

Abortion makes the question hard to answer. As Pope St. John Paul II said in *Evangelium Vitae*, abortion is a crime, and one "no human law can claim to legitimize." We can't support it in any way. Then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger said in 2002, in a famous doctrinal note about Catholic participation in political life, abortion violates "the essence of the moral law, which concerns the integral good of the human person." In

a message to the American bishops two years later, he said directly that a Catholic can't vote for a candidate because he supports abortion.

But here's where it gets tricky. The Church recognizes that democratic politics is a matter of imperfect choices between inadequate or even corrupt candidates to achieve limited ends and the best result we can. Politics involves a lot of "ifs" and "what ifs" and "maybes" and best guesses and questions never quite answered.

No candidate in American history has held a completely Catholic set of positions. And even if one did, we'd have to ask whether he really meant it and whether he'd really follow it. In almost every election, especially at the national level, one candidate gives you one thing the Catholic wants and takes away another thing, and his opponent does the same thing in reverse. [Voting requires mature reflection and often struggle.](#) It is not something the responsible Catholic does according to a simple formula.

That abortion is completely wrong doesn't mean a Catholic has to vote for the pro-life candidate (assuming there is one) and against the pro-choice candidate. Ratzinger explained: "When a Catholic does not share a candidate's stand in favor of abortion and/or euthanasia, but votes for that candidate for other reasons, it is considered remote material cooperation, which can be permitted in the presence of proportionate reasons." John Paul II had said the same thing in *Evangelium Vitae*, speaking of elected officials voting on legislation. The American Catholic bishops said this in their document ["Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship."](#)

"Remote material cooperation" means that you help someone do something, but at a distance. "Proportionate reasons" means roughly that you believe the good to be done outweighs the evil that will be done. Because abortion is so completely wrong, that good must be very good indeed. What does this mean

for voting?

First, even when one candidate says he is pro-choice and the other says he is pro-life, that fact isn't dispositive, as the lawyers say. It doesn't come close to settling the matter. Your first job as a Catholic voter is to know what the candidates say and what they mean by it, if they mean anything. For example, you may find that the "pro-life" candidate is not really pro-life or that if he is, his policies are not, or if they are, that he won't push them once elected. Anyone can say he's pro-life and then not do anything to protect the unborn.

Second, you must consider all the issues. You may find you have a proportionate reason for voting for the pro-choice candidate. Or you may not.

Third, you are not bound by the choices our two-party system presents. You may find you can't vote for either major candidate. You may, for example, take a long view and want to help build a more Catholic alternative to the two major parties. You may vote for a third party or even not vote at all.

You may believe that the pro-choice candidate's policies will save more unborn lives than the pro-life candidate's; or that the pro-life candidate will do such damage to society, and to human persons, that he loses whatever advantage he has in saving unborn lives by the damage he causes; or that the pro-life candidate will do such damage to our country and our political system that he will destroy the possibility of a pro-life public ethic. Or other reasons.

Catholics don't vote by formula. We vote with "a well-formed conscience that perceives the proper relationship among moral goods," as the American bishops said. And that's hard work, but it's the work we're given to do.

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