

RESPECT LIFE MONTH:

Three Rules for Catholic Voters

Our bishops say that abortion is the preeminent social issue.
What does that mean for us on Election Day?

By Trent Horn, Catholic Answers

Faith, Abortion, and Voting, Part 3

In this series leading up to Election Day, we will explain why abortion is the most serious and urgent social issue of our time and what this means for Catholic voters. Are we simply free to vote for whatever candidate we prefer, for any reason that's in our conscience? Or does our right to vote come with objective moral responsibilities that we must consider before casting our ballot?

In our previous installment we talked about what Catholic politicians need to do when it comes to the preeminent issue of abortion. But what about Catholic voters? What responsibilities do we have?

Here are three rules every Catholic voter needs to follow when it comes to the issue of abortion. As with the rules for politicians, they are derived from Catholic principles and magisterial statements:

First, Catholics must *never promote or directly vote for propositions or laws whose goal is to maintain or increase access to abortion*. Pope John Paul II said, "In the case of an intrinsically unjust law, such as a law permitting abortion or euthanasia, it is therefore never licit to obey it, or to take part in a propaganda campaign in favor of such a law, or vote for it" (*Evangelium Vitae*, 73).

Second, a Catholic must *never vote for a politician because of that politician's support for legal abortion*. To do so is to commit a grave sin. As Cardinal Ratzinger said, "A Catholic would be guilty of formal cooperation in evil, and so unworthy to present himself for Holy Communion, if he were to deliberately vote for a candidate precisely because of the candidate's permissive stand on abortion and/or euthanasia."

Third, Catholics may not *vote for a candidate who supports abortion merely because they agree with the candidate on other, less important issues*. In order to understand this rule we need to understand the difference between issues that involve intrinsic evils and issues that involve prudential judgments.

An intrinsically evil act is something that is always wrong no matter the circumstance. No policy goal, no public good, no sweet-sounding campaign promise can ever justify it.

This is why the USCCB says that “all issues do not carry the same moral weight and that the moral obligation to oppose policies promoting intrinsically evil acts has a special claim on our consciences and our actions.” The USCCB adds that other intrinsically evil acts beside abortion include euthanasia, assisted suicide, cloning, redefining marriage, genocide, torture, targeting civilians in war, and subjecting workers to inhumane conditions.

Prudential judgments, in contrast, involve issues on which the Church has not given us specific guidance. For example, we have a moral duty to help the poor, but the Church has not given us a list of specific policy proposals Catholics must endorse in order to carry out that duty. Catholics can reasonably disagree with one another about how to help the poor in practical terms and even forge compromises to resolve issues involving prudential judgments.

This means that just because a candidate endorses a different approach to an issue involving prudential judgments than you do, it doesn't follow that the candidate has endorsed an intrinsic evil. As Archbishop Charles Chaput put it:

You can't say that somebody's not Christian because he wants to limit taxation. This may not be the most effective policy, but it's certainly a legitimate Catholic position; and to say that it's somehow intrinsically evil like abortion doesn't make any sense at all.

A Catholic can never vote for a candidate *because* the candidate supports an intrinsic evil. We also can't vote for a candidate who endorses an intrinsic evil just because we agree with that candidate on issues that, however important, involve prudential judgment. For example, we could not vote for a candidate who campaigns on a plan to forcibly sterilize the poor because we like his job-creation ideas better than the other candidate's.

Read the entire 5-part series at www.catholic.com/magazine,. Scroll down to “More Catholic Articles.”

"It is impossible to further the common good without acknowledging and defending the right to life, upon which all the other inalienable rights of individuals are founded and from which they develop." --Pope John Paul II, The Gospel of Life