

Forming our Conscience – Preparing to Vote

When it comes to voting and forming our conscience in preparation for voting, it is essential that we acknowledge the existence of objective truth and objectively good values. There is right and wrong and we don't determine what's right or wrong as these objective values exist whether we believe it or like it. Knowing objective truth is ultimately knowing and living according to reality. Someone can say they feel the Earth is flat, but we all know that just because they don't believe the world to be round doesn't make it any less round. So the first key is to put in the mental effort to learn and never stop learning. Ignorance is not bliss. Along with this, we are called to form our consciences according to Jesus Christ and the Church He established. So knowing what our Church teaches (and why it teaches what it does) is vitally important. Properly forming our conscience is so important because modern society will otherwise warp our sense of right and wrong to the point where we see no problem with sin. Our conscience won't be reliable if we don't form it just as a piano won't produce good sound if it isn't regularly tuned. The beauty of a conscience informed by the truth is that it will be able to apply the principles of truth to tricky situations, such as who to vote for, when the "perfect candidate" is nowhere to be found!

Forming our conscience isn't something we can simply accomplish in a week or a month, but is rather a lifelong process of study, reflection, reading, and growing in our knowledge and faith. However, I want to equip you with some practical moral guidelines that can help you make decisions on who to vote for in the upcoming election. These points are complements of an article I read by a Mr. Colin Donovan, STL:

1. Personal moral character is not unimportant, as it obviously informs the candidates appreciation of the moral dimension of public issues, but it is the stated commitment to public policy in keeping with the **common good** which is the most significant factor.
2. The elements of the common good:
 - a. the fundamental and inalienable natural rights of human persons, (CCC 1907)
 - b. the basic common goods of society (food, clothing, health, work, education and culture, suitable information, the right to establish a family, etc.) (CCC 1908),
 - c. and the stability and security that comes with a just social order. (CCC 1909)
3. There are certain **Non-negotiables goods** which promote the common good:
 - As far as the Catholic Church is concerned, the principal focus of her interventions in the public arena is the protection and promotion of the dignity of the person, and she is thereby consciously drawing particular attention to principles which are not negotiable. Among these the following emerge clearly today:
 - (a) protection of life in all its stages, from the first moment of conception until natural death;
 - (b) recognition and promotion of the natural structure of the family as a union between a man and a woman based on marriage, and its defense from attempts

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to make it juridically equivalent to radically different forms of union which in reality harm it and contribute to its destabilization, obscuring its particular character and its irreplaceable social role;

(c) the protection of the right of parents to educate their children.

(Address to European Parliamentary Group, 30 March 2006 by Pope Benedict XVI)

These non-negotiable goods must never be in the same category or balance as other **negotiable goods**. Negotiable goods are those topics such as health care, immigration, gun laws, education policies. We all want good health care, including for those who are poor, to have a just and charitable immigration plan, to protect people from the dangers of firearms while at the same time not restricting the freedom to bear arms, and we certainly want good education for our children. However, the way that we achieve this is certainly up for debate and it would be foolish and far too simplistic to say that one candidate or one party just hates people and wants to make them miserable.

Here is a particularly helpful quote from the article regarding policy issues vs. essential issues:

“Those issues which are *non-negotiable*, like protecting innocent human life, and those which are *negotiable*, because they involve multiple moral principles and complex social circumstances, are not directly comparable. Negotiables, such as health care, the economy and foreign policy, can admit of various possible means to achieve the objective of the policy, and so people of goodwill can reach differing conclusions on how to achieve the goal.”

Non-negotiable topics must not be compared to negotiable topics in the instance of voting for the “lesser of two evils.”

I know this is hardly conclusive in moral principles and figuring out who to vote for, but my hope is that it's a helpful start and that it creates a conversation and sparks a deeper desire to vote well!

Your pastor,

Fr. Justin