

How Catholics have defended free elections—and why they must do so again

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In his first encyclical, “Magnifica Humanitas,” Pope Leo XIV warns against a “culture of power” where efficiency and domination replace human dignity and the common good. Although the document is primarily focused on artificial intelligence, its critique of concentrated power and its defense of truth against manipulation speak directly to larger themes of democratic life, especially those related to voting and elections.

As the United States celebrates its 250th birthday and approaches a consequential midterm election, American Catholics face an important test. Both at home and abroad, free and fair elections are under threat. These threats are less about outright fraud and rigging, and more about disinformation, voter intimidation, attempts to limit participation, central governments interfering with the local administration of elections, and verbal and physical threats to election officials. As Catholic theologians have noted, erecting unjust barriers to vote is a sin aimed at denying the sacred right to participate in civic life.

Catholics, as a significant voting bloc representing over one-fifth of the electorate, must decide whether we will defend the integrity of American elections as a moral expression of love for neighbor and commitment to the common good, or watch as the country slides further into authoritarianism, marked by indiscriminate immigration enforcement that has separated families and taken scores of innocent

lives. This is not a partisan question but one that is intimately connected to Catholic social and moral teachings.

Catholic teachings on voting and elections

“Democracy recognizes the dignity of every person and calls each citizen to participate responsibly in the pursuit of the common good,” Pope Leo [declared in April](#). Voting, according to Catholic social teaching, is a moral duty and responsibility. In his encyclical “*Centesimus Annus*,” Pope John Paul II praised the democratic election process for ensuring that citizens can participate in political life and can hold leaders accountable and replace them through peaceful means when appropriate. As Meghan Topp Goodwin [notes](#) in a working document outlining a Catholic case for democracy, Catholic support for free elections extends back at least to St. Thomas Aquinas, who wrote in *Summa Theologica* that “the rulers can be chosen from the people, and the people have a right to choose their rulers.”

The U.S. Catholic Church’s orientation to elections, as articulated in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and the U.S. bishops’ teachings on “[Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship](#),” is shaped by commitments to truth, peaceful civic participation and respect for legitimate democratic outcomes. Commitment to truth encompasses truthfulness in campaigns, in counting ballots and in reporting and respecting the results. Meaningful participation means that all eligible citizens should be allowed to vote free from violence, intimidation and other unjust barriers. Catholics are called to respect legitimate authority and the rule of law, and to reject violence, intimidation and attempts to overturn lawful results through coercion. While emphasizing cooperation, the

Catechism mandates that citizens refuse obedience to authorities when directives violate moral law or human rights.

The crisis of electoral integrity

Both globally and in the United States, levels of democracy have declined significantly. Indeed, three-quarters of the world now lives under authoritarian rule, according to the Varieties of Democracy Institute. Electoral manipulation and subversion have been central to this wave of “autocratization.” Rather than stuffing ballot boxes outright, elected autocrats choose from a menu of tactics to remain in power. This includes erecting barriers to voting, spreading disinformation, threatening and intimidating voters and election workers and rejecting election results, among many other tactics.

The United States has experienced a notable uptick in attacks on election integrity, especially since Donald J. Trump’s first term, when lies about the 2020 election led to the assault on the U.S. Capitol and attempt to overturn the results on Jan. 6, 2021. Nonpartisan democracy groups contend that what is different about 2026 is that, for the first time in modern U.S. history, the full power of the federal government is being turned against U.S. elections. This includes attempts to restrict access to the ballot, including through the pressuring of states to purge voting rolls. Unfounded claims of voter fraud, foreign interference in the counting of votes, and the supposed unreliability of mail-in ballots and voting machines are being amplified across all levels of government. Federal law-enforcement agencies are being deployed to manufacture the appearance of election fraud, intimidate election officials and create the pretext for contesting the results, as with the F.B.I. raids on election offices in Georgia and Arizona and on a voting rights organization in Ohio.

These are precisely the kinds of tactics used by emerging autocrats around the world to undermine elections and stay in power. The president has threatened to take direct control over election administration from states and punish those who oppose him. The very real possibility is that, as has happened with elected autocratic governments throughout the world, this will mean the administration can stay in power indefinitely.

Historically, the strongest antidote to democratic backsliding and authoritarian consolidation is broad-based movements that bring people together across race, class, societal sector and geography to engage in collective nonviolent action. Recent scholarship has found that the probability of stopping backsliding without an active civil resistance movement that employs tactics like protests, boycotts and strikes is about 7.5 percent; the probability rises to nearly 53 percent with a civil resistance movement.

The Catholic Church has played a critical role in protecting free and fair elections and democratic institutions in places like Zambia, where it participated in a broad front to educate the public and stop unconstitutional activity; Brazil, where it strongly condemned an attempted coup and called for national reconciliation; Guatemala, where it played the role of truth-teller, acted as a mediator and participated in nonviolent action to ensure a peaceful transfer of power; South Korea, where it played a vital role in ending martial law; and in earlier, iconic cases like Chile, Poland, the Philippines, and the U.S. South, when Catholic communities and hierarchy engaged in mutual aid, community organizing and civil resistance to uphold democracy. More historical examples can be found here *[link to sidebar]*.

Before, during and after elections

There are multiple important roles for the church and Catholic communities before, during and after elections. They are reinforced in guidance offered by interfaith groups in the United States currently focused on nonpartisan election defense, such as the [Faith in Elections Playbook](#), the [Faithful Fight Toolkit](#), the [Election Official Outreach Toolkit](#) and the [Executive Override Faith Companion Action Guide](#).

Faithful actions involve fighting for a level playing field in the lead-up to elections, including by stopping voter suppression and protecting local control of elections, then maximizing participation in voting, regardless of party affiliation. After votes are cast, it involves bearing witness to ensure that all votes are counted and that the results are legitimate, in coordination with other faith and civic leaders. Finally, it means ensuring a peaceful transfer of power through broad coalitions and, if necessary, through nonviolent protest and non-cooperation.

For church leadership, lay Catholics and grassroots organizations, activities in the pre-election phase could include:

- **Offer moral framing for free and fair elections** grounded in Catholic social teaching. Publicly affirm the sacredness of the vote through public statements, pastoral letters and moral appeals (like the Malawian bishops' highly consequential [pastoral letter](#) "Living Our Faith," the Leadership Conference of Women Religious' [Declaration of Commitment](#), and pastoral reflections on voting and civic participation by [Bishop Joseph N. Perry](#), an auxiliary bishop emeritus of

Chicago, and [Bishop Daniel E. Garcia](#) of Austin emphasizing respect for free will, human dignity, constitutional procedures and the rule of law. In homilies, prayers of the faithful and announcements, offer moral framing for free and fair elections. Reject electioneering in church and emphasize that the pulpit must remain a place of prophetic truth and moral clarity, not political opportunity. Reinforcement of this point from Pope Leo, our first American pope, would be significant.

- **Celebrate and encourage voting rights and participation** guided by faithful conviction. Filipino bishops have called for a [revolution of hope](#) while condemning corruption and democratic erosion. In the United States, Network’s “[See. Love. Vote.](#)” nationwide, nonpartisan voter education and mobilization campaign is focused on helping people participate in elections as informed citizens guided by love for neighbor and a commitment to truth and the common good—not simply party loyalty—and includes voter participation tools. The Aug. 1 [National March into Marquette Park](#) in Chicago in defense of voting rights and social justice; [Faith in Us](#), a multistate, multifaith initiative to defend elections led by Minnesota faith leaders; and the [National Convergence for Democracy](#), happening in Minneapolis on Aug. 21-23, are other opportunities for collective faith in action.
- **Conduct parish-based listening and education** on immediate threats to elections and the existential threat to democracy. Meet with key leaders to discuss election safety and educate on threats to election integrity, using resources like “[Protecting Participation in Civic Life](#),” from Catholics in Communion, and “[Executive Override](#),” from Protect Democracy. Catholics in Communion holds [regular Tuesday virtual trainings on](#)

supporting Catholics ministries to understand and react to voting threats.

- **Organize conferences that uplift stories of Catholics**, including Catholic bishops courageously upholding democracy and defending free and fair elections around the world. For example, “Participation, Dignity, and the Elections: A Virtual Catholic Theological Conference” on September 16-17, and the Democracy Initiative at the University of Notre Dame. Share helpful resources like “The Catholic Case for Democracy,” stories of Catholics resisting authoritarianism, and examples of how diverse faith actors and traditions have challenged autocracy and protected civic participation.
- **Establish or strengthen relationships with election officials** and other key actors who run elections. Attend election open houses and invite election officials to community spaces for question-and-answer sessions. Press them to develop contingency plans in case of federal interference, and let them know that the community will hold them accountable.
- **Encourage candidates to respect election results** no matter the outcome and secure pre-commitments from candidates along those lines, as the nonpartisan Wisconsin Business Leaders for Democracy has done.
- **Prepare to de-escalate political violence and build skills in nonviolence**. Recruit and train individuals to be poll chaplains, including through Faiths United to Save Democracy’s poll chaplain/peacekeeper program. Provide or advertise training in nonviolence, civil resistance, noncooperation and de-escalation in keeping with the Catholic tradition of Gospel nonviolence. This type of training, in churches across the

Philippines, was critical to the success of the “people power” movement that removed Ferdinand Marcos from power in 1986.

- **Participate in scenario planning and build election protection teams** within parishes and dioceses using planning tools like [Democracy Defense as Offense](#) or [Election Defense Scenarios](#). Organize regional participation summits for theological reflection and to discuss local election threats, develop “get out the vote” and voter support plans and make post-election plans.
- **Build coalitions** with other key religious and secular actors, including law groups (like law firms and bar associations), business groups (like local chambers of commerce), unions and veterans. Broad cross-sector, ecumenical alliances have been critical to defeating elected autocrats in Zambia, Brazil and elsewhere. Cross-denominational and interfaith joint statements and actions are particularly important in non-Catholic-majority countries.
- **Develop cross-partisan relationships**, particularly in communities prone to election-related violence, to display shared commitment to democratic values.

During:

- **Frame participation as empowerment, frame resistance as joyful and faithful** and encourage [voting as a civic celebration](#). Ensure that parishioners and communities know about alternatives to in-person voting and the relevant deadlines (such as early voting, drop boxes and absentee ballots).

- **Serve as a poll chaplain** by participating in poll monitoring programs offered by groups like Faiths United to Save Democracy. Encourage people to become volunteer poll workers. Inform everyone in your community about how to get help and report election disputes through 1-800-866-VOTE.
- **Design or participate in accompaniment programs** for people worried about going to the polls alone, including through partnerships with veterans, lawyers and other civic leaders such as [Project HALO](#).
- **Train community leaders to understand the rules** around law enforcement at the polls, administrative issues at the polls and provisional ballots. Provide trustworthy information and quickly condemn election interference, such as attempts to threaten voters and election workers.
- **Condemn violence and de-escalate tense situations**, including through joyful activities like Joy to the Polls in Philadelphia in 2020, or when local leaders organized a [dance party](#) outside the Philadelphia Convention Center during the vote count. Or in Lansing, Mich., when caravans of people drove around [honking and singing](#) ahead of election certification, also in the tense political environment of 2020.

After:

- **Call for all votes to be counted** as a show of respect for the dignity of voters. Support ballot curing and other rapid response efforts to support proper election administration and ensure that every eligible voter who casts a ballot is represented in the final count, even in the face of challenges to certification. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, for instance,

played a [key role](#) in mobilizing parish-based poll watchers and conducting parallel vote tabulation to check against official tallies.

- **Engage in public witness and prophetic voice** to ensure protection for poll workers, voters and votes. Adopt a polling place and have ongoing prayer, monitoring and potential accompaniment of election staff facing threats. Organize rosaries at polling locations (or virtually) to pray for election safety.
- **Use your status as trusted leaders** in the community to ensure that voters and community members receive trustworthy information about the election certification process.
- **Engage privately and/or publicly with key decision-makers, elected officials and other leaders** to ensure they fulfill their roles in accordance with democratic values. The Franciscan Action Network's [Election Official Outreach Toolkit](#) can support that process. Publicly endorse legitimate electoral results and urge losing candidates to accept them or await a court ruling. Guatemalan bishops made a significant intervention when they publicly acknowledged the rightful winner of the 2023 presidential election and called for a peaceful transfer of power.
- **Be prepared to mobilize and organize with other key local leaders** (such as neighborhood and community leaders, local business leaders, labor unions and former elected officials) if local or state election officials refuse to certify the election. The alliance between the A.F.L.-C.I.O., the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the National Association of Evangelicals and the National African American Clergy Network played a [key role](#) in

ensuring a peaceful transfer of power in Washington in January 2021.

- **Use the trusted voice of your parish to support leaders who show courage and conviction** in carrying out their duties, particularly those facing pressure to undermine our democratic process.
- **Legitimate and participate in non-cooperation and mass mobilization** activities to ensure a peaceful, lawful, orderly transfer of power at all levels of government. These activities have been necessary to uphold election integrity in countries around the world. They could include vigils, walk-outs, boycotts of corporate enablers, economic shutdowns and a range of other forms of organized noncooperation. Recognizing that autocratic regimes will often depict peaceful protestors as violent hooligans or terrorists, providing institutional legitimacy for nonviolent civic action is critically important, as the Catholic Church has done in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Guatemala, the Philippines, South Korea and recently in the United States during mass protests against lethal Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids in Minneapolis and other cities. Standing for nonviolence and disciplined nonviolent action while accompanying peaceful protestors in the face of state violence has been a significant contribution of Catholic bishops, priests, nuns and laypeople around the world.
- **Condemn state violence and repression and center respect for human dignity and societal reconciliation.** Trusted community leaders joining forces, speaking out and taking action against violence, ranging from public statements to vigils to noncooperation, is a key way to make political violence and repression backfire, strengthening those who come under attack

and imposing social, political and economic costs on perpetrators. During mass pro-democracy protests in 2018, the Nicaraguan bishops' conference condemned state violence and provided sanctuary and safe exit for peaceful protestors, and repeatedly put their bodies between the military, paramilitary groups and civilians.

Each of these roles is reflected in Catholic teachings and the practice of faithful citizenship in this country and around the world. Anchored in commitments to truth, human dignity and the common good, and responsive to the church's commitment to fraternity, [active nonviolence and just peace](#), they offer multiple ways for Catholic leaders, institutions and communities to uphold the sacredness of the vote as a moral commitment and social good.

The Dignity of the Vote

In “Magnifica Humanitas,” Pope Leo echoes [St. Pope John Paul II](#) in his call for building a “civilization of love” rather than a “culture of power.” The encyclical's embrace of truth, its rejection of concentrated political, technological and economic power, and its call to protect human dignity and the common good are premised on active civic participation and democratic culture. It is grounded in the kind of [fraternal love](#), recognition of humanity as family and communion that have underscored Catholic teachings from St. Augustine's description of kinship to Pope Benedict XVI in “Caritas in Veritate” to Pope Francis in “Fratelli Tutti.”

Just as American Catholics and bishops have stood in solidarity with immigrant communities, [condemning mass deportations](#), delivering groceries to families afraid of leaving their homes, [divesting](#) from

corporate enablers of detention facilities, and putting their bodies between federal officers and communities, now we are called on to defend the dignity of the vote. That entails working to level the playing field and resist election manipulation, particularly at the state level; encouraging voting informed by commitment to human dignity and the common good; ensuring that elections are free, fair and safe from violence and intimidation; and defending legitimate election results, particularly if election administrators come under attack. Public education via pastoral letters, homilies and adult catechism, poll monitoring, coalition-building, violence de-escalation, peaceful protest, prayerful anticipation, and disciplined noncooperation to uphold election integrity and the rule of law are all roles that Catholic actors have played in the past.

Today, the defense of free, fair and secure elections, a critical means to exercise principled Catholic voice and action, requires vigilance, preparation and partnerships with faith and secular groups. It requires standing with the vulnerable and marginalized, speaking out against abuses of power, and nonviolently upholding democratic principles and the rule of law. Fortunately, many Catholic parishes, dioceses, conferences and civic groups are already in motion. Their principled leadership, from the community level all the way up to Pope Leo, our first American pope, is necessary to stem democratic erosion and lead a societal renewal grounded in solidarity and love.