

Catholic Social Thought and Voting

By Fr. Fred Kammer, S.J.

“Political rights are meant to be exercised for the common good of the nation and the human community.”

— *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #2237

Current news about voter registration, voter suppression, gerrymandering, criminal justice reform, and foreign intrusion into U.S. elections call us to reflect on what Catholic social thought tells us about voting. As is often the case, considerations about voting begin with human dignity and the common good - the twin foundations of Catholic social thought.

The Second Vatican Council noted that the cultural, economic, and social evolution of peoples into the mid-twentieth century had resulted in profound changes in human institutions and how people related to one another. A key impact was on the political community “especially with regard to universal rights and duties both in the exercise of civil liberty and in the attainment of the common good”¹ While the Council did not prescribe a universal particular form of government, it made clear that “the political community exists for that common good in which the community finds its full justification and meaning”²



In spelling out that purpose, the council called for enhanced political participation in these words:

It is in full accord with human nature that juridical political structures should, with ever better success and without any discrimination, afford all their citizens the chance to participate freely and actively in establishing the constitutional bases of a political community, governing the state, determining the scope and purpose of various institutions, and choosing leaders.

A declaration on the right and duty to vote followed in the next sentence:

Hence let all citizens be mindful of their simultaneous right and duty to vote freely in the interest of advancing the common good.³

There is both a *right* and a *duty* to vote which attaches to citizens in a participative political society such that it is “morally obligatory” to exercise the right to vote as an expression of our ‘co-responsibility for the common good...”⁴



The Council goes on to underscore the universal requirement of a system of laws which protect the exercise of individual rights and the recognition of those rights and duties by all in society. This duty of government and law is an expression of the first element of the common good, namely, that “public authorities are bound to respect the fundamental and inalienable rights of the human person.”⁵ Not only government, but also other citizens, have a reciprocal duty to respect one another’s rights.⁶

When considering questions of voting by persons who are incarcerated or suspension of voting rights after release, policymakers should be very hesitant to restrict the political rights of citizenship:

They cannot be suspended by public authorities without legitimate and proportionate reasons. Political rights are meant to be exercised for the common good of the nation and the human community.⁷



Similarly, insofar as the exercise of the right to vote is essential to the common good of any society, gerrymandering must be judged against the warning of the Council:

Political parties should foster whatever they judge necessary for the common good. But they should never prefer their own advantage over this same common good.⁸

Efforts to dilute the voting power of those of another for the sake of one’s own party, then, should be subjected to strict moral scrutiny in protecting both individual human dignity and the common good. Even more so, the efforts of one national to undermine voting and elections within another nation should be condemned most severely.

Fr. Fred Kammer, S.J., serves as the Director of the Jesuit Social Research Institute at Loyola University in New Orleans, Louisiana. For more information on the JSRI: www.loyno.edu/jsri.
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ENDNOTES

¹ Second Vatican Council. (1965). *Gaudium et Spes: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, 73.

² Ibid., 74.

³ Ibid., 75.

⁴ Vatican. (1994). *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2240.

⁵ Ibid., 1907.

⁶ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. (2005). *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 156.

⁷ *Catechism*, 2237.

⁸ *Gaudium et Spes*, 75.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Father Kammer begins his reflection by referring to recent news about different aspects of voting; what you know about these current issues? How do such voting issues relate to basics of Catholic social thought such as human dignity, the common good, solidarity, rights and responsibilities, option for the poor, and care for Creation?
2. The Second Vatican Council called for all citizens to participate in building the common good, and noted that to do so, all must have the right to vote freely and the ability to do so; why does the Church believe all people have this right? And why have some people historically disagreed with this and prevented certain people from going to the polls? Do you, or can you find out, when and how African Americans, women, and Native Americans were finally allowed by law to vote? Do you know what individuals from these groups were subjected to as they tried to win the right to vote? Do you know what happened, and still happens, to many African Americans when they had the right to vote but were not welcome at the polls (see films like *Selma* and *The Secret Lives of Bees*)?
3. Father Kammer brings up the question of the prisoners' and ex-offenders' loss of the right to vote in U.S. society. This is different from many developed countries such as Ireland, Spain, Sweden, and Denmark where all prisoners can vote, or countries such as France, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Greece, and the Netherlands where most prisoners can vote except those convicted of the most serious crimes (The Sentencing Project documents that by 2016, 6.1 million people lost the right to vote due to incarceration). Why do you think prisoners and people released from prison lose the right to vote permanently in the U.S. while in other developed countries they don't? Should prisoners lose all or some of their human rights, including the right to vote?
4. At the end of his reflection, Fr. Kammer mentions gerrymandering (changing the borders of a voting district in order to increase the number of people within that area who will vote for a particular party or person). There have been recent court cases about gerrymandering, and they will continue. Why do many believe gerrymandering is unjust? How can Americans develop a fully just voting system that is fair and unbiased? What can we all do to contribute to such a fair and just system?

FAITH IN ACTION

- Learn all you can about past and present problems around voting in the U.S. Educate others in your communities. Support groups like the Sentencing Project (www.sentencingproject.org) and voting rights groups: www.lwv.org/voting-rights; www.aclu.org/issues/voting-rights; www.southerncoalition.org/program-areas/voting-rights.

PRAYER

Open our eyes, O Lord, and help us develop the knowledge we need to see the injustices in our voting systems. Grace our spirits, O Lord, and help us develop the vision we need to transform unjust systems and structures that undermine the right to vote. Develop our patience and build up our courage, O Lord, and help us work with joy as well as determination to co-create with you a just and peaceful society where everyone can contribute to the common good by exercising their rights and taking on their responsibilities as citizens. May the darkness of these days give way to the light so all may live as your beloved children. Amen.

