

WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

EYE ON THE CAPITOL

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IN OUR POLARIZED POLITICS CAN CATHOLICS NARROW THE DIVIDE?

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One doesn't have to try very hard these days to read or hear media accounts of how polarized our politics have become. The topic has been studied and commented upon at length in recent months. Moreover, some of this commentary notes that Wisconsin is among the most polarized places in the country, where the chasm between liberals and conservatives and Democrats and Republicans is especially wide.

Why is our politics so divisive?

For one thing, as was noted recently in a Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel story on the topic, voters are more ideological. That is, they rarely blend conservative and liberal positions. Instead, they are more likely to embrace either a liberal or a conservative view across the board.

In addition, voters are more likely to hold negative views of their political opponents. In the past, we viewed our opponents as merely mistaken. Today, we see their views as "a threat to the nation's well-being," as the article put it.

Perhaps more significant is the finding that political differences are most pronounced among those who are most engaged in our politics. Those most likely to participate in and decide policy debates are least likely to occupy the "middle ground" in society. This is not a recipe for effective government.

Can we Catholics help make things better?

Perhaps we can. Many surveys describe Catholics as "swing voters" who more often than not vote for the winner in close elections. It's not that most Catholics are independent. Indeed, a recent survey by the Marquette Law School Poll indicates that in terms of party affiliation, Catholics divide almost evenly between the two major parties. However, Catholic voters do seem to show a greater willingness to vote for the other party from time to time.

Perhaps Catholics are positioned to counsel for moderation in policy debates. Perhaps we can articulate our understanding of the common good to help other citizens grasp that policies must be measured by their impact not merely on our partisan interest, or that of allied interest groups, but especially on the entire community and those who are vulnerable. Perhaps Catholics can share their understanding that our call to solidarity with all people means we need public institutions to work for things that the private sector can't do, while also affirming that our principle of subsidiarity means government must assist, but not supplant, smaller organizations and families.

Perhaps we Catholics can also witness our belief in the innate dignity of all human beings by reminding our allies that God loves those who disagree with us. We can model temperate rhetoric and civility in debate. We can remind our fellow partisans that an opponent is not the same thing as an enemy.

Because we live in a democracy, we cannot escape our vocation of citizenship. We bear ultimate responsibility for what politics looks like and for what government does in our name. And if we have helped contribute to the polarization that weakens our civic health, so can we take the lead in healing the divisions that wound our potential to make things better.

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