

WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

EYE ON THE CAPITOL

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EARLY PRIMARY MEANS VOTERS MUST PAY ATTENTION NOW

By John Huebscher, Executive Director

In past years, voters could enjoy a summer without thinking much about elections. August could be devoted to swimming, fishing, enjoying the Brewers, following the Packer's training camp, and one more short vacation. Then, as September began, voters could decide for whom they would vote in the mid-September primary.

Not anymore.

Beginning in 2012, the primary for offices filled in the November election takes place on the second Tuesday in August. This means that we have just a few weeks remaining to assess the candidates and decide which ones will be on the ballot for the general election.

We have had August primaries before. This was the case for several years in the 1940's when the Legislature felt that the additional month between the primary and the general election gave those serving abroad in World War II time to vote. And, while this is the second time the primary will take place in August in this century, 2014 is the first time primaries for Governor and other state constitutional offices are being held.

Primary elections are critical for offices where there is no incumbent on the ballot. Such races often draw more candidates and, if there is a large field, it is possible to win a primary with as few as several hundred votes.

Also, as partisan gerrymandering has created more districts that are not really competitive between the major parties, the primary election is the election that matters. Indeed, this year in 52 of the 99 primaries for the Assembly and 3 of the 17 primaries for the State Senate candidates are either unopposed or all the candidates are from one party. In these races, whoever wins on August 12 will be the victor in November.

Thus, if we are to take our vocation of "faithful citizens" seriously, now is the time to assess the candidates' qualifications and where they stand on the issues. Now is the time to ask them the hard questions as to their priorities and principles. Now is the time to press them if we want a change from the politics of polarization and incivility that have become too common in recent years.

To help voters prepare for their Election Day decisions, the WCC has prepared a series of resources that explain Catholic principles and issues of interest. These resources can be found at the WCC website at: www.wisconsincatholic.org.

Those looking for the bishops to tell them for whom to vote will be disappointed. Telling people what to do in the voting booth is not the job of the bishops. The role of the bishops is to help form consciences. The role of the laity is to be active in the public square. As the WCC's *Faithful Citizenship* resources explain:

As a moral voice in the public square, the Church must remain independent of any political party, faction, or candidate. Within the Church, clergy and laity have different but complementary roles. The charism of the clergy is to preach the Gospel message so that all may form their consciences properly.

The charism of the laity is to transform the culture. In the political arena, lay men and women do this by voting, serving in public office, supporting or opposing candidates, forming political parties, educating voters, and developing or influencing public policy between elections.

If we want to help transform our politics and our culture, the August primaries are a good place to start.

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