

## WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

### EYE ON THE CAPITOL

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#### **REJECT ATTACK ADS BY VOTING, STAYING INVOLVED AFTER ELECTION**

By John Huebscher, Executive Director

The more campaign seasons I experience the more grateful I become to the people who invented the “mute” button on my remote control. It seems as more and more money is poured into election campaigns, the greater the number of negative advertisements that offer little to voters beyond appeals to their anger, fear, and resentment. And voters respond by tuning out and staying home.

But this should not surprise us. That is what the ads are supposed to do. Attack ads are not designed to attract voters to a particular candidate. Rather, their purpose is to tug the voter away from certain candidates. These ads are designed to suppress turnout, dampen enthusiasm, and keep voters from thinking that they can do much to change things.

This leaves the field to the partisans on both sides. And our politics today—with its declining rates of voter turnout, dysfunctional government that too often prefers confrontation to compromise, and rhetoric that sheds heat but no light—is the fruit of this approach to campaigning.

So, what can voters do about this?

First, we need to vote anyway. We can resolve that attack ads will not so sour us to the choices on the ballot that we opt out of the process. We can diminish attack ads by looking deeper than these ads want us to look. We can examine what candidates are for as well as what they are against. And then we can express our will at the ballot box.

But that is only a first step.

After the election we need to press the candidates to live up to their obligation to serve the common good over the special interests. We need to insist on sound policy over superficial promise. We need to press our leaders to respond to our hopes instead of our fears.

And we need to do this even when the people we vote for lose. I have yet to meet a voter who always votes for the winner. Indeed, all of us spend part of our lives being represented and governed by people we did not vote for. But our obligation to engage our leaders is just as important as their duty to serve the public interest. We can't expect our leaders to govern wisely if we don't share our own wisdom and insights with them after they take office.

The Church has long understood this need for engagement. That is why the bishops have reminded us that participating in the political process is a moral obligation. It is an obligation that requires

persistence and commitment. Pope John Paul II said it very well in his 1987 encyclical, *Sollicitudo rei socialis (On Social Concern)*:

“Anyone wishing to renounce the difficult yet noble task of improving the lot of man in his totality, and of all people, with the excuse that the struggle is difficult and constant effort is required, or simply because of the experience of defeat and the need to begin again, that person would be betraying the will of God the Creator.” (#30)

So, even as we have many reasons to be repulsed by what we see on TV this election season, we can and should remain committed to our vocation as faithful citizens to vote, to advocate after the election, and to continue with the “difficult yet noble task” of making our community, our country, and our planet a better place.

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131 W. Wilson St., Suite 1105  
Madison, WI 53703  
608-257-0004  
[www.wisconsinatholic.org](http://www.wisconsinatholic.org)