Catholic Social Thought and Voting

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..." 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..."

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.

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..."

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." Not only government, but also other citizens, have a reciprocal duty to respect one another's rights.

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.

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.

Efforts to dilute the voting power of those of another party 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 nation to undermine voting and elections within another nation should be condemned most severely.

ENDNOTES

2. Ibid., 74.
3. Ibid., 75.
5. Ibid., 1907.
7. Catechism, 2237.
8. Gaudium et Spes, 75.