Opinion
News
Editorial

An electric sign reads "No Voting Here Today" in a parking lot in Lawrenceville, Georgia, on Jan. 5, 2021. The polling location was an early voting site, but it was not a polling place for the run-off election that day. (Newscom/ZUMA Wire/Sue Dorfman)

by NCR Editorial Staff

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In the 2020 introductory letter to the U.S. bishops' document on "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship," even before getting into which issue is preeminent or not, the second paragraph begins, "Everyone living in this country is called to participate in public life and contribute to the common good."

Everyone.

That portion of the letter cites the catechism's affirmation that "It is necessary that all participate" (#1913), which in turn quotes the "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" (*Gaudium et Spes*): "One must pay tribute to those nations whose systems permit the largest possible number of the citizens to take part in public life in a climate of genuine freedom."

The largest possible number.

Participation in public life can include running for office, advocating for issues, supporting candidates financially, volunteering for campaigns, or working in myriad fields that serve the public. But the most basic and universal way that nearly *everyone* or at least *the largest possible number* of Americans can participate in public life is by voting.

So it should go without saying that anything that tries to limit a citizen's right to vote is contrary to Catholic teaching on faithful citizenship. Except it doesn't go without saying.

In fact, this nation is currently facing hundreds of state laws designed to put barriers in front of the ballot box. Last month, Georgia passed a series of measures — including limits on mail-in ballots, voter ID requirements and a prohibition on passing out food and water at polls — that will effectively limit voting access for poor and Black communities, in what many are describing as a return to the Jim Crow era after Reconstruction.

These blatant voter suppression provisions are billed as necessary to prevent fraud — in a nod to former President Donald Trump's "big lie" (debunked by all experts, including Trump's former Attorney General William Barr) that the election was stolen from him. In reality, Republicans proposing these measures know that increased voter turnout has meant fewer GOP victories. So the strategy is to prevent turnout.

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President Joe Biden called the Georgia laws "sick" and "un-American," and more than 100 companies, like Delta Air Lines, Coca-Cola, disavowed them. Even Major League Baseball pulled this summer's All-Star Game from Atlanta in protest.

Yet we have heard not a peep from any Georgia bishops, nor from the U.S. bishops' conference, at least as of press time — nearly two weeks after the law was signed.

Even more shocking, however, is the reporting from NCR national correspondent Christopher White that conservative Catholics are some of the key players behind the bankrolling of these voter suppression efforts — reputedly as part of "pro-life" activism to end legalized abortion.

The Susan B. Anthony List, headed by Catholic convert Marjorie Dannenfelser (who spearheaded Trump's pro-life coalition in 2016 and 2020), praised Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp for signing the bill into law, saying his "leadership has helped galvanize an election integrity movement surging toward restored trust and confidence in elections where it's easy to vote and hard to cheat."

Integrity?

White reports that shortly after Trump's defeat last November, the Susan B. Anthony List joined forces with the American Principles Project to launch the Election Transparency Initiative, a $5 million voting reform campaign targeting states with "close 2020 margins and a pro-life GOP-controlled legislature." In addition, prominent Catholic and former head of the Federalist Society Leonard Leo is pledging tens of millions of dollars into conservative election efforts, including the Honest Elections Project, which warns that the legitimacy of elections is under attack.

Not all Catholic pro-lifers are on board with this shift in focus. Kim Daniels, co-director of Georgetown University's Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life, said that the pro-life cause is about giving voice to those without one. "These voter restriction efforts are the opposite of that," she told White.

"Instead of talking about how best to protect and support unborn children and their mothers, some pro-life groups are lobbying and fundraising for racially-charged voter restriction efforts," said Daniels. "It's another sign of the moral costs of the transactional politics of the last four years."

When a key backer of the voter suppression initiatives is a hedge fund president who has donated more than $34 million to conservative causes, it's easy to wonder if abortion really is the primary — or should we say "preeminent"? — motivator. But either way, some Catholics' alignment with the GOP has once again put them in contradiction to the church's teaching, this time on the importance of the responsibility of faithful citizenship.

If we teach that Catholics should vote in accordance with a conscience formed by the church's teaching on issues, we have to make sure that draconian laws will not try to prevent them from voting in the first place. Catholics cannot support voter suppression, even under the guise of being "pro-life."

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