

# The Catholic case for focusing on local issues

*Polarization. Division. Friends and family turning on one another. A pandemic. Widespread protests against injustice. Riots. The death of a liberal Supreme Court justice, and the nomination of a conservative woman to take her place.*

*And, in a few short weeks, Election Day will be upon us.*

*In our editorials this summer and fall, we have addressed this discord. But political division, in and of itself, is not the problem. A healthy society can and will engage in healthy debate. We are not a healthy society. But we can be one – and, as Catholics, we can lead the way.*

*In this special issue, we are presenting four points of view on the 2020 U.S. presidential election. The authors disagree with one another. As an editorial board and as individuals, we disagree with some of what each author has to say. But we and they are united in one purpose: to provide a model for charitable discussion of the four major options that we as Catholic citizens must consider as we approach the ballot box.*

[Read the full editorial here.](#)

In this essay, Bill Kauffman, a longtime political essayist, makes the Catholic case for the importance of local elections.

## **Additional articles in this series:**

[The Catholic case for President Donald Trump](#)

[The Catholic case for Joe Biden](#)

[The Catholic case for Brian Carroll and the American Solidarity Party](#)

In “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship,” the Catholic bishops of the United States ask our merciful Father to “Teach us to treat others with respect, even when we

disagree.”

I’m afraid that lesson hasn’t quite taken yet. In American politics, the 2020 version, the rancor is rancid and the discord is disgusting. But there is a way out.

Henry Adams, the great historian and descendant of presidents, called politics “the systematic organization of hatreds.” Although I don’t know which is worse – organized hatreds or disorganized hatreds – I do know that “participat[ing] in public life and contribut[ing] to the common good,” as the bishops counsel us to do, must consist of far more than merely cheering on Team Red or Team Blue. In fact, that kind of rabid partisanship actually undermines public life and the common good.

Besides, what kind of impoverished palette includes only two colors, red and blue? Talk about undiverse!

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On a scale as massively large as that of the United States, those of us who seek to participate or contribute at a level beyond the local are reduced to a single dimension, a simple (and usually invidious) identifying tag. And so public discourse today in these disunited states is nasty and brutish and as short (and usually moronic) as a tweet.

The political races this fall that ought to matter most – those for town council, county judge, dog catcher – often feature one unopposed candidate. Perhaps this indicates widespread satisfaction with grassroots leadership. Or maybe centripetal forces – the sucking of all power to remote and centralized loci – have fooled us into thinking that local matters no longer matter.

In the presidential election (otherwise known as the contest to determine our national celebrity-in-chief), however, your vote – and here I dip into the lexicon of today's American teenager – literally does not matter.

Never in our country's history have a state's electoral votes been decided by a single popular vote. You are far likelier to be struck by lightning en route to the polls than your vote is to be decisive. So don't agonize; it really doesn't matter for whom you cast your presidential vote.

What does matter is how you spend your time and money and manifest your love when you are not in the voting booth.

We cast far more important votes every other day of the year than we will on Nov. 3. Do we buy produce at Walmart or at the farmers market? Do we patronize Amazon or the shop on the corner? Do we passively accept the depravity and didacticism of Hollywood's products – here we are now, entertain us – or do we participate in community theater, the local orchestra, the marching band, beer-league softball or the rod and gun club down the road?

And for those of us whose artistic or athletic talents have not been lit by the divine spark, do we attend local concerts, local theater productions, high-school basketball games, art gallery openings, craft fairs, church suppers? For they also serve those who only sit in the stands or the cheap seats and applaud their neighbors.

If politics must enter in, we should condition its demands by the Catholic principle of subsidiarity. In the bishops' words, this is the principle that "larger institutions in society should not overwhelm or interfere with smaller or local institutions." We protect and invigorate the local by restoring essential functions thereto. This will have the added benefit of stripping those larger institutions of their powers to make war on our families, our communities and on

people across the sea.

Thomas Jefferson ... (Oops! Are we still permitted to whisper his name in this self-righteous age, when the lion mauls the lamb – for its own good, of course– and we see so clearly the motes in the eyes of our ancestors?) Anyway, the author of the Declaration of Independence and model for many a defaced statue said that we should be able to perform most if not all the duties of citizenship in person.

Yet in 2020, even the most attenuated and inconsequential of these duties – voting – is endangered.

On Election Day, I enjoy the walk down to the firehall, where we gather, briefly, as neighbors to register our preferences for those who will be entrusted with coercive power over us. This year, we are being urged by the authorities to mail in our ballots, thereby avoiding chance encounters with neighbors. In the future, we will be encouraged, then prodded, then perhaps mandated to vote by tapping icons on a computer screen, thus cutting out even the mailman-middleman and making voting a wholly impersonal and technocratic act.

But faithful citizenship is so much more than checking a box on a ballot.

You don't bolster citizenship by casting votes for people whom you do not know, people whose existences seem almost incorporeal, accessible only as pixelated (not to mention pixilated) images on a screen. Nor is it an act of citizenship to type nasty anonymous messages into internet comment boxes or to virtue-signal on Facebook. No, real citizenship is exercised, and our communities are strengthened by our cheerful, committed and loving involvement in our towns, on our streets, in our parishes and with our neighbors.

I am not an abstainer. I'll be voting on Nov. 3. As always, my candidate for president will be a mere historical footnote. *Que sera sera*. I won't lose any sleep over it.

The way back for our lost and despairing country leads homeward. Each of us can contribute to finding that way back by the choices we make every single day. What you do before and after you cast your meaningless vote next month is infinitely more important than if you vote R, D or Other.

*Bill Kauffman is the author of 11 books, among them "Dispatches from the Muckdog Gazette" as well as the screenplay for the feature film "Copperhead."*