



open wide our hearts

the enduring call to love *a pastoral letter against racism*

Racism and Voting

In the November 2018 pastoral letter against racism, Open Wide Our Hearts, the Catholic bishops of the United States urge all Catholics to acknowledge “the scourge of racism” that still exists in our hearts, words, actions, and institutions. Racism can be individual, when persons fail to recognize certain groups as created in the image and likeness of God and equal in dignity, or it can be systemic, where practices or policies treat certain groups of people unjustly. One example of systemic racism is lack of access to the vote for some communities of color.



The Church teaches that all persons have both a legal right and a responsibility to have their voice heard in the public square to promote human dignity and the common good of society. As people of faith, we have the obligation to help shape the moral character of society by voting and other acts of public participation. We also must act to ensure that the right to vote is protected for all citizens. This has often been threatened for many minorities in the U.S.

“Racism can only end if we contend with the policies and institutional barriers that perpetuate and preserve the inequality – economic and social – that we still see all around us.”

– U.S. bishops, Open Wide Our Hearts

Sixty years ago, the United States Commission on Civil Rights [documented](#) a history of pervasive discrimination toward minorities in all aspects of voting, despite the 1870 Fifteenth Amendment that prohibits denying citizens the right to vote because of “[race](#), [color](#), or previous condition of servitude.” Since the 1870s, threats of violence and actual violence, especially in the South, had been used to discourage African Americans from voting. Government officials openly opposed minority voting. For example, U.S. Senator Theodore Bilbo of Mississippi called for Klansmen to visit African Americans the night before elections to send a message that they should not try to vote. [Poll “taxes”](#) became a part of the election system in many states, requiring money from poor sharecroppers for voting privileges. Literacy tests were another systematic attempt to deny voters of color access to the voting booth: in states where educational opportunities for minorities were very limited, many African Americans had little

or no literacy skills. Some of [these tests](#) were designed so no one could pass, such as demands to recite the entire U.S. Constitution or to count the bubbles in a bar of soap to prove math abilities. Gerrymandering, the practice of redrawing voting district boundaries, was historically [used to suppress](#) the African American vote.

These injustices prompted the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which was initially successful in eliminating many of the barriers to voting for minorities. However, a 2018 Report by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights detailed a [decline](#) in the Act's enforcement. The report suggests Latino Americans, Native Americans, and African Americans are facing new barriers to voting. [Some Catholic voices](#) are raising concerns about voter identification laws seen in many states in recent years. The Maryland Catholic Conference [opposed one such](#) legislative proposal in 2017, which would "make voting more difficult for people with disabilities, the elderly, and the poor," who "have already established their identities via voter registration."

State Catholic conferences have also been vocal about other issues related to access to voting, including [gerrymandering](#) and [restoration of voting rights](#). Others raise concerns about restrictions on early voting, lack of local and accessible registration opportunities and precinct voting locations

Pray with St. John Paul II

"Lord our God, you created the human being, man and woman, in your image and likeness, and you willed the diversity of peoples within the unity of the human family. At times, however, the equality of your sons and daughters has not been acknowledged, and Christians have been guilty of attitudes of rejection and exclusion, consenting to acts of discrimination on the basis of racial and ethnic difference. Forgive us and grant us the grace to heal the wounds still present in your community on account of sin, so that we will all feel ourselves to be your sons and daughters."
([Universal Prayer on Day of Pardon](#))

(especially true in the South and on Native American reservations), and illegal purges of voting rolls, which disproportionately affect African-American and Latino American voters. [One in ten Latinos](#) have been harassed at polling places.



Today, too many barriers to the right to vote remain for minorities. In response, we are called to work to ensure that all are able to exercise their rights, as faithful citizens, to raise their voices in the public square.



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