Opinion
Editorial
People vote in the U.S. presidential election on Election Day, Nov. 5 at Holy Trinity Catholic Ch

People vote in the U.S. presidential election on Election Day, Nov. 5 at Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Erie, Pa. (OSV News/Reuters/Shannon Stapleton)

by NCR Editorial Staff

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A thought that has been evolving in Catholic circles in recent years apparently achieved a rare point of consensus in our divided church with the most recent U.S. election: Catholics are politically homeless.

The phrase is everywhere in the Catholic universe. Then-bishop (now-Cardinal) Robert McElroy articulated it in an interview with the National Catholic Reporter four years ago. John Carr at Georgetown might have been the first to coin the phrase for Catholics. And our friend and former colleague, John Allen, writes that is essentially what Pope Francis said when he advised picking the lesser of two evils.

What should be a point of pride — that no one owns us and no party is large enough to represent the breadth and depth of our faith and what it signifies — is instead delivered as a lament. We are supposed to feel sorry there is no such wonderful place where we can all gather in kumbaya agreement under the same political tent.

The perception that such a place should exist is a sad consequence of the path our clerical hierarchy has taken in recent decades. The U.S. bishops have opted to severely narrow what it once meant to be Catholic in the public square by advocating a crimped, one-issue-above-all-else approach. That approach has allowed a single party, in this case the Republican Party, to ensnare many of the

bishops' allegiance and fidelity and, by extension, a growing number of Catholics. It would be just as destructive of the church's moral authority if for some reasons the bishops became captive of the Democratic Party.

A single-issue strategy makes for easy politics. If the "life" issues are reduced to a single issue, abortion, and a single political approach, voting becomes simple. Politicians have little to do in winning an approving nod from the local Catholic structure, bishop on down.

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This tradeoff diminishes the moral authority of the church in the public square. One-issue politics allows us to avoid wrestling with the complexities of other life issues such as the right to health care for all, care for immigrants, income disparity, workers' rights, assaults on the environment in the name of economic profit, world-leading incarceration rates and the horror of the death penalty. Under this approach, Catholics need no longer worry about runaway spending on weapons systems that threaten global destruction.

No perfect party for Catholics exists. Politics is not religion. At best, our religious convictions and our faith should inform our politics and attempt to influence policy. Our faith and convictions shouldn't be a payoff for single-issue promises.

We shouldn't be a sure bet for either party. Our votes should be a matter of a conscientious decision that involves judging candidates, issues and effects on the common good across a range of issues.

The further tragedy in all of this is that the power of the Catholic social justice tradition has been tattered and goes missing from our political conversation. It has become a victim of politics distorted by party tribalism and the hierarchical retreat from a unified and robust stand on a range of issues. We've become predictable participants in a culture war seemingly without end.

Our lament should be not that we're homeless, but that we've lost our voice on so much that is vital to a healthy community and democracy. Catholic politics have become virtually indistinguishable from that of any other single-interest group.

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