



How Should Christians Vote?

The separation between church and state does not preclude applying religiously grounded judgments as to what political positions most nearly embody the search for human well-being.

Why Christians Should Vote

The earliest Christians existed as a separatist group in a country governed by an authoritarian political system imposed by Rome. Therefore they did not vote and had little sense of responsibility for the political order that surrounded them. For quite some time early Christianity was regarded as a branch of Judaism and was tolerated because Judaism was accorded the privilege of exercising its faith as a separate minority. In time this situation changed, and Christians underwent persecutions whenever they resisted the claims of the state for complete obedience. By the fourth century, the Roman Emperor Constantine became a Christian and made his faith the official religion of the empire. This greatly changed the relationship of Christians to the political order.

Christians have subsequently debated whether or not this was a good thing. Generally speaking, the majority of Christians came to accept the uses of power by which political affairs are normally conducted. Probably the first and foremost change was the willingness to accept military service as the means through which society maintains internal security and defends itself against outside threats.

Eventually the conduct of public affairs underwent another transformation—from authoritarian governance by emperors (or kings) to representative patterns in which citizens had a voice in selecting who would govern them. This change did not occur everywhere, and Christians had to live under whatever type of political system was present in the place where they were



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located. Many found themselves living in emerging democratic states, and they generally welcomed the rise of political systems that derived their authority from the consent of the governed. This created a presumption of religious support for democracy and meant Christians would begin to vote, particularly in democratic countries located in Western Europe and in the United States. As compared with the debate over whether Christians should engage in military service, there have been relatively few questions raised about the appropriateness of the practice of voting by Christians.

But this change in practice has not always been accompanied by an adequate understanding of the relationship between faith and politics. It is simply inadequate to assume that beginning to exercise the franchise automatically endows Christians with political wisdom. Moreover, many people have continued to believe that religion and politics should be entirely separate aspects of life—that the *city of this world* has nothing to do with the *heavenly city*. A Yale Divinity School professor was once told by a preacher that even to admonish

people to vote (not how to vote!) “would degrade the high purpose of the pulpit”¹ Many religious people share a feeling that politics is “dirty business” that stands in sharp contrast to the purity sought by religion.

To look upon voting as a purely secular duty is to deny the importance of faith for living in this world. But to use a particular faith commitment as the primary ground for deciding how to vote can undercut the integrity of the political process by turning faith into a privileged claim that exempts itself from public challenge. Some of the greatest issues in Christian moral judgment concern how political responsibility can be exercised by Christians without making faith a threat to democratic openness. Christians should vote, but it is very important to have a basis for doing so that involves a mature embrace of the democratic process.

Some Questionable Uses of Religion in Voting

Christians should not use voting merely as a way of putting our fellow Christians into positions of authority. The ballot box is not a device for selecting members for a club, for seeing to it that “only our kind” become public officials, or for grasping for ecclesiastical power and influence. The religious affiliation of a candidate must never be the sole reason for supporting that candidate. Those who run for office on the basis of their religious identity—run campaign ads, for example, that emphasize their ecclesiastical membership—may or may not be worthy of support. Even treacherous candidates have been known to tout their religion vociferously. Mere membership in a religious body is no guarantee of wisdom, maturity, or a compassionate approach to public affairs.

It follows that Christians should not automatically oppose a candidate because of that candidate’s religious affiliation. The American public has sometimes had a hard time accepting members of specific religious groups as bone fide choices. It was decades before a Roman Catholic was elected president, and recently questions were raised about the suitability of a Mormon. Members of the Unification Church have also been suspect, though none have run for the presidency. To be sure, candidates who intend to use public office to further the fortunes of one particular group should be rejected, as should any candidates who intend to use

public office to disadvantage other religious groups. Other than that, any candidate is worthy of consideration for election to public office on the basis of her or his competence and views.

Moreover, Christians should avoid judging candidates simply on the basis of one specific behavioral standard favored by a religious group. It is alleged that Strom Thurmond—the arch supporter of segregation—was initially elected to office by church types who were impressed by the fact he did not serve liquor in his home. It is particularly questionable to judge candidates by behavioral standards that are uniquely associated with particular religious bodies. We would not, for instance, be right in expecting candidates to say regular bedtime prayers, or to favor liturgical worship over freestyle worship (or vice versa), or to abide by certain dietary laws. But we might have reservations about a candidate who was given to overt and frequent use of profanity, who advocated different positions erratically, who advocated and practiced socially destructive behavior, or who showed contempt for particular groups within our society. Character traits do have a bearing on suitability for office, but we must be very careful in using litmus tests that rule out persons for reasons that do not have widespread public significance.

If the behavior of a candidate involves wrongdoing or dishonesty, it most likely has a bearing, but even here there are no universally accepted standards. Most people would discount whether or not a candidate once experimented with drugs, was a cut-up in college, had taken out a subprime mortgage, lives in the wrong side of town, or prefers soft drinks to alcoholic beverages used prudently. Questions of doctrinal belief should also be off limits. In one public debate during the 2008 primary campaign, the candidates were asked whether they accepted the Bible as infallible. The moderator should not have allowed that question (which was submitted by a member of the public audience) to be posed. Public officials are not charged to be defenders of particular religious beliefs or even exemplars of virtue. They are charged to be good managers of public affairs. In other words, we shouldn’t elect people based on whether we’d like them as a personal friend. Rather the key factor is whether a candidate for public office has views that would prevent the exercise of public office in a way that advances the common good.

Relevant Legal and Political Factors

Two important points must be borne in mind in considering the way religious bodies can or should relate to the electoral process. Both a legal factor and an ecclesiastical factor have a bearing on whether or how religious groups might back particular candidates.

The legal reason has to do with the policy of the Internal Revenue Service that denies tax exemption to groups (churches included) that actively back specific candidates for office. General discussion of what is good policy is supposedly allowable, but partisan support is not. (Sometimes zealous public officials get confused about this distinction, but the difference is sufficiently discernible to be enforceable.)

This does not preclude a religious group from choosing to relinquish its claim to tax exemption in order to support the candidacy of a particular candidate, but it suggests that any such effort should be open and above board. Partisanship should not be sneaky or done with the hope of not being challenged. Moreover, a religious group might very well wish to challenge the policy of the Internal Revenue Service—especially if it is arbitrarily applied. This could be done either by advocating a change in the regulations or by engaging openly in admitted civil disobedience, leading to judicial review.

The theological reasons for religious bodies to refrain from explicit partisan backing of specific candidates stem from a belief that membership in the church does not abrogate the right of individual conscience. If churches back specific candidates, they may pressure members to fall in line against their will. To be sure, there have been and still are some ecclesiastical bodies that tend to behave in this manner, but particularly in the Reformed tradition as well as in many other branches of Christianity, Christ alone is considered the Lord of Conscience, and ecclesiastical leadership is exercised only persuasively and never coercively. Both ordinary members and ecclesiastical leaders should be free to participate in the political process as individuals on the same terms as all other citizens, and members of religious groups may give due attention to the views of their leaders, but a political stance should never be a prerequisite for good standing in a religious group, nor should any stigma be attached to disagreeing with the views of church leaders, regardless of whether those views are on the right or on the left.



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How, Then, Should Christians Vote?

The answer is that they should vote thoughtfully. But being thoughtful is not easy, nor is it getting any easier in a political process increasingly utilizing sound bites, character subversion, insinuating commentary, and phrases with minimal policy significance. The so-called debates that are being used with increasing frequency in campaigns often concentrate on peripheral factors rather than plumbing the fundamental issues that are at stake in an election. Campaign managers often consider themselves involved in “selling” candidates to the public rather than advancing the awareness of how the candidates will actually govern if elected to office. If religious bodies do no more than insist on being thoughtful about the electoral process—standing up for clarity about purposes—they will make a worthy contribution to a process we all should cherish for its potential uniqueness.

Christians can join with others in posing questions that dig beneath the superficialities of much political rhetoric. While individual Christians many not be experts about specific strategies, they ought to have an informed grasp of what is involved in being fair, just, and compassionate. When churches function as they should, they provide guidance for thinking about fundamental issues. Doing so involves asking questions such as the following:

- *What do the various candidates believe about the role of government?* The Constitution of the United States suggests that government serves at least two important functions. It protects liberty, and it advances the general welfare. Some politicians believe the protection of liberty is most important, and others believe that government is the only agency that can sustain nationwide advancement of the general welfare. Those in the first group want to get government off our backs, and those in the second group want to use government to

put our shoulders together to do things no subgroup can achieve by itself. Some candidates run for office on the ground that public office is incapable of being effective and that the task of elected officials is to curtail it as much as possible. Others run for public office because they believe liberty is safeguarded by official actions and that there is a mandate to encourage behavior that contributes to the general good.

- *Whom should the government protect?* One group will answer that the primary role of government is to protect the right of diligent people to pursue their own interests provided only they do not do so in flagrantly improper ways. The other group will stress the role that government can play in protecting the least affluent and least able members of society from hostility and discrimination—from being outcasts in their own country. The first group stresses the importance of protecting the nation from violent threats—particularly from aggression by other nations or from actions by dangerous characters within—and tends to be strong on defense and harsh on crimes. But the second group holds that government should also protect ordinary citizens from practices that produce great hardship and inequalities for the weaker or less-favored members of the society. This group understands the importance of political policies that seek to mitigate social injustices and not merely repulse dangerous threats. The specific issues that develop in elections illustrate the complexity of applying either of these general views. Is predatory lending a moral outrage or merely shrewd business? Is affirmative action a barrier to individual freedom or a protection of the disadvantaged? Are welfare programs a public moral obligation or an invitation to freeloading? Is universal health care a matter of protecting society as a whole from the ravages of sickness and financial ruin, or it is an illegitimate extension of governmental functions?
- *How should government exercise its authority?* On one side are those with a strong conviction that only harsh measures are effective, that retributive justice is needed in dealing with domestic crime, and that military power is the only effective instrument for dealing with a menacing world. The first view leads to strong-armed law enforcement that fills jails and prisons and to a foreign policy that favors unilateral preeminence and regards military strength as most crucial. The other view believes government protects

us from wrongdoing through programs that reduce threats by rehabilitating those who run afoul of the law and by participating in international forums that make the discouragement of aggression a multinational commitment. This view believes we best protect ourselves by making the world less threatening rather than mounting the greatest capacity to destroy those who threaten us.

Contrasts such as these can be expanded and extended. They help to make us aware that there are basic differences at stake in elections. Admittedly, it is the case that many people on both sides of these contrasts profess to be Christians and vote their inclinations without examining which of the alternatives is most consistent with a Christian understanding of the human situation. But to the extent that Christians can raise such fundamental issues, they can contribute to the improvement of the political scene.

Conclusion

We can all be helped to raise the quality of public discourse by the reading we do and the dialogue we have with others. It helps to read journals of Christian opinion. Many mainline denominations make special efforts to provide informative discussions of many social issues. These efforts are often carefully done and can be the basis for thoughtful examination of the issues that face the country. They often deal with specific policies and the relevance of these policies to the public good. At times they do pose uncomfortable questions and hence are often overlooked (or deliberately avoided) in local settings that have not developed the interest or the capacity for respectful conversations about public issues. Christians would do well to study and discuss public policies and then to use their own good judgments as to how to vote.

Yes, Christians should vote, albeit thoughtfully, and with due attention to what their faith teaches about the common good.

About the Writer

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Endnotes

1. William Muehl, *Politics for Christians* (New York: Association Press, 1956), 4.