

Editorial: Bridging the 2016 political divide

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Would you rather talk about politics or religion?

If you're like most Americans, you prefer discussing politics. And if you're like most U.S. evangelicals, you'd rather stick to religion.



Marv Knox Just in time for your discussions, LifeWay Research has released the results of [a survey that shows how Americans feel about talking up both politics and religion.](#)

Despite the adage about not speaking of religion and/or politics in polite company, most Americans like to discuss both, said Scott McConnell, director of LifeWay Research.

Politics or religion?

Practically everyone has a preference, he added.

“Six in 10 Americans are more comfortable talking about politics than their spiritual beliefs. And most say they aren’t interested in having more spiritual conversations,” a LifeWay statement reported. “By contrast, evangelical Christians prefer talking about God over politics by a 2-to-1 margin.”

“People tend to discuss the things that matter most to them,” McConnell said. “For evangelicals, that is their faith.”

Here’s how the divide breaks down: Americans who feel more comfortable talking about religion include 51 percent of women, 57 percent of weekly church attenders and 63 percent of evangelicals. Political discussions happen more often among men, 69 percent of whom favor talking politics over religion, and non-evangelicals, among whom 65 percent would rather discuss politics.

Particularly perilous

Election years make political speech perilous. Have you felt nervous when politics comes up for discussion?

In 2016, friendships seem to be on the line. Friendships across the political spectrum have blessed my wife, Joanna, and me. Most vote differently than we do. Up to now, political differences have not hindered our friendship. We agree to disagree, granting the other the right to cast a “wrong” ballot and laughing about canceling the others’ votes.

This year, we feel the weight of history, and the political divide feels wider, the stakes higher and the veneer of civility thinner. That’s not scary; it’s sad. And I wonder if this election will cost friendships. Tension stretches tightest between fellow believers who seek to do God’s will in the voting booth but feel the Lord leading them in opposite directions.

Will the bonds of friendship endure this campaign?

We need each other

If we work at retaining our relationships, friends can remain friends, no matter how we vote—and even no matter who wins. Christians can lead the way.

Here are ideas to consider as we traverse this long, disturbing campaign:

1. *Christians must not demonize each other.*

That's how talk radio and website comments work. Vilify everyone with a different idea and "win" the argument. But that's not the pattern for Christian conduct. As Jesus' followers, we must respect the Spirit's work in each other. Our bonds of faith should be stronger than our political ties.

2. *Christians participate in both political parties.*

Faith, Bible study and prayer lead some Christians to be Republicans and others to be Democrats. Of course, secular political issues—the size and nature of government, economics and the like—guide them, too. But principled Christians follow their religious beliefs into both parties.

Their reasons are as varied as the voters, but two issues stand out. Many Christians are Republicans because that party has shared their opposition to abortion. Likewise, many Christians are Democrats because that party has reflected their views regarding the poor and marginalized.

3. *Christians back both major-party candidates.*

This is hard for both sides to imagine. And they typically argue from the negative; they're voting for one because they cannot pull the lever for the other. These Trump voters don't trust Clinton and cite her emails and Benghazi as examples, and they can't support her pro-choice abortion position. Similarly, Clinton voters dislike Trump's xenophobia, misogyny, narcissism, disdain for the handicapped, and ignorance of both the Bible and the Constitution.

4. *Democracy affirms choices.*

For 229 years, the U. S. Constitution has granted all citizens the right to vote according to the dictates of their consciences. Americans across the

political spectrum affirm democracy and proclaim loyalty to the Constitution. They assert our political experiment has helped make the United States the strongest, freest nation on earth.

So, if we honor constitutional principles, we can acknowledge friends' right to make political choices—even those we believe are wrong.

5. No matter who wins, we're going to need each other.

At the rate the campaign is going, the election will leave our nation horribly divided. Every day, Americans get hammered with declarations about how different we are from each other. After the election, the losing political party—perhaps the winner, too—will need to rethink its reason for existing.

Christians who affirm God's creation of all people and subsequently affirm our common humanity will play important roles in rebinding our nation. Only those who believe in miracles need apply, but the work will be vital.

6. This election is important, but it's not ultimate.

God is sovereign over all people across all time. God is Lord over kings and kindergartners, over presidents and peasants and preachers. Civilization has endured all manner of calamity, from hurricanes and volcanos and earthquakes, to dictators and corrupt politicians and carpetbaggers.

We'll get through this. But we need each other. And we need faith—wherever it leads.

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