

Voices: 8 guidelines for Christian political engagement

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Many of us would agree with what a friend of mine recently said: “I think I’m ready to live in some precedented times.”

It is fair to say, even during the best of times, presidential elections bring out the worst in people. All too often, Christian engagement in contemporary American politics reflects the tendencies in the broader culture rather than a faithful Christian witness.

What follows are some suggested guidelines for Christian political engagement. These by no means are exhaustive. My hope is they might serve as helpful reminders as we navigate the highly charged atmosphere of the current political season.

The temptation for many Christians is to bury their heads in the sand due to the negativity and nastiness of contemporary politics. Instead, we are called to be active in the world to—in the words of Micah 6:8—“Do justice and love mercy” and to “seek the welfare of the city” as Jeremiah explains.

As N.T. Wright and Michael F. Bird declare in their new book, *Jesus and the Powers*, “Christ’s kingdom may not be of the world, but it is for the world.” It is our obligation, in other words, to be “salt of the earth” and “light of the world.”

Guidelines for Christian political

engagement

In light of these considerations, what guidelines might Christians consider for political engagement?

1. Don't make God a Republican or a Democrat.

It is important to recognize no political party has a stranglehold on truth or moral purity. Christians should remind themselves parties exist primarily to mobilize voters to win elections. Their purpose is to gain power.

Christians risk frustration—or worse, manipulation—when we baptize a particular party or political agenda.

What if Christians embraced a political agenda that transcended party loyalty?

2. Do not bear false witness against your political opponents.

This is particularly difficult to do in a polarized climate where demonization, fear mongering and conspiracy theories seem to prevail. Christians sometimes can be the worst purveyors of political lies and often adopt an “end justifies the means” ethic to rationalize their rhetoric.

What if Christians challenged false claims of both their political opponents and allies? What if they refused to engage in the politics of personal destruction?

3. Recognize politics is the “art of the compromise.”

Rather than insisting on ideological purity, Christians should accept compromise is at the heart of democratic governance. Not much can be achieved unless members of both parties reach across the partisan divide to get legislation passed.

While Christians should not ignore or set aside their convictions, they too often have let their religious ideals shape unrealistic policies, often making perfect the enemy of the good.

What if Christians were known for finding common ground on difficult political issues?

4. Take a holistic view when choosing candidates.

On July 4, 1827, Presbyterian minister Richard Ely delivered a sermon entitled “The Duty of Freemen to Elect Christian Elders.” Ely’s argument is one that would be echoed in many churches to this present day.

Yet, theological litmus tests for political leaders are problematic as many of our most consequential presidents—Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt and others—might not fit the Christian mold some seek.

This is not to say the personal character of a political candidate does not matter. At the very least, Christians should demand politicians possess leadership virtues, such as wisdom, moderation, humility, courage and selflessness.

What if Christians demanded integrity from all of our leaders, no matter their party affiliation or political ideology?

5. Avoid oversimplifying complex issues.

Most public policy issues are complex and defy easy solutions. Can foreign policy, health care, immigration and the economy really be addressed in a political sound bite?

Christians in particular should avoid the temptation to oversimplify public policies and affirm Paul’s recognition that we all “see through a glass darkly.” Recognizing complexity might soften our stances and make us willing to dialogue more honestly with those with whom we disagree.

As former U.S. senator and Episcopal priest John Danforth has said: “The problem is not that Christians are conservative or liberal, but that some are so confident that their position is God’s position that they become dismissive and intolerant toward others and divisive forces in national life.”

What if Christians exemplified humility in the public square, rather than self-righteousness?

6. Pursue policies that reflect love of neighbor and advance the common good.

The old adage about American politics is people vote “according to their pocketbooks.” This remains the case today, as the economy ranks high among voters in this presidential election year.

To be sure, taxes and other economic policies matter and have a significant impact on the wellbeing not just of ourselves, but of others. Yet, as we consider economic and other policies, are we concerned primarily about our own welfare or the good of others, especially the poor and powerless?

What if Christians prioritized policies that benefited “the least of these”?

7. Model active and informed citizenship.

Political apathy and ignorance are widespread in the United States. The average citizen often is disengaged or ill-informed. Information is abundant, but too often what we encounter online is not intended to inform.

Too many of our preachers, pundits and politicians are ramping up fear and manufacturing outrage, rather than encouraging us to “come and let us reason together.”

The easy approach is to gravitate toward news sources that confirm our biases, while informed citizenship requires persistence and discernment.

What if Christians practiced fair-minded and fact-based political advocacy?

8. Pray for all nations and their leaders.

In some ways, Christians in the United States have triple citizenship. We are citizens of the kingdom of God, citizens of the United States and global citizens.

Naturally, we tend to invest our emotional energy in the issues of our own communities and country, to the neglect of the very serious challenges faced by people around the globe. Christians should strive to foster a greater global awareness that may put our parochial political disputes in perspective.

What if Christians saved their moral outrage for the persistence of poverty, famine, civil war and genocide around the world, rather than petty partisan squabbles?

None of these guidelines are meant to suggest Christians should be passive participants in American politics. To be sure, there are times when Christians should express righteous indignation in the face of injustice, as well as call out political leaders when they fall short.

At the same time, Christians often do not cultivate, in the words of theologian Miroslav Volf, “habits of wise reflection.”

What if Christians modeled a political engagement that reflected wisdom and honored Christ?

J. David Holcomb is professor of history and political science at the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor and a member of Meadow Oaks Baptist

Church in Temple. The views expressed in this opinion article are those of the author.