

How Should a Christian Vote? 31 Oct 2012, Calvinist International, online

...What is Voting?

The first thing to consider is what voting is and does, especially given the peculiar mystique accorded it in the United States.

Voting is a method of registering the will of the people in a matter of the common good. It is generally regarded as a basic element of democracy, but democracy, of course, would need to be defined. Chesterton reflected that a real democracy is not so much one where the people are rulers by ballot, but rather one where rule is popular, embodying the people's best instincts and customs, and serving the people's best interests. But the ballot, insofar as it tallies the opinion of wise citizens, can serve as a useful enough method of decision in council, whether the vote is for candidates or for laws. It makes more sense, I think, at the local scale, and less the further out and up one goes; but be that as it may, it's what we have.

So voting is a legitimate method in certain forms of polity. Neither the polity nor the method is necessary (many Americans wrongly presume that a republican or a democratic polity is the only just one, but this is simply false; it is not even true that republican or democratic polities necessarily afford greater personal or civic liberty: it is perfectly possible for a monarchical or mixed polity to guarantee justice and freedom, just as it is quite possible for republics in oligarchic deformation, or for democracies in collectivist deformation, to destroy justice and freedom – forgive me, I'm rambling), though they may well be regarded as good and useful respectively. Christians are bound by reason and revelation to care actively for the common good and to work for it, and thus, in democracies, voting can be and usually is to be used insofar as it serves that end. Unlike Brazil, we have no mandate to vote; if we did, we would have the same sort of moral obligation to vote as we have to obey any other just civil law, but we don't, and so we don't. What moral obligation we have to vote arises not from the positive law, but rather insofar as prudence deems that the general obligation to work for the public good specifically entails our making use of the ballot in this or that case. But it cannot be said that there is an absolute moral obligation to vote.

Keep It in Perspective

America has always had a bit of a problem with its own self-image. Frankly, it's a bit self-centered. Sometimes Americans even think of themselves as a new Israel, an elect people who are politically the "apple of God's eye." Recent commentators have called this the problem of "Americanism." This makes questions that ought to be earthly and prudential turn into religious and ultimate ones.

The Manichæan tone of American politics echoes in the parties' ballot rallying: the citizen is never encouraged to carefully consider the general facts, let alone the details, but rather to "rock the vote" for the good cause and against the bad. Consider Obama's messianism four years ago, even among certain Christians, and the anti-Obama apocalypticism of the so-called Christian Right. This

kind of apocalypticism is nothing new. Voting has thus become a ritualized form of civil war, which will replay over and over every time the season arrives. In this, it is akin to the ever-repeated ritual altar call of American revivalism which promises much and effects very little, or to the sports cycles of American television. And just as the victory of one team over another is of little moment, so too is the victory of one party over another. But this is a terrible way for rational people to make careful decisions, and so we must bring voting back down to earth.

...Yes, Vote

We can see the folly of people who, seeing that voting isn't the unqualified good most pretend it is, therefore abstain from it totally in a grandstanding way. To do so is to make as much a fetish of voting as do those who think it sacramentally comprehensive of civic participation and make a moral mandate of it... One should rather be willing to use voting, when useful, as one means of prudent civic participation among many.

Even though voting is in no way equivalent to full civic participation and is not strictly speaking necessary to it (even if a day came when really huge numbers of people were suddenly disenchanted and refused to vote, such a turn would not leave the city simply unmanaged, because the causes of such a turn would certainly express themselves in political discourse and provoke massive political changes), and even though the choices on offer are speciously different, the instrument still works well enough to be of use as one element of civic participation, especially at the municipal level.

So let us make our first resolution: voting is almost never a sin matter; it is a prudential matter. It is a particular political method, not of the very essence of civic freedom or civic participation in any of its modes. Must we vote? No. Ought we to vote? Sometimes, at least. Voting is a flawed but legitimate method, and the normal method in this country. Given these facts, there is, if not a legal obligation, something of a moral one in general unless one is morally certain that his duties of civic participation are being otherwise carried out, and that he has good proportionate reasons for not voting.

Principles of Voting

So we're going to vote. Must we then, as Christian citizens, vote for one candidate in particular? Must we not vote for one or the other?

We have to keep reminding ourselves that politics is a matter of prudence. Prudence finds means to the practical end of the good in any given situation, and since most real life situations are messy, prudence is messy. But there are some general principles which guide our prudent deliberation.

In politics, we seek the common good. As citizens of a republic, we aim to elect leaders whose prudence we trust with regard to the common good. They might not be perfect, but they need to be reliable.

Must He Be a Man of Moral Probity?

A politician must be moral only with regard to the virtues proper to the statesman, of which some are moral, and some artistic, since politics is fundamentally an art. Although the virtues mutually cohere, it is possible to be vicious in some respects without significantly damaging the other virtues with regard to their exercise of the political art. People aren't really knit-sweaters that unravel with any loose thread. Most of us are inconsistent and at times even irrational.

The current public emphasis on personal spotlessness only apparently comports with Christian concerns in politics. For reasons just mentioned, personal impeccability is not a criterion, only that the statesman be a man of rectitude requisite for his office. The media's moralizing scrutiny is not Christian, it is prurient, and used primarily as a tool to disqualify men thought to pose some sort of threat to the status quo, and thus very irregularly applied. But, barring new legislation making sharper distinctions between what is fair comment on publicly pertinent aspects of a public person's private life, Christians should be careful not to measure magistrates by an unqualified standard of spotless private virtue. Very rarely is virtue really the issue in such cases; other motives are quite usually behind those sorts of scurrilous exposés, and the alternative candidate is rarely more saintly in any significant way.

Must He Be Christian?

...We would say that the ideal society ought to consistently account for its morals and freedoms and that this will require a certain sort of Christian constitution, however we are also permitted as Christians to work within and even for polities that have not yet achieved this ideal status. The only requirement that seems inescapable is that the candidate not be religiously obligated towards the destruction of the common good, or if he is, he should at least be very unlikely to follow through on such obligations (but that's very tricky to determine indeed).

...we do not and cannot judge the character of a man's heart. But we most certainly can judge the candidate's policy and its conformity to the principles of Christian political wisdom and moral doctrine. ..We should consider very closely a man's stated policy by the measure of moral truths, granting him of course room for his own prudential estimate of what aims are to be pursued, in what order of priority, and with what political tactics. But in a republic, politics is a matter not only of the statesman's prudence, but also of the citizen's, and we will often find that our fellow countryman's decisions on which candidate will do the better job differ from ours, even when our principles are the same.

One must vote for the man who one thinks will effect the greatest good. Sometimes, however, one is faced with a situation where one or both of the candidates says he will pursue an imprudent or even immoral policy, or acquiesce in one, and those are the only choices on offer. This is the dilemma of the two evils. What then?

Voting For Evil?

If one were to vote in that situation – and principled abstinence, if coupled with other kinds of constructive civic participation, is certainly a legitimate option in such a case – then one must weigh the question of formal and material cooperation in evil. These names, while somewhat out of style today, are actually very helpful.

Formal cooperation in evil is sharing the intent of the evildoer, as when you vote for a candidate precisely because he supports abortion, or were one to assist in a bank heist. Material cooperation is when your act is some part of the chain of things which will probably result in an evil, and evil intended by the evildoer, but you do not share the intent. Both kinds of cooperation come in two modes: near and far. Remote cooperation is many degrees of participation removed; near cooperation is much closer to the misdeed. Formal cooperation in evil, near or far, is always immoral. An example of remote formal cooperation in evil is a man who provides a fake ID to another man who will use the ID to rent a car to carry an assassin to his target, if the provider knows the purpose of renting under false pretenses; an example of near cooperation, in the same scenario, is the driver. If the provider of the fake ID does not know, his providing a fake ID is material cooperation, but still evil, since he is breaking the law. Since material cooperation means that one is involved causally in the chain of events but does not share the intent, there are two ways this can happen: with awareness of the unshared intent to evil, and without it. In cases where consequent evils are a significant possibility of an action, such as investment, we are morally bound to inquire as far as possible into the consequences of the activity to insure that we are not being complicit in evil; we cannot plead ignorance if there was a good chance of finding out the truths. But in many cases, our inquiry cannot extend so far, or we cannot control the variables regarding the possible though not probable consequences of an action licit in itself, and thus we will sometimes unavoidably be found materially cooperant, in a remote way, in evils. We must simply work to minimize these occasions.

But sometimes, far material cooperation in evil can be prudently justified without moral compromise. This occurs when the formal cooperation is in a good, although some evil will probably or even certainly result from the circumstances involving the good which is being formally cooperated in, and we have proportionate reasons to take the risk. And it is this circumstance which must most often be weighed by the Christian citizen in voting. An example of this would be paying taxes, even though the government will very probably, almost certainly, use some of those funds towards ends which you deem immoral. You nevertheless may and should pay the tax out of a duty toward the good of civic participation and wholly without evil intent. Further, the Government is under no necessary compulsion to use the taxes for evil, nor does the taxpayer have a certain knowledge of what his exact funds will support. This sort of cooperation can be carried out with full awareness in good conscience. Likewise with voting for the “lesser of evils.” But you must honor the conscience of other Christians and indeed of all other citizens who cannot find in their conscience to vote in such a situation, and thus fulfil their duty of civic participation through other means.

We can say a few things in specific about our current bi-party political monopoly. The Democrats' full embrace of the culture of death makes voting for them very difficult on Christian principles. They have been shameless in their identification of "healthcare" with abortion and even outright unchastity and immorality, and they have made no secret that "women's rights" is a euphemism for abortion. And while we demur from hasty judgments that Obamacare directly equals theft, it is certainly true that the bureaucratic welfare State in its present form is directly destructive of civil society and the family, and Obamacare will very likely make things worse for actual hospitals, doctors, and patients.

But the Republicans support war doctrines contrary to Christian principle and a form of crony corporatism that necessarily weakens the family and the common good, and much of their morally conservative discourse is demonstrably insincere or founded on principles unacceptable to orthodox Christians. Many of us are also starting to feel that the Republicans simply assume the conservative Christian, or at least Evangelical vote, and thus feel no compulsion to actually work to represent it.

Since we do feel that neither party obviously promotes the common good or considers itself informed by Christian wisdom, it seems that a principled pragmatism, handling matters case by case while working for broader reformation, is the only option. And this means we have already removed ourselves from any readily applied Biblical commands and prohibitions, which, as the Reformers taught, bind us now in only the general equity, which means, the natural law. We must use wisdom and strategy, keeping in mind the limitations of politics.

In considering imperfect options, we must weigh many things very carefully. Is, for instance, Obama's abortion policy so great an evil that it outweighs any other goods? Is Romney's foreign policy so great an evil that it outweighs the possibility of his curtailing abortion? Would either choice be formal cooperation with evil? If so, that choice cannot be made. If not, would the material cooperation be near or far? If near, it would also be best not to support such a choice. But if the material cooperation is far, then you may. As you can see, this is quickly a difficult matter. While one can have personal moral certitude sufficient for action, there is still enough uncertainty involved that one must be very careful in judging others' prudence.

But after all that (and it is a lot to say), even if formal cooperation or unwarranted material cooperation in resulting evils is not involved, one must vote for the candidate one thinks, in prudence, is the better fit for the situation at hand.

...So What Counts?

To wrap all of this up, we should ask the very basic questions: What does a President do? and What can a President do?

The President is not a king or absolute dictator. His word is not, in fact, law. He is, instead the head of the executive branch of government. He directly controls the military and foreign policy – which also means human rights standards – and any future Supreme Court nominations. The President can also veto bills, choose not to enforce certain laws and policies, and provide a general cultural leadership. These are his negative or indirect qualities. Less tangibly, he is also the most powerful voice in his party, and thus he’s something analogous to a “head coach” for the nation. In our day of media scrutiny and open dissent, this is far from absolute, but it is still significant. The direct qualities are most objective, and can be addressed with the most confidence, though one never knows future hypotheticals with any certainty.

Christians should be responsible citizens, but the majority of the energy ought to be spent on local politics and crafting meaningful relationships and communal and cultural identity. We need virtuous citizens before we can really hope for their virtuous representatives, and we should be realistic about the possibilities of any given administration or political season. And of course, all things must be carried out in charity. Vote for the candidate who is most likely to do the most good (and the least evil), and do your best in the rest of your life to support and encourage the common good.

Now after all of this, I’m sure you’re a little put out with me that I haven’t told you who to vote for. I haven’t, and I won’t. I’d much rather teach you how to choose, and ask that you teach that to others. The cultivation of reason in your friends and family will do more than a thousand campaign signs. Be patient, keep your trust in God alone, and love your neighbor as yourself.

always yours,

Phronesis