

Faith and Politics Discussion Guide

A Question of Faith

In recent years, the role of faith in the political arena has become more and more prominent. Ever since John F. Kennedy, a professed Roman Catholic, defeated Richard M. Nixon in the 1960 presidential race, Americans have demanded an ever-increasing transparency from political candidates regarding their religious beliefs. Since then, the well-publicized and highly visible Christianity of presidents such as Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and George W. Bush has firmly fixed religious faith as a key issue in any political campaign. For better or worse (depending on your point of view), Americans seem to prefer leaders who are people of faith. And with some 83 percent of Americans identifying themselves as “Christian,” candidates from both major political parties have lined up to convince believers—especially conservative evangelical Christians—that they share their faith and therefore are worthy of their votes.

But do faith and politics really mix? The framers of the U.S. Constitution were careful to insist that the federal government does not have the power to enact a “state religion.” Watchdog groups are quick to point out any breach—real or imagined—of this prescribed “separation of church and state.” But most Americans apparently believe that at least when it comes to the highest office in the land, there should not be a total separation of faith from politics.

With the 2008 presidential race (along with races for 35 Senate seats and all 435 seats in the House of Representatives) in full swing, issues of faith and politics have never been more crucial—or more hotly debated. The purpose of this discussion guide is to assist you in thinking through some of the questions many Americans are asking about the role of faith in politics.

The Role of Faith

1. Do you believe that politicians need to be people of faith in order to govern most effectively?
2. How important is it to you that a candidate for president or other political office profess a deep personal faith in Jesus Christ?
3. Both candidates in the 2008 presidential election have professed a personal faith in Jesus Christ. Given today’s political climate, do you think it would be possible for a candidate who openly expressed religious skepticism or outright disbelief in God to win the White House? What about an adherent of another religion?
4. To what extent do you think voters should take into account a candidate’s character and private morality when deciding who should be put into office?
5. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a twentieth-century German Christian, once stated that “politics are not the task of a Christian.” Do you agree or disagree with this viewpoint?

6. The argument is often made that “you can’t legislate morality.” Do you believe this is true? How should personal faith influence the creation and interpretation of laws and policies?

Professions of Faith

7. Is it necessary—or even a good idea—for candidates to make their religious beliefs public? At what point does a public profession of faith start to seem like mere words used for political gain?

8. What potential pitfalls or advantages do you see in Christians aligning themselves with a particular political party?

9. Are there ways in which genuine faith is prohibitive of a career in politics? Do you think there are “deal breakers”—potential conflicts between faith and politics—that might make it necessary for a person of faith to step down from a political position? If so, what for you are those “deal breakers”?

Issues of Faith

10. What importance do you place on a politician’s stance on “issues of traditional values” (such as abortion, gay marriage, etc.) compared with “national issues” (such as the economy, national security, the military, etc.)? How might you choose, for example, between a candidate who agrees with your position on abortion but who differs on foreign policy and the economy and an opponent whose positions on foreign policy and the economy are similar to yours but who has an opposite view on abortion?

11. Would you support a candidate who places a high value on ethical reform but has relatively little political experience? How about a candidate who has a long history in politics but does not stress the importance of good ethics?

12. What should be the role of humility in public office? What examples of humility (or lack thereof) can you identify among current politicians and candidates?

Standards of Faith

13. Often in a political race it seems necessary to point out the flaws of the opposing candidate to elevate one’s own platform. How much do you think a candidate needs to rely on making the other person look bad? Can a candidate be truly respectful of and tell the truth about his or her opponent and still win an election?

14. Is there such a thing as a clean political campaign? What would it look like?

15. What is your opinion of negative advertising on TV and radio? What do you think is the best way for a person of faith to respond to political attacks or negative ads?

People of Faith

16. What kind of candidate might inspire you to volunteer time and effort to his or her campaign?

17. Many politicians work hard to project an image of optimism, resiliency, and hope. What filters do you apply to such political messages to discern which candidates are genuine in their faith and which might only be putting on a show?

Scriptures about Politics and Government

18. Take some time to look up the following Bible verses. How does what the Bible has to say about government affect the way you view issues of faith and politics today?

Proverbs 28:2

Daniel 6:1-5

Luke 20:22-25

Romans 13:1-7

Titus 3:1

19. Proverbs 21:1 says, “The king’s heart is like a stream of water directed by the LORD; he guides it wherever he pleases.” Do you believe that God guides even unbelieving rulers?

20. What other Bible passages inform your understanding of government and your views about the relationship between faith and politics?

Final Thoughts

Our nation’s founders believed that the country would function best when its citizens are informed about the issues facing them as a nation, are involved in finding solutions to those issues, and hold their leaders accountable for their decisions and actions. Toward that end, we hope these questions have helped stimulate your thinking and discussion about faith and politics.

Regardless of your own political leanings, may God bless you as you seek to become more informed about key issues and determine which candidates you will vote for this election season and in the future.