

Political engagement as an act of faith

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On the day I turned 18, I could hardly wait for the final school bell to ring—but not for the reason you might imagine. I couldn't wait to get in my car, drive downtown to the courthouse, and register to vote.

Women in the United States were permitted this right only 96 years ago with the passing of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which reads in part: "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex." Knowing the years of struggle that undergirded women's suffrage, I do not take this right for granted. Since my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday I have voted in every presidential election, each time thinking deeply about the issues at stake and choosing the candidate I believe best suited to the position.

This election, however, feels different to me. I care greatly who is elected to be our next president, but I'm reluctant to engage in an exchange that feels more like a mud-slinging brawl than a thoughtful, truth-seeking conversation. Christians on social media post memes likening the president and first lady to jungle animals; Hillary Clinton is slammed with the traditional aging, power-hungry-woman tropes; and Donald Trump is ridiculed for his hair and likened to an Oompa Loompa. The comments sections of news sites contain ridicule and hate. People at the next table in the coffee shop demean and deride a candidate, calling him or her "evil," a person no Christian could vote for.

Attack has always been the political *modus operandi*. But this year's election cycle highlights more than ever a significant reality: the way a person participates in the electoral process is a mirror that reflects the soul. Am I operating out of love? Or out of fear? For Christians, these are crucial questions.

Our country suffers from economic problems and great income disparity. The rhetoric in current political conversation reveals deep divisions on abortion, immigration and refugee policies, abuses of power, and LGBTQ issues. Sincere believers, with deep and honest conviction, can find themselves on opposite sides of

any given issue.

However, if I come to my position out of fear of the other and denial of my responsibility to fellow humans, it's disingenuous to consider myself a follower of Christ. The Samaritan did not consider race or personal cost when he came to the aid of his neighbor. Many of the women who originally fought for my right to vote were also ardent abolitionists. They believed deeply in the inherent worth and dignity of each human being and in the value of both sexes.

All citizens have the right—and the privilege—to debate these issues and vote their convictions. Discernment is important in the electoral process, as is thoughtful disagreement. But if our debate and our choices make gods of our bank accounts and our need for security at all costs; if we attack with venom, hate, and judgment; if our deeply held convictions are not based in faith, humility, compassion, and an unwavering acknowledgment that we are all created in the image of God, it's hard to argue that we are followers of the Light.

It would be wonderful to elect a business leader who embodies integrity, wisdom, and compassion to straighten out our financial affairs and lead our country. I do not believe Donald Trump fits this description. It would be wonderful for a woman of integrity, wisdom, and compassion to break through the highest glass ceiling. I'm not sure that Hillary Clinton is the woman I'd like to see achieve this goal. But I don't want to participate in hateful rhetoric against either candidate.

I don't know which candidate I will vote for this November. I've been told that voting for a third party candidate is throwing my vote away. Perhaps. But honoring my conscience is more important to me than achieving victory with the majority. And not to vote at all would be to deny one of my most basic rights, and one that was hard-won.

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