

None of the above: Why I won't be voting for president

by [Mark Noll](#) in the [September 21, 2004](#) issue

As has been the case for the past few presidential elections, on Election Day I will almost certainly cast my vote once again for none of the above. Here is why:

Seven issues seem to me to be paramount at the national level: race, the value of life, taxes, trade, medicine, religious freedom and the international rule of law. In my mind, each of these issues has a strong moral dimension. My position on each is related to how I understand the traditional Christian faith that grounds my existence. Yet neither of the major parties is making a serious effort to consider this particular combination of concerns or even anything remotely resembling it.

In searching for a party that is working for something close to my convictions, I am not necessarily looking for a platform supported by overtly expressed religious beliefs. It would be enough to find candidates promoting such positions by reference to broad social goals and general patterns of American democratic tradition. In fact, because each of these issues is of vital national concern for people of all faiths (and none), I am eager to find public voices willing to defend convictions similar to my own in generic social terms rather than with specifically religious arguments.

My disillusionment with the major parties and their candidates comes from the fact that I do not see them willing to consider the political coherence of this combination of convictions or willing to reason about why their positions should be accepted—much less willing to break away from narrow partisanship to act for the public good. Broad principles and particular interests have never in the history of the republic been more confusedly mixed than they are today. Sketching reasons for my political convictions will make my electoral dilemma clear.

Regarding race: From 1619, when the first African indentured servants were offloaded in the American colonies, until the 1960s, American political institutions wavered in deciding whether African Americans could be full and equal citizens of a democratic nation. A general principle of American democracy demands that

members of every race and ethnic group be treated equally before the law, but a general fact of history demands that sustained, accumulated wrongs must be addressed by sustained, ongoing remediation. The most chilling words ever spoken about the fruits of American inequality were part of the second inaugural address of Abraham Lincoln in March 1865: “Yet if God wills that it [the Civil War] continue, until all the wealth piled by the bond-man’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid with another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousands years ago, so still it must be said ‘the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.’”

Shortly after Lincoln made this speech, the Civil War did come to an end. Yet the “scourge,” the “offense,” of race-defined social inequality did not end until much later, if in fact it has actually come to an end. The U.S. pays a heavy price, and it pays it daily, for its history of injustice to African- American citizens. African Americans who wait for redress, who do not take into their own hands the challenge of shaping their own future, compound this larger difficulty. But full attention to the racially infested plight of impacted urban areas—a Marshall Plan in some shape or form—is certainly the least that could be asked of the major political parties as recompense for America’s longest lasting and most debilitating political crime.

Regarding life: I am militantly prolife because I do not want the U.S. to commit the social suicide that results when nations allow personal preference to trump human life. Through the long course of the ages, a personal preference to disregard life has been mostly exercised by male authority at the top of society. Today it is exercised by different actors because of the spread of egalitarian values. But whether exercised from above or below, personal preference is mortally dangerous if it operates without reasonable restraint. Assumptions that are nearly universal in human history testify that, without compelling reasons to the contrary, life should be favored over death.

To be sure, free societies need to defend the prerogatives of citizens to decide whether to bring life into existence or not. And free societies, especially those that claim to hold life as a supreme value, should offer all possible support to the mothers who bring new life into the world and to the intact families that young lives so desperately need in order to become useful, productive citizens. In addition, since prenatal life is closely bound up with maternal life, it is necessary to legislate with nuance and sensitivity when acting to preserve life. All necessary qualifications

having been made, however, it is imperative for nations that want to promote liberty and justice for all to stand behind the principle of life and against any effort, however well intentioned, to compromise that fundamental principle.

Regarding taxes: The U.S. needs to base its income tax policy on broad views of justice and equity—that is, it needs sharply progressive income taxes. The ability to create wealth does depend on personal initiative, personal intelligence, personal work and personal luck. It depends also on a social infrastructure that allows initiative, intelligence, hard work and luck to result in the creation of wealth. If you live in Bangladesh, Haiti, Zimbabwe or many places in Russia, your chances of becoming wealthy are scant, regardless of how smart you are, how hard you work or how much initiative you take.

It is a matter of justice that those who benefit most from the social infrastructure of the U.S.—from its traditions of liberty as well as its traditions of entrepreneurial creativity, its provisions for making business work as well as its culture of personal consumption—should pay the most to maintain that infrastructure. What I earn is in some real sense “mine,” but in another equally valid sense it is “ours,” since what “we” provide is the kind of political and social environment in which money can be made.

Regarding trade: The U.S. should continue to defend principles of free trade and, wherever possible, expand the operations of free trade. Free trade, admittedly, can be painful for individual segments of advanced economies like the U.S., and so there needs to be temporary assistance for segments hurt by the expansion of free trade (which assistance could be adequately funded if tax revenues were being raised from segments of the population benefiting from the expansion of free trade). But in broader terms free trade opens up opportunities for the kind of entrepreneurial activity that creates jobs and expands markets. It binds nations with cords of commerce. It makes the necessities of life more widely available. It provides long-term solutions for problems exacerbated by poverty and the failures of education. It shows citizens of dictatorships and statist regimes the economic advantages of free economic activity. And it makes the U.S. safer from international resentment or attack by promoting new jobs in poverty-stricken regions of the world.

Regarding medicine: Basic medical coverage, supplied at minimal cost and with minimal hassle, should be offered to all. The wisdom of this argument does not require that such coverage be considered a basic human right. Prudent self-interest

should be all that is needed: Those whom illness or disability incapacitates become a drain on the public purse and are kept from functioning as productive workers. Those who live in constant fear of being pauperized by illness or disability do not function productively or contribute to the institutions of political and civil society. America's history of free competition has contributed to the splendors of American medicine. But locking those splendors away from a growing portion of the American populace is a problem of the first order.

A problem of nearly equal magnitude is the skyrocketing expense of medical coverage that results when individual parts of the medical system act only from their own perceived short-term interests. Timorous solutions are not the answer. Political leaders must find the courage to propose comprehensive programs, the perseverance to push them along, and the commitment to make things change.

Regarding religious freedom: All of modern world history reinforces the proposition that people must be allowed to exercise the basic human right of worshiping God, or not worshiping God, as they choose. The violation of this right has proven destructive of social well-being, corrosive of social harmony and stultifying to human flourishing. That religious freedom is almost certainly the most basic human right has been demonstrated by the repeated social constriction and economic regression where it has been abridged.

Regarding international rule of law: In an increasingly complex and riven world, the U.S. must act with scrupulous justice in its actions overseas. U.S. policies based on unilateralism—whether in trade, diplomacy or war—can only make the international arena more dangerous for all. Since the U.S. is by far the strongest nation in the world—the new Rome of the early 21st century—it should ponder the overextension, the shortsighted presumption, the failures of imagination and the unilateral use of force that caused such difficulties in the latter phases of the Roman Empire. Warfare remains the most explosive instrument of international policy. Self-interest is a legitimate reason for the use of force, but only when the strictest standards of justice—*jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*—are observed.

I have arrived at these seven political convictions as a result of my Christian faith. Yet each can be advanced in terms of the public good without reliance on a particular faith. Of course, I may be mistaken either in what traditional Christianity should mean politically for an American citizen in the early 21st century or in how best to argue for these positions with reasoning not demanding a commitment to traditional Christianity. But as long as I hold these positions, I am a citizen without a

political home.