

How Should Christians Vote in 2010?

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Introduction

Our question in this article is obviously not, 'who should Christians vote for in 2010?' Rather it is 'how can Christians prepare to vote as Christians in 2010?' Christians sometimes react defensively to talk of 'a Christian approach' to voting, as if the very idea were intrusive. Too often our ballot papers compete with our bank accounts as the very last places we expose to the unsettling effects of sanctification. Voting, we feel, is 'ours' – a sovereign act of choice done in the innermost recesses of our private conscience and behind the curtain of a polling booth. It's nobody else's business and there is no 'word of the Lord' on the matter.

This article, by contrast, proceeds from four assumptions.¹ First, all Christians should strive to allow their political thinking and acting to express their Christian discipleship just as in any other part of their lives. The New Testament people of God, living 'between the times', are summoned to 'seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you' just as their exiled Old Testament forebears were (Jer. 19:7).² Among many other things, this will mean Christians today joining in the difficult task of discerning what the unique contribution of government is to the promotion of justice and the public good. This is no easy task and does not come automatically to Christians – they have to work at it.

Second, such striving is best done, not in solitary acts of private judgment accountable to no-one, but in open, respectful, rigorous and prayerful deliberation in the community of believers. Third, in engaging in that task of corporate discernment we do not have to start from scratch. To do so would mean the waste of reinventing the wheel and the foolishness of repeating past mistakes. Rather, we should draw on the rich legacy of Christian political wisdom which many individuals and organisations are busy developing and applying today.³

Fourth, when Christians reach considered judgments on the task of government, they need to make their contributions within the normal channels of public democratic debate and action; Christians are now one minority among others (we live in a *post*-Christendom context) yet our goal should be to work for the common good of the whole nation (as we see it) and not just defend our own interests. Certainly we may appeal where appropriate to the Christian roots of our political system and resist the marginalization of religion from public life (we do not live in a *pre*-Christendom context), but we should not presume to possess any privileged public standing.⁴

A. Getting to grips with parties

Preparing to vote means getting to grips with the role of political parties and the content of their policies. Christians are often uneasy with the very idea of political parties, but effective Christian citizenship means taking them seriously. Here are four common misconceptions.

1. 'There's no Christian view of party politics'

As a matter of fact, thoughtful and informed Christians in good conscience support almost all the main national and regional parties in the UK. I say 'almost all' because vanishingly few Christians support extremist parties like the British National Party. Such parties espouse stances incompatible with unambiguous Christian political principles, such as racial equality.

Leaving those parties aside, how might we go about assessing the others? A common rejoinder at this point is that,

while Christian political convictions can negatively rule certain parties out, they can offer no *positive* guidance on which party to support. The view is that the decision must be left to the subjective judgments of individual Christian voters who, like any others, must be left free to decide what mix of principles, policies or personalities – or indeed autobiographical factors ('my Dad always voted Tory, or 'I'm a trade unionist') – they find compelling as they make that choice.

But this is not adequate. It is, admittedly, very difficult to argue that only one party in 2010 is worthy of Christian support. This would be true, incidentally, even if most Christians could actually agree on what the relevant 'Christian political principles' were, which unfortunately they don't. Instead we are in the realm of complex, contestable judgments of 'practical reasoning' on which sincere Christians will disagree. But this does not mean Christian debate on voting is pointless, as if the absence of certainty and unanimity meant that Christian practical reasoning had nothing substantive to say on one of the most important collective decisions democratic societies make. It is precisely because the issues are complex and debatable that we need to engage in a process of rigorous reasoning, by which we test each other's grasp of and fidelity to Christian political principles.

2. 'Parties agree on ends, they just differ over means'
Sometimes it is suggested that parties all share the same political 'ends' – justice, compassion, community, prosperity, social cohesion, etc. – and only disagree about the 'means' to realise them. Parties offer different 'technical' means to the same ends, and Christian political convictions have nothing specific to say about those means.

But the distinction between means and ends collapses on closer inspection. For example, the difference between market-based responses to environmental pollution (e.g. a carbon trading scheme) and regulatory responses (e.g. statutory limits on emissions) is not just a difference between two technical means to reach the same end. The balance between market freedom and legal restraint in any area of policy itself reveals differing larger visions of the role of government in society and of the very nature of what it means to be a 'society'. Is government primarily a facilitator of free individual (or corporate) choices, or a guarantor of common goods?

This issue also reveals a difference over the relative weight given to the costs of long-term environmental sustainability compared to the short-term economic costs of government regulation, and this too is a question about ends not simply means. So choices

between different means betray prior commitments about political ends, and Christians cannot pretend to remain above the fray on that question.

3. 'If only we had no political parties...'

General elections in the British system are the moment when citizens choose who will serve as their representatives in parliament. Like most western states, Britain is a representative democracy – a remarkable historical achievement to which Christianity has made a decisive contribution.⁵ 'Representative democracy' means both that the government (the 'executive') is approved by and accountable to elected representatives of the citizens and that it should be responsive to their considered political convictions. Government should not slavishly follow those convictions, but should interrogate, lead, educate, and, when they are foolish or oppressive, resist them. Knowing their own hearts, Christians do not romanticise the supposed wisdom of 'the people'. But a representative democracy holds that such convictions must be reckoned with and responded to by government. Respecting representative processes is key to government's recognition of citizens as *members* of the political community and not merely subjects to be ordered about or consumers who just need to have their desires satisfied.

At this point the unique and necessary role of political parties comes in. Parties are necessary to bring about coherence both in the people's convictions and in government policy. Forty million individual voters speaking separately cannot possibly send any clear message to government on how to govern. Citizens need parties to clarify a set of core convictions around which they can effectively mobilise and to work out what these mean for various areas of policy. Governments need parties to gather together a group of broadly united office-holders around a clear direction of governance.

Whether we like them or not, parties are now indispensable to representative democracy, and Christians should be committed to them, with many joining parties to improve the clarity and integrity of their convictions. Admittedly, the view that parties should be organizations of political *conviction*, and not just electoral machines or mouthpieces of special interests, is often mocked as 'idealistic'. But Christians active in parties should face down that mockery and seek wherever possible to elevate the character, behaviour and rhetoric of their parties. They should resist what is often praised as 'pragmatism' but which is actually cynical trimming to short-term electoral winds ('if you don't like our principles, we have others').

Some Christians hold the view that party politics is inherently tainted and should be avoided. Certainly many political contributions can be made which transcend party divisions. Most Christian campaigning groups – like most pressure groups generally – quite properly try to operate on a cross-party basis, seeking to influence policy in all or any parties. This is extremely valuable work, but of course it presupposes the very existence of parties which, in government, will enact their favoured policies. We cannot say that this strategy is somehow ‘more Christian’ than the work of those who operate within the parties themselves.⁶

4. ‘I vote for the person not the party...’

Sometimes we hear Christians announce, piously or in exasperation, that they are ‘voting for the person not the party’. But they are not: when we vote, we are necessarily electing a party. We are not simply electing a prime minister or a constituency MP.⁷ Obviously the character, record and commitments of party leaders and candidates are relevant to how we vote. But these individuals come with parties attached, and it is the convictions and policy commitments of these parties which should weigh far more heavily in determining how we vote. Those commitments are summed up in a party’s manifesto. While this will only be a rough and incomplete guide to what the party actually does in office, it is the moment when the party’s core convictions – or lack of them – are put on display and it should be taken seriously.

B. Assessing the stances of parties

Christians must, therefore, examine the rival party programmes on offer and reach their best judgement of which to support in 2010. Here I can only briefly point to a few of the considerations they should bear in mind as they do so.⁸

First, because parties make commitments across the whole range of public policies, Christian voters need to assess a party’s overall balance of policies and not simply focus on one or a few selected issues. While individual Christian campaigning groups properly concentrate on one or a small number of related issues (they can’t do everything), Christians should take a wider view of the common good when they vote. They can’t and shouldn’t isolate one issue – whether development aid, bio-ethics, religious liberty, marriage, pollution or whatever – and decide on that basis alone. In voting they will, *whether they know it or not*, be expressing a view (even if they don’t *have* a view) on all those and many other issues, so if they want to vote responsibly they had better know what the consequences of their vote will be across the board. Second, however, in some elections there are one or more issues that are not simply ‘single issues’ but

‘defining issues’. The latter should weigh much more heavily on Christian minds than the former, and it is a critical task of corporate Christian discernment to identify what these are in any election. While single issues (e.g., university tuition fees, or the rate of VAT) have limited impact on other areas of policy, defining issues (e.g., climate change or elderly care) have systemic impact on many other areas. They’ll likely reveal the central pathologies – perhaps even idolatries – of a society, the areas of its greatest ‘brokenness’.

But not every issue which reveals a ‘central pathology’ is necessarily within the capacity (or remit) of government to solve. Or, at least, while government may well have a role, that role may be quite restricted. For example, law and public policy have limited power to keep fragile marriages together. Identifying what government *can and can’t* do is itself a key political judgement, about which there is extensive, serious Christian reflection. For instance, a change in the married couples tax allowance may have some impact on divorce rates but it may not be the most important thing government can do, and it certainly won’t be the most important thing that can be done at all: the contribution of churches, schools, and the media are likely far more decisive.

Social pathologies which arise from deeper moral, cultural and spiritual deficiencies – such as our decreasing capacity to sustain long-term relationships – cannot be fixed by law. But these pathologies have effects which may threaten some people’s basic needs and rights, and here government has a unique protective role. This is why the overriding concern of government in response to surging divorce rates is protecting the welfare of children – surely one of the defining issues in this election for Christians. Equally, it is why the existing assault on the right to life of the unborn child, and the looming threat to the right to life of the elderly and the dying, are two others.

The same applies to global warming. In my view this is the towering defining issue of our time because of the sheer scale and immediacy of its likely consequences for all of us and especially the poorest of the world. It reveals a profound social pathology: a deep addiction to ever-increasing material consumption secured through endless economic growth. Again, government cannot address that spiritual pathology directly – it can’t make us honour nature as God’s gift – but it can act extensively to protect victims from others’ irresponsible behaviour and to incentivise responsible action.

Another defining issue concerns how governments negotiate the current economic crisis. With public

expenditure inevitably set to be reduced painfully in the next few years, Christians should bring their distinctive concerns to the question, concerns which may not be those dominating the upcoming campaign. One is that, when public revenues are tightly constrained, the overriding objective of government should not be to increase comfortable people's personal prosperity as fast as possible, but to ensure that the basic needs of the weakest members of society (those relying solely on a state pension, for example) are protected. Another is that the longer-term goal of expanded government intervention in the economy – clearly necessary in the short-term – should ultimately be to restore economic responsibility where it properly belongs, notably in suitably reformed banking and financial sectors, but equally among ordinary consumers who have recklessly and greedily taken on unsustainable levels of debt.

Conclusion

To prepare for their upcoming electoral choice, Christian communities should seriously engage in discerning the defining issues of this election. I've only offered a few suggestions that might feed into the discussions Christians need to have. Such discussions can be hosted by local churches, faith-based schools, Christian student groups, Christian groups within the parties, Christian campaigning groups, and elsewhere. Because we are largely unfamiliar with this kind of discussion, we may need to tread carefully as we learn new skills of respectful Christian deliberation and disagreement. But we can at least make a start – for the sake of 'the welfare of the city'.

¹ For a discussion of these assumptions, see the further reading suggestions.

² See, e.g., Alan Storkey, *Jesus and Politics: Confronting the Powers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).

³ See, e.g., Nick Spencer and Jonathan Chaplin, eds., *God and Government* (London: SPCK, 2009).

⁴ See, e.g., Nick Spencer, *Neither Private Nor Privileged: The Role of Christianity in Britain Today* (Theos 2008), and Jonathan Chaplin, *Talking God: The Legitimacy of Religious Public Reasoning* (Theos, 2008), accessible at: <http://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/mainnav/reports.aspx/>

⁵ See Jonathan Chaplin, 'Christian Justifications of Democracy', *Ethics in Brief* 11.3 (August 2006), accessible at: <http://klice.co.uk/uploads/EiB/chaplin%20v11.3%20pub.pdf>

⁶ Some Christians have opted instead to form distinctively Christian parties. I can't discuss this option here but I would not rule it out in principle. See, e.g. the Christian Peoples Alliance: <http://www.cpaparty.org.uk/>

⁷ Except for the very few candidates who stand as 'Independents'.

⁸ For a discussion of several key policy areas, see Rose Lynas, ed., *Votewise Now! Helping Christians engage with the issues* (London, SPCK 2009), and *Choosing the Common Good* by the Roman Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales (Stoke on Trent: Alive Publishing, 2010). For an earlier discussion, see Jonathan Chaplin, ed., *Politics and the Parties* (Leicester: IVP, 1992). Two accessible web resources are: www.susa.info/ and <http://www.makethecrosscount2010.net/defining-issues>

For further reading

- David Koyzis, *Political Visions and Illusions: A Survey and Christian Critique of Contemporary Ideologies*, IVP-USA, 2003.
- Rose Lynas, ed., *Votewise Now! Helping Christians engage with the issues*, SPCK, 2009.
- Nick Spencer and Jonathan Chaplin, eds., *God and Government*, SPCK, 2009.
- Alan Storkey, *Jesus and Politics: Confronting the Powers*, Baker Academic, 2005.

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