

How Do I Weigh the Issues?

By David Platt

LET'S IMAGINE a dream scenario.

You enter the voting booth on election day, and you're met with two options. The first candidate clearly represents positions that accord with God's Word. The candidate is pro-life, promotes justice for the economically disadvantaged and the immigrant, and counters racism head-on. The candidate is an exemplary follower of Jesus who tries to put God's clear commands into practice. Though the candidate's party platform involves a host of positions that cannot be said to be the Christian position, a good argument can be made that those policy positions represent a wise Christian approach.

The second candidate and party are markedly different. The candidate is openly antagonistic toward everything in God's Word and has no regard or respect for followers of Jesus and their beliefs. On almost every significant issue, the candidate works against clear commands in God's Word. What's more, the party platform contains hardly any positions that could conceivably be called a Christian position.

As you look at the options, the decision is easy. With peace of mind and a clear conscience, you walk into the voting booth on election day, and you cast your ballot for the first candidate. Simple, right?

Unfortunately, this isn't the way of the modern world. If things were so cut-and-dried in our country today, you probably wouldn't have picked up this book (though I submit that it would still be helpful to ask these seven questions). But since such simplicity is not a reality, what do we do? With a host of different issues before us, some of which are clear in God's Word and others that are less clear, and with two primary candidates and parties that have divergent perspectives on those issues, how do we weigh all the information in order to make a wise decision with our vote?

Two Parties

Let's start by reiterating a point from Question 2 about who holds our hearts. In the history of democracy, every political party has possessed both strengths and weaknesses. As products of human invention, political parties inevitably have idolatrous trajectories and trend toward positions that do not honor or reflect God's character. No human political party has a monopoly on justice.

These foundational realities are important, particularly in a two-party system where followers of Jesus feel squeezed into a mold in which they don't necessarily fit. As we've

seen, biblical principles are not exclusively practiced by one party or the other. And don't both political parties show evidence of God's common grace?

Questions about Opposing Parties

It might be helpful to pause here because some of you may be thinking, "I don't think that political party shares any biblical principles or shows any evidence of God's common grace." If that thought is rattling around in your brain, I would encourage you to ask the following questions:

- Are there any concepts consistent with biblical justice being promoted by the political party that I oppose?
- Does that political party show any concern for vulnerable individuals and groups?
- Does that political party demonstrate any desire for fair creation or implementation of laws?
- Do any of that political party's candidates show evidence of decency, morality, or order?
- How is that political party trying to promote good and prevent evil?

Considering these questions as they relate to a politician or a political party that you oppose may help you in a variety of ways. You may find yourself appreciating people that our political culture wants you to disparage. You may begin to discover that "those people" are not necessarily out to ruin the country, including you and everyone else in it. They may be doing what they believe is best, and most loving, and most right, even if they are seriously mistaken. In this realization, you might recall a few times when you've been mistaken, even when you thought you were promoting good. This understanding might prevent you from judging others in a way you don't want to be judged.

In an even greater way, asking these questions may draw you closer to God. If you're honest in answering these questions, you'll find yourself growing in your ability to appreciate God's grace in people who are very different from you, and even in people who might be very opposed to him. You might come to see in a fresh way that many of the people you oppose politically are sinners in need of a Savior, and they're doing the very best they know how. You might be prompted to pray for them and share the gospel with them or their political followers instead of warring with them over political opinions.

Questions about Your Own Party

A potentially more helpful exercise, though not always an easier one, is to ask similar questions of your own political party. Since we're usually prone to think more positively about candidates or parties that we are inclined to support, it can be helpful to ask questions similar to those above but with a different slant:

- Are there any concepts of injustice that might be motivating my political party?
- Does the political party I support show any lack of concern for any vulnerable individuals and groups?
- Does the political party I support demonstrate any lack of focus on fair creation or implementation of laws?
- Do any political candidates in the party I support show a lack of decency, morality, or order?
- How is my political party failing to promote good and prevent evil?

Asking and answering these questions can be a humbling exercise, particularly when it exposes realities we may not want to see. One of those realities is the tendency to judge sin in those we oppose politically while excusing sin in those we support politically.

As an example, before the 2012 election in the United States, one survey reported that 70% of people who identified as white evangelical Protestants said that an elected official's personal character was critical to his or her ability to govern ethically. Four short years later, before the 2016 election, that number had dropped from 70% to 30%.⁴ Over the course of four short years, self-identified white evangelical Protestants completely shifted their views on personal character in an election. It's at least worth asking why that shift occurred.

Trade-Offs

Even as I write that last sentence, I can hear some people's response: "The 2016 election presented two candidates who were both lacking personal character." My aim in this book, again, is not to argue that point one way or the other. But the very argument itself leads us to a reality that we face as we vote in a two-party democratic system: we are making a choice between sinful candidates and imperfect parties. If both candidates and parties show evidences of God's grace in their efforts at just governance, and both demonstrate man's sinfulness in ways that lead to unjust governance, then every follower of Jesus who votes in the election must inevitably acknowledge and embrace some level of trade-offs.

In other words, followers of Jesus will inevitably vote for a candidate or party that they believe is better on certain issues than the other candidate or party. Their belief about which is better will presumably be grounded on biblical foundations. However, voting for that candidate or party may still come with some pretty heavy baggage. No matter which way you vote, you're going to support a candidate or party that may not align with biblical foundations in every possible area.

Abstain from Evil

Oh boy, here we go. We're talking about the "lesser of two evils" approach to voting, right? It's the approach where we hold our nose and vote for a candidate or party we don't fully support (and may actually have serious concerns about) simply because that candidate or party is not as evil as the other. You might assume this is what I'm advocating. Am I?

Not exactly.

What's unhelpful about this "lesser of two evils" language is that the Bible gives us the following command: "Abstain from every form of evil" (1 Thessalonians 5:22). This is why some followers of Jesus may choose convictional inaction by deciding not to vote. But I don't believe convictional inaction is the only option for followers of Jesus who want to abstain from evil. It seems possible to steward our vote in a sin-soaked world in such a way that we can work toward justice in significant ways while soberly realizing that injustice remains in other ways.

Competing Injustices and Potential Compromises

Part of the effect of sin in the world of politics is competing injustices. Take, for example, a proposed law that includes substantial, needed relief for the poor yet at the same time loosens restrictions on abortion. Or consider another proposed law that tightens restrictions on abortion yet loosens the definition of marriage.

In circumstances like these, followers of Jesus should want to work for justice in every way, not just one way. Yet we find ourselves continually faced with potential compromises—times in which we must make hard decisions, and we could conceivably make a case for why (or why not) to support either side of that decision.

Biblical Clarity and Practical Consequences

As we make these hard decisions, it is helpful to weigh our options as wisely as possible based on God's Word and the situation around us in the world. And different followers

of Jesus will weigh options in different ways. Consider two factors that Christians might use to weigh political options: biblical clarity and practical consequences.

The first and most important factor is biblical clarity. We want to hold fast to truths and commands that are clear in God's Word and that have direct application to political positions in the world. Earlier we mentioned several issues where the Christian position is unambiguous, issues like murder, care for the poor, marriage, and racism. As we look at political issues, we want to determine how direct the line is from God's Word to those issues. In our decision-making, we want to give greater weight to issues where the line is clear and direct, and lesser weight to issues where the line is less clear and more indirect.

The second factor to consider is practical consequences. This involves evaluating the potential consequences of the political decisions we make, including the effects of those decisions in our communities, our country, and the world. As we make political calculations, we measure the weight of practical good or harm that might come to people based upon our decisions.

Weighing Abortion

Let's take just one of the Christian position issues from earlier—abortion—and consider how Bible-believing, gospel-embracing followers of Jesus might weigh this issue differently in an election.

According to Psalm 139 and a host of other Scripture passages, God knows, loves, forms, and fashions children in the womb of their mothers. Abortion, therefore, is an affront to God's sovereign authority as Creator, an assault on God's glorious work in creation, and an attack on God's intimate relationship with the unborn. For this reason, Christians should work to save children in the womb. This is the Christian position. And I should add that the Christian position is also to care for children out of the womb as well as their mothers in at-risk situations.

Years ago, in the United States, a politician could run for either of the two primary political parties and be pro-life or work against abortion. This, however, is no longer the case in our country. The Democratic Party promotes abortion, and it is almost impossible to be a Democratic politician while advocating for pro-life policy. The reverse is also true. It is highly unlikely that you'll find a Republican who promotes abortion.

Still, various Christians identify as Democrats or vote for candidates in the Democratic Party, causing other Christians to wonder, “How is it possible for any Christian to vote for a Democrat or identify with the Democratic Party?” The answer to that question is found in different Christians weighing different issues in different ways and coming to different conclusions. What do I mean?

A Plethora of Issues

No Christian would be a Democrat if the only issue involved in an election was abortion. If that was the case, then every Christian’s choice would be clear. But abortion is not the only issue involved in an election, particularly for the President of the United States. Every Christian has a host of issues to weigh in a presidential election.

Consider a short and non-exhaustive list of political issues: judicial appointments, gun control, gender identity, government mandates, drug policy, social security, social media regulation, net neutrality, minimum wage, government spending, corporate tax, capital gains tax, property tax, pension reform, labor unions, tariffs, immigration, border wall, border security, campaign financing, foreign lobbying, healthcare, Medicaid, marijuana use, veterans affairs, elementary to college education, climate change, oil drilling, alternative energy, nuclear energy, space exploration, foreign aid, foreign elections, the UN, NATO, NSA, prison reform, police reform, drug trafficking, public transportation, and ... well, I trust you get the point.⁵ Might it be possible, then, for a Christian to believe that abortion is biblically wrong but at the same time want to advance biblical justice in other areas?

Might it be possible for Christians to support a Democratic candidate or the Democratic Party in order to stop other injustices, even while understanding that the candidate they support desires to continue abortion?

Christian Y and Z

“But we’re talking about millions of babies who are dying!” you might say. “How can that even begin to compare with pension reform and capital gains taxes?” That’s a good question, and this is where I hope that considering both factors above—biblical clarity and practical consequences—might be a helpful framework for understanding how different Christians might weigh these issues in different ways and come to different conclusions. Let’s imagine two such Christians.

We’ll start with Christian Y. She weighs biblical clarity on the issue of abortion extremely high, seeing it as the evil, horrifying murder of children made in God’s image. She also weighs practical consequences on this issue extremely high, believing that if she votes

for a Republican candidate or the Republican Party, there is a chance that abortions will end, particularly if conservative Supreme Court appointees overturn *Roe v. Wade*, the Supreme Court case that made abortion legal. That potential practical consequence, in her calculation, far outweighs almost every other injustice in our country. Even if a Democratic candidate could balance the nation's budget tomorrow and end all taxation in the process, she would still not vote for that candidate because of how she weighs abortion in terms of biblical clarity and practical consequences.

Now let's consider Christian Z. She weighs biblical clarity on abortion just as Christian Y does. But when Christian Z considers the practical consequences on this issue, while she desperately wants to save children in the womb, she doesn't believe voting for a Republican candidate will change the law of the land. In fact, based on history, Christian Z is suspicious of the idea that a Republican candidate will be able to put a stop to abortion. She believes that even if *Roe v. Wade* is overturned, the issue might still go back to the states, where locations that already have a high number of abortions will continue to perform them. So, she weighs the practical consequences of voting for either a Republican or Democratic candidate much lower than Christian Y does on the issue of abortion.

Now if abortion were the only issue in an election, then Christian Y and Christian Z would both vote to oppose abortion. Where they diverge is on the myriad of other issues at play in a presidential election. Let's add in just one other issue for now: economic policies aimed at caring for the poor.

One More Issue

Imagine that Christian Z believes that the outcome of the upcoming election is significant regarding economic policies aimed at caring for the poor. Though these issues may be a bit lower on the level of biblical clarity (i.e., Scripture isn't explicitly clear and direct about specific economic policies relating to care for the poor), Christian Z rates these issues particularly high in terms of practical consequences. Further, she believes that a Democratic candidate or party in this election will make a significant difference for the good of the poor. Based upon that conviction, in addition to her opinion that this election is not going to have significant practical consequences for abortion, it is reasonable that Christian Z may decide to vote for a Democratic candidate.

Conversely, Christian Y may agree that the policies of the Democratic candidate or party will likely be more effective in terms of caring for the poor. Further, Christian Y may agree on the level of biblical clarity associated with those policies. However,

Christian Y believes that when Democratic candidates are elected, they immediately rush to loosen restrictions on abortion instead of caring for the poor. So Christian Y believes that in the end, voting for a Democratic candidate will have a low level of practical consequences regarding care for the poor and a high level of practical consequences for the death of children. Therefore, it is reasonable that Christian Y may decide to vote for a Republican candidate.

Based solely on these two political issues, Christian Y and Christian Z are pretty much guaranteed to vote differently in the upcoming election. Though they both embrace the gospel and are trying to apply biblical foundations to their voting decisions, they come to different conclusions. The reason? They weigh issues differently in terms of both biblical clarity and practical consequences.

Serious Consideration of the Question

I hope it's clear that I'm not asking you to agree with everything Christian Y or Christian Z represents in the above illustration. I'm also not implying that Democratic economic policies are better for the poor than Republican economic policies. Many Christians will disagree on that and many other issues. I'm simply illustrating that the question "How do I weigh the issues?" is extremely significant and requires serious, informed, biblical, prayerful consideration in our voting decisions.