

ENGAGING IN THE ELECTORAL PROCESS



“While declaring our ultimate allegiance is to God, Scripture recognizes that faithfulness to God requires political engagement by the people of God.”
(United Methodist Book of Resolutions, #5012)

Just as we pursue change by advocating for just policies, so too we are called to faithfully engage in the electoral process. Elections provide an opportunity for us to put our faith into action by engaging candidates, encouraging participation, selecting representatives, and voting on ballot initiatives.

VOTING RESPONSIBILITIES

“The strength of a political system depends upon the full and willing participation of its citizens.” (United Methodist Social Principles, ¶164.B)

Voting can be an act of faith. Voting for policies and individuals that uphold our shared values of justice and peace is one way Christians can work for a world that more closely resembles the one God desires for us. With this ability to impact change comes responsibility. First: a

responsibility to actually *vote*.

And second: a responsibility to *be informed*. Before you step into the voting booth, research the candidates and potential ballot initiatives on which you will be deciding.

VOTING RIGHTS

Our United Methodist Social Principles state, “The form and the leaders of all governments should be determined by exercise of the right to vote guaranteed to all adult citizens” (United Methodist Social Principles, ¶164.B) Voting is a tremendous opportunity to create change. Because of its power, the right to vote has historically been withheld from many. In the United States, it has been a centuries-long struggle to expand the right to vote beyond the original electorate of land-owning white men.

Elections are generally organized and regulated by the states. In some states, there are efforts to undermine access to voting processes and depress voter turnout.

These infringements on voting rights include voter ID laws, polling place closures, the purging of voter rolls, limits on early voting, and the denial of voting rights for ex-offenders. These policies and practices disproportionately impact the elderly, hourly workers, students and communities of color.

Other states have taken innovative approaches to increase voter participation including vote-by-mail, automatic voter registration and same-day registration. Find out the voting laws in your state and advocate with your state legislature, governor and secretary of state to expand voter participation and to guarantee the voting rights of all citizens.

DOS AND DON'TS FOR ENGAGEMENT

In the United States, churches, pastors and other people of faith might be wary of engaging in the electoral process because of a church or organization's tax exempt status. Faith leaders and religious organizations can legally safeguard the right to vote, educate communities on issues and candidates, and encourage participation in the electoral process without running afoul of the Internal Revenue Service (IRS).

The United States tax code grants tax exemption to 501(c)(3) organizations, including nonprofit and religious organizations. The Johnson Amendment of 1954 prohibits 501(c)(3) organizations from some involvement in the electoral process. The IRS provides guidelines that outline permissible actions for these organizations.

In accordance with these guidelines:

CHURCHES CANNOT...

- Endorse or oppose any candidate for public office.
- Fundraise for or make financial contributions to any candidate or political party.
- Provide educational material distributed by candidates or political parties. Materials must be unbiased toward all candidates.
- Rent space to any candidate for a reduced cost.

If offering space, it must be made available to all candidates equally and at the same rate.

- Publish advertisements sold below market rate or editorials that favor any candidate.

CHURCHES CAN...

- Host voter-registration and "get out the vote" events. Consult your state's secretary of state for resources and guidelines.
- Provide education on topics in a non-partisan manner.
- Welcome candidates for public forums if every candidate is invited to participate.
- Encourage support for issues or policies important to your community.
- Serve as a polling site.

When in doubt, consult the Internal Revenue Service website for guidelines.

WHAT ABOUT THE SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE?

People of faith are sometimes anxious about engaging in the political process because of the separation of church and state. The United Methodist Church has long supported "the rightful and vital separation of church and state, which has served the cause of religious liberty." Our United Methodist Social Principles also go on to say that this cause "should not be misconstrued as the abolition of all religious expression from public life." (United Methodist Social Principles, ¶164.C) In line with our Wesleyan heritage, we believe there is no holiness without social holiness. Individuals can be staunch supporters of the separation of church and state and, at the same time, be strong advocates for a more just and peaceful world.