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Pick Your Poison: What Does it Mean to Vote?

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Alastair Roberts

Susannah Black, Steven Wedgworth, and Miles Smith join me for a wide-ranging discussion of the subject of how Christians should regard voting and the ethical significance of casting a vote.

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<https://mereorthodoxy.com/consequentialist-theory-voting>

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Transcript

Hello and welcome. Today I am joined by three of my friends to discuss a rather timely issue, but to discuss it in a way that maybe steps back from it a bit and thinks about some of the deeper principal issues that underlie it. So I'm joined by Stephen Wedgworth, Associate Pastor at Faith Reform Presbyterian in Vancouver, and Miles Smith, Visiting Assistant Professor at Hillsdale College, and Susanna Black, the Senior Editor of Davenant Press and an editor at Plough and Breaking Ground.

The question we're going to be considering is the matter of the vote and voting. So we're going to be stepping back a bit from the question of for whom we ought to cast our vote or whether we should cast a vote at all in a given election and thinking more about the issue at a level of basic principle. This raises a number of interesting and challenging ethical questions that I think at the very least should encourage us to think more carefully about what we mean when we cast a vote for someone.

What sort of action is it? How can we consider the ethical dimensions of this action, particularly as Christians? So first of all, we should maybe think about what it means to have a system that has a vote because there are many different systems of voting that we may be thinking about when we're having this discussion. The system here in the UK is rather different from that which will be in the US or in Canada or other parts of the world. So for instance, if you're in Australia or Brazil, you have compulsory voting, which raises different ethical dimensions of the question than you would have in a system where you're not voting as a compulsory option.

Voting in the UK is not for head of state or head of government directly. But for one's local MP, so the party that wins will determine who will be prime minister. And it's not seen as the same rebranding of the nation every four years as it might seem that the US election is from this perspective.

And then there are other questions that we might have. What does it mean to vote for someone for president as distinct from a local MP or someone who's senator? These sorts of questions are all ones that we'll hopefully get into along the way. So first of all, to throw it out to you guys, what do you think is distinctive about the US system of voting, for instance, that raises different ethical questions surrounding one's vote than you would find in, let's say, Australia or the UK? Well, I think, you know, I think that you mentioned the fact that Americans actually vote for their head of state.

That's not necessarily common. Even in Western Europe, people may vote for the head of state, but the presidents don't have the same power. Really, only France and the United States have this voting system where people actually cast an individual ballot for the head of state.

So that makes things different. We're not just voting for our prime minister. We're voting for the head of the American Union.

We're voting for the republic's head of state. And so it means that there's a symbolic aspect of voting for in the United States that there isn't in the UK. Boris Johnson's the head of government, but he's not the queen.

And so that makes things a little bit different. And it brings language into the question of the franchise that you don't have in Australia or Ireland, or the rest of the Commonwealth. Yeah, I think that's right.

And it also brings in the dynamics of voting within a two-party system and voting for people who might well not get elected. In which case you have, you know, there are all these sort of hashtags and bumper stickers and so on saying, not my president after Donald Trump was elected, because there is this sense in America, I think that it's the sort of combined sense of like political authority comes from being voted in. There's a vague sense of sovereignty over me is just my sovereignty that I've given over to the state.

And then you've got this very heightened two-party system where, you know, every four years, basically, everyone kind of goes around seeking out media outlets, which will tell them that the other side, whoever the other side are, are completely unfit to vote, or completely unfit to govern, you know, basically not civilized, and that the world will end if they win. And how that all nets out is that you have basically half the population feeling extremely disenfranchised every time the election happens, because basically every election is 50-50. And it becomes very, very difficult to feel as though the government, at least at the federal, at the national level, is your government.

You really do feel as though, I think a lot of people really do feel as though Donald Trump is not their president. He does not have political authority over them. And that seems to me to be insane as a system.

There's also the issue - this closely follows what you just said, Susanna, but the US president is perceived to have, and to some extent I think this is accurate, immensely more power and significance than other heads of government or state. And you can look at this from purely a sort of the legacy of post-World War II, the leader of the free world. Or you can put your various sort of quasi-religious perspective, God's man for America who many people think of as God's special nation.

Or if you're more sort of left-wing, he's a symbol of sort of negative or unhealthy power that nevertheless sort of has global significance. And so there is this sense of urgency with the vote. It's difficult to say you're making purely a practical decision.

One of the questions that I think comes up at this point is what the purpose of a system

of voting, or democracy more generally, what purpose does it aim to achieve? And two terms that can often be raised in this context are representation and legitimacy. Having a democratic system is supposed to lead to representative government. And then having a democratic system and avoiding all forms of corruption, etc., provides for legitimacy.

It gives a mandate to people to govern. And yet those terms, it seems to me, have a bit more – there are questions that could be raised about that. I mean, we can say, I think, the Queen is representative as head of state, but she's not voted for.

You don't need a system of voting to render her representative. She's representative on other grounds. And then there are other times when people can be legitimately voted in and yet not actually be representative.

I mean, the questions that Susanna was raising earlier on about a system where many people feel disenfranchised. And then there are questions around the term representation, particularly in the current context, where many people use it in maybe an identity politics inflected sense, where it's very much your particular part of the demographic that needs to be represented. You need to have a visible manifestation of your particular group in positions of power.

And then for others, it can be seen in terms of policy or some other form of representation. I'll be interested to hear your thoughts on how we pick apart these terms, particularly as they relate to a system of voting and democracy. And then questions of how we consider the suffrage and suffrage in light of this, the right to vote, who should be included.

These sorts of questions are ones that we have novel answers to today relative to times in the past. And we don't often think about those positions that we have taken. We think that they're self-evident.

What are some of the considerations that have led to our current position? And how can we maybe have a better sense of what stance we're taking when we take the positions that we do on these questions? A lot of what in the United States you mentioned, Alastair, the ideas of representation. And there's, I think, increasingly in the early 21st century, there's this idea that every institution needs to be representative. According is sort of kind of a one man, one vote, socio-ethnic identity, socio-cultural identity, socio-economic identity.

And there's some value in that. The problem is, of course, with a president, with a unitary president, he can't properly be representative. I think this is maybe one of the fundamental mistakes people make about the U.S. president.

He's not supposed to be representative. He's supposed to be the chief executive of the United States. And we've, because of the nature of American republicanism in the 20th

century, we've really created kind of a lot of trappings around the presidency that don't look very Republican.

We are desperately trying, I think, to treat the president as a monarch without properly knowing what that means. I think it's a great example is to compare Air Force One to Queen's flight. Air Force One is a massive airplane and they has an entourage everywhere it goes.

And the Queen flies around on what's essentially a sort of an oversized Learjet. And so we're trying to, I think, get to the point every election where we kind of find some sort of a perfect representation. And obviously with the two party system, two different sides think that they're getting some sort of guy who, if not represents every voice, then it can at least speak for them.

I think that's problematic when you think about what it is to be Republican. Small r is that Republican executives aren't supposed to be representative. That's the point of parliaments, of Congresses.

Republican executives are supposed to execute laws. And so I think there's sort of a fundamental misunderstanding of what it is to be represented in the United States, because we look for that in almost every level. And we should really only look for it in our state reps, in our local representatives.

Well, I mean, in in the House of Representatives as well, I think you could probably properly look for it. But I think I do think that looking at the sort of conflict over the electoral college now, it does sort of show a fundamental difference in the way that people are thinking about what it means for government authority to be based on representation and be Democratic. Now, as opposed to when the nation was founded, there doesn't seem to be any room for any kind of legitimate authority or perception of legitimacy other than a kind of very, very flat one man, one vote system.

Whereas, you know, if at least to a certain degree, at least some of the founders, I hate to be sort of like, I don't know, Claremont about this. He's drowsy and about. Yeah, it's the old faith.

But, you know, when it was when the country was founded, your represent your the House of Representatives was where representative government was where democratic government was meant to go. That's where that's what that was for. And then you had the Senate, which were up until the 17th Amendment in what was it, 1923 or something like that.

I think 13, 13, you know, where they were appointed. And then you had the president, which, you know, the House of Representatives, the electoral college was essentially like the presidency seems to be a little bit of a fudge. If you're going for if you're thinking

about the country as it was initially founded to be governed as a kind of idealized mixed regime with democratic aristocratic and monarchical elements to the presidency, obviously, was supposed to be the monarchy and the monarchy can't really be elected.

But the the electors, it's just it seems to be less clear cut than the kind of very clear. All right. The House of Representatives is the democratic house.

The Senate is the aristocratic house. And then the president is somehow the king. Yeah, you mentioned you mentioned Claremont, and it reminds me of competing historical representations of what the president is, because the Claremont view and you see this in like Jaffa's presentation of Lincoln, like the president is the great man of the nation.

He steps in and does the heroic deeds. He leads the people. And he's really essential in that in that model.

Right. And you see this with Claremont today. Right.

Like all the other parts of government are the problem. And the president, you know, he's the one guy that at least in theory could step in and fix things. But then there's the other view.

And this one I remember from when I was reading the Count James Bryce. He talks about, you know, historically, great men have not ascended to the presidency, that that's actually the minority of presidents and that many presidents are quite unremarkable. And they were they were simply good at parliamentary proceedings or they were good at being heads over corporations.

And they just were convenient. They were able to hold that place. And I think you see you see both kinds of characters in the history of America and different periods of history, different sort of segments of the population favor one approach or the other.

That question of what a president stands for, I think, is a good one to lead into a further question, which is, what is the difference between voting for a person, voting for policy, for instance, a particular proposition or voting for parties as coalitional entities, or maybe a particular representative of a party like a local MP in a UK general election? For instance, you mentioned the president is a sort of great man character. The president can be seen as a symbol. He has a sort of pulpit from which he can speak to the nation as a persuader.

And he's also an example in certain respects in some understandings of what the president stands for. And I think all of that probably shapes how the act of voting for such a person will be conceived. How can we maybe think through some of the differences between these different objects or persons that were or groups that were voting for? How does that shape our understanding of the ethics of voting more generally? It seems that a lot of what when you really get down to actually casting a

vote, and perhaps this is a weakness in the American system, is that you you're voting for really one of two broad coalitions.

That's what every person is a part of. Obviously, the Westminster system gives you more variety, maybe not so much more, but more variety. And every time you vote in the United States, you have a name in front of you, but you also know that person's sort of partisan affiliation.

That would lead you to think that the parties in the United States are actually strong. And I think that's maybe one of the big mistakes is that parties in the United States are not particularly strong ideologically. And they're not as institutionally strong as we tend to think.

In 2015, 2016, a person who never had a significant history with the Republican Party in Donald Trump effectively takes over the party apparatus. And so you're left kind of asking, are we actually voting for parties? That seems to be what a lot of people believe, especially when it comes down to the presidential elections. People aren't always in love with the candidate, but they vote based on this idea that this person will bring this group's coalition and that coalition's ideas into power.

So that's essentially why they vote. Yeah, there's really - it's both. There's the party and the man or the person, and there's a bit of a tradeoff with every combination because Trump was not a Republican in his history.

He actually - his policies, what he really promoted when he was campaigning were issues that had not been major Republican points leading up to that. But once he got elected, he did accommodate a lot of Republican interest. They sort of negotiated a new balance.

And so they did a little border stuff but nothing close to what Trump was promising he would do. And then they couldn't get the health care figured out, so nothing happened. And then the tax proposal was not overly nationalist or populist.

It was very much a typical Republican kind of model. But then they were less hawkish on the military and really dialed back foreign adventuring. So with the Trump example, you can see there were shades of both.

He was breaking the categories, but then he also did kind of accommodate some of them as well. One of the ways that I've kind of thought about this over the last couple of days especially is I got into this conversation on Twitter with my boss, actually, one of my bosses, Peter Malmsten, who's the editor-in-chief of Plow. And he was talking about he's an Anabaptist.

And he was kind of in this squabble, not squabble, but discussion with a fellow Anabaptist, another member of the church community, the Bruderhof that they're both

part of, about what it means to vote and whether voting is ethical. Obviously, like a lot of Anabaptists just won't vote because they, on their account of it, when you vote for someone, you're authorizing them. That's the sort of way that they think of it.

You're authorizing them to do whatever it is that they do in the course of carrying out their governmental activities. And one of those things is going to be killing people. And Anabaptists don't think that you can ever do that as a Christian.

And so there are a huge number of Anabaptists, including Bruderhof members, who just won't vote at all because of that, which becomes tricky in the case of Bruderhof communities in Australia. But so that kind of sense of voting as authorizing or voting as giving personal assent to something is kind of one way of thinking about it. And I kind of tend to think in those terms, although rather than authorizing, I think I would sort of more think of it as swearing fealty.

Like if I'm voting, I'm saying this is the person I would be willing to serve in this person's court. I don't think they're perfect. I don't think that they're, you know, they are not Christ to whom I can pledge unconditional fealty.

But they are a kind of decent-ish executive, decent-ish king. And that is very much not, I think, the way that Pete was thinking of voting and very much not the way that I think is more traditional in American sort of voting, perception of what voting means. So what Pete said was, it was a kind of a good phrase.

He says that the way he thinks of voting is as in my fallible judgment, given the political system we have, this person is more likely to serve the common good in high office than that person. Like that is the statement that you are making when you're voting. And that's kind of a - it's a different flavor than I pledge my loyalty to this person and authorize him to act politically on my behalf.

But the pledging loyalty, I don't know that that can hold up because you're going to have to very just literally speaking in America, you're going to have to be loyal to whoever wins. They in fact are the head of your state, and you can't just say, no, I'm not going to do whatever they enact without facing the consequences. So there's that level you're going to have to be loyal, but then you could flip it, and you could say, well, would you be able - would you be willing to work for someone who you didn't vote for? So imagine you get called to work for President Trump on some department board, and you didn't vote for him, but for some reason now he's asking you to be a part of his group that makes policy.

You could - I could conceive an argument where you say, well, of course you accept. You get involved, so you can then shape the policy. So it seems like the way you described it as pledging loyalty or whatever, you could disprove that in two directions.

I know. I'm not saying it's rational. I think it's probably completely irrational.

One of the things I think is worth thinking about is that in the United States we're still operating broadly under the same constitution that was passed in 1789. And I think scale and the number of people voting and the scale of what's being voted for has changed, and we haven't kind of necessarily updated how we think of these. I think a great example is how much - what type of proximity you had to elected officials.

In 1789, every single representative represented about 30,000 people. The average U.S. rep today represents about 700,000 people. So you were more likely to have - the idea that you're voting for someone and you have to kind of eat the responsibility for voting for them.

Well, that's easier to imagine if you're essentially one out of 30,000 population and you're an even smaller number of voters. In 1832, when the Reform Act is passed in Britain, it enfranchises - this is the Reform Act. There's going to be another one in 1867.

It enfranchises 13 percent of the men. That's the reformed franchise. Beforehand, it had been about 2.5 percent.

So your space has changed vis-à-vis the person who's electing you. The U.S. president in 1830 is president of a republic that has 12 million people in it. And so I think we've kind of - we have changed so much.

We haven't kind of updated how we perceive citizenship. What do you take on responsibility for in 2020 compared to what you take on responsibility for in 1820 are probably pretty different. And we don't talk about that.

I'm not supposed to raise this question. Sorry. Go ahead.

I was going to say that point also makes you consider the nature of the executive branch having had to grow to keep up. And so when you're voting for a president now, you have to keep in mind you're voting for a person who is then going to create cabinets and departments. And he's going to then populate those with people who will then make policies.

There's also the question here I think of the way that politics and the vote fit into our broader civic life. We have this sense of voting as - I mean for many it is the absolute zenith of one's civic responsibility and participation. And there's very little conception of what might lie beyond that for many people.

But yet there's a great deal of symbolic and other weight that's placed upon for whom you cast your vote, even though that actual vote is an incredibly ineffectual action for the most part. I doubt that any of us have cast a vote that actually made a difference. In terms of the larger mass of people, we're part of movements that made a difference.

But our part wasn't decisive. We weren't the straw that broke the camel's back. And so I think this leads to questions about the way that voting is perceived and the degree to which, for instance, universal suffrage, for example, leads to the politicization of great areas of civil life that formerly were not politicized.

A little anti-American suggestion there, Alistair. How can we consider the symbolic weight that the vote has within democratic life more generally, but America in particular? It seems to me that this also ties into the question of what do we mean when we vote for a president? Are we voting for a character and a person and all the virtues and vices that go with that, a symbol of the nation and of the office? Or are we voting for someone who's going to maybe appoint certain Supreme Court justices or some other driving through certain policies, whatever it is? How do we consider the symbolic weight that that has? Yeah, well, Alistair, you said Supreme Court. We should probably separate that one because that one's not symbolic.

So that one is much more practical. But the symbolic side is huge. And I've really felt it now having left America.

I actually left the country after Trump was elected. So not because of that, but I did. I'm living in Canada now, and it is striking that the way people think about politics and even civic identity, it is very different.

So we just had Canadian Thanksgiving. They just call it Thanksgiving here, but Canadian Thanksgiving. And so I asked some of the people there, what do you guys tell? What stories do you tell for Thanksgiving? What's the ritual here? And they don't really have much.

If you're a Christian who really wants to make the most of it, then you get your Bible out, and you talk about God and how he's blessed your family and maybe your church community, things like that. But they don't have Plymouth Rock. They don't have the pilgrims and the Indians and Squanto putting the corn in the dirt.

They don't tell sort of like, what do you mean - daddy, what do you mean by this service? They don't have that in their Thanksgiving, at least not the communities here in British Columbia. And that was kind of just a big reminder of like, wow, America, for whatever we can say about it, good or bad, there is still like a sacred national character or narrative. And we don't even think about it as Americans, but like it's real.

And that definitely goes into our thoughts on voting. It seems so. One of the ways that you could think about this is like, what does the act of voting look like or what's the flavor of it or what does it mean? And so the kind of swearing fealty, you know, is one imaginative way to grasp that.

The kind of pledging loyalty to Americanism as a kind of system in general or reaffirming

your commitment to this historical people, this system of government, whatever it is, is kind of another. But then there is also this – there's this question of, Alastair, you were talking about like, what is the place of voting in the larger – one's larger political life, because voting is actually quite a small part of political life. And I'm going to read some Oliver O'Donovan.

I hope you guys are okay with that. He talks about – he says, the essential political duties we owe our neighbors are those of living together with them peacefully under the law and of giving proper support to the institutions of government that uphold the law. It is very unglamorous and very necessary.

To this essential basis, a democratic polity has added the specific responsibility of voting in elections. To perform that democratic task well is quite difficult. It means listening carefully to political debates and sifting the true from the false in a self-questioning way, aware of the subtle influences of prejudice upon ourselves as well as upon others.

It means to be open to persuasion, ready to change one's mind. It means achieving a clear sense of the difference between what we can and must decide and what we cannot and should not try to decide. And he later goes on to talk about the crucial aspect of sort of voting and deciding on – and political speech.

Voting as a kind of political speech and the purpose of political speech is not partisanship but attempting to speak the truth, which gets into his whole kind of vision of candid speech as a major political responsibility. And that kind of – that seems to me to be a very kind of civic republican-flavored understanding of what the vote is. The picture there is probably voting in a more limited franchise.

It's someone with a toga, their token of citizenship or a chioppa or whatever it was in Florence, which marks them out as someone who has – who's taken on the responsibility of public deliberation and public leadership. And voting is kind of one of the ways that you exercise that. And public speech, candid public speech is another one of the ways that you exercise that.

But it's a much less partisan and a much less mass and sort of vision of what voting is. But it's also not my sort of notion of swearing allegiance or pledging allegiance to a person. It's much more civic republican.

And that is – I don't know if that's like a viable, realistic way of understanding what a vote can be in contemporary America. But it is one way that voting has been conceived of imaginatively and ethically in the past. I think it is viable in one sense.

I think this isn't a problem with what you're saying, Susan. I think this is maybe just systematic and maybe to what Steve talked about, kind of there is this kind of broad-based sort of heavily contrived but nonetheless kind of civil nationalism in the United

States. I think probably the missing thing that gets sort of forgotten is how reflective American civic nationalism is of the broader American citizenry.

Our story tends to be updated fairly regularly, more so I think than other Western democracies. And I think it has a lot to do with the fact that Americans are not spatially confined in the same way that other Western democracies are. What do I mean by that? Well, Michigan is very different than New York City, is very different than Florida, et cetera, et cetera.

So do you have sort of these broad-based things that are experienced like Thanksgiving? But different communities kind of tell themselves different stories about themselves. And I think the unique challenge of voting in the United States is how do you get all these communities to kind of tell a similar story about themselves when it comes to the act of voting? What are we going to affirm? Which part of our story are we going to lend our support to in a given candidate? Because I think that's really what people are doing is they're trying to find, yeah, there's always the kind of very brass tacks economics kind of just I need money on the table for food, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. But that's not always how people vote.

They vote to sort of say this person affirms the part of the American narrative that we think is important. And you've seen that a lot in 2020. There's two American narratives.

And so how do you get Americans especially to think about voting as some sort of actually enterprise-seeking truth? You've made a good case. If it could work, that would be great. I don't know if it can or not.

So I'm admittedly being a little Augustine by saying I doubt it. STEPHAN KINSELLA. I think to answer this question, you've got to kind of either already have answered or at the same time answer this question about the spiritual, sacred relationship to American citizenship.

If someone really does buy into a sacred nationalism, then you're not going to convince them that they should just vote purely economically or what have you. But you could see the opposite error and say, well, the sacred nationalism is what accounts for all of our culture war anxieties, which is also not true. There really are cultural issues that affect the nation.

So you kind of have to ask – you have to answer that question in order to then make this other issue about practical voting. I think one of the things to think about, it's really incredible to look at how newspapers are an amazing resource for this. Look at how people talked about exercising the franchise for president in the 19th century versus how we do it in 2020.

What they're talking about is so different. And obviously that's normal, right? Times

change. People think about different things.

But the vote is also a sort of request. We want the president to do X. And for a lot of American evangelicals, it's been we're using our vote to ask you to appoint conservatives and pre-court justices. For progressives, it might be we're asking you to bring about a more diverse and equitable social order.

So the idea of the franchise as a request is something that even before about 1880 or something, Americans wouldn't have recognized. So how is it that someone who - an office that is really not meant to be anything other than executive has become a sort of an aspect of Republican bonapartism? We're actually treating the president a little bit like an emperor. And is that healthy or not? I don't know if it really matters at this point is what's happened, but is there any way to change kind of people's expectation on what they're asking for presidents when they cast them out? Because I think that's a lot of what's going on.

STEPHAN KINSELLA But is he an emperor? You could ask that question. He maybe wasn't supposed to be an emperor, but has he in fact become that sort of a character because Alistair mentioned the Supreme Court. And as we know, the Supreme Court for the last decade has sort of been a 5-4 decision about extremely important and practical issues, even issues that run right into First Amendment-level freedoms.

And so we're all highly aware of the stakes. The person that can appoint those justices could practically affect our rights to worship. When we're thinking about voting, I think there's also the question of whether you are voting for the common good, whether you are voting for your particular interests or the interests of your particular region or town or profession, whatever it is.

How do you relate those different things together? Because it seems to me there's a deep sense of affront from many people when you vote for a candidate that they see as not representing them, but that candidate may actually be representing your own interests. Can you vote for someone that does represent your personal stake or your interests, even if that leads to leading to someone else feeling disenfranchised? I'm thinking about this particularly in the context of questions of race, which have often been the ones that have activated this sense of the voters as a violation of someone else's stake in the society. Yeah, I mean, to be normative here a little bit, I don't think, it seems to me that if you are going to vote as an expression of your interest, you shouldn't be voting.

Because to make any kind of political action ethically done has to be for the common good. And if you're voting for your own interests or if you are taking political action for your own interest, as opposed to for the common good, that's the definition of corruption. That said, I think it's unthinkable now to not think of voting as being something that you are supposed to do in your own interest.

Because we have this kind of almost Mandevillian sense of what we should be doing when we vote. Like, ambition must be made to counteract ambition. Everyone should go for their own good.

And the democratic process, much like the market, will sort out everyone's self-interested actions or votes into what is best for everyone. I don't think there's any reason to think that happens. And I think that even if it were the case that each race represented a different interest, which doesn't seem to me to be obvious at all, it just seems to me that political action, quad political action, cannot properly and ethically be action in your own interest.

It has to be action that you believe to be at least for the sake of the common good. And you have a conception of the common good without sharing certain metaphysical or ethical commitments. No.

I mean it's - no, of course not. So that said, if you know that everyone - that not everyone shares your ethical or metaphysical commitments, the only thing to do is vote or take whatever kind of political action that you can on behalf of those ethical or metaphysical commitments, which you believe should reflect reality, whether or not other people share them. And I think that that's - the only reason that we think otherwise is because Oliver Wendell Holmes had a nervous breakdown after the Civil War and became a pragmatist and then screwed everything up.

Like, pragmatism is completely bonkers as a way - and this kind of democratic pragmatism that Holmes and Dewey and Perse and everyone kind of bought into fully, where you're kind of trying to discern the direction of history or the perception of the - like doing your best with - I don't know. It's just - sorry, I'm like ranting a little bit because I'm also reading about Oliver Wendell Holmes, who was such a terrible person. I mean, I just don't think that we should like allow our minds and politics to be structured by that kind of - that kind of post-Civil War pragmatism anymore.

And I think your question, Stephen, reflects that. I think one thing that worth - oh, sorry, Steve, go ahead. Oh, no, you go ahead.

I was going to say something that might change this conversation. Well, I think the conversation about common good is really an important one. One of the things that - for anyone who's listening in the United Kingdom or on the continent, one of the things that's really difficult about having a vision of a common good in the United States - it doesn't mean there shouldn't be one because I think there should, but I do think federalism is actually meaningful for this reason.

The entire United Kingdom is the size of the landmass of Colorado. Germany is the size of Montana. France is a little bit smaller than Texas.

And so the Netherlands and Belgium could both fit in South Carolina. So you have spatial considerations and topographical and geographical ones that actually are really meaningful. I live in Michigan.

Climatologically here, it's similar to Lithuania. Steve lived in Florida for a while. Just because of where people live and the communities that are oriented around geography, topography, whatever, there is so much diversity of need in the United States that when you think about what is a common good in the United States, you almost would have to narrow it down to things that are predicated on something like metaphysical considerations first.

That would almost be necessarily a first place to start precisely because I'm going to have a - on my very narrow day-to-day reality of what is common good, I'm going to have a really different take on what that looks like than someone from New Mexico. So properly, I think what it is to actually have a vision of the common good in the United States has to start in things other than mere materiality because you will probably never be able to have a unified vision of common good if that's what you predicate common good on. I think that's really important.

I think, for instance, the population of Denmark is about the - smaller than the population of greater Los Angeles and the area of greater Los Angeles is greater than the size of Denmark. It's very hard for people to conceive some of the policies even that are often advanced on the basis of European examples. They don't consider how those might actually not scale up.

They depend upon a particular rootedness to a small geographic area, smaller population, and a very different sort of history. Beyond that, I think there's also the question of part of the effect of a large geographic area is similar to the effect of social media, which uproots philosophical discussions of politics and politics more generally from the gravity of space and locality. It tends to move it into the realm in particular of ideology.

And so the connection between American politics, I think increasingly politics more generally as it becomes discussed in this more abstract delocalized realm, it becomes focused upon themes of ideology. So we talk about things like socialism or nationalism as such without considering that those things might mean very different realities from country to country or context to context. How can we consider well the sort of ideological debates and conflicts that have tended to congeal around presidential politics? And how to maybe - should those things be deflated? Is there a place for that sort of ideological conversation? How can its effect be properly understood and measured as well? Boy, that's so difficult because there's sort of the level of conversation that people like us are going to have, and then there's the way in which ideology kind of actually happens, which is usually people don't know they have it.

They don't realize what their ideology is until after big, momentous things have happened. And so we can kind of say, oh, you should do this or that with it, but for most American voters, they're reacting to things that are happening to them. And then they can kind of look backwards and piece together the categories and the images and the metaphors and the things that were shaping their perception.

I mean, I think that to a certain degree, ideology is kind of curdled metaphysics. And given what Miles has said about the almost necessarily metaphysical nature of the common good that we in America have got to seek because of the extreme variety of practical, local kind of common goods in the sense of public goods or in the sense of local circumstance. I think it's very difficult to have non-ideological politics.

And I think that the only solution is to have politics, political discussions that are explicitly metaphysical. Because you can't avoid it. You just have to do it well.

It's sort of like C.S. Lewis on reading fiction. Like you're going to read fiction no matter what. So you had better read some good fiction.

Well, I think to kind of give two examples within fairly recent history of sort of ideological commitments that get problematic, you can use the sort of narrow jingoism of MAGA. What does this even mean? What does making America great mean? That's ideological. But there's people who buy it.

I mean, there's millions of people who have said this is something we should be committed to. On a more kind of highbrow level, you have sort of the neoconservative interventionism of the Bush presidency. And this is something that a narrower group admittedly were committed to.

But they were still committed to it with the same sort of dogmatism in the face of sort of vaporous understandings of what the consequences might be of it. I think it was Susan Sontag that made a point one time about Americans. Maybe it wasn't Sontag.

I can't remember. But basically, American politicians are nannies to Americans in a way that European politicians aren't to other Europeans. You think of the example of Winston Churchill in the Blitz giving pretty bad news to the British people routinely.

Can the American president give bad news to the American people routinely? It seems not. And why is this? Because we are so committed to ideas of our own exceptionalism in light of all of our evidence. And I think this kind of American exceptionalism kind of blinds us uniquely within the Western world.

Maybe not uniquely to the depths of blindness, but certainly as a scale, we have a particular commitment to it. So I think American exceptionalism is one of the reasons why ideology is so problematic. Or in the United States.

I wonder if it might be helpful as a tool. I also just finished this book on Churchill, like the first year of Churchill's. Well, the first year of the war, really.

I wonder if it might not be helpful as a tool to think in terms of like the Anglo American democracies, which is the phrase that he was using to try and boost Roosevelt into the war. In the sense that these aren't ultimate goods. This is not the one way that it is proper to choose leaders.

Voting is not the one way to ensure or get recognized political representation or legitimate government. But, okay, here's O'Donovan again. The defense of Western democracy must, it seems, be even more modest than the most modest defense current amongst apologists.

Perhaps it may take some such form as this. Modes of representation cannot be chosen in a vacuum. They're dependent on the conditions of society and on the forms of spontaneous representation that arise unbidden.

In a society that has lost most of its traditional representative forms, the unstable and shifting relations built on individualism and technology, but which can count on economic wealth, good communications and general literacy. There's not a serious alternative to the ballot box. Attempts to revive lost forms of loyalty are liable to be ersatz and morally hollow.

We had better secure ourselves against the temptations they present by setting a high procedural threshold for movement of spontaneous popular identity. And this electoral democracy provides. It's very sort of ad hoc and what he sees electoral democracy as being, it's like, this is what we've got.

We kind of all woke up in Anglo-American democracies. And that is what is recognized more or less, even in the. Even as completely insane as the every four years ritual of deciding that the other half of the country are psychopaths who should not be trusted with the government of, you know, a soda stand.

But I know so to shop. It's still what we've got and it's what. Is sort of recognized as the source of or at least a ritual of legitimation.

And it provides what he calls this kind of like channel for the change of what his phrase was popular. The it's almost a general will thing, but not in a. Totalizing Rousseau way. Yeah, I think that idea of a general will is is really important.

I mean, we have this tendency and telemedia will anytime something bad happens, we will say that. Well, you know. People don't deserve this.

Well, a lot of times they do. Right. I mean, you know, the Americans aren't.

Particularly, you know, moral paradigms any more than any other Western democracy. I think George Bernard Shaw's famous quote democracy is a device that ensures we will be governed no better than we deserve. I think that's I mean, that's one of the reasons why we go to go through the charade.

Right. We would rather sort of have our own problems be those of our creation. Because we're that convinced of our need for agency.

I don't know whether that's uniquely American, but it's certainly amplified in American political rhetoric. It's like from what we've been we'll be saying big ideas. Right.

We're worried about ideology, but it's here. We have to deal with it and the voting realities that we have, it seems like just maybe putting some distinctions between, okay, these are ideologies that whether we like them or not, they still can work in our system. Right.

They still room for them and they make sense. And then these are ideologies which really do kind of destroy the whole thing or will slowly eat it out and hollow it hollow it out to where there's nothing there. As Christians giving commentary, maybe just starting something as basic as that and then saying what practical political actions can be taken to maintain a healthy arrangement and to at least slow down a destructive arrangement can we take? I think one aspect of American, particularly American, I think, political rhetoric is that of emergency.

You can think maybe of the flight 93 election, Michael Anton's expression. The idea that there is a disaster on the way if you do not take emergency action. And that action is one that places you at the points you have to pull the lever.

The trolley has to be diverted to a different rail. It may run over a couple of people on the way, but it will save the multitude that was going to hit in the other direction. You are the one that's responsible for this.

You're the one that's been given the ability to pull that lever. How much should that frame the way that people think of the act of voting, the choice between the lesser of two evils? And along with that, the question of how much should effectiveness be a criteria for voting as opposed to maybe voting for third parties or abstaining? Well, I don't want to criticize my first of all colleagues, Ryan, because it was powerful at the time. I think a lot of people really bought it.

My initial question is just how many flight 93 elections are there? It seems we're told everyone, every one of these is a flight 93 election. And so how many flight 93s are out there in the sky? Just the other thing I think is worth mentioning is that, Alastair, you mentioned the idea of abstention. Americans were not very comfortable with it.

And usually because there's an entire American sort of moral and political dialectic about

a duty to vote. I think there's a long history in the West of abstention being not only something that's allowable, not only something you could do, but in some cases being something you should do. We have the two candidates in the 2020 election, not because people voted, but because of two relatively corrupt political organizations sort of going about their machinations and on some level, foisting them on the political process.

There's 335 million Americans. I doubt very much you would say that Joe Biden or Donald Trump are the two men who should rule the United States. And picking between those men would not be something that you would say is what you would do if you would get the best.

So I think on some level, it would be good to actually ask pretty hard questions about whether Christians especially should keep feeding this two party machine. And that doesn't mean that they should vote for one candidate or another. It does mean they should ask, why do we keep investing so much institutional prestige into two institutions that haven't actually done perhaps what they've promised for progressives or for conservatives? Parties in the United States are really unusual.

And I think we can at least look at abstention as something that could be done to just say, hey, why do we keep feeding this? It seems to me that one way to go about it would be to not say we should abstain or we shouldn't. But the more I think about it, the more it seems as though the problem is not too much politics. It's not enough politics in the sense that the political act, voting becomes the one political act.

And the political authority of the president becomes the one kind of authority that political authority that's recognized. You know, even though Donald is kind of pessimistic about this, you know, society has lost most of its traditional representative forms, attempts to revive lost forms of loyalty are liable to be ersatz. I'm not sure that's true.

I think there's plenty of political sort of relationship that exists. I think just in terms of local organizations, even the family as a political organization. These are actual political relationships and taking them and taking those kinds of political loyalty more seriously and investing more in them.

And at the same time, taking the other kinds of. You know, public politics duties like the candidate speech that O'Donovan talks about and and other sorts of things more seriously as well would actually give us a richer and fuller and more well-rounded. Sort of kit of political things to do and ways to experience our ourselves as political animals so that it's not all freighted on this one every four year choice that seems like a little bit strange.

I think abstention is certainly should be allowed, and in some sense it shouldn't be underestimated because, again, think of the example of Trump. One of the big arguments is that he energized, he got people to vote who had not been voting prior to

him. And that argument only works.

It only has power if there were people that weren't voting, and we were aware of that. And we see the abstention or the not voting as potentially significant. It's a statement about insufficiencies and inadequacies that may be in the future we should change.

So abstention is it should be allowed and should be seen as is actually potentially effective. But I want to give one statement in the opposite direction. Maybe this is a little bit of public penance on my part.

The last cycle I wrote a little article for Mere Orthodoxy against basically saying why I wouldn't vote for Trump and I said now is the time to really do a third-party thing. Nothing came of it. It was largely inaccurate in its predictions, and very few people were persuaded by my suggestions.

So I'm going to put that out of the way. Well, thank you. But I've been thinking about that after the fact, and yeah, a lot of stuff I thought would play out.

I wrote it before the election had happened. I thought Trump wouldn't win, and I was wrong. I got a lot of stuff wrong, which is normal.

We all get stuff wrong when it comes to politics, but it just was like an occasion or it's been an occasion over the years for me to reflect upon that. Sometimes we abstain or we say we can't participate in this or that based upon things we think we are confident in, things we think we understand, and then we're actually quite wrong. We have such a limited perspective, and so with Trump, when I was thinking about him a while back, a lot of my opposition to him was don't know that you can trust him, really worried about the symbolic aspects of him.

And he's certainly been a mixed bag. I wouldn't say that now I'm on the MAGA train, but he actually did do certain things, and I'm particularly thinking about the nomination of the judges and the vocal support of pro-life activism. He did things that even your really conservative family values kind of candidates in the past had declined to do once they got elected.

And that has stuck with me. It's like I put all my energy in some sense into the symbolic category with some judgment about the guy's trustworthiness, which I think was a fair judgment at the time. And I was kind of wrong about a lot of that, and had maybe the candidates that I was more excited about had they got elected, they could have disappointed me in the other direction.

They could have got up there and not delivered on all sorts of things. And so I do wonder about our energies when we're proclaiming whether or not we have to abstain or whether we're super committed to certain candidates, whether we wouldn't all be benefited by just toning it down a notch, like lowering our expectations all around... ..

but then maybe being open to the way politics can surprise you and shake out. Maybe the small little momentum has gotten a little bit bigger since last time, and if these two guys happen to get together, then this other thing might happen.

I think that's exactly right. I think one of the things that the way I would phrase it is we need to quit expecting presidents to be essentially small-R Republican, sort of Christian Cesaro Papist exemplars. I think that happened for a long time with especially conservative, sort of low-church evangelical Christians.

They really sort of every time we voted, there was this idea, I'm voting for a good Christian man. And Trump has kind of finally gotten people to stop saying that. Now, there's some of his sort of evangelical supporters who will try to sort of contrive some sort of Christian baptism of this guy's really a good guy if you just look at things this way, and that's silly.

But I think a lot of people on the right have kind of gotten to the point of, you know what, we need to take down our expectations. We want to vote for someone who can basically protect us. And that's a pretty low bar, whether they actually need protection or not.

You can argue that until the cows come home. But I think he has resulted or there has been the result of him being president as people sort of taking down their expectations for what presidents actually do. That's something that people like Stephen Wolfe is a good example of someone who's written on the subject of the importance of consequences within the discussion of the ethics of voting.

We tend to talk a lot about what traditionally Christians have talked a lot about character of candidates. And that is something that's come out more recently in the discussion surrounding John Piper's piece on voting. How can we think about the place that consequences should have in our considerations? Because it seems to me that many people who would focus upon character might end up acting politically in a way that maybe could keep their hands clean, but is completely ineffectual and doesn't actually stand up for some goods that are under assault.

How can we think about the place that consequences should have, some of the ways in which those might, that consequentialist approach might be a danger, and some ways in which we can overstate the importance of character or maybe understate it? Yeah, the character argument I think is one. John Piper just made it, but it's one that has been made on and off over the years. And what I think was so perplexing, what brought a sense of cognitive dissonance to the evangelicals in America is that some of the people who had been really championing character matters just switched on a dime.

They just dropped that argument entirely and moved to the consequential position. I'm thinking of the - there was - I can't - I don't want to name a guy and be wrong, but there was some guy. He wrote a bunch of books for kids on heroes and virtues or whatever,

and that was always his theme, the importance of character and leadership.

And then he comes out as a giant Trump supporter before Trump was elected. And so that can make your head spin. You're like, wait a minute.

And then there's a sense of betrayal like, so was - were these people just lying? Like they didn't really care about it, or are they willing to pretend that a guy has character? That was a big part of why there was such unrest and people not knowing what to make of this. But I think we've got to be, again, slower, I guess, in our reactions. It can't be just about character to the exclusion of the political consequences.

I think we can say that. If a guy is a super nice, honest, angelic guy, and then he gets totally manipulated and turned around and forced to do other people's agendas because he's so nice, then he's not a good politician. You don't want him in the room making decisions.

He's too nice. That's his problem. You've got to have a bit of a brawler at times, but character is going to have consequences.

The way that someone makes a decision, especially in a crisis, a real crisis, a pandemic or a flood or a war, many times that's going to come back to his baseline character. So I think we need to take both commitments seriously and then try to make the best decision we can at the time. Well, I do think it's important to remember that niceness is not virtue, and niceness can actually be a lack of virtue.

I don't think that it's possible for there to be a politician who's too virtuous in the sense that to be truly virtuous is to have the qualities of courage and prudence and wisdom that would prevent you from being walked over or being fooled by bad advisors or whatever. So I don't think the question is, all right, so we need to balance good character with someone who will be effective. I think that good character is by definition effective.

It's a question of can we find someone of the best character possible. And I think my instinct is that this is not a sort of wanting to keep my hands clean thing. This is a, or a kind of perfectionism or kind of bent up, you know, abdication of political responsibility.

I actually do think that to a certain degree, voting for Trump or having someone in the office who just is not virtuous at all, and knowing that you kind of helped put him there, does bad things to you and to the country. I don't know whether, you know, who would be worse, who would have been worse, which is why I'm very happy to have voted third party. But it just, I don't think that it's a question of balancing character with effectiveness.

I am. One of the things that we do, we, here we have the kids, we have the students read Polycraticus, which is this middle 12th century political treatise written by John of Salisbury. And one of the things that you realize is kind of when we in 2020 talk about

character, and I like this is a way that Susanna differentiated niceness from virtue.

We're talking about it. And also the word we tend to use, we, in 2020, we use this word decency a lot. So I think that it's important to concede that with someone like Trump, there's very real, I think, viable concern.

I think Susanna, you're onto something that, you know, will his character lead him to do something impulsive? Will he do something impulsive, imprudent and whatnot? I think that that's a really viable concern. So I think that that's maybe the critical one, right? Does does certain types of lack of character lead to certain types of problems? I think with someone like Donald Trump, it's imprudence. It's impulsiveness.

With the I want to go back to this idea of niceness, though, because I think this is something we do need to draw a pretty black line. When we talk about niceness and decency, we do kind of tend to talk about it a little bit. CS Lewis is that hideous strength, the NIC style, that style of quote unquote decency.

And even upstream from that, I think it's important to realize that what we call decency is very Anglo centric, incredibly Anglo centric. The way that we expect our politicians to behave is pretty Anglo centric. I lived I did a semester abroad in Italy when Silvia Berlusconi was prime minister.

There's certain things that everyone just kind of shrugged off in Italy because, well, it's Italy that we wouldn't shrug off. So I think kind of conceding that there's certain Anglo centric ideas of decency and certainly conceding that some of it's pretty wiggish that, you know, downstream from from wig thinkers in the late 17th century. That's I think that's important to concede.

I also think Susanna's point is really important. There's certain types of lack of character that can lead to certain types of failures. And I think Trump's imprudence and impulsiveness is something that really seems to probably that rattles my belt as much as anything, because I do think those are character failings.

And I do think they matter how much they matter up for debate. But they're certainly not negligible. On the Anglo aspect of the concepts of decency, I'd go beyond that and say it's very much a certain class sense of decency.

If you're in a working class context, Trump may come across rather differently. The other thing along those lines is the sort of character that some displays is not merely a matter of how they will govern. It's something contagious.

It's something that shapes the way that people move around them and the character of the people closest to them. I think as a great example of this, the story of King David, when he sins, it changes the whole tenor of his administration. He gathers people like Joab closer to him, and then other people are put further away.

Nathan, for instance, you'll find also that there is just instability more generally around him because people can't trust him. They can't trust each other. Messages aren't being sent faithfully.

And there's something about the integrity of an administration that arises from the character of the people at the heart of it. And beyond that, the way in which the character of Christian political discourse, particularly in evangelical context, has shifted following the last election, I think, is noteworthy. There's something that's changed that's not merely a matter of us.

We can't compartmentalize character quite as straightforwardly as maybe we think we can. And there, I think the challenges of Piper's approach should be reckoned with. There's I mean, I have my differences with his arguments, but I think character is contagious.

And when we're voting for people, we're voting for something about the atmosphere that we're going to create. How can we deal with that dimension in a way that's wise as Christians, but also shrewd in the way that we're called to be? Yeah, I said niceness, which was fun to then get everyone to pounce on. But I think let's be honest.

When the average American commentator, not people who are going to be quick to give you the classical definition or the Christian theological definition, but when the average American commentator says I want a virtuous president, the reality is they are filling in that word with definitions that I think each of us would criticize. They want him to be honest, but they want him to promote certain sorts of - maybe it's including certain voices, defending certain causes, being empathetic to this or that. And then they usually say a nod towards these other things, and they see that as part of virtue or character.

Obama is a great example. He really ran as a character candidate. It's hard for some conservatives maybe to get that - to understand that because they painted him in the liberal bad guy category.

But if you read a lot of his early speeches, he's hope. He's positive thinking. He's going to bring the country together.

He gave that speech about red states and blue states and even appealed to being multiracial at one point. He was a character guy, but you could argue that then he went and put in policies which were also in some point - some respects they were character-driven policies. We believe in these values.

They are on the trajectory of progress that is moral. But a lot of conservative Christians thought that those were actually quite evil or harmful. They thought that those positions were - worked against the kinds of values that maybe some of us would say you have to have to have a good common good.

So that's my big question mark about accepting that language in the world we live in. If we're only going to poll our congregations and they're going to vote, then we can use that language. But using that language for the voting group that is in America, I think we have to understand what that means.

It's very different. STEPHEN KINZER I think a couple things that come to mind with the current political reality and the idea of what it would be to be - have a virtuous president. Obviously, Steve is right.

You kind of have to look at what the reality is on the ground. I think of - I office across the hall from one of our classicists who's an Army vet. And he's not a particularly political guy, but just passingly noted that the number of 19-year-old American kids getting killed in the backside of a desert is down.

And so a lot of vets look at Trump and no matter what he says, no matter how disgusting he is, guess what? He's a good guy because he's just dispositionally - or they would say he's a good guy because he's dispositionally bothered by the idea of 21-year-old American kids getting blown up in the desert. That's something I don't think a lot of us think about. I'm not a vet.

But that idea of virtue, as in just kind of that protective idea, is I think what especially Trump has made a lot of progress in the American public with. That kind of almost godfather idea. Whether it's good or bad, I think it remains to be seen.

We're too close to probably make that judgment. But a lot of people see that as virtuous, that kind of protective sense. Whether he is protective or not, I don't know.

It's too soon to tell. But people perceive that. Questions of politics have been increasingly divisive for Christians.

And it seems that part of it is just a general instinct that gets concretized or it congeals around political standpoints. And that can be ideas of masculinity. It can be ideas of what the nation represents.

It can be ideas of virtues more generally that are somehow elicited by a Rorschach test of your political stance. How can Christians firewall the things that really matter from some of the political disputes and debates that we have? And how might that help us to engage in both aspects better? I think this is something incredibly simple. But I think a judiciousness on social media is probably one of the small things that Christians can do to really help to firewall conversations about politics.

Be careful what we retweet. Be careful what we say out there, especially with regard to politics. It's something small, but I think if more people did it, we might have at least a more thoughtful conversation within Christian circles and with the broader society around us.

I think getting churches as a pastor – and this is the thing that's mostly on my mind – getting churches to see the boundary lines between what is appropriate to a formal, official teaching position by the church and what, while important and people should feel free to really care about, are civic or earthly matters, accepting that distinction. And it does not mean that Christians don't care about civic matters. It's just an acknowledgment that the civic matters typically have a different jurisdiction.

They're more – they can quickly become more complicated or more particular to local areas, and they are not the sort of thing that the ministry of the church can take an actual dogmatic authoritative stance on. To me, I think that's huge, and I think most ministers get that despite what their social media might suggest. But when the rubber hits the road, they're not going to excommunicate a member over a political position.

But I'm not sure a lot of lay people always get that. And a lot of times the lay people bring the energy, the anger, and then the clergy are trying to respond to that or not respond to that, and you have a lot of panic and animosity in the meanwhile. So just clarifying the boundaries of like, okay, this is important, but it's politics versus this is a doctrinal, religious, spiritual matter that we must take an absolute stand on.

I'm not sure that I totally buy that distinction in the sense that I think that there are certain aspects of – because I don't think that you can firewall ethics from theology. And I think that there are – I'm not sure what they would be. I mean, I have some ideas, but I think there are certain ethical matters that have political – which politics impact, which you can't support as a Christian.

Like, there are positions that are not supportable as a Christian that I do think would be appropriate to excommunicate someone in the sense of saying, like, until you repent of this, maybe you shouldn't take communion if they are supporting those political positions. I mean, I really am very glad to not be in the position to have to make those calls, but I don't think that in principle they can't be made. It is surprising that the representative, Anabaptist magazine editor here argues that against the Presbyterian minister.

I don't listen. I'm an Anglican. Just joking.

Well, as an Anglican, you really should accept my view. An Anglican talking about church discipline. I mean, we're all about the religious test for office.

Yeah, but – well, you said moral though, right? And I think we have to be careful. Sure, if it's merely answering the moral question or you personally crossing a moral boundary in your action, then I agree. But when we're talking about certain matters of public policy or law that are moving into more contingent situations, that's where we have to make the difference.

And I would be willing to grant that occasionally you have a live issue on the table being debated politically that is of that first-order moral thing. But I think they are far less normal. They're much rarer than we commonly admit.

And even issues that in our mind are super obvious today would not have been so obvious to our Christian forefathers even 100 years ago. And so we just have to be very careful about that. Have we moved from the natural law into the particular applications of human law, and how far have we moved in that direction? Do you think Christians can speak to - or more particularly pastors - can speak to politics from the pulpit? And if they can, how should they do so? It seems that particularly in American politics, there's a concern to have religious leaders to speak out in some way or other in support of candidates.

The presentation of presidential candidates as people of faith, or at least associated with people of faith, has been far more pronounced in the US than in most other nations. And it seems to me that as Christians, we need to think about the way in which the weight of our teaching is put behind particular viewpoints or policies or persons. How are we supposed to think about that? What sort of theological tools might we have to hand to help us? Sure.

Well, the pastor - some of this depends on your denomination and their view of the pastoral office - but certainly from the pulpit or speaking in a formal capacity - well, actually let me back up. From the pulpit in a sermon, most Protestants would argue that the pastor really shouldn't say things in the sermon that he's not willing to then say, this is the word of the Lord. Now of course we acknowledge illustrations and maybe applications that are limited in nature, but honestly still, I think it's the second Helvetic confession.

It says the preaching of the word of God is the word of God. Really the whole point of the pastor saying it from the pulpit is because he thinks it is absolutely following from the word of God in a clear and direct way. And so if you find yourself as a pastor saying things that then you'd have to say, well, but okay, you're free to disagree with that, then you have gotten into a big problem here.

How much are you free to disagree with now from my sermon? How much of this is just my personal opinion? It really does start the doctrine of the preaching of the word. So if you come from the magisterial Protestant position, I think right away you've got an issue there. You've got to be very, very careful.

But then I would also say distinguishing between proclaiming principles. The Lord says this, thou shalt not kill or love thy neighbor. You can say that with extreme confidence.

But then deciding whether or not a particular law is a consistent application of that principle is different. And then saying whether or not a candidate is - can be reliably

expected to follow these principles in a certain way, that's even more difficult. And so I would say no endorsing of candidates.

I think that's entirely inappropriate. Very limited speaking on concrete laws or policies. They would have to really touch the principal issue in a very clear way.

And I would say very, very, very careful about what I would say from the pulpit in a sermon. I think that's exactly right. One of the things that Steve mentioned, the Protestant tradition, Protestants take declarations in the pulpit really seriously.

The reason why we're careful about politics isn't because we don't think it could be authoritative from the pulpit. It's precisely because we think it could be. So you better be careful about what you say.

Because if you put it to the - right, people should be careful because if you say certain things, it is the very word of God in some ways. I think it's instructive for Protestants because it's on this side of 100 years ago that an actual monarch was getting in a spat with an archbishop over whether that archbishop was going to preach a sermon. People forget that Edward VIII didn't abdicate because he thought the archbishop disagreed with him.

He knew that Archbishop Lange disagreed with him. What Lange was willing to do, though, was to say, I'm going to make a statement about the king being divorced in a sermon if you don't abdicate. And so people understood that him saying that publicly from the seat either at St. Paul's or at Canterbury would have carried a certain sort of weight.

And this is - would everybody believe that? No, but people still understood as late as 1936, this carries weight. He's going to make a political statement from the pulpit, not just privately, not just to the Privy Council, from the pulpit. And so when the archbishop starts saying things from the pulpit about the king potentially marrying a divorcee, this is something that's going to be nuclear.

And it's probably why the abdication happens on the timeline it happened. One of the questions that has often driven political viewpoints has been a concern to maintain the evangelical witness, or our witness as Christians more generally. How can we navigate that particular question in a context where the impact upon the evangelical witness, the perception of what Christians, evangelicals in particular, stand for, has shifted so much in the public eye in the last few years? Is that something that should factor into our political judgments? And if so, how? I think - Oh yeah, this was a topic that I mentioned in my mere orthodoxy essay.

I warned that evangelicals sort of voting for Trump in a big public way would destroy their witness. And what I meant by witness was the degree to which unsympathetic

people in the political realm believed that they were – that evangelicals were being honest and were actually promoting certain values. And I think in some ways that was right.

I think the evangelicals did ruin their witness in that sense. It's very difficult to imagine them being persuasive to a non-sympathetic audience. But on the flip side, you could say given everything else that's happened since then, is that very significant for the US politics? Does that really matter? Yeah, I think that – I mean Steve, that was a great point.

That was a real strength of the piece is that you were right. If anyone was maybe on the outsides looking at evangelicals and didn't really have a charitable disposition towards them beforehand, they certainly aren't going to now. I think a lot of it comes down to sort of why and what evangelicals, quote-unquote, witness is being ruined over.

And that's maybe the debate about Donald Trump. My guess is that if you were predicating evangelical witness, which some sort of progressive evangelicals might on being able to reach some sort of negotiated peace with the culture on late-term abortion, then you're never going to be able to have a witness with them. And so if it's Jeb Bush appointing Amy Coney Barrett instead of Donald Trump, evangelical witness is, quote-unquote, still going to be destroyed, quote-unquote.

But it really wouldn't matter. There's no way you're going to be able to sort of find some place to negotiate on that. On the other hand, with Trump, it seemed to be rhetorical, right? A lot of the witness ruining is because of his rhetoric.

And maybe that is substantive. Alistair made the point that rhetoric and actions can kind of corrupt people around them. So in that sense, it is something to think about.

Some of it, it's always going to be, quote-unquote, ruined. I don't know if you can be saved on some levels. But with some of Trump's rhetoric and the people around him's rhetoric, I think that is still an outstanding question.

And I don't know what that looks like downstream a few years. By rhetoric, let's be clear. It's not just he said a mean word.

I mean he was saying he would take certain positions and actions, which many evangelicals had prior to that point said were bad. Right. And that he was the kind of person that they had prior to that point said was unfit to hold office because of his personal ethics.

Right. Yeah, and I think that's a great point, Susannah. I think it's worth pointing out sort of there's a specific group of evangelicals that's being sort of referenced here.

And it's a lot of the people who are involved with the moral majority, the Falwells, the

Dobsons, those people. You know, that's kind of the group that I think people are looking at saying, see, evangelicals have ruined their witness, largely because they were very vocal during Bill Clinton's impeachment trial. I do think that it's important to not get too stressed out, though.

I mean, I agree that the question of ruining one's witness in that sense and for American evangelicals as a group to have ruined their witness in that sense is important. But there's also a way that you could be a little bit too precious, a little bit too worried about taking political action or voting at all, if that is a kind of political action, because it will never be pure. And I do think that that's actually not a good witness, even if we're just thinking in terms of witness being the major thing that we're doing, because, you know, one of the major ways that we do witness as Christians is we just try and live as decent human beings, you know, fulfilling the human call.

One of the human things to do is politics in all of its various flavors, including possibly voting. And so doing politics well is good Christian witness, just as, you know, editing magazines well or planting a garden well is good Christian witness. So I don't think that failing to do politics or keeping your hands clean in that sense is a good witness.

That concern of witness is often focused upon the perceived integrity of Christians or evangelicals, particularly in this case. It seems to me that we could raise the question beyond perceived integrity of how much our integrity itself has suffered as a result of some of the political stances that have been taken, the degree to which it's been seen as a battle that must be fought in a way that places us within a complete friend-enemy paradigm and makes us very neglectful of our own principles. And this situation of cornered animals, we're desperate, will take anything, any measure that will enable us to fight back those people who are opposing us.

Right. Yeah, that's a great point. And maybe some of the people that were spokespersons for Christian witness, evangelical witness, maybe they needed to be discredited, right? Maybe this will be God's providential humbling of the proud and making wise out of the fools.

Some people, it was a charade. It wasn't real. There was no depth there.

And so let's just know it. Let's know the truth. But then there are others who perhaps they did vote for Trump or maybe they didn't.

They were very vocal against him, but the way in which they made their case was still consistent with their purported values. And you can tell that over time. You could see their integrity as they demonstrated in complicated political situations.

Just before we finish, I'd be interested to hear from each of you what few questions you think that people should ask themselves before deciding how or whether to vote. All

right. Well, I'll jump in.

I think, can you do this with a good conscience? That's always the question. But then to what extent have I informed my conscience? Is it too - is it properly informed or have I gotten it a little bit too sensitive or too lax and deadened it? And then I would ask, what is the likely - what is the likely effect? Voting this way, will this achieve certain outcomes? And that will be different depending on where you live. Some states you'll have a lot more freedom.

Honestly, my vote is probably not going to change a whole lot. My state is overwhelmingly voting one direction, in which case you kind of can - you're freed up to not worry so much. You can vote about any sort of priority probably and not feel so bad.

But then if you're in a more swing state, maybe it changes. What effect will this vote have under our system and these conditions? Yeah, I think for me it's very simple. Who will be the one to hopefully create or sustain a political order that is in itself sustainable? Who's going to set up something for future generations? That sounds kind of deep, but it's really not.

I mean, it's sort of like, which of these guys do I think is less likely to mess up things more? And everybody's going to come to a different kind of answer right now. But I think that's what I think about. I do live in a swing state.

It's a fairly recent swing state. Michigan's historically very blue, but that's changed in the last five years, largely because of Trump's populism. So I think I am kind of thinking about who is going to be able to sustain some sort of calm, at least remotely just political order in the coming years.

I think I would add to that, take a look at the rest of your political relationships, meaning the rest of your relationships of loyalty and authority and obedience. And think about what your vote will do to them. Like if your parents really hate the person you're going to vote for, and it's not a matter of, and it will like seriously disrupt your family, and it's not a matter of conscience, then maybe don't make that vote.

If it'll get everyone pissed off. But that is not to say that it is a matter of conscience, you should let that determine. Just the sense that voting is a thing that has a social significance in your immediate circle, as well as something in the larger polity.

Thank you very much for joining me and for this discussion. It's been really stimulating. And if you've listened to this point, thank you so much for your time.

I know it takes a lot of time to get through all of these issues, but I hope it's been as enlightening for you as it has been for me. Hopefully be back again soon with more discussions of politics in our ongoing series on Oliver O'Donovan's *The Ways of Judgment*. Until then, thank you for listening.

God bless.