

Democracy

What does the Bible have to say about engaging with politics?

'It has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.' – Winston Churchill, 1947

When we talk about democracy, we generally mean our right to vote for the politicians who make decisions on our behalf. They are elected every few years and held responsible for the way the country is run. Sometimes they achieve what they promise, other times they fail or change their policies.

Many of us are dissatisfied with this system, but it is the best we have. What does the Bible – much of which was written before democracy had ever been established – have to say about how we engage in politics?



Thinking Biblically About...

What's the problem?

Democracy is something that we generally take for granted. Full democracy is a relatively recent development in history and still one that is enjoyed by only a fraction of the world's population. However, although it is our right to vote and elect our politicians to power, many of us don't bother.

There are several reasons for this. A major one is that we feel our elected leaders are no longer on our side. A series of scandals has undermined confidence in politicians – less than a quarter of people trust their MPs to represent them in Parliament. Decisions that have enormous significance to us are taken far away, behind closed doors and by people who operate in their own bubble, without adequate knowledge of the circumstances of our lives. Far from being accountable to the electorate, those in power seem distant and uncaring.

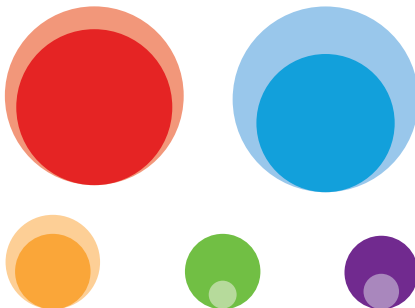
Having a range of political parties and ideologies is supposed to give us a choice of who leads the country, but 'They're all the same' is a frequent

criticism of politicians. Voters are disappointed but feel they have no means of redress; lack of open selection or powers of recall mean people can be stuck with MPs they don't want.

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Although there are many ways of becoming involved with local and national politics, party membership figures highlight one of the most common responses to these complaints: disengaging from mainstream political institutions. 'Membership of the three main political parties is at a historic low: less than 1% of the UK electorate is now a member of the Conservative, Labour or Liberal Democrat Party, compared to 3.8% in 1983... Yet membership of smaller, often nationalist parties has risen markedly since the new millennium.' (www.parliament.uk)

Political party membership



2002	2015
Labour: 250,000	Labour: 190,000
Conservative: 270,000	Conservative: 149,800
Lib Dem: 70,000	Lib Dem: 44,600
Green: 6,000	Green: 44,700
UKIP: 10,000	UKIP: 41,950

Data from <http://claritynews.co.uk> on 17th January 2015.

Consumer culture

Our culture is heavily influenced by the ideology of consumerism. This tells us that choice and change are the highest good, that they should define the way we express ourselves and enable us to be truly fulfilled. This worldview affects every area of life, from the goods and electronics we buy, the TV and media we choose, and even the lifestyles we adopt. It also impacts what we believe. When everything is supposed to serve our needs, we may find ourselves shaping our beliefs to fit our behaviour – rather than allowing our beliefs to change the way we act.

The consumer culture is one of instant gratification. If we don't get what we feel we deserve, we know we can always switch to another channel or brand. This tendency has been accelerated by technology, which gives us immediate access to news

and commentary, and the ability to respond through social media – albeit on a superficial level.

However, the same approach should not be applied to either politics or to faith. Democracy is not like watching a reality TV show where we can vote out the contestants we dislike, and our faith is not like an online store where we can always find another outlet if this one doesn't provide what we want.

Additionally, faith and politics, far from being separate, are inherently intertwined. If we truly want to advance God's kingdom on Earth, political engagement is one of the ways the Bible expects us to achieve that. Unsurprisingly, however, the Bible does not share our culture's typical views of what politics and government really are.



Q: What principles guide if and how you vote?

What does the Bible say?

Government in the Old and New Testaments

Both Testaments have much to say about political power, but their concerns are very different. Over the course of 1,000 years in the Old Testament, the Israelites experienced many forms of government. They endured the harshness of slavery under a powerful, centralised authority in Egypt, then combined spiritual and military leadership under Moses for 40 years in the wilderness, followed by *ad hoc* direction under a number of judges in the period following the entry into Canaan. A series of kings ruled for the next 500 years through the monarchy period, before Israel's exile to Babylon and loss of autonomy. Finally, the return to Jerusalem brought a degree of freedom under Persian authority after the exile.

In the New Testament, the major political question was how the Church should relate to pagan powers that did not share its beliefs. Both Jews and Christians were governed by the Roman Empire, an authority that placed allegiance to Caesar above any religious beliefs. Paul recognised the God-given but limited authority of earthly rulers (Romans 13:1-7), as did Jesus:



'They came to him and said, "Teacher... Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not? Should we pay or shouldn't we?" But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. "Why are you trying to trap me?" he asked. "Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." They brought the coin, and he asked them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's,"

they replied. Then Jesus said to them, "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's."

(Mark 12:14-17)

When we want to understand God's will for how we might influence and engage with our own political structures, we should therefore look primarily to the Old Testament. The New Testament gives us more insight into how, as Christians, we might respond to hostile authorities.

Power corrupts

Throughout the Bible, God's people had to deal with oppressive foreign powers. First there were the centuries of slavery in Egypt, before the Exodus. In the 8th century BC Assyria attacked and exiled the northern kingdom (see 2 Kings 17); a few decades later Babylonia exiled the southern kingdom (2 Kings 25). Finally, in the New Testament, the early church had to deal with the injustices of the Roman Empire.

All of these empires aggressively expanded their territories, taking land and power away from other nations and forcing their citizens to pay heavy taxes. They are examples of centralised power that is distant, vulnerable to corruption and unable to help those it is supposed to serve, at best. At worst it is abusive and disinterested in the welfare of its subjects. God gave the Israelites a similar warning when they asked for their own human king, 'Such as all the other nations have', thereby rejecting God as their king (1 Samuel 8).

For this reason, the Bible limits the power of Israel's king to prevent him from amassing wealth, building a

private army or putting himself above the Law:



‘The king, moreover, must not acquire great numbers of horses for himself or make the people return to Egypt to get more of them, for the LORD has told you, “You are not to go back that way again.” He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray. He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold. When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the Levitical priests. It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the Lord his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these

decrees and not consider himself better than his fellow Israelites and turn from the law to the right or to the left.’

(Deuteronomy 17:16-20)

In practice, many of Israel’s kings did not follow these rules, resulting in idolatry and repeated injustices – most notably Solomon (1 Kings 11).

God’s ideal for government

There are many passages in the Law books of the Old Testament (Genesis to Deuteronomy, known as the Torah) that discuss the nature of Israel’s ideal government. This could be summarised,

‘As small as possible but as large as necessary’

In the Torah, the idea of ‘government’ did not mean a central body of decision-makers acting on behalf of the nation, as we understand it today. It was something that was distributed throughout society and took place at every level, depending on what was most appropriate and effective. There were several different areas of authority, which overlapped but which were independent. These areas included the **individual**, the **extended family**, the **village or community**, the **Levites**, the **tribe**, and the **nation** as a whole. Each had authority to carry out the tasks that it was best placed to complete and a ‘higher’ authority did not necessarily take precedence over a ‘lower’ one.

For example, even national defence, which by its nature had to be dealt with centrally, did not automatically take precedence over family life. A recently-married man was exempt from military service for one year (Deuteronomy 24:5). Criminal and civil cases were to be tried in local courts whenever possible, with only the hardest cases being passed up to a more centralised authority (Deuteronomy 16:18-20; 17:8-13).

It is worth recognising that political power is not the only kind of power addressed in the Bible. The Jubilee and debt laws limited the centralisation of economic power, since this was just as likely to lead to injustice. Today, a common criticism is that big business has undue influence on public policy. Large media corporations, too, have a huge impact on how the public perceive competing policies and politicians.

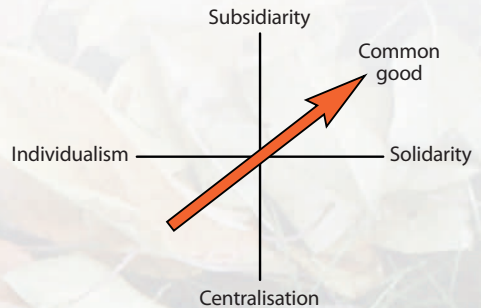
“Government was something that was distributed throughout society and took place at every level, depending on what was most appropriate and effective.”

At the same time as distributing as much responsibility as possible amongst the Israelites themselves, government still had the mandate to intervene where necessary to protect vulnerable groups. Although welfare was dealt with locally, by each family and in the community through the gleaning laws (Deuteronomy 24:19-22), tithes were also collected by the Levites to ensure provision for the most marginalised (Deuteronomy 14:28-29). Those who did not have the protection and support of a family or land – ‘the Levites (who have no allotment or

inheritance of their own) and the aliens, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns’ – would not be destitute.

Solidarity and subsidiarity

This decentralised approach, with different groups being given responsibility for the tasks that they are best able to carry out, is a principle reflected in the idea of **subsidiarity**.



“Solidarity refers to the virtue enabling the human family to share fully the treasure of material and spiritual goods, and subsidiarity is the coordination of society’s activities in a way that supports the internal life of the local communities.”

Pope Benedict XVI, 2008

Q: How do these biblical principles affect your view of what an ideal government might look like?

Subsidiarity is balanced by the principle of **solidarity**. This recognises the need to support and include those who are lacking in the resources to participate in our shared humanity.

These principles work together to bring about the **common good** – the conditions that allow us collectively to flourish. The Bible’s ideal for government, then, is very different from our typical understanding of political power as a centralised, distant body of officials who are responsible for making key decisions on our behalf. The biblical template was that ‘government’ was a far more local process that involved people directly in the matters that affected them most. It emphasised personal and collective responsibility, both for citizens’ own lives and for the role they played in the wider community.

Where do we go from here?

Being politically aware and engaged must be a priority for Christians. Although the most immediate results may be seen in direct action through our churches and local communities, comprehensive and long-term change often requires political action. Issues of social justice and public interest as diverse as slavery, women's suffrage, drink driving, the minimum wage and tobacco advertising have been addressed both by popular movements *and* political engagement.

It is important to recognise that democracy, the 'rule of the people', encompasses far more than simply voting. The principle of subsidiarity means that a more centralised authority is never given a job that could be better achieved by a smaller, more local one which has a direct interest in the outcome. This means we should seek to participate in organisations of all kinds that shape our communities and change the lives of those around us, as well as ourselves. We should not expect to create a more godly society only by marking a ballot sheet, but rather by engaging consistently with the situations we are called to address.

Political engagement may mean getting alongside MPs and other leaders through surgeries and public meetings, writing to and talking with councillors, or even standing for office ourselves. But it also means *governance* as well as *government*: taking part in the wider decision-making processes that shape our communities and society. This could entail becoming more involved with local schools as governors, participating in social action groups, taking part in community initiatives through our churches, or becoming a trustee of a local charity.

“As Christians, we need to not just be pulling the drowning bodies out of the river. We need to be going upstream to find out who is pushing them in.”

Desmond Tutu

Lastly, we must remember what it means for Christians to be in power of any kind.



'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. No so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'

(Matthew 20:25-18)

Q: How could you be more engaged and involved in the political process?

What does the **Bible** have to say about **Democracy**?



- We often think of democracy as a process of electing officials, who may become more interested in holding onto power than serving the needs of their constituents
- In the Bible, 'government' was a process that happened throughout society, with people having influence over the areas that affected them the most
- We need a broader view of political engagement, one which works on both the local and national level and requires us to be involved with our communities rather than simply voting every five years.

Thinking Biblically About... is a series of 2,000-word guides that unpack modern-day issues from a biblical perspective. The **TBA** series aims to give Christians a firm foundation for engaging with some of the most difficult questions of our times: money and debt, sex and marriage, how we spend our time, how we treat the environment and what the role of government is.

You can also read our **Long Distance Christian** series, a collection of 10,000-word booklets looking at key issues in more depth.

The Jubilee Centre is a Christian social reform charity based in Cambridge, UK. We are convinced that the Bible's teaching applies to every area of modern life and has enduring relevance for Britain and the world in the 21st century. At the heart of this social vision is a concern for right relationships, expressed by Jesus in his summary of the Old Testament, *'Love the Lord with all your heart... and love your neighbour as yourself.'* (Matthew 22:37-40)

Find out more at www.jubilee-centre.org/democracy