

In Times of Great Decision:
**How Congregations Can Take Part
in Legal, Non-Partisan Election Activities**

Authored by: Rev. Amanda Hendler-Voss

Session at a Glance:

Exercise 1: Faith Principles in an Election Year

Exercise 2: Voting Rights Timeline

Exercise 3: Characteristics of Just Leadership from the Psalmist's Perspective

Exercise 4: Guide to Legal, Non-Partisan Election Activities for Congregations

Rationale: The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called voting “a moral obligation” essential in calling upon our leaders to do justice. In this election year, people of faith have the opportunity to make our voices and values heard in the public square by actively engaging the political process by educating ourselves about our voting rights, articulating the characteristics inherent in a just leader, and putting our hands and feet to work getting out the vote in our communities.

Objectives:

- to consider the values and principles we bring to an election year as people of faith
- to explore a timeline of our nation's voting rights and discuss the impact of this history on our voting practices today
- to articulate characteristics inherent in a just and trustworthy leader
- to discern how congregations can get out the vote through legal, non-partisan election activities

Outcomes:

- participants will identify principles they bring to an election
- participants will increase their knowledge of the struggle for voting rights in our nation, and name how this history inspires us to vote today
- participants will place scriptural principles of just and righteous leadership in conversation with the values they seek in an elected leader
- participants will learn about legal, non-partisan election activities and explore ways in which their community of faith can get out the vote

Materials Needed:

- Copies of the Election Addendum for all participants
- Flip chart, easel, and markers
- Pieces of construction paper, each with one of the following dates written on it: 1780, 1800, 1850, 1900, 1950, 2000
- the “voting rights timeline” (provided below), with each date/event on a separate piece of paper

Advance Preparations:

1. Post pieces of construction paper, each with a date (i.e. 1780) printed on it, in chronological order along a wall, creating a timeline from 1780-2000.
2. Photocopy the timeline below, cut it up so that each event is on one slip of paper.

Exercise 1: Faith in an Election Year

Instructions: Begin by reading the opening prayer and Facilitator Introduction aloud. Then invite participants to select one of the principles printed below that is speaking to them, and use it to introduce themselves. These "Christian Principles in an Election Year" are used by permission of the National Council of Churches USA, celebrating the 100th anniversary of the American ecumenical movement, online at www.ncccusa.org.

Opening Prayer:

Creator God, Midwife of change, whose truth endures beyond the rise and fall of mighty empires, we hear your call in this election season. We are grateful that you urge us once again to walk with the poor, to welcome the stranger, and to proclaim release to the captive. In this time of great decision, be in our midst, that we might select leaders who see your image in people throughout the world. Bless our leaders with your justice, O God, that they might defend the afflicted, the children, and the poor. Guide our feet in the ways that make for peace. Amen.

Facilitator Introduction: The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called voting "a moral obligation," "an effective tool for change," and a right that is essential in calling the government to do justice. Since the birth of our nation, people of faith have given thanks for a system of governance which allows the voice of the people to be heard while making room for dissent and protest. Today we will examine our voting rights from a faith perspective and enter into dialogue about our calling to bring our values and voices into public life.

Group Introductions

1. War is contrary to the will of God. While the use of violent force may, at times, be a necessity of last resort, Christ pronounces his blessing on the peacemakers. We look for political leaders who will make peace with justice a top priority and who will actively seek nonviolent solutions to conflict.
2. God calls us to live in communities shaped by peace and cooperation. We reject policies that abandon large segments of our inner city and rural populations to hopelessness. We look for political leaders who will re-build our communities and bring an end to the cycles of violence and killing.
3. God created us for each other, and thus our security depends on the well-being of our global neighbors. We look for political leaders for whom a foreign policy based on cooperation and global justice is an urgent concern.

4. God calls us to be advocates for those who are most vulnerable in our society. We look for political leaders who yearn for economic justice and who will seek to reduce the growing disparity between rich and poor.
5. Each human being is created in the image of God and is of infinite worth. We look for political leaders who actively promote racial justice and equal opportunity for everyone.
6. The earth belongs to God and is intrinsically good. We look for political leaders who recognize the earth's goodness, champion environmental justice, and uphold our responsibility to be stewards of God's creation.
7. Christians have a biblical mandate to welcome strangers. We look for political leaders who will pursue fair immigration policies and speak out against xenophobia.
8. Those who follow Christ are called to heal the sick. We look for political leaders who will support adequate, affordable and accessible health care for all.
9. Because of the transforming power of God's grace, all humans are called to be in right relationship with each other. We look for political leaders who seek a restorative, not retributive, approach to the criminal justice system and the individuals within it.
10. Providing enriched learning environments for all of God's children is a moral imperative. We look for political leaders who will advocate for equal educational opportunity and abundant funding for children's services.

Exercise 2: Voting Rights Timeline

Instructions:

- *Distribute timeline slips to participants, each participant may have several. Explain that you will be exploring a voting rights timeline.*
- *As you call out each date in chronological order, invite the participant who has that date to step forward and read the event associated with that date. After each participant has read the event, they can post the event along the timeline on the wall.*
- *After all events have been read aloud, guide participants through the discussion questions.*

1789 Ratification of the U.S. Constitution; first elections held

The election of 1789 was the first U.S. Presidential election. White men with property can vote. Poor people, women, Native Americans, and enslaved African Americans cannot vote. Under the electoral college system, each voting elector cast two votes, and the recipient of the most votes was elected President, with the runner up becoming Vice President. George Washington and John Adams were elected as President and Vice President. Popular vote totals were not retained until the election of 1824.¹

¹ www.u-s-history.com, March 25, 2008.

1807 Women lose the right to vote in all states

Beginning in 1777, women lose the right to vote state by state. In 1807, they lose the right to vote in New Jersey, the final state to revoke the right. The repeal was sponsored by a politician who was nearly defeated by a female voting block ten years earlier.

1820 Property Laws Replaced by Poll Taxes and Religious Tests

Whites can vote even if they do not own property. But they must pay a poll tax or be able to read and, in some places, must pass a religious test before they can vote.

1838 Kentucky Reintroduces Women's Suffrage for Widows

Kentucky becomes the first state to reintroduce women's suffrage by allowing property-owning widows and single women with school aged children the right to vote in school board elections.²

1848 Border Crosses Mexicans; Voting Rights Denied

The Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo ends the Mexican-American war, and the U.S. border crosses Mexicans living in Arizona, California, New Mexico, and Texas. Mexicans living in these states are granted citizenship, but their voting rights are denied through English proficiency, property, and literacy requirements as well as violence and intimidation.³

1855 Blacks Can Vote in Only 5 States

Every new state that joined the Union after 1819 explicitly denied blacks the right to vote. In 1855, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont allow African Americans to vote.⁴

1870 15th Amendment Enfranchises Black Males

The Fifteenth Amendment states: "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any state on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude." Hiram Revels is the first African American elected to the U.S. Senate and Joseph Hayne Rainey becomes the first African American member of the House of Representatives.

1876 Black Voters in the South Repressed

Disputed returns from the 1876 presidential election, in which Democrat Samuel J. Tilden won the popular vote against Republican Rutherford B. Hayes, but fell one electoral vote shy of the 185 needed to win the presidency, provoke a constitutional crisis. The final outcome hinged on disputed results in four states, three of which are accused of refusing to count the African American vote. The black vote was severely

² www.womeninkentucky.com.

³ www.votingrights.org

⁴ www.historynow.org

suppressed in several southern states.⁵

1882 Chinese Exclusion Act Prevents Chinese Americans from Voting

Congress passes the Chinese Exclusion Act which denies citizenship and voting rights to Chinese Americans.⁶

1889 Wyoming Allows Women Full Voting Rights

Wyoming voters approve the first constitution in U.S. history granting full voting rights to women.

1915 Grandfather Clause Declared Unconstitutional

Oklahoma's "grandfather clause," only allowed literate men to register. Illiterate men whose fathers or grandfathers could vote in 1867 could also register. This measure, which disenfranchised illiterate or non-property owning blacks whose fathers and grandfathers were enslaved, is declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court.⁷

1920 19th Amendment Grants Women the Right to Vote

Voting rights for women were first proposed in 1848 at the Seneca Falls Woman's Rights Convention organized by suffragists Susan B. Anthony and Lucretia Mott. It took 72 years of protest and activism to become law. In the same year, Native Americans in North Dakota secure the right to vote if they abandon their tribal ties.⁸

1924 Indian Citizenship Act Provided for Suffrage for Native Americans

The Indian Citizenship Act declares all Indians born within the U.S. to be citizens, giving them the right to vote. Despite its passage, the right to vote is still governed by state law and many Native Americans are barred from voting until 1948.⁹

1943 Chinese Exclusion Act Repealed

In a major civil rights victory, the Chinese Exclusion Act is repealed, granting Chinese immigrants citizenship and voting rights. ¹⁰

1944 "White Primary" Declared Unconstitutional

The U.S. Supreme Court rules that excluding African Americans from membership in the Texas Democratic Party and from participating in primary elections is unconstitutional. According to the Court, primary elections are subject to the 15th Amendment.¹¹

⁵ www.votingrights.com and www.digitalhistory.uh.edu.

⁶ www.votingrights.com

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid

1957 Congress Passes the Civil Rights Act

The Civil Rights Act authorizes the U.S. Attorney General to sue to correct discrimination and intimidation of potential voters.¹²

1961 23rd Amendment Gives Vote to Citizens of Washington, DC

The 23rd Amendment is ratified, granting citizens of Washington DC the right to vote in presidential elections.¹³

1964 24th Amendment Abolishes the Poll Tax for Federal Elections

The U.S. ratifies the 24th Amendment, prohibiting any poll tax in the election of federal officials.¹⁴

1965 Voting Rights Act Prohibits Discriminatory Election Practices

Five months after “Bloody Sunday,” when more than 500 peaceful protesters are brutally beaten outside Selma, President Lyndon B. Johnson signs the Voting Rights Act into law. The VRA prohibits any election practice that denies the right to vote on account of race. It forbids literacy tests and other barriers to registration.¹⁵

1971 26th Amendment Gives 18-20-Year-Olds the Right to Vote

In a time when the U.S. was bitterly divided over the Vietnam War, the 26th Amendment is passed to lower the minimum voting age to 18, the age at which all males were eligible for the military draft. If 18 year olds were old enough to fight and die for their country, it was widely considered that they were old enough to vote as well.¹⁶

1974 Convicted Felons Denied the Right to Vote

The Supreme Court rules that states may deny convicted felons the right to vote.¹⁷

1975 Legislation Mandates Assistance for Language Minority Voters

President Gerald Ford signs legislation reauthorizing the temporary provisions of the Voting Rights Act and permanently bans literacy tests. The voting assistance provisions effect speakers of Spanish, Asian languages, Native American languages, and Alaskan Natives in jurisdictions where more than five percent of the voting age citizens (or at least 10,000 people) of a single language minority group are not proficient in English.¹⁸

1993 National Voter Registration Act Makes Registration More Accessible

¹² Ibid

¹³ www.civilliberty.about.com.

¹⁴ www.americaslibrary.gov

¹⁵ www.votingrights.org

¹⁶ www.deafvote.com

¹⁷ www.votingrights.org

¹⁸ Ibid.

The NVRA, also known as the “Motor Voter” Bill, makes registration more uniform and accessible, especially for minority and low income voters. It requires states to allow registration by mail. It also allows voters to register when obtaining a driver’s license, and at other state agencies such as welfare and unemployment offices.¹⁹

Discussion Questions:

1. What do you notice about the timeline, what surprises you, what’s missing?
2. What trends can you identify by looking at this timeline?
3. How are the events on this timeline impacted by the social and political contexts in which they occur?
4. How does this history impact your commitment to vote?

Exercise 3: Give our Rulers Your Justice, O God

Instructions: Read the Facilitator Introduction aloud. Ask a volunteer (or two) to read the excerpt from Psalm 72. Guide participants through the discussion questions.

Facilitator Introduction: Scholars suggest that Psalm 72 is a royal psalm, possibly written for use in a coronation ceremony for a king. It is flanked on either side with psalms of lament, deeply personal petitions to God to provide rescue, refuge, and relief in a time of intense oppression. Psalm 72 effectively answers these pleas by describing the king as one who reflects God’s commitment to judge with righteousness and justice, defend the cause of the poor, and deliver the needy. The psalmist compares the right relationship between a just ruler and the people to the relationship between rain and the earth. In the spirit of the psalmist, we are called to pray for leadership and define the characteristics inherent in a just leader. Through public proclamation of our hopes and expectations for just and righteous leadership, we seek to hold our elected officials accountable to higher standards. In so doing, we promote political leadership which becomes a blessing to the people of all nations.

Psalm 72: 1-15a

Give the ruler your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a ruler’s heir. May the ruler judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice. Let the mountains give exuberant witness; shape the hills with the contours of right living. May the ruler stand up for the poor, help the children of the needy, come down hard on those who oppress others. May the ruler outlast the sun, outlive the moon—age after age after age. May the ruler be rainfall on cut grass, earth-refreshing rain showers. In the ruler’s days may righteousness burst into blossom and peace abound until the moon fades to nothing. Rule from sea to sea, from the river to the rim. May foes fall on their knees before the ruler, and enemies lick the dust. Rulers remote and legendary will pay homage, monarchs rich and resplendent will turn over their wealth. May all monarchs fall down before the ruler and all nations give the ruler service. For the ruler rescues the poor at the first sign of need, the destitute who have run out of luck. The ruler has

¹⁹ Ibid.

*compassion for the down-and-out, and saves the lives of the needy. From oppression and violence the ruler redeems their life, and precious is their blood in the ruler's sight. Oh, let the ruler live!*²⁰

Discussion Questions:

1. What are some of the characteristics inherent in a just and righteous leader as expressed in Psalm 72?
2. According to Psalm 72, what impact does a just and righteous ruler have on the oppressed, other nations of the world, and the earth?
3. What are some of the obstacles to just and righteous leadership inherent in our political system?

Exercise 4: Election Activities: What's Legal, What's Doable?

Instructions:

- *Read Facilitator Introduction aloud.*
- *Invite a participant to read each sample situation, then determine as a group whether it might be a non-partisan (legal) or partisan (illegal) election activity for a congregation or 501(c)(3) organization. Use the Election Activities listed below to aid the conversation.*
- *Read the general guidelines aloud.*
- *Discuss the "Recommendations for Congregations and 501(c)(3) Organizations" and determine which activities your group will pursue.*
- *Close in prayer.*

Facilitator Introduction: As a presidential election approaches, our national dialogue often turns to the role of faith in informing public and political life. Many people of faith want to better understand how their congregations can get involved in legal, non-partisan election activities. There is much that congregations and 501(c)(3) organizations can do to get out the vote, talk about the issues, and educate the community. Below are some situations that provide examples of legal and illegal election activities for congregations and 501(c)(3) organizations. *Please note that this resource provides general guidelines only and should not be relied upon as legal advice.*

Sample Situations

1. The Associate Pastor at your church states in a sermon that it is a nation's moral obligation to provide affordable housing, health care, and quality education to the public. She notes that one of the candidates running for office does not support a national health care plan.
2. Your Sunday bulletin includes information about voter registration deadlines, Election Day, and notes "voting is a moral obligation." The announcement indicates that the church will provide rides for people to get to the polls.

²⁰ This text comes from a combination of "The Message" and the Inclusive Language Lectionary translations of Psalm 72.

3. The chairperson of your church's social justice committee has been asked to speak on behalf of your congregation at a local awards dinner. When he goes up to speak in front of the audience, he wears a campaign button.
4. A political party calls your church and asks the administrative assistant to furnish him with your congregation's mailing list. S/he agrees.
5. Your church agrees to host a candidate forum in which all candidates have been invited to attend. Prior to the event, non-partisan voter guides are made available in the lobby to members of the congregation and the public.
6. A church employee takes a leave of absence to work on a political campaign.

Election Activities²¹

Congregations and 501(c)(3) Organizations Cannot:

- endorse, support, or oppose a candidate for office
- engage in political fundraising or make campaign contributions
- host a forum in which all candidates are not offered the opportunity to appear
- make use of facilities, equipment, personnel or other resources to support or oppose a candidate
- ask candidates to sign pledges on any issue (tacit endorsement)
- increase the volume or amount of incumbent criticism as election approaches
- publish or communicate anything that favors or opposes a candidate

Congregations and 501(c)(3) Organizations Can:

- keep issues at the forefront during an election year
- distribute non-partisan voter guides
- prepare and distribute non-partisan candidate questionnaires
- organize/host a candidate forum in which all candidates are invited to participate
- provide information about voter registration deadlines and Election Day
- encourage members to vote without endorsing a candidate
- organize rides to the polls
- engage in limited lobbying, including work on ballot measures
- conduct non-partisan public education about participation in the political process
- educate candidates on issues

General Guidelines:

1. **Focus on issues**, not candidates or political parties.
2. Educate members and candidates on issues, educate members on engagement in the political process, including registration and voting.
3. **Include a disclaimer** in communications about the election, such as "WAND is a non-partisan organization that does not endorse, support, or oppose any political party or candidate for office."

²¹ These partisan and non-partisan election activity guidelines come from the Alliance for Justice, www.afj.org.

4. Engage in **Get Out the Vote** (gotv) efforts that encourage and support registration and voting, but don't endorse a candidate or party.
5. Distinguish between personal election activities and organizational election activities by documenting that staffers working or volunteering on behalf of a campaign take a leave of absence and ensuring that they do not make use of organizational resources (i.e. facilities, equipment, etc.).
6. Refer to Alliance for Justice (www.afj.org) for supporting guideline documents. Also refer to www.pewforum.org for election activity guidelines.
7. Seek legal advice if you have further questions.

Recommendations for Congregations

1. Announce **voter registration deadlines** and election dates in bulletins, newsletters, via congregational emails and website, from the pulpit, etc.
2. **Vote early**, then team up with another congregation or local nonprofit organization to **offer rides to the polls**.
3. Order free **voter guides** and election resources from Catholics United and Sojourners. These non-partisan voter guides are free of cost and can be distributed to the congregation or made available in the lobby of your building. See www.catholicsunited.org or www.sojo.net for more information (note: you may need to call these organizations to order the voter guide).
4. Send lay leaders to become election protection volunteers by serving as poll watchers, a bill of rights canvasser, or legal advocate. See www.ep365.org for more info.
5. Become informed of the issues. Use WAND's *Faith Seeking Peace* curriculum in your community. Ask candidates and their campaigns the tough questions. Visit www.faithwand.org or www.wand.org.

Closing Prayer:

One: Merciful and Beloved God,

Many: You are the Weaver of Peace.

One: Guide us in shaping leaders who resolve conflict with courageous compassion.

Many: You are an Extravagant Creator.

One: Grant that we might elect those who lead the way in walking more lightly on your beautiful earth.

Many: You are the God of many nations.

One: Remind us that our peace is bound up with the many tribes and nations who we call neighbors.

Many: You are the Advocate for the outcast.

One: Guide us in caring for the most vulnerable among us.

Many: You are the Stranger in our midst.

One: Help us to welcome the other with your extravagant welcome.

Many: You are the Comforting Healer.

One: Raise up leaders who will ensure that the sick can receive care.

Many: You are our God.

One: We are your children. Bless our leaders with your wisdom.

Many: Guide our feet on the path of peace. Amen.

For more information about the *Faith Seeking Peace* program of WAND:

www.faithwand.org

(781) 643-6740 (National WAND Office)

Rev. Amanda Hendler-Voss: ahvoss@wand.org