



# "Governed not by polls, politics nor profits..."

## A Principle Based Manifesto on Voting for Social Conservatives

By John Stemberger

Since I cast my first rather misguided vote in 1980, I have given much thought and consideration toward developing a principle based grid for political decision making. What are the moral "first principles" to consider when deciding who to vote for and why? These points below represent an attempt to develop a principled approach for social conservatives exercising active citizenship as we choose and support candidates.

### **1) The pro-life issue is not merely a single issue-it is a disqualification issue.**

As a movement, social conservatives have and will continue to have influence only if we are willing to draw an "ethical line in the sand" over certain core moral principles. The single most important such principle is the protection of human life from conception to natural death. From the destruction of human embryos, to killing people because they are old or disabled, pro-life issues represent the most fundamental of all human rights issues. Many have accused pro-lifers of being "single issue" voters. However, the pro-life issue is not merely a single issue, it is a disqualification issue-and one which goes to the core of human dignity and respect. So-called "pro-choice" candidates in essence argue that unborn children and other unwanted human beings should be denied full legal protection as persons under our constitution. This disqualifies them from holding public office. Whether rich or poor, young or old, handicapped or whole, born and unborn, all human life is made in the image and likeness of God and is therefore worthy of legal protection. If we are ever going to roll back the tide of these human atrocities, then we must be firm in our resolve to reject candidates who refuse to support this timeless and controlling principle. This is a hill we must be willing to die upon.

### **2) We should not vote for candidates based upon where they stand in the polls.**

Everyone wants to support a winner and no one wants to be with a loser. This may represent worldly wisdom but certainly not eternal truth. We are governed not by polls, politics nor profits-but by principle. Poll based voting is probably the single most insidious deception we can fall into as a movement. It is unprincipled to the core and a misguided way to engage in political decision making. The insatiable desire to be popular, to be an insider, and to be a winner for the sake of personal or political gain must be resisted with all our might if we are going to be people of integrity who have a sustained and lasting impact upon the process. On the other hand, throwing your vote

away for totally long shot candidates can keep good viable candidates from getting elected, so we need to be both wise and strategic. While I do believe that electability and political viability can be legitimate factors to consider, these are not the type of first principles which should guide our initial or final political choices.

### **3) Character matters-a lot!**

Modern American political history screams the truth that "character matters"-a lot! Even candidates that seem to be very committed to social conservative issues can still be very bad choices if they lack basic character. Temper tantrums, arrogance, dishonesty, poor judgment, ethical compromise, disloyalty, undisciplined lifestyles, financial mismanagement, rampant immorality and broken promises are all red flags that should be considered in deciding upon a candidate. And unless you know a candidate personally or know someone who knows the candidates you may never know the truth about a person's character and lifestyle. Having good character is critical and without it, an elected official can easily turn into an embarrassing disaster in no time.

### **4) We are not electing pastors or priests; we are choosing civil government officials.**

While character matters quite a bit, we must also remember that we are not electing pastors or priests-we are choosing civil government leaders. Personal immorality in the lives of our political leaders is an unfortunate but common reality. Affairs, divorce, alcohol and drug abuse, gambling and other manner of vice all present a question about how we should evaluate such behavior. While we must stand for righteousness, we must also guard against our own self-righteousness in evaluating others. Truth be told, there was only one perfect man and we crucified Him over 2000 years ago. While it would be preferable to have men and woman in public office whose personal lives are required to be "above reproach," like pastors, this is often not an option in our fallen world. A working principle to consider is that we should be more willing to forgive personal indiscretions and immorality that occurred in the long ago past than those transgressions that occurred recently. Time and retrospection offer the greatest opportunity for real contrition and conversion. Was this matter a mistake? An isolated moral failure? Or was it a pattern of long-standing bad behavior?

### **5) Realize that elections present both clear choices and mixed choices.**

In some election years candidates stand in stark and clear contrast on the issues and the choice is easy. However, it becomes more difficult when there is a mixture of good and bad factors to weigh. We live in an imperfect and fallen world and so we are often presented with a sort of choice-of-evils problem. This can be frustrating because many of us understand and want to clearly see right from wrong in the world. Yet, competing strengths and weaknesses can be difficult to weigh when there is no clear moral answer to the question, "who is the best"? Political candidates can hide, lie, misrepresent, and manipulate their past record or present views. However, usually with enough good information, it is possible to determine which of the candidates presents the "lesser of the evils." Staying home and shirking your most important civic duty should never be an option. Do the best you can and engage in the process as an active citizen.

### **6) "Professions of principle" are more important than "professions of faith"**

This can be a controversial point for some, but I have found this principle to be true over and over again. If I hire a plumber to fix a leak, I am not primarily concerned whether he claims to be a Christian, whether his faith is genuine or whether his theology is accurate. I am primarily interested in whether he can get the job done-and done correctly by the manufacturer's standards. I would argue the same is true for elected officials. Today it can be "cool to be Christian" and many public officials make professions of faith or church membership. However, we should be more concerned with where candidates stand on issues than where they go to church. The 1980 race between Carter and Reagan clearly highlights this principle. From all external standards, Carter was a "better Christian." Reagan however, was the candidate that stood for Biblically based values in his social policies. It is clear that true faith can and should have a dramatic effect upon a person's worldview.

But a mere expression of faith is not as important as a demonstrated record of commitment to the values that should flow from faith.

**7) A candidate's past voting record is much more important than any recently announced commitment to policy positions.** One of the greatest challenges in political decision making is getting accurate and truthful information. Politicians can be very slippery and difficult to pin down as many try and please everyone and play to both sides. Even more difficult is a candidate who makes an election year conversion to conservative values after having a history of being moderate or liberal. How can we judge sincerity? Is this just political expedience? We can not judge a man's motive or his heart, but we can judge his words and actions. And when evaluating candidates, past voting records are much more accurate indicators of what type of leader they will be than any recently announced commitments for the future. Apart from a genuine Christian conversion or a major life changing event, seasoned politicians rarely develop deep convictions that are different from what they have displayed and acted out earlier in their careers.

**8) Resist the temptation to vote your pocket book over principle.**

Of all the principles, this is probably the most important and also the easiest to violate and then try to rationalize the violation. In the world of politics, decisions can affect the amount of profit made by various industries, professions and businesses. Profits can potentially stand to either be enhanced or limited by such matters as insurance rates, tort reform, taxes, regulatory issues, and government subsidies. So many people sadly support candidates solely based upon how their own personal business or industry will be affected. I have spent most of my life voting for candidates that regularly oppose my economic interest as an attorney. I don't like this and I do not agree with it from a policy standpoint. But my commitment to principle on moral issues is greater than my commitment to maximizing profit. Economic and business issues are important and should be debated vigorously. But social and moral issues are paramount because they define us as a people and guide our destiny as a culture. The Bible says that "the *love of money* is the root of all evil." And when we place our own personal profit before principles which are in pursuit of the common good, we engage in some of the most idolatrous compromise possible. We must pledge our allegiance to God and His truth alone, and trust in Him to provide for our businesses and for our families.

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