

WHY MORE CHRISTIANS SHOULD VOLUNTEER TO WORK ELECTIONS

AUG 6, 2024

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*This interview is part of **The Reconstruct**, a weekly newsletter from Sojourners. In a world where so much needs to change, Mitchell Atencio and Josiah R. Daniels interview people who have faith in a new future and are working toward repair. This week features a guest interview by Sojourners online editorial fellow Ezra Craker.*

Growing up, my dad would take me and my siblings out for “presidential pancakes” each election. We’d tag along to the polls and then get treated to a big breakfast before school at a local diner. (In lieu of a sit-down meal, we’ve also done “midterm McDonalds.”)

My dad’s purpose was to instill the virtue of doing one’s civic duty. As I look to November, I see that the tradition can serve another purpose too: drowning election-season dread in copious amounts of butter and maple syrup.

It goes without saying that we’ve got plenty of dread to spare this year. Since President Joe Biden won the presidency in 2020, former President Donald Trump and his allies have falsely claimed that the election was rigged. Millions of Americans agree. Meanwhile, many other Americans fear how far Trump could take his authoritarian impulses in a second term. As our political culture becomes more tightly wound, the nuts and bolts of our democracy seem to be coming loose.

For the average citizen, it can be hard to verify every claim we see circulated in partisan media or online. Despite election law being clear that a party can choose its nominee at convention, for example, many Republicans **claimed** it was “too late” for Biden to step down from his reelection campaign.

That’s why I wanted to interview Chris Crawford, a policy strategist on free and fair elections at Protect Democracy, a nonprofit dedicated to defeating authoritarianism and strengthening democratic institutions. A Catholic, Crawford helped create the Faith in Elections Playbook, a resource for faith communities who want to support the 2024 electoral process.

Crawford and I spoke last month about the logistics of elections, conspiracy theories, and the role of faith communities in defeating authoritarianism.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Ezra Craker, Sojourners: How do we know that American elections are secure in a logistical and technical sense?

Chris Crawford: One thing to understand as we get into the nuts and bolts of elections is that there's a lot of false information out there, but also people are living their daily lives. They have a lot on their plates. So, people can be confused in good faith or not be paying attention to these kinds of things.

Thinking about our election system, one of the most important things to realize is that the elections are run by everyday people across the country. They are not run from one election hub in Washington, D. C. We have thousands of counties running elections. We have different rules for every state. We have about a million poll workers who are everyday people, who are well trained on the process, who step up and serve their communities.

And there's also a lot more transparency than I think people recognize. There are opportunities for them to get involved, for them to go watch the way things are going and to verify that the system is working correctly.

And so that's something that we're focused on with some of our work at Protect Democracy and with Interfaith America is helping people see themselves reflected in the process as a means of building trust in our elections.

What are some of those specific norms and procedures — ones that might not seem relevant to the average voter — that will be important to observe and safeguard in November?

For one thing, any sort of election equipment that is going to be used by an election system. Every state has a rigorous bidding process for selecting what type of equipment they might use. And then that all has to be tested and retested. Many of the tests are run in public so that everyday people can go watch the process, have it explained to them, and they can see the way that the process actually works, that the equipment actually works. And then they're stored securely until election day.

The poll workers and election officials at all the different polling locations have very strict guidelines on how to handle all of the equipment, how to handle all of the ballots, for example. You can see these people, in real time, handling these things effectively and following the rules.

We need a million poll workers. The best way for people to increase their trust in the process is to actually sign up and be someone working on the front lines of our elections, helping to check people in when they go to vote, helping to count the ballots, things like that.

I'd love to see more people who have questions about our elections get those questions answered by being part of the process.

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT FOR AMERICAN MUSLIMS TO VOTE

- Participating in the 2024 Election allows the Muslim communities to collectively build their influence and contribute to shaping policies that have a beneficial impact on our communities.
- Voting empowers Muslim Americans to actively participate in the democratic process, selecting representatives who align with their values and interests. Through casting their ballots, they can influence decisions on a wide range of issues, from local community concerns to national policies.
- This process allows us to have a say in shaping the laws and propositions that affect their daily lives, ensuring that our voices are heard and contributing to the direction of the society in which we live.
- This type of civic engagement goes beyond just casting votes; it's about asserting our presence and perspectives as Muslim Americans within the political landscape, especially right now in this polarized political environment.
- Voting ensures that representatives are aware of the concerns, needs, and aspirations of Muslim Americans, encouraging policymakers to consider these views when drafting legislation or setting policies.
- This way, voting becomes a direct channel through which Muslim Americans can advocate for their rights, promote social justice, and contribute to the shaping of a more inclusive and representative democratic society.

To Vote or Not to Vote: An Islamic Perspective

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Every election cycle, many well-meaning, God-fearing Muslims grapple with the issue of voting. On one hand, some argue that voting is an obligation, while others contend that it is an act of disbelief. This question is particularly important as the world becomes more polarized, and politically volatile, and extreme policies and politicians are on the rise worldwide. The impact on our community's well-being can be significant in such an environment.

It is important to appreciate what this discussion is rooted in. Central to this discussion, is the belief that every Muslim should have: no one has the right to establish law other than Allah, the Supreme, Most High. Allah says in the Quran:

إِن الْحُكْمُ إِلَّا لِلَّهِ

“Legislation belongs to none but Allah” (Surah Yusuf 12:40)

As minorities living in the UK, we find ourselves in a secular system with which we either engage with or disengage from it. This decision ultimately lies in what is more beneficial and harmful to the Muslim community.

If we consider the overarching aim of the Islamic Jurisprudence, it is to bring about benefits and prevent harms. This principle is articulated clearly by prominent scholars.

Al-Izz ibn Abd al-Salam states, “The entire Shariah is about interests: either preventing harms or bringing benefits” (Qawa’id al-Ahkam, 1/9)

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyyah echoes this sentiment, asserting, “The Islamic Jurisprudence aims to achieve and perfect benefits and to eliminate and reduce harms” (Minhaj as-Sunnah, 1/147).

Prominent contemporary scholars, including Ibn ‘Uthaymeen, have opined that participation in elections can be permissible if it serves the interests of Muslims and helps mitigate harm. This ruling is based on the principle of weighing pros and cons, where the potential benefits of participating in the political process outweigh the negatives.

The belief that no one can establish law other than Allah does not inherently conflict with working within non-Islamic systems, provided the intention is to promote justice and piety. If a Muslim participates in such a system with the objective of achieving these ends, it can be considered praiseworthy.

Conversely, involvement in the system without any religious objective is deemed unacceptable. Allah also commands us in the Quran:

فَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ مَا اسْتَطَعْتُمْ

“So fear Allah as much as you are able” (Surah At-Taghabun 64:16)

It is crucial to understand that choosing the lesser of two evils in an election does not equate to endorsing all policies of the chosen candidate. Instead, it is about mitigating greater harm and working towards the betterment of the Muslim community within the constraints of the existing system.

The Islamic Fiqh Council has also addressed this issue. Their session from 3-8 November 2007 discussed “Muslim participation in elections in non-Islamic countries.” They concluded:

1. Muslim participation in elections in non-Muslim countries falls under political jurisprudence (siyasah shar'iyyah), where rulings are determined based on weighing benefits and harms, varying by time, place, and circumstances.
2. A Muslim enjoying citizenship rights in a non-Muslim country may participate in elections due to the significant benefits such participation brings, such as presenting the correct image of Islam, defending Muslim issues, obtaining religious and worldly benefits for minorities, enhancing their influence, and cooperating with just and moderate people to achieve justice and truth.

Should you choose to vote, it is essential to consider several criteria. Look for candidates with a proven track record of integrity and trustworthiness. Choose individuals who uphold values aligned with Islamic principles, and who demonstrate a commitment to representing the interests of Muslims in society and those that are in need. It is also important to support candidates who are courageous and willing to stand up for justice and what is right, even in challenging circumstances.

Whether you decide to vote or abstain due to differing religious, social, or political perspectives, it is important to avoid polarization and discord. As Muslims, the recent unity displayed across many communities regarding the ongoing conflict has galvanized many others due to our collective resolve and leadership. This unity must continue during the current election period, in sha Allah.

In summary, the Islamic ruling on voting is nuanced and context-dependent. It emphasizes the importance of intentions and the overall benefit to the Muslim community. While the principle that only Allah has the right to legislate remains paramount, engaging in a non-Islamic political system can be permissible and even praiseworthy if done to uphold justice and prevent harm. As always, individual decisions should be made considering the specific context and seeking guidance from knowledgeable scholars.

Allah knows best.