

Managing Politics by Syler Thomas

The post-election, pre-inauguration, bi-partisan guide to engaging students politically
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My high school history teacher used to say: Every four years, we have an election, whether we need one or not. So whether we needed it or not, the 2008 election is behind us and later this month, we will be swearing in our new president. Depending on your political background and how you voted, you might now feel so relieved that the right person was elected, or you might feel like the country is doomed because of that no-good, rotten excuse for a candidate that *they* (not you) just elected. Regardless, set aside your own preference to think about how students interact with politics.

High school students are often *apolitical*. I distinctly remember a conversation with a good friend in high school who uttered the sad words: “Why should I even bother voting? It’s just one vote: what difference does it make?” Because I was that strange kid who had a unique interest in even local politics, mostly because of the activism of my mother, I was shocked and dismayed. I also gave her a list of all of the city council members she should vote for in the election that spring.

But high school students often don’t know and in many cases, don’t care about politics because they’re not yet old enough to vote. Is it important for us to help them in this? I think so.

Jim Wallis has done a fine job of challenging the notion that American Evangelicals should always support whichever candidate has the “Christian” view on abortion and homosexuality. Those are two important issues, to be sure, but the Bible has a lot to say about many issues, not just those two. Over the past thirty years, especially with the emergence of the Religious Right, Evangelical Christians have become “automatic Republicans.” But younger evangelicals care less about voting the way “all the other Christians do” and more about asking which candidates will be a better leader, which candidates have the character to go along with their platform, and which candidates have the experience to get the job done.

Granted, we must communicate to students that there is no candidate that can change our country or the world like Jesus can. As Derek Webb sings: “My first allegiance is not to a flag, a country, or a man...It’s to a king & a kingdom.” There is only one savior, only one king.

But that doesn’t mean we can’t or shouldn’t make a difference in the political realm. Students should be encouraged to not become jaded by the government. Individual people *can* make a difference. Some ideas to help your students get involved:

- Make sure they register to vote if they are 18. This is a privilege that millions in the world do not enjoy.
- Encourage them to sign up on the website www.one.org, where they’ll get e-mails inviting them to contact elected officials and sign petitions related to issues of global poverty.

- We need more politicians who are Christians. Plant seeds in the activist students that they could serve their country as an elected official some day.
- I'm inspired by Jesus' parable in Luke 18 of the persistent widow, who continually pesters the judge for justice until he relents. It reminds me of the movie "Shawshank Redemption," where the lead character Andy Dufresne writes a letter every day to the state in order to get more funds to buy books for the prison library. Students need to know that if they care passionately about a cause, their persistent advocacy for that cause can lead to change.
- Speaking of movies, invite them over to watch Jimmy Stewart in "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington." It's an inspiring story about how an average guy can make a difference in the world of politics.
- And of course, don't forget to laugh. If you need help, go to nbc.com where you can watch classic Saturday Night Live debate spoofs for hours on end.