

# Politics For Government

Or Politics For Politics?



by James W. Skillen

**A**merican politics increasingly exists for the sake of politics rather than for the sake of government. If this continues, governing will become more and more difficult and eventually impossible.

What is the answer? Americans urgently need to reorient politics toward its proper purpose: politics *for* the sake of government. What kind of politics is that? What is the purpose of government toward which politics ought to be oriented?

"Politics for the sake of politics" does not try to answer these questions. Instead, political groups work for their own causes and against anything they don't like. Government is treated as a tool for achieving the goals that various factions and interest groups have. Government, in fact, becomes a means to the end of politics.

"Politics for the sake of government," on the other hand, cannot avoid the question of government's proper purpose. It assumes that government has a calling to serve the body politic, to promote the public good, to defend the cause of justice. The question about government's purpose is not dismissed, because this approach to politics cannot justify itself without answering the question of government's prior calling. Politics remains a means to the end of government.

## SO NOW WHAT?

That is my introduction. So now what? What is the point? you ask. What am I trying to introduce?

Be patient. Don't give up on me too

quickly. American government and politics are in a mess, and a serious mess cannot be grasped easily or cleaned up quickly.

The biblical basis for the argument I want to make is fairly simple, though not without vast implications, a few of which I think I understand. God has repeatedly called his people to recognize that government "is God's servant for your good" and that it does not bear the sword in vain (Romans 13:4). God has also repeatedly sent prophets to call governments to account for not fulfilling their God-given duty to uphold justice.

as are parents and teachers and pastors.

This simple biblical truth stands as a rather startling challenge, however, to one of the basics of the American way of political life. The dominant tradition of American politics is grounded in the assumption that government is ultimately accountable to the people, not directly to God. "The people" may believe that God has endowed individuals with inalienable rights and that government is beholden to individuals because God gave those rights directly to them. But however it tries to show an *indirect* connection between God and government, the American constitutional tradition does not recognize government's *direct* accountability to God.

The American political tradition itself, I contend, is one of the reasons why "politics for the sake of politics" is now triumphing over "politics for the sake of government." After all, how can one pursue politics for the sake of government without constantly appealing to a higher authority and

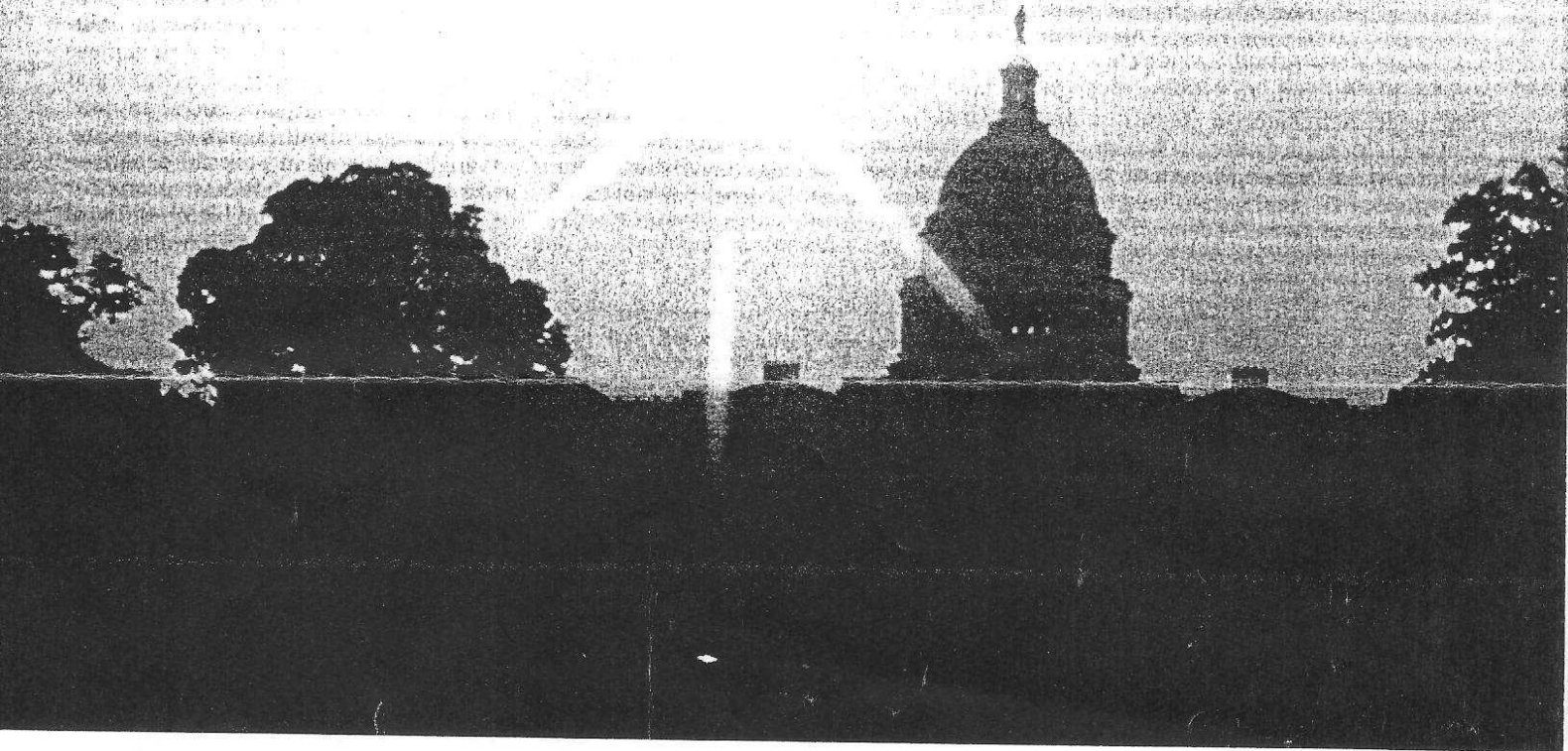
principles to which government is directly accountable? If one can appeal only to "the people" and their individual rights, it eventually becomes obvious that I and my group represent only some of the people. And if we find ourselves standing over against others who are also part of "the people," then who really speaks authoritatively for the people? Different groups hold different convictions, opinions, desires, wants, and interests. So apparently there is no single will of the people but only a diversity of groups of

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(Read Isaiah 10:1-4 or Jeremiah 22:1-23, for example.)

Of course, the early Christians had little opportunity to pursue politics of any kind. They were simply subjects — "subject" to Roman authorities with few if any active rights of political participation. But whatever they could do, whether it was only to pray, obey, or resist, they were to do it as unto the Lord, recognizing that government's proper calling, as a servant of God, is to uphold justice. Governments, in other words, are as directly accountable to God

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people each seeking its own will.

Without an agreement among citizens that their contentious politics should be oriented toward the fulfillment of government's proper purpose, each group gets pushed into campaigning and lobbying simply for what *it* wants over against what *others* want. Each group learns to accept the fact that it cannot speak for others, that it represents only a part of the popular will. Each must live and die for its own cause. Government is gradually reduced to the exertion of power by those who win the most votes or gain the most lobbying clout. Whoever wins gets to exercise greater influence over the making of laws. And governing increasingly becomes the exercise of power for the sake of politics, which is to say, exercising power for the sake of maintaining one's own influence in government in order to achieve what one wants. Lost forever are both politics for the sake of government and governing for the sake of justice.

The final reduction, short of anarchy, arrives when enough individuals feel they can no longer count on the political process to deliver enough of their group demands. They then resort to litigation in the courts for every conceivable rea-

son, claiming they are simply seeking the legal protection of their rights. Harvard law professor Mary Ann Glendon describes this process in her book *Rights Talk*. The struggle for the protection of rights appears to be the fight for civic inclusion, but increasingly what one achieves by this means is simply the right to be included in the field of combat where contending rights seekers take one another to court and bash one another in the process of interest-group politics.

#### WHY HAS IT COME TO THIS?

An assessment of our American political crisis cannot be developed in detail here. It requires, among other things, an analysis of the decline of representative government in conjunction with the growth of interest-group politics.

Legislating and enforcing law for the public good ought to be done by representatives of the people who enter offices that carry authority (God-authorized responsibility) to uphold justice for the entire body politic. Legislators and executives ought to be recognized as members of governing bodies which bear the responsibility of doing justice. This requires an electoral process through which representatives can be elected as

teams ready to enter office to govern on the basis of the platforms and promises they make public at election time.

For the most part, however, what we see in the United States today is not team politics for the sake of government based on programs made public at election time, but rather the election of individual representatives (including the president) who run quite independently of one another and who are tied neither to clear platforms nor to a party team capable of carrying out team-binding electoral promises. The voters know this and it is one reason why only half (or fewer) of them turn out to vote in elections. After elections the individual winners go to Washington or to state capitals, not to work as teams to make and enforce law according to their pre-election platforms, but rather to negotiate bills that can satisfy a thousand competing interest groups — "politics for the sake of politics."

Most bills now passed by legislators do not cohere as instruments for just governance but are merely collections of often incompatible pieces, representing a compromise designed to obtain a bare 51 percent majority. The legislative process often functions more to broker interest

groups than it does to implement the details of program commitments made by a party at election time. This is one reason why the president and Congress are unable to come to grips with ongoing budget deficits or to frame comprehensive reform measures on health care, welfare, and increasingly even on foreign policy.

I would even go so far as to say that the United States is laboring more and more under a political process that is actually displacing real government. Our problem is not that we have too much government but that we have a political process that is incoherently overextended and becoming ever more unaccountable and oppressive. We lack decisive government that takes a clear direction and is then either returned to office or removed from office by voters at election time in favor of another party (or parties). Instead, we have a political process that no one can manage, in which responsibility is so dispersed that no one can be held clearly accountable for policy outcomes. In place of genuine and identifiable government we have politicians working primarily to pass bills that can satisfy the demands of politics, bills that do not necessarily cohere in themselves or build upon one another as means of strengthening just governance across the land.

To assess this predicament in detail we would have to look at many more of its ingredients, including the built-in frictions among three different levels of government in our system (federal, state, and local); the close interdependencies among federal bureaucracies, congressional subcommittees, and interest groups; and the decline of the political parties in our simple winner-take-all electoral system. If you want to know more, read, for example, Jonathan Rauch's *Demosclerosis: The Silent Killer of American Government* and Douglas J. Amy's *Real Choices/New Voices*.

CHRISTIANS IN THE SYSTEM

What does all of this have to do with a Christian view of government's direct accountability to God and of the need for

a "politics for government" instead of "politics for politics"?

Consider the typical mode of political action pursued by contemporary Christians. What characterizes so-called "Christian politics" today across most of the political spectrum is a form of moralistic activism that feeds directly into what I've described as "politics for politics."

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Whether it is liberal church lobby groups campaigning for environmental protection or Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition campaigning against abortion and gay rights, the mode of operation is roughly the same. Both take for granted a political system in which groups are pitted against one another in all-or-nothing, winner-take-all combat. Few combatants seriously question the deficient character of the political process. They simply jump into the fray with the aim of defeating the enemy (those who stand against them), in order to gain the power to make government do what is right.

The first question we must ask about government, however, is not, "What do we think is right and good in general?" but rather, "What is the right and good thing that *government* should do in order to uphold justice for all citizens in the political order?"

Too many Christians, just like most other Americans, make the political mistake that I call "generalized, pragmatic moralism." They ignore the question about what government ought to do to fulfill its own particular obligation before God but hold fast to the conviction that there are general ethical demands people ought to obey in order to be good and to do good. From that standpoint, they then jump to the con-

clusion that politics is simply the field of large-scale moral battles in which contenders fight for the high stakes of political power in order to be able to achieve what is right and good for the country as a whole. In these circumstances, any and every question about human responsibility might come up in political debate — as if politics is the legitimate arena for

settling any big question of moral obligation. Practically, or pragmatically, they feel justified in using almost every means possible to win political power in order to do good things.

But since in our society there does not exist a general public consensus about a great many issues of human moral responsibility, the various political factions are driven to simplistic crusades in order to try to win at least a majority (even if only a bare majority) to their side so they can win political victories that

will justify the claim that they represent the will of the people. Each faction assumes that its views *do* represent the vast majority of the people and that the views of others (the "bad guys") represent only fringe elements. Conservative Christians view themselves, for example, as legitimate heirs and owners of the American heritage and see secular humanists as illegitimate infiltrators and enemies. Increasingly, such politicized moralism leads to the exaggerated rhetoric of political demonization in which each side has to paint itself as God's defender of truth and goodness over against the dangerous and perhaps even satanic opponent on the other side.

This flows from the American tradition of belief that government's task is to do the will of the people, and that God holds individuals but not government directly accountable. For the American government to be righteous, therefore, it has to be under the control of righteous people, and whatever righteous people want is what God wants and is therefore what government ought to do.

Moreover, there is also the principle that the will of the people is represented by the majority. Thus, any public moral argument or political battle must try to demonstrate that a majority supports the position being advocated. This is where

misdirected  
goal-oriented  
politics



the winner-take-all character of the process often forces exaggerated claims and demonizing denunciations from competitors, because each side feels it must do everything possible to paint a simple picture of right and wrong, good and evil, in order to win majority support.

Thus, a battlefield is marked off for a war in which the "good guys" have to defeat the "bad guys" in order to save the nation. A single will of the people does not exist, so different factions fight to win the majority of votes to give them the right to claim that they speak for the will of the people. Many Christians try to add religious weight to their political rhetoric by claiming to stand on the side of God's will for the American nation, warning of dangers and judgment if America falls from grace, and urging national moral recovery — all for the sake of advancing the political cause of their group over against the wrong or immoral causes of others.

As a growing number of morally fractious issues are forced onto the political table, no single political party can produce coherent platforms integrating all of them, so the political parties gradually become reduced to little more than electoral machines for the campaigns of individual candidates who share few if any common party obligations. Today, individual candidates choose parties; parties do not choose and discipline candidates. Citizens who hold strong convictions about one issue or another find little help in the parties as such, so they turn to pour their energy into the work of single-issue interest groups as their primary political vehicle. Consequently, the parties become even less significant as bearers of coherent governing programs and instead resort to the electoral sport of individual election campaigns. Politicians give up almost all pretense of working together in party teams that try to define a clear agenda for how government should do justice to the body politic. Politicians are driven to acquiesce in politics for the sake of politics, learning to become mere brokers of competing interests after they enter office. In the absence of meaningful debate about how government ought to deal with issues in order to promote the public good, hyper-moralistic rhetoric fills the vacuum.

What now stands out in so much of our American political debate is an ideological warfare between contending ver-

sions of a civil-religious nationalism. I have no doubt that at the root of many differences among people lies the religious conflict between the cause of Christ and the cause of Satan. But this deep conflict to which the Bible testifies is not unique to politics and it ought not to be politicized. The cause of Christ is directed by God through the power of the Holy Spirit; God has not turned it over to one of the political parties or interest groups. Nor is the cause of Christ monopolized by the United States of America or by any other state on earth. In fact, due to sin, the cause of Satan even finds support in the hearts and lives of not-yet-fully-redeemed Christians.

The only way to avoid the hyper-moralism and demonization of a politically crusading civil religion is to begin with the recognition that God holds governments directly accountable and not merely indirectly accountable through the people. God holds governments responsible not for everything on earth, but only for fulfilling the responsibilities that properly belong to government. The tasks of parents, teachers, employers, church leaders, and countless others in positions of authority are distinguishable from government's tasks. Not every moral question is a governmental question. Not every good thing should be pursued through politics, and not every evil should be fought by political means.

All of which is to say that politics ought not to exist for the sake of politics but for the pursuit of good government. Ultimately, such a pursuit requires that citizens recognize the God-given principles of justice that call government to its responsibility, principles that hold citizens as well as governments accountable for the political order they share. Clarification of these principles and debates over comprehensive governing platforms should become the focus of political efforts and election campaigns. Ideological polarization borne along by rhetoric that drowns out authentic civic debate will lead not to victory for the "good guys" but to the end of politics.

#### CHRISTIAN POLITICS FOR THE SAKE OF GOVERNMENT

Christians ought to be at the forefront of political action that aims for just government. What should be the agenda for such action?

First, let's begin with the important fact that governments ought to (and

often do) deal with more than isolated issues one issue at a time. Even the most important issues of abortion, civil rights, national defense, public health, jobs, and education do not exist in isolation from one another. Governments need to fashion budgets that set priorities from year to year encompassing all these areas at once. This "big picture" is increasingly ignored by citizens and public officials who practice politics for the sake of politics.

Christians called to serve their neighbors justly must not accept this decomposition of government's responsibility into a thousand separate sectors, with each dominated by special interest groups and cordoned off by specialized congressional subcommittees. If we can get no help from political parties and interest groups in trying to understand the big picture, then we must work all the harder to do so in public-policy think tanks, in political science classrooms, and in popular discussion groups. Think of it. When was the last time that you sat down with a group of Christians to discuss the big picture of a justly governed society? If you and I don't ask the right questions, how can we ever expect to gain a common insight into these matters?

In the second place, we must approach the concerns of government and politics with the aim of distinguishing public justice from government-perpetrated injustice rather than with the aim of trying to locate and destroy the "bad guy" (obviously not us) who is responsible for all the political evil in the world. We must, in other words, try to identify clearly the antithesis of political good and political evil that runs through all parties, all citizens, and all states. We must learn to be self-critical of our own sinfulness and not identify evil only with communists, secular humanists, and either the radical right or the radical left.

This requires a clear articulation of standards by which to make political judgments, and that is precisely my point. Being faithful followers of Jesus Christ in the political world requires that we work hard to discern the elements of justice in our system that ought to be conserved and those elements that require criticism and reform. This means solid team work over time so that a Christian community can develop mature political understanding. This is not possible if Christians engage politically on

only one or two issues and do so largely by proclaiming their own righteousness and blaming others for what is wrong with America.

Third, we must resist every temptation to demonize our political opponents while presuming that we are the messianic bearers of salvation for America. Some of the rhetoric most popular among Christians is the kind that urges love of the nation and disdain for government. Whether coming from the left or the right, those who feel that government is not following the course it ought to follow will often present themselves as the "good guys" who represent the true America, denouncing their opponents as the "bad guys" who have infiltrated government to do evil. The "nation" is presumed to be good and innocent while "government" is presumed to be dirty and untrustworthy. We take for granted that "we" stand on the side of the nation and that "they" (our opponents) control "government." Not only does this attitude and rhetoric obscure clear thinking about the task of government, it also further encourages the reduction of politics to a civil-religious end in itself rather than as a means to good government.

A fourth characteristic of a healthy Christian approach to politics is the development of "differentiated moral reasoning." Instead of assuming that politics is a field for generalized moral combat about everything under the sun, Christians should be leading the way to clear thinking about the difference between political-moral reasoning and, let's say, family-moral reasoning, or business-moral reasoning, or educational-moral reasoning. Government is not a parent or a business manager or a school principal. The kind of moral obligations that bind government to uphold public justice are different from the kinds of responsibilities church leaders have for church members or that college administrators have for students.

This is why most of us readily accept the moral distinction involved in the constitutional separation of church and state. We believe strongly that orthodox Christian faith is correct and that atheism, Hinduism, and many other religions are wrong. We would not agree to allow our churches to admit as full members people who do not believe in Jesus Christ. But we *do* agree that it is morally right for government to treat all citizens equally regardless of their faiths, and to

accept all as civic members of the body politic. An ecclesiastical judgment is distinguishable from a political judgment. Neither judgment is neutral, but each is rooted in a different kind of moral reasoning depending on one's conception of the identity and purpose of the church and the state.

Increasingly in our society people differ in their views not only about the proper way to worship (or to ignore) God but also in their views of journalism, the arts, education, the family, and a great deal more. Generalized moral battles in which citizens try to muster a 51 percent majority in order to claim that their view of life represents the "will of the people" do not take us far toward clarifying the particular task of government in relation to the many other tasks that belong to different institutions and organizations in society. But without clear arguments about what government ought to do and why it ought to do it in order to fulfill its responsibility, we cannot hope to make a significant contribution to "politics for the sake of government."

Finally, in the fifth place, I want to urge that Christians should engage in politics with the aim of changing the political system rather significantly. The U.S. Constitution did not fall from the sky as a revelation from God. It was composed by faulty human beings who, at the time, were unable to resolve either the problem of slavery or the question of church establishment in the States. The Bill of Rights is strong on individual rights but weak on the rights of families, churches, schools, and economic institutions, to name but a few. The American patterns of electoral representation and interest-group lobbying need a major overhaul.

Of course, none of us can wait for a new system to be constructed before we take our stand on the issues currently before us — issues of health care, welfare, global economic competition, abortion, gay rights, and a thousand others. But our problem as Christians, it seems to me, does not arise from the difficulty of figuring out how to take stances on particular issues. Rather, it arises from our lack of a solid political philosophy grounded in a biblical understanding of life. Working to develop a Christian political perspective, however, appears to most Christians in our pragmatic society to be pointless

and unnecessary because they are coming to accept the piecemeal, issue-by-issue condition of "politics for the sake of politics."

But getting out of this trap requires more than a change of attitude. It will require some fairly radical changes in the law to permit, for example, real religious diversity in public life. And, as I argue in my new book, *Recharging the American Experiment*, it will require a change in the structure of our electoral system. The major change I recommend is one that replaces the winner-take-all system of single-member districts with a system of proportional representation that allows diverse parties (including minority parties) to be represented in proportion to the number of votes they can muster.

Whether or not the particular changes I recommend are worthy of consideration, there is little doubt that the growing crises in our political and legal systems cry out for major reforms. Christians should not get lost in the day-to-day issues of politics the way the news media do. We should be the ones who can step back from immediate problems and dilemmas and work together for the long run for a new politics oriented toward just government. The United States is in trouble not just because a few issues are being mishandled by the wrong legislators, executives, and judges. It is in trouble because of a complex system crisis that is only further aggravated by "politics for the sake of politics."

The kind of politics we need demands a high degree of cooperation among many Christians for a long time into the future. It will require both the development of a sound political philosophy and some radical changes in the political system so that authentic public debate can occur and citizens can be adequately represented by publicly-accountable political parties, rather than by unelected interest groups. This is a challenge that reaches far beyond the 1994 and 1996 elections and into the early decades of the twenty-first century. ▲

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