

How to start relating to politics

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Being able to freely cast your vote is not a privilege enjoyed in every part of the world. With a Federal election on the way, Australians become more aware of our ability to participate in the democratic process. Of course everything comes under the sovereignty of our God whatever way we cast our vote—yet some of us find that we are not as well-informed as we would like when we arrive at the polling booth. Although there are those who study the issues and know their candidates, the rest of us either have a particular party we always support (perhaps without serious consideration of the alternatives), or we really have no idea about the policies of the various candidates, and on polling day we are confused about who to support and why.

For some of us, personal pressures and limitations may mean we leave deep political thought to others. But what if we wanted to take our knowledge further this election? How would we relate better to politics?

The SIE would like to bring to your attention some ways in which we might relate better to politics by beginning a relationship with current or future politicians. In this briefing, we want to suggest some methods that your church might use to help its members prepare for the forthcoming Federal election:

‘Make it Count’ (organized by the Australian Christian Lobby - ACL) is an event scheduled for 9 August at 7pm. Prime Minister John Howard and the opposition leader Kevin Rudd will address a group of leaders of churches from around the country. The speeches and question time will be **broadcast live via webcast**. Churches are invited to hold meetings at their church to listen to Mr Howard and Mr Rudd and to pray about the election. Full details are available at <http://www.australiavotes.org> and churches must register to participate.

‘Meet the Candidate Forums’ – Churches can consider participating in or hosting a Meet the Candidate Forum. But how might these help? Depending upon how it is done, a Meet the Candidate forum can:

- Establish a positive relationship with the local candidates, which you can build on in the future.
- Inform Christian voters about the policies of the various candidates.
- Communicate the concerns of Christians to the candidates.
- Educate Christians about the political process and the constructive role they can play in it.
- Convey to the wider community that Christians have an interest in politics and a willingness to discuss issues openly.

There may be good reasons why it would not be possible to host a forum in your church, and in the end it will be up to the minister and members of your church to decide if it is the way ahead for the church.

The SIE is not proposing to organize or co-ordinate the forums, but we can suggest the following two models you may like to consider. Depending on the demographics and culture of your local area you may find that one kind of forum will work more successfully than the other.

1. Tag along.

The Australian Christian Lobby is organizing ‘Meet Your Candidate Forums’ **aimed particularly at Christian voters**. You and others from your church could simply attend a forum already scheduled in your area.

But the ACL is also very happy for Anglican churches to participate by *hosting* one of their forums. ACL has a great deal of experience in organizing these events, and can provide all the necessary advice and back up that you need.

(Please see the attached letter from ACL and their contact details if you want more information.)

2. Do-it-yourself.

This is a ‘Meet the Candidates Forum’ **aimed at bringing residents in your local area** into your church. The forum is therefore open to everyone, and provides a means for your church to interact in a positive and constructive way with the local community. (See the attached guidelines.)

While we are positive about the benefits of a do-it-yourself ‘Meet the Candidates’ forum, we want to remind people that without adequate thought and planning, the potential for disaster is enormous. So if you are seriously thinking of hosting a forum we would encourage you to **do your research** and **avoid some of the potential hazards**, and most importantly, **start planning now!**

There are some parishes in the Sydney Diocese who have experience in running a ‘Meet the Candidate’ forum for the recent State elections, and we would encourage you to talk with them about their experience. Glenn Farrell, Rector at Jamberoo Anglican Church (glenn@jamberooanglican.com), and Byron Smith, Assistant Minister at Leichhardt Anglican Church (<mailto:bg@thesmiths.id>, aubg@thesmiths.id.au) have both hosted a forum recently, and have very kindly agreed to be contacted if you have questions.

Finally, some of you may have participated in the Federal Benchmark Survey (by the National Forum) which looked at the religious vote in Australia. If you are interested in the results of that survey go to:

http://ambit-gambit.nationalforum.com.au/archives/Federal_Benchmark_II.pdf.

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Sources/Further Reading:

‘Make It Count’: <http://www.australiavotes.org>

Federal Benchmark Survey: http://ambit-gambit.nationalforum.com.au/archives/Federal_Benchmark_II.pdf

Note: This paper is intended to assist discussion and may be corrected or revised in future. Short responses to social.issues@moore.edu.au are very welcome, but the SIE cannot guarantee a reply. To access this free regular briefing, visit <http://www.sydneyanglicans.net/socialissues> and to receive it by email, follow the link ‘Sign up for our free weekly briefing!’ Visit <http://sie.moore.edu.au>, our second website, for other material.

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