
JUST LOVE.

A Just Love Guide to Justice and Politics

Just Love is all about inspiring and releasing students to engage with God's heart for social justice, to see the world transformed to the way he intended it – and politics is a crucial part of that. This resource is intended to enable all students to begin engaging with politics on various different levels, so that we can begin to change the society around us.

What do we mean by politics?

This seemingly straightforward question is perhaps one of the most significant barriers to engagement with politics – 'googling' this very question, or asking it to several different people, can get you range of answers and debates that might leave you more confused than when you started. This is because there are many different ways of understanding and thinking about 'politics'.

On one level, politics is a very broad concept. It is a place where we try out our ideas about what is right and good for the world, and meet people who disagree. This contestation of ideas can lead to change and compromise. We will necessarily encounter these relationships and disagreements, and also encounter those with power, who are able to influence society and make things happen (often through their money, their relationships or their position). How we handle these relationships is an important part of politics, and thinking of politics in these ways makes engagement with it unavoidable.

It might also be worth narrowing this to a clear and relatively simple definition, just to get us started. Our country, at both a national and local level, is run by governments. These governments have power (the ability to do things, to make things happen). In its simplest sense, politics is how we decide what/who these governments are comprised of, and how we determine what they do. For the majority of this document, this is the type of politics we will be talking about.

Governance is a biblically endorsed concept from beginning to end. In Genesis, man is commissioned to rule over all of the things in the earth, and in Romans we are urged to submit to governing authorities, which are established by God himself. Politics allows us to have a say in who comprises the government, and in what the government uses its power to do. God has a vision for how society should be, and politics is an essential area of engagement for Christians if we are to influence society. Through the Bible we see how God used people in political positions, such as Esther, Daniel and Moses, to establish justice, set slaves free, and pursue his kingdom on earth. Because we live in a fallen world, politics can often be messy, and it can be difficult to discern the right course. However, as more Christians engage with the political process, we bring more of God's light into it, and can move closer to a form of governance that will build God's kingdom here on earth.

Why should I get involved?

Scripture is very clear (with over 2,000 verses on the subject) that Christians should be engaging with people who are poor or marginalized - and politics is a crucial part of doing that. By changing the political landscape, we can change the unjust structures that perpetuate so much of this poverty and marginalization. Jeremiah 29:7 tells us to 'seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have

carried you into exile'. Christians are sometimes reluctant to engage with politics because they see themselves as citizens of heaven, with an eternal perspective that outlasts the struggles of the world around them – but God wants us to engage with the world around us, His creation, right now. Biblical characters such as Daniel and Nehemiah influenced government and improved things for their societies even when they were exiled from their true home; we can look to the prophets, who God put in place to challenge the kings and speak up as advocates for those who were oppressed; Jesus himself was constantly challenging the Pharisees, who had much political influence, as well as other ruling authorities.

The Bible is clear that political engagement is good, but there are still questions to be answered:

Does political change make a difference?

Yes! We can look back from William Wilberforce and the abolition of the slave trade in the 1800s, to the establishment of the NHS in 1948, and the more recent caps on interest rates for payday loans in 2014. The government can pass laws, big or small, that make a significant difference to people's lives. Does it matter whether children have access to good education? Does it matter whether people can receive life-saving healthcare that they need? Should people be supported if they can't work and are unable to feed their families? Should we be at war? Does it matter if refugees are given asylum in our country? Politics influences all these things and many more, and the laws that our government chooses to pass or not pass have a significant effect on the lives of real people.

Can I affect political change?

When people engage, change happens. Every idea starts with an individual. Every campaign is made up of individuals. Groups of students have every chance of affecting political change. We can be reminded of Margaret Mead's quote: 'Never doubt that a group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has.'

Elizabeth Jewkes was an ordinary member of the public, and also a member of the Liberal Democrat Christian Forum (LDCF). Elizabeth was interested in the idea of raising the Income Tax threshold to the level of the minimum wage, so that the lowest paid would not owe any tax. After meeting Vince Cable MP at a Regional Autumn Conference, she began to research the idea further, and with help from other party activists and MPs, wrote a new policy. Elizabeth's proposal won the support of party leader Nick Clegg, and at the 2009 Autumn Conference, the new policy of raising the tax threshold to £10,000 was voted on and agreed. A year later, it became Coalition Government policy, which has meant that millions of low earners pay £700 less in tax each year. It really is possible to make a difference.

However, we can recognize that Elizabeth's story won't be the reality for everyone. We will not be able to change everything that is wrong in the world through politics – but as Christians we can have hope in a hopeless situation. It is a privilege and a challenge that Jesus calls us to join in with building his kingdom on earth right now. But when things don't go right, we can remember that one day he will ultimately renew all of creation.

Are there real alternatives in our politics today?

Within modern politics, parameters seem to be constantly shifting. There does seem to be a lack of clarity from many modern parties, and a reluctance to clearly stick to principles and stand up for unpopular but right decisions. This is linked to a lack of radicalism, stemming from a ruthless desire to

win votes from a population, the majority of whose views will cluster around a less radical middle ground.

This can be frustrating, but there are still real differences between parties that make our choices important. The lack of clarity and boldness that we may perceive in politics also presents an opportunity for people to be visionary and have ideas. If you aren't happy with policies proposed by any of the main parties, think about what policy you would want to propose and start talking about it. We have access to God's truth and God-given passion for justice – let's use it to inject new ideas into our political system.

How can I get involved?

Local politics

This will start by getting informed – which can be often be harder on a local level than a national level. It is good to be informed on the issues that matter to you and those in your area – read the news, talk to your friends who are into politics and find out what issues the marginalized in your community care about. In some cases, your local church may have a good idea about what is going on with local politics (and if they don't it would be worth prompting them to start thinking about it) so you could also start by asking them. However, much of getting informed will be through your MP, your local council, and your local community.

Engaging with your local council is a great to get involved with local politics. <https://www.gov.uk/find-your-local-council>. You will have a county council, responsible for wider services such as education, transport, social care and public safety, and a district/borough/city council, which covers a smaller area and is usually responsible for services such as rubbish collection/recycling, council tax collection and housing. Looking at your council's website will tell you what services they provide, who your local councilors are, and what some local issues might be. You can contact a local councilor to get more informed on local political processes and debates – and it will be worth checking if your Student Union has someone who engages with the local council, as it might be worth getting touch through them. Get to know some of the people involved in local politics, and you will start to feel more involved, and find more ways to shape what happens in the city around you - you may even want to become a local councilor after university!

It is also worth thinking about engaging with your MP. An MP is someone elected by your local area (constituency) to represent you in parliament. You can find out who your local MP is here: <http://www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/mps/>. This will give you links to their website (which will help you to get informed and give you contact details should you need them). If there is an issue that you feel strongly about, write your MP an email, give them a call or even a tweet! Most MPs will also hold surgeries, where constituents can drop in and talk to them about any issues they feel strongly about. Building relationships with your MP in this way is a great way to get more engaged with local politics.

While the council and MP are those officially responsible for governing in your area, it is sometimes helpful to learn about local issues by engaging with your community. Meet some of the people who live in your area (ideally non-students who have been around a bit longer than you have) and listen to what they have to say about local issues. If you and your friends have already begun to build relationships with your local council and MP, you may be able to draw people together to make a difference.

National politics

There are many great ways of getting informed on national issues. Reading newspapers and watching the news is a good start! Some other accessible ways of learning more are Question Time (Thursdays, BBC1), <http://archbishop-cranmer.blogspot.co.uk>, or the Show Up website - ... In general, a good principle is to find something that you're interested in and research it a bit more.

When thinking about national issues, engaging with your MP is definitely a good idea. They represent your views to Parliament, and if there are national policies that you feel passionate about, your MP should know so that they can represent this. Get in touch via the same processes discussed in the 'local' section – going to a surgery and building a relationship is the most effective way to make a difference. Generally, the best MP to contact is your own – sometimes, however, there may be another MP who is particularly involved/influential in a particular policy area, in which case it might be worth sharing your views with them.

If you feel very strongly about something, you might be able to join a campaign. Major charities such as Tearfund, Christian Aid or Oxfam will often be running campaigns of their own, and it might be best to latch on to what they are doing – research what is already out there.

Once you have started to think a bit more about politics, it might be worth joining a political party. An interesting way to make a decision on who you fit best with might be to do this survey, based on policies - <http://voteforpolitics.org.uk>. You will be able to join parties through their respective websites – for the three major parties there are also groups for Christians affiliated with that party, which can be worth joining as well – these are Christians on the Left, the Liberal Democrat Christian Forum, and the Conservative Christian Fellowship. Just Love can put you in touch with people from these organisations if you are interested in finding out more. You don't have to agree with everything a party stands for to join in – do you agree with 100% of the things that the other people involved with Just Love stand for, or that your church stands for? Probably not, yet you find common cause and work together to help build God's kingdom. This is how it should be with politics.

Student politics

Universities shape the people who will shape our culture in the future – so it is important for Christians to be engaging with the influential bodies within student life. Students' Unions (SUs) are representative bodies comprising the students studying at a Higher Education Institution, and will tend to have a wide range of influences and activities. Although these tend to encourage participation, there has been a trend towards apathy over student politics in recent times, which has often handed SU leadership over to those with more radical views, which further lowers involvement from others, as student politics can feel unrelated to ordinary student life. This can be frustrating, but can provide an opportunity for new people to come in and shape the landscape of student politics.

To start getting more involved, research the SU at your university, and find out what your next steps might be. If you want to think about standing for positions, we can put you in touch with Just Love students who have successfully represented their SUs in the past.

In Oxford, the position of sabbatical officer for Charities and Communities in the Student Union (OUSU) has been held by Christians for the past four years – in which time OUSU has run the Living Wage campaign. These SU officers, as well as many others, have campaigned tirelessly to ensure that Oxford University pays all of its staff enough to live on – a crucial change that will make a real difference to those struggling in Oxford. Getting involved in student politics, and standing up for what you believe in, can make a real difference.

How can I decide what I think about issues?

Christians can sometimes detach their theology from their political views, but the two should go hand in hand. Read some books that inform your ideas about social justice from a biblical perspective, which will then follow on to shape your political views. A good starting point is *Generous Justice* by Tim Keller, or *Christianity and Contemporary Politics* by Luke Bretherton, but there are a number of books recommended on the Just Love website that will be helpful with this. It can also be worth investigating publications from think tanks such as Res Publica or Theos, or articles from Christian groups working in politics, such as CARE, Christians in Politics or the Centre for Theology and Community.

It is also a good idea to talk about your views with others, as they will help to shape your views and ideologies. An interesting test can be the Political Compass - <http://www.politicalcompass.org>. This will help you to work out where your ideological views currently sit, and you can then work out whether this fits with your theology and your practical policy preferences.

Ultimately, we can't tell you what to think: wrestle with what the Bible says; pray for your city and your country; see what injustices you want to share with God; research what Christians have thought about politics through history; engage with contemporary political debates – but make sure that you show up!