

## Religion and politics: Do they mix?

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Faith playing  
a role in presidential campaigns

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SPRINGFIELD -- State Sen. Ira Silverstein is elected to vote on legislation, but when a matter comes up on a Saturday, someone else pushes his voting button.

Silverstein, a Chicago Democrat, is an Orthodox Jew. That means he adheres to religious guidelines that prohibit him from working on the Sabbath.

Religion in politics has been one of the common themes in the current presidential campaign.

Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, who is also an ordained Southern Baptist minister, once attacked ex-candidate Mitt Romney's Mormon religion, even going so far as to say the Massachusetts' governor was not a Christian because of his adherence to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. In response, Romney delivered his "Faith in America" speech, where he advocated for the freedom of worship. Yet, he also said he could never see a Muslim elected as President of the United States. Romney spent a great deal of time on the campaign trail trying to reassure potential voters he would not represent any one faith if elected to the White House. Illinois Sen. Barack Obama has expended energy distancing himself from his Islamic roots and his early childhood education in Islamic schools. And for his part, Huckabee is garnering large support from evangelical Christians, particularly in the southern states.

So what place does religion have in politics?

"I think the division between church and state is misinterpreted," said state Rep. Shane Cultra, R-Onarga, who described himself as Christian. "I don't think that means you can't be religious or have religious views or display religious things on public property."

Some say a person's religion is part of their social make-up, much like their

upbringing, economic status or ethnicity.

"It's certainly more important than what kind of household you come from," said state Rep. Ron Stephens, R-Troy, also Christian. "And what kind of household you come from affects your legislation."

### Religion and representatives

In 2001, Stephens brought a sense of his own personal spirituality to the Capitol Building after sharing an account of how he realized Jesus' presence after struggling with the death of his month-old grandson. He stood on the floor of the House of Representatives, telling his peers how he questioned his belief before feeling an overwhelming comfort sweep over him.

Should politicians bring their religious experiences to the House or Senate?

Many say yes.

"I think that's healthy and that's what makes this system so good," said House Minority Leader Tom Cross, R-Oswego, son of a Methodist minister. "I think the process usually finds a way to balance itself out. That's what the beauty of democracy is."

But most lawmakers aren't pulling out pocket Bibles to make legislative decisions. It's more subtle, he said.

"I think some legislators are probably conscious about that and some aren't so conscious about it," Cross said. In his case, "it probably does in ways that I probably don't even think about."

Others note that religion is a part of a person's identity, but say politicians should not put religious convictions over the needs of constituents.

"It hurts if it keeps you from doing the job that your constituents have given you the privilege of doing," said state Rep. Careen Gordon, D-Morris, who said she attended Catholic church growing up. "It hurts if one keeps you from doing your duty that you're sworn to do under the Illinois Constitution."

"When you look at the role of religion and politics, no elected official checks their background at the door when they take office," said state Rep. John Fritchey, D-Chicago, Roman Catholic. "We still need to always be mindful that when it comes to religion and politics, we really are serving two masters. One being a higher power and the other being a constitution, and at times that can be a difficult balance."

Those issues arise in many debates like mandating a moment of silence in public schools, which some say is a back door maneuver to make space for prayer. And

selling "In God We Trust" state license plates to raise money for a college scholarship program. Or allowing embryonic stem cell research or legalized abortion.

Pious players

Religious groups also try to influence politics.

The Rev. Alexander Sharp, president of Protestants for the Common Good, routinely makes his way to Springfield as a registered lobbyist. Instead of pushing scripture on legislators, he said he tries to guide lawmakers to keep legislation in line with the church's moral compass.

"It's important to realize that in being in Springfield, we're not saying that we know God's will on any particular matter of complicated public policy," Sharp said. "But we do think it's terribly important that our voices be heard and that faith concerns be brought forward to the public arena."

Moral issues are faith issues, Sharp continued. Protestants for the Common Good supports issues like ending poverty, the need for health care and protecting the environment.

"Unless you're simply going to view religion as a private, personal salvation -- which is a misinterpretation of what our faith is about -- you're going to miss the main point of what our faith calls upon us to do."

So what does faith call for?

That's what's up for debate.

Capitol Ministries, an evangelical group, says it simply wants to create disciples among lawmakers, not influence legislation. But they concede there's a trickle effect.

"Whether politicians realize it or not, the way they think about God and spiritual things tends to influence the way they think about politics a lot more than I think most politicians today would want to admit," said Sean Wallentine, vice president of Ministry Expansion and Operations for the California-based group.

The organization looks to install a minister in each state capitol. This is different from a chaplain who leads the legislature in prayer. Instead, it's a minister who leads individual lawmakers in Bible study and prayer, offer counsel and gather followers.

On the other hand, Illinois Church Action on Alcohol and Addiction Problems represents most churches in the state regardless of religious belief and lobbies lawmakers on issues of gambling, alcohol and drug prevention. This year the focus

is on stopping proposed gaming expansions.

But they insist they leave religion on the statehouse steps. "The legislators time and time again, they will tell you that they don't want to hear about morality. You can't legislate morality," said Anita Bedell, the organization's executive director and lobbyist. A lot of times they do legislate morality, she contends, whether or not they care to admit it.

"You don't go to church and just stay there on Sunday. You take your values with you wherever you go," she said. "Who you are, a lot of times, is based on your religious beliefs."

Prayer is another area where religion interacts with government. A prayer is routinely said before U.S. Congress and many statehouses and city council chambers during the beginning of session.

### Voting on faith

The difference in opinion on religious matters can be overwhelming -- even at the polls. But in most cases, religion also doesn't dominate votes, according to one political science professor.

"For a significant segment of the electorate, religion or religious affiliation may be only one of the kinds of cues to make the decision for who they'll vote for," said political science professor James Winship at Augustana College. "It's usually, for most voters, not a direct one-to-one relationship, 'I go to this church and thus I vote for so and so.'"

Winship, an ordained minister at United Church of Christ, points out that religion has always had an influence in American politics beginning when colonists fled from Europe to escape religious persecution.

"These are not new arguments by any stretch of the imagination," he said. "They are just old arguments taking new forms."

When Silverstein stares at a voting button back at the statehouse, he knows his choice is clear. Most of his peers do, too.

On tough votes, he consults a rabbi. On the Sabbath, he makes sure his peers know his position so he doesn't have to debate them on the floor.

And on those days, he makes sure a staffer is there to press the button for him.