

RELIGION IN POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS— AN INTERFAITH STATEMENT OF PRINCIPLES

This statement, released Feb. 21, 2012, was drafted by the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, the Anti-Defamation League and the Interfaith Alliance. It calls on all candidates for public office to help ensure decency, honesty and fair play in elections by conducting campaigns that honor our nation's traditions of religious liberty and avoid sowing religious discord.

Freedom of religion is one of our nation's most cherished liberties. It is at the very foundation of America. Our nation's Constitution protects religious freedom for all, prohibits religious tests for public office, and mandates separation of church and state. These are essential American ideals and values, which candidates for public office should respect.

Candidates for public office are, of course, free to worship as they choose. And they should feel comfortable explaining their religious convictions to voters, commenting about their own religious beliefs, explaining, if they wish to do so, how those beliefs shape their policy perspectives, and how they would balance the principles of their faith with their obligation to defend the Constitution if the two ever came into conflict.

There is a point, however, where an emphasis on religion in a political campaign becomes inappropriate and even unsettling in a religiously diverse society such as ours. Appealing to voters along religious lines is divisive. It is contrary to the American ideal of including all Americans in the political process, regardless of whether they are members of large and powerful religious groups, religious minorities, or subscribe to no faith tradition.

Voters should be encouraged to make their decisions based upon their assessment of the qualifications, integrity, and political positions of candidates. A candidate's religious beliefs . or lack thereof . should never be used by voters, nor suggested by political candidates, as a test for public office or as a shorthand summary of a candidate's qualifications.

Candidates for office bear the primary responsibility for setting the proper tone for elections. Anyone who legitimately aspires to public office must be prepared to set an example and to be a leader for all Americans, of all faiths or of no faith.

What is ethical is every bit as important as what is legal. Therefore candidates for public office should:

- Attempt to fulfill the promise of America by seeking to serve and be responsive to the full range of constituents, irrespective of their religion.
- Conduct their campaigns without appeals, overt or implicit, for support based upon religion.

- Reject appeals or messages to voters that reflect religious prejudice, bias, or stereotyping.
- Engage in vigorous debate on important and disputed issues, without deliberately encouraging division in the electorate along religious lines, or between voters who characterize themselves as religious and voters who do not.

Abiding by these principles, candidates for public office help ensure decency, honesty, and fair play in political campaigns, and they honor America's oldest and most fundamental values. Likewise, voters who insist on adherence to these principles contribute to the protection of our religious freedom.

Signed:

American Islamic Congress

American Jewish Committee

Anti-Defamation League

Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty

Interfaith Alliance

Islamic Society of North America (ISNA)

Hindu American Foundation

Muslim Advocates

National Council of Churches USA

Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund (SALDEF)

Sikh Coalition

Union for Reform Judaism

The United Methodist Church - General Board of Church and Society

United Church of Christ, Justice and Witness Ministries