

ELLEN G. WHITE ON POLITICS: THE RIGHT TO VOTE AND SEEKING PUBLIC OFFICE

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Since its inception, the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church has been known for its stand on the separation of the church and the state.¹ Some SDA church members interpret this principle of separation to mean that the church should have nothing to do with any form of political involvement, not even exercising the right of suffrage.² Others think that there is nothing wrong with voting, but seeking or running for government elective positions is a violation of the separation of the church and state principle. Moreover, they reason that the Bible and Ellen G. White are strongly against the idea that church members should seek elective or even appointive government positions.

There are others who believe that holding public elective positions does not compromise the principle of separation of church and state. They reason that this view is supported by the SDA statement on the issue of church and state relations.³ Adherents of this view argue that since God ordained

¹ See Ronald Lawson, "Church and State, at Home and Abroad: The Seventh-day Adventist Relations with Government," *JAAAR* 64.2 (1996): 297.

² For a survey of the early views of church members on the issue of voting, see Paul A. Gordon, "The Right to Vote—Shall I Exercise It?—Part 1," *Adventist Review* 157.43 (1980): 4–7, <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Periodicals/RH/RH19800918-V157-43.pdf>; Paul A. Gordon, "The Right to Vote—Shall I Exercise It?—Part 2," *Adventist Review* 157.44 (1980): 11–13, <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Periodicals/RH/RH19800925-V157-44.pdf>; Jared Miller, "Adventists, Prohibition and Political Involvement," *Liberty* (2011): 8–11, 29.

³ See Seventh-day Adventist Church, "Church-State Relations," <https://www.adventist.org/articles/church-state-relations/>

the government,⁴ seeking political office is neither against biblical principles⁵ nor against the counsel of the spirit of prophecy. Moreover, they argue that there is no sufficient evidence to warrant a conclusion that E. White is against taking part in politics and running for public office.⁶

In a poll conducted by the Adventist News Network in 2000, out of the 2,800 respondents to the question “should Adventists run for political office” 66 percent agreed, 28 percent disagreed, while 6 percent were undecided.⁷ Although the majority of the respondents were in favor of church members running for political office, it is evident that SDAs differ in their opinion regarding this issue.

This study attempts to resolve the conflicting views among SDAs regarding involvement in politics—the right to vote and especially seeking public office. This paper investigates and analyzes selected writings of E. White that present her views on politics, the right to vote, and running for public office.

1. Ellen G. White and the Right to Vote

It is a historical fact that many of the Millerites and Adventist pioneers voiced and penned their opposition against voting, for good reasons.⁸ In 1856, years before the SDA Church was formally organized, Roswell F. Cottrell, expressed his strong sentiments against voting. On the one hand, he believed that the government of the United States was the lamb-like beast of Rev 13:11 and that voting in favor of it was an endorsement of its actions. On the other hand, he was convinced that voting against it was clearly working against the fulfilment of prophecy. Cottrell wrote,

⁴ Romans 13: 1, 2, 6, 7. See also General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Ministerial Association, *Seventh-day Adventists Believe: A Biblical Exposition of Fundamental Doctrines* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 2005), 173.

⁵ See Gen 45:9; Esth 2:19, 3:3; Dan 2:48, 49; 3:30; 5:29; 6:2.

⁶ According to Dr. Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, a former associate director of the Biblical Research Institute, “There is no official Adventist Church position on whether individual church members should, or should not, run for political office.” Bettina Krause, “Adventist in Political Office: ANN Poll Reveals Conflicting Views,” *ANN*, 7 November 2000, para. 2, <http://news.adventist.org/en/all-news/news/go/2000-11-06/adventists-in-political-office-ann-poll-reveals-conflicting-views/>.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Gordon, “The right to vote: Part 1”; Gordon, “The right to vote: Part 2.”

If I vote in favor of the formation of the image, I shall aid in creating an abomination which will persecute the saints of God, and suddenly be destroyed by the brightness of Christ's coming.... On the other hand, if I vote against this work, I shall vote against the fulfillment of the prophecy, which is already in progress of fulfillment.⁹

A few years later, James White also expressed his ambivalence on the political situation of his time, yet hesitated to say it was wrong for someone to cast a vote. He concluded that it was a matter of personal conviction.¹⁰ In 1865, Uriah Smith in an editorial in the *Adventist Review* wrote,

To the question, why we do not with our votes and influence labor against the evil tendency of the times, we reply, that our views of prophecy lead us to the conclusion that things will not be bettered.... And we feel it our duty to confine our efforts to preparing ourselves, and others as far as in us lies, for the great and final issue already pressing upon us—the revelation of the Son [of] man from heaven, the destruction of all earthly governments, the establishment of the glorious, universal and eternal kingdom of the King of kings, and the redemption and deliverance of all His subjects.¹¹

It is evident that Smith's indifference to voting was brought about by his eschatological views. He seemed to look at the events transpiring in his time as an indicator of the impending doom of planet earth, and regardless of what voting could accomplish, it was inconsequential to prevent the course of prophecy.

The same line of thought ran through the mind of D. Hewett when he wrote, "My brethren, shall we spend our time in political campaigns to elect Buchanan or Fremont, when we so soon expect Christ in all the glory of his Father, and all the holy angels with him, when he shall sit upon the throne of his glory?"¹²

In spite of the conviction of some Advent pioneers against voting, E. White clearly favored the exercise of the right of suffrage and, for the cause of temperance, urged church members to vote. In fact, she stated that fail-

⁹ Roswell F. Cottrell, "How Shall I Vote?" *Review and Herald* 8.26 (1856): 205, <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Periodicals/RH/RH18561030-V08-26.pdf>.

¹⁰ See James White, "Politics," *Review and Herald* 16.14 (1860): 108, <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Periodicals/RH/RH18600821-V16-14.pdf>.

¹¹ Uriah Smith, "Politics," *Review and Herald* 8.19 (1865): 152, <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Periodicals/RH/RH18560911-V08-19.pdf>.

¹² D. Hewett, "The Vine of the Earth," *Review and Herald* 8.19 (1865): 150, <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Periodicals/RH/RH18560911-V08-19.pdf>.

ure to vote is a negligence of duty to cast an influence "by precept and example—by voice and pen and vote"¹³ to support the temperance law. As early as 1859, the issue of voting had been settled among the pioneers. On March 6, 1859, E. White entered a note in her dairy about a discussion that transpired among the pioneers regarding the subject of voting and that they have reached an important decision—that it was right to vote in favor of temperance.¹⁴

The third annual session of the General Conference in Battle Creek on May 17, 1865 could be considered a historic event for the church in relation to the question of voting. Together with some prominent leaders of the church, James and Ellen White were among the delegates who passed a resolution approving the right to vote and considered it as "highly proper" and a "blameless" act "when exercised in behalf of justice, humanity and right."¹⁵ The same resolution includes a caution that church members as they exercise their right to vote should have nothing to do with "the spirit of party strife."¹⁶

In 1880, E. White, in her promotion of temperance, counseled the brethren not to vote "intemperate men" into public positions.¹⁷ A year later, promoting the same cause, she emphasized that voting is the responsibility of every citizen. She wrote, "While we are in no wise to become involved in political questions, yet it is our privilege to take our stand decidedly on all questions relating to temperance reform."¹⁸

In July 1881 during a camp meeting in Des Moines, Iowa, a resolution was passed that all ministers and church members must join hands and through "consistent effort, personal labor, and the ballot box" forward the cause of the temperance movement. She even encouraged the ministers to use their influence among the churches to support the cause of prohibition.¹⁹ Some delegates were uncomfortable with the clause "the ballot box"

¹³ Ellen G. White, *Temperance* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1949), 253.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 255.

¹⁵ "Voting," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* 25.25 (1865): 197. <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Periodicals/RH/RH18650523-V25-25.pdf>

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Ellen G. White, "Necessity of Temperance," *Signs of the Times* 6.26 (1880): 301, <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Periodicals/ST/ST18800708-V06-26.pdf>

¹⁸ White, *Temperance*, 253.

¹⁹ "Iowa Conference," *Review and Herald* 58.2 (1881): 27, <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Periodicals/RH/RH18810705-V58-02.pdf>. Cf. White, *Temperance*, 255.

and moved for its deletion from the resolution. However, E. White gave her support for its inclusion.²⁰

A few months later, in an article also related to temperance published in the *Review* in November 1881, she wrote,

In our favored land, every voter has some voice in determining what laws shall control the nation. Should not that influence and that vote be cast on the side of temperance and virtue? ... The advocates of temperance fail to do their whole duty unless they exert their influence by precept and example—by voice and pen and vote—in favor of prohibition and total abstinence.²¹

E. White did not only encourage church members to vote in favor of the temperance cause, she went further and urged people to vote down candidates opposed to temperance principles and warned that those who vote into office candidates who repress religious liberty are partakers of the sins of these politicians while in office.²²

A thorough analysis of the above statements show that E. White did not prohibit church members from voting but rather encouraged them to exercise their "sacred prerogative," specially to support the temperance cause. As noted above, she even encouraged voters to oppose candidates who were against temperance work. In fact, in 1914, a year before her death, she reemphasized the same message of being actively engaged in the temperance cause.²³ Her position on the subject of voting has been clear.

2. Ellen G. White and Political Involvement

Although E. White urged church members to exercise their right of suffrage in promoting temperance legislations, in some of her later writings, she seemed to be strongly opposed to political involvement. During the 1897 General Conference session, E. White gave some counsels regarding involvement in political campaigns. In her speech addressed to the delegates of the session she warned that the people of God must not be involved in

²⁰ See White, *Temperance*, 255.

²¹ Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 1915), 387, 388.

²² See Ellen G. White, *Last Day Events* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 1992), 128. Cf. Ellen G. White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1923), 475.

²³ See Ellen G. White, "The Temperance Cause," *Review and Herald* 91.43 (1914): 1, <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Periodicals/RH/RH19141015-V91-43.pdf>

partisan politics so as to create dissention among them and lose their focus for mission. She pointed out that it is not a good message for the world to see that “brothers in the same faith, appear wearing the badges of opposing political parties, proclaiming opposite sentiments and declaring their divided opinions.”²⁴ She added that “there is danger, decided danger, for all who shall link themselves up with the political parties of the world. There is fraud on both sides. God has not laid upon any of our people the burden of linking up with either party.”²⁵

In a letter written in 1898 when she was in Australia, E. White counseled that as a people we are not “to become mixed up with political questions.”²⁶ The decision to vote or not to vote for a candidate is a personal matter. She continued, “Keep your voting to yourself. Do not feel it your duty to urge everyone to do as you do.”²⁷

The following year, E. White penned an advice to Bible teachers and educators in our churches and schools not to get involved in partisan politics.

Those who teach the Bible in our churches and in our schools are not at liberty to unite in making apparent their prejudices for or against political men or measures, because by so doing they stir up the minds of others, leading each to advocate his favorite theory. There are among those professing to believe present truth some who will thus be stirred up to express their sentiments and political preferences, so that division will be brought into the church.²⁸

In another statement bearing the same warning she wrote,

I call upon my brethren who are appointed to educate, to change their course of action. It is a mistake for you to link your interests with any political party, to cast your vote with them or for them. Those who stand as educators, as ministers, as laborers together with God in any line, have no battles to fight in the political world. Their citizenship is in heaven. The Lord calls upon them to stand as a separate and peculiar people. He would have no schisms in the body of believers.²⁹

²⁴ Ellen G. White, “Political Controversy,” *General Conference Daily Bulletin* (February, 1897): 59.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 1986), 2:336.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 2:336–337.

²⁸ White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, 475. See also White, *Gospel Workers*, 391–396.

²⁹ White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, 478–479.

She counseled that Christians must not wear “political badges, but the badge of Christ” and must leave political questions alone.³⁰ She stated that political preferences must not be publicized but rather be kept to one’s self. She stressed that “whatever the opinions you may entertain in regard to casting your vote in political questions, you are not to proclaim it by pen or voice.... None of you have any burden laid upon you by the Lord to publish your political preferences in our papers, or to speak of them in the congregation, when the people assemble to hear the Word of the Lord.”³¹

She gave a stern warning that teachers in the church and in our schools who publicize their passion about politics should be relieved of their responsibilities. She saw it unfit that tithing money is paid to anyone “speechifying on political questions.”³² In a more pointed remark, she even wrote that ministers “who desire to stand as politicians should have their credentials taken from them.”³³

These quotations from E. White have been interpreted by the SDA Church to mean that members should not “become preoccupied with politics, or utilize the pulpit or our publications to advance political theories.”³⁴ But can one conclude that E. White altogether rejected all sort of political involvement, including running for public office? Or can one find a different explanation for these statements, depending on the context?

3. Historical Context of Ellen G. White’s Statements

A cursory reading of the above statements may bring the reader to conclude that E. White was strongly opposed to any form of political involvement. Although the 1897 and 1898 statements were addressed to the church members in general, the local context will help the reader understand these statements in the right perspective. Leif Kr. Tobiassen, in an article published in the *Ministry Magazine*, presented pertinent questions worthy of consideration.³⁵ He asked if E. White’s use of the terms “politics” and “political” in-

³⁰ Ibid., 476.

³¹ Ibid., 478–79.

³² Ibid., 477.

³³ Ibid., 483.

³⁴ See Seventh-day Adventist Church, “Church-State Relations,” para. 11.

³⁵ Leif Kr. Tobiassen, “Adventists and Politics (Part 2)” *Ministry* (November 1968): 32, <https://cdn.ministrymagazine.org/issues/1968/issues/MIN1968-11.pdf>.

tended "to condemn only partisan strife and scheming, dishonest manipulations? Did she intend to discourage orderly exercise of the vote and serious study of political science?"³⁶

The seeming contradiction between E. White's call to go to the polls to advance the temperance cause and statements against political involvement demands scrutiny to get a balanced view of her understanding on the issue of political involvement. In reference to her negative comments on politics, Tobiassen indicated that one has to look into the historical milieu of the time when E. White gave these statements. He suggested that

since the expressions *politics* and *political* were penned by Ellen G. White during the latter half of the nineteenth century, an understanding of the character of political affairs in the United States at that time may aid the reader in ascertaining the accurate meaning of these terms as Ellen G. White intended them to be understood, and as they, no doubt, were understood by the readers at the time of publication.³⁷

In order to prove his point that the political situation during the time of E. White's writing was the main reason why she wrote some strongly-worded warnings against engaging in politics and affinity to any political party, Tobiassen quoted leading authorities in the field of American religious history.

There is no drearier chapter in American political history than that which records the period from the end of reconstruction to the Populist revolt of the early nineties.... Never before had American politics been so intellectually bankrupt.... Business ran politics, and politics was a branch of business. The country, said John Sherman after the election of 1888, had 'reached the last stages in the history of the Roman Empire when offices were sold at public auction to the highest bidder.'³⁸

In the first half of the nineteenth century, politics had been an honored calling, and those in public life had been the objects of admiration. This changed after the 1850's, and many persons came to feel that politics was a field to be avoided at all cost.... Politics seemed to be increasingly corrupt; and run by sordid professionals.³⁹

Smith made the same observation regarding the repulsive political situation in the United States during the last half of the nineteenth century.

³⁶ Ibid. See also White, *Gospel Workers*, 391.

³⁷ Tobiassen, "Adventists and Politics (2)," 33.

³⁸ Samuel Eliot Morrison and Henry Steele Commager, *The Growth of the American Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1942), 2:214, quoted in Tobiassen, "Adventists and Politics (2)," 33.

³⁹ Ralph Volney Harlow, *The Growth of the United States* (New York: Henry Holt, 1933), 611, quoted in Tobiassen, "Adventists and Politics (2)," 33.

Smith wrote, "Fraud, dishonesty, usurpation, lying, cheating, and stealing will largely determine the count: and the party which can do most of this work will probably win."⁴⁰

A careful examination of the historical context of E. White's statements show that she did not categorically condemn all sorts of political involvement but rather was against politicking in the negative sense of corrupt political practices such as scheming, mudslinging, and manipulation to influence others' vote that was prevalent during that time. She also warned the church not to identify with political parties.⁴¹ Moreover, she gave a strong warning against political party affiliation that causes rift and division among church members, thereby showing a false impression upon the world regarding the people of God and much more detract them from their mission.

I agree with Francis M. Wilcox's conclusion in an editorial in *The Advent Review* after his analysis of E. White's warnings on political involvement. He wrote, "When one becomes partisan, when he dabbles in politics, seeks to unduly influence votes, links himself with some political party, to work for its measures and its candidates regardless of the principles involved, it is this spirit against which we are warned."⁴²

One must also consider E. White's 1899 statements, published in *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, warning against entering into politics. These statements were addressed particularly to the teachers and workers of SDA educational institutions. She reminded the teachers and leaders not to discuss their political preferences in the classroom lest their own sentiments mislead the minds of the youth and bring division to the church. She gave a stern warning that church workers must not be preoccupied with political issues or be involved in partisan politics for this is not their calling.⁴³

4. Ellen G. White on Holding Public Office

It is interesting that while E. White wrote some statements against being involved in partisan politics, there are several quotations that seem to en-

⁴⁰ Uriah Smith, "The Political Situation," *Review and Herald* 61.29 (1884): 464, <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Periodicals/RH/RH18840715-V61-29.pdf>.

⁴¹ White, *Gospel Workers*, 392.

⁴² Francis M. Wilcox, "The Presidential Election," *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* 117.41 (1940): 2, <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Periodicals/RH/RH19401010-V117-41.pdf>.

⁴³ See White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, 477-479, White, *Gospel Workers*, 393.

dorse political involvement and seeking elective positions in the government. In the book *Education*, E. White wrote,

From the humblest lot those whom He has seen faithful have in times past been called to witness for Him in the world's highest places. Many a lad of today, growing up as did Daniel in his Judean home, studying God's Word and His works, and learning the lessons of faithful service, will yet stand in legislative assemblies, in halls of justice, or in royal courts, as a witness for the King of kings. Multitudes will be called to a wider ministry.⁴⁴

In an address to the students and teachers at Battle Creek College, E. White said on November 15, 1883, "Have you thoughts that you dare not express, that you may one day stand upon the summit of intellectual greatness; that you may sit in deliberative and legislative councils, and help to enact laws for the nation? There is nothing wrong in these aspirations."⁴⁵

E. White in fact encouraged those who have temporal aspirations and passion for other public responsibilities. She advised the youth not to be contented with low goals but to remember that "the fear of the Lord lies at the foundation of all true greatness."⁴⁶ The youth are to hold "all temporal claims and interests in subjection to the higher claims of the gospel of Christ."⁴⁷

She made clear to the youth that "as disciples of Christ," they are not "debarred from engaging in temporal pursuits"⁴⁸ but are encouraged to carry their religion with them. She added that "balanced by religious principle," they may reach any height they aspire for.⁴⁹ Notice how E. White emphasized that the youth must cultivate their God-given talents and reach noble and elevated tasks yet exhorted them to be firm in their religious principles. She emphasized that "there are responsibilities for everyone to bear; and we can fulfil life's grand mission only when these responsibilities are fully accepted, and faithfully and conscientiously discharged."⁵⁰ She

⁴⁴ Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1903), 262.

⁴⁵ White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, 82.

⁴⁶ Ellen G. White, *Messages to Young People* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 1958), 36.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 36-37.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁵⁰ See White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, 82-83; White, *Messages to Young People*, 37.

pointed out that it is a fallacy to say that success can only be attained by sacrificing Christian principle.⁵¹

E. White mentioned biblical characters such as Joseph and Daniel who honored and reflected God in the royal courts of earthly kings.⁵² She called the youth to follow their example,⁵³ stating that "the wise improvement of your opportunities, the cultivation of your God-given talents, that will make you men and women that can be approved of God, and a blessing to society."⁵⁴

Analyzing the intents of E. White in her comments on holding public office, one may find Tobiassen's pragmatic comments in reference to her position quite helpful. He wrote, "The conclusion would not be warranted that it is God's design to promote His kingdom today by His servants seeking public office; the statements indicate, however, that God's people cannot fully ignore the public aspects of life."⁵⁵

5. Conclusion

After a careful investigation and analysis of Ellen G. White's statements on politics and political involvement, one can conclude that E. White was not against all kinds of political involvement. On the contrary, she even encouraged church members to actively support the temperance caused by exercising their right of suffrage. What she was against was dirty politics, which is characterized by vote buying, mudslinging, and corrupt practices related to politicking.

E. White approved the right to vote and called it "highly proper." She made it plain, though, that members should vote wisely and independently and not be involved in partisan politics so as to create dissension and strife in the church. She counseled church members not to publicize their political views in church papers or use church-related assemblies as a political forum.

E. White also gave a strong warning to educators, leaders in the teaching institutions, and church workers not to be preoccupied with politics and use their position to promote their political preferences. For her, church

⁵¹ See White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, 83.

⁵² White, *Education*, 51–56.

⁵³ White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, 87; White, *Messages to Young People*, 28.

⁵⁴ White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, 87.

⁵⁵ Leif Kr. Tobiassen, "Adventists and Politics (Part 1)," *Ministry* (October, 1968): 3, <https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1968/10/adventists-and-politics>.

workers have a different calling and they must use their energy and influence to advance the work God has entrusted them.

Furthermore, there is no sufficient evidence to warrant a conclusion that E. White condemned one's desire to seek an elective political office. On the contrary, there are statements that encourage those who seek a noble desire to be of service to the community for God's glory. At the same time, she exhorted those who aspire for temporal pursuits to be firmly grounded in their religious principles.