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Churchgoers should be politics-doers

By Kirk Jowers

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Beyond a new gym membership and vowing to lose 15 pounds, consider another New Year's resolution: political participation.

Not only is political involvement easier than giving up chocolate, there has never been a more exciting year to play a role in the American democratic process. We are in the middle of perhaps the most dramatic presidential race in recent history. The issues are momentous and the stakes are high. For the first time in decades there is no heir apparent. Political fortunes change daily. An increasingly electrifying race offers candidates who are as diverse as they are interesting — the first woman, black or Mormon president.

In Utah, the governor, attorney general, state auditor, state treasurer, 15 state senators, 75 state representatives, three U.S. representatives and many municipal officers will be campaigning for office.

Why make political participation a resolution? If recent history is our guide, most of us will not participate except to vote, and many will not even do that. According to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, the United States, with an average voter turnout of just 48.3 percent since 1945, ranks 139th out of 172 countries (two behind Burma/Myanmar and just ahead of Mexico). Talk about irony. The nation that pioneered democracy is bringing up the rear when it comes to democratic participation.

Studies, theories and apologies abound for why we are failing. One reason is most pertinent to Utah and suggests that confusion rather than laziness or apathy may be a cause: the official ban on political activities by churches. Too often, religious adherents wrongly construe that ban as an impediment to their own political participation. The source of confusion — no surprise here — is the tax code. Churches operate under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code, which states that they must not "participate in, or intervene in ... any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for public office." Notably, the restriction is on the churches, not the congregants, a cultural distinction many miss. Thus, although a church may not use its resources for partisan ends, its members are free to immerse themselves in the political process.

Fortunately, many churches have begun to encourage their parishioners to get involved in democracy.

Political involvement can be inconvenient. It requires sacrifices of time and resources that might otherwise be devoted to leisure or other pursuits. Perhaps that is why the late LDS apostle Neal A. Maxwell observed, "Democracy is not meant for the naive, apathetic or the lethargic." Beyond voting, we can volunteer for or contribute to a candidate, party or cause of our choice, become a delegate or even run for office.

Vote and support whomever you choose — Democrat, Republican, Independent or otherwise — but participate!

Being an active church member does not require us to sacrifice our free speech rights, nor does it absolve us from our responsibility as a citizen to be active and engaged in the political process. Neither America nor Utah can afford to have any segment of the population unrepresented in electing and influencing leaders. Al Smith, the governor of New York who faced discrimination as a Catholic in his

1928 presidential bid, had it right when he said, "All the ills of democracy can be cured by more democracy."

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