

American Government & Politics: A Christian Worldview:
The Officeholder Test (15-20 minutes)

TEACHER INSTRUCTIONS/KEY

Goal

Students consider religious liberty and office-holding requirements in the early states.

Instructions

1. Divide students into pairs or groups of four.
2. Students read as groups the state constitutions excerpts that dealt with religious requirements of officeholders, then discuss as a group their thoughts.
3. Students individually read Candidates A–E’s beliefs, jot down the pros and cons of their ability to serve, and discuss in their groups.
4. Repeat Step #3 for the state constitutions and their requirements/non-requirements for officeholders.
5. Give students about 15 minutes to finish Steps 2 through 4, and then as a class ask volunteers to offer their thoughts on the questions.

Candidates

1. **Candidate A: Believes strongly in God and Christianity** (Pros? Cons?)
2. **Candidate B: Believes in God, but rejects Christianity** (Pros? Cons?)
3. **Candidate C: Christian who belongs to a tiny minority denomination** (Pros? Cons?)
4. **Candidate D: Atheist, but a respected businessman** (Pros? Cons?)
5. **Candidate E: Christian newspaper editor who constantly attacks government leaders** (Pros? Cons?)

State Officeholder Requirements

1. **State A: Only Christians may hold office.** (Pros? Cons?)
2. **State B: Only people who believe in God may hold office.** (Pros? Cons?)
3. **State C: There is no religious test for officeholders.** (Pros? Cons?)

Debrief

After finishing and discussing as a class, ask students these questions:

- Why would some states think religious requirements protected society? *AWV, but very likely because they believed officeholders who feared God would “execute judgment and justice,” or be afraid that God would judge them for not doing so.*
- Why would others oppose religious requirements? *AWV, so let students answer!*
- How does the Bible separate church and state? *AWV, but it’s critical that students understand that the church deals with sins within the church, and the state should punish “evil” (harm/theft/damage against person’s lives/bodies, property, and liberties).*
- We saw in our section “State Constitutions and a Key Question” that states wrote their own constitutions. What could states do with these constitutions to quiet the fears of some residents that Christian officeholders (or other religious officeholders) would violate their rights as non-Christians? *AWV, but simply guarantee in those state constitutions (like what Roger Williams and William Penn did in Rhode Island and Pennsylvania) that no one’s rights would be violated just because he didn’t believe in a certain faith.*

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Read the following excerpts from original state constitutions below as a group:

Delaware, 1776: Every person who shall be chosen a member of either house, or appointed to any office or place of trust, before taking his seat, or entering upon the execution of his office, shall take the following oath, or affirmation, if conscientiously scrupulous of taking an oath, to wit: "I, do profess faith in God the Father, and in Jesus Christ His only Son, and in the Holy Ghost, one God, blessed for evermore; and I do acknowledge the holy scriptures of the Old and New Testament to be given by divine inspiration."

Maryland, 1776: That no other test or qualification ought to be required, on admission to any office of trust or profit, than such oath of support and fidelity to this State, and such oath of office, as shall be directed by this Convention or the Legislature of this State, and a declaration of a belief in the Christian religion.

New Jersey, 1776: No Protestant inhabitant of this Colony shall be denied the enjoyment of any civil right, merely on account of his religious principles; but that all persons, professing a belief in the faith of any Protestant sect. who shall demean themselves peaceably under the government, as hereby established, shall be capable of being elected into any office of profit or trust, or being a member of either branch of the Legislature....

Georgia, 1777: The representatives shall be...of the Protestant religion....

Vermont, 1777: And each member, before he takes his seat, shall make and subscribe the following declaration, "I, ___, do believe in one God, the Creator and Governor of the Diverse, the rewarder of the good and punisher of the wicked. And I do acknowledge the scriptures of the old and new testament to be given by divine inspiration, and own and profess the protestant religion."

Massachusetts, 1780: Any person chosen governor, lieutenant-governor, councillor, senator, or representative, and accepting the trust, shall, before he proceed to execute the duties of his place or office, make and subscribe the following declaration: "I, ___, do declare that I believe the Christian religion, and have a firm persuasion of its truth; and that I am seized and possessed, in my own right, of the property required by the constitution, as one qualification for the office or place to which I am elected."

New Hampshire, 1784: Every member of the house of representatives shall be of the Protestant religion....That no person shall be capable of being elected a senator who is not of the Protestant religion....The President shall be chosen annually; and no person shall be eligible to this office, unless at the time of his election, he...shall be of the protestant religion.

Discuss as a group each member's thoughts on the above requirements. Are there any that stand out?

Now, individually, jot down one or two pros or cons of each candidate for officeholder in a new state. When everyone in your group has finished, discuss as a group:

1. Candidate A: Believes strongly in God and Christianity

Pros as an officeholder:

Cons as an officeholder:

2. Candidate B: Believes in God, but rejects Christianity

Pros as an officeholder:

Cons as an officeholder:

3. Candidate C: Christian who belongs to a tiny minority denomination

Pros as an officeholder:

Cons as an officeholder:

4. Candidate D: Atheist, but a respected businessman

Pros as an officeholder:

Cons as an officeholder:

5. Candidate E: Christian newspaper editor who constantly attacks government leaders

Pros as an officeholder:

Cons as an officeholder:

Now, individually, jot down one or two pros/cons of a state constitution that says this about officeholders. When everyone in your group has finished, discuss as a group:

1. State A: Only Christians may hold office.

Pros:

Cons:

2. State B: Only people who believe in God may hold office.

Pros:

Cons:

3. State C: There is no religious test for office.

Pros:

Cons: