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***"Are we commanded to vote?"***

***Response by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer***

Let's start out by pointing out how remarkable this question is, because it presumes that Jews are enfranchised to vote in the first place. We take this for granted now, but this wasn't always the case. In the original colonies under British rule, office-holding and voting rights were restricted to white, Protestant land-owning men. Over time, these restrictions were over-turned, for women and African-Americans, too. But poll taxes and other devices to restrict voter registration were and continue to be insidiously implemented.

Nowadays, Jews can freely vote and run for office, but there are still exceptions. A number of states, e.g. Maryland and Mississippi, to name a few, still prohibit any person who "denies the existence of a Supreme Being" from holding state office. This carve-out, if enforced, effectively eliminates secular, non-believing Jews from running for election.

Paradoxically, Bernie Sanders, says he believes in God, but not in a traditional manner. "I am what I am," he says. "And what I believe in, and what my spirituality is about, is that we're all in this together." This tricky circumlocution surely gives off vibes of being a non-believer and in a normal election year, Sanders might get disqualified for not being an ardent synagogue-goer.

Which brings us back to the question, because this is not a normal election year, and many registered Republicans – certainly, Jews among them – are considering not voting. Some will cross party-lines, but others would rather sit it out.

So, are we commanded to vote? No. Should we take for granted the right to vote? No. Should we work to protect those voting rights and expand them for everyone? Absolutely!