

Wall needed to hold so-called 'guardians'

Summer is here and the perennial graduation prayer controversy has subsided. However, a new church-state controversy is here just in time to fill a much needed void.

The Society of Separationists Inc., a self-described First Amendment watchdog group, has demanded that Utah discontinue the practice of using churches as polling places during elections. Fourteen Utah counties have been named by the society, which considers the practice to be a significant constitutional problem.

According to Salt Lake County Clerk Dixon Hindley, church-owned buildings are often used as voting sites because federal law requires that such sites be accessible to the handicapped, and the churches used meet federal requirements.

Furthermore, according to The Salt Lake City County elections clerk, the LDS Church has been very restrictive about the use of its buildings as polling places, requiring the government to show that there is no alternative to the use of LDS churches.

But these explanations don't satisfy Chris Allen, the director of the society, who insists that the use of a church as a polling place may lead to an individual voting the will of the church instead of (his) own conscience.

Kent Griffiths, a spokesman for the society, offers another objection to the practice. He is concerned that there are Utah citizens who find themselves disenfranchised because they are not willing to enter a church in order to vote.

Neither of these objections is plausible. If there are Utah residents so malleable as to alter their vote because of their surroundings, their problems will not be solved by altering those surroundings. How will discontinuing the current voting practice fortify the individualism of the terminally credulous?

Griffiths' objection is equally sophistical. If an individual will refuse to cast a ballot because he disapproves of the voting site, he has not become disenfranchised — he has disenfranchised himself: he is an agent, not a victim. Furthermore, it is difficult to see how such insurmountable disapproval of a religion could be considered anything but bigotry.



**Will
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**FOR THE
SAKE OF
ARGUMENT**

If one regards Utah to be an incipient theocracy, surely he would avail himself of any opportunity to vote in an attempt to change the status quo. If such an individual will not exercise this civic prerogative, he is a victim only of his own petulance.

Neither Allen nor Griffiths could quantify the alleged victims of the current practice. Neither could they cite relevant Supreme Court precedent to buttress their contention that the practice is in violation of regnant Establishment Clause guidelines.

According to Griffiths, The Society of Separationists is the legal arm of the American Atheists. It claims 600 members in Utah. Similar organizations in other states are engaged in campaigns to halt similar practices where the practice is sometimes more common than in Utah. According to Griffiths, in Texas approximately 45 percent of all voting is conducted in churches. Griffiths describes the fact that other states are presently confronting this same issue as a coincidence.

The peripatetic prayer police — also known as the ACLU — have not yet decided whether to join in the separationists' campaign. Reaching deep into her bag of First Amendment buzzwords, Michelle Parish-Pixler declared that the current practice exerts a chilling effect upon some Utah voters, and that the ACLU's legal panel is considering the question of involvement in the controversy.

There is no limit to the litigiousness of those who seek to suppress every tremor of religious expression within the public. For such people antiestablishmentarianism is itself a religion.

This country desperately needs a wall of separation between the First Amendment and its self-appointed guardians.