

How Most Americans Actually Feel About The Policy That Could Change Their Sermons

Faith and politics have a complicated relationship in the United States.

Many Americans want religious leaders to be clear about their values and how those values impact every aspect of life, including politics. And they want churches to be free to practice their faith, which includes discussing politics, without any government intervention.

But few want their preacher's advice on which candidate to vote for.

All three come into play when thinking about the Johnson Amendment, a 1954 law that bans certain non-profits—including churches—from taking part in campaigns. This includes a ban on endorsing candidates.

A new executive order signed by the president aims to ease this restriction. Yet survey research suggests that response to the order may be mixed.

A recent LifeWay Research survey found a majority of Americans oppose penalizing churches with a loss of their tax exemption if they endorse a candidate. And nearly eight in 10 Protestant senior pastors do not want the government regulating sermons and punishing churches for political content in their sermons.

Still, research consistently shows most Americans do not want pastors to endorse candidates in a church service. This includes evangelicals, as only 25 percent say pulpit endorsements are appropriate.

In other words, most Americans don't want pastors to endorse

candidates. Yet they don't want the government to punish churches if a pastor crosses that line.

There is a difference between believing something isn't prudent and saying it should be illegal. The Johnson Amendment set a penalty for political activity by churches that appears out of line with what Americans believe is appropriate.

Despite today's executive order, however, it's unlikely many pastors will begin endorsing candidates.

In 2012, LifeWay Research found only 10 percent of Protestant pastors agreed that pastors should endorse candidates for public office from the pulpit. In 2016, we found only 1 percent of Protestant pastors said they had endorsed a candidate during a church service.

The rallying point for Christian churches is a common faith in Jesus Christ—not politics. That unchanging faith leaves room for differing opinions on how society's problems, challenges, and opportunities are addressed. {eoa}