

Pastors Have a Popular Candidate—And It's Not Trump or Clinton

Political endorsements by preachers have been few and far between this election season.

That may be because the most popular candidate among preachers is “I don’t know.”

A new report from Nashville-based LifeWay Research found 4 out of 10 Protestant pastors are undecided about which candidate to vote for. A third (32 percent) plan to vote for Donald Trump. One in 5 (19 percent) plans to vote for Hillary Clinton. Four percent support Gary Johnson. Three percent do not plan to vote.

Few pastors believe Christians who vote their conscience will all support the same candidate. And few say Christians should vote only for a candidate who has a reasonable chance of winning.

Meanwhile, only one preacher in 100 has endorsed a candidate from the pulpit.

Those are among the findings of a new survey of 1,000 Protestant senior pastors conducted Aug. 22-Sept. 16, 2016. Most are ambivalent about the major party candidates, said Scott McConnell, executive director of LifeWay Research.

“Donald Trump does better with pastors than Hillary Clinton,” he said. “But both candidates are still less popular than ‘Undecided.’”

Voting Is a Must

Researchers found wide support for voting among Protestant

pastors. Eighty-eight percent of pastors say American Christians have a biblical responsibility to vote. That includes pastors of all denominational stripes—from Pentecostal (98 percent) and Baptist pastors (95 percent) to Presbyterian/Reformed pastors (81 percent) and Church of Christ ministers (79 percent).

But pastors don't expect all Christians to vote the same way. And few believe Christians should support only candidates who can win. Two-thirds (65 percent) disagree with the statement, "Christians who truly vote their conscience will vote for the same candidate." Less than a third (29 percent) agree. Six percent are not sure.

Two-thirds also disagree with the statement, "American Christians should vote for a candidate who has a reasonable chance of winning." Twenty-nine percent agree. Six percent are not sure.

While they believe voting is important, Protestant pastors have been extremely reluctant to make political endorsements during church services. Ninety-eight percent of pastors surveyed have not endorsed a candidate during a church service this year. One percent have endorsed a candidate during a service, and one percent are not sure.

Endorsements outside church are more common. Twenty-two percent of Protestant pastors have endorsed a candidate outside of their church role. Seventy-seven percent have not. One percent are not sure.

A similar survey in 2012 found 10 percent of Protestant pastors agreed when asked whether pastors should endorse a candidate from the pulpit. Eighty-seven percent disagreed. In 2012, 44 percent agreed they had endorsed candidates outside of their church role. Fifty-two percent disagreed.

"Enthusiasm for endorsements appears to be waning this year," said McConnell. {eoa}

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