

# House committee action opens door to candidate endorsement by churches

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WASHINGTON—The U.S. House Appropriations Committee approved a spending bill that includes a provision weakening the Johnson Amendment—the law that bars churches and other nonprofit organizations from endorsing political candidates without jeopardizing their tax-exempt status.

Advocates for separation of church and state, including the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, insisted the committee's July 13 action exposes churches to political pressure from candidates.

"In the name of protecting the church from the IRS and without any evidence of an overreaching bureaucracy, the appropriations committee acted today to expose the garden of the church to the woolly wilderness of partisan campaigning," said Amanda Tyler, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee soon after the July 13 committee action.

## **Committee rejects amendment**

Rep. Debbie Wasserman-Schultz, D-Fla., and Rep. Barbara Lee, D-Calif., proposed an amendment that would have deleted the section of the funding bill that included the provision regarding enforcement of the Johnson Amendment. The committee rejected the amendment by a 24-28 vote.

"Gutting potential enforcement of the law gives candidates and campaign donors a green light to press churches for their endorsements and possibly their tax-deductible offerings, too," Tyler said. "Vast majorities of clergy

and churchgoers oppose endorsing candidates from their houses of worship, knowing it would divide their congregations and distract from their mission.”

President Donald [Trump promised](#) at the National Prayer Breakfast in January he would “get rid of, totally destroy, the Johnson Amendment and allow our representatives of faith to speak freely and without fear.”

### **Polls show most don't want political endorsements at church**

A March 2017 poll commissioned by [Independent Sector](#) showed 72 percent of U.S. voters want to keep in place the law that prohibits nonprofit organizations from engaging in political activity without endangering their tax-exempt status.

That lines up with earlier research. In a [poll](#) of 112 evangelical Christian leaders in February by the National Association of Evangelicals, 89 percent said pastors should not endorse politicians from the pulpit, although some said the government should not penalize pastors who make political endorsements.

A [LifeWay Research survey](#) conducted in September 2015 showed 79 percent of U.S. adults believe it is inappropriate for pastors to endorse political candidates during church services, and three-fourths said churches should not make endorsements. However, the LifeWay survey revealed fewer than half—42 percent—wanted churches to lose their tax-exempt status if they endorsed candidates.

### **'Render to Caesar in God's house'**

The day before the House Appropriations Committee voted on the bill with language that weakened the Johnson Amendment, Tyler of the Baptist Joint Committee sent a letter to the committee outlining its opposition to that provision. The agency also [joined](#) more than 100 faith and nonprofit

organizations to ask the committee to oppose the provision.

“Current law strikes the right balance in protecting the integrity and independence of our religious sector,” the BJC letter said.

Tyler’s letter noted pastors and other religious leaders remain free to endorse or oppose candidates in their personal capacities, but most ministers recognize how divisive it would be in their congregations if political campaigning occurred in houses of worship.

“Jesus taught us to render unto Caesar what is Caesar and to God what is God’s. Curtailing the enforcement of the law could put pressure on churches to render to Caesar in God’s house,” Tyler wrote. “This approach does not bode well for religion or religious liberty.”