

# White evangelicals outliers on every issue of concern to voters

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—As they head to the polls, nearly all religious Americans say the coronavirus is the most critical issue facing the country, a new study shows. But there's one notable exception: white evangelicals.

Only 35 percent of white evangelicals said the coronavirus is of critical concern, the 11th annual American Values Survey conducted by PRRI, released Oct. 19, shows. Among this group, abortion and terrorism top the list of critical concerns. No other religious group identified abortion among its top three concerns.

On this and other issues, white evangelicals are outliers among U.S. religious groups.

“White evangelical Protestants do seem to be out on a limb on their policy views and views of Trump,” said Natalie Jackson, PRRI's director of research.

“It's more a fact of other types of Christians—mainline Protestants and Catholics—shifting away toward a more centrist outlook and increasingly leaving white evangelicals out on their own as the one religious group that very much supports Trump and is locked in with their party ID.”

## Most white evangelicals still support Trump

The study, conducted in September among 2,538 U.S. adults, shows that overall, 35 percent of Americans approve of how President Donald Trump

has handled the coronavirus pandemic, while 65 percent disapprove.



Evangelicals (from left) Ronnie Floyd, Rodney Howard-Browne, Adonica Howard-Browne, Johnnie Moore and Paula White stand behind President Trump during a July 10, 2017, meeting in the White House. (RNS Photo / Courtesy of Johnnie Moore)

But white evangelicals approve of the job Trump is doing at a rate of 76 percent, as compared to 52 percent of white mainline Protestants and 49 percent of white Catholics.

Heading into the 2020 election, their support for the president remains steadfast.

Majorities of every other religious group say the president has damaged the dignity of the office of president. But only 36 percent of white evangelicals believe that. And among white evangelicals who identify as Republicans, only 20 percent say he's damaged the dignity of the office.

White evangelicals are also the only major religious group to say the country is moving in the right direction, with 59 percent agreeing. By comparison, only 40 percent of white mainline Protestants, 39 percent of white Catholics, 40 percent of Hispanic Protestants and 28 percent of

Hispanic Catholics said the country is headed in the right direction.

That assessment drops even further among non-Christian and unaffiliated Americans. Only 24 percent of non-Christian religious Americans and 18 percent of religiously unaffiliated Americans say the country is headed in the right direction.

The one area where religious groups appeared to agree was regarding Trump's behavior in comparison with his predecessors. A majority of white evangelicals (55 percent) said they wish Trump behaved more like his predecessors, compared to 66 percent each of white mainline Protestants and white Catholics, and 67 percent of Hispanic Protestants. Seventy-one percent of Hispanic Catholics and non-Christian religious Americans wished Trump's behavior was more in line with his predecessors.

## **American exceptionalism**

On other issues, such as whether God has granted the U.S. a special role in history, the divisions surfaced once again: A strong majority (71 percent) of white evangelicals said the U.S. plays a special role—more than any other religious group. Only 35 percent of white Catholics, 32 percent of white mainline Protestants, and 15 percent of religiously unaffiliated Americans agree with the statement about the special role of the United States.

But even among evangelicals, there was a notable decline in support for the statement from four years ago, when 82 percent of white evangelicals said the same.

The survey also found there were no religious groups in which a majority agreed the United States sets a good moral example for the world. Only 33 percent of white Catholics, 29 percent of white mainline Protestants and 28 percent of white evangelicals agreed. Black Protestants (14 percent) and religiously unaffiliated Americans (10 percent) were even less likely to

agree America sets a good moral example.

The margin of error for the survey was plus or minus 2.6 percentage points at the 95 percent level of confidence.