



## BILLY GRAHAM CENTER

at Wheaton College

For Immediate Release  
Thursday, October 18, 2018

### **Evangelicals more issue oriented than candidate focused, new data shows**

Wheaton, Ill – In the 2016 U.S. presidential election, 53 percent of evangelicals reported voting for Donald Trump. That is a higher percentage than reported voting for Romney in 2012 (46 percent), McCain in 2008 (49 percent), and Dole in 1996 (45 percent). Only George W. Bush garnered a higher percent of evangelicals, both in 2000 (68 percent) and 2004 (69 percent).

Without President Trump on the midterm ballots, can evangelicals be expected to repeat their strong Republican support?

Yes, says Ed Stetzer, Executive Director of the Billy Graham Center Institute at Wheaton College, who oversaw a May 2018 research project about evangelicals in the 2016 election.

In conjunction with LifeWay Research, the Institute polled 3,000 Americans about their voting in the last national election, and found that only half of evangelical voters characterized their vote as voting for their specific candidate.

“I see no reason that focus on issues won’t be repeated next month,” Stetzer said, adding that the data reveals a number of key findings that indicate how evangelicals might be expected to vote in the upcoming state and congressional elections.

**1. Issues matter more than character.** Two-thirds of evangelicals (67 percent) by belief agree that “Christians can benefit from a political leader even if that leader’s personal life does not line up with Christian teaching.”

**2. The issue of abortion appears to matter more than party.** Although abortion was not the most important reason for evangelicals’ votes, three-quarters of evangelicals (75 percent) who are pro-life expressed a willingness to vote for a candidate who was truly pro-life, regardless of political party. Only half (54 percent) of non-evangelicals would cross party lines to vote pro-life.

**3. Many evangelicals are reluctant to criticize *their* leaders when they disagree.** 43 percent of evangelicals by belief agreed with the statement: “When a political leader is making important decisions I support, I should also support the leader when they say or do things I disagree with.”

While 48 percent disagreed, this still represents a significant percentage in comparison to only 27 percent of non-evangelicals who agreed.

**4. Evangelicals value politics more than non-evangelicals.** Nearly one-third of evangelicals (30 percent) said politics is “extremely important,” while only 18 percent of non-evangelicals judged it so. And, nearly twice as many non-evangelicals (13 percent) said politics is “not very important” compared to 7 percent of evangelicals.

“This data may seem disconcerting to many,” said Stetzer. “However, what we do see is that some evangelicals are seeking to stay engaged in politics even when they have substantial concerns about the individuals involved. People vote for complex reasons, and quick sound bites—like the “81% of evangelicals voted for President Trump” number—miss the nuance and reasons of how people voted. For many evangelicals, it appears it has been difficult to find a candidate they can fully endorse and they are left choosing what they see as the best fit among the choices they have.”

Evangelicals, it seems, feel committed to engaging the political process even when the candidates are far from ideal. In fact, when survey respondents were asked, “Which of the following best characterizes how you thought about your (2016) vote?” only half of evangelicals characterized their vote as “voting for their specific candidate.”

“In 2016, many evangelicals chose to look past a candidate as an individual to vote for a specific issue, platform, or party a candidate represented, seeing the candidates more like objects of representation than as individuals whose values and ideals fit theirs,” Stetzer said. “I don’t see any reason for that to change in the upcoming midterms.”

More information from the same dataset can be found at [Christianity Today](#).

###

The Billy Graham Center Institute of the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College exists to explore and analyze current trends in Evangelicalism and the Church’s teaching and practice of evangelism and mission.

LifeWay Research is a Nashville-based, evangelical research firm that specializes in surveys about faith in culture and matters that affect churches.

Contact: Laurie Nichols  
Director of Communications and Marketing  
[Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College](#)  
630.752.7960  
[Laurie.nichols@wheaton.edu](mailto:Laurie.nichols@wheaton.edu)