



For Immediate Release
Monday, November 5, 2018

Immigration still motivating evangelical voters

The 2016 election exit polls indicated evangelicals strongly supported Donald Trump for President. New research suggests that nearly two-thirds of evangelicals cite his stance on immigration as an influential reason in determining their support of Trump in 2016. In fact, 15 percent of Trump voters say it was the most important issue, second only to “improving the economy” (19 percent).

The Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College partnered with LifeWay Research in May 2018 to poll 3,000 Americans about their voting in the last national election.

According to the research, one in ten evangelicals by belief (using the National Association of Evangelicals research rubric)—including all those who voted in the 2016 presidential election—say immigration was the most important reason in deciding how they cast their vote in 2016. Only the economy (17 percent) and healthcare (11 percent) were named by more evangelicals.

The most important reasons cited by non-evangelicals for their vote were similar, but “personal character” of the candidate was cited as the most important reason by 13 percent of non-evangelicals, as opposed to only 7 percent of evangelicals.

The research also indicates immigration was significantly more important to those evangelicals who voted for Trump than Hillary Clinton. One in eight evangelicals (15 percent) who voted for Trump say immigration was the most important issue in deciding their vote, while nearly two-thirds (62 percent) listed immigration as an issue that influenced their vote.

Only three percent of evangelicals who voted for Clinton say immigration was *the* most important deciding factor, while one-third (32 percent) say it was an important issue. More Clinton evangelicals, immigration considered healthcare (58 percent), helping those in need (54 percent), the economy (50 percent), and personal character (45 percent) in influence. In contrast, only the economy (72%) and national security (63%) were viewed as influential by more Trump evangelicals.

“Although immigration wasn’t the leading reason for evangelical support of Trump, it was important to a significant contingent,” said Ed Stetzer, executive director of the Billy Graham Center. “And it remains so as we approach the mid-terms.”

Immigration was most important to even more non-evangelical Trump voters. Twenty-one percent of non-evangelical Trump voters say immigration was the most important reason for their vote versus 15 percent of evangelical Trump supporters.

The study also showed two out of three evangelicals (68 percent) support the Trump administration's efforts to reduce *illegal* immigration – 51 percent strongly support those efforts, while 63 percent support recent reductions in the number of *legal* immigrants to the United States, including 41 percent who strongly support reduction of legal immigration. Half of non-evangelicals also support Trump's efforts to reduce *illegal* immigration, and 45 percent support efforts to reduce *legal* immigration.

The widest split within evangelicals on immigration were by ethnicity, with white evangelicals far more likely to support restrictions on immigration. Three-fourths of white evangelicals support a reduction in *legal* immigration. In contrast, one-third of African American evangelicals (35 percent), half of Hispanics, and nearly two-thirds of other minorities (60 percent) support a reduction in legal immigration.

When asked if they support the Trump administration's efforts to reduce *illegal* immigration, 82 percent of White and three-quarters of other minorities (74 percent) agreed compared to African Americans (35 percent), and Hispanics (47 percent).

The study shows that evangelicals and non-evangelicals come together in support of one aspect of the immigration debate: the Dreamers.

Sixty-two percent of non-evangelicals and sixty-one percent of evangelicals agree the Trump administration should do more to resolve the lack of legal status of immigrants brought to the U.S. illegally as children. Those individuals, often referred to as Dreamers, are protected from deportation under the federal Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. There is no evidence of a difference between evangelicals of differing races when it comes to doing more for Dreamers.

"Political wrangling and self-interests have kept Republicans and Democrats from coming together to solve this issue that they generally agree on, and could affect nearly two million Dreamers in the U.S.," said Stetzer.

"Immigration remains a critical issue for evangelicals, and that may explain the intense focus the President and others have placed on a caravan of migrants that won't reach the U.S. until long after the midterm elections. Simply put, speaking against immigration can't help but bolster evangelical support for Trump's party even though his name isn't on any ballots," Stetzer concluded.

The Billy Graham Center Institute, part of the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College, exists to take a deeper dive into 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. The research protocols are at LifeWayResearch.com.

Contact:

The Billy Graham Center Institute at Wheaton College

BGCI.Research@wheaton.edu