

April 4, 2017

The Honorable Paul Ryan
Speaker
H-232 The Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Senate Majority Leader
S-230 The Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
House Democratic Leader
H-204 The Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Senate Democratic Leader
S-221 The Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Kevin Brady
Chairman
House Ways and Means Committee
1102 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Orrin Hatch
Chairman
Senate Committee on Finance
219 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Richard Neal
Ranking Member
House Ways and Means Committee
1139E Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Ron Wyden
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Finance
219 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Speaker Ryan, Majority Leader McConnell, Leader Pelosi, Leader Schumer, Chairman Brady, Chairman Hatch, Ranking Member Neal, and Ranking Member Wyden:

We, the 99 undersigned religious and denominational organizations strongly oppose any effort to weaken or eliminate protections that prohibit 501(c)(3) organizations, including houses of worship, from endorsing or opposing political candidates. Current law serves as a valuable safeguard for the integrity of our charitable sector¹ and campaign finance system.

Religious leaders often use their pulpits to address the moral and political issues of the day. They also can, in their personal capacities and without the resources of their houses of worship, endorse and oppose political candidates. Houses of worship can engage in public debate on any issue, host candidate forums, engage in voter registration drives, encourage people to vote, help transport people to the polls and even, with a few boundaries, lobby on specific legislation and invite candidates to speak. Tax-exempt houses of worship may not, however, endorse or oppose candidates or use their tax-exempt donations to contribute to candidates' campaigns. Current law simply limits groups from being *both* a tax-exempt ministry and a partisan political entity.

¹ Some have suggested a desire to remove this safeguard only as it applies to houses of worship and to keep all other 501(c)(3) organizations at the status quo. This path, however, is constitutionally problematic under *Texas Monthly v. Bullock*, 489 U.S. 1 (1989).

As religious organizations, we oppose any attempt to weaken the current protections offered by the 501(c)(3) campaign intervention prohibition because:

People of faith do not want partisan political fights infiltrating their houses of worship.

Houses of worship are spaces for members of religious communities to come together, not be divided along political lines; faith ought to be a source of connection and community, not division and discord. Indeed, the vast majority of Americans do not want houses of worship to issue political endorsements.² Particularly in today's political climate, such endorsements would be highly divisive and would have a detrimental impact on civil discourse.

Current law protects the integrity of houses of worship. If houses of worship endorse candidates, their prophetic voice, their ability to speak truth to power as political outsiders, is threatened. The credibility and integrity of congregations would suffer with bad decisions of candidates they endorsed. Tying America's houses of worship to partisan activity demeans the institutions from which so many believers expect unimpeachable decency.

Current law protects the independence of houses of worship. Houses of worship often speak out on issues of justice and morality and do good works within the community but may also labor to adequately fund their ministries. Permitting electioneering in churches would give partisan groups incentive to use congregations as a conduit for political activity and expenditures. Changing the law would also make them vulnerable to individuals and corporations who could offer large donations or a politician promising social service contracts in exchange for taking a position on a candidate. Even proposals that would permit an "insubstantial" standard or allow limited electioneering only if it is in furtherance of an organization's mission would actually invite increased government intrusion, scrutiny, and oversight.

The charitable sector, particularly houses of worship, should not become another cog in a political machine or another loophole in campaign finance laws. We strongly urge you to oppose any efforts to repeal or weaken protections in the law for 501(c)(3) organizations, including houses of worship.

Sincerely,

African American Ministers in Action

² E.g., National Association of Evangelicals, *Pastors Shouldn't Endorse Politicians*, Evangelical Leaders Survey (February 2017), <https://www.nae.net/pastors-shouldnt-endorse-politicians/> (finding 89% of evangelical leaders oppose pastors endorsing candidates from the pulpit); Bob Smietana, *Skip the Endorsements in Church, Say Most Americans*, LIFEWAY RESEARCH (Sept. 8, 2016), <http://lifewayresearch.com/2016/09/08/skip-the-endorsements-in-church-say-most-americans/> (finding 79% of Americans believe it is inappropriate for a pastor to publicly endorse political candidates during a church service and 75% agreeing that churches should steer clear of endorsements); Daniel Cox, Ph.D. and Robert P. Jones, Ph.D. *Majority of Americans Oppose Transgender Bathroom Restrictions*, Public Religion Research Institute (March 10, 2017), <http://www.prrri.org/research/lgbt-transgender-bathroom-discrimination-religious-liberty/> (finding 71% of Americans and all major religious groups in the country oppose allowing churches to endorse political candidates while retaining their tax-exempt status).

Alabama Cooperative Baptist Fellowship
Alliance of Baptists
American Baptist Churches USA
American Baptist Home Mission Societies
American Friends Service Committee
American Jewish Committee (AJC)
Anti-Defamation League
Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists
B'nai B'rith International
Baptist Fellowship Northeast
Baptist General Association of Virginia
Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty
Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America ~ Bautistas por la Paz
Baptist Women in Ministry
Bend the Arc: A Jewish Partnership for Justice
California Council of Churches IMPACT
Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good
Central Conference of American Rabbis
Christian Life Commission
Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME) Church
Churchnet, a ministry of the Baptist General Convention of Missouri
Colorado Council of Churches
Cooperative Baptist Fellowship
Cooperative Baptist Fellowship Heartland
Cooperative Baptist Fellowship Kentucky
Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Arkansas
Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Florida
Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Georgia
Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Mississippi
Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina
Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Oklahoma
Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Texas
Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Virginia
Disciples Center for Public Witness
Ecumenical Catholic Communion
Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon
The Episcopal Church
Equal Partners in Faith
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Evergreen Association of American Baptist Churches
Faith Action Network- Washington State
Faith in Public Life
Faith Voices Arkansas

Faithful America
Florida Council of Churches
Franciscan Action Network
Friends Committee on National Legislation
Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America
Hadassah, The Women's Zionist Organization of America, Inc.
Hindu American Foundation
Hispanic Baptist Convention of Texas
Interfaith Alliance
International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON)
Islamic Networks Group
Islamic Society of North America
Jewish Community Relations Council, Greater Boston
Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Washington
Jewish Council for Public Affairs
The Jewish Federations of North America
Jewish Women International
Kentucky Council of Churches
Mid-Atlantic Cooperative Baptist Fellowship
National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd
National Baptist Convention of America
National Council of Churches
National Council of Jewish Women
National Sikh Campaign
NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice
New Baptist Covenant
North Carolina Council of Churches
Oklahoma Conference of Churches
Pastors for Oklahoma Kids
Pastors for Texas Children
Pax Christi, Montgomery County, MD chapters
Pennsylvania Council of Churches
Presbyterian Church (USA), Washington Office of Public Witness
Progressive National Baptist Convention
Reconstructionist Rabbinical Assembly
Religions for Peace USA
Religious Institute
Rhode Island State Council of Churches
Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America
South Carolina Christian Action Council
South Dakota Faith in Public Life
T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights
Tennessee Cooperative Baptist Fellowship

Texas Baptists Committed
Texas Faith Network
Texas Impact
Union for Reform Judaism
Unitarian Universalist Association
Unitarian Universalist Service Committee
Unitarian Universalists for Social Justice
United Church of Christ, Justice and Witness Ministries
The United Methodist Church, General Board of Church and Society
Virginia Council of Churches
Women of Reform Judaism
Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual (WATER)

Cc: All Members of Congress