

May 4, 2017

US House of Representatives
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
Subcommittee on Government Operations
Subcommittee on Health Care, Benefits and Administrative Rules
2157 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Members of the Joint Committees:

We, the undersigned members of the Coalition for Liberty & Justice, express our strong support for the Johnson Amendment because it serves as a strong plank to maintain the wall of separation between church and state.

It is a gross mischaracterization of the wide latitude of freedoms that houses of worship enjoy in the United States to claim that their rights of free speech are being abrogated by the Johnson Amendment. These claims mask the more sinister intentions to channel money directly into political campaigns to influence elections.¹ In 2016, Rev. Jerry Falwell, Jr. was quoted in the *New York Times* saying that repealing the Johnson Amendment would “create a huge revolution for conservative Christians and for free speech.” It is simply false to claim that churches and other houses of worship cannot engage in political speech or that pastors as individuals are unfairly fettered. Houses of worship can engage in political speech, and clergy are free to speak their mind in their personal capacity.

The limit on 501(c)(3) organizations, including houses of worship, pertains only to abstaining from endorsing or opposing candidates in political campaigns. In return for this restriction, 501(c)(3) organizations receive preferential tax benefits, including being exempt from federal income taxes and allowing donors to the organizations to deduct their donations from their income tax. Eliminating the Johnson Amendment would allow houses of worship to continue the preferential tax status they currently enjoy while simultaneously giving them the unlimited capacity to covertly funnel those donations to elected officials and their campaigns. Moreover, houses of worship are not required under current law to provide financial information to the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) or federal government. All other 501(c)(3) organizations provide information about donations, expenses and assets to the IRS via the annual Form 990.

Removing the Johnson Amendment protections could allow houses of worship to create slush funds for politicians, transform clergy into mouthpieces for political candidates and threaten the integrity of both houses of worship and the democratic process. Churches, synagogues and mosques should not be political action committees. True religious liberty is a reflection of our democratic ideals in that it protects both freedom of religion and freedom from religion—safeguarding each individual’s liberty, without allowing any one religion to be imposed on all.

We cherish religious freedom as a fundamental right that protects houses of worship, religiously affiliated organizations and religious individuals—regardless of their beliefs about religion. But we reject views of religious freedom or free speech that privilege the religious views of some while disregarding the beliefs of others or that empower institutions to the detriment of the people whom those organizations claim to serve.

The Johnson Amendment serves as a shield preventing political campaigns from entering into the pulpit. It also prevents tax-deductible donations to unscrupulous houses of worship from being routed directly to political candidates.

¹ <https://www.citizen.org/sites/default/files/devil-in-the-details-johnson-amendment-report.pdf>

There is no assault on the free speech of churches or religious institutions. Rather, by seeking to repeal or weaken the Johnson Amendment these institutions seek to redefine fundamental liberties and consolidate money and power. It was Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor who said "Those who would renegotiate the boundaries between church and state must therefore answer a difficult question: Why would we trade a system that has served us so well for one that has served others so poorly?"

We represent a diverse cross-section of communities, including faith-based and secular organizations that are dedicated to LGBT rights, women's rights, civil liberties, reproductive health rights and justice. Though we hold distinct and diverse perspectives, we are united in our belief that public policies cannot privilege the religious beliefs of some over others or allow religion to be used to discriminate or undermine equality. We believe that true religious liberty respects individuals, supports the common good and reflects the foundational principles of our nation. Separation of church and state as well as religious freedom is grounded in the rights of individuals to exercise their beliefs without being imposed upon by the government. These are cornerstones of our democracy and the Johnson Amendment works to maintain that critical barrier and as such it should not be weakened or eliminated.

We urge members of the committee to stand for an expansive view of religious liberty that protects individual religious freedom and freedom of speech; one that does not compromise the integrity of religious institutions or our democratic process. Maintaining a vibrant Johnson Amendment is a key element in that protection. We urge committee members to support the Johnson Amendment.

Respectfully,

Abortion Care Network
Advocates for Youth
American Atheists
American Humanist Association
Association of Reproductive Health Professionals
Catholics for Choice
Center for Inquiry
Hadassah, The Women's Zionist Organization of America, Inc.
In Our Own Voice National Black Women's Reproductive Justice Agenda
Institute for Science and Human Values
Medical Students for Choice
Methodist Federation for Social Action
Muslims for Progressive Values
National Center for Lesbian Rights
National Council of Jewish Women
National Organization for Women
Political Research Associates
Secular Coalition for America
Society for Humanistic Judaism
Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation
Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual

For additional information on this statement or the signing organizations please contact Glenn Northern with Catholics for Choice at gnorthern@catholicsforchoice.org or 202-986-6093.