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[Tim Dickinson](#) July 13, 2025



Doug Pagitt speaks at a get out the vote rally in support of Kamala Harris in Harrisburg on November 3, 2024. *Paul Weaver/Sipa USA/APnormal*

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[Donald Trump](#)'s administration is giving [churches](#) a green light to explicitly endorse political candidates, without fear of losing their nonprofit tax status, under a proposed [court settlement](#). And a leading figure on the Religious Left insists that's a good thing for [Democrats](#).

The Internal Revenue Service — now led by controversial Trump appointee and [X enthusiast Billy Long](#) — proposed a "consent judgment" last week, seeking to settle a court case brought by Christian broadcasters. The [IRS](#) seeks to effectively exempt churches from the [Johnson Amendment](#), a federal law that bans tax-exempt groups from politicking. The proposed settlement states that "communications from a house of worship to its congregation... on matters of faith do not run afoul of the Johnson Amendment as properly interpreted." The document likens endorsements from the

pulpit to “a family discussion concerning candidates.”

Some progressives are sounding the alarm that this ruling will transform houses of worship into a political powerhouse for the MAGA GOP, which relies on evangelical Christians as its base. But [Doug Pagitt](#), a progressive evangelical pastor and executive director of [Vote Common Good](#), argues that ruling provides much needed clarity — and could actually give progressives a desperately needed boost.

The Johnson Amendment has long been a phantom menace. It remains on the books, but has been all but unenforced against churches, either purposefully or passively, for decades. This has led to “wild imbalance,” Pagitt says, with right-wing churches becoming integral to Republican [politics](#), while most mainstream and progressive church-leaders have abided by the (dead) letter of the law — contorting themselves to remain at arms length from anything to do with elections, lest they imperil their tax exemption.

“For too long, Republican politicians and their allies have spoken freely from pulpits, while too many Democrats and faith leaders held back, worried they would cross an invisible line,” Pagitt says. “This decision removes that roadblock.”

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The pastor insists Democrats and progressives now have a chance to level the playing field with voters of faith — but acknowledges that doing so will force both the center-left political establishment and progressive church leaders to get out of their comfort zones.

Pagitt spoke to *Rolling Stone* by phone. The transcript that follows has been edited for length and clarity.

How did you get involved in politics?

I've been an evangelical pastor my whole adult life. I come from that small, dwindling, little wing of the evangelical world that's called progressive evangelicalism. I got into this in 1983, when there were still a bunch of Jimmy Carter [evangelicals](#); I wax eloquently about how in 1976 and 1980, 60 percent of evangelicals voted for a Democrat from Georgia. My faith motivates what I do and the way I think about politics. And it doesn't end me up in the MAGA world.

What is the mission of Vote Common Good?

We connect with faith voters who are thinking about their political and their religious identities. Many Christian faith voters have a religious identity that came as a package deal, which ended up with them becoming [Republicans](#). People went to church to follow Jesus and ended up voting for Republicans every time — and they don't know how that

happened.

Then when someone like Donald Trump comes along, people are like, *I didn't think that's what we were saying 'Yes' to*. But they watched as the Republican Party and their faith communities went down the road in lockstep.

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We know that doesn't fit a lot of those people. They're not sure what to do about that. We help those voters connect their faith identity, and consider voting for Democratic candidates.

How long have you been active?

Since 2018. We do bus tours and events with Democratic candidates — introducing them to faith voters and faith leaders around the country. We've worked on hundreds of campaigns. We did events with [now governor] Josh Shapiro in Pennsylvania. We did a [bunch of work with the Harris campaign](#). We work with about 40 or 50 congressional candidates per cycle.

Your argument that the IRS ruling could be a good development for Democrats is not intuitive. How do you see it?

There has been this wild imbalance where Republicans

speaking about faith issues and faith voters all the time. Democrats rarely do. Republicans have organized almost exclusively under religious identity — so much so that the 2024 Trump campaign used an evangelical religious group, [Turning Point USA](#), as their [on-the-ground organizing](#).

Republican candidates will go to churches. Democratic candidates will — if they're Black churches. But rarely will they find themselves organizing in any other church context, or any other faith community organized around synagogues or mosques or temples.

And that's always been done under the guise of: *Well, the IRS laws say that religious communities have to be politically neutral. And there's no way to be politically neutral if you're going to talk to a candidate.*

Republicans have never had that problem. Republicans are just wildly running the table on this stuff — having absolutely no issues at all.

The Johnson Amendment has only been an obstacle, then, but only for one side?

The IRS became the rationale for the dividing line. I hear from [progressive] pastors and faith leaders all the time: *All my conservative counterparts, they talk about politics and tell the people who vote for. But we follow the law. And*

they're just lawless.

Progressives and conservatives have been telling two different stories about what the Johnson Amendment implications are, because the IRS has not been clear about it.

And now that they have been clear about it, it really creates an opportunity for Democrats to be able to talk to faith voters. And for faith leaders to be open — if they choose — to talk about politics. Maybe to host a forum at their church, or have a political talking group, or let a candidate come in and meet some people in their church without feeling like they're somehow running afoul of the law.

So mainstream churches have been so afraid of jeopardizing their tax status they not only won't endorse Democratic candidates, but won't even invite them to speak?

A lot of pastors are not even willing to show up at a public meeting supporting a candidate, because they're so afraid. We deal with this all the time.

The kind of kabuki theater that churches have had to do is almost comical. In a lot of Black churches, you'll see a separate part of the building that's the community center. And you could talk about politics over there, because that's

run by a separate entity of the church. But you can't do it in the church. It's ridiculous.

Or we did an event at a church in New Hampshire. This is a Sunday night — it wasn't a church time. The pastor said, *OK, and I'm going to give the welcome. But you have to rent the building with a rental contract — so you're an outside rental group at the church.* Which is fine. And the pastor gave the welcome and said, *I want to be clear that I'm giving my welcome from down here on the floor and not up there on the platform where the pulpit is, because when I'm standing up there, I'm in my church capacity, and when I'm here on the floor, I'm in my personal capacity.* And you're just like, *Come on.* It's silly. But that was his workaround. He was just trying his best to find some way to not violate the law.

Pastor Jeffress [conservative megachurch pastor Robert Jeffress] doesn't have that concern. He's not worried about where he's saying it! Or anything else! So they've been running [around] basically saying to America, *Republicans love religion, Democrats hate God.*

And the last 30 years, Democrats have basically said, *We have no argument with that.*

Democrats seem institutionally ill prepared for the opportunity you're describing.

We've been in a situation in which Democrats rarely want to speak about faith voters or even identify or understand faith voters. In 1992, the Democratic [tracking] system removed 'faith identity' from the voter file, even organized by faith tradition. If Elie Wiesel was right that the opposite of love is not hate, it's apathy, the fact that Democrats don't even know, or care, or think about this is a real problem.

We've worked really hard to try to help Democrats overcome their fear and phobia of faith voters, and help faith voters overcome their fear and phobia of Democrats. Because it's not good for politics. It's not good for religion. Pastors feel it. Parishioners feel it. Political parties feel it.

In other words, Republicans have a food addiction when it comes to religion, and Democrats have an allergy. And we'd like to see, we'd like to see both of them have a healthier relationship. Anything that can get us greater parity and conversation about political and religious identity, we think would be a very good thing.

You're confident Democrats can fish for votes in the pews?

Ninety percent of Black church attenders vote for Democrats, while 80 percent of white evangelicals vote for Republicans. But the difference in the faith between a Black church member and a white evangelical, it's not very great.

In fact, Black churches are sometimes more conservative socially, theologically, but they'll vote for Democrats.

We think a lot of Democrats could really benefit from this [new opportunity to communicate with faith voters.]

A big percentage of people who vote for Democratic presidential candidates are white Christians. Nearly 70 percent are religious people overall. Literally, the base of the Democratic party are religious people, and are white Christian people as well. But inside the Democratic Party it's like, *We've never even heard of these people. We don't know who they are and how are they living in America.* It's the strangest thing.

We just released a [big poll](#) on Christian voter identity, and 80 percent of Christian voters have said they're open to voting for a Democrat, including 40 percent of people who have never voted for a Democrat in their life. We know there's a real opportunity here.

To play devil's advocate on this. I [reported](#) during the campaign on Trump joining a Christian nationalist broadcast promising to roll back the Johnson Amendment. To the extent that churches more explicitly become the GOP's turnout machinery, no holds barred, that could really deepen their advantage.

It could. But I think there's going to be all kinds of blowback.

The churches that were already comfortable endorsing, despite the lack of clarity the Johnson Amendment, were doing it anyway. There is about 20 percent of the religious community where that's hard-wired into their political identity — and they're going to run wild. But their clientele is only so big.

There's a lot of conservative Republican pastors who've been doing a wink-and-nudge of endorsement. They don't say anything from the pulpit, but they put out a voter guide, and it all hints in one direction. But they don't ever have to own it. They're not going to be able to skate so comfortably down that road.

In working with faith voters, we meet people all the time. They're like, *I've gone to this church for six years. I had no idea they were wanting me to vote for Trump. I wouldn't have stuck around if I knew that. We never talked about it. And then there was all this implication that came right at the last minute.*

And there are a lot of conservative pastors that didn't want the Johnson Amendment to be clarified for churches in this way. They're like, *Oh, you gotta be kidding me. Now I'm going to have that person in my church say, flat out, 'Why do you not endorse Ron DeSantis for President?' Right?*

This is going to create more openness, more honesty. It's just going to clarify the relationship between pastors and their parishioners. Our politics and our religion in America could use more honesty, could use more openness, and could use more clarity on issues like this that matter.

Folks are pointing to this ruling as a further collapse of the wall between church and state. Does that trouble you?

We do a lot of work to try to stem Christian nationalism. We are deeply afraid of that. Some Republicans think that there's no way to be Christian without being a Christian nationalist. And some Democrats think there's no way to be talking about faith without also becoming Christian nationalists. Those things are not the same!

There are Christian nationalists. They are a real problem. We need to respond to them. But that doesn't mean you should just take the near 80 percent religious identity of America that is Christian, and say: *Don't talk about it. Ignore it.* It has not worked well for Democrats. And anything that gets us to a place that lessens the disadvantage that is faced by Democrats is a good thing.

What about your faith tradition leads you to believe the Democrats are a natural fit with religious voters?

The particular movement from the hyper-neocon conservatives, through the Tea Party, now into MAGA — that whole continuum has become toxic in its narrative about the American people's relationship with one another. It's pitting people as good guys and bad guys, and patriots and enemies, in a way that is just really volatile. Not only to the American story, but really to the Christian story — as people try to recognize that loving one another is essential, whether that be with your neighbor, or your enemy, or yourself.

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We ask candidates and voters to consider making a love-in-politics pledge. If people come from the Christian tradition, we ask them to look at the section on love from the book of First Corinthians. Love is patient; love is kind; love is gentle; love is self control. And we say, if you see any of that in the current political movement on the Republican side, then feel free to vote your conscience. And if you don't? Don't feel that somebody's forcing you to do that because of some version of your faith.

Look, religious people don't vote for Donald Trump because they think he's like them. They vote for Donald Trump because he keeps telling them that he *likes* them. Democrats keep saying, *We don't even recognize you*. And that's that's the problem. The problem for Democrats is not about policy, because most religious people don't think a lot about policy.

It's about identity and where you feel welcomed. And Democrats seemingly work really hard to try to say to religious people, *We don't care one bit about your religion.* Give us your vote. But please don't think about how religious you are when you're doing it. It doesn't make a lot of sense.