

Exploring Public Opinion on Three Key Issues for Radio Ministries:
Fairness Doctrine, Hate Crimes Legislation, and the Employment Non-Discrimination Act

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While there are a number of issues critical to the survival and functioning of radio ministries, and in many cases Christian ministries overall, Christians are not necessarily aware of or engaged on these issues. We examined public opinion polling data on three issues particularly important to radio ministries: employment non-discrimination in hiring by religious organizations, hate crimes, and the so-called “fairness doctrine.”

The fundamental finding of this analysis is that Christians’ opinions on these issues are not what we would expect them to be if they understood the threat that federal action on each of the issues might pose to a variety of Christian organizations including radio ministries. As we will discuss in more detail later in this analysis, radio ministries and others who help shape the opinion of Christians on these issues may need to do more to educate them about the importance of these issues and the implications of them for ministry organization.

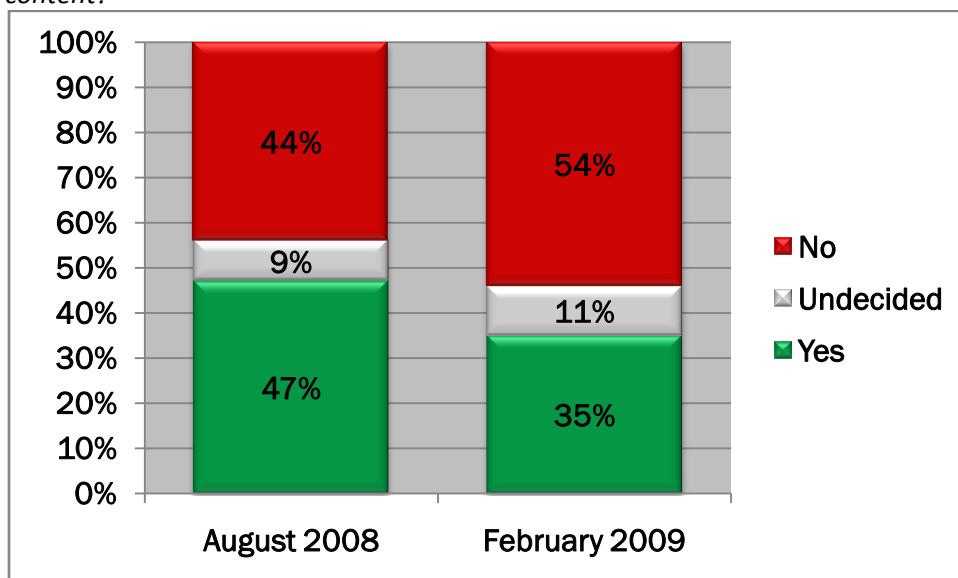
In order to explore these important issues, we explored the publicly available data on each of these questions. Because some of these topics have not been in the immediate policy debate recently, not all of the data we found was of immediate recency. However, for the purpose of this overview we feel the magnitude of the observed data is sufficient to reach some general conclusions about the opinions of Christians on these issues.

Fairness Doctrine

Reinstatement of the fairness doctrine has been more or less off-the-table as a policy issue since control of Congress changed in 1994. The recent change in control of both the White House and Congress has reintroduced the possibility of the fairness doctrine being revived. This poses a real threat to radio ministries as codification the fairness doctrine could force ministries to avoid any commentary that could be interpreted as relating to political or policy issues or face having the stations that carry them be cited by the FCC for violation of the doctrine. The real danger in this possibility is the “chilling effect” the doctrine could have on stations who could feel pressure to pro-actively drop some radio ministries in favor of left-leaning content or simply drop radio ministries entirely in favor of Christian music of other content that would not put them in fairness doctrine jeopardy.

Against this background, it is worth exploring the opinions of Christians regarding reinstatement of the fairness doctrine. A brief survey of the available public polling reveals no recent polling for which data among Christians is available. However, Rasmussen has conducted two recent polls for which sub-group data among social conservatives—a reasonable proxy for committed Christians—is available. The exact question wording and data were:

Should the government require radio stations to have equal amounts of conservative and liberal content?



This data shows an interesting and important shift based on increased awareness of the fairness doctrine issue. August of 2008 represents a period before the Presidential election and before there may have been widespread awareness of the fairness doctrine. At this point, the question may have carried more of an element of requiring balanced coverage of the Presidential campaign, a question which was likely to be answered in the affirmative by conservatives frustrated with what they perceived to be unfairly positive coverage of Barak Obama. This could account for the plurality of respondents who answered “yes.”

Five months later, on the other hand, there has been enough discussion of the possibility of a revived fairness doctrine on both Christian radio and other conservative radio for Christians and other social conservatives to begin to understand the implications of “requiring radio stations to have equal amounts of conservative and liberal content.” As a result, opposition to the fairness doctrine has increased dramatically.

There is, however, much room to raise awareness and increase the proportion of Christians who oppose reinstating the fairness doctrine. If Christians and other conservative voters are not vociferous in their opposition to the doctrine, it is unlikely that other voters are going to provide a core of opposition to it. It is therefore important that radio ministries let their listeners know about the threat that the fairness doctrine could pose to their ability to continue their missions so that much more than the bare majority we see here is opposed to the doctrine should the process of reinstating it become more active.

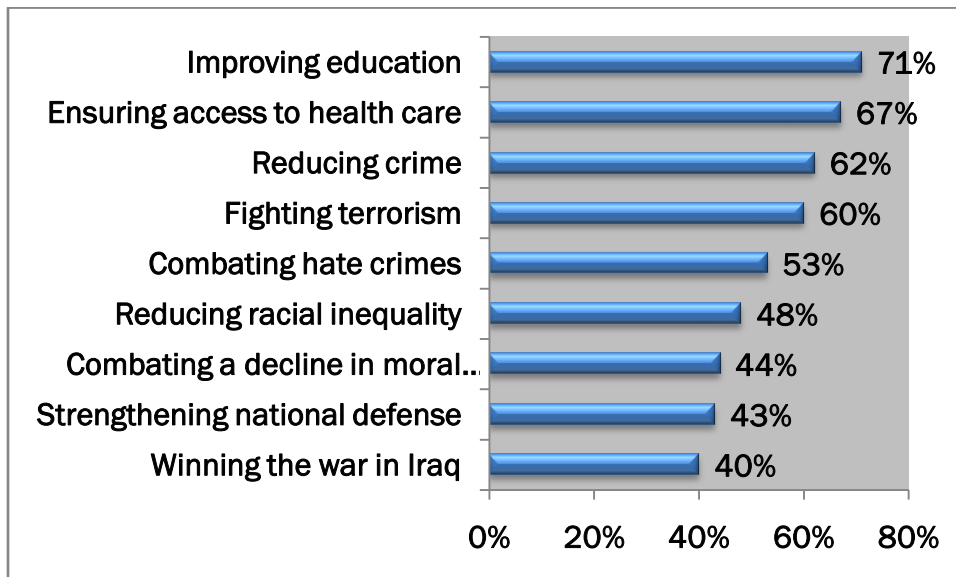
Hate Crimes Legislation

Another issue of potential importance to radio ministries which might soon re-emerge on the policy stage is hate crimes legislation. As we know from the experience of ministries in Canada, where hate crimes laws are already on the books, these laws can be used to prosecute radio ministries for

discussing biblical positions on issues such as homosexuality and other topics. Having such laws on the books in the U.S. would present another real danger to the viability of radio ministries.

Much like the fairness doctrine, hate crimes laws have not been a “hot button” issue for the last several years of Republican-controlled government. So there is once again not the same amount of polling data available as we see for topics that have been part of the policy agenda for the past decade. However, a Princeton Survey Research poll conducted January–March, 2005 gives us some interesting data on Christians’ feelings on these issues. Data below is from the interviews of Christians in this survey.

Percentage of Christians saying each of these issues should be a top priority



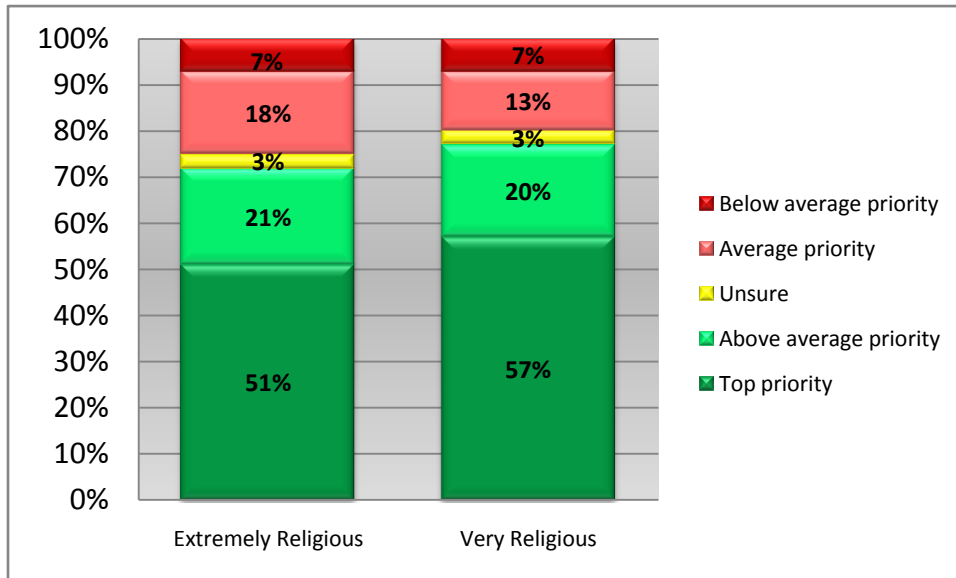
As the reader can see, a majority of Christians consider combating hate crimes to be a top priority for future legislation. Despite the fact that this is less important to them than a variety of other topic areas including education, health care, crime and terrorism, it still reflects a lack of understanding of what a hate crimes bill would potentially mean for Christian institutions including radio ministries.

Again in this data we see Christians taking what would likely be a predictable policy position if they were not fully aware of the implications of the proposed resolution to the problem. Reasonable people will agree that reducing hate crime, indeed reducing crimes of any sort, is a laudable goal for

government action. However, greater awareness of what hate crimes laws would do to the radio ministries they count on could be counted on to shift opinions on this issue.

We may also see some element of this effect based on the difference between the opinions of self-described “extremely” and “very” strong Christians. The data below shows this break-down.

Importance of “combating hate crimes” by strength of religiosity



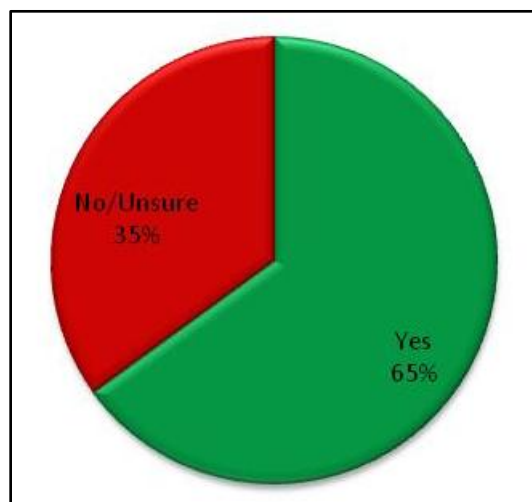
Self-described “extremely religious” Christians are already slightly less likely to think of combating hate crimes as a top priority than are self-described “very religious” Christians. This may indicate that the most religious Christians, those already likely to be the recipient of radio ministry communications and similar communications, already have some understanding of the issues that would face Christian organizations if hate crimes legislation were enacted. But it is important to keep in mind that even among those who may already be beginning to get this understanding, a majority thinks of combating hate crimes as a top priority. This reinforces the idea that there will have to be a significant educational effort if Christians are going to oppose a hate crimes bill or support an exception that will protect radio ministries.

Employment Non-Discrimination Act

The employment non-discrimination act exception for religious organizations is another area where the recent changes in Washington could pose a threat to radio ministries. Repealing this exception has long been part of the agenda of secularist activists and with control of both Congress and the White House in the hands of Democrats these activists can expect at least a friendly hearing and perhaps action on this element of their agenda.

There was not any recent data available regarding the underlying issue of applying the employment non-discrimination act to religious organizations screening applicants based on their religion overall. However, there was some data available from a Pew Center for People and the Press poll conducted in March of 2001. While this survey asked about requiring “faith-based” organizations that received federal funds to not discriminate based on the religion of an applicant, the strength of the opinions among evangelical white Christians gives us an indication that they may not understand the importance of allowing religious organizations to ensure that their employees share their faith and values and could suggest that white evangelical voters would be similarly confused about the implications of a general ban on religious discrimination by religious organizations.

Opinions of white evangelical Christians regarding whether faith-based organizations that receive federal funds should be forbidden to discriminate based on religious beliefs in hiring decisions.



Again we see indications that Christians may not fully understand the implications of a policy question to the institutions and organizations they value most. Even if we assume that the presence of “federal funding” in this question increases the percent of Christians who responded “yes”, it is still troubling that nearly two-thirds of them did so. This is a worrying indication that even without the modifier of “federal funding” Christian voters might either support or at least might not sufficiently oppose removing the Employee Non-Discrimination Act exception.

Again, as with the other topics we have examined in this analysis, this seems to be an education issue illustrated by the findings that Christian voters do not fully understand the implications of the policy changes being considered. Educational efforts by radio ministries and others in a position to influence opinions will be key to ensuring that critical opposition to change in this policy is there when it needs to be.

Summary and Recommendations

In this analysis we have examined three policy areas of potentially critical importance to the safety and perhaps even to the survival of radio ministries. In all three cases these are issue areas that have been largely dormant for a decade or more due to Republicans controlling at either Congress, the White House, or both and thus being in a position to block the agenda of the left on these issues. Now, with a wholesale change in control of the government these issues have re-emerged and imminent federal action on any one of them or several of them is a possibility.

Unfortunately, the data we examined at least suggests that Christians do not fully understand the implications of these policy proposals for the ministries they support. In the case of the fairness doctrine a majority of Christians likely opposes the policy, but the level of opposition is much lower than we would expect if they fully understood the implications of the policy. In cases like hate crimes and the

Employment Non-Discrimination Act, it is clear that Christians probably do not fully understand the implications of proposed changes for ministries and other faith-based organizations.

These cases suggest the need for a widespread and coordinated education campaign to ensure that Christians have the information they need to make an informed decision on all of these issues when action on them in Washington becomes imminent. We therefore recommend that all religious broadcasters consider taking the following actions:

- Include discussion of these issues and their potential implications on your ministry in your broadcasts on more regular basis.
- Research the most effective messaging for your organization to communicate to your members on these issues so you can help convey the immediate threat at hand.
- Begin regular research into the opinions around these issues and regularly track movement of these opinions.
- Provide more detailed information in written newsletters and updates.
- Consider developing an “issues alert” bulletin—or including these issues in an existing one—that will keep your supporters informed about the course of these issues in Washington. This may be done as a complement to NRB monitoring of these issues, but should include your own ministry “brand” to maximize the attention your supporters pay to these critical issues.
- Direct your supporters to NRB for more information and information about how they can get involved on these issues.