Repealing the Johnson Amendment would cost taxpayers billions

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A repeal on the ban on church electioneering would end up costing U.S. taxpayers billions.

The recently proposed tax reform bill includes a repeal of the Johnson Amendment as it applies to churches. This is a simple rule that prevents churches and other 501(c)(3)s from engaging in partisan politics. If the Amendment is revoked, political contributions could flow through churches and become tax-deductible donations. This would cost the American taxpayer $2.1 billion over 10 years in lost revenue, according to the congressional Joint Committee on Taxation.

Thomas Barthold, the chief of staff of the joint committee, testified before the House Ways and Means Committee on Monday, Nov. 6. Rep. John Lewis, D-Ga., asked him about the price tag of the proposed repeal. Barthold's answer is worth a listen. Here's the exchange.

FFRF continues to strenuously oppose efforts to repeal the Johnson Amendment and believes that it is a common-sense rule that keeps America's nonprofits nonpartisan. Without the Johnson Amendment, any mega-donor could cut the nearest church a check — for any amount — and take the tax write-off. The pastor could then spend the donation on anything, including political campaigns or attack ads. Churches would become super-PACs — unregulated, unaccountable, opaque super-PACs. Regular PACs would have to reorganize as churches because their donors would have fled, giving their donation, now tax-deductible, to churches.

Poll after poll shows that Americans want to keep politics out of their pulpits. According to Lifeway Research, an evangelical polling group whose slogan is "Biblical Solutions for Life," nearly 80 percent of Americans oppose pastors endorsing a candidate in church and 75 percent oppose churches publicly endorsing candidates.
Congress should listen to the American people and avoid a massive loss of tax revenue — as well as the destruction of our democracy.