



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on January 18, 2012

Texas Conservative Confab Exposes Fragmented Evangelical Vote

At a closed-door session of over 120 evangelical social conservative leaders January 17, Santorum won a three-ballot contest, winning the final vote by 75 percent, according to the [Family Research Council](#). "The focus here was on people putting aside their preferences, putting aside the candidate they had signed up with, trying to reach a consensus," Perkins said at a press conference following the event, which included such conservative Christian luminaries as Focus on the Family founder James Dobson and former presidential candidate Gary Bauer, founder of the conservative action group [American Values](#).



[Bauer insisted](#) that the meeting was not an attempt to stop front-running Republican candidate Romney, but told Fox News that "Senator Santorum is gaining some momentum right now, and I think what people are hoping to accomplish ... is just try to see what can be done to make sure that conservative values, the sort of Reagan conservatism, continues to dominate in the Republican Party."

In pronouncing Santorum the conservative Christian candidate of choice, Perkins claimed that the former Pennsylvania Senator "has consistently articulated the issues that are of concern to conservatives, both the economic and the social, and has woven those into a very solid platform. And he has a record of stability.... He's reliable."

But not all evangelicals and social conservatives were on board following the vote. More than a few notable Christian leaders insisted that former House Majority Leader Newt Gingrich is the only candidate with the intellect and political savvy to defeat Obama in November 2012. Among those voicing their disagreement over the results in a press statement were former Oklahoma Congressman and African-American pastor J.C. Watts; noted Christian pollster and political analyst George Barna; the Rev. Jim Garlow, a California pastor and leader in the defense of traditional marriage; and the Rev. Richard Lee, a noted Baptist pastor in Atlanta.

"It is unfortunate that early press reports incorrectly stated that there was a consensus for Santorum, or that the '150 leaders endorsed Santorum,' " the dissenting Christian leaders said in their statement to the press. "Such was not the case. Many there were and still are for Newt Gingrich."

While expressing their respect for both Santorum and fellow GOP candidate Rick Perry, they added that "we believe Newt Gingrich to be the only candidate that has the intellectual strength and the capacity to stop the left's attack on morality, the economy, basic freedoms, and our religious liberty."

Additionally, said the Christian leaders, "Mr. Gingrich is the social conservative that has the capacity to raise funds and produce a national organization that would allow him to compete with and defeat Barack Obama. For the sake of the nation, we remain steadfastly committed to Newt Gingrich."



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The [New York Times](#) noted that the foursome were not the only Christian social conservatives to eschew Santorum in favor of Gingrich. In an e-mail following the Texas meeting, [Liberty University Law School Dean Matthew Staver](#), whom the *Times* identified as “a co-chairman of a faith coalition that supports Mr. Gingrich,” wrote that the only consensus among “evangelical and faith leaders centers on values for any nominee and not for any particular candidate.”

Another prominent Christian, pro-family leader backing Gingrich is Don Wildmon, founder of the [American Family Association](#), who declared in a statement that “this election is the most important in the history of our nation. Our culture has become saturated with corruption and immorality. I firmly believe the future not only of our nation but all of Western civilization is at stake.”

Wildmon recalled that in the past “Christian conservatives have split their votes among three or four candidates,” allowing the “moderate-liberal wing of the Republican Party to capture the nomination.... The only way to prevent this from happening is for evangelical Christians to stick together and vote for the same person. I have decided to support Newt Gingrich and I hope you will rally behind him. I believe that the former Speaker of the House is the best qualified electable conservative candidate to make the changes needed in Washington.” He warned that if “conservatives split their vote three ways, then liberal-moderate candidate Romney is a cinch to win.”

Of course, there are some conservative Christian leaders who are firmly behind Mitt Romney, among them Jay Sekulow and his son Jordan, who lead the conservative legal advocacy group [American Center for Law and Justice](#), founded by another conservative Christian leader (and former presidential candidate) Pat Robertson.

[Baptist Press News](#) reported that last December in Romney’s home state of Massachusetts, “several social conservative leaders ... issued a joint letter to ‘fellow conservative friends,’ saying that Romney is a true social conservative.” Among those signing the unofficial letter of endorsement for Romney was Joseph Reilly of the group [Massachusetts Citizens for Life](#); Kristian Mineau of the [Massachusetts Family Institute](#), and Gerald D. D’Avolio of the [Massachusetts Catholic Conference](#).

“Some press accounts and bloggers have described Governor Romney in terms we neither have observed nor can we accept,” the conservative state leaders wrote in the letter. “To the contrary, we, who have been fighting here for the values you also hold, are indebted to him and his responsive staff in demonstrating solid social conservative credentials by undertaking the following actions here in Massachusetts.”

The letter then listed Gov. Romney’s conservative, pro-family accomplishments in the state, which the leaders said included fighting for abstinence education, vetoing a bill that would have provided minors with access to the “morning-after pill,” vetoing another that would have opened the door to embryonic stem-cell research, working to overturn a state court’s same-sex marriage ruling, and using an obscure 1913 law to prevent out-of-state homosexual couples from getting “married” in Massachusetts.

[Time](#) magazine noted that at the Texas meeting of evangelicals, author and political adviser Doug Wead made a speech in support of Ron Paul. After the meeting, recalled Wead, “I had people swarming me asking me for my card. They said, ‘My kids and grandkids support Ron Paul. As a born-again Christian, explain to me how you came to support him.’ They are curious.”

Of the meeting the [Washington Times](#) reported that there seemed to be an underlying suspicion among many present that the whole affair was orchestrated for the sole purpose of synthesizing an evangelical endorsement for Santorum over Gingrich. “By the time the weekend was over, it was clear that this had



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been definitely planned all along as a Rick Santorum event,” Wead, the only invited Ron Paul supporter, recalled. “The organizer was for Santorum, the person who created the invitation list was for Santorum, the emcee was for Santorum, and after making sure all of the Gingrich people had vented early, the last three speakers before the vote were for Santorum.”

Wead added that the whole idea “of evangelicals meeting this late to select a candidate always struck me as incredibly naïve, almost stupid. It is way too late for that.”

One vocal conservative Christian leader, the Rev. Robert Jeffress of First Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, said that ultimately the meeting in Texas did little more than expose the lack of agreement among evangelicals for who they would like to see run against Obama. “The real division is between the idealists who are looking for the right president, anybody but Romney,” Jeffress observed, “and the pragmatists who don’t want to cut off their access to the next president, who they think will be Romney.”

Photo of Rick Santorum: AP Images

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