

To: Sentinel Action Fund
From: OnMessage Inc.
Date: August 2026
Subject: Focus Group Findings

OnMessage is pleased to report findings from a recent series of focus groups. This series consists of six groups of 10-12 mixed-gender participants. In Michigan on August 18, 2026, we conducted three focus groups of center-right Evangelical voters, Jewish voters, and mixed-propensity Republican voters, respectively. In North Carolina on August 20, 2026, we conducted three focus groups of center-right Evangelical voters, swing voters, and mixed-propensity Republican voters, respectively.

Our recent series of focus groups explored center-right and persuadable voters' views on religious freedom, antisemitism, and the rise of extreme rhetoric from the far-left. Overall, this project made clear that voters have awareness of threats to religious freedom and religious-based violence that are on the rise, and the issue has become vote-motivating for key segments of voters. **Voters who care about these issues in both states are primed to vote Republican.** This memo consists of our key findings across both states, along with our analysis and recommendations in each respective state.

KEY TAKEAWAYS - MICHIGAN

- Issues surrounding religious freedom, antisemitism, and Islamic extremism are tangible for Michiganders. Jewish voters, even those who aren't supportive of President Trump nor are historical Republican voters, described legitimate fears for their personal safety which they see as being driven by the left. Evangelical voters similarly feel threats against open expressions of faith are on the rise.
- Even standard Republicans are alarmed by what they've seen from the left, whom they see as pushing a harmful agenda when it comes to antisemitism and Israel as a whole.
- Across the groups, voters have seen the issues we discussed as increasingly important and vote determinative for many. That is due in part to the ethnic and religious tensions they have witnessed in their daily lives, and what they describe as a far-left extremist in Abdul El-Sayed being on their ballots this fall.
- In Michigan, voters are seeing the rise of socialism mirror a rise of Islamic extremism, which is becoming united in the minds of many.

KEY TAKEAWAYS – NORTH CAROLINA

- North Carolinians across all three groups are aware of rising threats to religious freedom but feel them less acutely. They are angered by what they see as the left's failure to condemn violence and extreme rhetoric but are less certain that it's affecting their state today. However, they do fear it eventually could.
- More daunting to them is the overall trajectory of the Democrat Party, particularly its acceptance of socialism. Voters aren't ready to call Roy Cooper a far-left extremist, but they do see him as becoming a party line vote with other Senate Democrats who are pushing policies out of touch with most North Carolinians.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM & ANTISEMITISM IN MICHIGAN

In Michigan, both the Evangelical group and the Jewish group made clear that domestic issues of religious freedom and antisemitism have become vote determinative to them. Evangelicals fear that outward expression of Christianity is becoming shunned, while Jewish voters have legitimate fears about their daily safety. They see religious discrimination as posing very tangible danger to them.

"Religious freedom is under attack... It exists, but we see that they have shut down different religious issues. Christianity always gets bashed, period, and nobody cares about that. You can bash another religion, and they'll come at you like you're crazy."

– Male Evangelical Voter

"It always scares me... how do we know when these kids are getting out of their cars and getting dropped off someone isn't going to drive by and start shooting at all the children?"

– Female Jewish Voter

They see the left as becoming increasingly radical on issues of religion and antisemitism, and also incoherent in terms of their party's values. To both groups, the driver of the rise in antisemitism is a Democrat party that has been unsupportive of both Israel and Jewish Americans also has normalized extreme rhetoric against Christians and Jews. Meanwhile, they view the Democrat party as unwilling or unable to denounce Muslim extremism and values that undermine our core tenets as a country.

"Jewish people have been targeted a lot... always. You have a candidate running for Congress that can't stand the Jews... Antisemitism is almost like a norm now, politicians are afraid to say stuff about it..."

They'll say Israel's not a legal state"

– Exchange from Evangelical Group

"Our democracy doesn't feel threatened by the Christians, it doesn't feel threatened by the Jews. But there's a large section of popular radicalism that's popping up that does threaten exactly what America is here in Detroit, in New York City... [from] radical Muslims."

– Female Jewish Voter

Moderator: "Who's pushing the anti-Jewish message?"

Evangelical Voters: "The left. Islamic groups."

On the other hand, these voters are clear in trusting the Republican party more on religious freedom and standing up to antisemitism. Jewish voters went as far as to say that issues of Jewish safety have superseded traditional voting priorities for them, like abortion access. A candidate who does not support Jewish Americans and calls for an end to aid to Israel is outright disqualifying to them. Both Evangelical and Jewish voters in Michigan equate support for Israel with support for Jewish Americans.

"I'm not a fan of Trump, but I think he's a good example of someone who does mostly support Israel... It's all the same, Israel, Judaism, Zionism... I do agree they are mostly the same."

– Exchange from Jewish Group

When asked about voting priorities in 2026, Jewish voters were extremely straightforward in the importance of fighting antisemitism and stopping Abdul El-Sayed:

"I probably would have agreed with [other issues being top of mind] before October 7th. It would take something really, really bad or extreme for me to vote on something else [besides antisemitism]."

"I never in my wildest dreams would have thought I'd consider [voting Republican], but it's leaning towards that because I really don't like [Abdul El-Sayed] at all."

Taken together, we found conclusive evidence that center-right, religion-oriented voters in Michigan are not only motivated by issues like rising antisemitism, Muslim extremism, and the left's inability to contain either, but that these issues will be vote determinative for them in the Senate race.

Our standard Republican voters in Michigan are aware of the issues of threats to religious freedom, and willing to say the left is pushing a harmful agenda when it comes to antisemitism and Israel as a whole. To them, these issues are slightly less acute, but they recognize the impact they're having in their area. They are clearly primed to continue voting for Republicans on the issue, particularly with Abdul El-Sayed on the ticket. Their focus is more so on the overall shift leftward of the party, though, of which religious freedom and extreme rhetoric are contributing pieces. However, they aren't as energizing due to these issues as our more religion-oriented voters.

Moderator: "Who would you say support Jewish Americans more?"
Republican Voters: Trump, Republicans.

"I think there's a small faction of Democrats with a very strong voice right now that seem to be anti-Judaism, or Christianity. But if you're looking at the progressive Democrat Party, it seems to be the very squeaky wheel right now."
– Female Republican Voter

Michiganders made it clear that the Democrat Party's threats to religious freedom are no longer on the back burner for any center-right voter. Violent rhetoric is on the rise, and they are ready to push back. These groups made us feel confident that center-right Christian and Jewish voters can be activated along these lines, particularly in response to Abdul El-Sayed.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM & ANTISEMITISM IN NORTH CAROLINA

Center-right voters in NC are aware that there have been challenges to religious freedom and increased tensions across the country but aren't feeling them as directly as Michiganders yet. One respondent noted that in the South they feel freer than other parts of the country. Others described that while America has strong legal religious protection there is growing social pressure surrounding the issue. Some went as far as saying you were allowed to talk openly about LGBTQ issues but would be rejected for sharing religious views that weren't seen as accepting.

"Legally I think we are the most free country in the world. I think culturally because these issues have become so charged I think people feel less free to express themselves, so they're more inclined to keep it to themselves."

– Male Republican Voter

"I think in the near future [religious freedom] is going to start constricting... I think society is changing. Somebody brought up the transgender thing, and it's almost like you're the big bad wolf if you want to go say something that you're against. If you say homosexuality is a sin, you really get blacklisted if you say something like that."

– Exchange from Evangelical Group

While North Carolina voters are less concerned about the rise of Islamic extremism and diminished religious freedom, it would be wrong to say they believe it isn't a problem. They simply believe it is a problem that American institutions can handle, at least in the short term. However, when we prodded and expanded the timeframe in question, they were significantly more willing to accept that the left's stance on the issues will cause serious problems down the road. Many acknowledged that extreme leftist rhetoric like Mamdani's commentary on Israel could be linked to increased attacks against Jews and that failing to call out the extremism will create more problems.

"What did they expect when they voted Mamdani in? Did they think he was just going to be welcoming to every group of people? Now they're paying for it. Jewish people are dying."

– Female Evangelical Voter

"I don't agree with [Mamdani's language] because it causes hatred ... When a candidate goes into office, do his constituents get emboldened, like 'everybody's thinking like me, we can take off our disguise now and show our true colors?' It seems like it..."

– Exchange from Swing Group

Voters in each group plainly stated that Republicans were more supportive of Christians and Jews, while Democrats were more supportive of Muslims. **They see Republicans as more willing to protect religious freedom.** However, it's worth noting that in North Carolina the issue does not have the urgency that it does in Michigan yet in terms of vote motivation. Evangelicals said it would be something they think would be motivating to likeminded members of their church and that our conversation was effective in making them see the importance of supporting Republicans because of the issue.

"[To my friends at church], I think the freedom of religion angle might be more persuasive [to get them to vote]."
– Male Evangelical Voter

Moderator: "Do you think about religious freedom when you go to vote?"

Evangelical Voters: "Not in the past, but now moving forward when you see more and more of the stuff like Minneapolis, and Zohran swearing in on the Quran for the first time ever in this country I think about it... Had I thought about religious freedom going to the voting booth? No, because I still believe we have religious freedom... It's incremental, a gradual concern now."

CONCERNS ABOUT THE RADICAL LEFT AND THE RISE OF SOCIALISM

Participants in both states commented on the overall trajectory of the Democrat Party – a theme which can prove effective in both states. In Michigan, the rise of Islamic extremism and socialism are seen as hand-in-hand, arriving at the same time. In North Carolina, we found that the rise of progressive and socialist politicians has raised alarms for voters and they view it as opening the door for attacks on religious freedom and violence.

The tension going on in the Democrat Party is apparent to all center-right voters. There is a disconnect between the values of inclusivity they seem to be chasing and the beliefs of some of the politicians they are welcoming with open arms. Multiple participants spoke about an evolution away from what they believed was a more 'traditional' Democrat Party.

"The Democrat Party is two different parties. You've got the traditional Democrats, which I don't mind... Then you have the other part of the Democrat party which are socialists, communists, and Muslim extremists. They're trying to hold the party together but they're having a civil war. They're not the Democrat Party I grew up with, they're dangerous, they don't know what they want to be. They're trying to get as many votes as they can, so they're appealing to different groups, and the groups make no sense."
– Male Jewish Voter, Michigan

"I heard an expression: suicidal empathy. You can't speak out against anything because 'you're okay, everybody's okay.' It comes off as weak to me. The left tends to lean that way to me."
– Male Swing Voter, North Carolina

In Michigan, we found that Abdul El-Sayed represents both the advent of socialist policies and heightened threats to religious groups. In North Carolina the conversation had a different tune. Voters are not yet ready to call Roy Cooper an extremist. However, we found mounting evidence that they believe he could be a gateway to Democrat extremism at the national level.

Respondents in North Carolina summed up what electing Roy Cooper would mean well, saying:

"I think Cooper would just vote along with them. The Democrats just vote lock-step always. Rarely do you have a Democrat Congressman or Senator that doesn't vote along with all the other ones... The real threat is a Democrat majority, regardless of how Cooper votes or doesn't vote. If he gives them a majority... that's the real danger."

– Exchange from Evangelical Voters, North Carolina

CONCLUSIONS

Michigan and North Carolina proved to be incredibly useful foils to each other when it came to evaluating growing concerns about religious freedom, socialism, Islamic extremism, and antisemitism. In Michigan, the fight on these issues has arrived and voters are already thinking about them as they head into the 2026 elections. They are seeing radical Democrats, Islamic extremism, and a rise in antisemitism/threats to religious freedom that are not abstract. They are tangible, vote determinative, and create legitimate fear. Accordingly, we see the imperative of voting Republican to protect religious freedoms as primed to play out in Michigan this cycle.

In North Carolina, comparatively, voters understand that tensions on these issues are on the rise but are unsure when they'll become a primary concern for their state. More plainly, they know there has been an increase in religious violence against Christians and Jews and are angered by Democrats' failure to condemn the rhetoric that enables it. It seems more distant to their community today, though. While they surely can be motivated to vote Republican on issues of religious freedom, they are not as top of mind today as they are in Michigan.

In both, we found overwhelming evidence that the center-right can and will move towards voting Republicans on these issues, particularly in states and races where Democrats nominate extreme candidates. In expanding these findings to other states, we would recommend leaning into what opening the door to Democrat control enables. Namely, that's an unchecked wing of their party that has no issue with extremism and seemingly little desire to prevent violence that comes from their misguided talking points.