Christian Conservatives Lean Toward Carson, Cruz, and Walker – So Far
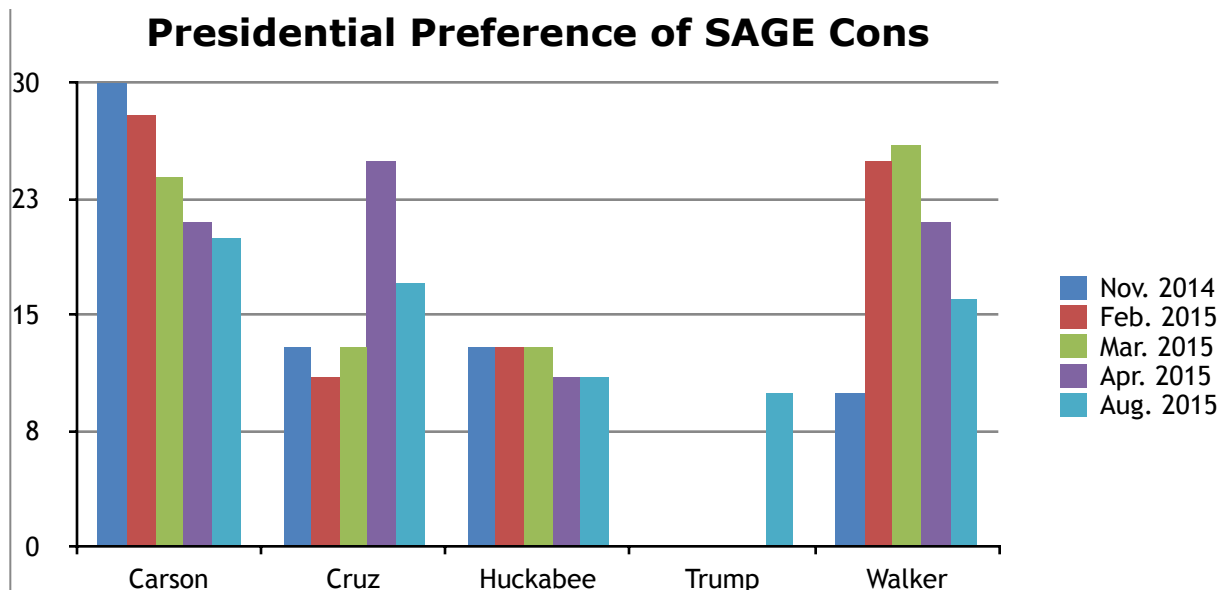
Aug. 31, 2015 – If it were up to spiritually active Christian conservatives, the 17 candidates currently seeking the Republican presidential nomination could be whittled down to just three: Ben Carson, Ted Cruz, and Scott Walker.

The American Culture & Faith Institute (ACFI, the research division of United in Purpose) has been measuring the appeal of Republican presidential candidates among Christian conservatives since the end of the 2014 mid-term elections, through its RightView™ tracking survey. Over the course of its election-related surveys since last November a consistent pattern has emerged.

ACFI focuses upon tracking a particular segment of Christian conservatives, a group labeled SAGE Cons. The name is an acrostic for **S**piritually **A**ctive, **G**overnance **E**ngaged Conservatives. That moniker refers to the fact that these are individuals who are actively pursuing their Christian faith, are actively involved in the political process, and possess conservative theological and political beliefs. They represent a large share of what the media would call social conservatives, although the two groups are not interchangeable.

Immediately after the mid-term elections in November – and long before any of today's candidates announced that they were running for the nomination – a RightView™ survey revealed that the preferences of SAGE Cons were Ben Carson (30%), Ted Cruz (13%), Mike Huckabee (13%), and Scott Walker (10%). Even before the large assembly of candidates emerged, some well-known politicians failed to capture the support of SAGE Cons, such as Jeb Bush (4% support in November 2014), Rand Paul (5%), and Chris Christie (1%).

There have been changes in the results produced by the surveys conducted since last Thanksgiving. The largest change has been the sudden rise of Scott Walker, jumping from 10% to 25% following his breakthrough speech at the Iowa Freedom Summit in January. The other major change was the entry of Donald Trump into the race in June. He immediately hit double figures in support (10%), although he is not close to the top of the heap among SAGE Cons.

Presidential Preference of SAGE Cons

Perhaps the most noticeable pattern has been the steady decline of Ben Carson, who has dropped from 30% immediately after the mid-terms to 20% today. The drop in Carson's support is attributable to the expanded field of candidates as well as a shift in people's preferences.
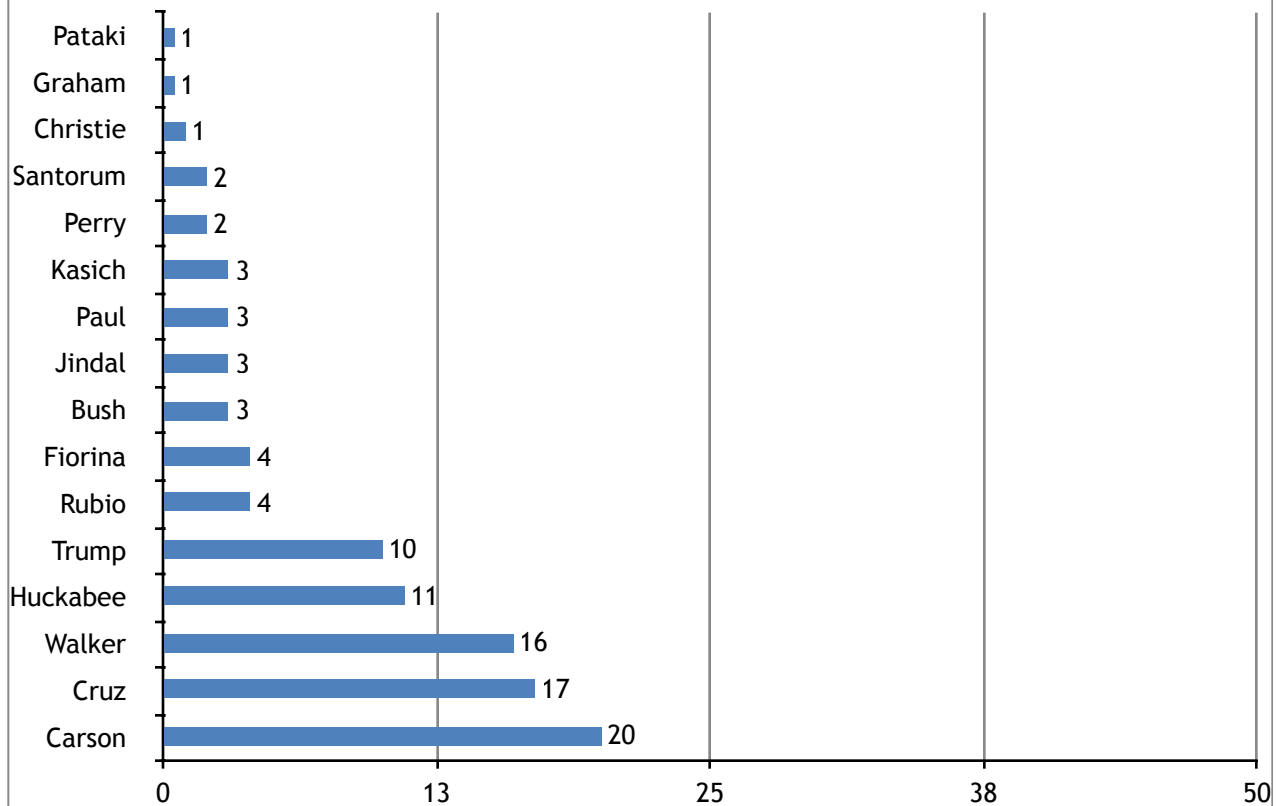
Also noteworthy has been the surge-then-decline of Scott Walker. Starting with 10% support, he jumped to 25% in February, largely due to his nationally-heralded performance at the Iowa event, maintained that standing in March (26%), but has since slid to 16%.

Another candidate whose numbers have been somewhat volatile is Ted Cruz. After opening the season at 13%, the Texan peaked at 25% in April – immediately after the wave of publicity following his candidacy announcement – before dropping to 17% in August.

The only candidate who gained significant support from SAGE Cons between April and August was Carly Fiorina, who rose by three points after her debate performance in July.

The result is currently a five-man race for the hearts of SAGE Con voters. The August 2015 results show Carson still leading, with 20% of the SAGE Con support, followed closely by Cruz (17%) and Walker (16%). Trailing them are Mike Huckabee (11%) and Trump (10%), with no other candidates generating more than 4% support from this segment of voters. Marco Rubio and Carly Fiorina each registered 4%; Jeb Bush, John Kasich, Bobby Jindal, and Rand Paul each received 3%; Rick Perry and Rick Santorum garnered 2% apiece; and Chris Christie had 1%. Lindsey Graham and George Pataki each earned less than one-half of 1% of the total support.

Presidential Preference of SAGE Cons, as of August 2015

Candidate	Value
Pataki	1
Graham	1
Christie	1
Santorum	2
Perry	2
Kasich	3
Paul	3
Jindal	3
Bush	3
Fiorina	4
Rubio	4
Trump	10
Huckabee	11
Walker	16
Cruz	17
Carson	20

The profile of those within the SAGE Con base who support the various candidates is interesting, if generally lacking in surprises. In exploring the sources of support for each candidate, Carson, Cruz, and Walker were typically the top three candidates drawing support from each demographic segment studied.

- Strong conservatives constitute nearly two-thirds of the SAGE Con constituency. They were most supportive of Cruz (21%), Carson (18%), and Walker (17%). Mild conservatives favored Carson (22%), then Walker (14%) and Huckabee (11%).

- Veterans, who comprise one-fifth of all SAGE Cons, were equally supportive of Cruz (17%), Carson (18%), Walker (19%) – and Trump (16%). Graham, known as a "defense hawk," picked up less than one-quarter of one percent from SAGE Cons.

- Church attendance patterns impacted candidate support. While those who faithfully attend church services at least once a week were most supportive of Carson (21%), Cruz

(16%) and Walker (15%), the people who rarely attend church services were most likely to back Trump (22%).

- The SAGE Cons under 30 years of age were most attracted to Rand Paul (23%). Those at the other end of the age spectrum – 65 years of age or older – went with the usual top-three of Carson (19%), Walker (18%), and Cruz (15%).

- SAGE Cons who are very conservative on fiscal matters placed Ted Cruz at the top of their list (21%) while those who are very conservative on social issues put Carson at the head of theirs (20%).

- Respondents who identified themselves as strong supporters of the Tea Party named Cruz as their favorite (32%) followed distantly by Walker (17%) and Trump (14%).

The August survey of more than 2,600 conservatives also provided an indication of which candidates are doing best among the SAGE Cons in several of the critical swing and early-primary states.

- Arizona: Carson and Cruz are tied for the lead.
- Florida: Carson holds a slim lead over Cruz.
- North Carolina: Cruz, Carson, and Walker are in a three-way tie.
- Ohio: Cruz and Carson are tied for the lead.
- Pennsylvania: Carson holds a 10-point lead over Walker and Cruz.
- Virginia: Walker leads Cruz by four points.

The survey was conducted online in August among 2,638 respondents drawn from a panel of more than 35,000 previously-screened adults who qualify as SAGE Cons.