

When Should a Political Candidate's Religion Become a Campaign Issue? How Mitt Romney's Mormonism Has Become a Factor in His Previous and Current Races

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This article examines Mitt Romney's campaigns in Massachusetts for the U.S. Senate in 1994 and for governor in 2002, and his current campaign for the presidency in order to better understand how candidates should present their religious beliefs to the public, how the media cover a candidate's religion, and what affect that coverage has on the campaign. Such questions are particularly important to candidates and their electoral fortunes when the candidates' religious beliefs fall outside the mainstream (not Protestant or Catholic) and stories circulate about those beliefs. For Romney, who is Mormon, religion was a storyline that he was forced to deal with in each of his Massachusetts campaigns (especially in the 1994 election). By examining Romney's campaigns in Massachusetts we will not only see how the media covered his religion and how Romney responded, but we also gain a greater understanding of the challenges and opposition Romney faces because of his religious beliefs in his campaign for the presidency. Moreover, the lessons presented here are of value not only for studying Romney and other Mormon candidates but also for other political candidates from non-traditional Christian faiths.

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In recent years the influence of religion on politics has become more recognized in academia, the media, and among politicians. In the political science literature, for example, studies have ranged from examining religious groups' participation in campaigns to how religion influences voting behavior. The news media in covering campaigns and discussing election results often highlight the importance of religion, and candidates themselves frequently and openly discuss their religious beliefs.

Although the influence of religion on politics has been covered more in the literature and the news media in recent years, relatively little attention has been dedicated to how candidates should present their religious beliefs to the public, how the media cover a candidate's religion, or what affect that coverage has on the campaign. How a candidate and the media discuss a religion is especially important to a candidate and his electoral fortunes when the candidate's religious beliefs fall outside the mainstream (not Protestant or Catholic) and stories circulate about those beliefs. This is currently happening with Mitt Romney, a Mormon,¹ who is running for the Republican nomination for president. Romney has the credentials to be a viable candidate for president, but a number of pundits have said that Romney's biggest hurdle in getting the nomination is his religion. Such commentary begs the questions of the role of the media in covering a candidate's religion and how candidates like Romney should handle questions about their religion.

To examine questions about the media's coverage of a candidate and his religion and how it affects the candidate and the campaign, this paper examines Mitt Romney's campaigns in Massachusetts (when he ran for the U.S. Senate in 1994 and for governor in 2002), and his current campaign for the Presidency. In each of his Massachusetts campaigns (especially in the 1994 election), religion was a storyline that he was forced to deal with. By examining Romney's campaigns in Massachusetts we will not only see how the media covered his religion and how Romney responded, but we will also gain a greater understanding of the challenges and opposition Romney will face because of his religious beliefs in his campaign for the presidency this year. The lessons presented here ought to be of value not only for studying Romney and other Mormon candidates but also for other candidates for elected office who are not members of mainstream Christian faiths.

Background of Mitt Romney

Mitt Romney is the son of George Romney, a former governor of Michigan and Presidential candidate in 1967. After serving a 30-month mission for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormons) in France, Romney married, graduated summa cum laude from Brigham Young University, and then went to Harvard where he graduated cum laude from law school and received an MBA and was designated a Baker Scholar from Harvard's business school. He had a very successful and lucrative business career working in management consulting with Bain and Company and co-founding a private equity investment firm called Bain

¹ Mormon is a nickname for members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. LDS is also a recognized abbreviation of the church's name. Throughout this paper Mormon and LDS will be used interchangeably.

Capital. In 1994 he ran for the U.S. Senate and presented Senator Edward Kennedy with the stiffest election battle of his career. Romney gained more fame when he became the chief executive officer (CEO) of the Salt Lake Winter Olympics in 1999, where he was credited with turning around an organization that was mired in massive debt and plagued by scandal into a successful and profitable Olympics that many believed could not have been run any better. Massachusetts Republicans courted Romney to come back to Massachusetts to run for governor, and he was elected in 2002. He did not seek reelection in 2006 and instead prepared to run for the Presidency. He has been married for 38 years and has five children and 10 grandchildren. Romney's accomplishments are impressive, and he is in many ways the ideal Republican candidate. He is a devoted family man, successful businessman, governor of a populous and prosperous state, good-looking, well spoken, and smart. One big caveat prevents him from being the perfect candidate, however--he is a Mormon.

Public's Perception of LDS Church and Voting for a Mormon

Persecution and lesser forms of derision have been the lot of Mormons since the church's founding in 1830. In the church's early years, its members were driven from their homes by mobs in Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois, and Joseph Smith, the church's founder and first president, was martyred by a mob in Illinois in 1844. Shortly thereafter the main body of members began heading west to avoid further persecution. They eventually headquartered in Salt Lake City and Utah while also colonizing numerous settlements throughout the west. Persecution followed them to Utah, though, and continues in some forms even today. Although angry mobs no longer hunt down Mormons and governors do not issue executive orders to exterminate Mormons, as the Missouri governor did in 1838, there remains substantial misunderstanding and hard feelings toward Mormons.

Hofstadter (1964) describes how the American mass media has often demonized Mormons and other non-traditional faiths by raising fears that, if elected, religious zealots might take control of the United States. Additionally, some sectors of the mass media have portrayed the LDS church and other non-mainstream religions as deviating from accepted norms (Hampshire and Beckford, 1983). Valenti (2004) describes how she was pleasantly surprised by the sense of normalcy and decency she experienced in Utah that seemed to be at odds with the oddities associated with how Mormons are presented in the mass media. Breen (2001), in describing media coverage of a broad spectrum of religious groups, notes that non-traditional faiths like the LDS Church are often covered as if they were scandals or 'freak shows.' When Time magazine presented feature stories about the LDS church, Scott and Stout (2006) suggest the Mormons are portrayed more as a financially successful organization than a religious institution that focuses on mainstream Christian values. As it relates to politics, some scholars have criticized the Mormon Church hierarchy for instructing its adherents to vote as a block for moral issues such as restrictions on alcohol and same-sex marriage that the faith opposes (Campbell and Monson, 2003).

For those who are not religious, the LDS church is criticized for its stances on abortion, gay marriage, and its generally conservative views and teachings of social and moral issues. On

the other hand, many Christian churches are openly hostile towards Mormons and preach against Mormons from their pulpits, calling the LDS church non-Christian and a cult. Such criticism stems from differences in LDS doctrine from most Christian sects. LDS differ in their view of God (Mormons believe God has a body of flesh and bones), their belief in God the Father and Jesus (Mormons believe they are distinct and separate beings), the acceptance of additional scriptures (Mormons accept the Book of Mormon and other modern revelations to be God's word along with the Bible), among other differences. Evangelicals, despite agreeing with Mormons on many moral and social issues, are particularly harsh in their criticisms of Mormon doctrine.

These doctrinal disagreements and at times misunderstandings have translated into one of the main reasons people may be reluctant to support Romney for president. Several public opinion polls the last few months show that about one-third of the public will not vote for Romney because he is LDS, regardless of whether or not they agree with his policy positions. When these polls compare a Mormon candidate with someone of another faith, people are shown to be potentially much less likely to vote for a Mormon than a candidate who is Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish, although voters are more likely to vote for a Mormon than a Muslim, Scientologist, or Atheist.

Romney is not the first member of the LDS church to campaign for the Presidency, although he is generally considered the Mormon with the best chance to garner widespread support. Joseph Smith, the founder of the faith, declared his candidacy for the Presidency in 1844 and ran on a progressive platform that included expanded religious rights, the purchase of slaves for the purpose of freeing them, and using populist principles to grow the economy. Romney's father, George Romney, ran a full-scale campaign for the Presidency in 1967-68 and was thought to be a viable candidate for those who did not support eventual GOP nominee Barry Goldwater (Hewitt, 2007). Other Mormons who campaigned to become President include Democrat Morris Udall in 1976 and Republican Orrin Hatch in 2000.

In short, religion will be an important factor in the presidential campaign and may substantially affect Romney's chances of winning the nomination. This, of course, is not the first campaign in which Romney has had to deal with questions about religion on the campaign trail. To better understand what issues might arise on the campaign trail this year and how he might address these questions, we now turn to his campaigns in Massachusetts to examine the role religion played in those campaigns.

The 1994 Senate Campaign in Massachusetts

Even before Mitt Romney announced his candidacy to be the Republican nominee for the U.S. Senate to challenge Senator Edward Kennedy, whispers and concerns began surfacing from other Republican candidates and their campaigns that Romney's religion would hinder his ability to be a viable challenger to Kennedy (Editorial 1994a; Daly and O'Hanlon 1994). These whispers grew louder after Romney announced his candidacy. Romney recognized those concerns and tried to head off more when he announced his candidacy by drawing a distinction between his religion and his public life: "My church makes it very clear that religion and politics and one's personal views on political issues are quite separate" (Editorial 1994a).

Initially, the most vocal of Romney's critics was Gene Hartigan, campaign manager for Janet Jeghelian, one of Romney's challengers for the Republican nomination. Hartigan argued that if Romney were nominated he would be forced to spend valuable campaign time talking about his religious views rather than on what it would take to defeat Kennedy. In response, Charles Manning, one of Romney's aides, said, "There is no rational way to combat the religious bigotry of the Jeghelian campaign. Mitt Romney's reputation is one of being honest, good man. And I guess if he has to fight religious bigotry in this campaign he will do it." The Republican state party chair also asked the Jeghelian campaign to apologize to Romney and his family. However, Hartigan defended himself, arguing he was "not attacking Mitt Romney for being Mormon. I am saying that his church doctrine doesn't support his political positions." Hartigan contended he was raising a political question, not a religious one, and it was a question Romney would have to explain during the campaign. (Phillips 1994a).

In responding to Hartigan the Romney campaign used a refrain that it was to use repeatedly throughout the campaign whenever questions were raised about his religion – his religion was out of bounds and he would not talk about it. "It is the view of the Romney for Senate campaign that religion should not be an issue for any candidate for public office. We sincerely believe that in Massachusetts in 1994, a candidate's religious beliefs should not be a campaign issue, but rather something that is personally and privately held in their church and in their heart" (Phillips and Aucoin 1994).

Romney's Church Callings Pose Problems

Although Romney and his campaign proclaimed they would not talk about his religious beliefs, this did not stop the media and other candidates from raising questions about Romney's religion and forcing Romney to talk about it. It was inevitable that questions would be raised, of course. If religion is something that is important to a candidate, there is likely going to be stories about the candidate's religion, regardless of their faith. If a candidate's religious beliefs are unusual or out of the mainstream, they will receive even more attention. It is no surprise, then, that Romney and his religion drew so much attention: his religious beliefs are important to him, many people do not know much about the LDS church and consider its beliefs peculiar, and Romney held high-level lay positions in the church for many years. From 1981 to 1986 he served as bishop in Belmont, Massachusetts and then stake president in that area until March of

1994. The bishop is the chief clergyman of a congregation, or what the LDS would call a ward and the stake president presides over a number of these wards. As stake president Romney presided over 14 wards in Massachusetts (Phillips and Aucoin 1994). Thus, not only was Romney tied with a church that many deem as weird, but he also was part of the church's hierarchy in Massachusetts, and seen as responsible or at least needed to explain the church's stances on various controversial issues such as the church's position on abortion, blacks, women, and gays. Moreover, Romney was forced to respond to stories that came up about things he did or said as a church official.

In July a story surfaced in which some church members claimed Romney had criticized homosexual behavior the previous fall in a church meeting with about 250 to 300 single Mormons. A person at the meeting recounted that Romney "said he was appalled at the incidence of homosexuals in the congregation. He went on to say that he found homosexuality both perverse and reprehensible." Three other people at the meeting agreed with this account. Romney disputed their recollections of his talk. "I specifically said they should avoid homosexuality and they should avoid heterosexual relations outside of marriage. I did not use the words perverse or perversion. I just said it was wrong....That is what my church believes." The bishop of the ward corroborated Romney's version of the story (Lehigh and Phillips 1994a).

Another issue that came up involved the counsel he had given as a bishop to a single mother who was pregnant. The single mother, in an account corroborated by a longtime friend and an aunt, claimed that Romney had threatened her with excommunication if she did not give her baby up for adoption. Romney rebutted this charge, after receiving permission from the woman to give a "limited statement" on the counseling advice he considered confidential. He explained that she did not work, was living on welfare, already had another child, and had many problems that he would not go into in order to protect her privacy. He denied he had made any threats of excommunication and said after she had the baby the Church gave welfare funds to help support her. The Romney campaign also released a statement from two Mormon leaders who worked with Romney who said "he has never advocated any such sanction" against single mothers (Phillips and Lehigh 1994a).

In the Republican debate held September 1, both of these issues were raised again when his opponent, John Lakian, directly asked Romney about the woman's claim that he had counseled her to give her baby up for adoption and the allegation that he had called homosexuality a perversion. Romney responded strongly: "I'm sick of it. I'm tired of the Mormon stuff. I'm not running for Cardinal, I'm running for the Senate of the United States." He also accused Lakian of sending out a flyer to the gay community saying Romney was a "former Mormon bishop." Romney continued, "This consistent bringing up of Mitt Romney, former Mormon bishop, I think that's inappropriate. I haven't mentioned your religion. I don't know what it is. I don't care what it is." (Battenfeld 1994a). Lakian denied he had ever questioned Romney's religion and that it had not crossed his mind or mouth, but he then slipped up and referred to Romney as "Mr. Mormon" even as he was denying it. Lakian denied any responsibility for the flyer but after the debate he admitted that his campaign paid for the mailing and that he saw the flyer before it was mailed. (Battenfeld 1994a; Woodlief 1994; Jacobs 1994).

Throughout the campaign Romney said he believed that women had the right to have an abortion, but the Kennedy campaign tried to cast doubt on whether he would protect abortion rights. A story that first appeared in a local feminist publication and was picked up by the mainstream media helped Kennedy's cause in raising questions about Romney's support of abortion. The story was about a woman who wanted an abortion, but Romney, in his role as her bishop, pressured her not to have one. Although Romney did not remember this case, he said, "As an official of the church, I did my best to represent the teachings of the church, but when you ask me what I think our society should do, I believe society should allow individuals to do whatever they choose and live by whatever beliefs they have. It is not the role of government to make choices for individuals" (Lehigh and Phillips 1994).

Romney's Religion and the Kennedys

Initially Romney received support for keeping his religion and politics separate from an unlikely source - his Democratic opponent, Senator Edward "Ted" Kennedy. Kennedy, months before Romney won the Republican nomination, weighed in on the issue: "It is not an issue and it shouldn't be. President Kennedy and the American people settled that question in the 1960 campaign. It was a proud moment for the country, and this issue should never be raised again" (Farrell 1994).

But several months later Senator Kennedy faced a different political circumstance and felt differently about bringing up Romney's religious beliefs. By September Romney not only looked like he would handily win the Republican primary but poll numbers revealed a very close race in a head-to-head match-up between Kennedy and Romney. With Kennedy confronting the toughest election battle of his career, the Kennedy campaign changed strategy and began drawing attention to Romney's religious beliefs and questioning the role of women and blacks in the church.

Just a few days before the Republican primary, Joseph P. Kennedy, Senator Kennedy's nephew and at the time a member of Congress, said in a *Boston Herald* article that Romney was "part of the white boys club" and that the LDS church treats blacks and women as "second-class citizens."

Romney responded, "Joe Kennedy has a very inaccurate perception of my faith" (Editorial 1994b). The Romney campaign called on Senator Kennedy to repudiate his nephew's comments, but the Kennedy campaign wanted the story to continue. Senator Kennedy's spokesman said "Joe Kennedy was speaking out against prejudice against women and minorities. He has every right to speak his mind." A Romney spokesman responded, "This means, very obviously, that Senator Kennedy is breaking his word and is going to try to raise the religious issue in this campaign and I think that's disgusting" (Battenfeld 1994b).

Joe Kennedy continued to attack the LDS church for its treatment of blacks and women during the next few days, and he joked that his brother, who was Senator Kennedy's campaign

manager, had “let me out of my cage.” He said, “I’m finding the life of a pit bull is a very difficult one.”

Joe Kennedy was forced to back off some of his claims, though, and he admitted he made a mistake when he claimed that blacks could not hold the priesthood. He said he was unaware the policy had been changed in 1978 (Mohl 1994). Just five days after Joe Kennedy’s initial attack on Romney’s religion, he called Romney to apologize for the remarks he had made about the church and wrote a letter to the *Boston Globe* in which he said, “I deeply regret my remarks” that misrepresented the church’s positions on blacks and their ability to hold the priesthood. However, the Romney campaign remained upset because in the apology he wrote to the paper he again reiterated the falsehoods and brought up the story that Romney had counseled a single mother to give her new baby up for adoption. (Phillips 1994b).

Senator Kennedy entered the fray a few days later. At a Northeastern University groundbreaking ceremony, Kennedy, in response to a reporter’s question, said he thought Romney should be asked about his religion. “Where is Mr. Romney on those issues in terms of equality of race prior to 1978 and other kinds of issues in question?” (Lehigh 1994).

The next day Romney held a press conference in which he charged Senator Kennedy of violating his brother’s stand on the separation of church and state in public life. “In my view the victory that John Kennedy won was not for just 40 million Americans who were born Catholic, it was for all Americans of all faiths. And I am sad to say that Ted Kennedy is trying to take away his brother’s victory.” “He will intentionally try to reverse his brother’s victory...either with self-proclaimed attack-dog Joe Kennedy or by himself, continuing to raise my faith from now until the election to make sure I am constantly ...categorized in the minds of the voters on the basis of my faith.”

Like his nephew, Senator Kennedy said he thought questions about Romney’s religion were fair game but then reversed himself a few days later after editorials, public opinion polls, and his brother’s own words condemned his criticism of Romney’s religion. Although some polls indicated Senator Kennedy had been hurt by making religion a political issue (Phillips and Lehigh 1994b), it likely worked to his advantage. By continuing to bring up Romney’s religion, stories continued to circulate about his comments about homosexuality, encouraging the single woman to give her baby up for adoption, the church’s policy of keeping blacks from holding the priesthood prior to 1978, and the misperception that the role of women is limited in the church (Lehigh and Phillips 1994b; Battenfeld and Miga 1994). It was a calculated effort by the Kennedy campaign to focus attention on Romney’s religion, something of which most people in Massachusetts did not know much about, and it effectively knocked Romney off-message and forced him to talk about religion rather than the issues he would have liked to discuss. (Nolan 1994).

Even though public opinion polls indicated the race was tight for a time, near the end Kennedy pulled away and won the election with 58 percent of the vote to Romney’s 41 percent – the smallest margin of any of Kennedy’s elections. Although religion played an important role in the campaign, few people believe that religion cost Romney the election. Rather it was the

dormant Kennedy team kicking it into gear when they could see that Kennedy was in trouble and could lose the election. Moreover, rather than religion being the source of criticism, Kennedy was most successful attacking Romney's much-ballyhooed business career and portraying him as a cold-hearted capitalist who had little regard for the working man.

The 2002 Gubernatorial Campaign in Massachusetts

Romney returned to Bain Capital after his defeat to Kennedy and became CEO of the Salt Lake City Winter Olympics in 1999. He was credited with turning around a scandal and debt ridden operation into a very successful Olympics in 2002. His good looks, speaking ability, and his success managing the Olympics garnered him a friendly media spotlight. Even before the Olympics were over, speculation abounded over what Romney's next step would be and what political office he might seek. Massachusetts Republicans lobbied Romney to run for Governor. The issue was sticky because Republican Governor Jane Swift took office after Governor, Paul Celluci was appointed U.S. Ambassador to Canada. Swift intended to run for governor in 2002, and Romney had said the year before that he would not challenge a sitting governor of his party. However, Republicans wanted Swift out. Her low approval ratings offered little hope that she could defeat a Democratic candidate. Because of pressure from Republicans to drop out of the race, Swift decided not to run, which opened for Romney an uncontested path to the Republican nomination. In the general election he faced Shannon O'Brien, the state treasurer, who won the Democratic nomination after a bruising primary battle.

In the 2002 campaign, Romney's religious beliefs again became an issue in the campaign (Keller 2002), although it was not brought up nearly as much as in the 1994 campaign. Some speculated that it was partly because O'Brien, who is Catholic, did not want to bring up religion because with the sex abuse cases hanging over the church, she could not bring up Romney's religion without raising questions about her own faith (Paulson 2002).

Gay rights and gay marriage were issues that attracted more attention in 2002 than they had in Romney's first campaign. O'Brien, throughout most of the campaign, said she supported civil unions but did not support gay marriage. With just a few weeks before the general election, however, she reversed herself and promised, if given the opportunity, to sign legislation legalizing gay marriage. The Romney campaign pounced on O'Brien for changing her position: "Shannon O'Brien changes her mind so often that she looks like a weathervane in a hurricane. It's clear that Shannon O'Brien has no convictions and will say whatever is politically convenient," a Romney spokesman said. Romney maintained he was against gay marriage and civil unions but was for civil rights for gays, including health insurance coverage and inheritance rights. An O'Brien spokesman said Romney was not in a position to say he supports gay rights and brought up the allegation first leveled during the 1994 campaign that in a church meeting Romney had called homosexuality "perverse." Romney's spokesman retorted, "To dig up some old disproven allegations that were refuted in order to make a religious smear is unfortunate and intolerant of Shannon O'Brien. She pledged not to make religion an issue." (Klein and Ebbert 2002; Sullivan 2002).

One story that continued attention to this issue revolved around Romney's gift of \$1 million to Brigham Young University, a LDS church-owned university in Provo, Utah, to help endow the Institute of Public Management in his father's name. BYU has an Honor Code that prohibits "homosexual conduct," and many individuals and groups voiced criticism of BYU's policy and of Romney for not trying to do anything to change it. Although O'Brien did not comment on this story, her running mate, Chris Gabrieli, did, saying that Romney's \$1 million donation was an endorsement of BYU's stance. "You buy into the whole package when you make a donation," Gabrieli said. The Romney campaign said the \$1 million donation was given to support BYU's "education mission" and that Romney is not in the position to change BYU's policies toward gays (Ebbert 2002).

There were of course other stories in the campaign about Romney's religion that caused a stir for a few days. One was a charge levied by Robert Coard, the president of Action for Boston Community Development, a prominent antipoverty agency. He said, "A lot of folks have questions about the [LDS] church in regard to blacks and women. [Romney] needs to prove what he has done with regard to people of color." Coard said the question about people's "color should be raised even more with [Romney] than with Shannon [O'Brien]." Commentators condemned Coard for his words (Keane 2002; Editorial 2002), and O'Brien tried to distance herself from the charge and her spokesman said Romney's religion should not be a factor in the election (Beardsley 2002). For his part Romney replied to this challenge with the same mantra he had many times used, "I'm certainly not going to have a campaign about religious issues. I'm going to focus on opportunities for people of all backgrounds." Aides pointed out that as head of the Olympics he had selected minorities for several prominent leadership positions and many contracts were given to minority-owned companies.

Like the 1994 campaign, Romney was repeatedly asked about his religion in debates and interviews and other settings. Even though his campaign team said they would not talk about his religion, they had no other choice but to do so as questions continued to arise about his church and its doctrine. He consistently drew a line between his religious beliefs and what policies he would support and frequently referred to President Kennedy's stance on the separation of religion and politics. In one of the debates with O'Brien, Romney tried to reassure voters they had nothing to be concerned about with his religious views: "People should be entitled to their own beliefs, and I would in no circumstances impose my views on another person" (McElhenny 2002). Unlike the 1994 election, though, Romney pulled away from O'Brien and won the election with almost 50 percent of the vote to O'Brien's 45 percent.

The 2008 Presidential Campaign

Mitt Romney announced February 13, 2007 he was running for President. Months and even years before the official announcement there were columnists and pundits speculating on the effect Romney's religion would have on his chances to get the Republican nomination – and with good reason.

Although some have made the case that Romney's religion will not be a factor, judging from his previous campaigns in Massachusetts and recent public opinion polls, it may. Religion may not have affected who won in his Massachusetts races, but it was still a factor in what Romney had to talk about and the amount of copy dedicated to it in the newspapers. And Massachusetts is a state whose voters would not focus on religion as much as voters in many other states. Moreover, public opinion polls taken within the last several months indicate Romney's religion will be a big factor in his efforts to secure the Republican nomination. In general the polls reveal about one-third of the electorate may refuse to vote for a Mormon for President. For example, in July 2006 a *Los Angeles Times* survey showed that 37 percent of respondents would not vote for a Mormon for President. In November a Rasmussen Reports survey found 43 percent of American voters would not consider voting for a Mormon. The *Wall Street Journal*/NBC News Poll in December found that 27 percent would have "some reservations" about voting for Romney and another 35 percent said they would feel "very uncomfortable" about a Mormon in the White House - a total of 57 percent that would have at least some misgivings about voting for Romney because of his religion. A *Washington Post*/ABC Poll in December found that 35 percent said they were less likely to vote for a Mormon. A Fox News/Opinion Dynamics poll taken in December of registered voters found that 29 percent of evangelicals said they were less likely to vote for Romney because he is Mormon. A *USA Today*/Gallup poll in February found that 24 percent of the public would not vote for a well-qualified Mormon and 33 percent of Republicans said they would not vote for a well-qualified Mormon. In all, only 54 percent said they would feel "completely comfortable" voting for a Mormon. In a February *Washington Post*/ABC News poll 29 percent said they would be less likely to vote for a Mormon candidate and 38 percent of white evangelical Protestants said they would not vote for a Mormon.

Just as poll numbers highlight the importance of Romney's religion in the campaign and the public's bias against Mormons, the number of stories discussing or referring to Romney's religion do as well. Table 1 shows how often a candidate's religion is mentioned in newspaper stories. The data is derived from a Lexis-Nexis search of articles of all major newspapers on the Lexis-Nexis list of major newspapers from November 8, 2006 to the end of March, 2007. These dates start the day after the midterm election and cover the first quarter of 2007 when many candidates were rumored to be running or announced their candidacy. For each candidate two searches were conducted: one included their name and religious affiliation and in the other just their name was used. The same article could be counted for different candidates.

The Table shows that Romney's religion was much more likely to be featured or at least mentioned in a story than the religion of other candidates. Some of the stories were about Romney's religion and its affect on the campaign, but many were stories not related to his religion but thrown in with Romney's name nevertheless. Indeed, it seems the news media is fixated on Romney's religion.

The questions about Romney's Mormonism that are arising in the 2008 Presidential campaign are somewhat different than those concerns that arose in previous Massachusetts races. For Massachusetts voters, the difference in LDS theology from Protestant and Catholic doctrine was more of an oddity than a reason not to vote for a Mormon candidate. Instead in Romney's

Massachusetts campaigns the LDS church was portrayed and criticized for treating women and minorities as “second class citizens” – to use Joe Kennedy’s term – stemming from the church’s opposition to abortion and the Equal Rights Amendment, not allowing women to hold the priesthood, and not giving blacks the authority to hold the priesthood until 1978. Most voters in Massachusetts disagreed with the church’s position on these issues so Romney’s opponents tried to attack him by criticizing the church. Romney responded by trying to draw the line between the church’s beliefs and his beliefs and tried to convince voters he did not answer to church leaders.

One of the problems Romney may have to overcome in winning the Republican nomination for the Presidency is gaining the support of evangelicals, which is a different task from what Romney had to do in Massachusetts. Because evangelicals are such an important component of the Republican Party, this group has a large say in who gets the Republican nomination. Although the LDS church shares common ground on a host of policy positions with evangelicals, the problem Romney faces will be the deep-seated animosity that many evangelicals have toward Mormons. For many evangelicals it will not be enough for Romney to have the same policy and social views, because the difficulty they have with Romney is not his church’s stance on social issues but rather their fundamental disagreements with Mormon doctrine (e.g., Hill 2005; Novak 2006; Reilly 2006). Evangelicals do not believe Mormons are Christians and some go so far as to call Mormons a cult.

Others suggest, though, that many evangelicals may be willing to support any candidate who is thought to be on the right side of the culture wars, even if that person is LDS (e.g., Antle 2006; Eastland 2006; Elliott 2006). Nancy French, who organized the website “Evangelicals for Mitt” suggests that voters will warm up to Romney because of his stance on mainstream Christian moral issues and not spurn him because of his faith. French said, “Evangelicals and Mormons both tend to be politically conservative and...will care less about the Mormonism and more about the man” (Elliott 2006). Antle (2006) contends that Romney may well get support from evangelicals if he can convince them that he is consistently strong about such pro-life issues as abortion, contraception and the use of stem cells from embryos. Still, Antle warns that Romney may be perceived by some born-again Christians as not being fervent enough on these concerns, and statements Romney made in his senate and gubernatorial campaigns will haunt him in these efforts.

In a notable effort to gain wider public acceptance for Romney and other LDS candidates for national office, Mormon filmmaker Mitch Davis developed a website titled “RunMittRun.org” (Proctor, 2006). The website featured irreverent video commercials featuring prominent Mormons, including National Football League quarterback Steve Young and entertainer Donny Osmond. The theme of each commercial asked the question, “Can A Mormon be President?” The website is no longer active and has since been converted a new site titled “OurSharedValues.org” The “Shared Values” website points on the common ground that the LDS Church shares with other Christian faiths.

The Role of Public Relations in the Romney Campaigns

Amy Sullivan speculated in *Washington Monthly* (2005) that much of the anti-Mormon sentiment can likely be overcome with good public relations and providing enough information so the electorate can get to know the candidate.

A score of researchers have commented on the extent to which increased attention is being placed on the role of public relations, advertising and marketing in political campaigns. The general feeling is that candidates and causes are continuously using advanced public relations and marketing efforts to shape the view of the public. As a result, the importance of public relations as a campaign tool grows from election to election and, in the minds of critics, may be out of control and may unfairly influence the political process (Esser, Reinemann, & Fin, 2001). Bennett (2007) notes how the use of the Internet and WWW has made it easier for politicians and their marketing and publications experts to build a “brand name” for their candidate, just as one might sell cars or cereal. Gattone (2002) suggests that a wide range of public relations efforts including image making, responding to attack ads, and the development and deployment of TV and multimedia all play a critical role in shaping public perceptions and manipulating the electorate to support your cause. The net effect, Blumer and Kavanagh (1999) argue, is that a “Third Wave” of political campaigns has been created in which public relations and marketing efforts are strong influencers of how much of the public will vote in an election.

The most effective of public relations involves much more than merely obtaining publicity and spreading the candidate’s message. The truly effective public relations that Sullivan and others speak of also focuses on building lasting relationships with stakeholders by listening to their concerns and adjusting the organization’s philosophy and activities in relation to their feedback. Rawlins (2007) suggests that building and maintaining relationships with the most important stakeholder groups is at the essence of what public relations professionals should strive to achieve. Dougall (2005) emphasizes the importance of evaluating the extent to which public relations efforts successfully build long-term relationships. If Romney and his staff develop and implement a sound public relations program (Wilcox, 2007), people will likely be more inclined to cast votes for the candidate, not the faith the politician adheres to. This happened with Romney in Massachusetts: people saw how he led the state on a day-to-day basis and the generally positive results that followed. Good public relations, however, is not likely going to be enough, though, with many evangelicals, who oppose Mormons doctrinally and may be reluctant to vote for someone who they feel belongs to a cult.

Discussion

Even though Romney wishes it were not, his religion is undoubtedly a big part of his campaign. Polls and the number of stories referring to his religion prove this to be true. The prospects of a Mormon president will possibly lead to a more negative, mudslinging campaign than we are accustomed to. Although other candidates are unlikely to be too forward in criticizing Romney’s religious beliefs or engage in Mormon-bashing directly, many outside groups will. Some with a religion bent who believe Mormons are not Christian and even a cult may attack the LDS church and its beliefs in an effort to keep a Mormon from being president.

Those who do not want a Republican to be president or disagree with his policies will also attack his religious beliefs as a means to bringing him down. Potentially, this campaign season will feature more attacks on a religion than we have seen before and with the growth of YouTube.com as well as 527s and other groups, the candidates won't have to be the ones with the anti-Mormon attacks.

As an illustration of what kinds of opposition Romney may face, one has to look no further than the Arizona gubernatorial election of 2002 (Sullivan, 2006). LDS congressman Joe Salmon was running neck-to-neck with a Democratic candidate, Arizona Attorney General Janet Napolitano, for the open seat. Less than a month before Election Day, third party candidate Dick Mahoney began running patently offensive television commercials that attempted to link Salmon with fundamentalist sects that still practice polygamy along the Arizona-Utah border. The ads attempted to weaken the credibility of Salmon, even though it is widely known that these sects are not in any way a part of the LDS Church and that Mormons who take part in these polygamous relationships are automatically excommunicated from the faith. Sadly, the ads worked in discouraging people (especially women) in voting for Salmon, even though they ironically did not significantly increase the numbers of individuals voting for Mahoney.

It will also be interesting to see how the mainstream media cover these attacks and Romney's religious beliefs in general. It would seem as though the American public should be past the point where candidates for public office are judged or ridiculed because of their faith. Yet a different standard seems to apply to Mitt Romney and presumably any other Mormon who seeks the presidency. As we saw in Romney's Massachusetts campaigns and so far in this campaign, the Mormon candidate is often put in the position of having to answer for his church or to explain church doctrine. In his Massachusetts campaigns, for example, Romney was criticized and questioned about women not holding the priesthood, but these kinds of questions are not usually asked of Catholic or Protestant candidates, who are not expected to answer for their church's actions or doctrines. In the coming months some will certainly attack Romney for his church's practice of polygamy, a practice the church ended in 1890, and for his own grandfather being a polygamous. Yet how many candidates are questioned or condemned by what their church or grandfather did in the 1800s. What will the media decide is out of bounds? It will be interesting to watch how the media cover a Mormon candidate and how it varies from the coverage of other candidates.

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