



DOES MITT ROMNEY HAVE A “RELIGION PROBLEM”?



Mitt Romney and Liberty Chancellor Jerry Falwell Jr. bow their heads in prayer during the commencement ceremony at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia, May 12, 2012.

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Last weekend, Mitt Romney delivered an address at the commencement ceremony of Liberty University, a conservative evangelical institution. Despite Liberty University's regular practice of hosting prominent Republican candidates, media reports paid special attention to this speech as an opportunity for Romney to "calm fears that his Mormon faith would be an obstacle to evangelical Christian voters."¹ This August at the Republican National Convention, Romney will become the first member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS), more commonly known as Mormons, to receive the presidential nomination of a major party, a fact that has sparked much speculation about Romney's electoral prospects. Indeed, before primary voting even commenced, pundits variously cast Romney's Mormonism as "his biggest political hurdle," "a barrier to his election," and "a cause of voters' diffidence."²

Even as Romney built an insurmountable lead in convention delegates needed to win the Republican nomination during the primaries, he has struggled among white, evangelical Christian voters. Pundits regularly attribute these struggles to a "religion problem" rather than to other sources of disagreement with the candidate.³ This claim is rooted in the fact that many evangelicals—a staple of the Republican electoral coalition—skeptically regard Mormons as non-Christians. For example, the prominent pastor of the largest congregation in Texas described Mormonism as a "cult" and urged the audience at the Values Voters Summit last fall, "Every true, born again follower of Christ ought to embrace a Christian over a non-Christian."

Now that Romney is the presumptive nominee, questions turn to Romney's viability among evangelical Christians in the fall election as his religion becomes an even "bigger issue" in the campaign.⁴ Will Romney's religion drive a wedge between him and evangelical Christian voters? Of particular concern is whether a general election campaign that informs evangelical Christians about Romney's religion and emphasizes the differences between the Mormon faith and their own will demobilize this segment of potential Republican voters. Below we present evidence from a new survey experiment that, contrary to this concern, information about the LDS church and Mr. Romney's affiliation with it poses little threat to his electoral prospects, even among evangelical Christians. In fact, messages about Romney's religion may even boost his support among conservatives.

An Anti-Mormon Electorate?

Romney's alleged "religion problem" is rooted in the suspicion that some voters will refuse to support the Republican nominee because of his religion. Decades of polling has shown that Mormon candidates face steep obstacles in the American electorate. Roughly one in five Americans say they would not vote for a generally well-qualified nominee from their party who happened to be a Mormon in Gallup surveys going back to 1967. The 22% of respondents who oppose the hypothetical Mormon nominee in the 2011 survey is the third highest level of opposition, behind only that toward an atheist candidate (49%) and a gay or lesbian candidate (32%).⁵

Does Mitt Romney Have a "Religion Problem"?

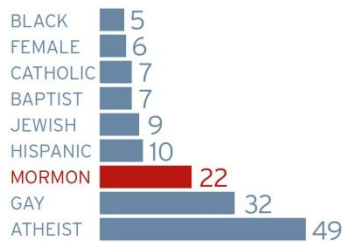
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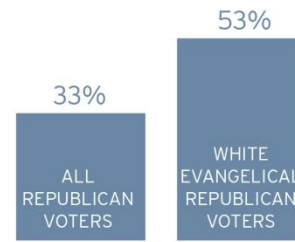
If your party nominated a generally well-qualified person for president who happened to be Mormon, would you vote for that person?



% of Americans who say they would not vote for a nominee who is...



% of each group saying Mormonism is not a Christian religion...



Sources: Gallup, Pew Research Center

Anti-Mormon sentiment may be particularly acute among evangelical Christians. While two-thirds of white evangelical Christians have favorable views of Mormons generally,⁶ many evangelical Christian denominations disagree with a variety of LDS practices and theological teachings to such an extent that they see these differences as separating Mormons from the Christian faith. Although most Americans don't know much about the Mormon church—55% say they know little and another 27% say they know nothing about Mormon practices and beliefs—many rank and file evangelical churchgoers believe they know enough to see major differences between their own faith and the LDS church. Fifty-three percent of white, evangelical Republicans said the Mormon religion is not Christian and another 12% were not sure according to a Pew Research Center survey taken in November of last year.⁷ Indeed, white evangelicals are the only major American religious group other than black Protestants among whom a majority does not say that Mormons are Christians.⁸

The Pew Research Center also asked Americans how likely they were to support a Mormon candidate. Although two-thirds of Americans claimed this would make no difference in their vote decision, another 25% readily admitted that they would be less likely to support a Mormon candidate. Among white, evangelical Christians this share rose to more than one in three.⁹

Mitt Romney did in fact struggle among evangelical Christians during Republican primary voting this spring. According to exit polls, Romney did worse among

evangelicals than among non-evangelicals in all but two states,¹⁰ often by double digits. In most states, he lost evangelical Christians either to Rick Santorum or Newt Gingrich, including in many of the states where he won among primary voters overall. In Ohio, for example, Romney eked out a narrow victory despite losing the evangelical vote by seventeen points. Things were worse in the south, a region with especially high shares of evangelical Christians. Romney lost evangelical Christians by 35 points in Louisiana, 33 points in Georgia, 24 points in South Carolina, and 16 points in Tennessee, carrying none of these states.

The primary elections fueled speculation about anti-Mormon bigotry among evangelical voters, but it is important to note that these voters overwhelmingly back the presumptive Republican nominee over incumbent Democrat Barack Obama. Nearly three-fourths of evangelical Christians chose Romney and only 20% chose Obama in trial heats taken shortly after Santorum's exit from the Republican primary.¹¹ These supposedly anti-Romney voters are among the least supportive of the president. Only one in four white, evangelical Christians has favorable opinions of Obama. Indeed, among Republicans who do not think of Mormons as Christians—that is, the subgroup believed most predisposed against Romney—fully 92% have *unfavorable* opinions of Barack Obama.

Of course, the conjecture among campaigners and pundits is not that evangelicals will jump to Obama. Rather, scrutiny of Romney's religion during the campaign would activate anti-Mormon sentiments to such an extent that evangelicals wary of both a Mormon candidate and a disliked Democrat will opt not to vote. At this point a great many Americans do not yet know Romney's religion, but the numbers who do are increasing—from 39% in November of last year to 48% this March.¹² As the campaign fills the informational void, the number of Americans, including evangelical Christians, exposed to information about Romney's religion will grow. Turned off by a Republican nominee who does not share their faith as they perceive it, these potential voters may simply stay home on Election Day, hurting Romney's chances for victory.

There are several problems with this argument. First, evangelical Christian reticence to back Romney may have little to do with his religion. Among a group that mostly identifies as conservative, the 44% that see Romney as "not conservative enough" may have policy differences with the Republican nominee, particularly on social issues.¹³ If this is the case, then media coverage about his religion would do little to address this policy or ideological divide. Second, decades of election studies show that most partisans who initially hesitate over their party's nominee set aside their differences with the candidate and develop more favorable impressions over the course of the campaign. The general pattern again suggests campaign messages about Romney's religion would do little to turn white, evangelical Christians away from him.

Americans are likely to learn much about Mormonism between now and November, and it is unclear how, if at all, that information will affect the outcome on Election Day.

Support for Romney and the Mormon Label

As the discussion above makes clear, the question of whether Romney’s religion will hurt his electoral prospects is long on speculation and short on evidence. Polling results shed some light on the question, but have not tried to account for the increase in information about Mormonism that voters will be exposed to over the course of the general election campaign. In the past four months, the *New York Times* alone has published articles on Mormon history, policy positions, and even cuisine.¹⁴ Americans are likely to learn much about Mormonism between now and November, and it is unclear how, if at all, that information will affect the outcome on Election Day.

In short, white evangelical voters do not abandon Romney even when differences between their beliefs and his are emphasized.

We address this question using a survey experiment aimed at simulating the effect of learning more about Mormonism on political opinions. We administered a short online survey to 2,084 respondents, approximately 16% of whom were white evangelical Christians.¹⁵ After respondents were asked to provide background information, they were randomly assigned to receive one of four possible short informational prompts about Mitt Romney. The first prompt simply said that Romney was seeking the Republican nomination for president. The second prompt added a phrase indicating that Romney is a Mormon. The remaining prompts also identified Romney as a Mormon but added further details about the teachings of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.¹⁶ The third prompt emphasized a similarity between Mormon doctrine and traditional Christian doctrine, specifically that “The Mormon Church believes that Jesus Christ is the son of God and the Bible is the word of God.” The fourth prompt emphasized differences between Mormons and traditional Christian teachings: “In addition to accepting the Bible as the word of God, the Mormon Church also believes that the Book of Mormon is the word of God. The Mormon Church believes the Book of Mormon was written on golden plates by ancient inhabitants of America whom Jesus Christ visited shortly after his resurrection. The Church also believes that the book was later discovered in 1823 when Joseph Smith found it buried in upstate New York.” These variations in question wording were designed to test not only if information about Romney’s religion matters but also whether the effect of this information depends on the extent to which it activates stereotypes about similarities or differences between Mormon beliefs and traditional Christianity.

Each respondent was shown one of the four prompts, and was then asked to answer a handful of questions about their likelihood of voting for Mitt Romney, Barack Obama, or not voting for either of these two candidates. If learning more about the Mormon religion influences peoples’ opinions about Romney, then we would expect the type of information respondents were given to affect their stated preferences for supporting him in the upcoming election.

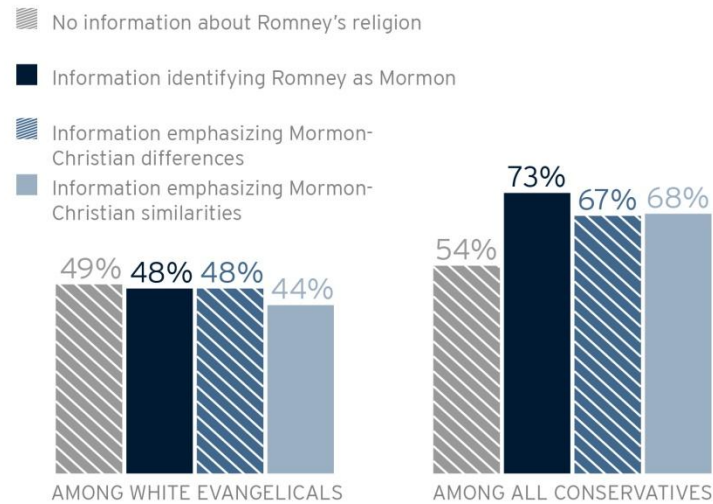
We find little evidence that any of the information prompts about Romney had more than a trivial effect on his electoral prospects.¹⁷ Respondents in general—and white evangelicals in particular—were just as likely to support Romney regardless of

Does Mitt Romney Have a “Religion Problem”?

Does knowledge of Mormonism affect perceptions of Romney?

Information about Romney's religion has little effect on his electoral prospects among white Evangelicals, but increases his support among conservatives as a whole.

Support for Romney, among survey respondents who were given...



what they were told about Romney's religion. Of course, telling these individuals Romney's religion might not matter because many of them may have already known that fact (although the polling evidence noted in the previous section suggests otherwise). What might matter more than Romney's religion itself is how this fact is framed—for instance emphasizing differences or similarities between the religion Romney identifies with and more traditional Christian beliefs. But we don't find significant effects of providing the additional information about LDS beliefs, either among respondents overall or among evangelicals.¹⁸ Interestingly enough, information that emphasizes differences between Mormons and mainstream Christians appears to have a similar (non-)effect as information that emphasizes similarities. In short, white evangelical voters do not abandon Romney even when differences between their beliefs and his are emphasized. Thus it appears that the concerns among campaign watchers about Romney's religion are misplaced.

Does this mean that information about Romney's religion does not matter at all? No. This information does matter, just not in the way that election pundits have speculated. When respondents are broken out by their own ideology, interesting patterns emerge. First, among conservatives, mentioning Romney's Mormon religion actually *increases* his support by 19 percentage points. Providing conservatives with additional information about Mormon teachings—whether emphasizing similarities

or differences with traditional Christian doctrine—generates comparable effects. Mentioning Romney’s religion even has a pro-Romney effect of 20 percentage points among conservative, white evangelicals—the subgroup of white evangelicals who should be most pre-disposed against the Republican nominee if the conventional wisdom about religious prejudice were true.

In contrast, information about Romney’s religion has no impact on political liberals in our sample. Whether they were told about Romney’s religion or they were also told further details about official Mormon belief, liberal respondents were no more (or less) likely to back the Republican.

This last finding may be unsurprising given that liberals are already predisposed against the Republican nominee (in a recent poll only 13% of self-described liberals expressed support for Romney in the upcoming election).¹⁹ But why should the impact of information about Romney’s *religion* vary so much by voters’ *ideology*? Our experiment does not provide a definitive test, but one compelling idea is that Romney’s religion gives voters a clue about how the candidates differ ideologically. Candidate characteristics, such as religion or race, can sometimes work as information shortcuts for voters, conveying information about where they might stand based on perceptions of where people with those same characteristics usually stand. Two-thirds of American Mormons self-identify as conservative, compared to 37% for the public as a whole.²⁰ If Americans recognize this, then they may transfer this conservatism to a particular Mormon candidate. Or, it may be that associating Romney with a religious label itself prompts voters to think of the candidates in more ideological terms.

Conclusion

Our results should not be taken as definitive, particularly because they are not based on a nationally representative sample. But they do suggest that concerns over Mitt Romney’s “religion problem” have been overblown and quite possibly miss a compelling counter-narrative. Romney’s religion does not seem to reduce his support among white evangelicals. Even priming these prospective voters to think about differences between their own faith and the Republican nominee’s does not drive a wedge between them. Instead, information about Romney’s religion may actually increase his support from conservative voters, including among conservative white evangelical Christians. On the other hand, Romney’s religion does not cost him any votes among liberals who are generally not supportive of him anyhow. At the end of the day, it appears that voters’ long-term political preferences matter more for their general election choice than the religious identity of the Republican nominee.

Information about Romney’s Mormon religion does matter, just not in the way that election pundits have speculated. Among conservatives, mentioning Romney’s religion actually *increases* his support.

Appendix: Survey Questions and Regression Results

Survey Questions Used in Analysis

In addition to being American, what do you consider your main ethnic group or racial group?

- White, Non-Hispanic
- Black, Non-Hispanic
- Hispanic
- Other, please specify: _____

Would you describe yourself as a born-again or evangelical Christian, or not?

- Born-again or evangelical Christian
- Neither born-again nor evangelical Christian

On a scale ranging from extremely liberal to extremely conservative, where would you place yourself?

- Extremely liberal
- Very liberal
- Somewhat liberal
- Moderate
- Somewhat conservative
- Very conservative
- Extremely conservative

Information prompts (respondents randomly assigned to see one of four):

- A: Mitt Romney is seeking the Republican nomination to run for president against Democrat Barack Obama this fall.
- B: Mitt Romney, a Mormon, is seeking the Republican nomination to run for president against Democrat Barack Obama this fall.
- C: Mitt Romney, a Mormon, is seeking the Republican nomination to run for president against Democrat Barack Obama this fall. The Mormon Church believes that Jesus Christ is the son of God and the Bible is the word of God.
- D: Mitt Romney, a Mormon, is seeking the Republican nomination to run for president against Democrat Barack Obama this fall. In addition to accepting the Bible as the word of God, the Mormon Church also believes that the Book of Mormon is the word of God. The Mormon Church believes the Book of Mormon was written on golden plates by ancient inhabitants of America whom Jesus Christ visited shortly after his resurrection. The Church also

believes that the book was later discovered in 1823 when Joseph Smith found it buried in upstate New York.

If the 2012 general election for president were being held today and the candidates were Barack Obama, the Democrat, and Mitt Romney, the Republican, who would you vote for? [respondents were randomly shown either this question or an identical question that reversed the order of the candidates' names in both the question and the responses]

- Definitely Barack Obama
- Most likely Barack Obama
- Leaning toward Barack Obama
- Undecided
- Leaning toward Mitt Romney
- Most likely Mitt Romney
- Definitely Mitt Romney
- Some other candidate

Appendix Table: Effect of Information Provided on Percentage of Respondents Supporting Mitt Romney

	All Respondents	Liberals	Conservatives	Evangelicals	White Evangelicals	White Conservatives
Identify Romney as Mormon	0.037 [0.026]	-0.002 [0.020]	0.191** [0.066]	0.017 [0.069]	-0.006 [0.078]	0.201+ [0.105]
Emphasize Mormon-Christian similarities	0.016 [0.025]	0.008 [0.021]	0.127+ [0.067]	-0.032 [0.067]	-0.006 [0.077]	0.097 [0.109]
Emphasize Mormon-Christian differences	0.010 [0.026]	-0.016 [0.020]	0.141* [0.066]	-0.053 [0.069]	-0.044 [0.078]	0.095 [0.115]
Constant (mean support in control group)	0.208** [0.018]	0.063** [0.015]	0.540** [0.050]	0.427** [0.049]	0.488** [0.055]	0.647** [0.083]
Observations	2,084	1,079	435	424	333	137

Notes: ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, + p<0.1; robust standard errors in brackets. Dependent variable is a binary indicator identifying respondents who said they would vote for Mitt Romney (or are leaning toward voting for Romney) if the election were held today. Coefficients indicate the predicted difference in probability of supporting Romney between respondents that received the listed information and respondents that received no information about Romney's religion. Results are from ordinary least square regressions, but because no control variables are included the results are essentially identical to marginal effects from probit regressions.

Endnotes

- ¹ Youngman, Sam. May 12, 2012. "Romney Seeks Evangelical Votes, Opposes Gay Marriage." *Reuters*. See also: Parker, Ashley. May 12, 2012. "Romney Tells Evangelicals Their Values are His Too." *The New York Times*.
- ² For examples, see: Reilly, Adam. April 26, 2006. "Take My Wives...Please! Mitt Romney's Clumsy Mormon Shtick." *Slate*.
http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/politics/2006/04/take_my_wives_please.html; Stolberg, Sheryl Gay. October 15, 2011. "For Romney, a Role of Faith and Authority." *The New York Times*. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/16/us/politics/for-romney-a-role-of-faith-and-authority.html?pagewanted=all>; and Moore, Martha T. December 28, 2011. "Mormon Romney Struggles to Win Over Evangelical Christians." *USA Today*.
<http://www.usatoday.com/news/politics/story/2011-12-28/romney-mormon-christian/52257162/1>.
- ³ For example, Hood, John. October 4, 2011. "Romney's Religion Problem." *National Review*.
<http://www.nationalreview.com/corner/279087/romneys-religion-problem-john-hood#>; and Lawrence O'Donnell of MSNBC reported on Romney's "religion problem" in the April 3, 2012 episode of his show (http://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2012/04/04/lawrence_odonnell_mormonism_is_an_vented_religion.html).
- ⁴ For examples see: Gilgoff, Dan. April 11, 2012. "Evangelical Leader: Mormonism Will Become a Bigger Issue for Romney." CNN.
<http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2012/04/11/evangelical-leader-mormonism-will-become-a-bigger-issue-for-romney/>; Zoll, Rachel. May 3, 2012. "Romney, Mormons Brace for a Mean Political Season." *The Associated Press*.
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=151945195>; and Barbaro, Michael, and Michael D. Shear. May 15, 2012. "Iowa, Again, Serves as Proving Ground for Romney." *The New York Times*. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/16/us/politics/iowa-again-serves-as-proving-ground-for-romney.html>.
- ⁵ Saad, Lydia. June 20, 2011. "In U.S., 22% are Hesitant to Support a Mormon in 2012." Gallup.
<http://www.gallup.com/poll/148100/hesitant-support-mormon-2012.aspx>
- ⁶ However, favorability toward Mormons among white evangelicals is close to the levels among Americans as a whole (67%) but less than among Republicans (74%) (Jones, Robert P, Daniel Cox, William Galston, and E.J. Dionne. "What it Means to be American: Attitudes in an Increasingly Diverse America 10 Years After 9/11." *The Brookings Institution and the Public Religion Research Institute*. 2011.).
- ⁷ "Religion and the 2012 Election: Romney's Mormon Faith Likely a Factor in Primaries, Not in General Election." November 23, 2011. Pew Research Center.
- ⁸ Jones, Robert P, Daniel Cox, William Galston, and E.J. Dionne. "What it Means to be American: Attitudes in an Increasingly Diverse America 10 Years After 9/11." *The Brookings Institution and the Public Religion Research Institute*. 2011.
- ⁹ "Religion and the 2012 Election: Romney's Mormon Faith Likely a Factor in Primaries, Not in General Election." November 23, 2011. Pew Research Center.
- ¹⁰ One of these states is Virginia where the ballot included neither Newt Gingrich nor Rick Santorum.

¹¹ “Social Issues Rank as Lowest Priorities: With Voters Focused on Economy, Obama Lead Narrows.” April 17, 2012. Pew Research Center.

¹² “Gas Prices Offset Good News about Jobs: Romney Leads GOP Contest, Trails in Matchup with Obama.” March 14, 2012. Pew Research Center.

¹³ “Gas Prices Offset Good News about Jobs: Romney Leads GOP Contest, Trails in Matchup with Obama.” March 14, 2012. Pew Research Center.

¹⁴ Rothstein, Edwards. April 22, 2012. “Go West, Young Religion: Mormonism on Exhibit.” *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/23/arts/design/in-salt-lake-city-museum-shows-how-mormons-see-themselves.html>; Goodstein, Laurie. February 2, 2012. “Romney’s Tough Immigration View Is at Odds With His Church.” *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/03/us/politics/romney-immigration-position-at-odds-with-mormon-church.html>; and Moskin, Julia. January 24, 2012. “Not Just for Sundays After Church: A New Generation Redefines Mormon Cuisine.” *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/25/dining/a-new-generation-redefines-mormon-cuisine.html>.

¹⁵ Respondents were recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk and were each paid 50 cents to complete the survey, which was conducted in March and April 2012. The sample is not nationally representative, but previous research suggests that this is unlikely to be a significant limitation in the case of survey experiments that recruit respondents using Mechanical Turk (Berinsky, Adam J., Gregory A. Huber, and Gabriel S. Lenz. “Using Mechanical Turk as a Subject Recruitment Tool for Experimental Research.” Unpublished paper. 2011.).

¹⁶ The information used in these treatment prompts was obtained from the LDS church’s website, “Mormon Beliefs: An Overview of Fundamental Mormon Beliefs” (<http://mormonbeliefs.org/>).

¹⁷ For the full set of regression results, see the Appendix.

¹⁸ We find that information emphasizing differences between Mormon and mainstream Christian beliefs decreases support for Romney among evangelicals by 4-5 percentage points, an effect that is not statistically significant.

¹⁹ “Social Issues Rank as Lowest Priorities: With Voters Focused on Economy, Obama Lead Narrows.” April 17, 2012. Pew Research Center.

²⁰ “Mormons in America.” January 12, 2012. Pew Research Center.

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