

Religion and politics

Did Romney's guarded approach do him in? Mormon, Evangelical observers say open dialogue is key to overcoming biases

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[The Salt Lake Tribune](#)

Article Last Updated: 02/08/2008 07:44:19 PM MST

In 2006, two Utah friends - one Evangelical, one Mormon - took a couple of trips back East to meet with members of Mitt Romney's camp. They weren't there as supporters of his potential presidential bid, per se, but rather because they had a vested interest in how Romney would approach the months, even years, ahead if he were to make a run.

Their message was simple: Romney would have to be upfront about his Mormon faith and beliefs.

"You've got to have town-hall meetings, discussion groups, something on your Web site," Gregory Johnson remembers the pair saying. "Religion can't be a taboo thing, because people are going to want to know."

Johnson, president of Standing Together, a Utah network of evangelical churches, was traveling with his longtime friend and partner in interfaith promotion, Robert Millet, a religious-education professor at LDS Church owned Brigham Young University. Open dialogue, the two believe, is the salve to soothe ignorance and suspicion. Johnson says Romney should have applied the prescription.

The candidate suspended his campaign Thursday in the aftermath of the crushing blow that was Super Tuesday, and Johnson says Romney's guarded approach, the perceived secrecy about his beliefs, helped do him in.

Added to this was the reality that even though Evangelicals weren't necessarily talking about Romney's religion, in part because it was deemed inappropriate to do so, they were thinking about it. A study conducted by professors at Vanderbilt University and Claremont Graduate University shows as many as 57 percent of conservative Evangelicals admitted they were hiding behind more politically correct criticisms, such as condemning Romney for flip-flopping.

Brett Benson, a political-science teacher at Vanderbilt, says the team set out to measure biases in this historic election season and how they'd shape results. While many studies have been done about attitudes toward women and blacks, the Mormon question hadn't been explored, explains Benson, who happens to be Mormon. His co-authors are not.

Their survey, completed just before Romney's Dec. 6 speech on the importance of faith, showed bias against Mormons is stronger than it is against women and blacks, especially among conservative Evangelicals. It also showed - among other things - that providing information can dispel stereotype-driven biases, including the ones that say Mormonism is a cult, polygamy runs rampant and any elected Mormon

would be controlled by LDS Church headquarters. But, and this is a biggie, this doesn't necessarily hold true for conservative Evangelicals.

The explanation, Benson says, is rooted in recent history.

In the early 1980s, Southern Baptist Convention leaders discovered that about 40 percent of Mormon converts were being drawn from Baptist ranks, Benson says. This realization pitted two proselytizing faiths against one another in the "marketplace for souls," he continues, and fueled efforts to inflame negative perceptions.

A Dan Jones poll conducted Thursday for KSL and the *Deseret Morning News* just after Romney announced his campaign's suspension indicated that of the nearly 90 percent of Utah Republicans who supported Romney on Super Tuesday, only 2 percent said they'd throw their weight behind Huckabee. In fact, the numbers showed support for Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton edging close to support of John McCain, who gathered 30 percent of the immediate support swing.

This reaction, even if it's passing, "speaks to the problem" and proves that it's not just Evangelicals who are holding biases, Johnson says. And it further bolsters the need for leaders in the conservative evangelical world and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to start talking and building bridges.

Millet looks at these election-cycle reactions and realities and says he prefers to see this time as an opportunity, even a "wake-up call," rather than an indicator of "bad news."

"You know, we're not very well-understood across the country," he says of his fellow Mormons. "Is there a better way to present ourselves so people aren't mystified or horrified when a Mormon candidate comes forward?"

Grappling honestly with this question, and not being afraid to talk to others, is key, Millet adds.

"You don't have to give away the store, you don't have to compromise" your own beliefs, he says. "We can hold our separate, private views and still have meaningful, enjoyable and enlightening conversations."

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