

Will Mormonism Keep Mitt Romney out of the White House?

Larry Powell*

This paper examines the impact of Mitt Romney's religious faith (Mormonism) on his chances of winning the presidency in 2012. Romney was unsuccessful in trying to neutralize the religion factor in 2008. His attempt to address the issue with a speech on his faith had no impact on the issue, and he was out of the race within two months afterwards. For the 2012 Republican primary, Romney took a different approach by ignoring his religious beliefs while addressing other issues. He was aided by a series of flawed primary opponents who unsuccessfully positioned themselves as viable contenders and who also ignored the Mormon issue. Still, Mormonism remains a point of vulnerability for Romney. Even though he was able to clinch the Republican nomination, many Americans still view Mormonism as a cult. Further, six of ten American voters still do not know about his Mormon faith. That factor could eventually hurt him in the November election, but he is also encumbered with other weaknesses that may play a bigger role in the general election.

Keywords: Mitt Romney, Mormonism, Religion, Silence

During the 2008 election, Mitt Romney discovered that his Mormon faith was a major hindrance in seeking the Republican nomination for President. Some voters were turned off by the negative image of his religion. Others reacted negatively to his perceived inauthentic attempts to reach out to evangelicals. Romney faced a situation that reminded observers of John F. Kennedy's 1960 campaign. Kennedy won the Democratic nomination, but faced questions in the general election about his Catholic faith. Would he let the Pope dictate United States policy? Kennedy faced those doubts directly with a speech in Houston, Texas late in the campaign. Kennedy's speech was effective and he went on to win the presidency.

Romney attempted to do the same with a speech on his Mormon faith in 2008, but his speech was not effective. Instead, he was out of the race within two months after that effort. His problem may have been that Kennedy's speech directly addressed the public's questions about Catholicism, while Romney's speech was an appeal for religious tolerance that never addressed voter concerns about Mormonism.¹

Regardless, Romney sought the Republican nomination again in the 2012 election. Early on, he was viewed as the heavy favorite to win his party's nomination.² Conservatives continued to look for an anti-Romney candidate in a series of "anybody but Mitt"

* Larry Powell (Ph.D., University of Florida) is Professor of Communication at the University of Alabama, Birmingham. He can be reached for comment on this essay at lpowell@uab.edu.

¹ Larry Powell & Mark Hickson, III, "Mitt Romney, Mormonism, and Religion in the 2008 Election" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Alabama Communication Association, Montgomery, Alabama, July 30, 2011).

² Ross Douthat, "The Inevitable Nominee," *New York Times*, October 23, 2011.

challenges.³ Romney had to knock off a series of opponents – including Michelle Bachman, Rick Perry, Herman Cain, and Newt Gingrich—as Republican voters kept seeking a candidate other than Romney who would be more conservative and who would not be hampered by his religious faith.⁴ Even the Republican establishment, which seemed to be his strongest base, appeared to view him as an imperfect candidate.⁵ Further, his religious base seemed in peril when Mormon leaders instructed their membership to stay out of the presidential nomination.⁶ Still, this time he was more effective, essentially locking up the nomination in April when former Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum dropped out of the campaign.⁷

But the question of whether he could defeat incumbent Democrat Barack Obama, remained. The one positive aspect of his religion was that it helped him win the Nevada caucuses, but that was countered by suspicions in most other states.⁸ He seemingly won the Iowa caucuses, but garnered just 14 percent of the evangelical vote.⁹ Daniel Burke argued that the doctrines of Romney’s Mormon faith were just too much at odds with evangelical views—including differences regarding the nature of God, the Trinity, and acceptance of revelations and books beyond the Bible. Similarly, Laurie Goodstein reported on theological differences between Christianity and Mormonism that included differences in beliefs about the Trinity, the afterlife, and the idea that humans could become Gods.¹⁰ Patrick Mason argued that Mormon leader Joseph Smith preached fairly orthodox Christianity at first but became increasingly radical in his latter years, labeling every other church as “corrupt” and “wrong.”¹¹ Such radical views continued in the image of the church for many voters. Santorum was perhaps the candidate who was most critical of Romney’s religion. His appearance before college students in Iowa drew boos after he criticized both Mormonism and gays, leading *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd to write that Santorum seemed to be “running for President of Leave It to Beaverland.”¹²

Romney’s basic strategy on religion appeared to be totally opposite from his 2008 effort. Instead of addressing voter concerns, he ignored the topic and talked about other issues—jobs and attacks on Obama.¹³ As Jodi Kantor noted, “Mr. Romney and his aides speak so sparingly about his faith . . . that its influence on him can be difficult to de-

³ Jeremy W. Peters, “Anybody but Mitt,” *New York Times*, November 20, 2011.

⁴ Michael Barbaro and Jeremy W. Peters, “In Run, Romney Uses Whatever-it-Takes Style,” *New York Times*, March 2, 2012; Charles Krauthammer, “Mitt Romney May Falter as the GOP Field Narrows,” *Birmingham News*, December 3, 2011.

⁵ Jeff Zeleny, “G.O.P. Leaders Still Seem Torn about Romney,” *New York Times*, December 2, 2011.

⁶ Lee Davidson, “Mormon Leaders Told to Stay Out of Politics,” *Birmingham News*, July 9, 2011.

⁷ Jackie Kucinich, Catalina Carnia, and Richard Wolf, “And Just Like That, it’s Obama vs. Romney,” *USA Today*, April 11, 2012.

⁸ Richard A. Oppel, Jr., “Romney Counting on Mormon Backing for Victory in Nevada Caucuses,” *New York Times*, February 5, 2012.

⁹ Daniel Burke, “Romney’s Evangelical Problem Starts with Theology,” *Birmingham News*, January 7, 2012; Daniel Burke, “Are Mormons Christian? It’s Not All That Simple,” *Birmingham News*, January 28, 2012. It was later discovered that Rick Santorum had won the caucus by a matter of only a few votes.

¹⁰ Laurie Goodstein, “A Theological Basis for Evangelical Christians’ Unease With Romney,” *New York Times*, January 15, 2012.

¹¹ Patrick Mason, *The Mormon Menace: Violence and Anti-Mormonism in the Postbellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹² Maureen Dowd, “The Grating Santorum,” *New York Times*, January 8, 2012.

¹³ Ashley Parker, “Romney Skips G.O.P. Rivals in Anti-Obama Speech,” *New York Times*, March 31, 2012.

tect.”¹⁴ This approach was consistent with a long line of rhetors who used such a rhetoric of silence. Cheryl Glenn has argued that silence can be an expressive instrument of communication, but Romney’s approach was more consistent with topic avoidance.¹⁵ That approach is consistent with a tradition that goes back to Plato.¹⁶ In modern times, it has surfaced in the rhetoric of race relations,¹⁷ women’s rhetoric,¹⁸ and presidential politics.¹⁹ Booker T. Washington, in particular, used silence to express his rejection of some events that were not conducive to race relations.²⁰

As Jeff Zeleny noted, that approach “offers him a chance to sidestep the concerns of social conservatives, some of who question his commitment to their causes and are uncomfortable with his Mormon faith.”²¹ At times, he even differed with the leaders of his faith, taking a tough anti-immigration position that was at odds with the Mormon church.²² That approach was one reason that *New York Times* columnist Frank Bruni wrote that “There’s too much reticence in Romney’s Mormonism,” and that as the campaign progressed, his Mormon faith would be “the bejeweled albatross around his neck.”²³ Also waiting in the wings was the potential damage it could do to his campaign among minorities. After all, the Mormon church had previously limited full participation for blacks, viewing them as descendants of the biblical murderer Cain, and Romney has refused to criticize that policy.²⁴

Meanwhile, Romney’s rhetorical strategy was aided by his opponents, who increasingly attacked him for his business background, thus allowing him to avoid talking about religion or the related social and cultural issues.²⁵ By the time of the South Carolina primary, Romney’s speeches avoided the issue even further as he directed his attacks against Obama rather than his Republican rivals.²⁶ By then, Romney had effectively established himself as a leader among a group of unusual candidates. As Michael Kinsley concluded, “this year’s crop of Republican candidates has been especially odd. . . . Of the four who remain viable, only Mitt Romney can even pass as normal—and he has the eerie, Stepford-wife quality of being so normal it’s weird.”²⁷

¹⁴ Jodi Kantor, “Romney’s Faith, Silent but Deep,” *New York Times*, May 20, 2012.

¹⁵ Cheryl Glenn, *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004).

¹⁶ Treat Eades, “Plato, Rhetoric, and Silence,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, 29 (1996): 244-258.

¹⁷ Dana L. Cloud, “The Null Persona: Race and the Rhetoric of Silence in the Uprising of ’34,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, 2 (1999): 177-209.

¹⁸ Monika Alston, “Empowered Silence in Women’s Political Rhetoric: State Rep. Gilda Cobb-Hunter” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Communication Association, Chicago, Illinois, November 2007).

¹⁹ Keith V. Erickson & Wallace V. Schmidt, “Presidential Political Silence: Rhetoric and the Rose Garden Strategy,” *Southern Speech Communication Journal*, 47 (1982): 402-421.

²⁰ Robert L. Heath, “A Time for Silence: Booker T. Washington in Atlanta,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 64 (1978): 385-388.

²¹ Jeff Zeleny, “Attacks on Romney’s Business Background Could Actually Help Him,” *New York Times*, January 15, 2012.

²² Laurie Goodstein, “Romney’s Tough Immigration View is at Odds With His Church,” *New York Times*, February 3, 2012.

²³ Frank Bruni, “Mitt’s Muffled Soul,” *New York Times*, February 5, 2012.

²⁴ Daniel Burke, “Could Mormon’s Racial History Hurt Romney?” *Birmingham News*, February 11, 2012.

²⁵ Zeleny, “Attacks on Romney’s Business Background.”

²⁶ Susan Saulny and Jeff Zeleny, “Romney, in South Carolina, Sets His Sights on Obama,” *New York Times*, January 6, 2012.

²⁷ Michael Kinsley, “Steady Santorum Shines in Odball Race,” *Birmingham News*, February 24, 2012.

Such observations created a “whiff of panic” among Republican leaders, who began to “sense that the Republicans’ odds of winning back the White House grow longer day by day” due to Romney’s image problems.²⁸ Romney didn’t help that evaluation because of his own ambiguous campaign style. As Dowd wrote, “There’s a certain *pathos* to Romney. His manner is so unauthentic, you can’t find him anywhere. Is he the guy he was on Wednesday or the guy he was on Thursday?”²⁹ That idea may have been most directly expressed by the Romney campaign consultant who described him as an “Etch-a-Sketch” candidate.³⁰ As David Javerbaum wrote, the statement was “an apparent admission by a campaign insider of two widely held suspicions about Mitt Romney: that he is a) utterly devoid of any ideological convictions and b) filled with aluminum powder.”³¹

Republican rejection of this approach is understandable, since equivocation strategies are more reflective of Democratic approaches to campaigns than those of Republicans. Over the years, the most prominent strategy for Democrats has been the “Least Objectionable Candidate” outlined by Joseph Napolitan.³² That approach attempts to alienate as few voters as possible by equivocating on many issues and providing ambiguous responses on many questions. By contrast, the biggest umbrella strategy for Republicans has traditionally been the “Easy Decision” model advocated by Stephen Shadegg.³³ This approach focuses on drawing sharp distinctions between the Republican and Democratic contenders.

Romney’s use of a Democratic-oriented strategy has created an image problem for him, particularly within his own party. In modern politics, a candidate’s image is often a factor of what Lang and Lang called “the television personality.”³⁴ This approach identifies the political image as a three-factor design composed of television performance, political role, and personal image. A similar perspective is the view that the candidate as a political actor is concerned with two basic dimensions, a political role and a stylistic role.³⁵ Romney’s problem falls within the category of personal image or stylistic role, depending upon which taxonomy you prefer. Regardless, his inconsistency on issues has overridden some of his partisan strengths, making him appear to be a candidate who is reluctant to take a position and stick to it.

Further, the question remained as to whether Republican evangelicals could be energized to turnout for him in November 2012.³⁶ They certainly were not in the mood to do that in November 2011. A poll by the Public Religion Research Institute found that, at the time, almost six in 10 Americans still did not know he was a Mormon—a finding that observers viewed as a major hurdle to his chances of winning.³⁷ Further, the Republican electorate was pushing the party further to the right, placing a stronger emphasis on

²⁸ Eugene Robinson, “A Whiff of Panic in the GOP,” *Birmingham News*, February 22, 2012.

²⁹ Maureen Dowd, “Is Elvis a Mormon?” *New York Times*, March 18, 2012.

³⁰ David Javerbaum, “A Quantum Theory of Mitt Romney,” *New York Times*, April 1, 2012.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Joseph Napolitan, *The Election Game and How to Win It* (New York: Doubleday, 1972).

³³ Stephen Shadegg, *The New How to Win an Election* (New York: Taplinger, 1972).

³⁴ Kurt Lang and Gladys Engel Lang, *Politics and Television* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1968).

³⁵ Doris A. Graber, “Personal Qualities in Presidential Images: The Contribution of the Press,” *Midwest Journal of Political Science*, 16 (1972): 46-76.

³⁶ Dan Balz, “Can Romney Prevail if Few are Excited?” *Birmingham News*, December 4, 2011.

³⁷ Lauren Markoe, “Religion Poll Reveals Big Hurdle for Romney,” *Birmingham News*, November 12, 2011.

evangelical views. As columnist Kathleen Parker noted, the right wing of the party and its fundamentalist views “increasingly have forced the party into a corner where science and religion can’t coexist.”³⁸

By May 2012, the religious issue had shifted slightly in Romney’s favor. An updated poll by the Public Religion Research Institute found that evangelicals were reluctantly shifting their support to Romney and the number that did not realize he was a Mormon had dropped by eleven points to 49 percent.³⁹ Still, as that number had dropped, so had support for Romney (under 40 percent). Thus his religion still remains a question that will have an unknown influence on his campaign.

In conclusion, despite running against a vulnerable incumbent, Romney faces a series of problems in his effort to win the presidency. One of those problems will be his Mormon religion, which he has tried to handle by using a rhetoric of silence on the issue. His justification for this approach was that many voters were leery of the religion. A problem with using a rhetoric of silence, though, is that currently a majority of voters don’t yet realize that Romney is so closely identified with the faith. That information is likely to come out before the election is completed.

However, that may be merely one of his problems—joining a list that include questions about his ability to win women voters, his “Etch-a-Sketch” personality, and his lack of charisma. Ultimately his image problem, particularly the fact that he is an equivocating candidate, may exceed the problem of his religious background. As *New York Times* columnist Frank Bruni wrote, “Romney lacks the aura and excitement that propelled others to the presidency.”⁴⁰

³⁸ Kathleen Parker, “After the Know-Nothings,” *Washington Post*, November 20, 2011.

³⁹ Lauren Markos, “Why do Some Voters Think Obama is Muslim?” *Birmingham News*, May 19, 2012.

⁴⁰ Frank Bruni, “The Front-Runner’s Missing Magic,” *New York Times*, February 12, 2012.