

The Religion Question and Presidential Selection: Confronting the Elephant in the Room

Robert E. Botsch

Professor of Political Science and Director of the USC Aiken SSBRL

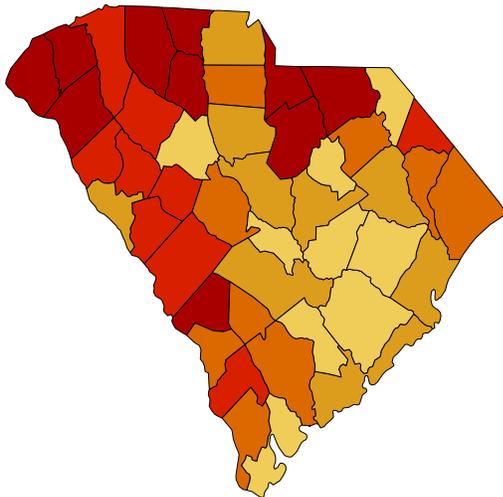
A public service report from the USC Aiken Social Science and Business Research Lab

Note: the findings and conclusions in this report are solely those of the author and do not represent any position by USC Aiken

Mitt Romney is facing a problem similar to that faced by John F. Kennedy in 1960. The problem can be captured in almost the same question JFK's staff asked a little over a half century ago. Would religious conservatives vote for someone of his religion (Catholic then and Mormon now)?

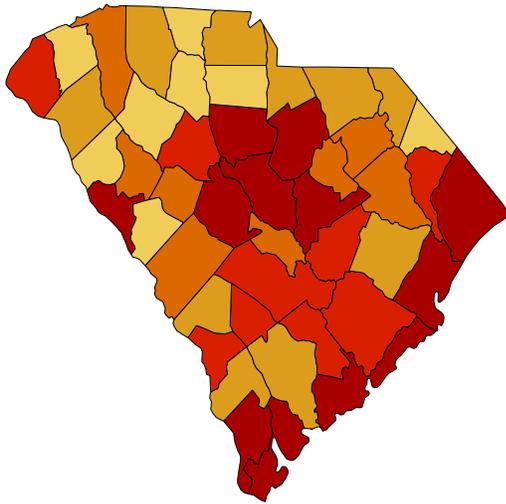
Strong empirical evidence from the SC GOP primary suggests that the answer is often no. Exit polls show that Romney did twice as well among non-evangelical voters (44%) as he did among evangelicals (22%). Our own analysis lends further support. We compared Romney's percentage of the vote in each of South Carolina's 46 counties with the percentage of Southern Baptists who live in that county. Members of Southern Baptist Convention churches are overwhelmingly white and conservative and Republican and often self-identify as religious fundamentalists.¹ The two maps below show a clear and strong pattern. The lower the percentage of SBC members (shown as lighter colors in Map 1), the higher the percentage of voters who chose Romney (shown as darker colors in Map 2). The statistical correlation was extremely strong at -0.55 and was highly statistically significant.

Map 1. % Baptist



Values	To	N
0.10	0.15	(9)
0.16	0.20	(9)
0.23	0.26	(9)
0.27	0.34	(9)
0.36	0.55	(10)
Missing Data		

Map 2. % Romney



Values				N
17	To	21		(8)
22	To	23		(10)
24	To	25		(8)
26	To	28		(9)
29	To	43		(11)
□ Missing Data				

The media have frequently reported that many primary voters are uneasy about Romney and that even his supporters seem to lack the enthusiasm exhibited by supporters of the other candidates. While the media have touched on religion, it has not been covered as much as other factors, such as Romney's wealth, his wooden efforts to relate to voters, or his flip-flopping on issues. Empirical evidence from the primary suggests that while these factors may have played some role, they ignore a major explanation for voter discomfort with Romney, at least among religious fundamentalists.

Gingrich was just the latest non-Romney in a series of temporary front-running non-Romneys. All had considerable problems of their own. In particular, Gingrich had personal baggage that should have put off fundamentalists with strong family values. And like Romney, Gingrich had to disown his own previous progressive issue stands.

All the non-Romneys had one common characteristic—they were not Mormons. Except for Ron Paul, the only non-Romney who did not get at least a moment at the top was the other Mormon candidate, Jon Huntsman. Put simply, too many Republican voters were uncomfortable with Romney's Mormon religion. Should Romney win the nomination, religion could well cost him states where the election is close and where significant numbers of religious fundamentalists reside.

In 1960 in the West Virginia primary, JFK, spurning the advice of the majority of his staff who felt that the religion question was too explosive, chose to confront the question directly. In a televised interview, Kennedy spoke from his heart, reviewing the tortured history of church-state relationships. He stated

that “when any man stands on the steps of the capitol and takes the oath of office of President, he is swearing to support the separation of church and state...And if he breaks that oath...he is committing a sin against God.”

Kennedy reformulated the religion question facing wavering voters so that voting for him became a conscious affirmation of religious tolerance and Constitutional respect. (See Theodore H. White. 1961. *The Making of the Presidency 1960*. pp.126-8.) To be sure, though Kennedy did win West Virginia and later the White House, being a Catholic continued to depress his vote among conservative Protestants. But confronting the question reduced the damage then. And it paved the path for acceptance of Catholic candidates now. It is no small irony that Catholic candidate Gingrich indirectly benefits from the religion question today.

No doubt Romney’s staff is well aware of the religion question and has decided that it is too dangerous to raise. Romney may need a Kennedy moment. Being willing to openly confront the question would in itself signal great personal strength, courage, and leadership.

Religion was also a question in 2008. In Aiken County South Carolina, where we perform exit polling every two years, we saw that 60% of Republican self-identified religious fundamentalists reported that religion was “extremely important” in their voting choices. By a 4 to 3 ratio, white fundamentalists saw candidate Obama as a Muslim rather than a Protestant. Among all whites who saw Obama as a Protestant, Obama won 33% of the vote, not bad for a Democrat in a very Republican county. But among whites who saw him as a Muslim (22% of all whites), Obama won only 4% of the vote. If Romney wins the nomination, the choice might be a little more complex in 2012 for many religious fundamentalists. They will have to choose between one candidate whom many continue to insist is a Muslim and another who is a Mormon.

To be sure, informal religious tests for office are also employed by Democrats and independents. In the 2008 exit poll, 23% of all Democrats and 22% of independents said religion was “extremely important” in their voting choice, though religion tended to be relatively more important among all Republicans (36%). The percentages were similar for voters in our 2010 exit poll.

Voting for or against presidential candidates on the basis of religion has a long history in our nation, dating back to Adams supporters opposing Jefferson on the grounds that he was not a Christian. That in 2012 “born-again” Catholic Newt Gingrich won a plurality in heavily Protestant South Carolina suggests that we have come a long way since 1960 when whether to vote for a Catholic was the religion question. Gingrich owes JFK a debt of gratitude. Romney, whether he wins or loses, has the historic opportunity to help the nation begin to eliminate the religion question for one more religious group.

¹ While national polls employ the term “evangelicals” or “born-again evangelicals” to identify religious conservatives, we prefer to use the term “fundamentalists” to identify religious conservatives. While this may not seem to be an important distinction to those looking at the South from the outside, the difference is in fact quite significant. Virtually all Christians see themselves as evangelicals, meaning that they are instructed to spread the

gospel and win converts. Fundamentalists are about the most religiously conservative subgroup of evangelicals, who see a literal interpretation of the Bible as the inerrant word of God. This is so important—or fundamental—that they see this as the defining characteristic of who is and is not a Christian. For example, Jimmy Carter would see himself as a born-again evangelical, but not as a religious fundamentalist. His views on many questions, including the suitability of a Mormon for the White House, would most likely be quite different than the views of most fundamentalists.