

Survey finds deep challenges for Romney

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WASHINGTON (RNS) More than four in 10 American voters say they are uncomfortable with the idea of a Mormon in the White House, a reflection of the steep challenge facing Mitt Romney in the GOP primary.

According to a survey released Tuesday (Nov. 8) by the Public Religion Research Institute, Romney faces an identity problem among those who already know he's a Mormon, and those who don't but generally have qualms about the faith.

The poll found evangelicals are warming to Romney's chief rival, businessman Herman Cain, and are also the group that harbors the most unease with Mormonism among all religious groups surveyed.

Among white evangelical voters, 47 percent expressed discomfort with a Mormon president, compared to 42 percent of Catholics and 30 percent of white mainline Protestants. Among Americans overall, the figure was 42 percent.

In a general election pitting Romney against President Obama, white evangelicals -- who have significant disagreements with the Democratic president -- are likely to side with the Republican, said Dan Cox, PRRI's research director.

A different kind of challenge facing Romney is that almost six in 10 Americans still do not know he is Mormon. "This is after, what, six debates? Seven debates?" said Robert Jones, the research firm's CEO. "The other shoe has yet to drop."

But neither Jones nor Melissa Deckman, a political science professor at Washington College who has studied evangelicals, thought the survey gave Romney reason for total despair, in part because evangelicals have few other options.

"Because there is not a George W. Bush or other strong evangelical in the Republican race, that gives Romney some inroads" among evangelicals, Deckman said.

Even though GOP contenders Rick Perry and Michele Bachmann are two evangelicals who have made their faith prominent in their campaigns, they are trailing far behind Romney and Cain.

Particularly interesting to the surveys' authors was the extent to which voters were truthful about their feeling about Mormons. Historically, more people have told pollsters they would vote for black or female candidates than actually voted for them.

Not so with Mormons, said Jones.

He and Cox designed a question that would allow voters to express discomfort with a Mormon president, but as part of a group of statements. The questioner would not know exactly which statement bothered them. But the data showed no greater antipathy toward a Mormon president than among people who were willing to reveal their discomfort candidly.

That held true across religious groups -- except for mainline Protestants. When asked directly, 30 percent of mainline Protestants said a Mormon president would concern them; asked indirectly, 57 percent did.

Deckman, who identified herself as a mainline Protestant, offered that as a group, "they don't necessarily like to say impolite things."

"But with mainliners being up for grabs, this could be an issue for Romney," she added.

Overall, the survey showed white evangelical voters gave their highest favorability ratings (70 percent) to Cain, followed by Perry (56 percent) and Romney (49 percent). A month earlier, Romney's favorability ratings within this group were at 63 percent, and Cain's were in the single digits. Perry's remained about the same.

The survey also highlighted significant differences between the views of older and younger Americans on a Mormon president, with younger Americans showing far more discomfort.

Fifty-four percent of voters between 18 and 29 say they would be at least somewhat uncomfortable with a Mormon president, compared to less than four in 10 senior voters.

Jones speculated that young people's wariness about a Mormon president may stem in part from their relatively strong support for gay marriage, and the fact that the Mormon church has been active in the movement to ban it. The age group tends to associate the church with being anti-gay, Jones said. "We hear that in focus groups." The survey of 1,505 Americans was conducted between Sept. 22 and Oct. 2 and has a margin of error of plus or minus 2.5 percentage points.

The survey also asked Americans several questions about the distribution of wealth and equality of opportunity in the nation. Among the survey's findings:

- A strong majority (60 percent) of Americans agree society would be better off if wealth distribution was more equal, with 39 percent disagreeing. Nearly 7 in 10 young people say this, compared to 46 percent of seniors.
- Almost eight in 10 black Americans and Hispanic Americans agree that society would benefit from more wealth distribution, compared to 54 percent of whites.
- Nearly three-quarters (73 percent) of Americans believe discrimination against minorities "is still a very serious problem in our society."