

# Mormonism hurt Mitt Romney in 2008. What about 2012?

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c. 2012 Religion News Service WASHINGTON (RNS) Mitt Romney's Mormon faith makes people uneasy. If used against him in the fall presidential election, the negative stigma or stereotypes could be hard to overcome, according to an academic study released Monday (May 21) by political scientists at the University of Akron, Notre Dame and Brigham Young University.

That, at least, was the case in 2008, and "given that the general perception of Mormons has not changed," the research suggests "that Romney's religion will remain a potential stumbling block."

This is the "stained-glass ceiling" which used to restrict Catholics and Jews from high office, according to the study, which was published in the journal Political Behavior. Most Americans are still far less familiar with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, even though there are about equal numbers of Mormons and Jews in the United States.

Mormons and non-Mormons don't interact much, making non-Mormons "susceptible to persuasion by negative information about the group in question," according to the study's authors, including religion and politics scholar John Green, director of the Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics at the University of Akron.

The problem is not that Romney "is open with his faith," Green said. "It is that his Mormon faith, in particular, makes many people uneasy. And that unease has political consequences."

This was demonstrated in Romney's failed 2008 presidential bid, according to the study, which examined polling data by a consortium of universities as well as analyses of other studies on religion and politics. Concerns over Romney's Mormonism "dwarfed concerns about the religious backgrounds of Hillary Clinton

and Mike Huckabee," the study says. This occurred despite Romney's declaration in a nationally televised speech that "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the Savior of mankind."

He said that while his and other churches may have differences in theology, "we share a common creed of moral convictions."

Will voters' still have those concerns in 2012? The study suggests they could if Romney's religion is attacked. But one of the co-authors, J. Quin Monson of BYU, noted in a telephone interview that this election could mark a departure.

Romney has all but sewn up the GOP nomination, whereas neither Clinton, a Democrat, nor Huckabee, a Republican, won their respective parties' nominations in 2008. Attacks on Romney from the left by figures such as HBO's Bill Maher, who used Twitter on Monday to call Mormonism a "cult" may do little to sway conservatives anyway.

And evangelical conservatives who in the past were wary of Mormonism appear to be even more worried by a different prospect -- the reelection of President Obama. Many conservative Christians have become more accepting of Romney's faith.

David Axelrod, Obama's senior campaign strategist, told CNN on Sunday that attacks on Romney's religion are "not fair game."

"The real question mark is whether the changing context will change the reaction to Romney's religion," BYU's Monson said. He said he wants to see hard data, "but I think it's entirely possible that we may see a shift in 2012."