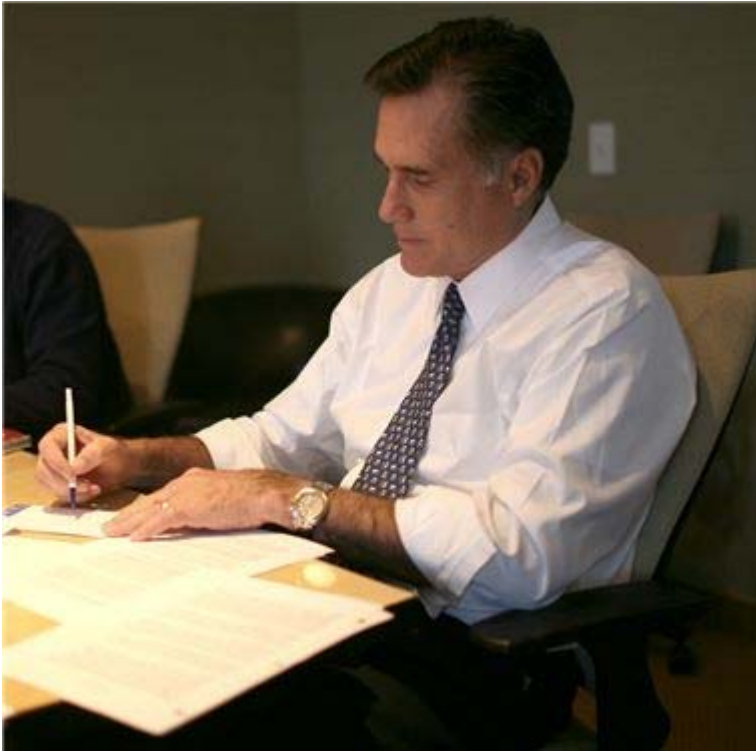


## Expertinent: How Romney Should Address His Mormon Faith (Part One)



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By Andrew Romano



*Expertinent is a regular Stumper column featuring interviews with experts on the news of the day.*

There's only one day to go before Mitt Romney's "Major Address on Mormonism" ® at the George H.W. Bush Presidential Library in College Station, Texas. Between now and then, Romney, who is writing the speech himself (with a little help from Newsweek editor Jon Meacham's American Gospel), has no public events scheduled--just private fundraisers in the Lone Star State and Louisiana. The MSM has whipped itself into a frenzy. The big question: what should Romney say?

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I'll admit: I'm interested. In the midst of "silly season"--a time of petty political sniping--a speech relying on presidential rhetoric to address the idea of religious tolerance seems like a refreshing change of pace. That said, politics is still at play here. So Stumper called John Geer, Distinguished Professor of Political Science at Vanderbilt University and co-author of a new scientific survey assessing bias against Mormonism (especially among "born-again" Christians), to discuss the potential risks--and rewards--of Romney's strategy. Excerpts:

### **How biased are Americans against Mormons?**

Bias against Mormons is significantly more intense than bias against women and blacks, and it's even stronger among conservative southern Evangelicals. In fact, it rivals their bias against atheists.

### **Does that mean Romney is doomed?**

Not at all. Our data shows that people who know Mitt Romney is a Mormon show far less bias than those who don't know he's a Mormon. For example, among our sample of southern evangelicals--we have an extra oversample of 600 people--those people who don't know Romney is a Mormon exhibit a tremendous amount of bias against Mormons. Those who know that he's a Mormon are far, far less likely to be biased.

### **What does that tell us?**

You may or may not like Mitt Romney, but he's an effective candidate, he's a quality politician, and by just being who he is, he's a kind of a role model, a spokesperson in some sense, for the Mormon religion. He demystifies it by showing that he's not wearing horns, that he's not a member of a cult.

**So when people know Romney's a Mormon and see him as a representative, they're more**

**willing to be accepting of the religion as a whole.**

Right. I think the American people collectively--and there are, of course, exceptions--there's a strong social norm for religious tolerance. Still, only about two percent, maybe three percent, of the population is Mormon, which isn't that different than the Jewish community--about three percent. But think about the distribution of where Jews live versus where Mormons live. The Jewish community populates the entire East Coast and West Coast and key parts of the Midwest. In the major metropolitan areas, lots of people know someone who's Jewish. But the Mormon religion, by contrast, has concentrated a huge proportion of its population, not by intent, in a handful of small states. Our data suggests, therefore, that not many people--only about half--say they know Mormons.

**So that's the basis of ignorance, which breeds bias.**

Exactly. When Kennedy faced Catholicism and the biases against that, it was less of a hurdle because almost everybody knew Catholics. There was some familiarity. That's one reason why Romney needs to address this--people's caricatured view of Mormons.

**Let's talk about the address specifically. According to the Los Angeles Times, "Romney said Monday that he would not focus on his Mormon beliefs in a major speech on religion this week and instead would discuss his concern that "faith has disappeared from the public square."****Based on your data, is this the right approach?**

The data we have suggests it's probably not a good idea. How much he wants to talk about his faith and the Mormon religion is not entirely clear based on our evidence. But we have pretty compelling results that suggest that if people learn more about the Mormon religion--in a sense checking the kind of bias that exists out there, that Mormons believe in polygamy, that Mormons represent a cult, etc.--that if you check that information with counter-information, such as letting people know that the Mormon church banned polygamy a hundred years ago, and you provide that kind of context, that people become a little bit more tolerant and show less bias. Our data are pretty clear. There is bias against Mormons--but it dwindles once people learn more.

**What about a plea for tolerance, like Kennedy made in 1960?**

We gave people the biased information against Mormons and try to counter it with various scenarios, information being one of them--like "the LDS church is big on family and traditional values." Then we just did a plea for tolerance, literally clipping from Kennedy's Houston ministers speech one of the passages where he talks about the need to have tolerance. The tolerance doesn't work. It's the information that checks the bias. When people who are not aware that Romney is Mormon are given the classic caricature of Mormons, that drives down Romney's ratings. But the thing is, you can only bring back the ratings of Romney with new information. A plea to tolerance does not work. Sure, it's a good thing. But you first have to let people know what you're asking people to be tolerant of. That's the key takeaway.

**So you're saying Romney needs to be specific? To act as a spokesman?**

How specific he should be we don't have any good handle on. We just think that getting more information out there is important. Him just standing up and addressing the issue will, in some sense, do a little bit of that right away. But he does need to let people know some of the key tenets of the Mormon religion is some way, shape or form.

**Aren't there risks to that?**

Sure. If the speech doesn't go well, it could be really hard on him. The Republican race is totally fluid. Nobody's over 20 points nationally in some polls. Everybody's vote is up for grabs. People's preferences are weakly held. There are people who will find out for the first time that Romney's a Mormon through this speech. It may be that in the short term he takes a little bit of a hit as people digest the information and get used to it. They may still be playing to these kinds of caricatures, and it's going to take more than just a speech to overcome that.

**Some observers say Romney's timing is off. They say he should have addressed this issue earlier--or even later, like Kennedy.**

Kennedy addressed the Catholic issue by winning the West Virginia primary in 1960. Back then, what really mattered was what insiders thought of Kennedy, and he allayed that particular fear. But the big hurdle right now for Romney is these Southern evangelicals. He'd probably prefer to do it in the general election, but he's got to get the nomination first--and these concerns are cropping up. The difference with Kennedy is a difference in the particular constituencies--Democratic insiders versus Southern evangelicals.

Some people say Romney should've done this in the summer. The problem with that is, it would've been somewhat presumptuous of Romney in the summer to claim that he has to give a major speech on this topic

when no one knows who he is and he's not a frontrunner, like he is now. Also, the attacks hadn't heated up yet. There was no context by which you could begin to see this anti-Mormon bias promoted by various third-party groups, if you will. You're beginning to see that now.

I think the timing of the speech is ideal. He needs to inoculate against those kinds of attacks.

**Is there a political benefit here beyond simply allaying anti-Mormon bias. Does Romney have an opportunity to look "presidential"?**

The opportunity is a great one; the reasons for the opportunity aren't great. The fact that he has the opportunity to be in a very presidential setting, introduced by a former president and to get a lot of media attention--he has a real chance to shine. The key, though, is not only to demystify the Mormon religion, but also to talk about how faith works for him. This needs to be personal. He needs to come across as a person who's saying, "Look, this is my religion people are questioning and I'm not happy about it." There are a lot of questions about Romney being the classic politician--the guy who's willing to do whatever is necessary to win. Tomorrow, he has a chance to deal with that and show what he believes in a broader sense than just faith. But he's like a cat on a hot tin roof right now.