

New Vanderbilt scientific poll reveals intense bias against Mormons; Romney must demystify his religion to gain support

Bias against Mormons is significantly more intense among the public than bias against either African Americans or women, according to a new scientific poll by three professors from Vanderbilt and Claremont Graduate universities.

The survey was designed to assess bias against Mormons, how best to combat it and its potential impact on the nomination process and general election campaign.

Vanderbilt's Distinguished Professor of Political Science John Geer and Assistant Professor of Political Science Brett Benson and Jennifer Merolla, the Mary Nicolai-George Blair Assistant Professor in the Department of Politics and Policy at Claremont Graduate University, designed the Internet survey that was conducted in mid-November and analyzed the results.

A national representative sample of 1,200 people participated along with an additional over-sample of another 600 "born-again" Southerners. The over-sample was designed to measure the concerns that people have expressed about Romney's religion among the evangelical base of the Republican Party.

Geer said that while there have been a handful of surveys about Mormons and possible discrimination, they have relied for the most part on people simply indicating if they would be willing to vote for a Mormon for president.



"People today might say they would vote for a woman, Mormon, African American or other minority, when, in fact, they have no intention to do so," he said. "They may not want to be labeled a bigot, so they give a socially acceptable answer. We address this problem in our study." Geer said the study also looked at the impact of various messages on people's attitudes toward Romney.

Key findings of the study include:

- Bias against Mormons is significantly more intense among the public compared to bias against women and blacks. The bias against Mormons is even more pronounced among conservative Evangelicals. Their bias against Mormons rivals their bias against atheists.
- Only about half the nation claims to even know a Mormon or to know that Romney is Mormon.
- The extent of the bias against Romney is moderated if the individual already knows that he is Mormon. That information seems to demystify the Mormon religion, making people more tolerant of the religion. Those who do not know Romney is Mormon exhibit much greater bias upon learning of his religion.
- When participants in the survey are provided information that stereotypes Mormons, such as "Mormons are part of a non-Christian cult" or "Mormons are polygamists," they react negatively to Romney's candidacy.
- Participants react favorably to messages that dispel the negative stereotypes about Mormons. Examples would be "about a hundred years ago the Mormon Church banned

polygamy," or "the Church of Jesus Chris of Latter-day Saints stresses traditional family values." However, simple appeals for religious tolerance do not win over support for Romney from the respondents.

Geer noted that Romney's address, scheduled for Dec. 6 at the George H. W. Bush Presidential Library, is not without risks. "Depending upon how the speech is designed, it could stir latent bias by activating certain interests of the voting public," he said. "However, those who are biased against Mormons are not necessarily hardened in their positions." According to the survey results, Romney should provide clear, accurate information to dispel misconceptions about the Mormon religion.

With the primaries approaching, negative attacks, including some related to Mormonism, are likely, according to Benson. "The speech may be Romney's best chance to strike pre-emptively to inoculate the public from such attacks," he said. "Therefore, the speech may work if Romney can walk the delicate line of explaining his beliefs and values without driving away conservative evangelicals."

Media Contact: Ann Marie Deer Owens, 615-322-NEWS
annmarie.owens@vanderbilt.edu