

Romney addressing his faith at a key time

John Faherty

The Arizona Republic
Dec. 6, 2007 12:00 AM

Today, presidential candidate Mitt Romney will talk about faith and how his religion - he is Mormon - would influence his presidency.

His speech comes as his campaign in Iowa is suddenly stumbling and new research indicates bias against Mormons is greater than bias against African-Americans and women.

There is no shortage of Mormons holding national offices, but there has never been a Mormon president.



Romney's talk is already being called his "Kennedy speech," a reference to 1960 when candidate John F. Kennedy felt compelled to speak about his faith to a gathering of Baptist ministers in Texas.

That day, Kennedy said: "I am not the Catholic candidate for president. I am the Democratic Party's candidate for president who happens also to be a Catholic. I do not speak for my church on public matters, and the church does not speak

for me."

Kennedy's goal that day was simple: He wanted to make clear his belief in the separation of church and state.

Romney's job is more nuanced.

His religious conviction is seen as a political strength by analysts. But he may want to avoid delving into the particulars of his religion.

"It would be deeply problematic to get into the minutiae of his religion, the same as it would for any religion," said Jean Bethke Elshstain, a professor at the University of Chicago Divinity School.

Despite the risks, some of Romney's closest advisers have been urging him to speak openly about his faith.

Last week, his son, Tagg Romney, said, "I just think it's an issue for some people. Better for him to get out there and tell people, 'This is who I am.'"

Romney's speech today, like Kennedy's, will be delivered in Texas. And it must be viewed in terms of the political landscape in Iowa and its Jan. 3 caucus.

In May, a *Des Moines Register* poll gave Romney a double-digit lead over his closest rivals.

Now, he trails former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee.

Advertisement



Print Powered By  FormatDynamics

Huckabee, an ordained Baptist minister, has repeatedly stressed his Christian background and is strongly supported by religious voters in Iowa.

A poll conducted by the Associated Press and the Pew Research Center this month indicated that Huckabee's new lead comes from the support of Iowa's White evangelicals, who make up 38 percent of Republicans in the state.

Huckabee's lead among those voters is nearly 2-1.

Why faith matters

Elshtain, is never surprised when a candidate's faith becomes a campaign issue.

"These are important issues to people," Elshtain said. "The American electorate is unusually open to bringing faith to the campaign."

The irony is that once a person becomes president, there is very little, if any, history that shows a particular brand of faith changes the way a person conducts himself in office.

Bill Clinton and Harry Truman were Baptists. George Washington was an Episcopalian. Thomas Jefferson was a Deist.

Still, Elshtain thinks Romney's talk today will need to be carefully orchestrated because his faith is not as well known among voters.

There are 5.8 million Mormons in the United States, according to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Although that is by no means a small church, it does remain something of a mystery to many in the nation.

"I think what he specifically wants to do is calm worries that his religion is a particularly peculiar outcropping," Elshtain said.

Mormons such as Rep. Jeff Flake of Arizona and Sens. Orrin Hatch of Utah, and Harry Reid of Nevada all hold national office, but they come from areas

with a significant number of Mormon voters.

Romney will not have that luxury in his national campaign.

This week, three academics released results from a national poll of 1,200 people designed to assess bias against Mormons.

"People are more reluctant to vote for Mormons than they are Blacks or women," said John G. Geer of Vanderbilt University, author of the study.

Romney's speech today should help because Geer's research also indicates bias against Mormons is significantly lower among people who already know that Romney is Mormon.

That information "seems to demystify the Mormon religion, making people more tolerant of the religion," Geer said.

Differences among faiths

Increased awareness is good news for Kyle Hettinger, 47, a Phoenix attorney who is Mormon.

"It's just a weird issue for us. What is the big deal?" Hettinger said. "I hope that he is not shy about the fact that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a Christian church."

That issue is significant for some and contested by

Advertisement



A bright idea in
online advertising.
PrinterStitial® Ads by
Format Dynamics.

FormatDynamics

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics

others.

Polling this summer by the Pew Research Center indicated that 31 percent of Americans do not believe Mormons are Christian. An additional 17 percent said they are not sure.

White evangelicals are most likely to think that the Mormon religion is not Christian, the poll said.

Among White evangelicals who attend services at least once a week, 52 percent believe that Mormons are not Christian.

Some are not convinced Mormons are Christians, because of differences between their beliefs:

- Mormons believe the Bible is the word of God, only to the extent that it is translated correctly. Evangelicals do not qualify its accuracy.
- Mormons believe the three aspects of the Holy Trinity are three separate entities. Most Christians believe the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one being.
- Mormons put their faith in books in addition to the Bible, including the Book of Mormon, which founder Joseph Smith called "the most correct of any book on Earth."

Finding commonalities

David K. Udall, a Mormon who has been involved in politics for most of his adult life, hopes that despite some differences between the Mormon faith and that of other Christians, people will see commonalities between the faiths.

He also hopes voters will also be able to once again focus on policy issues.

"There is no mystery here. If you get to know Mormons, you see right away they are pretty good people," Udall said from his Mesa office.

"The story ought to be about the issues. Things like the war on terror."

During Kennedy's speech in 1960, he talked about being a Catholic. He also demonstrated that he sensed a day like today would come again.

"For while this year it may be a Catholic against whom the finger of suspicion is pointed, in other years it has been, and may someday be again, a Jew or a Quaker or a Unitarian or a Baptist," Kennedy said.

Reach the reporter at john.faherty@arizona-republic.com.

Advertisement



A bright idea in online advertising.

FormatDynamics

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics