

Faith hurdle low for candidates: Religiosity doesn't matter that much

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The recent-vintage wisdom of presidential politics is that voters want their candidates to have strong personal faith. But for the moment, the front-running candidacies of Democrat Hillary Clinton and Republican Rudy Giuliani seem to suggest that beyond a certain minimum level, the religiosity of a candidate doesn't matter that much to the voting public.

Or at least so say analysts at the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. And in the case of Republican Mitt Romney, whom voters see as the most religious candidate in either field, his Mormon faith appears to be a unique stumbling block for a quarter of those polled.

Since the 2004 election, Democrats in particular have sought to find a way to talk about personal religious faith in the context of politics, trying to counter Republicans' charges that they are the party of secularists.

To some extent the Democrats have succeeded, said Greg Smith, a Pew Center research fellow: large majorities of 3,002 Americans polled in the first half of August regard all the major candidates—Democratic and Republican—as “very” or “somewhat” religious. But having established that identity in the public mind, it doesn't matter much whether one candidate seems more religious than another, even to voters who care about religion generally, Smith said.

“You can conceptualize it like running the 100-meter hurdles. You have to get over the hurdle, but it's not that high,” he said. Nor does it matter whether one candidate clears it by a greater margin than competitors.

The Pew poll found that Clinton and Giuliani remain front-runners in their respective parties even though only 16 percent of those polled thought of Clinton as “very religious” and only 14 percent considered Giuliani “very religious.”

By contrast, many more respondents saw Democrats John Edwards and Barack Obama as “very religious” candidates—28 percent for Edwards and 24 percent for Obama. Among Republican candidates, Fred Thompson was seen as “very religious” by only 16 percent, and only 19 percent thought the same of John McCain.

Romney, who by far and away is seen as the most religious contender—46 percent of respondents called him “very religious”—faces a stiff challenge because he is Mormon. About 25 percent of respondents, “Democrat, independent and Republican alike, say they would be less likely to vote for a presidential candidate who is Mormon,” said a report accompanying the poll.

Other things being equal, voters said they would be more likely to vote for a Jew or a Catholic than a Mormon. They told pollsters they would be more receptive to a Mormon than a Muslim, and much more receptive to a Mormon than an atheist.

Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints call themselves Christians, but many Christian denominations dispute that. Although Mormon teachings about family, work, chastity and charity closely follow traditional Christian values, they spring from a different view of God, scripture and the life of Jesus Christ.

On other issues, Pew found that most voters this year are much less concerned about social issues such as abortion and gay marriage than they have been in the past. Those topics have often been obscured on voters’ radar by the war in Iraq and domestic issues like the economy, health care and the environment, Smith said.

He said that climate partly explains the lead by Giuliani, the former mayor of New York who favors both abortion rights and gay rights.

Pollsters found that fewer than a third of Republicans knew that Giuliani supports abortion rights and that perhaps more important, among those Republican-leaning voters who knew his position, he still had a very high 76 percent approval rating. –

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