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**Keynote Address from the 85th Annual Meeting of the Indiana Academy of the Social Sciences**

***A Stained-Glass Ceiling? Mitt Romney and Mormonism*<sup>\*,†</sup>**

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**ABSTRACT**

Did Mitt Romney's religion—Mormonism—help or hurt him in his campaigns for the presidency? While Romney's religious affiliation was generally viewed as an electoral liability, Americans' ambivalence about Mormons presented the possibility that, depending on framing, it could be neutralized or could perhaps even become a political asset. Survey experiments during both Romney's 2008 and 2012 campaigns suggest that although Romney's religion was a detriment when he ran the first time, it had largely ceased to be an issue in 2012. Although Mormonism did not have much effect on Romney's performance at the polls in the general election of 2012, however, Romney's candidacy has had an effect on perceptions of Mormonism. In the wake of his campaign, attitudes toward Mormons have become politically polarized, with Republicans holding a far more positive view of them than Democrats, with Independents in the middle.

**KEY WORDS** 2012 Presidential Election; Mormonism; Mitt Romney; Religious Tolerance

Much is rightly made of John F. Kennedy's victory in the 1960 presidential election as a giant leap for religious tolerance in America. In winning that election, Kennedy demonstrated that the Constitution's promise that there shall be no religious test for office

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† This paper contains material originally published in Chapter 9 of *Seeking the Promised Land: Mormons and American Politics* by David E. Campbell, John C. Green, and J. Quin Monson (2014, Cambridge University Press). Reprinted with the permission of Cambridge University Press. All requests to reproduce this material must be forwarded to Cambridge University Press.

was true in fact as well as law, at least for Catholics. Although Kennedy was the first Catholic to win, however, he was not the first to run. That distinction belongs to Al Smith, who ran as the Democratic presidential nominee in 1928. During the 1928 campaign, Smith faced virulent anti-Catholicism in a landslide loss to Herbert Hoover (Prendergrast 1999). There were many reasons for Smith's loss, so it would not be accurate to pin it all on his religion, but neither should we dismiss the hostility and even bigotry directed toward him because of his religion.

As the first member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS)—a Mormon—to run as a major party nominee in a general presidential election, is Mitt Romney better described as the Mormons' John F. Kennedy or their Al Smith? Was he like Smith, in that his candidacy fanned the flames of religious hostility, or, notwithstanding his loss at the polls, was he more like Kennedy, in that he broke through a stained-glass ceiling?

In answering this question, I will draw on research I have done in collaboration with John Green and Quin Monson and published in our book *Seeking the Promised Land: Mormons and American Politics* (Cambridge University Press). I refer interested readers to our book for a more thorough discussion of themes introduced here.

I begin by noting that, although Romney's Mormonism was widely seen as an electoral liability—a point reinforced by our data presented—it also had the potential to be an asset. For example, consider the following incident in the 2012 campaign. In the fall of 2012, Romney was in the midst of his tight presidential race against Barack Obama. Although buoyed by his strong performance in the first presidential debate, Romney faced continued criticism for comments he had made at a private fundraiser in which he had dismissed 47 percent of Americans as “dependent upon government, who believe that they are victims . . . and so my job is not to worry about those people. I'll never convince them that they should take personal responsibility for their lives” (*New York Times* 2012). At the end of the second presidential debate, the two candidates were asked the following question by an audience member:

What do you believe is the biggest misperception that the American people have about you as a man and a candidate? Using specific examples, can you take this opportunity to debunk that misperception and set us straight?

Romney went first. In seeking to defuse criticism for his “47 percent” comment, he began by saying, “I care about 100 percent of the American people.” After underscoring that point, he went on to say,

[M]y passion probably flows from the fact that I believe in God. And I believe we're all children of the same God. I believe we have a responsibility to care for one another. I— I served as a missionary for my church. I served as a pastor in my congregation for about 10 years. I've sat across the

table from people who were out of work and worked with them to try and find new work or to help them through tough times. (ABC News 2012)

Romney was referencing one of the most potentially controversial parts of his biography, his Mormonism, to rebut one of the most damaging charges leveled against him, that he was a callous elitist. In doing so, he was emphasizing the universalistic aspects of his faith, which in a highly religious nation like the United States had the potential to soften his image and thus win votes.

This example reminds us that Mormonism presents a paradox. Mormonism is the “quintessentially American religion” (Moore 1986) while simultaneously engendering negative reactions both from members of other faiths—especially evangelical Protestants—and secularists. Accordingly, my colleagues and I have found that Americans’ perceptions of Mormons are a mix of both positive and negative stereotypes. (See chapter 7 of *Seeking the Promised Land* for more details.) Given that Mormonism is the proverbial double-edged sword, in sifting through the evidence from Romney’s two presidential campaigns, our question is whether, on balance, Mormonism did more to help or harm his prospects at the polls.

## **THE 2008 CAMPAIGN**

In Romney’s debut performance during the 2008 Republican primaries, his Mormonism was a significant detriment in the eyes of many voters. Political science theory illuminates why voters would react strongly to the “peculiar” religious background of a relatively unknown candidate running in the primary process. Voters typically have little information about the candidates running. Not only are the candidates often unfamiliar, but because they are all in the same party, primary voters cannot glean any information from the party label as in a general election. In such an environment, a little bit of information can have an outsized impact on how voters perceive a candidate. Political scientist Samuel Popkin (1994) has memorably described the “low information rationality” that characterizes voters’ behavior during primaries. Voters receive information—often limited—about candidates. If they accept the information as reliable, it is stored for retrieval until needed for a decision. At the decision point, people sample across the stored information to form an opinion (Zaller 1992). For candidates with a long track record in public life (e.g., Hillary Clinton), most voters will already have a lot of stored information. One more piece of information, like her religious affiliation, is not likely to make much difference—a small pebble in a large pond. For lesser known candidates, one piece of information, particularly novel information, will have a far greater impact, like a large rock in a small pond, and if that information is membership in a distinctive, even controversial, religion, it is likely to make a big splash.

During the 2008 primaries, we tested how voters responded to information about Mitt Romney’s background in the LDS Church.<sup>1</sup> In particular, we examined how voters reacted to different ways of framing Mormonism. We did so while the primaries were

underway, when Romney was still relatively unknown and a viable candidate for the Republican nomination.<sup>2</sup>

We randomly assigned respondents (roughly 200 each) to read different descriptions of Mitt Romney. Everyone received this positive boilerplate description of him:

*As you know, Mitt Romney is running for president. He is a successful businessman, a former governor of Massachusetts, and the head of the 2002 Winter Olympics. He has been married for thirty-nine years and raised five sons.*

Some respondents were randomly chosen to receive more information, which was added immediately following the information about his personal background. One group learned that Romney “has been a local leader in his church,” while another learned that he has been a local leader of “the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, often called the Mormon Church.” After reading the description of Romney, all respondents were asked whether the preceding information made them more or less likely to vote for him.

This method enabled us to compare the reactions of voters who received only the boilerplate biography (control group) to those who received the additional information about his religion. By comparing the two groups, we determined if additional information about Romney’s religion made voters more or less likely to vote for him. Recall that at this time, Romney was a newcomer on the national political scene, so for many voters, our information would have made a large splash.

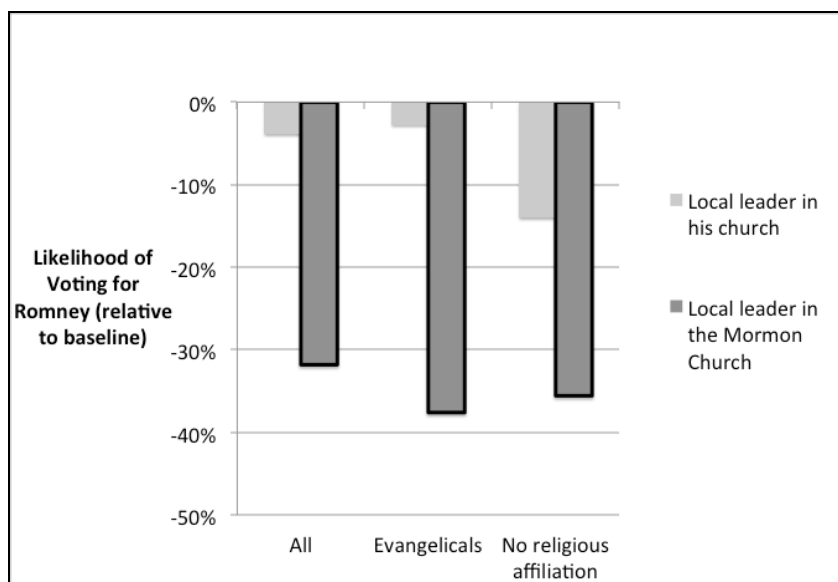
As shown in Figure 1, the information that Romney was a leader in the Mormon Church had a substantially negative effect on the likelihood of participants voting for him.<sup>3</sup> The figure compares the reaction of respondents in the control group—who, recall, read nothing about Romney’s religion—to those who received information about his religion. As shown in the figure, when Romney’s church was not identified, voters registered no statistically significant reaction, but when his affiliation with the Mormon Church was explicitly mentioned, Romney’s support dropped by roughly 32 percentage points.

Figure 1 also displays the results for evangelicals and for people with no religious affiliation (the “nones”). Tension exists between Mormons and other religions (evangelicals) and between Mormons and secular society (nones). Both groups have a slightly more negative reaction to Romney’s Mormonism than does the general population. Not surprisingly, evangelicals do not have a negative reaction upon reading that Romney has been a leader in his church when it remains unidentified, while nones have a negative reaction to the unnamed church, approaching statistical significance.<sup>4</sup>

Romney was not the only candidate in the 2008 primary season to face questions about his religious background. Among his Republican opponents, Mike Huckabee was an ordained Southern Baptist pastor, which might have been a problem for some voters.

On the Democratic side, Barack Obama faced the double whammy of controversial comments made by the pastor of his Chicago church, Jeremiah Wright, and the rumor that he was actually a Muslim. To gauge the relative impact of concerns about Romney's LDS background compared to the concerns raised about other candidates, we conducted a parallel set of experiments during the primary season. Because Romney, Huckabee, and Obama were all relatively unknown to most voters, for contrast, we also tested voters' reactions to information about the religious background of Hillary Clinton, as she was extremely well known.

**Figure 1. Reactions to Romney's Religion, January 2008**



*Note:* A black border represents a statistically significant effect ( $p < 0.05$ , one-tailed test).

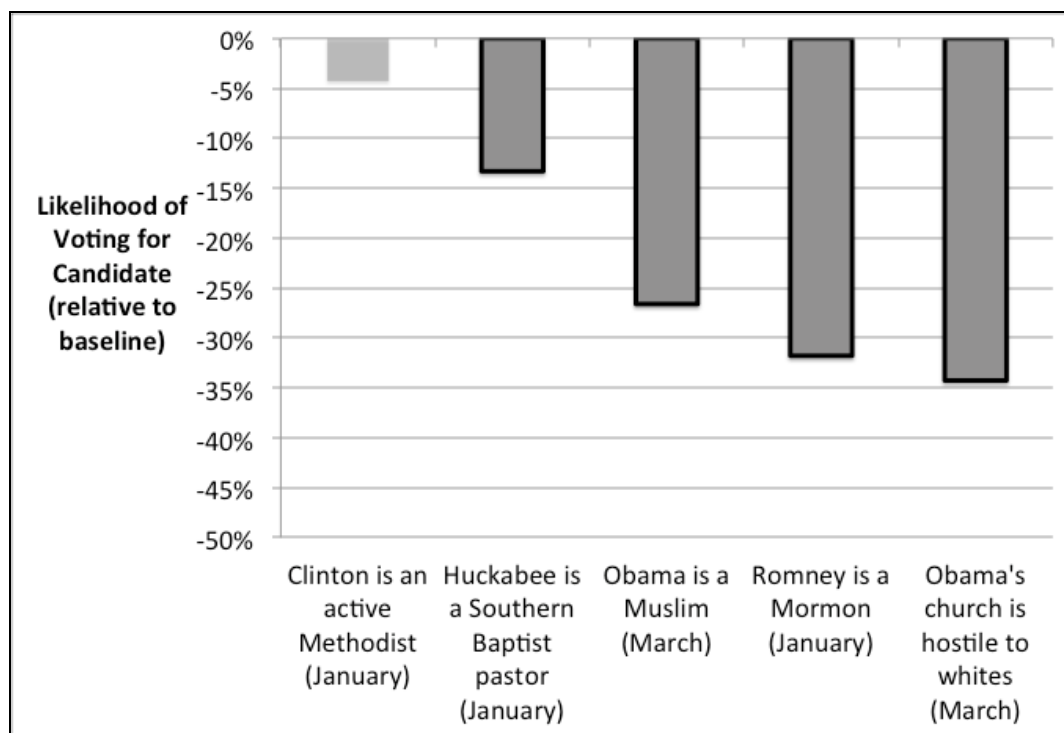
*Source:* Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project (2008).

In each case, members of the control group read a boilerplate description of the candidate while another randomly selected group read the same description with additional information about the candidate's religion. As with the Romney experiments, we limited our descriptions to information that was factually correct, using language with a neutral tone. This undoubtedly limited the effects we observed, as far more incendiary, and often inaccurate, information circulates during a political campaign.<sup>5</sup>

Figure 2 displays how each description affected voters' likelihood to vote for the candidate in question. Not surprisingly, the effect for Clinton was small and statistically insignificant. Not only did most Americans already have their minds made up about her, but Clinton's background as a United Methodist, a mainline Protestant denomination, was unlikely to cause voters as much concern as the other candidates' religions.

Huckabee’s background as a Southern Baptist minister triggered a significant negative reaction but, at 13 percentage points, was far less than the concern elicited by disclosure of Romney’s Mormonism. Voters’ reaction to information about Obama’s alleged Muslim background and his pastor were highly negative—a little smaller and the latter a little larger, respectively, than the “Mormon effect.”<sup>6</sup> All told, in 2008, Romney’s Mormonism was as large a political liability for him as were two of the most explosive charges leveled against Barack Obama.

**Figure 2. Reactions to Presidential Candidates’ Religion, 2008**



*Note:* A black border represents a statistically significant effect ( $p < 0.05$ , one-tailed test).

*Source:* Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project (2008).

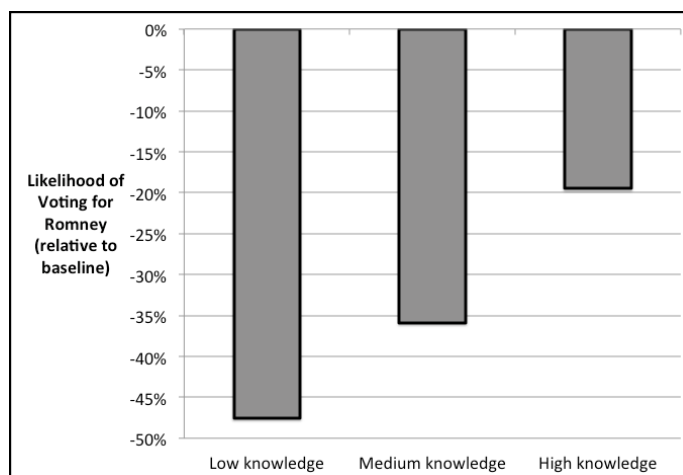
Historically, Democrats have had a stronger aversion to Mormon presidential candidates than have Republicans. That pattern was borne out in our Romney experiment, as the Mormon effect for Republicans was a drop of 25 percentage points, compared to 36 points for Democrats.<sup>7</sup> Among Democrats, there was also a negative and statistically significant reaction to the description of Romney as a leader in his unnamed church, albeit smaller than the Mormon effect (13 percentage points).

## CONTACT AND KNOWLEDGE

Even though this experiment shows that, on balance, voters' reaction to Romney's Mormonism was negative, recall that general impressions toward Mormons are a mixture of both positive and negative (and not every voter reacted negatively to Romney's religion). We have found that two factors in particular foster a positive perception of Mormons: a close personal relationship with a Mormon and factual knowledge about Mormonism. We further have found that both close contact and factual knowledge also ameliorated, at least partially, the negative reaction to Romney's Mormonism when he first appeared on the political scene in 2008.

Figure 3 displays participants' reaction to the description of Romney as an active Mormon among voters with low, medium, and high factual knowledge about Mormonism.<sup>8</sup> Among those with low knowledge, when Romney was described as a Mormon, support for him dropped by 48 percentage points, compared to 36 points among those with a medium level of knowledge and 20 points among those with high knowledge. Even though greater knowledge "buffered" a negative reaction to Romney's Mormonism—a 20-point drop is obviously less than a 48-point drop—it is still noteworthy that the reaction was negative across the board.

**Figure 3. Factual Knowledge about Mormonism ("Romney was a local leader in the Mormon Church.")**



*Note:* A black border represents a statistically significant effect ( $p < 0.05$ , one-tailed test).

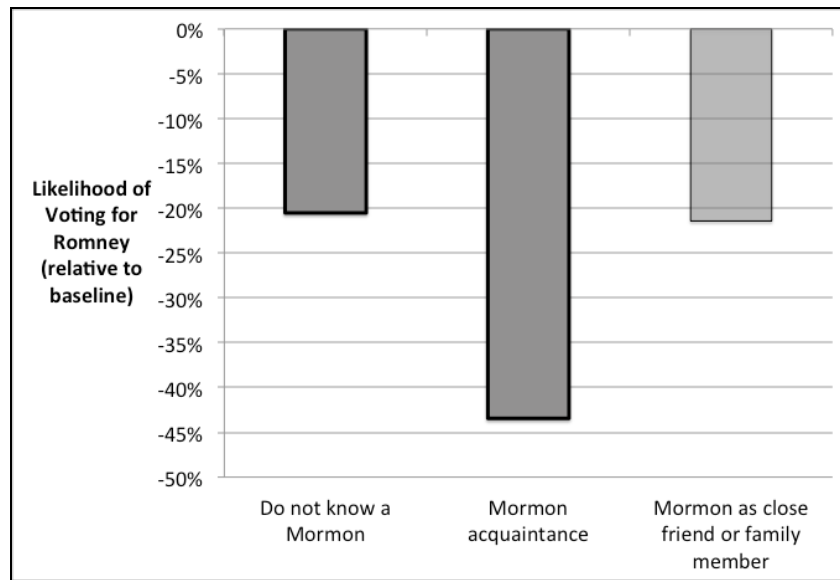
*Source:* Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project (2008).

Figure 4 makes a similar comparison, but this time by the degree of reported social contact with a Mormon. Note that a moderate level of contact did more harm than good for attitudes about Romney. Among people with the least and most contact with Mormons, the negative reaction to Romney's Mormonism was about the same—a drop of



roughly 20 percentage points in support—but among those in the middle (who knew a Mormon but only as an acquaintance), the effect was twice as large: a decline of 43 percentage points.

**Figure 4. Contact with Mormons (“Romney was a local leader in the Mormon Church.”)**



*Note:* A black border represents a statistically significant effect ( $p < 0.05$ , one-tailed test).

*Source:* Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project (2008).

These results reflect the reactions to Romney’s Mormonism in the absence of any further information, thus providing a baseline in the absence of the back-and-forth in a political campaign. Of course, political campaigns are designed to increase what voters know about a candidate, whether positive or negative. Just as important is how such information is framed. Scholars of framing effects distinguish between “frames in thought” and “frames in communication” (Chong and Druckman 2007; Druckman 2001). The former refers to what we might think of as a preexisting condition—the attitudes or opinions that people hold on a given matter. The latter refers to the way information on a given matter is presented in public discourse by the media, politicians, and other opinion shapers. Framing effects result from the interaction of the two.

As shown by the way voters reacted upon reading of his involvement in the Mormon Church, Romney definitely faced negative frames in thought about Mormonism. Among these, one of the most potent is the claim that Mormons are not Christians. Evangelical Protestants, a key constituency in the Republican primaries, are especially likely to hold this belief. Labeling Mormons as non-Christians thus has potential political implications. A majority of Americans (and an even greater share of Republicans) believe

the United States was founded as a “Christian nation,” and thus may not want a non-Christian to lead it (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2006). The presidency has quasi-religious trappings, as exemplified by the office’s many public ceremonies and patriotic rituals with religious undercurrents—examples of what Robert Bellah (1967) has aptly described as America’s civil religion.

In comparison, countercurrents exist within the collective American psyche that could dampen, perhaps negate, any potential concern that Mormons are not Christians. To address those potential concerns, Romney introduced two counter-frames in his December 2007 speech “Faith in America.” The first echoed John F. Kennedy’s argument for religious tolerance in 1960, when he faced antagonism toward his Catholicism. Both Kennedy and Romney drew on the widespread frame in thought among Americans in favor of religious freedom, guaranteed by the separation of church and state. Romney consciously referenced Kennedy and argued that “a person should not be elected because of his faith nor should he be rejected because of his faith.” In doing so, he was tapping the deeply held American value of religious freedom. Call this the “separationist” counter-frame.

Romney did not stop with deploying Kennedy’s argument about religious freedom. Unlike Kennedy, Romney felt he had to reassure religious conservatives that he shared their values, even if not the same theology, and that all religious communities supported a common moral perspective:

There is one fundamental question about which I often am asked. What do I believe about Jesus Christ? I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the Savior of mankind. My church's beliefs about Christ may not all be the same as those of other faiths. . . . It is important to recognize that while differences in theology exist between the churches in America, we share a common creed of moral convictions. And where the affairs of our nation are concerned, it's usually a sound rule to focus on the latter—on the great moral principles that urge us all on a common course.  
(Romney 2007)

Call this the common-values counter-frame.

We designed our experiment to test reactions to the frame that Mormons are not Christians, thus ensuring that what was a latent frame in thought among some voters was a frame in communication for all of the respondents in this particular treatment group. Accordingly, a random selection of subjects not only received the boilerplate biography of Romney and the information that he was a local leader in the Mormon Church but also read that “some people believe Mormons are not Christians.” Still another group of subjects received all of that information plus the separationist counter-frame:

*Others say that Mitt Romney’s religion should not be an issue in the campaign, since a person’s faith should be irrelevant to politics.*

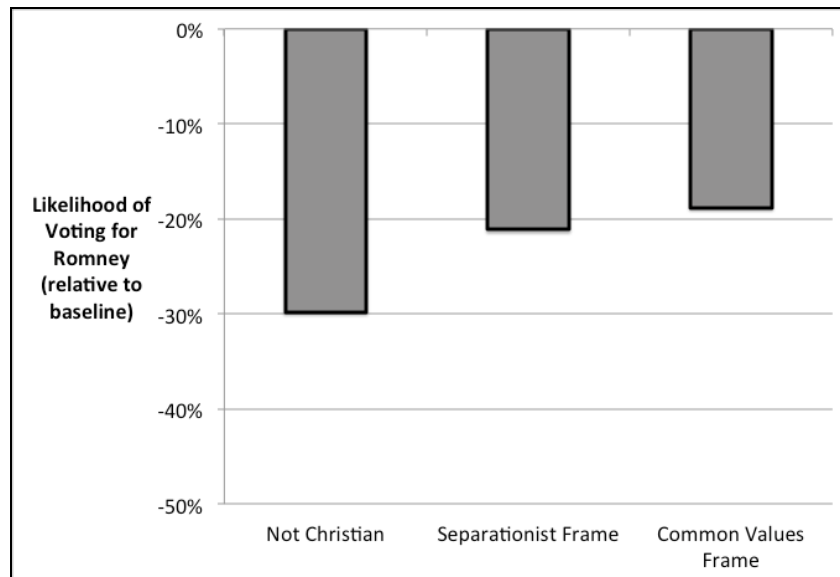
Yet another group received the common-values counter-frame:

*Others point out that Mormons believe in Jesus Christ, and that they have the same values as members of other faiths.*

Here, too, these statements would have been frames in thought for some of our respondents. By being articulated, they became frames in communication.

Figure 5 displays how voters reacted to the frame and counter-frames. As expected, telling—or reminding—voters that Mormons are sometimes described as non-Christians drove support down for Romney by roughly 30 percentage points. Interestingly, this is about the same reaction elicited by simply mentioning that Romney is an active Mormon. The two counter-frames lessened the negative reaction but did not neutralize it completely. In each case, hearing the “not Christian” frame followed by a counter-frame led to a drop in Romney’s support of about 20 percentage points—roughly 10 points less than in those who were exposed to only the “not Christian” frame.

**Figure 5. Reaction to “Not Christian” Frame and Counter-Frames**



*Note:* A black border represents a statistically significant effect ( $p < 0.05$ , one-tailed test).

*Source:* Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project (2008).

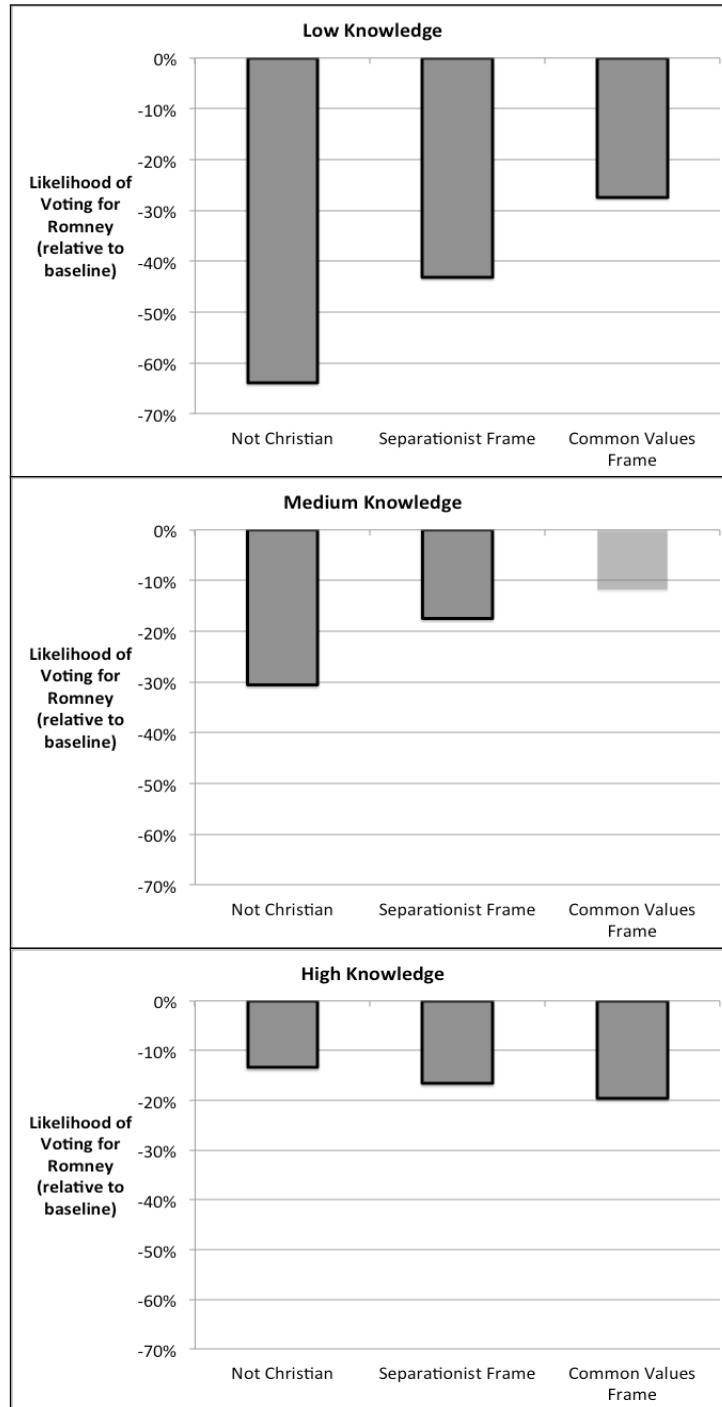
As we would expect, evangelical Protestants had a stronger reaction to the “not Christian” frame than did the general public; their support for Romney dropped by roughly 40 points. Evangelicals were also largely not persuaded by the counter-frames. With the separationist counter-frame, Romney’s support among evangelicals dropped 32 points. Evangelicals appeared to be a little more receptive to the common-values counter-frame, as it led to a smaller decline, of 27 points.

Political campaigns do not occur in a vacuum, as the information that circulates is filtered through voters’ own opinions and experiences. The real test of a frame in communication is how it interacts with frames in thought. We were interested in knowing how the impact of the not-Christian frame and the two counter-frames varied according to the ameliorating factors of knowledge about Mormonism and personal contact with Mormons.

Figure 6 displays how voters reacted to the frame and two counter-frames according to their degree of factual knowledge about Mormonism. As expected, voters with the least information about Mormonism reacted most negatively upon reading the not-Christian frame (64 percentage points!). The counter-frames were partly ameliorative, with the common-values argument modestly more persuasive than the separationist argument. Among voters with medium information about Mormons, the counter-frames were more effective—the common-values frame weakened the negative reaction to the point that the reaction no longer met the threshold for statistical significance. For voters with a high level of knowledge, the counter-frames produce a muted response. Although the differences are slight, there is even a hint that the counter-frames actually decreased support for Romney. The general pattern for the different levels of knowledge comports with our expectations. Less preexisting knowledge about Mormons meant that the information introduced through the campaign was novel, thus making a bigger splash and having a bigger effect. More knowledge meant that further information hardly made a wave.

The pattern for social contact has a curvilinear pattern. As shown in panel 1 of Figure 7, people who did not know a Mormon reacted quite negatively to the information that Mormons may not be Christians (a drop of 29 percentage points), but upon hearing either counter-frame, their concerns were mostly assuaged, as the drop in support for Romney was slight and, in statistical terms, insignificant. (The counter-frames were equally effective.) Each frame and counter-frame made a splash, as they had little of the information gleaned from personal relationships. In contrast, people who had close contact with Mormons (panel 3, Figure 7) were hardly affected at all by the frame or the counter-frames—the slight negative effects were substantively small and statistically insignificant.<sup>9</sup> These people had already made up their minds about Mormons, so the information presented in the experiment had little to no effect. We saw a very different result for people who had a moderate amount of contact with Mormons. They reacted negatively to the claim that Mormons are not Christians, but their likelihood of voting for Romney barely budged upon hearing either counter-frame.

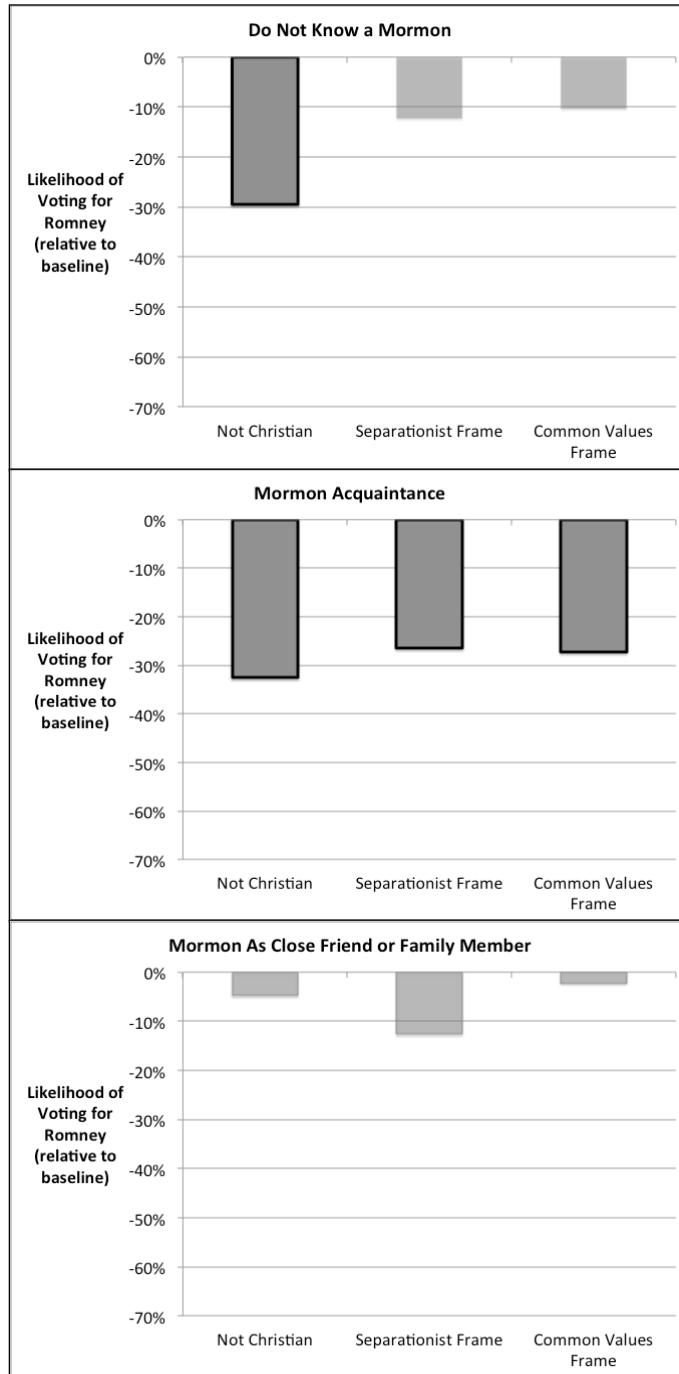
**Figure 6. Reaction to “Not Christian” Frame and Counter-Frames, by Knowledge of Mormonism**



*Note:* A black border represents a statistically significant effect ( $p < 0.05$ , one-tailed test).

*Source:* Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project (2008).

**Figure 7. Reactions to “Not Christian” Frame and Counter-Frames, by Contact with Mormons**



*Note:* A black border represents a statistically significant effect ( $p < 0.05$ , one-tailed test).

*Source:* Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project (2008).

Let us pause to summarize what we have learned thus far about voters' reactions to information about Mitt Romney's Mormonism, circa the 2008 primary season.

1. *Romney's Mormonism mattered, and not in a good way.* Identifying Romney as an active Mormon, not just an active churchgoer, produced a substantial negative drop in his support. In relative terms, the drop in Romney's support was comparable to the negative effect of Obama's association with Pastor Jeremiah Wright, an issue that threatened to derail Obama's 2008 nomination bid. Specifically, framing Mormonism as a non-Christian religion triggers a negative reaction among voters; counter-framing only partially ameliorates that negative reaction. Importantly, in 2008, the information that Romney is a Mormon was novel, as many voters would have been unaware of that fact. More generally, few Mormons had run for president. Not since the 1968 campaign of Mitt's father, George Romney, had voters been faced with a Mormon presidential candidate who was both devout and viable.
2. *The more people knew about Mormonism, the less it concerned them.* The Mormon effect was less among people with greater factual knowledge of Mormonism. Similarly, voters with the least factual information about Mormons had the strongest negative reaction to the frame that Mormons are not Christians.
3. *A little social contact leaves a big impression.* People who had a moderate degree of contact with Mormons—who knew a Mormon in passing—had a stronger negative reaction to Romney's Mormonism than people with either no contact or close contact. Like people with no contact, they evinced a strong negative reaction to the not-Christian frame; like those with close contact, their opinions were not affected by the counter-frames. We might call this a reverse-Goldilocks effect. In the fairy tale, Goldilocks always finds the middle option to be “just right.” For Romney, the people who had experienced middling contact with Mormons were his biggest problem.

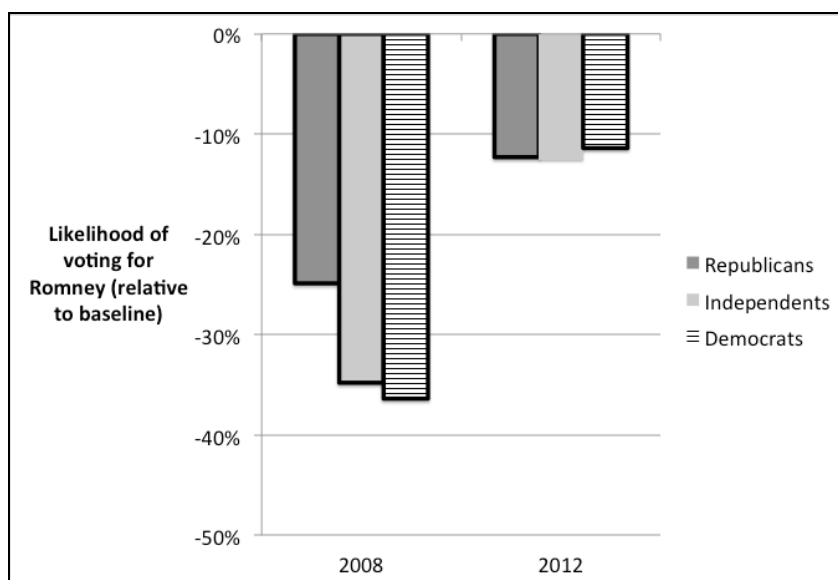
## **THE 2012 CAMPAIGN**

With these results from 2008 in mind, it might seem as though Romney's Mormonism should have mattered a great deal to a great many voters in the 2012 general election. After all, the degree of factual knowledge did not increase in 2012. Between 2010 and 2012, the average score on our Mormon knowledge quiz did not change substantially; the average score was 2.02 in 2010 and 2.17 in 2012. Likewise, using different measures, a Pew survey also found that factual knowledge about Mormons had not increased in 2012, in spite of countless media stories about the LDS Church and Mormon culture (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2012). Nor did we see an increase in self-reported contact with Mormons between 2008 and 2012. In 2008, 15 percent had a close relationship with a Mormon. The number was 13 percent in 2010 and 14 percent in 2012—fluctuations all within the

margin of error.<sup>10</sup> With a steady level of knowledge of and contact with Mormons, it might have appeared that Romney’s Mormonism would prove to be a big electoral liability. Many observers at the time expected as much.

And yet it was not. To underscore that point, Figure 8 displays what happened when we replicated our original Romney experiment in October 2012, as Romney was in the closing stage of a heated Republican nomination contest.<sup>11</sup> Everything about the experiment was the same,<sup>12</sup> but while the direction of the results remained the same, the magnitude substantially decreased. In 2008, identifying Romney as a Mormon dropped his support by roughly 25 points for Republicans, 35 points for Independents, and 36 points for Democrats. In 2012, the negative effect was about 12 percentage points for all three groups.

**Figure 8. Decline in Negative Effect of Romney's Mormonism (“Romney was a local leader in the Mormon Church.”) from 2008 to 2012**



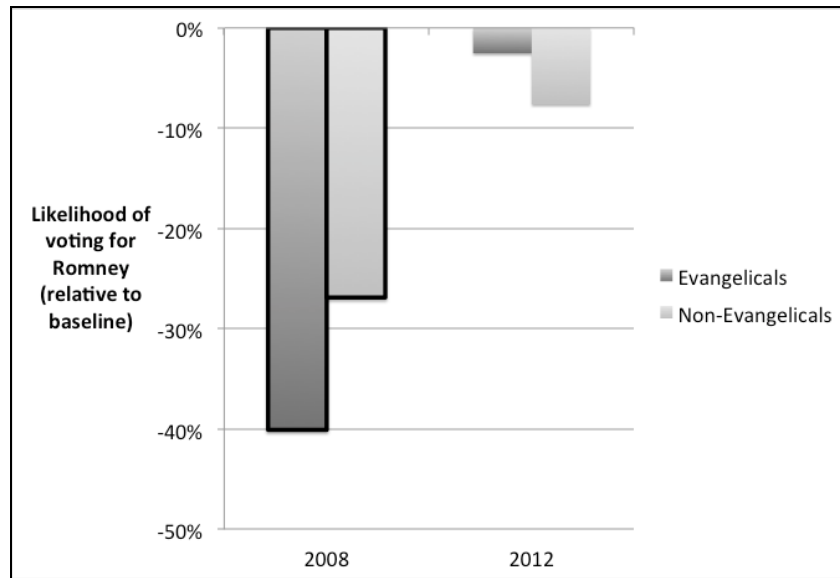
*Note:* A black border represents a statistically significant effect ( $p < 0.05$ , one-tailed test).

*Sources:* Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project (2008); Mormon Perceptions Study (2012).

We see an even more dramatic decline in the effect of the not-Christian frame. In particular, Figure 9 displays the change in effect for evangelical Protestants—a group that is both heavily Republican and most likely to consider Mormonism to be a non-Christian religion (see chapter 7). In 2008, the not-Christian frame caused a 40-point drop in Romney’s support among evangelicals and a 27-point decline among non-evangelicals. By the 2012 general election, it had no statistically significant effect on either evangelicals or non-evangelicals.



**Figure 9. Cessation of Effect, Even among Evangelicals, of the Claim That Mormons Are Not Christians**



*Note:* A black border represents a statistically significant effect ( $p < 0.05$ , one-tailed test).

*Sources:* Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project (2008); Mormon Perceptions Study (2012).

In other words, our experiments reinforce the story told by the analysis of how attitudes toward Mormons affected the 2012 presidential vote. There may have been an effect, but it was small and likely inconsequential.

What explains the “case of the disappearing Mormon effect”? There is little mystery. In early 2008, voters were still forming an opinion about Romney, as he was in his first national campaign. By late 2012, voters had been exposed to a slew of information about Romney—first as he ran the gauntlet of the Republican primaries, then as the GOP nominee. When we did our survey in October of 2012, only weeks before election day, most voters had learned enough about Romney to have made up their minds about him. For many voters, information about Romney’s religion was no longer novel. As just one indication that voters had undergone a learning process, in 2008, about half of our respondents could correctly identify Romney’s religion. By the fall of 2012, this had risen to 68 percent,<sup>13</sup> although it is worth noting that this still means that even when the presidential campaign had its greatest salience, roughly 1 in 3 Americans did not know that Romney is Mormon.

Thus, any bits of information we included in our vignettes were small pebbles, leaving barely a ripple. This is not to say that Romney’s Mormonism had no effect on voters’ attitudes toward him; rather, by the time of the general election, those voters who cared about his religious background had already incorporated that information into their assessment of him. This is similar to the way that investors account for the available

information about a firm when trading its stock. At any given point in time, the stock price reflects what investors know about that company. In the case of the 2012 election, most Republicans who may have been inclined toward a negative reaction to Romney's Mormonism were more concerned with ousting President Obama from the White House.

To summarize what we have learned from our analysis of the 2012 presidential election:

1. *Novelty wears off.* In the 2008 Republican primaries, Romney was largely unknown; thus, information about him—particularly his membership in an “exotic” religion—had a large effect on voters' perceptions. By the general election of 2012, however, Romney had become a household name. Accordingly, the novelty of learning about his background, including, and perhaps especially, about his religion, had worn off.
2. *Context matters.* In the 2012 general election, Romney was no longer one among many Republican hopefuls vying for the party's presidential nomination. He had become the party's standard-bearer against a Democratic president with exceedingly low approval among Republicans. When given a choice between a dislike for Obama and a dislike of Mormonism, the former overwhelmed the latter.

We should not dismiss the significance of the diminishing impact of Romney's Mormonism the longer he was in the public eye, as it suggests that many voters had no problem voting for a Mormon in the context of the 2012 election—even those voters with theological concerns about Mormonism. Although a small majority of voters chose Obama over Romney in 2012, the vast majority of that majority did so for political, not theological, reasons. We find it especially telling that our 2012 experiment shows that Republicans, Democrats, and Independents alike all had a similarly mild reaction to the description of Romney as a devout Mormon. While the decision to vote for Romney was largely determined by voters' partisanship, reactions to his Mormonism were the same regardless of party.

### **DID MITT ROMNEY AFFECT ATTITUDES TOWARD MORMONS?**

Throughout 2011 and 2012, Mormonism was subject to extensive public attention—so much so that pundits regularly began referring to the “Mormon Moment” (Bowman 2012). In journalistic parlance, a “news hole” opened up for stories about all things Mormon. There were articles about fashion among LDS hipsters (Williams 2011), Mormon cuisine (Moskin 2012) and, of course, *The Book of Mormon* musical on Broadway (Zoglin 2011). In the course of reporting on Mitt Romney's biography, journalists introduced many Americans to numerous aspects of Mormonism, including his time as a missionary in France (Evans 2012), his temple marriage to Ann (Kantor 2012), his considerable financial contributions to the LDS Church (Podhoretz 2012), and his service as an LDS leader at both the local (bishop) and regional (stake president) levels (Ertl 2012). Although we have already seen that this media attention did not lead to

an increase in knowledge about Mormonism, the media attention to all things LDS suggests that public attitudes toward Mormons might have changed.

At first blush, it would appear that they have not. In our 2008 survey, 49 percent had a very favorable opinion of Mormons and 7 percent had an opinion that was very favorable. In 2012, 51 percent had a favorable opinion while 8 percent were very favorable—increases so small as to fall within the margin of error. Likewise, between 2007 and 2012, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found that the percentage of Americans who said that Mormons are not Christians had remained at 31 percent.<sup>14</sup>

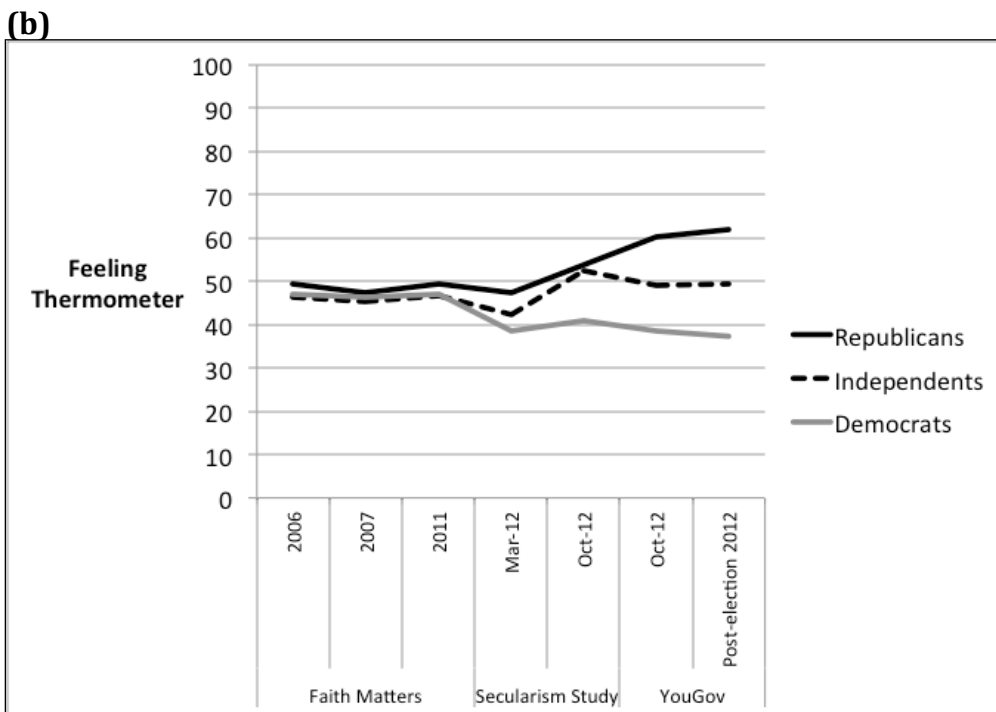
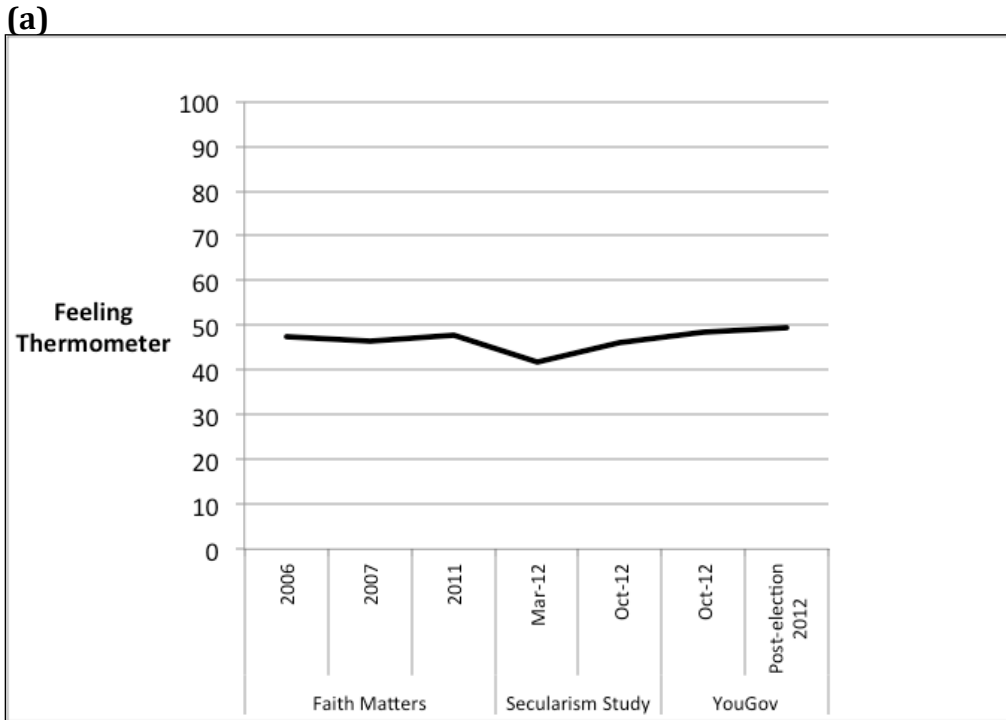
Similarly, the general perception of Mormons held steady.<sup>15</sup> Panel 1 of Figure 10 displays the nearly flat line in general perceptions of Mormons, as measured on a 0–100 scale, from 2006—before Mitt Romney entered the political stage—to 2012.<sup>16</sup> A closer look reveals, however, that a notable change has occurred in the distribution of opinions about Mormons. In the second panel of Figure 10, we break out how Republicans, Democrats, and Independents have each perceived Mormons over the period from 2006 to 2012. In 2006, there were no partisan differences; Mormons received the same rating across the party spectrum. By 2012, a wide party gap had opened. Republicans became more much favorable toward Mormons, Independents became slightly more favorable, and Democrats became sharply less favorable.

Like an object being acted on by equal and opposing forces, the net result was that the overall attitude toward Mormons did not move. Likewise, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found that between 2011 and 2012, Republicans became more likely to offer a positive one-word impression of Mormons, while Democrats became less likely.<sup>17</sup> Republicans also became more likely to say that their religion has “a lot in common” with Mormon beliefs, while Democrats did not change (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2012). In chapter 8, we found a similar pattern with Gallup survey data on support for a generic Mormon candidate.

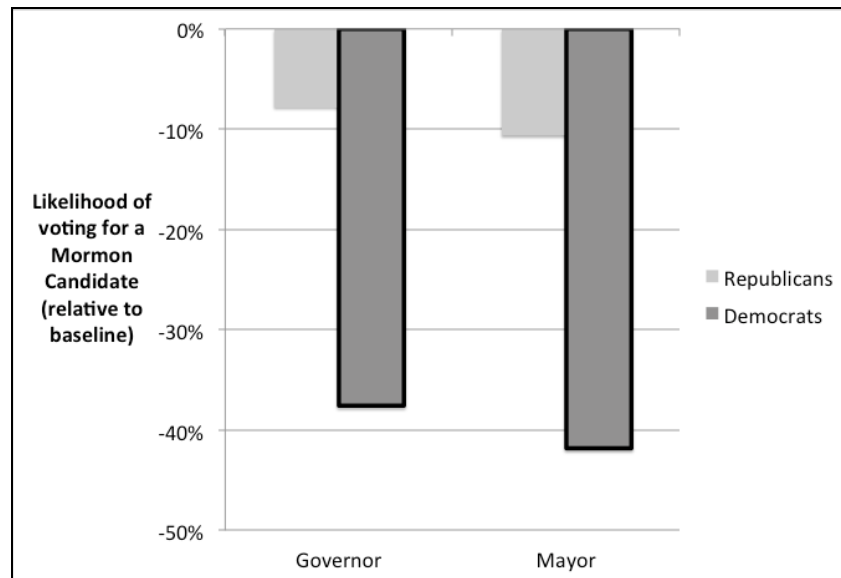
In our politically polarized times, perhaps we should not be surprised that attitudes toward the religion of the Republican presidential nominee would split along party lines. When so much in American society takes on political meaning, why not the perceptions of a religion, especially the religion of the Republican presidential nominee?

Whether a matter of surprise or not, the partisan inflection in attitudes toward Mormons complicate our assessment of the 2012 presidential election, for although Mitt Romney’s Mormonism did not, in the end, have much of a direct effect on the presidential vote, this does not mean that Mormonism has ceased to matter at the polls. Another experiment indicates that Mormon candidates for other offices risk a negative reaction to their religion. In the fall of 2012, we tested people’s likelihood of voting for a mayoral or gubernatorial candidate when he was and was not identified as a Mormon.<sup>18</sup> As in the Romney experiment, we provided a baseline boilerplate biography of a fictitious candidate and then in the experimental group added that the candidate was active in the Mormon Church.

Figure 10. Overall, general perceptions of Mormons have (a) held steady while (b) the general perception of Mormons has become politically polarized.



**Figure 11. More Partisan Polarization: Democrats Much Less Likely to Vote for Mormon Candidates (“Candidate is ‘an active member of the Mormon Church.’”)**



*Note:* A black border represents a statistically significant effect ( $p < 0.05$ , one-tailed test).

*Source:* Mormon Perceptions Study (2012).

Is the Mormon effect among Democrats because of religious bigotry? Not necessarily. With limited information about these hypothetical candidates, including no party label, most Democrats likely inferred that this candidate was a Republican. After all, the Republicans’ presidential nominee was Mormon, and as can be seen in chapters 4 and 5 of our book, Mormons *are* mostly Republicans and generally conservative. Similarly, Mormons’ highly publicized and tightly organized movement to muster support for California’s Proposition 8 has likely also contributed to the perception of Mormons as politically active social conservatives squarely under the Republican umbrella—and of course, the 2012 Republican presidential nominee was a Mormon as well.

These inferences are not merely hypothetical, as we have empirical confirmation that voters are largely aware of Mormons’ Republican-ness. In the same 2012 survey, we asked our respondents whether members of different religious groups are Republicans, Democrats, or “an even mix of both.” As many people describe Mormons as “mostly Republicans” (59 percent) as say the same about evangelicals (61 percent), the latter often referred to as the base of the Republican Party.

## **CONCLUSION**

I conclude by returning to the question I posed at the beginning: Is Mitt Romney the Mormons' John F. Kennedy or Al Smith? Superficially, he resembles Smith. After all, both lost. The data we have presented in this chapter, however, suggest that Romney resembles Kennedy after all—or at least his 2012 run for the White House was more like 1960 than 1928. During his first presidential run in 2008, Romney's Mormonism was definitely a drag on his political support. Although Americans highly knowledgeable about Mormonism or who had close relationships with Mormons expressed little concern about his religion, such people were in relatively short supply, but in 2012, Romney's Mormonism faded as an issue. In not winning the presidency, he may not have broken through the stained-glass ceiling, but perhaps he made it more like an open window. Romney was a Mormon candidate who lost a presidential election, not the candidate who lost because he was Mormon. The difference is significant.

Mormonism did not cost Mitt Romney the presidency in 2012, but his presidential bid has shaped attitudes toward Mormonism. Although Romney's time on the national stage did not lead to greater knowledge of the LDS religion nor a change in whether Mormons are thought to be Christians, it did lead to a sharp partisan divide in how Mormons are perceived. They rose in favor among Republicans and fell in the eyes of Democrats. Romney leaves a legacy of intensifying partisan relevance for Mormonism; whether this legacy lasts remains to be seen.

## **ENDNOTES**

1. These data come from Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project 2008.
2. Specifically, the experiment ran from January 24 to February 4, although 90 percent of the surveys were completed by January 28. Romney dropped out of the race on February 7.
3. All of these results omit Mormons.
4. Results are similar for respondents with high versus low religiosity.
5. Below are the full descriptions of the candidates used in the experiments.

As you know, Hillary Clinton is running for president. She is a graduate of Yale Law School and the former First Lady. She is currently a U.S. Senator, representing the state of New York. She has been married for thirty-two years and raised a daughter. Hillary Clinton has also been an active layperson in the United Methodist church.

As you know, Mike Huckabee is running for president. He is a former governor of Arkansas. In 2003, he lost 110 pounds after being diagnosed with Type II diabetes and is a spokesman for living a healthy lifestyle. He has been married for thirty-three years and raised three sons. Mike Huckabee has also been an ordained Southern Baptist pastor.

As you know, Barack Obama is running for president. He is a former community organizer in Chicago and a best-selling author. He is currently a U.S. Senator, representing the state of Illinois. He has been married for sixteen years and has two daughters. Barack Obama is a member of the Trinity United Church of Christ. (1) Some people have said his church is hostile to Whites and promotes Black separatism. (2) Some people have said that he must be a Muslim, because his paternal grandfather was a Muslim.

6. The survey was fielded from March 21 to April 9, 2008, after the controversy over Obama's pastor had become national news and Obama had delivered a very high-profile speech in response to the controversy. He gave that speech on March 18, 2008.
7. Likewise, we see virtually the same results for self-described voters in Republican versus Democratic primaries.
8. The quiz of factual knowledge about Mormonism in 2008 differed from the one in 2010, discussed in chapter 7. The 2008 test consisted of four true-false questions, which provided little differentiation (i.e., the test was too easy). Specifically, the quiz was worded:

Of the following statements about practicing members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, indicate which are true:

- Practice polygamy (have more than one wife) [False]
- Do not drink alcohol [True]
- Give 10% of their income to their church [True]
- Do not believe in the Bible [False]

9. The cell sizes are small, so statistical significance is not very informative.
10. These figures come from the 2008 Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project, and the 2010 and 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Studies.
11. We ran our experiment on the 2012 Mormon Perceptions Study, which is described in Appendix 1 of *Seeking the Promised Land* (Campbell, Green, and Monson 2014).
12. The biography was exactly the same, except that we updated the number of years that Mitt and Ann Romney had been married.
13. A December 2012 Pew survey found a nearly identical 65 percent of Americans could identify Romney's religion; however, a November 2011 Pew survey found that only 39 percent of Americans could identify Romney's religion. We found a higher percentage in 2008. The difference could be that some voters could recall Romney's religion in the midst of the 2008 primary race but it slipped their minds by the fall of 2011. It could also be that the sample drawn for the online Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project 2008 was more politically knowledgeable than the sample drawn for the Pew telephone surveys. It could also be because we used different standards for determining a correct answer, or it could be because of sampling variability.

14. In the surveys we have conducted, we have actually found a slight increase in the percentage saying that Mormons are not Christians, from 36 percent (2008) to 43 percent (2010) to 41 percent (2012). Our results differ from Pew surveys in 2007, 2011 and 2012, at least in part because Pew uses telephone surveys while we administered ours online. The Pew surveys have a sizeable fraction of “don’t know” responses, because in a telephone survey, respondents can easily volunteer that they do not know the answer, whereas our online survey did not have an explicit “don’t know” option. In 2012, 18 percent of Pew survey respondents said they did not know whether Mormons are Christians, compared to 16 percent in 2011 and 17 percent in 2007. When we put our results alongside Pew’s, we can either conclude that the percentage of Americans who think Mormons are not Christians stayed the same (Pew) or increased slightly (our data). Either way, the percentage did not decrease. See Appendix 1 of Campbell et al. (2014) for details of the 2007, 2011, and 2012 Pew surveys.
15. For more on perceptions of religious groups measured this way, see *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (Putnam and Campbell 2010).
16. The flat line is especially noteworthy given that these data came from different surveys and are thus subject to the vagaries of what are known in the polling business as house effects, or variations in sampling, question wording, weighting, and so on that produce systematic differences across survey research firms.
17. Specifically, 23 percent of Republicans offered a positive one-word response in November 2011, compared to 35 percent in December 2012. Among Democrats, the percentage of positive responses dropped from 26 percent to 19 percent.
18. Respondents were assigned to either the mayoral or gubernatorial experiment. Wording for the full experimental treatments is provided below. The text in bold was not included in the description given to the control group.

Jim Anderson is running for mayor/governor of a mid-sized city/state close to yours. He is forty-two years old, married, and a father of three school-age children. He started a successful local real estate company. He has also been the president of the local Rotary Club **and is an active member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, also known as the Mormon Church.** Anderson was re-elected twice to the state legislature.

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