

Mitt Romney and the Mormon Question(s)

☒ Gallup announced Monday that 22 percent of Americans would not vote a Mormon into the presidency, even if he were nominated by their own party. This is a figure that has not just remained steady since 1967, but on the whole has risen five points.

Broken down by affiliation, 18 percent of Republicans, 19 percent of Independents, and 27 percent of America's most open minded and tolerant political party, the Democrats, say they couldn't be persuaded to take the plunge. Though Gallup notes lesser educated people are more likely to reject a Mormon nominee, there "are no significant differences on this question by gender, age, region of the country, or religious preference." What does this mean for Mitt Romney, who is not only the Republican front-runner, but also a Mormon?

Call it a hunch, but it feels like those Republicans are opposed for religious reasons, and those Democrats are opposed because they fundamentally distrust and dislike all religions. (Except Islam, of course, which the Left adores and respects to the utmost, because tolerating Islam is a hell of a lot easier than being stabbed to death in the street.) Problem is, you can't always tell the difference between a Catholic objection and an atheistic one – they both tend to believe their way is the One Way.

For example, this caller to the John Gibson show: "The Mormons and the whole magic underwear thing is what has me tilted out... They believe they wear a special garment that they believe are magical, and if Romney believes that, if he believes in magic undergarments, I don't want him" to be president. You call it: annoying Catholic or annoying atheist?

Gibson did eventually ask the caller, "Do you know how silly this gets once you open this door?" but at the root of it, just about every religion becomes silly once it's broken down and honestly examined. Whether Romney is a strictly observant Mormon or a Jack Mormon (i.e., the LDS equivalent of a "cafeteria Catholic") is less critical to his campaign than how to address attacks on his religion.

And make no mistake: The strongest points against him are RomneyCare and Mormonism. The Left will be hesitant to attack RomneyCare because that would mean, ipso facto, attacking ObamaCare. So you'll have what we had throughout the 2008 nominating process, mainly fits of disbelief, perfectly encapsulated for the purposes of this column by Lawrence O'Donnell, MSNBC host and professional oh-dear.

"This man stood there and said to you, 'This is the faith of my fathers,'" O'Donnell said on The McLaughlin Group in late 2007. "The faith of his father is a racist faith. As of 1978 it was an officially racist faith, and for political convenience in 1978 it switched, and it said 'Okay, black people can be in this church.' He believes, if he believes the faith of his fathers, that black people are black because in Heaven they turned away from God, in this demented, Scientology-like notion of what was going on in Heaven before the creation of the Earth... When he was 30 years old and he firmly believed in the faith of his father, that black people are inferior, when did he change his mind? Did the religion have to tell him to change his mind?"

These charges will stick because they're spectacular, saying nothing of those few on the Right who will argue Mormonism is a cult. So what seems more likely, that Romney will deftly maneuver around them or that he will stumble badly and, in doing so, clear a path for Governor Perry?