NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER DONATE NOW!
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Religion may play crucial role in 2012 campaign

Nancy Frazier O'Brien Catholic News Service | Jun. 10, 2011

WASHINGTON -- As seven Republican candidates for president prepared for a June 13 debate in New Hampshire and others waited in the wings, there were signs that religion will play as big a role in the 2012 election as it has in other recent campaigns.

Many of the declared or potential candidates lined up in Washington June 3-4 to address a "strategy briefing" sponsored by the Faith & Freedom Coalition, an organization headed by Christian Coalition founder Ralph Reed, and to pledge their commitment to the coalition's views on abortion, same-sex marriage and similar social issues.

Polling in early June by Quinnipiac University in Hamden, Conn., showed that former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney had more support among Republican or Republican-leaning independent voters than any other GOP candidate, with 25 percent. Sarah Palin, the former Alaska governor who is not an official candidate, received support from 15 percent of the poll respondents, with businessman Herman Cain at 9 percent.

But another part of the Quinnipiac survey offered less promising information to the Romney campaign.

Asked to assess their comfort level with the faith of presidential candidates, 36 percent of the poll respondents said they felt somewhat uncomfortable or very uncomfortable with a Mormon candidate. Only 13 percent said they would be uncomfortable with a Catholic candidate, while 59 percent said they would not be comfortable with a Muslim candidate and 60 percent said a candidate who was an atheist would make them uncomfortable.

Both Romney and another possible candidate, former Utah Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr., have ties to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, although Huntsman said in a recent Time magazine interview that it is "tough to define" whether he is still a member of the church. "I'm a very spiritual person and proud of my Mormon roots," he said.

Peter A. Brown, assistant director of the Quinnipiac University Polling Institute, said the poll showed "that the American people -- especially Democrats -- have many more questions about a Mormon in the White House than they do about followers of other religions."

The margin of error for the poll released June 8 was plus or minus 2.2 percentage points.

David E. Campbell, an associate professor of political science at the University of Notre Dame and founding director of the Rooney Center for the Study of American Democracy, said some candidates face a "stained-glass ceiling" when it comes to their faith.

"My research suggests that while Romney, like any candidate, has many assets and many liabilities, the fact that he is (a Mormon) ... is definitely an electoral liability for him," in the same way that John F. Kennedy's Catholicism was a liability to be overcome in 1960, Campbell told Catholic News Service. About the same percentage of voters have negative opinions about a Mormon candidate today as did about a Catholic candidate

in 1960, he added.

Campbell, a Mormon himself, co-wrote the 2010 book "American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us" with Harvard professor Robert D. Putnam.

The two authors found that Catholics and Jews are viewed very favorably by most Americans -- even slightly more favorably than mainline Protestants. They attribute the change over the past 50 years to the degree of "interreligious bridging" by Catholics and Jews today.

"There has been a dramatic change in the way Catholics are integrated into the mainstream of American society," Campbell said. Fifty years ago, Catholics had their own neighborhoods and schools and a distinctive form of worship in Latin, he said. But today Catholics are much more likely to have Protestant friends and vice versa.

"Interreligious bridging is a major factor in how a religion is perceived," Campbell said. "Mormons bridge the least of all, and they are not viewed very positively."

The current slate of declared or possible GOP presidential candidates includes several Catholics -- former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, former U.S. Sen. Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania and current New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie.

Several belong to nondenominational Christian churches or evangelical branches of mainline denominations. Palin, who has said she was baptized Catholic, attends Wasilla Bible Church in Alaska. Former Minnesota Gov. Tim Pawlenty is a member of Wooddale Church in Eden Prairie, Minn. U.S. Rep. Michele Bachmann of Minnesota belongs to the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod.

U.S. Rep. Ron Paul of Texas was raised a Lutheran and had each of his five children baptized as Episcopalians, but now attends the First Baptist Church of Lake Jackson, Texas.

Cain, the former president and CEO of Godfather's Pizza, is the most overtly religious candidate so far, serving as an associate minister at Antioch Baptist Church North in Atlanta.

Although more than half of the 44 presidents in U.S. history have belonged to one of three mainline denominations -- Episcopalian, Presbyterian or Methodist -- none of the declared Republican candidates is a member of any of those churches. Among the leading undeclared but possible candidates, Texas Gov. Rick Perry is a Methodist.

The Next Step FORWARD [2]

DONATE NOW [2]

Enjoy this article?
Help support more like it by **donating today!** [2]

Source URL (retrieved on *05/06/2015 - 05:02*): http://ncronline.org/news/politics/religion-may-play-crucial-role-2012-campaign

Links:
[1] http://ncrnews.org/webathon/donate/in-content
[2] http://ncrnews.org/webathon/donate/article-end