

Framing Faith:

How Voters Responded to Candidates' Religions in the 2008 Presidential Campaign

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Abstract

During the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign, considerable attention was paid by pundits and voters alike to the personal characteristics of the candidates. In this paper we test how voters responded to information, framed in different ways, about a candidate's religious affiliation. We do so using a series of experiments embedded in multiple waves of the 2008 Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project. The experiments were run in "real time," by which we mean that our subjects were introduced to timely information about the candidates throughout the primaries and general election season. In January, how did voters react to Mitt Romney's Mormonism? In March, how did they react to information about Barack Obama's controversial pastor, or to the recurring rumor that he is secretly a Muslim? How did voters respond to the same information in October, once Obama was officially the Democratic nominee?

We find that negatively perceived information about a candidate's religion has powerful effects that are not easily mitigated by countervailing positive information. While the framing literature suggests that prior knowledge and prior preferences can mitigate the effects of negatively perceived information, we find that general political knowledge has little to no effect as a buffer while specific religious knowledge can effectively buffer, though not completely erase, the effects of negative information. In addition to understanding the practical political effect of the candidates' religious affiliation, our analysis permits a greater theoretical understanding of how voters use religion as a heuristic when assessing candidates and thus, more broadly, the social identities that matter in contemporary American politics.

The 2008 presidential campaign was filled with references to candidates' religious affiliation, especially during each party's primary and caucus process in late 2007 and early 2008. In particular, Republican Mitt Romney faced seemingly endless questions about his Mormonism which he deflected but then finally attempted to address with a major campaign speech on December 6, 2007.¹ While Romney faced a steady stream of questions about his religion, Democrat Barack Obama faced a flash-flood of media attention to the comments of his long time pastor, the Reverend Jeremiah Wright of the Trinity United Church of Christ (TUCC). The ensuing storm came at a critical juncture during the extremely competitive nomination contest with Hillary Clinton and eventually led to Obama giving up his TUCC membership and disavowing Reverend Wright. Obama, however, also faced the recurring rumor that, his own identification as a Christian notwithstanding, he is actually a Muslim.

Our paper utilizes the literature on negative information and frames together with survey experiment data collected over the course of the 2008 nomination campaign to address questions related to the effect of information on candidate choice. In particular we are interested in the effect of information about the religious backgrounds of two major candidates that was largely perceived to be negative. The data come primarily from the Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project (CCAP), a multi panel survey with waves fielded throughout the course of the 2008 campaign, including both the primaries and the general election period. These data are supplemented by the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), fielded in October 2008, in the heat of the general election. We find that negatively perceived information about a candidate's religion has powerful effects that are not easily mitigated by countervailing positive information. While the framing literature suggests that prior knowledge and prior preferences can mitigate the effects of negatively perceived information, we find that general political

¹ For the full text of the speech, see <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=16969460>.

knowledge has little to no effect as a buffer while specific religious knowledge can effectively buffer, though not completely erase, the effects of negative information. There are particularly interesting nuances for religious knowledge in the case of Mitt Romney, where we have numerous measures available. For example, compared to those who do not personally know a Mormon, a passing personal acquaintance with a Mormon amplifies instead of buffers the negative reaction to damaging claims made about Romney's Mormonism, while a close relationship with a Mormon largely inoculates one against such allegations. Another striking difference occurs between those who possess subjective knowledge, measured by a self-report of significant knowledge about Mormonism, versus objective knowledge, measured with a brief Mormon knowledge battery. Hearing that Romney is a Mormon has a much larger negative impact on those who have high self-assessed knowledge of Mormonism than those who have high objective knowledge of Mormonism. Prior preferences, both political and religious, show mixed results. They can buffer but sometimes they serve to intensify a voter's reaction.

While the 2008 presidential campaign shows that allegations about candidates' religious backgrounds are rarely, if ever, made in paid campaign advertising, this paper shows that messages delivered outside of formal channels can have powerful effects on the perceptions of the candidates.

Framing Effects, Negative Ads, and Candidate Choice

Framing effects have a long history in psychology, political psychology, and public opinion, with clear framing effects demonstrated in substantive areas such as the media, race, and campaigns. In an election campaign a frame is conceptualized as a central organizing principle for voters' comprehension of the political world. Kinder (1998, 796) refers to a frame

as an “opinion recipe” or a recommendation about how a topic should be understood, while Gamson and Modigliani (1987, 143) define a frame as “a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, weaving a connection among them.” Thus frames are a cognitive structure within individuals’ minds that help them sort through information presented by political elites, or “rhetorical weapons created and sharpened by political elites to advance their interests and ideas” (Kinder 1998, 822). This cognitive structure is seen as the product of social interaction between the public and the information-providing elites (Gamson 1992).

Frames are usually thought of as elite discourse that helps shape public opinion and in much of the literature frames typically tap into questions of fundamental values such as free speech, public order, equality, and so forth. But the definition of frames can easily be broadened to include a variety of information from a variety of sources. In this sense, framing fits squarely with the political science literature on experiments (Kinder and Palfrey 1993), survey response (Zaller and Feldman 1992), as well as information processing and candidate evaluations (Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh 1989). Rather than frames designed to tap into fundamental or competing values, we are interested in whether voters are persuaded by the way information about a candidate is framed and, if so, under what conditions they are persuaded by the framed information. Our innovation is that we are dealing with realistic frames about actual candidates in the midst of a heated presidential nomination campaign. While the substance of this information—candidates’ religions—is of interest in its own right, it provides an excellent opportunity to assess framing effects on candidate choice.

One powerful framing effect with considerable empirical and theoretical foundations demonstrates the power of negative information. These effects are sometimes referenced as

“loss aversion” or “prospect theory” (Kahneman and Tversky 1979; Tversky and Kahneman. 1981). Quattrone and Tversky find that, when compared to the status quo, potential losses “loom larger than gains” (1988, 724). “Loss aversion” means that people express a “preference for the status quo over alternatives with the same expected value” and is used in this context as an explanation of incumbency advantage in elections (Ibid.). The powerful framing effects of negative information are consistent with a larger literature in psychology demonstrating a disproportionately powerful effect of negative over positive information. In the pithy but memorable formulation of one review essay: “bad is stronger than good” (Baumeister et al. 2001). The disproportionate effects of negative over positive information are observed in the formation of impressions or attitudes, but also extend to evaluation and recall of events, and even extend to sensory experiences such as taste and smell.

In applying the “bad is stronger than good” principle to politics, Lau (1982; 1985) notes the asymmetry between positive and negative political information. He reviews two competing explanations for negativity bias in political settings. The first is perceptual—we are surrounded by mostly positive information and when negative information is viewed against this background, it stands out, is remembered, and thus has a disproportionate effect. A second reason is motivational—we are cost oriented (and thus risk adverse), so that we are strongly motivated to avoid the potential costs. As evidence of potential costs mount, we are increasingly motivated to avoid them.

The power of negative information has also been well studied in the context of political campaigns, especially advertising. Within the voluminous literature on campaign advertising, considerable controversy exists over whether or not negative campaigns decrease (e.g. Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995) or increase turnout (e.g. Freedman and Goldstein 1999;

Goldstein and Freedman 2002), while the meta-analytic jury finds that they have no effect (Lau et al. 1999; Lau, Sigelman, and Rovner 2007). However, in contrast to the controversy over the effects of negative advertising on political participation, there is greater consensus that negative ads increase voters' political knowledge. Negative information sticks with voters because it more effectively arouses emotions (Brader 2006). Geer (2006) points out that negative information is also much more likely to be supported with specific facts and documentation, thus it may get more easily noticed and break through campaign clutter. Both Geer (2006) and Franz et al. (2008) note relevant characteristics of negative ad content. Ads focused on personal traits are not nearly as common as issue-based negative ads. Numerous studies suggest that voters learn more from negative ads than positive ads, remember them longer, and perhaps become more engaged politically as a result (Geer 2006; Franz et al. 2008. Lau, Sigelman, and Rovner 2007; Freedman and Goldstein 1999; Goldstein and Freedman 2002).

Mendelberg (2001) adds nuance to our understanding of negative information's effects, specifically about race, as it can also cause a backlash. The persuasiveness of a campaign message framed in overtly racist terms is blunted because explicit mentions of race can bring society's prevailing norm of equality to mind, which in turn leads voters to recoil from the candidate associated with the racial attack. Instead, negative messages which do not make explicit reference to race, but subtly prime voters to think of racial stereotypes, are more effective. While Mendelberg centers on race, she speculates that other campaign appeals which violate an equality norm—referencing candidate characteristics such as sexual orientation or religion—can also provoke a voter backlash. But paralleling race, more subtle messaging which primes negative associations without blatantly contravening the norm of equality may prove to

be highly effective. This paper specifically tests the impact of information about religion. Does information about a candidate's religious background trigger a backlash among voters?

A further innovation of this research entails the type of campaign communication under examination. Mendelberg, and most others who research the effects of campaign communication, focus their attention on paid television advertising. While obviously an important source of information about candidates, neither is television advertising the sole source of such information. What is the reaction to information which circulates through other means, such as discussions in the news media or, virally, via the internet?

Gamson (1992) provides insight into understanding how framing effects can work outside of the oft-studied advertising effects. He describes how frames in messages delivered by the media or through other means become "culturally available." In the case of political candidates, culturally available information about them need not circulate through formal advertising or other campaign sponsored communications. Cultural availability does not even require attention in the news media.

Drawing from both Mendelberg and Gamson, we can see how negative information about an ostensibly taboo topic like religion might damage a candidate, even if his opponent's ads never mention it. The spread of negative information about another candidate's religion through viral email or other such methods, regardless of its veracity, is likely to enter the public discourse and become culturally available, thus potentially affecting voter evaluations of candidates. And because such information typically does not emanate directly from an opponent, it is less likely to cause the sort of backlash Mendelberg finds from overtly racial campaign advertising.

All of the negative messages we describe were culturally available to voters during the 2008 campaign, even though none of them were the subject of paid campaign advertising per se.

Many were reported in the news media, often in the context of covering what “some people say” about a candidate. Most were also the subject of e-mails, blog posts, and the like. This paper will focus on voters’ reactions to information about two presidential candidates in particular, Mitt Romney and Barack Obama, both of whom faced criticism of their religious backgrounds. In Romney’s case, we test voters’ reactions to information about this membership in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (aka the “Mormon” Church).² In the case of Obama, we examine how voters reacted to information about his membership in the Trinity United Church of Christ, as well as the rumor that he is a Muslim. For both Romney and Obama, we further test for the effect of countervailing information. As with the potentially negative information we tested, the counter-arguments were selected on the basis of their cultural availability: they were all publicly made during the campaign.

The general hypothesis which undergirds our analysis is simply that information perceived to be negative will drive down support for a candidate—*even in the face of countervailing information perceived to be positive*. However, we also hypothesize that voters’ predispositions can serve as buffers to negative information, negating or at least minimizing its impact. Conversely, there are other predispositions which can accentuate the impact of negative information. Specifically, we focus on two characteristics which the literature on framing suggests are critical moderators of how voters respond to information: both their prior knowledge and preferences (Chong and Druckman 2007).

Previous research on framing has found that, depending on other factors, higher levels of political knowledge can either accentuate (Nelson, Oxey, and Clawson 1997) or weaken framing effects (Kinder and Sanders 1990; Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2001). In the case of candidate

² Rather than use the church’s formal name throughout the paper, we will instead use the term “Mormon” to refer to Romney’s religion.

religion, it seems likely that respondents with greater relevant knowledge will be less affected by the information provided in our experiments about a presidential candidate because well-informed respondents are more likely to have formed a prior opinion on the subject. Hence, we expect that prior knowledge serves as a buffer to the information content of the frame.

There are many types of knowledge, however, and it is not clear that they all work the same way. While the existing literature has focused on political knowledge, the assessment of a candidate's personal characteristics—especially his or her religion—is likely to also be moderated by at least three other types of knowledge. One is personal experience with the religion in question. In the case of Romney, does the respondent personally know a Mormon? A second is self-assessed knowledge. Do respondents think that they know a lot about, again in Romney's case, Mormonism? Still a third type of knowledge is objective. Do respondents actually have an accurate knowledge of what Mormons believe? This leaves us with four types of knowledge which could plausibly serve to moderate the impact of negative information: objective/political, personal, self-assessed/religious, and objective/religious. In the Romney experiment we are able to examine the moderating impact of all four types of knowledge, while in the Obama experiment, we test the impact of political knowledge.

Prior preferences can also moderate the impact of information provided in the course of a campaign. For example, we would expect partisanship to serve as a perceptual screen such that, for example, Democrats are more inured to negative information about a Democratic candidate, and Republicans more so for information about a fellow Republican. However, since Romney and Obama were running in their parties' primaries at the time of our experiments—and thus were engaged in intra-party competition—it is not clear the extent to which partisanship per se will serve as a filter. We also expect that voters who are initially favorable toward a candidate

are less influenced by negative information about that candidate, although the degree to which such favorability buffers negative information remains an open question. In addition to political predispositions, there is a second type of prior preference with potential relevance for information about a candidate's religion, namely a voter's own religion (or absence thereof). We would expect that religious views will mediate reactions to information about the religion of a political candidate. In sum, we expect a respondent's knowledge and prior preferences to mediate, and perhaps even negate, the impact of information about a candidate's religious background.

In addition, we also test temporal variation in the impact of negative information. We hypothesize that negative information has a larger impact during the primary season than later on, when the general election is in full swing. Primaries are the period in which voters are first learning about candidates, where one piece of information is more likely to sway their opinions. By the time of the general election, voters know more about the two parties' nominees, and so a single bit of information is a drop in a much larger bucket. Furthermore, because the parties obviously have not yet chosen their presidential nominee in the spring of an election year, we would expect a candidate's co-partisans to be more persuadable by negative information than in the fall. Once the nomination contest is over, each party's standard bearer presumably receives the "benefit of the doubt" from voters who identify with that party. To examine the differences in voters' reactions over time we replicated the Obama experiment, originally conducted in March/April during the primaries, with a fresh group of subjects in October during the heat of the general election campaign.

Data

Our analysis primarily uses data collected in the Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project (CCAP), a multi-investigator panel study conducted over the course of the 2008 presidential campaign season. The first wave of the study was conducted in December of 2007, with subsequent waves in January, March, September, October, and a post-election wave in November 2008. We also employ data from a similar survey, the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). The CCES is also a large, collaborative study using essentially the same methodology as the CCAP, but with fewer waves and more attention to congressional elections. For both CCAP and CCES, surveys were administered on-line by YouGov/Polimetrix to a representative sample of registered voters³ (Jackman and Vavreck 2009). The experiments analyzed herein ran in either January (CCAP-Romney), March/April (CCAP-Obama), or October (CCES-Obama). For the three experiments the cell sizes for each treatment averages roughly 200 cases. These cell sizes ensure a high degree of statistical power and the ability to look at subgroups of respondents. The randomization across treatments was successful, as there are no statistically significant differences for gender, education, partisanship, age, evangelical affiliation, or Catholic affiliation.⁴

Respondents were provided with a brief description of the candidate in question and then asked whether the information provided makes them more or less likely to vote for that candidate. For example, here is the baseline description of Mitt Romney, which includes no information about his religion but instead only positive, boilerplate biographical information:

³ The sample oversamples battleground states, such that voters in non-battleground and battleground states are represented in equal proportions.

⁴ The randomization test was performed by a performing a chi-square test on the distribution of each demographic trait across the treatment conditions.

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.

All else being equal, does the above information make you more or less likely to vote for Mitt Romney?

Much more likely

Somewhat more likely

Somewhat less likely

Much less likely

The baseline description of Barack Obama was similarly anodyne and positive:

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.

Respondents were randomly assigned to one of multiple descriptions of the candidate (10 for Romney, 6 for Obama). The baseline condition only includes the above biographical information, while the remaining treatments add additional information pertaining to the candidate's religion.

The Romney frames are listed in Table 1. Remember that in each case, the information about his religion was given in addition to the biographical boilerplate used as the baseline condition. There are four general categories for the descriptions of Romney, each of which touches on different aspects of Romney's Mormonism.

1. *Church/Mormon*: basic descriptions of Romney's involvement in either his church (unnamed) or in the LDS (Mormon) Church.
2. *Strange Beliefs*: descriptions of Mormons as holding strange beliefs, each of which is accompanied by one of two counterframes: (a) Mormons have the same values as members of other faiths; (b) a person's faith should be irrelevant to politics.

3. *Not Christian*: a description of Mormons as not really being Christians, with two subsequent descriptions containing counterframes to that claim: (a) a person's faith should be irrelevant to politics; (b) Mormons believe in Jesus Christ and have the same values as other faiths
4. *Racists*: a description of Mormons as racists, since blacks were denied full participation in the church's rites until 1978. One subsequent description provides countervailing information, specifically that Mitt Romney's father, George Romney, supported civil rights for African Americans in the 1960s and 1970s.

The Obama frames are detailed in Table 2. They can be divided into two categories, one which deals with the controversy surrounding Obama's church and pastor⁵ and another which tests the impact of the recurring rumor that Obama is secretly a Muslim.

1. *Church Hostile to Whites*: a description of Obama's church as "hostile to Whites" and a promoter of "Black separatism," with two subsequent counterframes: (a) his church welcomes worshippers of all races; (b) his church teaches strong values
2. *Muslim*: a description of Obama as a Muslim, with one counterframe noting that he is "a committed Christian who attends the United Church of Christ."

Each candidate description met two criteria. First, all of the information was true, which undoubtedly weakened the effectiveness of our frames, since much of the information that voters are exposed to during the course of a campaign is false and thus more incendiary. For example, note that Obama was not described as a Muslim (which would be false); instead, the vignette referred to the fact that some people *claim* he is a Muslim (a statement that is true). Similarly, we

⁵ Note that we wrote these questions many weeks before the controversy regarding Jeremiah Wright became a major issue in the campaign. This was fortuitous, as it meant that our experiment was fielded when this information was circulating. It did, however, mean that our description of Obama's church is relatively mild compared to how Jeremiah Wright was portrayed in the press. We can only assume that a more vitriolic description would have triggered an even greater response. Nonetheless, our effects are quite large.

did not describe Mormons as Christians or not—a matter which rests on theology—but simply reported that some people *say* Mormons are not Christians, an objectively true statement.

The second criterion met by all our descriptions is realism. As noted, all of the counterframes were actual arguments used during the 2008 campaign by supporters and opponents of Romney and Obama. In favoring realism, we acknowledge that the counterframes may not be the *strongest* possible (Chong and Druckman 2007), but we wish to test the effects of the actual arguments employed during the 2008 campaign, not hypothetical arguments that might have been made. Indeed, for an argument to be culturally available, it must be in circulation. For example, we could have cited many different counterarguments to the allegation that Mormons are racists. The one we used, however, was cited by Romney himself in the prominent speech he gave addressing his religion in December of 2007, specifically, that his own father (George Romney) had been a supporter of civil rights.⁶ While we do not claim that we included every germane frame and counterframe, we were able to test most of the major claims heard throughout the 2008 campaign.

Reactions to Romney

We begin with our experiment testing reactions to Romney’s Mormonism. Figure 1 displays how voters in general responded to the information provided in each of the descriptions. We have collapsed the four response categories into two: either the information made one more or less likely to vote for Romney. In interpreting these results, it is important to remember that respondents were required to indicate whether the information we provided made them more or less likely to support Romney; they could not say that the information had no effect. Thus, when

⁶ The relevant line from the speech was, “I was taught in my home to honor God and love my neighbor. I saw my father march with Martin Luther King.” (The latter claim was later disputed by critics).

we see that 23 percent of respondents indicated that the baseline description made them less likely to vote for Romney, we should not forget that this means 77 percent said it made them *more* likely.

The most relevant results to consider, therefore, are the comparisons between each treatment and the baseline, and so that is where we will focus our attention. For example, while 23 percent of voters said that the baseline description made them less likely to vote for Romney, 26 percent of voters said that learning Romney has been a local leader in his church (without naming it) makes them less likely to vote for him—a 3-point gap. However, 55 percent of voters said that learning Romney has been a local leader in the *Mormon* church makes them less likely to vote for him—a 32-point gap when compared to the baseline.

Without a reference point, it is difficult to gauge the substantive size of the effect for hearing that Romney is Mormon. A benchmark for comparison is provided by voters' reactions to information we provided about the religious background of Hillary Clinton and Mike Huckabee, both of whom were, at the time of the experiment, viable candidates.⁷ Compared to a generic but positive baseline description, learning that Hillary Clinton is “an active layperson in the United Methodist Church” leads to an increase in support of 4 percentage points ($p = .36$)⁸ while reading that Mike Huckabee “has also been an ordained Southern Baptist pastor” dropped his support by 13 percentage points ($p < .05$). The Huckabee effect is statistically significant, as is the effect when voters are told that Romney is a leader in the Mormon church, although the Huckabee effect is much smaller (-13 versus -32 points). Given that Hillary Clinton has been a

⁷ The baseline description of Hillary Clinton was: “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.” For Mike Huckabee, it was: “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.”

⁸ All tests of statistical significance reported in this paper are two-tailed.

major figure in American politics for nearly two decades, it is not surprising that opinions about her would not change upon being told of her religious background. From these results, it is fair to say that when compared to the effects for Clinton and Huckabee, there is a large negative effect for learning, or being reminded, that Romney is a Mormon.

Table 3 displays the differences in the likelihood of voting for Romney between the baseline condition and each treatment. A bolded number means that the difference between that treatment and the baseline is statistically significant. An asterisk indicates that a treatment with a counterframe is statistically different than the frame which is being countered, e.g. whether the frame that “Mormons are not Christian, but faith should be irrelevant to politics” is significantly different than just the information that Mormons are said by some not to be Christians. Since the two references to Mormons having strange beliefs are both accompanied by counterframes, asterisks do not apply to them. Likewise, asterisks do not apply to the Church/Mormon frames, since they have no counterframes. Because the assignment to treatments was randomized, there is no need for control variables; comparisons of means suffice.

We find support for the hypothesis that negative information drives out the positive. As noted, hearing that Romney is a leader in his church is modestly negative information, while adding the information that he is a Mormon substantially elicits an even more negative response. Given that 43 percent of voters gave Mormons an unfavorable rating in the January wave of the CCAP panel, it is perhaps not surprising that the description of Romney as a Mormon would be a negative cue. Indeed, in results not shown, we have found that there is a precipitous 52 point decline in Romney’s support among people who are unfavorable toward Mormons and knew that Romney was a Mormon (before they were told his religion in the experiment). However, even among those who said that they were favorable toward Mormons (and correctly identified

Romney's religion), there was still a 24-point drop in support upon receiving the cue that Romney is Mormon.

The two descriptions which mention that Mormons have "strange beliefs" are nearly identical to simply hearing that Romney is a Mormon. Voters' negativity toward Mormons is apparently not swayed by the counterframe that Mormons share the same values as other faiths, nor by the argument that faith should be irrelevant to politics. Similarly, hearing either that some people believe Mormons are not Christians or that they are racists has a similarly sized negative impact on support for Romney.

What about the counterframes to the "not Christian" and "racist" frames? In both cases, the counterframes do reduce the negative reaction to Romney, but not enough to wipe out the impact of the negative information. Take, for example, the counterframe to the "not Christian" claim which points out that Mormons believe in Jesus Christ and have the same values as members of other faiths (a major theme in Romney's December 2007 speech on his religion).⁹ While simply hearing the "not Christian" charge drives down support for Romney by 29 percentage points, hearing that charge accompanied by this counterframe only drives down support by 18 percentage points—a statistically significant 11-point difference. Similarly sized effects are observed for the other counterframes.

We turn to testing whether and, if so how, knowledge moderates the reaction to these frames, beginning with political knowledge. Political knowledge is measured using a 14-item index of factual items about contemporary politics.¹⁰ Respondents were divided into three

⁹ From Romney's speech on his religion: "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."

¹⁰ Ten of the items consisted of identifying whether particular people serve in the House, Senate, or neither (John Dingell, Nancy Pelosi, Bill Gates, John Boehner, Susan Collins, Henry Waxman, Jon Kyl, Dennis Kucinich, Patrick Leahy, and Ted Kennedy). The other items were identifying the position held by Condoleezza Rice, identifying the Guantanamo Bay is a US detention facility, whether the US dollar had become stronger or weaker over the last year, and whether over the last few years the US has increased or decreased imports of manufactured goods.

roughly equal categories of objective political knowledge: low medium, and high.¹¹ Results for the series of Romney frames are presented for respondents at each knowledge level.

With only a few exceptions, political knowledge has little impact on how voters respond to the various Romney frames. One exception is that people with low political knowledge are apparently partly reassured about the possibility that Mormons might not be Christians when they hear that Mormons share the same values as other faiths—while this counterframe does not wipe out the effect of the “non-Christian” frame, it does decrease its effect by 17 percentage points (-17 versus -34). Another exception is that respondents with a medium level of political knowledge are similarly reassured, partially at least, when they hear the counterframe that faith should be irrelevant to politics (-11 versus -40).

We turn next to the three other types of knowledge which we hypothesized might serve as a buffer for the information about Romney’s religion--personal, self-assessed, and objective—and in so doing find that these types of knowledge do indeed correspond with different reactions to the information about Romney’s religion (see Tables 4 and 5). Take, for example, being personally acquainted with someone of the Mormon faith. We can compare three different groups: people who do not know a Mormon (46 percent); people who have a Mormon acquaintance, neighbor, or co-worker (40 percent); and people who have a close friend or family member who is a Mormon (14 percent).¹²

Across the three categories, there are no statistically significant differences in the effect of hearing that Romney is a leader in his church. However, there is a large effect for being told that Romney is a Mormon, especially among those who know a Mormon in passing. They exhibit a drop of 43 percentage points, compared to 21 for those who do not know a Mormon

¹¹ The three categories reflect the bottom, middle, and top third of correct responses.

¹² Respondents were asked to report their relationship to the Mormon “they know best.”

(both effects are statistically significant at $p < .05$). However, even those who are close to a Mormon have a negative response to identifying Romney as one, although the effect (-23 points) is not statistically significant. When we examine the specific frames and counterframes, we find that people with a Mormon family member or close friend generally do not show any statistically significant effects, although the relatively small N for this group makes significance difficult to reach. Putting statistical significance aside, even the substantive size of the effects suggests that people with a close relationship to a Mormon are generally not swayed much, or at all, by the information in the cues. In most cases, the effect size for people who know a Mormon well is smaller and for some the direction of the effect is reversed so that it is positive.¹³ This evidence is suggestive that knowing a Mormon well makes people more likely to accept that they share common values with Mormons.

The one notable exception to the generalization that knowing a Mormon well dampens the effect of negative information is the reaction to the frame that “Mormon beliefs are strange, but faith should be irrelevant to politics.” The negative effect of this frame is roughly the same regardless of whether you do not know a Mormon (-20 points), you know one in passing (-26 points), or you know a Mormon well (-26 points). We speculate that this is because most Americans *do* believe that religion is relevant to politics and, accordingly, this cue reminds them that Mormons believe differently than they do. With few exceptions, this frame elicits a strongly negative reaction from different groups of voters. Note the claim that Mormons are racist, an especially vitriolic accusation, engenders a strongly negative reaction among both those who are not or only superficially acquainted with a Mormon (-24 and -39 points respectively), but actually triggers non-significant response among those who are close to a Mormon. Among those

¹³ Specifically: church leader; Mormon beliefs strange, but have same values; Mormons not Christian but have same values.

who either do not know a Mormon well or at all, the counterframe to the racist charge—that George Romney worked for civil rights—is partially effective, deflecting but not negating the effect. Inexplicably, this counterframe actually drives down support among those who know a Mormon well to a greater extent than the frame alone, but the effect is not significant.

In Table 5, we see an interesting difference between self-assessed and objective knowledge of Mormonism. Self-assessed knowledge is based on a question that asks how much the respondent knows about “the Mormon religion and its practices.”¹⁴ Objective knowledge is based on a four-item battery of factual questions about Mormon beliefs and practices.¹⁵ Perhaps the most significant comparison is between those who say they know a lot about Mormonism versus those who objectively do know a lot—the contrast between the two groups is striking. Hearing that Romney is a Mormon has a much larger impact on those who have high self-assessed knowledge of Mormonism (35 points) than those who have high objective knowledge of Mormonism (20 points). Comparable differences are seen for the “Strange Beliefs” and “Not Christian” frames. And while both groups have the same reaction to the information that Mormons are allegedly racists, those with high objective knowledge are much more likely to have that negative effect countered upon reading the counterframe. Indeed, they are so reassured that they do not differ from those who receive the baseline description.

In comparing those who have low self-assessed knowledge of Mormons versus those who have low objective knowledge, we also find a notable difference. Those with low objective

¹⁴ Those who answer some/a great deal (64 percent) are coded as having high self-assessed knowledge of Mormonism, while those who answer not very much/nothing at all (36 percent) are coded as having low self-assessed knowledge.

¹⁵ The items are whether Mormons practice polygamy today (false); do not drink alcohol (true); pay 10 percent of their income to their church (true); and do not believe in the Bible (false). The mean score on the index is 3.28. Accordingly those with a perfect 4 are coded as having “high objective knowledge” while those who scored less than 4 are coded as having low knowledge. This splits the sample in half (49 percent have a perfect score). Note that, in the January wave, this index was only asked of 2/3 of the respondents (i.e. the items were only included on 2 of the 3 universities’ modules involved in this study).

knowledge react more negatively to the information provided about Romney's religion. An even more negative reaction is observed among those who combine a high degree of self-assessed knowledge with a low level of objective knowledge. Among people in that category, hearing that Romney is Mormon drives down support by a sizeable 44 percentage points.

By way of summary, objective knowledge—about Mormonism, not politics—serves as a partial buffer for negative information about Romney's religion. Close personal knowledge serves to buffer most of the specific charges leveled against Mormons, while a passing acquaintance with a Mormon accentuates the negative reactions (when compared to not knowing a Mormon at all).

We move next to prior preferences as another potential buffer to negative information, beginning with what might be expected to be the strongest buffer of all, favorability toward Romney as measured in the baseline survey (see Table 6). We divide the sample into three categories of roughly equal size: those who are favorable toward Romney (N=819), neutral or have no opinion (N=735), or unfavorable (N=756). There are notable differences in how these groups react to the information we provided about Romney. In every case but one, people who were predisposed to favor Romney reacted less strongly to the information about his religion than those who had either neutral or unfavorable feelings toward Romney. The one exception is the claim that Mormons are not Christians, which had a roughly equal effect regardless of one's favorability toward Romney. However, those who were favorable toward Romney were more responsive to the countervailing arguments. In fact, they were especially persuaded by the argument that faith should be irrelevant to politics, as it negated the effect of the "Mormons are not Christian" frame. Similarly, among people favorable to Romney, the counterframe to the

allegation that Mormons are racist led to a response that was no different, statistically, than the baseline (it is -8 points, but the gap is not statistically significant).

Taken together, these findings suggest that negative information has less effect on those who were predisposed to favor Romney and can be partially rebuffed with counter-information. On the other hand, this also means that those who were predisposed not to favor Romney, or even those who had no opinion toward him, respond strongly to information about his religion, and are not reassured by the countervailing arguments.

We find similar results when we turn to another prior preference, namely partisanship (Table 7). Republicans are generally less affected by negative information than Democrats. Interestingly, Democrats are far more affected by the racist claim than Republicans, and even though the counterframe reduces the negative effect, even with the countervailing information the charge that Mormons are racists drives Romney's support down by 34 points among Democrats.

Owing to the difficulties Romney had in gaining support among evangelical voters, it is also informative to compare the reactions of evangelicals¹⁶ to Catholics to respondents unaffiliated with a religion. In doing so we find that while members of all three religious groups generally react negatively to information about Romney's religion, evangelicals have the strongest reaction. Perhaps not surprisingly, this is particularly apparent for the allegation that Mormons are not Christians where, regardless of whether there is a counterframe, evangelicals react more negatively than either Catholics or the unaffiliated. Conversely, upon being told that some people think Mormons are not Christians, Catholic respondents are reassured by the information that Mormons share the same values as other faiths. In contrast, this counterframe

¹⁶ Evangelicals are identified using their denominational affiliation, which was reported in an open-ended question. Those in the evangelical category do not include either Hispanics or African Americans.

has no effect on evangelicals or the unaffiliated. Given that many evangelical churches teach that Mormons are not Christians, this finding is likely another example of negative information reinforcing a prior belief.

Compared to evangelicals and the unaffiliated, Catholics have more complicated reactions. They are persuaded by the counterframe that, while Mormon beliefs might seem strange, faith ought to be irrelevant to politics (a sentiment most famously expressed by a Catholic, John F. Kennedy). Finally, Catholics are not influenced by the claim that Mormons are racist. We interpret these results to mean that Catholics do not have strong prior preferences regarding Mormons, whereas evangelicals and the unaffiliated do. Indeed, this supposition is confirmed by the fact that Catholics are more likely to have a favorable opinion of Mormons than either evangelicals or the unaffiliated.¹⁷

From the individual trees of these individual results, a forest comes into view. Just as knowledge can serve as a buffer for negative information, so can prior preferences. The people most resilient to negative information are those who already favor Romney. On the other hand, those with a negative assessment of Romney or Republicans, or with a background which suggests a negative response to Mormons, are affected most strongly by negative information about Romney.

Reactions to Obama

We can test whether the power of negative frames and the moderating effects of knowledge and prior preferences are idiosyncratic to Romney by examining how voters respond to information about Barack Obama. Figure 2 mirrors Figure 1, displaying the percentage of

¹⁷ Respondents were asked to rate their favorability toward Mormons. Sixty-five percent of Catholics have a favorable opinion (combining “mostly” and “very” favorable), compared to 54 percent of evangelicals and 44 percent of the unaffiliated.

respondents who said that the information contained in each vignette made them less likely to support Obama. As with the Romney frames, the most useful comparison is between the baseline—which, recall, contains only boilerplate biographical information—and each of the other experiments. The fact that even the innocuous baseline description leads 33 percent of respondents to say that it makes them less likely to support Obama reminds us that some voters react negatively to all sorts of information. Thus, as above, tables 8-10 again present comparisons between each treatment and the baseline.

When all respondents are taken as a whole, we can see that the information about Obama's church was potentially incendiary. The field dates for the study fell in the midst of the controversy over Obama's church and pastor, which undoubtedly contributed to the strength of the effect.¹⁸ The negative effect is larger for the information about Obama's church than the allegation that Obama is a Muslim, while neither of the counterframes for the information about Obama's church have *any* neutralizing effect. And while the Muslim frame has a negative effect, the counterframe that Obama is actually a committed Christian partially counteracts its impact. Given the events of the time, this is understandable, since news attention was focused on the fact that Obama attended the Trinity United Church of *Christ*. Hullabaloo about Obama's Christian church would seem to undercut the claim that he is secretly a Muslim.

As with the Romney frames, we find that political knowledge has a limited moderating effect. When respondents are again divided into those with high, medium, and low knowledge, we find slight differences at most. The information about Obama's church is negative across the board, although the people with low political knowledge are the most susceptible to persuasion by the positive counterframes, while those with medium and high levels of knowledge are

¹⁸ The field dates for the March wave were March 21st – April 14th, 2008. The story about Jeremiah Wright and the Trinity United Church of Christ broke in early March; Obama gave his much-discussed speech on race in America in response to the controversy on March 18, 2008.

actually less supportive of Obama upon hearing the counterframes. For the claim that Obama is a Muslim, people at all levels of general knowledge are affected (although those with the lowest knowledge are affected least of all) but then reassured by the counterframe. As was the case with Romney, the impact of politically salient religious cues is not moderated by generalized political knowledge.

Perhaps surprisingly, negative information about Obama's religion was not buffered by what might be considered the strongest prior preference: favorability toward Obama.¹⁹ (See Table 9). As with Romney, favorability was measured in a baseline survey administered over a month prior to the experiment. Regardless of the favorability toward Obama the allegation that Obama's church is hostile to whites and promotes black separatism triggers a negative response. With only one exception, this holds true for the counterframes as well—the lone exception being that people who have a neutral view toward Obama are persuaded by the information that his church teaches good values (although the negative effect is still significantly different than the baseline, so the overall effect is nonetheless to drive Obama's support down). The story is similar for the two Muslim frames. Whatever their level of favorability toward Obama, the news that some say he is a Muslim engenders a negative response. Across the board, however, that negativity is counteracted by the counterframe to the Muslim accusation. (For those who are neutral toward Obama, this frame actually makes them more likely to support Obama than the baseline).

The absence of a moderating effect for favorability toward Obama on voters' responses to the negative information about his religion is a departure from the results for Romney, where we found that favorability buffered at least some of the negative information about Mormonism.

¹⁹ In the baseline survey (December 2007), 38 percent of respondents had an unfavorable view of Obama, 21 percent had a neutral view (or had no opinion), and 41 percent had a favorable view.

In other words, even Obama's supporters were affected by the accusations swirling around his church and pastor. Unlike the concerns about Romney's Mormonism (or for that matter, the allegations that Obama was a Muslim), which were largely a whispering campaign, Obama's church and pastor were high profile, front-page news. The fact that Obama was still contending for the Democratic nomination against a serious challenge by Hillary Clinton no doubt also contributed to the heightened reaction, even among those who were inclined to support Obama.

When we turn to another prior preference, partisanship (Table 10), we see an interesting contrast. As with favorability toward Obama, party identification does only a little to moderate the information about Obama's church. Republicans and Democrats alike (Republicans a little more so than Democrats) say it makes them less likely to vote for him, with the counterframes having little or no effect. Republicans and Democrats, however, differ in their response to the allegation that Obama is a Muslim, as Republicans react far more negatively (-36 points) than do Democrats (-19 points). The counterframe works to partially counteract the Muslim rumor for both Republicans and Democrats, although even with the counterframe, Republicans are 17 points less likely to vote for Obama (a significant effect).

In comparing respondents of different religious identities, we see substantial differences. Interestingly, Catholics respond more negatively than evangelicals to the information about Obama's church. Catholics also have a stronger reaction to the claim that Obama is a Muslim than evangelicals. The most distinctive religious group in this regard is the unaffiliated. These respondents were unaffected by the information about Obama's church (no significance differences compared to the baseline), and responded *positively* to both descriptions of Obama as a Muslim, although the effects do not reach statistical significance. In this case, the prior preference does not just lead to positive information outweighing the negative; it actually leads

to ostensibly “negative” information—that Obama is a Muslim²⁰—triggering a positive, or at least a neutral, response.

Comparisons Over Time

We ran a replication of the Obama experiment in October on the CCES. This enabled us to minimize house effects (since the same firm conducted both the CCAP and CCES) while also ensuring a fresh group of respondents who had not been part of the earlier experiments. With a smaller number of total respondents, we limited the replication to four treatment conditions: the baseline, the allegation that Obama’s former church²¹ is hostile to whites, the Muslim rumor, and the counterframe to the Muslim rumor (that Obama is a committed Christian).

The results for all respondents together, as well as Republicans, Democrats, evangelicals, Catholics, and the religiously nonaffiliated, are displayed in Table 11. The corresponding results from March are included in parentheses to facilitate comparisons between the spring and the fall. Recall that we hypothesized that reactions would be muted relative to March, since Obama was much better known in October than during the primaries. This hypothesis is largely confirmed for reactions to the description of Obama’s church as anti-white. All but one group had a substantially weaker reaction in October than in March. Indeed, that information had such mild effects on Catholics and the nonaffiliated that, while negative, the effect for neither reaches statistical significance. The one notable exception is evangelicals, who were as affected by the

²⁰ We wish to stress that there is no reason that being identified as a Muslim need be considered negative information. As shown in our data, however, empirically it turns out to be the case that most Americans do respond negatively to the description of Obama as a Muslim. A majority, 54 percent, of our respondents give Muslims an unfavorable rating.

²¹ In order to keep the description accurate, we had to modify the description slightly to account for the fact that Obama had left the Trinity United Church of Christ by the time the experiment was conducted.

allegations about Obama's church in the general election season as during the primaries (-19 points in the primaries, -17 in October, both $p < .05$).

The story for reactions to the Muslim rumor is similar. Overall, the effect of hearing the Muslim rumor was weaker in October (-7 and non-significant compared to -27 and highly significant). This was true for both Republicans and Democrats. There was no change in the reaction of people without a religious affiliation (+1 but not significant at both times), and essentially no change in how evangelicals responded (-12 and -15 respectively, but neither one having achieved significance). Catholics experienced the biggest shift, moving from a huge and significant negative effect in March (-43) to a small but non-significant positive shift in October (+2). It is as though Catholics were wary of Obama during the primaries, but had come to embrace him by the general election and were thus unaffected by the Muslim rumor.

Significantly, the counterframe to the Muslim allegation had very little effect in October, when it did in March. In no case, in fact, did the counterframe lead to a significantly different response than the initial allegation that Obama is secretly a Muslim. This suggests that for people who were willing to consider that Obama might be Muslim, his description of himself as a committed Christian was already "culturally available." Their reaction to the Muslim rumor likely came *in spite* of information to the contrary, whether supplied by our cue or in the wider culture.

Comparing the Romney and Obama Experiments

We find both similarities and differences when comparing the Romney and Obama experiments. One key similarity is that political knowledge makes little difference for how voters respond to information about either candidate's religion. One key difference, however, is that

candidate favorability—which we assumed would be a strong moderating influence—mattered for reactions to Romney membership in the Mormon Church, but not for Obama’s membership in Chicago’s Trinity United Church of Christ. The charges leveled against Obama’s church triggered a negative reaction even among Obama’s supporters, which was not overridden by the positive counterframes provided. The potency of Obama’s church as a potentially damaging issue is no doubt the reason that Obama eventually left the church and disavowed his former pastor.

On the other hand, the one case where prior favorability toward Romney did not buffer a negative charge is also highly informative. Respondents who rated Romney highly were as troubled by the allegation that Mormons are not Christians as people who were either neutral or unfavorable toward him. This, undoubtedly, is the reason that Romney explicitly spoke of his belief in Jesus Christ during the major speech he delivered on his faith.

For both candidates, some prior preferences served as buffers to the negative frames, while others accentuated their effects. For Romney, Catholics reacted less strongly to information about his religion than either evangelicals or the religiously non-affiliated. Both evangelicals and the non-affiliated, who otherwise have little in common politically, had strong negative reactions to allegations about Mormonism. In most cases, the counterframes did little to temper their concerns. For Obama, religious non-affiliation was a buffer to the charge that Muslim is secretly a Muslim. Even in March, and even without the counterframe, non-affiliators were unaffected by the Muslim rumor.

Given the attention paid to the oft-repeated rumor that Obama is secretly a Muslim, it is also interesting to note that voters were generally reassured by the counterframe (that Obama is actually a committed Christian). But, again, we see that prior preferences shape voters’

responses, as Republicans were more receptive to the Muslim claim than Democrats. Of all groups, Catholics were especially like to react negatively to the Muslim rumor, at least in March. While we hesitate to make too much of this one finding, it is striking that there was a lot of discussion among the punditry that, during the primaries, Obama was having a difficult time winning over Catholic voters. These results appear to be confirmation of his difficulty among Catholics. That difficulty, however, disappeared in the general election campaign. In October, Catholics showed no reaction to the Muslim rumor. While most groups had a weakened effect for the Muslim rumor in October, none came close to the dramatic swing observed among Catholics (from -43 to +2 points).

Significantly, in surveying the results we found no evidence that claims about a candidate's religion risk the sort of backlash that Mendelberg has found for racial appeals. Attacks on a candidate's religion, at least for Romney and Obama, do not appear to violate the same societal norm of equality as do overt racial messages. Unknown, however, is whether paid campaign advertising which makes religious references would be perceived as violating cultural norms. Since campaign advertising rarely, if ever, makes reference to religion, this is a null set.

It is reasonable to assume that some of the expressed concern about Obama's church and pastor was really a veiled way of raising the issue of his race, given that his church falls squarely in the tradition of the prophetic Black Church. Similarly, raising the question of whether Obama is a Muslim may also speak to anxieties about his race. In the case of Obama, playing the religion card may have also been a way of playing the race card.

For Romney, however, religion *is* the central story. These experiments confirm that many Americans are suspicious of Mormons, notwithstanding that they are the fifth largest religious group in America (Penning 2009). In Gamson's terms, allegations that Mormons have strange

beliefs, are not Christians, and are racists appear to be culturally available memes. Even people who, objectively, know a lot of accurate information about Mormons are still negatively impacted by allegations about the religion, although they do not react as negatively as people who simply say they know a lot about Mormonism. One of the strongest negative reactions of all comes from people who say they know a lot about Mormons but, in actuality, do not.

Knowledge of another type does serve as a buffer to charges leveled against Mormonism. Consistent with the venerable contact theory (Allport 1954; Pettigrew and Tropp 2000) negative reactions to information about Mormons are lessened among people who have a close friend or family member who is a member of the LDS Church. But even a close personal relationship does not completely buffer negative information about Mormons. Interestingly, having a passing relationship to a Mormon engenders an even more negative response than not knowing a Mormon at all.

Conclusion

We have tested voters' responses to information regarding the religious backgrounds of two presidential candidates. In so doing, our objective has been to illuminate framing effects in the real-time of a presidential campaign, a subject that is under-explored in the literature. Our results make clear that information about the religion of a candidate can be potentially inflammatory. In Romney's case, the question obviously arises as to whether his campaign was doomed from the start because of his Mormonism. Our evidence indicates that negative perceptions of Mormons are widespread and, for many voters, resistant to countervailing information. While this does not mean that Romney was, or in the future will be, unable to win

either the Republican nomination or a general election, it does suggest that his religion is a potential liability.

On the other hand, our evidence regarding Obama suggests that negative information about religion need not doom a candidate to defeat. Information about Obama's membership in Chicago's Trinity United Church of Christ, and therefore his implied association with the controversial Reverend Jeremiah Wright, led to a sharply negative response from voters—even among people who were favorable toward Obama. Yet, as the campaign proceeded, it took a backseat to other concerns and, obviously, Obama was able to win both the Democratic nomination and the general election notwithstanding any lingering concerns about the church he attended in Chicago. While, among evangelicals, suspicion remained strong in October about Obama's (former) church, for most voters the issue had less impact in the fall than the spring (although it did not entirely dissipate).

Similarly, the rumor that Obama is secretly a Muslim did not have much traction, as in this case voters were largely convinced by the countervailing information in March. By October, the counterframe to the Muslim allegation had very little effect on anyone, which is likely because the counterframe was in wide circulation. Anyone who suspected Obama was a Muslim was also aware that he identified as a Christian. In Gamson's terms, the counterframe had wide cultural availability.

More generally, this research confirms the importance of studying campaign communication outside of formal channels. Paid advertising is only one way through which voters learn about candidates. Our understanding of campaigns would be enhanced by more attention to information that flows through unofficial channels.

In broader theoretical terms, our research confirms the efficacy of negative frames. Negative information crowds out the positive (even if the “negative” information is simply identifying a candidate as a member of a religion or church which meets with disapprobation). Furthermore, political knowledge has little to no effect as a buffer to negative information related to religion. However, religious knowledge can act as such a buffer, but in different ways depending on the type and source of the knowledge. Prior preferences, political and religious, can also act as buffers, but can also intensify a voter’s reaction.

All in all, these findings suggest that frames matter in campaigning, but not all frames are created equal. While negative information crowds out the positive, both the content and timing of that negative information matter.

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Table 1. Descriptions of Mitt Romney

Baseline	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.
Church	Mitt Romney has also been a local leader in his church.
Mormon	Mitt Romney has also been a local leader of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, often called the Mormon Church.
Strange Beliefs, But Same Values	Mitt Romney has also been a local leader of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, often called the Mormon Church. Some people have expressed concern that Mormons hold beliefs that seem strange. Other people say there is no reason for concern, because Mormons have the same values as members of other faiths.
Strange Beliefs, But Faith Should Be Irrelevant	Mitt Romney has also been a local leader of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, often called the Mormon Church. Some people have expressed concern that Mormons hold beliefs that seem strange. 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.
Not Christian	Mitt Romney has also been a local leader of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, often called the Mormon Church. Some people have said that Mormons are not really Christians, because some of their beliefs are different from Protestants and Catholics.
Not Christian, But Faith Should Be Irrelevant	Mitt Romney has also been a local leader of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, often called the Mormon Church. Some people have said that Mormons are not really Christians, because some of their beliefs are different from Protestants and Catholics. 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.
Not Christian, But Believe in Jesus Christ	Mitt Romney has also been a local leader of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, often called the Mormon Church. Some people have said that Mormons are not really Christians, because some of their beliefs are different from Protestants and Catholics. Others point out that Mormons believe in Jesus Christ, and that they have the same values as members of other faiths.
Racists	Mitt Romney has also been a local leader of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, often called the Mormon Church. Some people have said that Mormons are racists because until 1978 the Mormon Church did not allow blacks to participate fully in church rites.
Racists, But George Romney Supported Civil Rights	Mitt Romney has also been a local leader of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, often called the Mormon Church. Some people have said that Mormons are racists because until 1978 the Mormon Church did not allow blacks to participate fully in church rites. Others point out that some Mormons, including Mitt Romney's father, supported civil rights for blacks throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

Table 2. Descriptions of Barack Obama

Baseline	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.
Church Hostile to Whites	Barack Obama is a member of the Trinity United Church of Christ. Some people have said his church is hostile to Whites and promotes Black separatism.
Church Hostile, but welcomes people of all races	Barack Obama is a member of the Trinity United Church of Christ. Some people have said his church is hostile to Whites and promotes Black separatism. Others point out that his church welcomes worshippers of all races.
Church Hostile, but teaches good values	Barack Obama is a member of the Trinity United Church of Christ. Some people have said his church is hostile to Whites and promotes Black separatism. Others point out that his church emphasizes values for African Americans such as a strong work ethic, commitment to family, and self-respect.
Muslim	Some people have said that he must be a Muslim, because his paternal grandfather was a Muslim.
Muslim, But Is Christian	Some people have said that he must be a Muslim, because his paternal grandfather was a Muslim. Others point out that he is a committed Christian who attends the United Church of Christ.

Figure 1

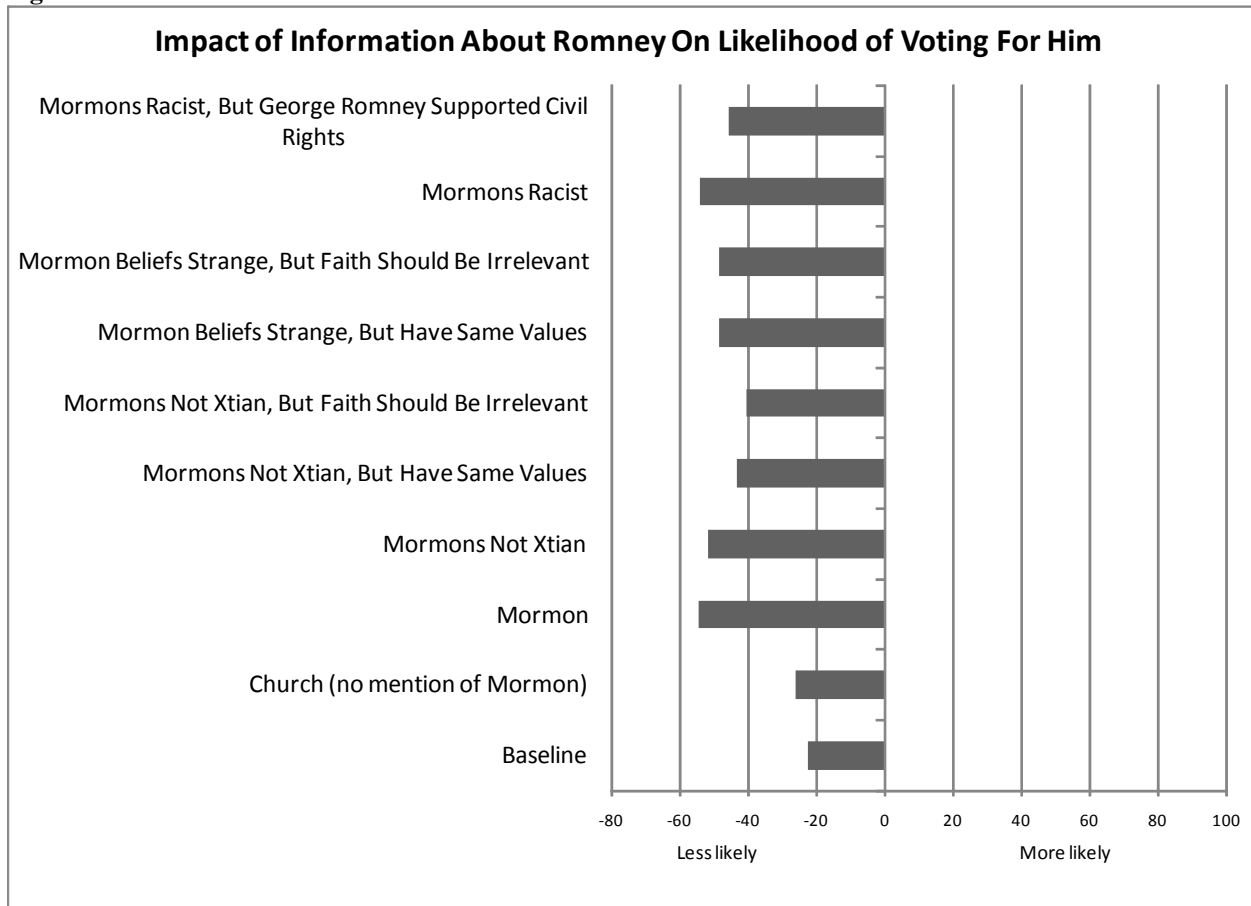


Table 3. Reactions to the Romney Frames, By Levels of Political Knowledge

	All	Low political knowledge	Medium political knowledge	High political knowledge
Church (no mention of Mormon)	-3	-9	-7	5
Mormon	-32	-33	-44	-23
Reactions to “Mormons have strange beliefs”				
Mormon Beliefs Strange, But Have Same Values	-26	-31	-25	-24
Mormon Beliefs Strange, But Faith Should Be Irrelevant	-26	-32	-39	-17
Reactions to “Mormons are not Christian”				
Mormons Not Christian	-29	-34	-40	-18
Mormons Not Christian, But Faith Should Be Irrelevant	-21*	-31	-11*	-10
Mormons Not Christian, But Have Same Values	-18*	-17*	-32	-11
Reactions to “Mormons are racist”				
Mormons Racist	-32	-38	-29	-21
Mormons Racist, But George Romney Supported Civil Rights	-23*	-27	-26	-21
N	2310	934	655	673

● Each cell indicates the percentage indicating that they are less (negative) or more (positive) likely to vote for Romney, compared to the baseline description.

● Bolded cells are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$, two-tailed) in comparison to the baseline.

● For the “Not Christian” frames, an asterisk means that the cell is significantly different than “Mormons Not Christian” (without a counter-frame). For the “Racist” frames, an asterisk means that the counterframe condition is significantly different than the “Mormons Racist” frame.

Table 4. Reactions to the Romney Frames, By Acquaintance with a Mormon

	Do not know a Mormon	Mormon known best is an acquaintance/ neighbor/ coworker	Mormon known best is a family member/close friend
Church (no mention of Mormon)	3	-7	3
Mormon	-21	-43	-23
Reactions to “Mormons have strange beliefs”			
Mormon Beliefs Strange, But Have Same Values	-23	-28	3
Mormon Beliefs Strange, But Faith Should Be Irrelevant	-20	-26	-26
Reactions to “Mormons are not Christian”			
Mormons Not Christian	-29	-33	-3
Mormons Not Christian, But Faith Should Be Irrelevant	-12*	-26	-12
Mormons Not Christian, But Have Same Values	-10*	-27	1
Reactions to “Mormons are racist”			
Mormons Racist	-24	-39	-4
Mormons Racist, But George Romney Supported Civil Rights	-14	-20*	-20
N	614	563	197

- Each cell indicates the percentage indicating that they are less (negative) or more (positive) likely to vote for Romney, compared to the baseline description.
- Bolded cells are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$, two-tailed) in comparison to the baseline.
- For the “Not Christian” frames, an asterisk means that the cell is significantly different than “Mormons Not Christian” (without a counter-frame). For the “Racist” frames, an asterisk means that the counterframe condition is significantly different than the “Mormons Racist” frame.

Table 5. Reactions to the Romney Frames, By Knowledge of Mormons/Mormonism

	Know a lot about Mormons (self-described)	Do not know a lot about Mormons (self-described)	High Mormon knowledge (objective)	Low Mormon knowledge (objective)	High self-described knowledge / Low objective knowledge
Church (no mention of Mormon)	-5	0	1	-5	-8
Mormon	-35	-26	-20	-40	-44
Reactions to “Mormons have strange beliefs”					
Mormon Beliefs Strange, But Have Same Values	-27	-24	-14	-37	-45
Mormon Beliefs Strange, But Faith Should Be Irrelevant	-25	-27	-18	-38	-41
					-45
Reactions to “Mormons are not Christian”					
Mormons Not Christian	-29	-30	-12	-43	
Mormons Not Christian, But Faith Should Be Irrelevant	-22	-19	-16	-27*	-33
					-28*
Mormons Not Christian, But Have Same Values	-18*	-18	-19	-17*	
Reactions to “Mormons are racist”					
Mormons Racist	-30	-35	-26	-38	-40
Mormons Racist, But George Romney Supported Civil Rights	-17*	-32	-4*	-35	-34
N	1483	827	723	712	435

● Each cell indicates the percentage indicating that they are less (negative) or more (positive) likely to vote for Romney, compared to the baseline description.

● Bolded cells are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$, two-tailed) in comparison to the baseline.

Table 6. Reactions to the Romney Frames, By Prior Favorability Toward Romney

	Very/Somewhat favorable toward Romney (baseline)	Neutral/Have not heard enough to say (baseline)	Very/Somewhat unfavorable toward Romney (baseline)
Church (no mention of Mormon)	-1	-6	-6
Mormon	-20	-40	-35
Reactions to “Mormons have strange beliefs”			
Mormon Beliefs Strange, But Have Same Values	-16	-26	-34
Mormon Beliefs Strange, But Faith Should Be Irrelevant	-8	-43	-31
Reactions to “Mormons are not Christian”			
Mormons Not Christian	-29	-35	-29
Mormons Not Christian, But Faith Should Be Irrelevant	-8*	-36	-25
Mormons Not Christian, But Believe in Christ and Have Same Values	-13*	-20*	-26
Reactions to “Mormons are racist”			
Mormons Racist	-17	-38	-44
Mormons Racist, But George Romney Supported Civil Rights	-8	-30	-34
N	819	735	756

● Each cell indicates the percentage indicating that they are less (negative) or more (positive) likely to vote for Romney, compared to the baseline description.

● Bolded cells are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$, two-tailed) in comparison to the baseline.

● For the “Not Christian” frames, an asterisk means that the cell is significantly different than “Mormons Not Christian” (without a counter-frame). For the “Racist” frames, an asterisk means that the counterframe condition is significantly different than the “Mormons Racist” frame.

Table 7. Reactions to the Romney Frames, by Partisanship and Religious Identity

	Republican	Democrat	Evangelical	Catholic	No religion
Church (no mention of Mormon)	6	-13	-3	-5	-14
Mormon	-25	-36	-38	-34	-36
Reactions to “Mormons have strange beliefs”					
Mormon Beliefs Strange, But Have Same Values	-22	-31	-33	-26	-27
Mormon Beliefs Strange, But Faith Should Be Irrelevant	-18	-42	-25	-10	-30
Reactions to “Mormons are not Christian”					
Mormons Not Christian	-22	-35	-40	-22	-27
Mormons Not Christian, But Faith Should Be Irrelevant	-15	-25	-32	-17	-22
Mormons Not Christian, But Have Same Values	-11*	-26	-27	-6	-17
Reactions to “Mormons are racist”					
Mormons Racist	-19	-47	-54	-4	-42
Mormons Racist, But George Romney Supported Civil Rights	-11	-34*	-33*	-14	-21*
N	981	1062	514	471	439

● Each cell indicates the percentage indicating that they are less (negative) or more (positive) likely to vote for Romney, compared to the baseline description.

● Bolded cells are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$, two-tailed) in comparison to the baseline.

● For the “Not Christian” frames, an asterisk means that the cell is significantly different than “Mormons Not Christian” (without a counter-frame). For the “Racist” frames, an asterisk means that the counterframe condition is significantly different than the “Mormons Racist” frame.

Figure 2

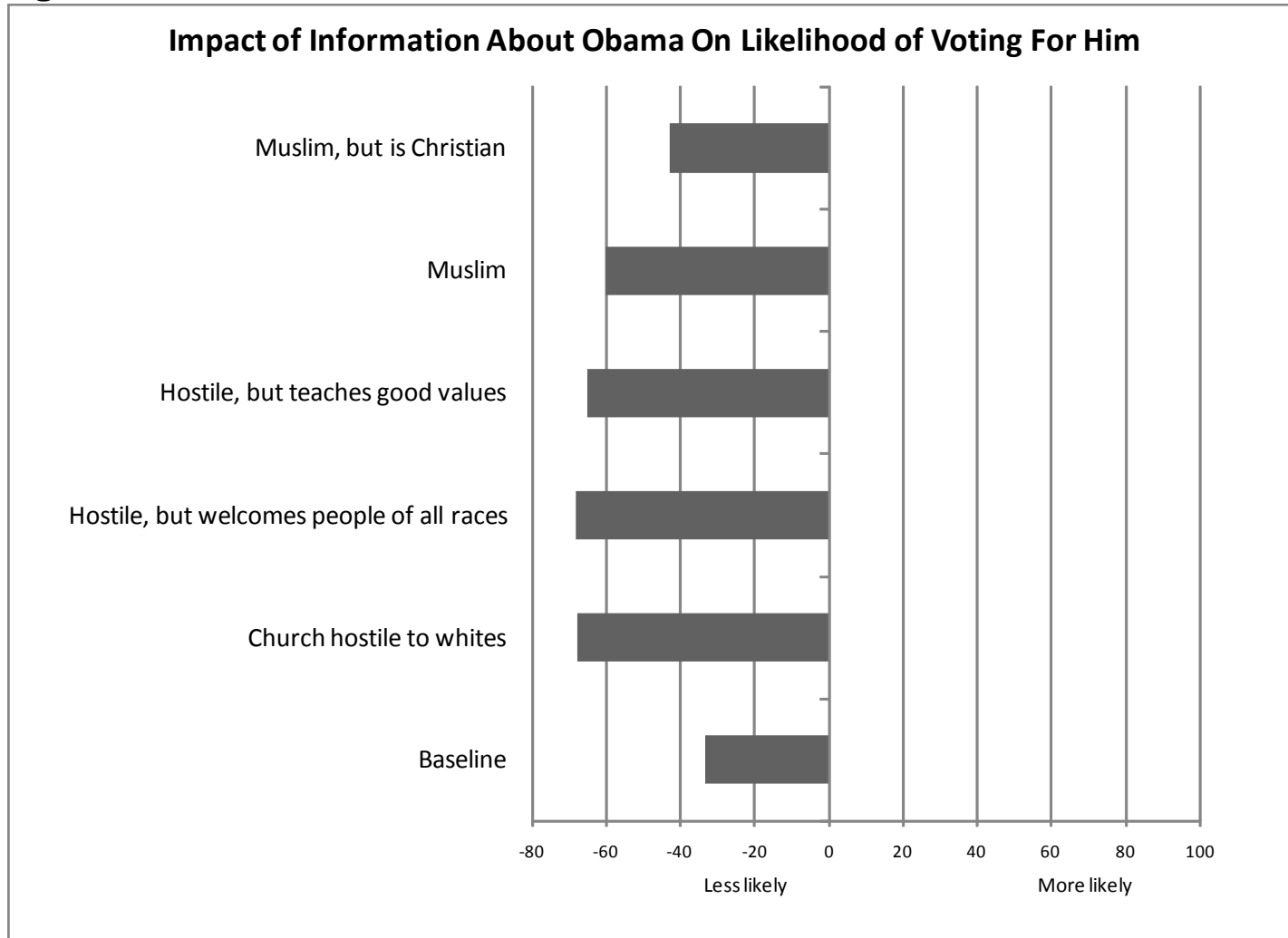


Table 8. Reactions to the Obama Frames, By Levels of Political Knowledge

	All	Low political knowledge	Medium political knowledge	High political knowledge
Reactions to Obama's church				
Church hostile to whites	-34	-39	-35	-29
Hostile, but welcomes people of all races	-35	-30	-40	-33
Hostile, teaches good values	-32	-20*	-44	-38
Reactions to "Obama is a Muslim"				
Muslim	-27	-19	-31	-32
Muslim, but is Christian	-10*	-6	-14*	-8*
N	1255	467	321	378

- Each cell indicates the percentage indicating that they are less (negative) or more (positive) likely to vote for Obama, compared to the baseline description.
- Bolded cells are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$, two-tailed) in comparison to the baseline.
- For the "Obama's church" frames, an asterisk means that the counterframe is significantly different than the charge that Obama's church is hostile to whites. For the "Obama is a Muslim" frames, an asterisk means that the counterframe condition is significantly different than the "Muslim" frame.

Table 9. Reactions to the Obama Frames, by Prior Favorability Toward Obama

	Very/Somewhat favorable toward Obama (baseline)	Neutral/Have not heard enough to say (baseline)	Very/Somewhat unfavorable toward Obama (baseline)
Reactions to Obama’s church			
Church hostile to whites	-36	-43	-32
Hostile, but welcomes people of all races	-37	-37	-33
Hostile, teaches good values	-31	-26*	-30
Reactions to “Obama is a Muslim”			
Muslim	-23	-40	-22
Muslim, but is Christian	-10*	-4*	-12
N	581	234	440

- Each cell indicates the percentage indicating that they are less (negative) or more (positive) likely to vote for Obama, compared to the baseline description.
- Bolded cells are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$, two-tailed) in comparison to the baseline.
- For the “Obama’s church” frames, an asterisk means that the counterframe is significantly different than the charge that Obama’s church is hostile to whites. For the “Obama is a Muslim” frames, an asterisk means that the counterframe condition is significantly different than the “Muslim” frame.

Table 10. Reactions to the Obama Frames, Partisanship and Religious Identity

	Republican	Democrat	Evangelical	Catholic	No religion
Reactions to Obama's church					
Church hostile to whites	-43	-36	-17	-38	-35
Hostile, but welcomes people of all races	-44	-35	-19	-53	-20
Hostile, teaches good values	-43	-26	-23	-51	-26
Reactions to "Obama is a Muslim"					
Muslim	-36	-19	-15	-43	1
Muslim, but is Xtian	-17*	-9	-9	-13*	8
N	431	483	245	227	239

- Each cell indicates the percentage indicating that they are less (negative) or more (positive) likely to vote for Obama, compared to the baseline description.
- Bolded cells are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$, two-tailed) in comparison to the baseline.
- For the "Obama's church" frames, an asterisk means that the counterframe is significantly different than the charge that Obama's church is hostile to whites. For the "Obama is a Muslim" frames, an asterisk means that the counterframe condition is significantly different than the "Muslim" frame.

**Table 11. Reactions to the Obama Frames, Partisanship and Religious Identity in October
March results in parentheses for comparison**

	All	Republican	Democrat	Evangelical	Catholic	No religion
Reactions to Obama's church						
Church hostile to whites	-18 (-34)	-19 (-43)	-15 (-36)	-19 (-17)	-8 (-38)	-6 (-35)
Reactions to "Obama is a Muslim"						
Muslim	-7 (-27)	-13 (-36)	-3 (-19)	-12 (-15)	2 (-43)	1 (1)
Muslim, but is Xtian	-9 (-10)	-16 (-17)	-5 (-9)	-18 (-9)	7 (-13)	-3 (8)
N	971	376	463	227	209	168

- Each cell indicates the percentage indicating that they are less (negative) or more (positive) likely to vote for Obama, compared to the baseline description.
- Bolded cells are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$, two-tailed) in comparison to the baseline.
- For the "Obama is a Muslim" frames, an asterisk means that the counterframe condition is significantly different than the "Muslim" frame.