

GOP presidential race again features faith, but new dynamics

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By Robert Marus

ABP Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON (ABP)—With Democratic front-runners talking openly about evangelical-style conversion experiences and Republicans lamenting that none of their top-tier candidates are bona fide social conservatives, experts say the 2008 presidential campaign may rewrite political playbooks on the role of faith.

“Of course this could all change, but right now there’s no candidate out there that really energizes evangelical voters the way that (President) Bush did” in the 2000 and 2004 elections, said Barry Hankins, a religion and politics expert at Baylor University.

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And, noted Clemson University political scientist Laura Olson, at least two of the top three Democratic candidates have shown they can “speak ‘evangelical-ese’” and appeal to evangelical and other religious voters.

Has the politics-and-religion script been flipped? Experts say a massive rearrangement of voting patterns among religious conservatives probably won’t happen in this election. But the election may signal the beginning of a significant shift in the dynamics of faith and politics over the long term—and even small shifts in the way certain demographic groups cast their ballots can mean big results for an electorate that has been closely divided between the Democrats and the GOP for nearly a decade.

In the end, experts say, the way in which faith issues affect the 2008 election will depend heavily on which candidate each party nominates—and the dynamic between the two final contenders.

In the race for the Republican nomination, the current front-runners exhibit a number of apparent contradictions:

- An Episcopalian who reportedly attends a Southern Baptist church and who has a rocky relationship with Christian conservative powerbrokers (John McCain);
- A Roman Catholic whose views on abortion and gays are at odds with both the Vatican and his own party's platform (Rudy Giuliani); and
- A Mormon who has reinvented himself as pro-family after previously supporting abortion rights and once declaring he would do more for gays than liberal stalwart Sen. Ted Kennedy. (Mitt Romney).

Waiting in the GOP wings, meanwhile, are a thrice-married Southern Baptist who recently admitted to an extramarital affair, a socially conservative Church of Christ former senator whose evangelical credentials have been questioned by James Dobson and another Catholic New Yorker who is supportive of gay rights and abortion rights.

And the GOP candidates with the strongest social-conservative credentials— including a Southern Baptist minister—have raised little money and are polling near the bottom among potential Republican voters.

The top three Republicans—in poll numbers and fundraising totals for the first quarter of 2007—are Arizona Sen. John McCain, former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, and former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani. Each has had difficulties with elements of the conservative Christian community.

Although McCain has a strong conservative voting record on social issues, he has embraced positions that have angered some leaders of the Religious Right.

“I can see the evangelical Republicans saying, ‘You know, he’s better than

the opposition.’ But there’s not going to be the excitement for him that you had for Reagan or Bush,” said Baylor’s Hankins, who teaches history and church-state studies at Baylor. He is the author of *Uneasy in Babylon: Southern Baptist Conservatives and American Culture*.

Clemson’s Olson, who co-edited the book *Christian Clergy in American Politics*, said McCain “has a real struggle with” talking about “things in a faith-based way.”

With McCain, she said, “there isn’t going to be that genuine connection that, frankly, somebody like George W. Bush had” with conservative religious voters.

Giuliani, in a poll of white evangelical Republicans released recently by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, polled well with potential voters. He and McCain were roughly even as the front-runners.

However, Hankins and Olson said, Giuliani’s longstanding moderate stances on social issues—he is pro-choice and pro-gay-rights—may dampen the enthusiasm of evangelicals’ support for him. Many politics experts believed heavy turnout for Bush among evangelical voters in 2000 and 2004 played a crucial role in his two narrow victories.

“The turnout issue, I think, is going to be a very significant problem (for Republicans) if it’s Giuliani,” she said.

But Hankins noted that the former mayor’s chances in the general election may depend on which Democrat he ultimately runs against. “Evangelicals might support Giuliani if the alternative is bad enough,” he said.

The same dynamic may end up boosting McCain in the primary election, Olson said. “If it really comes down to him and Giuliani trying to get the nomination, McCain would be the lesser of two evils for the ‘values’ constituency...,” she said, referring to a term for conservative religious

voters popularized after the 2004 election.

In addition, two possibilities could doom Giuliani in the general election: A third-party candidate who appeals to social conservatives dissatisfied with their choices or a Democratic opponent who appeals to conservative religious voters.

Romney, meanwhile, has surprisingly come in first thus far among fellow Republicans in the all-important fundraising polls, but he is not gaining much support in surveys of potential evangelical Republican voters. Both Olson and Hankins said evangelical reluctance to support him might stem more from his recent pedigree of social conservatism than from his Mormonism.

The former governor of one of the nation's most liberal states would be the first member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints to become a major party's presidential nominee. He has campaigned for president as a strong opponent of abortion rights and same-sex marriage. But, in his gubernatorial campaigns, he was strongly pro-choice and pro-gay-rights.

Romney's rhetoric began to change with the furor sparked by the state's legalizing gay marriage in 2004. Debate the next year over a bill dealing with embryonic stem-cell research caused his abortion views to evolve, he has said.

Romney's short history of social conservatism may hobble him more than his controversial religion among voters who value true believers on hot-button social issues, Olson said.

"I really, really think that it's less that he's a Mormon and more that he's not a dyed-in-the-wool social conservative," she said.

But Hankins took a different view. Romney's faith may remain a problem in his race through the GOP primaries, he insisted. "I think what you would

need there, you'd need (James) Dobson and (Pat) Robertson and (Jerry) Falwell and every big-name Christian Right person you can think of get out front and ... explain why you should support a Mormon."

However, Hankins added, conservative evangelicals have long made political and social alliances with Mormons despite their theological disagreements. "You're still on the same side of the cultural divide that Christian Right warriors see in America—the moral divide."

Regarding Romney's newly found social conservatism, Hankins said he may actually have some advantage with evangelicals.

"Evangelicals believe in conversion," he said. "You know, (President Ronald) Reagan was pro-choice at one time."

The two viable GOP candidates with the most appeal to evangelicals and other social conservatives include a Baptist minister—former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee—and Kansas Sen. Sam Brownback, a stalwart opponent of abortion rights and gay rights.

Their numbers, however, put them far behind the top three and just ahead of obscure Republican also-rans like Colorado Rep. Tom Tancredo and California Rep. Duncan Hunter.

"They don't have the kind of star quality to attract the attention of the media that then allows people to get excited about them," Hankins said.

Hankins and Olson said Huckabee—whose style and charisma may appeal to moderates in the general election—has the potential to do far better, were he to possess the resources of the top-tier candidates.

"Huckabee, if he could move to the front of the pack, the Christian-Right evangelicals would jump all over that," Hankins said. "But it's a matter of getting to the front of the pack."

Perhaps GOP strategists and big-money donors have strategically coalesced around candidates without strong Religious Right credentials, Olson suggested. "Since President Bush is becoming less and less popular overall ... maybe there's some sense that, if the Republicans want to win in 2008 ... then you've got to pick somebody who is going to be, in some real obvious way, different than George W. Bush."

Another aspect that could impact how faith affects the election is candidates who have yet to enter the fray but who have serious star power. After all, the first primaries are nearly 10 months away.

At least three Republicans could still step into the race and contend seriously with the leading candidates: former House Speaker Newt Gingrich of Georgia, former New York Gov. George Pataki, and former Tennessee Sen.—and current TV star—Fred Thompson.

Gingrich and Thompson would have the strongest appeal to social conservatives because of their voting records, Olson and Hankins said. However, they both have drawbacks.

Gingrich is on his third marriage, and his two previous marriages ended badly. He recently appeared on Dobson's radio program—highly popular among evangelicals—to confess an affair near the end of his second marriage. It took place even as he led the charge against then-President Bill Clinton for lying about his own marital infidelity.

"There are times that I have fallen short of my own standards. There's certainly times when I've fallen short of God's standards and my neighbors' standards," Gingrich said, saying he had asked for God's forgiveness.

Gingrich's first wife—who had been his high-school math teacher—has said he discussed divorce details with her as she was in the hospital recovering from cancer surgery. Gingrich has said he does not recall whether that happened.

He married his second wife, Marianne Gingrich, months after his first marriage ended in 1980. The second divorce came in 1999, after he acknowledged an affair with Callista Bisek, a congressional aide more than 20 years his junior. He soon married Bisek.

Hankins said Christian conservatives could be convinced that Gingrich, the former conservative revolutionary, has put such escapades behind him.

“If Gingrich could do in the moral sphere what Romney might be able to do in the political sphere—that is, convince people he’s had a conversion,” then he has a chance of winning the nomination, he said. “That’s going to be tough, but he’s got all the political and religio-political stances the Religious Right loves.”

But Olson said Gingrich, like Romney, risks appearing inauthentic.

“I think Gingrich goes and he talks to Dobson, you know, for strategic reasons. But does that end up looking forced, in the way that it might end up looking forced for McCain?” she asked, referring to the senator’s recent attempts to mend fences with conservative Christian leaders he angered. The move came under significant criticism from some of McCain’s previous supporters.

Thompson, meanwhile, has low name recognition—but his face appears on millions of television screens every week as an actor in NBC’s Law & Order series. Dobson recently questioned whether Thompson, despite his strong social-conservative voting record, was a committed Christian. The former senator has said little publicly about his personal faith.

Olson said that exchange is significant for evangelicals.

“Whatever Dobson says, people are going to pay attention to,” she said. “But, I think, if you’re Dobson, if you are the ‘pro-family’ movement ... and you’re looking at the (GOP) landscape and there’s nobody that we like, then

one may realize Thompson is one's best choice. And you start to say, 'O.K., maybe we were a little harsh on you to begin with.'"

Pataki, both agreed, would have many of the same problems among religious voters as Giuliani. His moderate positions on social issues are similar to those of his fellow New Yorker.

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