

Too many trips to the wedding altar may trip up presidential contenders

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—When Southern Baptist public policy spokesman Richard Land sizes up the Republican presidential pack and factors in whether a candidate has been divorced, he thinks of marriage mathematics, not just morals.

“The progression from two to three ... wives is not an arithmetic progression for evangelicals; it’s exponential,” said Land, president of the [Southern Baptist Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission](#). “Three is at least one too many.”

Former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani and former House Speaker Newt Gingrich—both potential candidates—each are twice divorced and thrice married. Sen. John McCain has been married twice. All three have had hints of extramarital affairs.

For Land and other conservative religious leaders, the checkered marital

histories of GOP candidates could be an important factor. While divorce may not be a deal-breaker, it could be, depending on how many and for what reasons.

And for all their work to protect the “sanctity” of marriage, the high divorce rates of GOP front-runners puts many evangelicals—not to mention the candidates themselves—in an uncomfortable position.

Recent polls suggest voters take multiple marriages and extramarital affairs seriously. A [USA Today/Gallup Poll](#) found that less than half of weekly church attenders—48 percent—would be “completely comfortable” with a candidate who has married three times. The [Pew Research Center for the People and the Press](#) found 62 percent of Republicans, and 25 percent of Democrats, would be less likely to support a presidential candidate who had an extramarital affair in the past.

Giuliani—who announced his divorce to his second wife at a City Hall press conference, to which she responded with charges of marital infidelity—may have the most work to do to win over skeptical conservatives.

Gingrich recently confessed to Focus on the Family founder James Dobson that he was having an affair while leading the charge for President Bill Clinton’s impeachment in the Monica Lewinsky sex scandal.

Tom Minnery, senior vice president of public policy for Focus on the Family, said Gingrich “took a long step toward reconciliation with Christian voters” by speaking in an “amazingly transparent” way on the program.

Other evangelical leaders said “a strong family image” can be helpful to competing GOP candidates, such as former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, Kansas Sen. Sam Brownback, California Rep. Duncan Hunter, former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, or former Wisconsin Gov. Tommy Thompson.

Even the conservatives' beloved icon, Ronald Reagan, was able to overcome his failed first marriage to actress Jane Wyman to become the first divorced president. But, cautioned Al Mohler, president of [Southern Baptist Theological Seminary](#) in Louisville, Ky., "That divorce was not a serial event."

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