

The Salt Lake Tribune

<http://www.sltrib.com>

LDS political activism on gay marriage could impact Romney future

Fallout » Prominent fight could help and hurt White House bid

By Thomas Burr
The Salt Lake Tribune

Salt Lake Tribune

Updated: 11/24/2008 06:27:52 AM MST

The Salt Lake Tribune

<http://www.sltrib.com>

Washington » The key role played by the LDS Church in passing California's gay marriage ban could have long-lasting consequences - good and bad - for the future of the nation's highest-profile Mormon politician: Mitt Romney.

The LDS effort could give Romney a crucial boost among evangelicals who wield great power in choosing the Republican presidential nominee. But it might leave the former Massachusetts governor an even tougher slog among a broader electorate.

"What the LDS Church just did in California and elsewhere, should help [Romney] because it sends a signal to evangelical Protestants that while we differ religiously, politically we are first cousins," says Charles Dunn, dean of the School of Government at Regent University, founded by evangelical leader Pat Robertson.

Romney's run for the Republican nomination this year was fraught with concerns that evangelicals wouldn't cast their votes for a member of the LDS Church, seen as heretic, or even cultist, by some groups.

Romney lost the Iowa caucuses, for example, to one-time Baptist minister and former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, who drew out a large showing of evangelicals.

In his faith speech last year, Romney took pains to assert that his church would not dictate his actions in office.

But University of Iowa communications professor Bruce Gronbeck says the distance he tried to put between faith and public policy could be obliterated by the recent anti-gay marriage campaign.

"That gap being closed, not by individual Mormons, but by the church itself, is creating a problem," Gronbeck says. "It will create a special problem if and when [Romney] re-gears his campaign."

That may make some independents wary of voting for a Mormon candidate, he says, and stoke more fears of how much power the church has over its faithful members.

Romney has said it is "unlikely" he will run again for national office, though he was active in helping Republican contenders this election year and is widely considered a frontrunner for the 2012 nomination. He remains on the public stage, just this week weighing in against the proposed bailout of the U.S. auto industry.

If he runs again, Dunn says the Mormon effort in California may have curried Romney more favor, even if Romney wasn't vocal about the issue.

"It helps," Dunn says.

In stops in Iowa and New Hampshire during the Republican primary, Romney heralded his own efforts as Massachusetts governor to fight back against a court ruling allowing same-sex marriage. He cited "traditional marriage" as a key component of American life.

Romney didn't donate any money directly to the Proposition 8 campaign, though his daughter-in-law, Jennifer Romney, contributed \$1,000.

John Green, a professor at the University of Akron and a senior fellow at the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, says the high-profile criticism aimed at the LDS Church over the Proposition 8 battle could endear some evangelicals. But the next presidential election is more than four years away.

"It depends on how well-remembered the involvement of Mormons in Proposition 8 is," Green says. "It depends on how long-lived this criticism of Mormons is."

Kirk Jowers, a Romney friend who heads the University of Utah's Hinckley Institute of Politics, says once the initial sting of criticism over the church's involvement ebbs, the action shouldn't really affect future Mormon candidates.

However, he added, "It may bring to the forefront again the question of whether some of the far-right base of the Republican Party have taken for granted a strong Mormon-Republican tie but see Mormons as merely useful rather than acceptable."

tburr@sltrib.com

PEGGY STACK contributed to this report.

Close Window

Send To Printer