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Mitt's speech a big hit with Utahns

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GOP presidential candidate Mitt Romney's speech on religion this week was a huge hit with Utahns, especially those who share his Mormon faith.

According to a new Deseret Morning News/KSL-TV poll, 89 percent of Utahns surveyed statewide thought Romney did a good or even excellent job. And nearly as many — 78 percent — thought he has helped his candidacy by speaking out on faith.

The numbers were even higher among respondents who identified themselves as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Ninety-six percent of them approved of what Romney said, and 85 percent said he helped himself in the race.

About three-quarters of the 320 respondents in the survey conducted Thursday identified themselves as LDS. The overnight poll by Dan Jones & Associates had a margin of error of plus or minus 5.5 percent.

"I'm not really surprised he did that well in Utah," said pollster Dan Jones. After all, his previous polls have found Romney is by far the favorite presidential pick of the state's largely Republican and largely Mormon electorate.

Kirk Jowers, director of the University of Utah's Hinckley Institute of Politics and a Romney supporter, said the speech could have backfired even here because it was taken so personally by so many Utahns.

"I think a less than worthy effort by Romney would have probably been met by more extreme reactions than any other place in the country," Jowers said. "The expectation was so high, and people were taking the subject matter very personally."

Romney delivered his long-awaited address on "Faith in America" Thursday at the George H.W. Bush Library and Museum in College Station, Texas, speaking only in broad terms about his own beliefs and mentioning the word "Mormon" only once.

But Jones said that was apparently enough for Utahns, even though there had been some hope that Romney would use the speech as an opportunity to clear up misperceptions about the LDS Church or

even as a "Mormon moment" to attract interest in the faith.

The speech, made less than a month before the first votes in the 2008 presidential race will be cast in the Iowa caucuses on Jan. 3, was aimed at soothing concerns raised by evangelical voters who don't see Mormons as fellow Christians.

Thursday's poll also asked Utahns whether they thought the perceptions of the LDS faith in other areas of the country were fair, and 62 percent said they weren't fair. And 82 percent said religion shouldn't be a factor in presidential campaigns.

Many Utahns have been startled to realize, Jowers said, that a significant core of the Republican Party believes that Mormons may not be eligible to be president because of their beliefs.

"As American children, we always hear that anyone can grow up to be president, but LDS children were hearing, perhaps for the first time, that that aspiration didn't apply to them in the minds of some of the religious right," he said.

Jones said the speech helps reinforce that Romney's candidacy is a chance to overcome religious biases, just as Democratic candidates Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama represent opportunities to support a woman or an African-American candidate.

The pollster cautioned that it's too soon to tell, though, whether Romney's speech will translate into votes in Iowa, where he's facing tough competition from former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, a Baptist minister, and in other states.

Romney spokeswoman Gail Gitcho said the candidate, the former leader of the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City, "is pleased with the amount of support he has received in Utah. He has a tremendous team in the state."

She said through the speech "the American people were given an opportunity to learn exactly who Mitt Romney is — a man of faith and moral strength who understands that our common religious heritage is critical to our nation's strength."

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