

POLITICS

# This Year, Voters Focus More on a Man Than on His Religion

By SERGE F. KOVALESKI JAN. 18, 2012

GREENVILLE, S.C. — Four years ago, Mitt Romney's Mormon faith was a point of considerable concern, if not contention, for many Republican voters in South Carolina, a state where many voters are evangelical Christians and one that is known for its bare-knuckled politics.

With two days until this year's South Carolina's primary, the issue of Mr. Romney's faith has not vanished, though it is not nearly as prevalent as it was in 2008. South Carolina Republicans this time seem more pragmatic about choosing the candidate they believe will be best suited to defeat President Obama, fix the economy and promote Republican values, according to interviews with dozens of voters, analysts, elected officials and religious leaders.

For some, Mr. Romney's Mormonism has become less of a worry than Mr. Obama's liberalism over the last four years.

In this city in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, in an area that is a major manufacturing engine for the state and a strong link in the Bible Belt, Adam Crittenden Bach, 32, a lawyer and evangelical Christian, said that he supported John McCain in the last election but intended to vote for Mr. Romney on Saturday. Back in 2008, Mr. Bach doubted that the conservative base would turn out for a Mormon, and he considered Mr. McCain to be the strongest candidate on national security.

“But today, I think the base is much more comfortable with the Mormon issue, and that has helped to shape my decision to get behind Romney,” Mr. Bach said. “What excites me about him is his experience in the corporate world and his recognition that the federal government needs to be cut down to size and reshuffled.”

Louise Quinn, 81, a semi-retired interior decorator from Greenville and a conservative Christian, said she decided to support Mr. Romney because of his aggressive foreign policy stance. His Mormonism is irrelevant, she said. “If he were an atheist it would not bother me,” said Ms. Quinn, who said she voted for Mr. McCain in 2008.

In that primary, Mr. Romney finished fourth, logging just over 15 percent of the vote. Mr. McCain won with more than double that in a contest that was noted for its mudslinging. The month before the voting, several thousand South Carolinians received fake Christmas cards purporting to be from Mr. Romney that endorsed polygamy and that falsely claimed to have been sent by a Mormon temple in Boston.

Today, Mr. Romney leads the Republican field in polls, but his campaign is taking no chances in a state where an estimated 60 percent of Republican voters identify themselves as evangelical Christians.

The Rev. Brad Atkins, president of the South Carolina Baptist Convention, which is made up of about 2,100 churches, was hardly enthusiastic in discussing Mr. Romney as a candidate in the primary, but he noted that he would vote for him in the general election should he become the nominee against Mr. Obama.

“You can’t separate the spiritual aspect of a man from the political aspect,” Mr. Atkins said. “The core of who we are is found in our spiritual beliefs.”

Andy Sherman, 34, the owner of a construction company from Laurens, backed Mike Huckabee, a Baptist preacher and former Arkansas governor, four years ago. He said he planned to vote for Newt Gingrich on Saturday and expressed misgivings about Mr. Romney’s faith and the Mormon church’s view of God.

“At the end of the day, I’d rather have a president who worships the same God as I do,” he said.

Mary Beth Morgan, 51, a legal assistant and evangelical from Simpsonville, expressed a similar view and said she was undecided about her vote. “If I throw my support behind someone, I want it to be a person who is most in line with my values and beliefs in Christ, and because Mr. Romney is a Mormon, that is one of the reasons he would not be my first choice,” Ms. Morgan said.

Mormons do not have a big presence in South Carolina. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the formal name of the church, says that just under 1 percent of the state’s population, or nearly 37,000 people, are Mormon.

Mark DeMoss, a senior adviser to Mr. Romney, said that in contrast to the last election, the campaign has not been courting evangelical leaders in an organized fashion.

“There is not a faith or values committee or anything like that, because last time there was a steep hill we faced with religious conservatives since he was largely unknown and needed entree,” Mr. DeMoss said.

Indeed, Mr. Romney had been espousing some Mormon virtues during the campaign. “I do think the country would benefit from a good dose of Mormon values like the commitment to marriage and families and a good work ethic and integrity,” Mr. DeMoss said.

And in Greer, Dee Benedict, 66, a Republican and an evangelical Christian, has spent the last several years working to muster support for Mr. Romney among Christian conservatives in the state.

Last week, the campaign released a radio advertisement that said, “Today Christian Conservatives are supporting Mitt Romney because he shares their values: the sanctity of life, the sacredness of marriage and the importance of the family.” It has also mailed out a brochure titled “Meet Mitt ... Faith. Family. Country” that addresses his religious life, but without mentioning the Mormon

church. Under the heading “Allowing Faith to Be His Guide,” the mailer says, “A man of deep and abiding faith, Mitt has been in the same church his entire life.”

Mark White, the senior pastor of the Christian Assembly of God, a Pentecostal church in Greenville, said Mr. Romney’s “belief system is very much in line with evangelicals.”

“I think Mitt is as strong as any evangelical on any of the issues, such as being pro-life and defining marriage as being between a man and a woman,” said Mr. White, who met Mr. Romney and his wife four years ago and has supported him since.

Ralph Reed, the chairman of the Faith and Freedom Coalition, said that Mr. Romney’s Mormonism has been less of a hindrance for him in South Carolina because the issue was explored and debated in 2008.

“The novelty of the Mormon issue has largely worn off since it was fully litigated last time, and people are just not as interested in that anymore as a front-burner issue,” Mr. Reed said. “With high unemployment in South Carolina, conservative voters are much more focused on jobs and the economy, and Romney can speak credibly to those issues.”

Others pointed out that voters elected Nikki R. Haley, an Indian-American and Sikh-turned-Methodist as governor in 2010. Ms. Haley, a Republican, has endorsed Mr. Romney.

Dick Harpootlian, chairman of the South Carolina Democratic Party, said the embrace of Mr. Romney and the fact that a black Republican, Tim Scott of Charleston, was elected to Congress from South Carolina in 2010 indicates that a new pragmatism may be taking hold.

“It suggests that the minds of South Carolinians are not as shackled by religion and race as they used to be and that we can more fully debate policy,” he said.

Ben Few, 66, an evangelical who owns a pharmacy in Spartanburg, said he supported Mr. Obama in the last election but was now backing Mr. Romney.

“I feel that Mr. Romney would support middle-class entrepreneurs like me against the big-box companies,” Mr. Few said. As for Mr. Obama, he added, “It seems that he is lost to a lot of things and oblivious and out of touch with what is going on below him.”

Bryan Betts contributed reporting from Greenville, and Lisa Schwartz from New York.

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