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Rick Perry -- a Godsend to Mormon Mitt?

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WASHINGTON, D.C. ([TheStreet](#)) -- Though he's now flavor-of-the-month in Republican polls, Texas Gov. Rick Perry (R-Methodist) may be a godsend to the presidential prospects of former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney (R-Mormon).

If he gets past Romney for the nomination, Perry's Bible-thumping may be the diversion from a hell-ish economy President Barack Obama needs to fire up a secularist Democratic base and appeal to younger, less religious independent voters -- especially as Perry's "job-producing" record is increasingly revealed as that of a tax-revenue-bestowing, special-interest corporatist, rather than a free-market conservative.

In a [2007 survey of 35,000 adults](#), Pew Research found a quarter of 18- to 29-year-olds had no religious affiliation. And one in 10 Americans self-identified as either agnostic, atheist or "secular unaffiliated." In both the Republican Party and the general electorate, God doesn't have the influence he used to, four decades after religious conservatives began pushing back through politics against abortion and the sexual revolution.

Arguing that Perry's candidacy helps Romney will seem counterintuitive if you believe bowing before TV preachers is key to a Republican nomination. In a few early contests, evangelicals dominate, starting with Iowa where Southern Baptist preacher, Gov. Mike Huckabee, won in 2008, but with only 9% more than Mormon Romney (34% to 25%). Huckabee quickly fizzled, unable to parlay Iowa victory into South Carolina success two weeks later.

Perry is making a mistake of first-time presidential candidates, pandering to perceived power brokers in his party's base -- forgetting others are tuned in, including independents essential to November victory. Introducing religion at a high decibel level, as he did with his Aug. 6 seven-hour God-a-thon, Perry offers Romney the opportunity to underscore an important defensive message about his Mormon faith: "I'll keep my religion out of my politics." Romney could invade Perry's home court and make a Kennedy-style speech to Texas Protestant preachers to drive home the point.

Religious conservatives' influence peaked in 1994, when Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition turned out believers to win the U.S. House for Republicans, rejecting not just HillaryCare but the '60s lifestyle they believed Bill and Hillary Clinton embodied. But move forward to 2010, and the surge that reclaimed the House for the GOP was all about the economy stupid, not social issues. It was a Democratic defeat by Tea Partiers distressed about crashing home equity and 401(k) values, with ObamaCare iconic for spending they felt was killing the economy.

The "social issues" frame has undergone seismic change in the 21st century, with significant Republican and independent support for same-sex marriage, or at least civil unions, as well as gay military service.

The religious pandering mistake Perry is making is like Romney's in 2008, when he ran away from libertarian-ish views on gay rights and abortion, opening himself to a flip-flop charge that still hounds him. Romney could have sold "family values" by showcasing his big attractive family, and noting he was one of the few monogamists in the oft-divorced Republican field.

Romney learned his lesson (it can take a trial run) and now stays away from cultural issues, focusing on three themes: jobs, jobs and jobs. He knows after Iowa comes not only South Carolina, but New Hampshire (which he is almost sure to win) and mega-states with big delegate prizes, like his birth place Michigan; or Florida, where he came close to McCain in 2008; and delegate-rich New York and California, where Republicans are more secular.

Perceived inordinate influence of religious conservatives ignores they are concentrated in the South, where Republicans already have a near-electoral college lock. Obama won the presidency with only 55 Old Confederacy electors from Virginia, North Carolina and Florida (with its huge influx of Northerners). But he still would have won, with 310 electoral votes, *without a single Southern state*.

Republicans and GOP-leaning independents in the rest of the country have more moderate-to-libertarian views on social issues. Example: Only a third of Republicans, according to a [May 2011 Gallup poll](#), believe abortion should be illegal in all circumstances.

The 2012 voters won't be your mother's electorate when it comes to religion. Independents hold the key to presidential elections in our equally partisan-divided country. They may not be partial to another swaggering, born-again Texas governor who seems to be suggesting God talked him into running. They may be more receptive to a free-market-friendly candidate like Romney, or even the incumbent -- rather than a Texas career politician for the past 27 years, with lots of ties to lobbyists.

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