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DURHAM, N.H. — Michele Dillon, professor of sociology at the University of New Hampshire, is available to discuss the significance of former Gov. Mitt Romney's upcoming speech about his Mormon faith, and the role of religion and religious voters in presidential elections. Dillon can be reached for interviews at michele.dillon@unh.edu and 781-239-3552 (h); 781-915-8837 (cell). According to Dillon:

Significance of Romney's Speech

"Romney's speech will be a very politically significant speech -- but hard to surpass the historical significance of Kennedy's speech. Kennedy had to take on the political and religious establishment, and the long and deeply ingrained cultural bias in America -- a quintessential Protestant culture -- against Catholicism and its substantively different theology (e.g. its communal rather than individualist focus) and European-centric traditions. Since 1960, we have not paid so much attention to a candidate's specific religion, although Carter's election made a lot of Americans (and others) take note of his born-again theology."

"Over the last few elections, religion has certainly mattered, but Romney is attracting extra attention precisely because his faith is, to many Americans, so at odds with what they, and especially evangelical Christians, believe. They ask: "If the Bible is without error, why does Romney need texts other than the Bible?" Most conservative Protestants are now at least somewhat tolerant of Catholicism (the largest denomination in the United States), but Mormonism is still seen as quirky --and its relatively recent and American roots don't help."

Evangelical Protestant Voters

"Evangelical Protestants are the least tolerant of people who are not like them, on religion and on other issues. And Romney's Mormonism -- because it is somewhat close to but also very different from what Christians believe, makes evangelicals nervous. This suspicion is further fueled because of Romney's political history in Massachusetts and his equivocation on abortion and gay rights over the years.

Because these 'values' issues are so important to evangelicals, they are concerned that Romney is slickly hiding behind statements that may be intended to please evangelicals but that are ultimately, from their perspective, not trustworthy. So while Romney's own family life of marital stability and adoring children should help him (compared to Rudy Giuliani and even John McCain) among evangelicals, his squeaky clean life is shadowed by his changed stances on core issues and by the perceived theological and social peculiarities of Mormonism."

Mike Huckabee's Appeal to Evangelicals

"In contrast to Romney, Mike Huckabee is a dream for evangelicals. He is a Baptist minister, and there is coherence between his moral values and his political agenda on these issues (though obviously his views on immigration/taxation are at odds somewhat with Republican conservatism).

Romney's Challenge

"The challenge for Romney in his speech is to articulate clearly what he believes in terms of his own faith as well as in regard to the always-complicated church/state issue, and yet couch his views so as not to be seen as either pandering to evangelicals or glossing over real differences."

"Kennedy had to convince Americans that if elected, he would not be taking his cues from Rome. Romney has, in some sense, a more difficult challenge. The changes that have occurred in American society with the rise of the Christian Right and the blurring of the boundaries between church and state means that he has to convince Americans that he will not be swayed by his Mormon faith and yet at the same time that he will be responsive to the faith-based interests of evangelical constituencies."

