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## FLDS issue could hurt Romney's VP chances

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Last month's raid on the Fundamentalist LDS Church in Texas could prevent Mitt Romney from being picked as the Republican vice-presidential nominee, one of his longtime supporters says.

"Unfortunately, the FLDS issue has probably elevated considerations about what Romney's faith would do to the ticket," said Kirk Jowers, director of the University of Utah's Hinckley Institute of Politics and an early backer of Romney's failed presidential bid.

Now, Jowers said, Romney has to once again confront concerns about his membership in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints because the faith is so often confused with that practiced by followers of the FLDS Church.

Romney, who ended his race for the White House earlier this year, is seen as being on the shortlist of possible running mates for the presumptive GOP nominee, Arizona U.S. Sen. John McCain.

McCain has said he is considering a number of unnamed candidates for the No. 2 spot on the party ticket. His decision is not expected until after Democrats finally choose their nominee from between Illinois Sen. Barack Obama and New York Sen. Hillary Clinton.

The timing of the Texas raid couldn't be worse for Romney's chances, Jowers said.

"Everything that's on the public's mind is a consideration when looking at your VP candidates," Jowers said. "So fair or not, everything's on the board as McCain weighs which individual will help him get elected as president."

Texas officials have rounded up more than 450 children from the polygamous sect's ranch there and have placed them in foster care while allegations of child abuse are investigated. More than 30 girls between the ages of 14 and 17 are believed to either be or have been pregnant.

In June, Romney is scheduled to speak at the Texas State Republican Convention, and there's likely to be no avoiding the questions surrounding both his LDS faith and the beliefs of the FLDS.

"Everyone will focus on it," Jowers said, even though Romney is not expected to talk specifically about religion during his address to GOP delegates. "He'll get a chance to put a human face on what the LDS Church is compared to what is going on in those compounds."

A spokesman for Romney, Eric Fehrstrom, said in an e-mail, "I don't have any comment on the events in Texas. They don't concern Mitt Romney or his church." Fehrstrom said Romney "intends to support whoever it is that John McCain selects as his running mate."

Not everyone agrees that Romney could be hurt because of the focus on the FLDS.

"I think that's kind of stretch," said Matthew Wilson, a professor specializing in religion and politics at Southern Methodist University in Dallas. "I'm not saying that I think Romney will necessarily be picked, but if he's not, it won't be because of this event."

Wilson said most voters won't connect the actions of a "self-contained cult" with Romney's membership in the LDS Church. But, he added, "That being said, I still think Romney's Mormonism is a negative factor in terms of being chosen by McCain."

That's because polls have shown some Americans will not vote for a Mormon presidential candidate.

Romney attempted to deal with those concerns last December by delivering a speech on religion, also in Texas.

Robert George, a Princeton law professor and director of that university's James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions, also said that most Americans will see the FLDS Church for what it is.

"I think that the vast majority of the American people, even if they're not very familiar with Mormonism, even if they're suspicious of Mormonism, fully recognize that the LDS Church is not to be confused with these wild, cult-like organizations," George said.

He, too, said the FLDS issue wouldn't be a factor in McCain's choice for vice president.

"I trust the McCain campaign to trust the American people to make that distinction. I don't know if Romney will be chosen as the nominee. I think he'd be a good choice, but if he's not chosen, it won't be because of that crazy offshoot," George said.

He said Romney should pay more attention to reassuring voters that his conservative positions on issues like abortion and gay marriage are sincere, even though he adopted them after he was elected governor of Massachusetts in 2002.

"What's a lingering problem for Romney is not his LDS faith," George said, rating Romney as one of McCain's most likely picks for vice president. "What's lingering is that his positions in Massachusetts were not those characteristic of Mormons."

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