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Questions About Religion on the Campaign Trail

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As Americans exercise their right to vote in presidential primaries, caucuses, and conventions, candidates face questions from voters on a wide range of issues, including religious faith. When it comes to this issue, what should they be looking for? Which questions about religion are most helpful in selecting a President?

Faith and the Formulation of Policy. Questions about religion that relate to the potential conduct of candidates once they are in office may be useful; questions about personal religious piety may be less so.

Questions about a candidate's personal practices when it comes to prayer, church attendance, and leaning on faith during stressful times may provide voters an interesting self-assessment from the candidate and shed some light on the candidate's ability to endure the inevitable strain of the presidency. Yet candidates' assurance of their own piety is no guarantee that they will act with integrity once in office. Moreover, short of knowing the candidates personally, it is difficult to confirm whether the candidates' spiritual self-assessment is genuine. Even if indisputable, religious commitment or good character does not in and of itself guarantee that a candidate will pursue sound public policies.

In contrast to questions about personal religious practices, questions about the role that a candidate's faith would play in the formulation or execution of

the candidate's public policies, if elected, could be of substantial value to voters.

For instance, given that the President's fundamental duties are outlined in the Constitution, voters might inquire about whether and how candidates' faith might affect their ability to fulfill those duties. These kinds of questions might include: How do their beliefs reconcile with commanding lethal military operations? And how would their convictions influence their choice of nominees to the U.S. Supreme Court or other federal judgeships? Voters might also want to know whether and to what extent the candidate would follow the Constitution of the United States in the face of a contravening religious authority of the candidate's faith—whether a sacred text, a religious tradition, or a religious leader.

The Source of Authority. A candidate's religious faith may also influence his or her policies on a wide range of issues, such as the source and nature of political authority, the purpose and role of government, and the relationship of government to other social institutions such as families, schools, and

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religious institutions. A candidate who sees laws or voters as the source of people's rights may adopt policies in office that are different from the views of a candidate who sees life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness as "unalienable Rights" with which people are "endowed by their Creator," as the Declaration of Independence says.

And there are also important questions about the difference that candidates' religious convictions make in crafting their political agenda and prioritizing a variety of issues. Has their experience in a particular congregation provided insights into the nature of certain challenges or new possibilities for tackling them? What role, if any, do faith and prayer play in how they choose to govern?

Important Questions. Individual voters may ask whatever questions they wish, take whatever account of the answers they wish, and make their choice among candidates on whatever basis they wish. Many voters will decide, as is their right, to take into account religious matters in choosing whom to vote for. For these voters, questions about how candidates' faith will affect their public policies in office are more likely to produce information useful to the public than are questions about candidates' personal religious piety.

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