

ANAMARIECOX
ON POLITICS... AND WHATEVER

Liberal conviction affirmed by polling about faith!

If you ask Mississippi Republican voters if they think President Obama is a Muslim, don't be surprised if their answer obliges



Ana Marie Cox

guardian.co.uk, Tuesday 13 March 2012 22.15 EDT

[larger](#) | [smaller](#)



Sign greets visitors to Mississippi along the highway from Tennessee. Photograph: Dave Martin/AP

The Public Policy Polling finding that only a small percentage of likely Republican primary voters (pdf) in Alabama and Mississippi believe that Barack Obama is a Christian may be worrisome – except that I'm hard-pressed to find any reporting or commentary on the fact that puts it that way.

Though there's been an explosion of stories around the subject, the flavor of commentary has been largely liberal glee of this apparent confirmation that Obama opponents don't just disagree with the president, but are *ignorant* – about him specifically, but probably about the world in general. The coverage of this poll in the blogosphere closely tracks the response in the media to the report that among news consumers, Fox News viewers were the least knowledgeable about current events.

People like stories that confirm suspicions they already had: proponents of the president believe that his critics are ignorant and that opposing the president and his policies is

itself a function of ignorance. (Let's leave aside the even more deeply-rooted belief that being correctly informed about the president and his policies leads to approval of both.)

The logic goes like this: "They're anti-Obama! They think he's a Muslim! They are anti-Obama because they think he's a Muslim!" There are a few major problems with this chain of reasoning. First, it's not entirely clear that not believing Obama to be a Christian makes someone fundamentally against Obama. The most recent national poll on Obama's religion found that 18% of Americans believed him to be a Muslim and 43% said they didn't know what religion he was. So, something like 61% of Americans aren't sure if he's a Christian or not – and some of them voted for him anyway.

If there's a direct relationship between being suspicious of Obama's beliefs and being suspicious of his presidency, shouldn't his approval rating be even lower than it is? Statistically, there have to be some people out there who aren't sure Obama is a Christian, but apparently haven't let that determine their opinion of his job performance.

Among the evangelicals so prevalent in the south, the relationship between a voter's confidence in a candidate's Christianity and their preference for him is even more complicated. Evangelical Christians' doubts about Mitt Romney's faith have been widely reported, but even among Republican voters (evangelical or not) who say, point blank, that Mormons are not Christians, Romney has a 51% approval rating. That's only 10 points lower than his approval rating among Republicans who believe Mormons *are* Christians.

Romney has a lot of problems with evangelical voters, but it's possible that what they think of his faith is not chief among them. It's possible that the president's faith is equally low on the list of evangelicals' concerns.

Probably the biggest flaw in thinking that conservative voters' distaste for Obama is based on (incorrect) beliefs about his religion is that those who are eager to oust Obama probably came to their opinion about him long before they formulated a specific critique of his (presumed) faith. Conservatives oppose Obama, for whatever reason – maybe even one based on policy! They are pro-life, they think his economic policies aren't free-market enough! They are, you know, conservative!

And this opposition breeds general suspicion, making it easy for a person who is already not really likely to pick up Obama's autobiography to buy into a rumor they've heard. (See above: people like stories that confirm suspicions they already had.)

Which brings us to the real problem with the PPP poll: it seems likely that if you ask someone who is already dubious about Obama's policies and motivations whether he's a Christian or not, free-floating anxiety about him suddenly has specific expression. This is one way to explain the otherwise baffling *increase*, despite increasing evidence and statements to the contrary, in the number of Americans who have doubts about the president's faith.

A voter with resentments about the economy, the emergence of "Obamacare", or the debate over contraception who gets a phone call in March of 2012 asking if he thinks the president is a Muslim could be forgiven if his thinking on the subject is influenced by the fact that *people are still doing polls about it*.

;