

WHY DOES MITT CHEAT HIS COUNTRY BUT NOT HIS CHURCH?

As tax day approaches, the presidential campaign has looked like this: 1) Buffet rule. 2) Mitt's taxes 3) Who gives to charity.

In an attempt to shift focus away from Mitt's efforts to make sure other rich people like him don't have to pay taxes, John Sununu suggested that Obama and Biden don't give enough to charity.

When Joe Biden went to New Hampshire on Thursday to attack Mitt Romney's tax proposals, the Romney campaign greeted Biden by attacking President Barack Obama's charitable giving rate. On a campaign conference call with reporters, former New Hampshire Gov. John Sununu, a Romney backer, said the following:

In their own private lives, it would be nice to see some contributions to charity that are significant out of President Obama and Joe Biden. I think it is an interesting contrast to make with the presidential candidate the Republicans have now put together a nomination for, that is Mitt Romney, former Governor Romney, who gave almost 15% of his income last year to charity.

In response, the White House has released the Obamas' taxes, showing they donated 22% of their income, a higher percentage than they paid in taxes.

I expect we'll dwell on this for a while, but the entire tax versus charity debate ignores one

thing: 10% of Mitt's money, by Mormon Church rule, goes to the Church. The only debate (and it is a big debate in some quarters) is whether that 10% is pre- or post-tax. So when Sununu boasts that 15% of Mitt's income goes to charity, what he really means is Mitt gives 5% after paying the amount required to pay by his Church.

All that got me thinking. Why is it that Mitt cheats his country but not his Church? That is, why is it that Mitt pays his 10% without trying to squirrel money away in Switzerland or the Cayman Islands, but doesn't pay 32% like other rich people? The money largely goes to pay for similar things: bureaucracy, education, welfare, the extension of soft power around the globe (luckily for the Mormon Church, it can rely on the US for its hard power and so doesn't have to tax Mitt as much). The Church invests heavily in political donations to make sure gay men and women are treated unequally before the law. The Mormon Church tithe even pays for social and recreational events, the kind of thing Republicans would scream about if Democrats suggested paying for them).

Partly it may be an ideological issue. That is, it's not so much that Republicans don't want nice things like education, welfare, and social events. Rather, they want to supply those goods via a range of churches, which not only get to demand moral behavior from members, but also don't have the authority to limit profit-making ventures (indeed, the Mormon Church is noted for its successful profit-making ventures).

But I also think it's the means the two institutions use to get people to pay their taxes. It's not just that the IRS doesn't check whether the rich pay their fair share; fewer than a half percent of the very rich will be audited. But it's also the way in which—at least as reported by friends and as I could understand from the outside—the recognition and influence within the Church are doled out to those who perform their tithe generously. Want to be a

bishop? Pay your tithe (and it also helps if you're successful in business). Want to be stake president? Pay your tithe.

In other words, Mitt would never ever have achieved the leadership he did in the Church if not for tithing generously and willingly.

We exact no such requirement from our government leaders. Even Obama's paying a far lower tax rate than I am, to say nothing of the measly taxes Mitt pays after sending his money off to tax shelters around the globe. And yet we let him run for office as if he's a citizen in good standing.

If the Mitt campaign thinks it's fair to consider charitable donations along with taxes (and Mitt has long pointed to the combined number as proof that he's not stingy), then it's fair to ask why he cheats his country of taxes but not his Church of tithing.