

## **Dry Kindling: A Political Profile of American Mormons**

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This paper is premised on the simple assertion that, in seeking to understand the impact religion has on American politics, Mormons<sup>1</sup> matter. Sheer demographics alone would suggest this to be the case: since its founding in 1830, the LDS Church has grown to have over 4 million American members. Mormons are now the sixth largest religious body in the United States. This means that there are twice as many Mormons as Episcopalians and nearly equal numbers of Mormons and Jews. And, unlike most of the other denominations that compare with them in size, Mormon ranks are swelling. Indeed, throughout the 1990s, the LDS Church grew faster than any other denomination in the U.S.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to their size and growth rate, the geographic concentration of Mormons in many Western states makes Mormon voters a potentially formidable electoral bloc. Utah, settled by Mormons and home of the LDS Church's world headquarters, has a population that is two-thirds LDS. Even beyond Utah, however, Mormons congregate in substantial numbers. They constitute 27 percent of the population in Idaho, 10 percent in Wyoming, 7 percent in Nevada, and 5 percent in Arizona.<sup>3</sup> Even in areas where Mormons are not as numerous, they nonetheless have a considerable share

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<sup>1</sup> On the question of nomenclature, we use "Mormons" to refer to members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the official name of the Church) although at times we also use "Latter-day Saints." We employ the terms "Mormon Church" and "LDS Church" interchangeably.

<sup>2</sup> According to the most recent Glenmary Research Center study "Religious Congregations and Membership: 2000" the Mormon Church increased its membership by 19.3 percent during the 1990s Goldstein, Laurie. 2002. "Conservative Churches Grew Fastest in 1990s, Report Says." *New York Times*, September 18, A16..

<sup>3</sup> These estimates are from *Churches and Church Membership in the United States, 1990*, published by the Glenmary Research Center Bradley, M.B., Norman M. Green, Dale E. Jones, Mac Lynn, and Lou McNeil. 1992. *Churches and Church Membership in the United States, 1990*. Washington, D.C: Glenmary Research Center.. See [http://www.adherents.com/largecom/com\\_lds.html](http://www.adherents.com/largecom/com_lds.html) for a listing of LDS population by US states and counties.

of the religious market. In the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area, for example, there are twice as many Mormons (40,000) as Missouri Synod Lutherans.

The potential potency of a Mormon electoral bloc is not merely a theoretical proposition. Mansbridge (1986), for example, credits Mormon voters as instrumental in the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment in some key states near the end of its ratification period. In particular, Mormons have played an important role in the politics of various Western states. In California, for example, LDS Church members were urged by church leaders not only to vote for Proposition 22 (a ban on gay marriages) in 2000, but also to become actively involved in the campaign (Coile 1999; Salladay 1999). Latter-day Saints in other states have also been involved in advocating ballot initiatives banning same-sex marriages, including active support for efforts in Hawaii, Alaska, and Nevada. Mormon political involvement has also been observed outside of the Western states, as the Mormon Church has supported an anti-same sex marriage initiative in Nebraska and opposed riverboat gambling in Ohio.

In general, scholars working on religion and politics have had little to say about Mormons. This is in spite of the fact that as the literature on how religion and politics intersect in the United States has burgeoned, scholars have become increasingly sophisticated in distinguishing among different religious groups. In seeking to explain how politically-relevant attitudes and behavior are affected by religious involvement, a number of systems to classify denominations have been developed (Kellstedt et al. 1996; Kohut et al. 2000; Layman 2001; Steensland et al. 2000). However, these classification systems generally group Mormons with other, very different faiths in a catch-all “other”

category,<sup>4</sup> or ignore them all together. This omission is largely explained by the fact that too few Mormons show up in most national surveys to conduct reliable or meaningful analyses of their behavior. In addition, despite their cultural conservatism, Mormons have not been a high profile component of the Christian Right, the movement that has drawn the most attention from scholars investigating religion's imprint on contemporary American politics.

We seek to contribute to the expanding literature on America's religious mosaic by presenting a political profile of American Mormons, with particular attention paid to how the LDS Church mobilizes its members on select political issues. At the outset, let us be clear regarding how we define mobilization. Borrowing from Rosenstone and Hansen, the term as we use it refers to "the process by which candidates, parties, activists, and groups induce other people to participate. We say that one of these actors has mobilized somebody when it has done something to increase the likelihood of her participation" (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, 26). Our focus is thus on the potential for the LDS Church to spur political participation among its membership.

Our discussion of Mormon mobilization relies on a metaphor, what we call the "dry kindling" effect. By this we mean that Mormons have great potential for political activity. Like kindling they can be lit, ignited by the spark of explicit direction from their

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<sup>4</sup> In the religious tradition classification outlined by Kellstedt et al. Kellstedt, Lyman A., John C. Green, James L. Guth, and Corwin . Smidt. 1996. "Grasping the Essentials: The Social Embodiment of Religion and Political Behavior." In *Religion and the Culture Wars*, edited by J. C. Green, J. L. Guth, C. E. Smidt and L. A. Kellstedt. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield. Mormons are grouped into a "Conservative Nontraditional" category together with Jehovah's Witnesses, the Worldwide Church of God, and Christian Scientists. Unlike the other religious tradition classifications these denominations do not share a common religious worldview nor do they share characteristics in their historical development. Similarly, Steensland et al (2000) group Mormons in a miscellaneous category.

church leaders. However, much of the flammability is due to the relative infrequency with which Mormons are mobilized by their church leaders.

The dry kindling effect derives from three characteristics of Mormons, each of which is necessary but not sufficient to explain Mormon mobilization.

1. They are politically and culturally distinctive
2. Their intensive church involvement builds social capital and civic skills, both of which contribute to the capacity for political mobilization
3. Both the organization and teachings of the Mormon Church facilitate adherence to the instructions of LDS leaders, including on political matters

### **A Politically Peculiar People**

We begin by profiling the partisanship and voting patterns of Latter-day Saints over the last three decades. In two words, Mormons are *conservative* and *cohesive*. For example, in the 2000 presidential election the Third National Survey of Religion and Politics found that 88 percent of Mormons voted for George W. Bush, exceeding the 84 percent of observant white evangelicals who voted for the Bush-Cheney ticket (Green et al. 2001).

There is great historical irony in the fact that contemporary Mormons are such loyal Republicans. When it was founded in the 1850s, the Republican Party had as its aim the elimination of what the 1856 party platform called the “twin relics of barbarism” – slavery and polygamy. The reference to polygamy was a direct attack on the Mormons, as they were reviled nationally for this practice (which was officially repudiated by the church in 1890).

That all seems to be water under the bridge, as Mormons have become increasingly Republican in both their partisanship and voting patterns. Using data from the National Election Studies, Figure 1 displays the percentage of Mormons who identified as Republicans in three periods: 1972-1978, 1980-1988, and 1990-2000.<sup>5</sup> The data are aggregated over multiple years because of the relatively small number of Mormons in any single survey in the National Election Studies series. For comparison's sake, we also present the percentage of Catholics and Southern Baptists who identified as Republicans over this same period.<sup>6</sup> We do so because, as we will elaborate upon below, Mormons share similar characteristics with both of these groups. In terms of institutional structure, the LDS Church has much in common with the Catholic Church. But in terms of their cultural worldview, Mormons are more like Southern Baptists (or at least like Southern Baptists are often portrayed).

From the figure, we see that in the 1970s, roughly half of Mormons identified as Republicans, climbing to 60 percent in the 1990s. While Catholics and Southern Baptists show a similarly sloping upward line, the percentage of Republicans in both groups is about twenty-five to thirty percentage points lower than among Mormons in all three decades.

Mormons not only identify as Republicans; they vote for them too. Figure 2 displays the percentage of each religious group voting for Republican presidential

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<sup>5</sup> In addition to strong and weak Republicans, this includes respondents who lean toward the Republicans. Results are substantively unchanged when the leaners are excluded.

<sup>6</sup> The Ns for each group in each decades are as follows:

	1972-1978	1980-1988	1990-2000
Mormons	156	93	131
Southern Baptists	804	985	1000
Catholics	2075	2253	2752

candidates in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, subtracted from the national average. For example, in the 1990s 65 percent of Mormons voted for GOP candidates, while nationally the average was 39 percent. The difference, 26 percentage points, is displayed in Figure 2. We see, therefore, that even though the percentage of Mormons voting for Republican presidential candidates fell from 75 percent to 65 percent between the 1980s and 1990s, Republican support in the general electorate fell even more sharply (which should be obvious from the fact that a Democrat won the presidential elections in 1992 and 1996, and the popular vote in 2000). While Catholics and Southern Baptists, relative to everyone else, also became more likely to vote Republican, again we see that Mormons lean much more heavily toward the GOP.

While it is perhaps a historical irony that contemporary Mormons favor Republicans, history teaches us that we should not be surprised to see that Mormons are homogeneous in their political leanings. Political unity among Mormons has deep historical roots. In the 1830s and 1840s, one of the charges leveled at Mormon settlers in Missouri and Illinois was that they voted as a bloc. In fact, in 1838 fears of Mormon bloc voting led non-Mormons to thwart Mormon voters' attempts to cast ballots in Gallatin, Missouri. The resulting riot led the governor of Missouri, Lilburn W. Boggs, to issue an order that the Mormons must be driven from the state or "exterminated" (Arrington and Bitton 1979, 51). Faced with this choice the Mormons opted to leave the state, crossing the Mississippi River to found the city of Nauvoo, Illinois. But their bloc voting continued. In the 1840s Mormon leaders, church founder Joseph Smith particularly, were

courted by candidates of different parties vying for the cohesive Mormon vote.<sup>7</sup> When the Mormons settled in Utah, the church actually had its own political party (the People's Party), which dominated state politics until it was disbanded in 1891 by church leaders who saw that Utah's unique political landscape was an impediment to efforts to achieve statehood. Owing to the historical antipathy many Mormons felt toward the Republican Party, Utah became a predominantly Democratic state. Concerned that the one-partyism of Utah was still an obstacle to becoming a state, LDS Church leaders "encouraged the development of the Republican party among church members" (Barrus 1992, 1102) [see also (Larson and Poll 1989; Lyman 1986, 150-184)]. These efforts were quite successful and the Mormon Church, as reflected in the politics of Utah, enjoyed a relatively healthy balance between the two parties throughout much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, at least until the 1980s. Prominent church leaders were affiliated with both parties. For example, Ezra Taft Benson, one of the church's governing authorities and eventually president of the church, was a politically conservative Republican of national stature, and served for eight years as Agriculture Secretary in the Eisenhower administration. Hugh B. Brown, a high-ranking church official in the 1950s and 1960s, openly identified himself as a Democrat, even speaking at the party's Utah state convention in 1958.

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<sup>7</sup> Responding to accusations in 1841 that he instructed church members in how to vote, Joseph Smith gave the following answer:

With regard to elections, some say all the Latter-day Saints vote together, and vote as I say. But I never tell any man how to vote or whom to vote for. But I will show you how we have been situated by bringing a comparison. Should there be a Methodist society here and two candidates running for office, one says, "If you will vote for me and put me in governor, I will exterminate the Methodists, take away their charters," etc. The other candidate says, "If I am governor, I will give all an equal privilege." Which would the Methodists vote for? Of course they would vote en masse for the candidate that would give them their rights.

[B.H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* vol. 5, p.490 as quoted in Arrington and Bitton (1979, 51-52)].

As we have seen, this period of relative political diversity among Mormons did not last. Others have documented how over the last twenty to twenty-five years, social issues have become increasingly salient to the electorate, with the GOP positioning itself as the party of cultural conservatism (Kohut et al. 2000; Layman 2001; Miller and Shanks 1996). As a socially conservative group, Mormon voters have generally found themselves in accord with positions taken by the Republicans over this period.

One clear indication of the current political homogeneity among Mormons is that church leaders, echoing times past, have expressed concern about it. Just as LDS leaders took steps to counter the political homogeneity of Mormons in the 1890s, the 1990s also saw public encouragement of more bipartisanship among the Latter-day Saints. In a 1998 interview with the *Salt Lake Tribune*, Marlin K. Jensen, an LDS Church leader and a Democrat, spoke candidly about the church leadership's desire for greater political diversity among Mormons. In referring to a letter released by LDS Church leaders encouraging greater political involvement among their members, Jensen remarked:

[O]ne of the things that prompted this discussion . . . was the regret that's felt about the decline of the Democratic Party and the notion that may prevail in some areas that you can't be a good Mormon and a good Democrat at the same time. There have been some awfully good men and women who have, I think, been both and are both today. So I think that it would be a very healthy thing for the church – particularly the Utah church – if that notion could be obliterated. . . . Because I know that there is sort of a division along Mormon/non-Mormon, Republican/Democratic lines. I think we regret more than anything that there would become a church party and a non-church party. That would be the last thing we would want to have happen (Salt Lake Tribune 1998).

While LDS leaders may wish to see greater partisan diversity among Mormons, their conservative leanings on social issues makes the Republican Party their natural home. As one example of their conservatism on an issue that has resonated in the so-called “culture

war,” Latter-day Saints generally take a traditionalist view regarding the role of women in society. Since 1972, the National Election Study has asked respondents their opinion on whether women should work outside the home. Specifically, the question is worded:

*Recently, there has been a lot of talk about women’s rights. Some people feel that women should have an equal role with men in running business, industry, and government. Others feel that a woman’s place is in the home. Where would you place yourself on this scale or haven’t you thought much about this?*

<i>Women and men should have an equal role</i>			<i>A Women’s place is in the home</i>			
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Figure 3 displays the percentage of Mormons, as well as the other two religious groups, who selected 5-7 on the scale above, indicating that they are more prone to believe that a “woman’s place is in the home,” than that “women and men should have an equal role.” Again, the percentage for each group was subtracted from the national average. Note that for all groups, the percentage expressing a traditionalist opinion has dropped over the three decades that the NES has included this question. However, among Mormons, Southern Baptists, and Catholics, only the Mormons became – relative to the rest of the nation – more culturally conservative from the 1970s to the 1990s. In the 1970s, 38 percent of Mormons chose a traditionalist view of gender roles, while by the 1990s that had dropped to 29 percent.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, the national average fell from 27 to 12 percent.

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<sup>8</sup> The change among Mormon Church members mirrors accommodation to changing women’s roles in statements by church leaders. “The church’s statements about women have evolved in such a way that the traditional ideal is reaffirmed even as new roles and behaviors are accommodated” Iannaccone, Laurence A., and Carrie A. Miles. 1990. "Dealing With Social Change: The Mormon Church’s Response to Change in Women's Roles." *Social Forces* 68:1231-1250..

In other words, the mean for Mormons in the 1990s is about the same as the national average during the 1970s.

Another gauge of cultural conservatism consists of attitudes regarding abortion, perhaps the most salient issue driving the cultural divide between the parties (Adams 1997). Since 1980, the NES has asked a standard question regarding the respondent's position on abortion.

*There has been some discussion about abortion during recent years. Which one of the opinions [on this page] best agrees with your view? You can just tell me the number of the opinion you choose.*

1. *By law, abortion should never be permitted*
2. *The law should permit abortion only in case of rape, incest, or when the woman's life is in danger*
3. *The law should permit abortion for reasons other than rape, incest, or danger to the woman's life, but only after the need for the abortion has been clearly established*
4. *By law, a woman should always be able to obtain an abortion as a matter of personal choice.*

Table 1 displays the distribution of abortion opinions among Mormons, Southern Baptists, and Catholics. In this table, responses from 1980 to 2000 are aggregated,<sup>9</sup> in order to ensure that we have a reasonable number of Mormons in the sample. To account for differences in the rate of church attendance across the three groups we have chosen to report the responses for frequent church attenders only,<sup>10</sup> although the results do not change substantively when we do not make this restriction. In comparing Mormons, Southern Baptists, and Catholics there is little difference in the percentage who report

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<sup>9</sup> While we concede that twenty years is a long stretch of time, we have no reason to believe that abortion attitudes changed substantially within these three groups over this period.

<sup>10</sup> This is defined as respondents who reported attending church a "few times per month" or more.

that abortion is never justified. Sixteen percent of committed Mormons and Southern Baptists take this position, with 19 percent of Catholics doing so. The big differences arise when we move to the next category – the position that abortion should be permitted when the mother has been raped, is the victim of incest, or when delivery of the baby will endanger her life. Far more Mormons take this position than Southern Baptists and Catholics. Fully 60 percent of frequently attending Latter-day Saints choose this option, compared to 45 percent of Southern Baptists and 38 percent of Catholics who attend church frequently (the difference in means for Mormons compared to both Southern Baptists and Catholics readily achieves statistical significance). While there are few differences in the percentage choosing “when need has been established” as a justification for abortion, far fewer Mormons indicate that they believe abortion is a personal choice – only 10 percent, compared to 23 percent of Southern Baptists (a difference that is not statistically significant), and 26 percent of Catholics (a difference that is).

The explanation for the large number of Mormons willing to permit abortion under some limited circumstances is presumably the fact that this is the official position of the LDS Church. While the church’s opposition to abortion dates back to at least 1884 (Daynes and Tatalovich 1986, 4), the LDS position has never been absolute. Exceptions are justified. For example, the LDS First Presidency, the church’s highest governing body, issued a statement in the wake of the landmark *Roe v. Wade* decision in 1973 that stated:

The Church opposes abortion and counsels its members not to submit to or perform an abortion except in the rare cases where, in the opinion of competent medical counsel, the life or good health of the mother is seriously endangered or where the pregnancy was caused by rape and produces serious emotional trauma

in the mother. Even then it should be done only after counseling with the local presiding priesthood authority and after receiving divine confirmation through prayer. (Lee, Tanner, and Romney 1973)

The policy has not changed since and has periodically been given renewed emphasis by current Mormon Church general authorities (Nelson 1985; Oaks 2001).<sup>11</sup>

Viewed in this light, Mormons appear particularly adherent to their church's official teachings. When we add the percentage of respondents who would never permit abortion to those who would permit it only in the case of rape, incest, and the health of the mother, we see that Mormons are the most consistently anti-abortion group among the three. Among frequently attending Mormons, 76 percent take a "pro-life but with some exceptions" position, compared to 61 percent of Southern Baptists and 57 percent of Catholics who attend church regularly.

Thus far, we have seen the first line of evidence for the dry kindling hypothesis: Mormons are a politically and culturally distinctive group. They are overwhelming Republican, even to the point of bucking the national trend in their preference for Republican presidential candidates. In a pattern that tracks their voting in presidential elections, there is a widening gap between Mormons' opinions on gender roles and those of the rest of the nation. Furthermore, Mormons largely adhere to their church's official position on abortion.

The fact that Mormons are distinctive politically is at least partly due to their distinctive beliefs and lifestyle. In addition to a relatively traditional view of gender roles

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<sup>11</sup> Contrast this with the official Southern Baptist position: "Procreation is a gift from God, a precious trust reserved for marriage. At the moment of conception, a new being enters the universe, a human being, a being created in God's image. This human being deserves our protection, whatever the circumstances of conception." See <http://www.sbc.net/aboutus/pssanctity.asp>. The Catholic position is similar, as stated in Article 5 of the Roman Catholic catechism: "Human life must be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of conception. From the first moment of his existence, a human being must be recognized as having the rights of a person—among which is the inviolable right of every innocent being to life."

and opposition to abortion, LDS doctrine contains other elements that mark Mormon beliefs and behavior as distinctive from mainstream American society. This includes a health code that prohibits coffee, tea, alcohol, and tobacco. Additionally, the Mormon emphasis on traditional families means that Mormons are encouraged not to delay marriage and having children; as a result the average Mormon family has far more children than the national average (Utah has the nation's highest birth rate).<sup>12</sup> In one analysis of General Social Survey (GSS) data pooled from 1972 to 1988, a majority (54 percent) of Mormons said that they thought the ideal number of children was four or more. The mode for every other religious group is two (Bahr 1992).

Clearly, the teachings of the LDS Church and the practices of individual Latter-day Saints regarding social and cultural issues can be characterized as conservative. Therefore, it is not surprising that in a political environment characterized by partisan conflict over cultural issues, Mormons would gravitate to the party that has stressed moral conservatism. This is, however, quite different from an explicit endorsement of the Republican Party, or individual Republican candidates by the church hierarchy, which is not the practice of contemporary Mormon leaders.

### **Religious Participation and Political Activity**

The social distinctiveness of Mormons goes hand in hand with the distinctive level of commitment Latter-day Saints make to their church. It is accurate to say that the Mormon Church imposes a lot of "costs" on its members. But these costs may actually be the benefits of Mormonism. Sociologists of religion employing the assumptions and

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<sup>12</sup> Although note that birth control is not formally proscribed by church policy.

methods of economists have advanced a compelling theory regarding the institutional advantages of what are called strict churches or, in other words, churches that ask a lot of their members in terms of behavioral restrictions and financial commitment (Finke and Stark 1992; Iannaccone 1992; Iannaccone 1994; Iannaccone 1995). Members of strict churches are able to overcome collective action dilemmas because the distinctive lifestyle expected of members—abstinence from alcohol, regulation of sexual behavior, etc.—screens out free riders. In order to ensure compliance with their behavioral guidelines, strict churches

penalize or prohibit *alternative* activities that compete for members' resources. In mixed populations, such penalties and prohibitions tend to screen out the less committed members. They act like entry fees and thus discourage anyone not seriously interested in buying the product. Only those willing to pay the price remain. (Iannaccone 1994, 1187)

Members of strict churches are thus expected to devote significant amounts of time and energy into volunteer activity for their faith, reinforcing these social networks (Wuthnow 1999). The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a quintessentially strict church (Campbell 2003).

Even a brief description of the expectations placed upon members of the LDS Church underscores the level of commitment required within the Mormon faith. The Mormon Church asks for a considerable investment of time from its laity. First, Mormons are expected to spend a significant amount of time at church meetings—members of the LDS Church attend three consecutive meetings on Sundays, lasting for a total of three hours. Mormons may also spend considerable time traveling to and worshiping in LDS temples, which are distinct from the Sunday meetings held in the more numerous church meetinghouses. In addition to the time spent attending these

church meetings, adult Mormons usually receive an assignment within the local congregation. This might include arising at the crack of dawn to teach high school students about LDS doctrine before they go to school. It might be organizing local proselytizing efforts, or participating in one of the church's welfare activities. On top of these specialized assignments, each Mormon is also assigned a set of other members of the local congregation to visit every month, to ensure that their needs are being met by the church. Furthermore, many Mormons spend up to two years in full-time missionary work while young or when retired. This list, which is far from exhaustive, hopefully provides a sense that the Mormon Church has high expectations for the amount of time its members invest in the church's activities.

These investments of time and energy are also accompanied by a considerable financial commitment as Mormons are taught that they must pay a literal tithe, or ten percent of their income, to the church. In addition to their tithes, many Mormons also contribute to other funds operated by the church, particularly one set aside for the assistance of the poor in their local communities.

The high level of commitment that Mormons are asked to make to their church is why we characterize Latter-day Saints as "dry kindling" for political mobilization. We hypothesize that Mormons' church involvement feeds the fires of their political activism, by providing them with the civic skills and social networks that facilitate engagement in public affairs. An alternative hypothesis, however, is that Mormons' voluntarism for their church crowds out any political activity by limiting the amount of time available for involvement in politics. Fortunately, a new source of data, the 2000 Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey (SCCBS), allows us to test these competing hypotheses.

Conducted under the direction of Robert Putnam, the SCCBS consists of representative samples collected in 40 communities across the United States, as well as a sample drawn nationally. The result is an N of almost 30,000 cases, including 219 self-identified Mormons.<sup>13</sup> Using these data, we are thus freed from the inferential hazards of aggregating surveys over multiple years in order to have a critical mass of Mormons in our analysis.

### *Church Involvement*

We begin by detailing the “costs” of membership in the Mormon Church by reporting the level of church membership and attendance among Latter-day Saints, again in comparison to Southern Baptists and Catholics. Table 2 displays the percentages of Mormons, Southern Baptists, and Catholics respectively who attend church “almost every week” or more. We see that of the three groups, Mormons are the most frequent attenders of religious services, with 67 percent reporting that they attend church weekly. In a pattern that will become familiar, Southern Baptists (58 percent) fall in between Catholics (47 percent) and Mormons. The difference between Mormons and Catholics easily exceeds the standard threshold for statistical significance, while the gap between Southern Baptists and Mormons is right on the threshold ( $p < 0.10$ ).

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<sup>13</sup> The SCCBS consists of representative samples drawn in forty communities across the United States, as well as a national sample. A detailed explanation of the methodology can be found at <http://www.cfsv.org/communitysurvey/index.html>. The dataset itself has been archived at the Roper Center, [http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/dataacq/scc\\_bench.html](http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/dataacq/scc_bench.html). Note that the number of Mormons in the survey does not totally reflect the percentage of Mormons in the nation, as reported by the membership records of the LDS Church. One possible explanation for this is simply the vagaries of random sampling, compounded by the fact that Mormons are geographically concentrated. None of the SCCBS communities have a large LDS population (none are in Utah or Idaho, for example), which has likely led to the under-representation of Mormons relative to their share of the national population. It is also possible that there are people listed on the membership rolls of the LDS Church who do not identify as Mormons, and choose not to identify themselves as such when asked by an interviewer.

Table 2 also turns to another type of cost by displaying two measures of the resources, both time and money, that members of these three religious groups invest in their churches. First is a measure of their financial donations, which was gauged in the SCCBS using the following question.

*People and families contribute money, property, or other assets for a wide variety of charitable purposes. During the past twelve months, approximately how much money did you and the other family members in your household contribute to: All religious causes, including your local religious congregation?<sup>14</sup>*

A simple cross-tabulation of this measure by denomination reveals Mormons to have the highest giving rate. For example, 22 percent of Mormons report giving more than \$5,000 to religious causes, compared to 9 percent of Southern Baptists and 2 percent of Catholics. However, this comparison is potentially misleading because it does not account for possible differences in household income across the three groups. It could be that Mormons simply have a higher average income than Southern Baptists and Catholics. To correct for different levels of income, Table 2 thus displays a religious giving index. The measure of religious contributions has been divided by the measure of family income.<sup>15</sup> Using this measure, and thus roughly accounting for differences in household income, Mormons still come out as having the highest religious giving rate, although only the difference between Mormons and Catholics achieves statistical significance.

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<sup>14</sup> The close-ended options were: (1) None; (2) Less than \$100; (3) \$100 to less than \$500; (4) \$500 to less than \$1,000; (5) \$1,000 to less than \$5,000; (6) More than \$5,000.

<sup>15</sup> Note that in neither measure are the categories in equal intervals so this index has no real meaning beyond comparisons across denominations. That is, you cannot determine the religious donations of each group as a percentage of their income. The income categories are: (1) \$20,000 or less; (2) Over \$20,000 but less than \$30,000; (3) Over \$30,000 but less than \$50,000; (4) Over \$50,000 but less than \$75,000; (5) \$75,000 but less than \$100,000; (6) \$100,000 or more.

The third row of Table 2 reports the extent to which members of the three religious groups have participated in their local church, in response to the following SCCBS question:

*In the past twelve months, have you taken part in any sort of activity with people at your church or place of worship other than attending services? This might include teaching Sunday school, serving on a committee, attending choir rehearsal, retreat, or other things.*

Mormons have the highest rate of religious participation, with 78 percent indicating that they have taken part in an activity with members of their church. This is in comparison to 53 percent of Southern Baptists and 36 percent of Catholics. As another indication of their faith-based voluntarism, a higher percentage of Mormons (60 percent) than either Southern Baptists or Catholics (36 percent and 27 percent respectively) report having volunteered for a religious group in the previous year. In all of these cases, the differences between Mormons and the other two groups can be distinguished from zero at levels well beyond the conventional threshold for statistical confidence.

An implication that follows from the intensive church involvement of Mormons is that their church activity provides training in what Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) call “civic skills.” These are the quotidian tasks that constitute the practice of civic involvement – holding meetings, giving speeches, writing letters, etc. They find that training in these skills is an important resource leading to political activity, and that such training is often provided by churches. Data from Verba, Schlozman, and Brady’s Citizen Participation Study confirm that Mormons are well-trained in civic skills at church.<sup>16</sup> For example, 53 percent of Mormons report having given a speech or

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<sup>16</sup> Based on authors’ analysis of the Citizen Participation Study. Note that these results are based on a sample of 45 Mormons, 242 Southern Baptists, and 681 Catholics.

presentation at church within the previous six months, compared to 14 percent of Southern Baptists and 4 percent of Catholics. Similarly, 48 percent of Mormons report having attended a meeting where they took part in making decisions within the last six months. Twenty-eight percent of Southern Baptists and 8 percent of Catholics have done the same.

### *Political Involvement*

Having quantitatively confirmed the behavioral commitment Mormons make to their church, we can turn to testing whether their church involvement sparks or extinguishes their political involvement. To do so, we again turn to the SCCBS, which included numerous measures of political engagement. We have constructed a simple index of political involvement with the following components:<sup>17</sup>

- (1) voting in the previous presidential election
- (2) signing a petition within the past twelve months
- (3) attending a political rally within the past twelve months
- (4) participating in a demonstration, protest, boycott, or march within the past twelve months
- (5) worked on a community project within the past twelve months
- (6) belonging to an organization that has taken local action for social or political reform within the past twelve months
- (7) belonging to a public interest group, political action group, political club, or party committee

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<sup>17</sup> The Cronbach's alpha index of this scale is 0.65. Exploratory factor analysis reveals that the components of the index all load cleanly on a single dimension. The index has a mean of 2.1, with a standard deviation of 1.6.

We have simply added up how many of these activities each respondent engages in. The final row of Table 2 displays the mean score on this participation index for Mormons, Southern Baptists, and Catholics. We see that Mormons score moderately higher on the participation scale than the two other religious groups (all of these differences are statistically significant).<sup>18</sup> Nor are these differences simply the result of demographic differences among these groups, as Mormons maintain their higher level of political involvement even when controlling for potentially confounding factors like education, marital status, and political interest (results not shown). *Prima facie*, therefore, it would appear that their church involvement does not push Mormons out of political involvement.

But does their religious involvement pull them *into* political activity, as the dry kindling hypothesis suggests? To test whether it does, we have created an index of religious participation which includes three behavioral measures of religious participation: frequency of attendance at religious services, participation in a church-based activity outside of worship services, and working as a volunteer for one's place of worship in the previous year.<sup>19</sup> We then employ a multivariate model that interacts being Mormon with this index of religious participation: *Mormon X Religious Participation*. If the dry kindling hypothesis is correct this interaction term should be positive, which would mean that the more Mormons are involved in their church, the more they are involved in politics. We also include interactions between religious affiliation and religious involvement for both Southern Baptists and Catholics, in order to test whether

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<sup>18</sup> The difference between Mormons and the combination of remaining groups is also statistically significant (not shown).

<sup>19</sup> The Cronbach's alpha of the index is .60, and again exploratory factor analysis shows that these three activities load on a single dimension. The mean of the index is 4.2 and the standard deviation is 2.1.

the relationship we observe for Mormons is parallel to these other denominations. In addition, we control for a host of other potentially confounding variables, including education<sup>20</sup>, age, marital status (currently married or not), gender, political ideology (coded so that a higher number indicates a more liberal ideology), and one's general level of political interest.<sup>21</sup>

Table 3 displays the results. As expected, we see that the coefficient for the religious participation index is positive, with one of the larger impacts in the model. The interaction between Mormon and religious participation is also positive and statistically significant, meaning that we find support for our hypothesis. The more Mormons are involved in their church, the more they are involved in politics. Furthermore, while the other denominations' interaction terms are positive, their magnitude is smaller than what we observe for Mormons. In other words, while for all three groups there is a positive relationship between religious and political participation, that relationship is strongest for Mormons. The differences among the three denominations are graphically presented in Figure 4, where we see how each religious group's mean score is affected by the level of

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<sup>20</sup> Education, ideology, political interest, and religious participation have been standardized to have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1, in order to facilitate comparisons among them.

<sup>21</sup> The unusual way in which the SCCBS was conducted presents some statistical challenges. Since the data are not based on a probability sample of the U.S. population, but rather representative samples in a series of communities (which were not randomly chosen), they explicitly violate a fundamental assumption underlying OLS regression: observations are not truly independent of one another. We would expect two respondents in Minneapolis to be more similar to one another than two respondents in Boston. In other words, without accounting for the clustered nature of the sample the standard errors of any model will be significantly distorted, leading to incorrect inferences about statistical significance. To account for this, we report robust standard errors, accounting for clustering within communities. This means that we have relaxed the assumption that cases are independent *within* communities, although we continue to assume that they are independent *across* communities. Alternatively, we have also run the model with fixed effects for each of the communities and found identical results. A third alternative is to use a hierarchical linear model (HLM). In this case, HLM does not appear to be an appropriate estimator, since we are not interested in incorporating any contextual variables into our analysis – one of the primary applications of HLM. Nonetheless, we have run HLM using various specifications and found similar results to what we report here. (All of the coefficients of interest maintain the same sign). Owing to the convergence across these different models, we have opted to display the simplest to interpret.

religious participation. The level of predicted political activity for each religious group was calculated using the regression coefficients from Table 3 and changing the religious participation index from its minimum to its maximum values while holding other values constant at their means. Interestingly, Mormons with the lowest level of religious participation have a slightly lower rate of political activity than Southern Baptists or Catholics who have the same level of religious involvement. Mormons have the steepest sloping line, however, and so at the highest level of religious participation, they have the highest level of political involvement.

In sum, analysis of data from the SCCBS provides evidence of the second condition for the dry kindling effect, namely that the intensive church involvement of Mormons facilitates their capacity to be politically involved. It is important that we note, however, that the higher rate of political activity of Mormons who are fully engaged with their church is not generally due to explicit mobilization on the part of LDS leaders. As we will explain in greater detail below, such direction comes infrequently. Instead, the high rate of political activity among participating Mormons is far more likely to be due to the civic skills and social networks they foster through their church activity.

### **Political Mobilization**

The third component of the dry kindling effect centers on the emphasis within Mormonism on adherence to the instructions of the church's leaders. These instructions are generally affirmations of LDS doctrine, but on rare -- and thus significant -- occasions also include direction on political matters.

Strictly in terms of its organizational structure, the LDS Church is reminiscent of the Catholic Church; it is centralized and hierarchical, with clear lines of authority. Like

the Catholics, Mormons have a single leader for the entire organization. The LDS Church is led by a president, a position that is simultaneously both ecclesiastical and administrative in nature. In Mormon parlance, the president of the church is a “prophet, seer, and revelator,” and the only person entitled to receive divine instruction pertaining to the church as a whole. Mormons pay close attention to the speeches he delivers and books and articles he writes. Adherence to the prophet’s instructions in all matters is a hallmark of Mormon religious observance, *including in regards to political questions*. For example, in an oft-cited address to students at church-owned Brigham Young University, Elder Ezra Taft Benson – at the time next in line to become president of the LDS Church and someone who had been visibly active in political causes – emphasized that the church president’s counsel is not necessarily restricted to spiritual matters, but may extend to political issues as well (Benson 1980). Speaking of the LDS Church’s involvement in legislative and electoral politics, current LDS Church President Gordon B. Hinckley more recently explained the reasoning behind the church’s occasional involvement in politics by saying, “...we deal only with those legislative matters which are of a strictly moral nature or which directly affect the welfare of the Church... We regard it as not only our right but our duty to oppose those forces which we feel undermine the moral fiber of society” (Hinckley 1999).

The president of the LDS Church is at the apex of an organization with a clearly defined chain of command. He is assisted by two “counselors,” (somewhat like vice-presidents). These three men comprise the First Presidency, the church’s highest governing body. Immediately below the First Presidency in both stature and decision-making authority is a group of twelve church officials known as the Quorum of the

Twelve Apostles. Collectively these church officials are known as general authorities.<sup>22</sup>

The general authorities oversee the global operations of the LDS Church, which is divided into geographic units. Their role is administrative as well as pastoral, as they are the key policy-making body for the entire church. Individual congregations, known as wards, are run entirely by lay members, under the close oversight of the church's general authorities. Local leaders receive instruction from the church's leaders through periodic visits by general authorities and training sessions broadcast on the church's satellite network. Day-to-day operations are governed by a handbook of instruction and policies, which local leaders are advised to consult regularly. In short, within the LDS Church the doctrinal principle that church members should "follow their leaders" is not merely an abstract platitude. It is embodied within both the doctrine and the institutional structure of the organization.

The centralized organization and small cohesive congregations that characterize the LDS Church mean that church members can be rapidly mobilized when necessary. When natural disasters strike, for example, the LDS Church is often among the first groups within a community to render aid (Arrington, Fox, and May 1976). In theory, this same type of mobilization could be applied to political causes.

However, in practice it rarely has been applied to politics, at least in contemporary times. While the church's members may be predominantly Republican, the LDS Church itself is scrupulously nonpartisan. Indeed, while it may appear that the Mormon emphasis on adherence to the church's leadership would mean that they wield great political influence, in reality LDS general authorities have not made public

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<sup>22</sup> As the LDS Church has increased in size, the ranks of the general authorities have grown. In addition to the First Presidency and the Twelve Apostles, there is another layer of general authorities – the Seventies. A small number of these officials serve for life, others for a fixed term.

statements advocating candidates or a particular party for several decades. Before every biennial U.S. election, the First Presidency issues a letter that is read during Sunday meetings to every congregation in the United States, in which the strict political neutrality of the church is emphasized.<sup>23</sup> And this neutrality is not simply a formality, honored only in the breach. Political candidates (even those that are LDS) do not give political speeches in LDS meetings; campaign literature is not distributed in LDS Church buildings; and voter guides are not distributed to LDS members while they are at church.

That the political neutrality advocated by the church's general leadership is honored by its leaders at the local level can be confirmed with data from the National Election Studies. From 1994 to 2000, the NES has asked respondents about whether any political information pertaining to the current campaign was provided at their places of worship, or whether their clergy encouraged them to vote in a particular way.<sup>24</sup> Table 4

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<sup>23</sup> Following is the text of the letter to this effect read in LDS meetings in October 2000:

In this election year, we reaffirm the Church's long-standing policy of political neutrality. The Church does not endorse any political party, political platform, or candidate. Church facilities, directories, and mailing lists are not to be used for political purposes. Candidates for public office should not imply that their candidacy is endorsed by the Church or its leaders, and Church leaders and members should avoid statements or conduct that may be interpreted as Church endorsement of any political party or candidate. In addition, members who hold public office should not give the impression they represent the Church as they work for solutions to social problems. We urge Church members to study the issues and candidates carefully and prayerfully and then vote for those they believe will most nearly carry out their ideas of good government. Latter-day Saints are under special obligation to seek out and then uphold leaders who will act with integrity and are "wise," "good," and "honest" (see Doctrine and Covenants 98:10). As personal circumstances allow, we encourage men and women in the Church to serve in public offices of either election or appointment—including school boards, city and county councils and commissions, state legislatures, and national offices.

Sincerely your brethren,

The First Presidency

<sup>24</sup> "Was information about candidates, parties, or political issues made available in your place of worship before the election?" and "Did the clergy or other church leaders at your place of worship encourage you to vote for a particular candidate or party?" Note that the second question is not included in the NES cumulative file distributed by ICPSR.

combines data from 1994 to 2000, comparing Mormons, Southern Baptists, and Catholics on these measures. The table is restricted to frequent church attenders only, to ensure that if respondents report that they did not hear any political cues at church, it was not because they were not in the pews to hear the message. We see that of these three religious groups, Mormons are by far the least likely to receive political cues at church. Only 8 percent report receiving information about candidates, parties, or issues at church, compared to 14 percent of Catholics and 18 percent of Southern Baptists (differences that are both statistically significant). Similarly, only 1 percent<sup>25</sup> of Latter-day Saints report that their clergy urged them to vote for a particular candidate, contrasted with 6 percent of Catholics and 11 percent of Southern Baptists. Again, these differences clear the bar for statistical significance, although the Mormon-Catholic gap only achieves a p value of about 0.10.

The fact that Mormons rarely receive political direction from their church leaders does not mean that it never comes. While the Mormon Church maintains official political neutrality in partisan elections, church leaders emphasize that they will take a public stand on issues deemed “moral” and not “political.” Thus, there are occasions when the LDS general authorities speak on public issues and channel the organizational energy of Mormon Church members to specific causes. For example, in 1976 LDS leaders announced the church’s official opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). In response, church members actively worked to defeat the ERA in a number of states including Florida, Illinois, Maryland, Nevada, and Virginia (Magleby 1992; Quinn 1997). Typically, the LDS Church has taken official stances on issues raised by ballot

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<sup>25</sup> Owing to the small number of Mormons in this sample, this is a grand total of *one* respondent.

initiatives, and not campaigns for elected office. This is presumably because of the church's reluctance to be seen as intervening in a partisan contest, as well as the fact that this is often the vehicle by which controversial social issues are brought before the electorate. In recent years LDS Church involvement of some kind has been observed in numerous statewide initiative campaigns opposing gambling (Arizona, Idaho, Ohio, and Utah) and gay marriage (Alaska, California, Hawaii, Nebraska, and Nevada).

Because of the contest's national profile and the relatively large number of Mormons in the state, the extensive involvement of the Mormon Church leading up to the March 2000 primary election in California is especially interesting. Local church leaders were intensely involved at all levels of the campaign to mobilize Mormon Church members to actively support Proposition 22, an initiative to ban gay marriages. The official involvement by LDS Church leaders included two letters in May 1999. The first outlined the justification for supporting the initiative and gave fundraising instructions to the leaders of local congregations. A second letter was read over California pulpits during Sunday worship meetings, encouraging church members to donate money, volunteer for the campaign, and otherwise support the initiative. The grass roots involvement of church members included participation as precinct walkers in a sophisticated voter identification effort and in subsequent phone bank and mailing operations staffed by LDS volunteers to mobilize voters. It is difficult to estimate the precise impact of Mormon Church members on the campaign, as there are no public records that record the religion of campaign donors or workers, but press accounts indicate the pressure brought to bear on Mormons in California was intense and that the subsequent level of participation in both fundraising and grass-roots political activity,

especially among church attending Mormons, was quite high (Coile 1999; Salladay 1999).<sup>26</sup>

We have good reason to believe that the official involvement of the LDS Church exerted a significant influence on the voting behavior of its membership. In previous research regarding Mormon voting behavior on ballot initiatives we outline two conditions that must be present in order for Mormons to respond to their leaders on political questions (Campbell and Monson Forthcoming.). First, the position must receive the official institutional endorsement of the church. Second, the position of the leadership must be unified and widely known among church members. Both conditions were clearly met in the case of Proposition 22. It is also interesting to note that the model of LDS Church involvement in the Proposition 22 campaign follows closely tactics used in a 1988 Idaho lottery initiative campaign. In both cases this included using local leaders to solicit contributions from members as well as to actively recruit them as campaign workers (Popkey 1988).

## **Conclusion**

The metaphor of Mormons as “dry kindling” is meant to evoke an image of a group with great potential for political mobilization by their religious leaders. The uniqueness of the Mormon capacity for sparking intense activity among its membership is highlighted with a final comparison to attempts at mobilization among Evangelical Protestants and Roman Catholics. Christian Right organizations like the Christian Coalition, which of course target Evangelical Protestant churches (including Southern

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<sup>26</sup> A voluminous set of anecdotal evidence has been collected in a web narrative about Mormon Church involvement in Proposition 22 at <http://www.lds-mormon.com/doma.shtml>. The web pages include a scanned set of documents that are referred to in some of the press accounts including precinct walking instructions, voter identification forms, and the letters from LDS Church leaders mentioned above.

Baptists), expend great efforts to mobilize voters. Without the organizational advantages of a single centralized church, however, the Christian Coalition is less able to tap into channels of communication within a religious community the way the Mormons have done. On the other hand, a hierarchical organization is clearly not sufficient for intense mobilization. The Catholic Church has just such an institutional structure, and yet without intensive voluntarism among the laity to foster social networks, civic skills, and intragroup trust, church-directed political activity is not terribly successful. In the Proposition 22 case, Catholic leaders in California also endorsed the effort, but there is not evidence of a broad mobilization of lay Catholics in California by their leaders that compares to the mobilization of Mormons.

The metaphor of dry kindling is also meant to evoke periods of dormancy, punctuated by periodic bursts of intense mobilization, followed again by dormancy. That is, the potential for Mormon mobilization largely lies latent. While there was once a time when LDS Church leaders regularly spoke out on political issues, that has not been the case in the second half of the twentieth century. Since World War II, Mormon general authorities have only offered formal endorsements on a select number of public controversies, opposition to gay marriage being the most recent. Our intention has been to demonstrate that Mormons have an explosive capacity to muster their troops on behalf of these political causes – with enough firepower to conceivably tip the balance in a close contest.

Yet as we have stressed, it is the very infrequency of Mormon mobilization that accentuates its effectiveness. Because LDS Church leaders rarely speak out on explicitly political questions, when they do Mormons sit up and take notice. Should LDS leaders

speaking on politics more frequently, Latter-day Saints might respond in smaller numbers or with less vigor. The result is a delicate balance between frequency and potency. We began this paper by asserting that in American politics, Mormons matter. In light of this balance, perhaps we should amend that statement: Mormons potentially matter a lot, but not too often.

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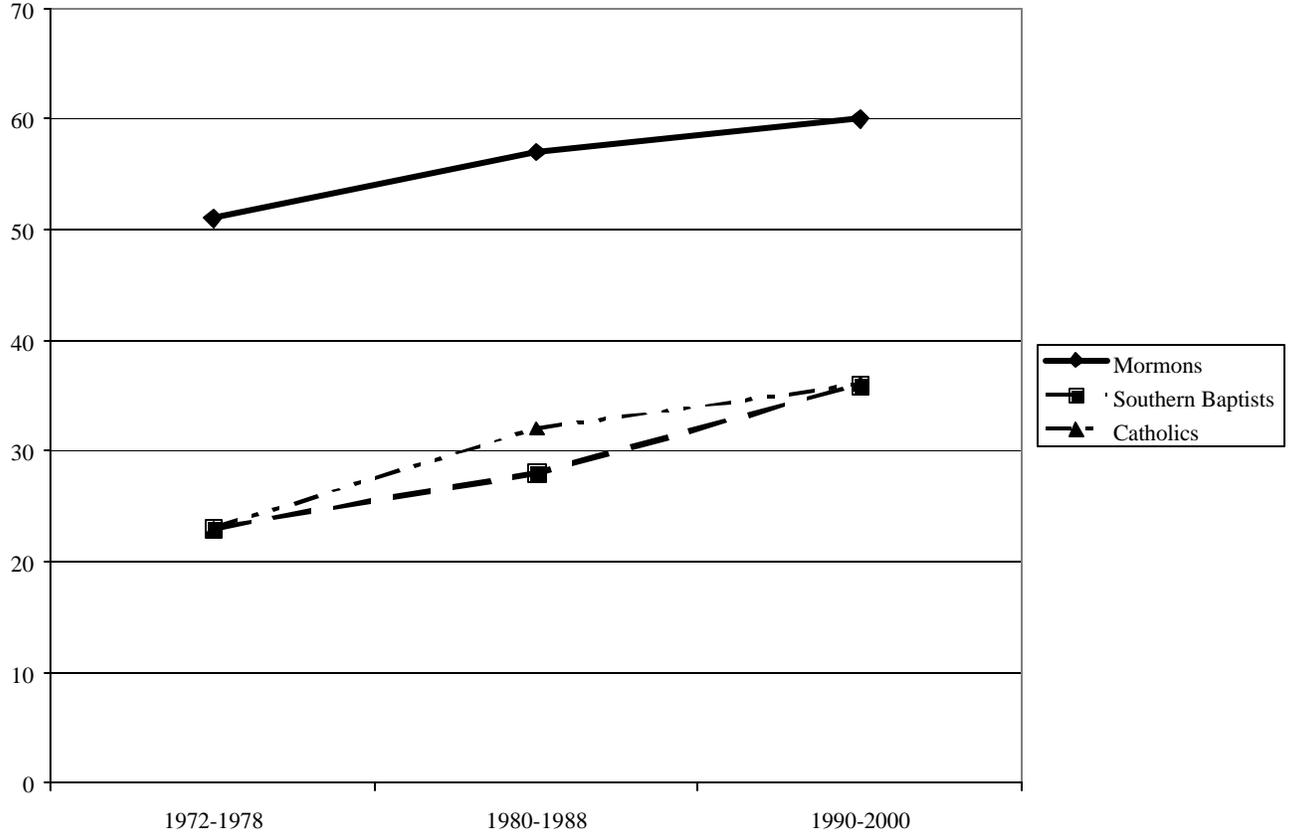
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### Figure 1. Partisanship Over Time

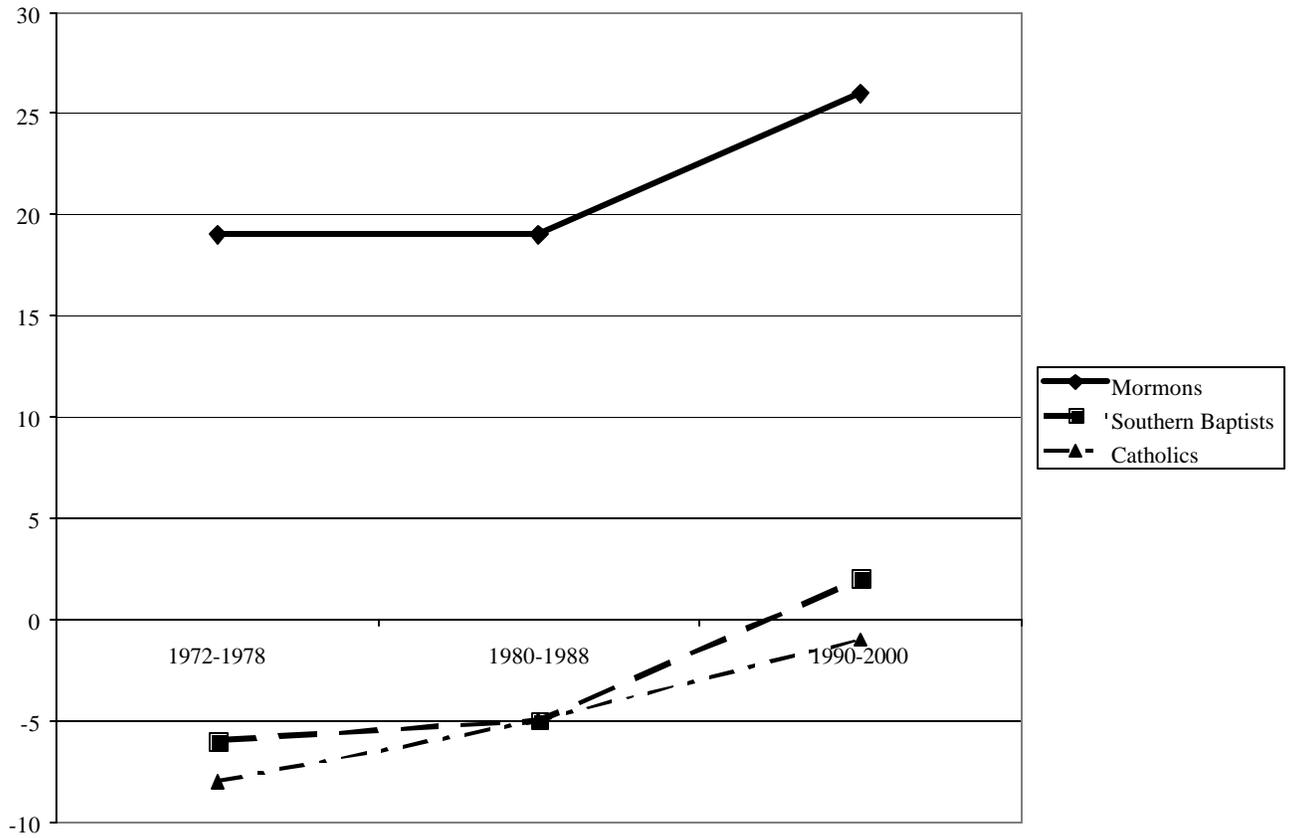
Percentage Identifying as Republicans



Source: National Election Studies

**Figure 2. Presidential Vote Over Time**

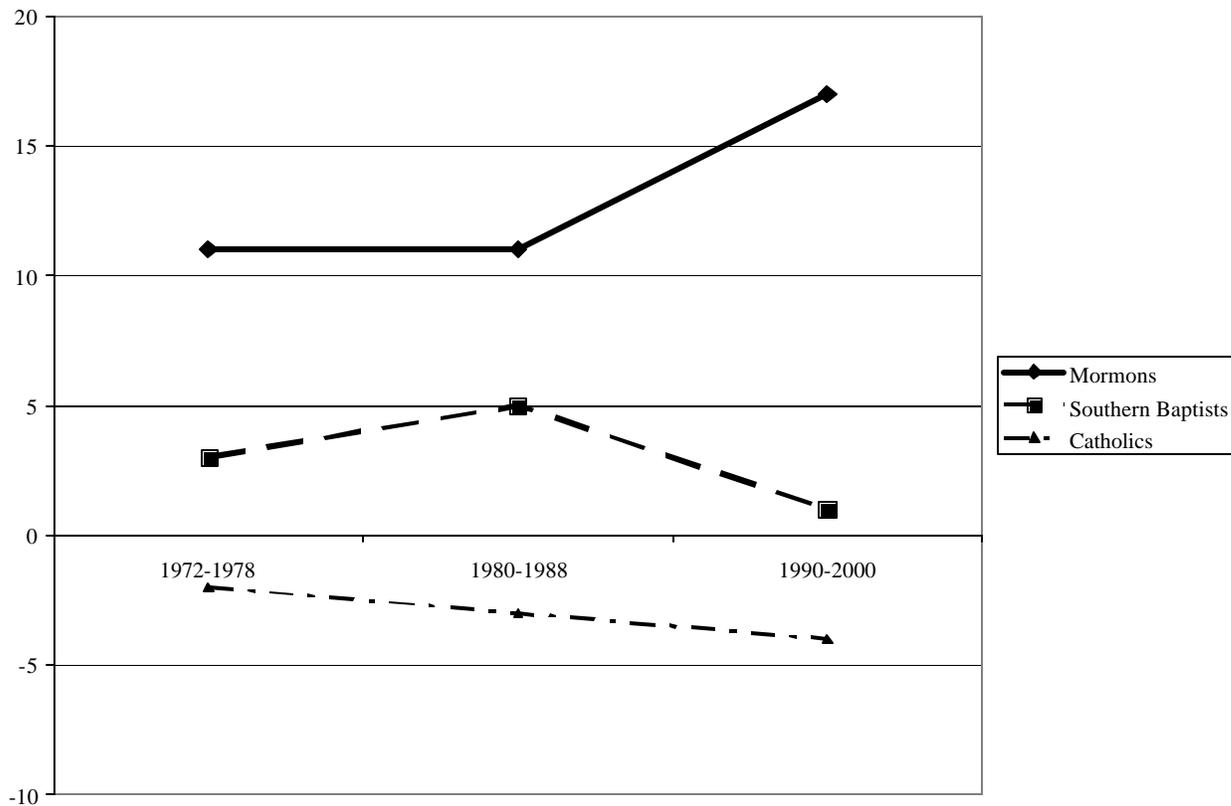
Percentage Voting For The Republican Candidate, Subtracted From The National Average



Source: National Election Studies

**Figure 3. Opinion on Gender Roles Over Time**

Percentage Choosing Traditionalist View Of Gender Roles, Subtracted From The National Average



Source: National Election Studies

**Table 1. Abortion Attitudes**

Percentage Choosing Each Position (Frequent Church Attenders Only)

	Mormon	Southern Baptist	Catholic
Never	16	16	19
Rape, incest, and when the woman's life is in danger	60	45***	38***
When need has been established	14	17	17
Personal choice	10	23***	26***
N	154	1230	2892

t test, \*  $p < .10$ ; \*\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .01$  (two tailed). For the purpose of determining statistically significant differences, Mormon is the comparison category.

Source: National Election Studies, 1980-2000

**Table 2. Levels of Religious and Political Participation**

	Mormon	Southern Baptist	Catholic
Attend church “almost every week” or more (%)	67	58*	47***
Religious Giving Index (mean)	1.05	.93	.67***
Participate in church activity (%)	78	53***	36***
Volunteered for church (%)	60	36***	27***
Political Activity Index, 0-7 (mean)	2.27	1.91***	1.85***
N	168-218	720-1147	6210-7204

t test, \* p < .10; \*\* p < .05; \*\*\* p < .01 (two tailed). For the purpose of determining statistically significant differences, Mormon is the comparison category.

Source: Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey

**Table 3. Religious Participation and Political Activity**

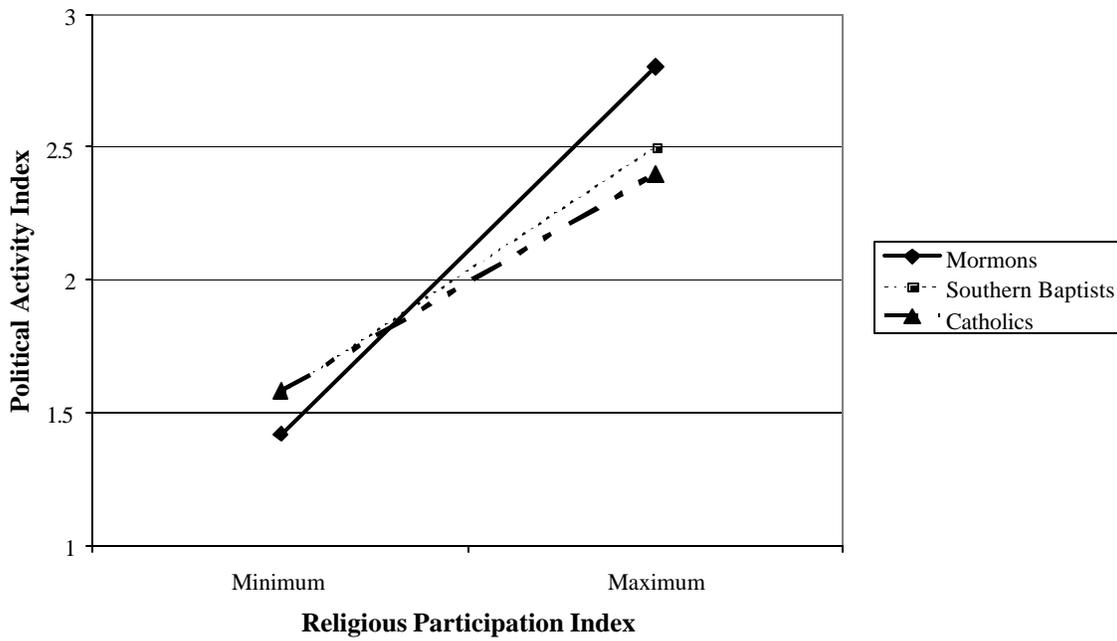
	<i>Coeff.</i>	<i>s.e.</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Mormon	0.019	(0.125)	
Southern Baptist	-0.068	(0.040)	
Catholic	-0.112	(0.022)	***
Education	0.409	(0.017)	***
Age	-0.000	(0.001)	
Married	0.105	(0.023)	***
Female	0.004	(0.019)	
Ideology	0.164	(0.018)	***
Political Interest	0.506	(0.014)	***
Religious Participation	0.217	(0.018)	***
Mormon X Religious Participation	0.264	(0.127)	**
Southern Baptist X Religious Participation	0.106	(0.040)	**
Catholic X Religious Participation	0.068	(0.026)	**
Constant	2.066	(0.051)	***
Observations	21631		
R-squared	0.28		

The dependent variable is the political participation index and ranges from 0 to 7. Robust standard errors are in parentheses. Education, Ideology, Political Interest, and Religious Participation have been standardized to have a mean of 0 and standard deviation of 1.

\* p<.10, \*\* p<.05, \*\*\* p<.01

Source: Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey

**Figure 4. The Impact of Religious Participation on Political Activity**



Results calculated from the model in Table 3. Predicted political activity was calculated by changing the religious participation index from its minimum to its maximum values while holding other values constant at their means.

**Table 4. Political Recruitment At Church** (Frequent Church Attenders Only)

	Mormon	Southern Baptist	Catholic
Political information provided at church	6	18***	14**
Clergy urged that you vote a certain way	1	11***	6*
N	64/69	381/403	1016/1115

t test, \*  $p < .10$ ; \*\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .01$  (two tailed). For the purpose of determining statistically significant differences, Mormon is the comparison category.

Source: National Election Studies, 1994-2000