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Mormons and the Christian Right: Are They “Right” for Each Other?

by Dan Elenbaas

The Christian Right represents one of the most significant political movements in modern U.S. history. Despite what many political analysts and liberal activists have characterized as the decreasing influence of the conservative Christian movement (see especially Frum 1994, 17; Jelen 1993, 178; and Jelen and Wilcox 1992, 199), the Christian Right scored a major victory in the recent 1994 mid-term elections, helping the Republicans gain control of both houses of Congress for the first time since the Eisenhower Administration. According to John Green, a Christian Right expert at the University of Akron, twenty-four of the thirty Christian Coalition-supported candidates he followed won their 1994 congressional elections (Shanahan 1994, 3). The Coalition itself takes credit for helping Republican candidates win forty-four House Seats (including most of the new seats), eight new Senate seats, and seven governorships (American Political Network 1994). Regardless of whose numbers are more correct, no one is refuting that the Christian Right played a significant and expanded role in this year’s elections.

As the nation’s political scientists attempt to unravel the mysteries behind the Republican landslide of 1994, renewed attention is appropriately being given to the role of the Christian Right. Among the important questions being asked are, “what is the Christian Right?”, “who is included in the Christian Right?”, and “what is the future of the Christian Right?” A recent Campaign and Elections article attempting to answer some of these questions, discussed how to best classify members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons):

There is reasonable dispute over whether all of the considerable Mormon influence in the Utah Republican Party organization should be considered as being part of the Christian Right (Persinos 1994, 22).

The explanation for this “reasonable dispute” is that while Mormons seem to behave and vote like the Christian Right, they do not tend to belong to any of the organizations associated with the Christian Right.

In this paper, I will show that Mormon voting behavior has indeed been substantially consistent with the Christian Right, and will attempt to provide reasons for the similarities. I will also show, however, that despite the resemblances, there are many significant institutional, historical, and cultural barriers to Mormon involvement in the political organizations that comprise the Christian Right.

Background

The New Christian Right is the modern incarnation of a long tradition of conservative Protestant political activity in the United States. Since the turn of the century, fundamentalist Christians have coalesced into significant political movements at least three distinct times (Wilcox 1992, 4-20). In the 1920s, the Christian Right’s first political battle was against the teaching of evolution in public schools. Although the anti-evolution movement enjoyed only limited success, their organizational and political strategies were fairly sophisticated. Following a relative decline in the 1930s and 1940s, the Christian Right reemerged in the fight against communism in the 1950s and 1960s. The third major wave of conservative Christian activism, which continues today, started in the mid-1970s with the election of born-again Christian Jimmy Carter.

Since Carter’s election over twenty years ago, the New Christian Right (so called to distinguish itself from previous Christian Right movements) has enjoyed mixed success. The most notable organization of the late 1970s and 1980s was the Moral Majority, founded in 1978 by televangelist Jerry Falwell. After an initial period of high-profile success, the Moral Majority’s financial support waned, and in 1989 Falwell disbanded the organization after claiming that it had achieved its goals. Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians wasted no time in picking up where Falwell left off. Pat Robertson, another popular televangelist, immediately organized a new conservative religious organization called the Christian Coalition.
Since its inception in 1989, the Christian Coalition has become the leading Christian Right organization in the U.S. The Christian Coalition claims a current national membership of over 1.4 million members, organized in 1,144 chapters and covering all fifty states (Griffith 1994, A10). In the 1994 elections, this grass-roots oriented organization spent millions of dollars and passed out over 33 million voter guides throughout the country (Shanahan 1994, 3). A recent survey by Campaigns and Elections showed that the Christian Right, primarily through the organizational strength of the Christian Coalition, has become the dominant working majority in eighteen state Republican Parties, and has substantial strength in thirteen other states (Persinos 1994, 22).

Like Jerry Falwell, who claimed to speak for “Catholics, Jews, Protestants, Mormons, and Fundamentalists seeking to restore moral equilibrium to the United States” (Wilcox 1992, xii), the Christian Coalition is open to members of all faiths. Despite their open-membership policy, however, the Christian Coalition is primarily comprised of fundamentalist, Pentecostal, and Charismatic Christians. Mormon membership in the Christian Coalition continues to remain small, however, in spite of the fact that Mormons seem to agree with the Christian Right on most of today's political issues.

Similar Political Behavior

Defining the Christian Right can be very difficult. Some analysts limit membership to born-again Christians, while others include only those who are dues-paying members of Christian Right organizations (Hamilton 1994, 28). The first method is not particularly useful in analyzing Mormon membership in the Christian Right because Mormons may or may not be considered “born-again”; the second method is flawed in the same way that saying only those who pay dues to the Democratic party should be considered Democrats. A more valid measure of membership in the Christian Right movement is political behavior. In this respect, Mormons seem to fit the Christian Right mold quite well. Data from the 1994 KBYU/Utah Colleges Exit Poll administered by Dr. David Magleby, Professor of Political Science at Brigham Young University1, shows a strong correlation between the voting attitudes and behavior of Mormons and the attitudes and behaviors that characterize the conservative Christian movement. Particularly in terms of ideology, partisanship, and social issues, Mormons in Utah appear to fit the Christian Right mold perfectly.

Ideologically, there is consensus that members of the Christian Right are predominately conservative (Hamilton 1994, 28; Green, Guth, and Hill 1993, 87; Wilcox 1989a, 403-4). Data from the BYU exit poll shows that self-identified “active” Mormons in Utah tend to consider themselves substantially more conservative than their inactive-Mormon and non-Mormon neighbors2 (see Figure 1).

![Figure 1 (Magleby 1994)](image)

Data collected by the National Opinion Research Center reveals that while 54 percent of Mormons surveyed classified themselves as conservative, only 40 percent of Evangelical Protestants classify themselves that way (Wald 1992, 82). These studies confirm that Mormons are actually more conservative as a group than the fundamentalist Christians who comprise most of the “official” Christian Right.

Another significant determinant of Christian Right membership is party affiliation. There is a strong and continuous correlation between support of the conservative Christian movement and identification with the Republican Party (Green, Guth and Hill, 87; Wilcox 1989a, 404; Wilcox 1989b, 58). In Utah, 75 percent of all Mormon voters classified themselves as Republicans (Magelby 1994). Nationwide, according to data from the National Opinion Research Center, 57 percent of Mormons classified themselves as Republicans, compared to only 33 percent of the Evangelical Protestants (Wald 1992, 80). The relationship between Mormons and the Republican party is espe-
cially clear when looking at the recent voting behavior of "active" Mormons in Utah (Figure 2).

**Statewide Active-Mormon Vote**

*Although popular conservative Democratic incumbent Bill Orton easily won reelection in Utah's 3rd Congressional District, when voters were asked whether they would support a Republican or Democrat if Bill Orton was not running, an overwhelming majority said they would choose the Republican.*

Once again, Mormon party identification and voting behavior appear to make them natural candidates for inclusion with the Christian Right.

A third well-established measure of support for the Christian Right is position on certain social issues. Members of the Christian Right tend to hold conservative positions on most social issues such as abortion and school prayer (Wald, 227-78). As shown below, active Mormons take very conservative positions on these and other contemporary social issues (Figure 3).

**Active-Mormon Issue Positions**

By nearly every measure, Mormons seem to be more conservative, more Republican, and more in-line with Christian Right issue positions than most other religious groups that currently constitute the conservative Christian movement. In terms of ideology, party affiliation, and social issues, Mormons may even "out-right" the Christian Right. Based on their political behavior patterns, Mormons should be included in the Christian Right.

**Reasons for the Similarities**

The similarities in political attitudes and behavior between Mormons and the conservative Christians can be substantially accounted for by key similarities in their religious values, beliefs, and practices. While both sides may be hesitant to admit it, there is significant overlap in the doctrines of the Mormon church and the various Protestant churches typically associated with the Christian Right. These overlaps are in areas that bare a direct relationship to political behavior.

One significant indicator of support for the Christian Right is an individual's level of religiosity. It has been shown that members of the Christian Coalition are considerably more active in their religious worship than members of their faith who are not part of the Coalition (Wilcox 1989b, 57). Based on the data from the 1994 KBYU/Utah Colleges Exit Poll, 78 of the respondents were Mormon, and over 90 percent of those considered themselves religiously active. How does religiosity translate into participation in the conservative Christian movement? It seems the more devout an individual is in his or her faith, the more likely he or she will attempt to actively promote the values associated with that faith.

In the effort to promote the values connected with their respective religious traditions, the fact that Mormons and members of the Christian Right have been shown to take substantially similar positions on most contemporary issues is not a fluke. Although there are important theological differences between the Mormons and the fundamentalist Protestants, they both believe that the Bible is the word of God, that Jesus Christ is divine, and that he will return to the earth to rule during a Millennium of peace. Both groups are guided by Biblical commandments against adulterous sexual relationships (including a prohibition of homosexuality), against abortion, and against many other modern-day vices.

The combination of similar moral codes based on Christian teachings and high levels of religiosity equates to Mormon and Christian Right political behaviors that seem to mirror each other. Based on this data alone, one would presume a high-level of Mormon membership in the various Christian Right organization. A closer look, however, will show that this is not the case.
Different Motivations, Different Tactics

While similarities in political behavior can be attested to the Mormons' similar religious values, that same value structure also results in several important differences between Mormons and the Christian Right. These deeply rooted differences have been strong enough to preclude Mormons from active participation in Christian Right organizations, and will likely continue to have that effect. Some of the reasons for lack of Mormon participation are the role, policies, and mission of the Mormon church itself, the animosity between Mormons and fundamentalist groups, and the cultural tradition and history of Mormons.

One major reason for the lack of Mormon membership in the formal organizations of the New Christian Right is the official policies of their church regarding institutional political involvement. The church itself employs a specific policy of political non-involvement which prohibits the use of church resources and facilities for political causes (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 1985, 11-12). While this does not mean that the Mormon church is apolitical (it has taken positions on several moral-political issues), it is a significant contrast to the norms of political participation in fundamentalist Christian churches, where religious leaders often play a primary role in politics (e.g., Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson).

In an article examining the relationship of the Mormon church to the then popular Moral Majority, Brinkerhoff, Jacob, and Mackie (1985, 243) conclude that not only is the Mormon church non-political, but that open political involvement is actually inimical to the stated “mission” of the proselytizing church:

The attempt to build the Church (for Mormons this means gaining converts) through the presentation of the virtues of Mormon culture (emphasis on the family, achievements of members, etc.) requires a focus of energies and a distancing from extremism. . . . The late Mormon President Spencer W. Kimball exemplified this focused pragmatism when he stated that while there were some political issues on which the Church might take an institutional stand..., a broad-based political activism should be avoided since “the result would be to divert the Church from its basic mission of teaching the restored gospel of the Lord to the world.”

Rather than the widespread integration of politics and religion found in fundamentalist Christian churches, the Mormon church has tried to remain as politically subtle as possible in order to appeal to the greatest number of potential converts. This focus not only applies to the church as an institution, but also has a significant impact on the lives and levels of political activism of its members.

For active Mormons, the church is second only to the family in terms of loyalty and participation. The Mormon church requires such a high level of commitment and activity from its members that participation in other outside groups is typically limited. This is due in part to the lay nature of the Mormon church, in part to the doctrinal focuses of the importance of the family, and in part to the many time-consuming programs (including missionary work) implemented by the church. Participation in outside groups, especially ones with near-religious vigor like the Christian Right, is difficult for active Mormons due to the established loyalties and significant time constraints resulting from membership in their church.

In addition to the more practical considerations, however, there is a deeper, historical reason Mormons have excluded themselves from Christian Right organizations. Much of the substantial persecution levied upon the Mormon church and its members in the nineteenth century was at the hands of the members of the same churches that now make up the New Christian Right. Although manifestations of the enmity between the Mormons and fundamentalist Christians have toned down over the years, an underlying intolerance remains. A 1985 study of religious social distance in the U.S. found that the “greatest degree of intolerance or social distance manifest by one religious group towards another is that of the Conservative Christians for the Mormons” (Brinkerhoff, Jacob, and Mackie 1985, 241).

The intolerance for Mormons held by many fundamentalist Christians is no secret. Even in their attempts to welcome Mormons into their organizations, fundamentalist Christians often refer to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as a “non-Christian cult” – a very offensive characterization to Mormons. At a recent Christian Coalition Conference, an evangelical was overheard saying that “even though Mormons are a cult, they are welcome in the common moral cause” (Witham 1994, A4). To many Mormons, these hardly represent words of welcome.

As a consequence of Fundamentalist antipathy toward them, Mormons are unlikely to
feel comfortable associating with one of the main sources of anti-Mormon literature. As recently as the 1994 elections, Mormons were credited with helping defeat what would normally be considered a doctrinally sound anti-gay measure in Idaho (Dunlap 1994, 9). Mormon opposition to the initiative was due in part to their historical memory of being persecuted as a minority group, and in part as a response to revelations that the bill’s sponsors hired the same film studio that was used to promote the highly publicized anti-Mormon film, “The Godmakers” (Trillhaase 1994, B2). It is exactly this kind of case that shows how Mormon political behavior is significantly impacted by their unique religious goals and cultural history.

In addition to helping defeat the Christian Right’s anti-gay efforts in Idaho, Mormons and Mormon politicians have often departed from their staunch conservative positions, especially when the rights of a minority group are affected. Although Mormon Representative Earnest Istook (R-Oklahoma) has been selected by new Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich to “take the lead on school prayer” (Merida and Dewar 1994, A1), renowned Mormon Senator Orrin Hatch (R-Utah) has attempted to play a moderating role on such important Christian Right issues as school prayer, abortion, and term limits (Roderick 1994, 170, 213). While neither Hatch nor Istook officially represent the Mormon community, they are representative of the sometimes unpredictable political behavior of Mormons.

Conclusions
The data is incontrovertible: Mormon political behavior on an individual level qualifies them to be included in the broad definition of the Christian Right. Mormons tend to be ideologically conservative, they tend to be Republicans, and they tend to hold traditional positions on social issues. Much of the similarity between Mormons and the Christian Right can be ascribed to the similarities of their value systems. Although theologically different, both have many key doctrines in common.

In spite of their agreement on most socio-religious issues, as Brinkerhoff, Jacob, and Mackie (1987, 247) aptly put it,

...the dynamics of Mormon organizational culture, however, with its emphasis on respectability and moderation and a religious pragmatism that channels most of its energies into church expansion, makes ongoing alliances problematic.

Mormons may act like they belong to the Christian Right, but because of the institutional requirements and doctrinal differences of the Mormon church, together with the historical enmity between the two groups, Mormons will likely never become a significant part of the formal conservative Christian movement.

WORKS CITED


NOTES

1 The 1994 KBYU /Utah Colleges Exit Poll surveyed over 7,000 Utah voters in ninety polling places on November 8, 1994.

2 Active LDS includes voters who classified themselves as either “very active LDS” or “somewhat active LDS.” Inactive LDS includes voters who classified themselves as either “not very active LDS” or “not active LDS.” Non-LDS includes all other voters.