



2018

# Review of Why Liberals Win (Even Win They Lose Elections): How America's Raucous, Nasty, and Mean 'Culture Wars' Make for a More Inclusive Nation, by Stephen Prothero

Neil J. Young

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr2>



Part of the [Mormon Studies Commons](#)

## BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Young, Neil J. (2018) "Review of Why Liberals Win (Even Win They Lose Elections): How America's Raucous, Nasty, and Mean 'Culture Wars' Make for a More Inclusive Nation, by Stephen Prothero," *Mormon Studies Review*: Vol. 5 : No. 1 , Article 10.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18809/msr.2018.0116>

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr2/vol5/iss1/10>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mormon Studies Review by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@byu.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@byu.edu), [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).



BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

**Title**      Review of *Why Liberals Win (Even Win They Lose Elections): How America's Raucous, Nasty, and Mean 'Culture Wars' Make for a More Inclusive Nation*, by Stephen Prothero

**Author**     Neil J. Young

**Reference**   *Mormon Studies Review* 5 (2018): 121–125.

**ISSN**        2156-8022 (print), 2156-8030 (online)

**DOI**         <https://doi.org/10.18809/msr.2018.0116>

Stephen Prothero. *Why Liberals Win (Even When They Lose Elections): How America's Raucous, Nasty, and Mean 'Culture Wars' Make for a More Inclusive Nation*. New York: HarperOne, 2016.

*Reviewed by Neil J. Young*

*Mormon Studies Review*, vol. 5, 2018, pp. 121–26

© 2018 Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18809/msr.2018.0116> Journal DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18809/mimr.21568030>

DEPENDING ON HOW ONE FEELS ABOUT THE 2016 ELECTION, reading a book titled *Why Liberals Win (Even When They Lose Elections)* might seem like either a deluded endeavor or much-needed balm. In his latest work, Stephen Prothero argues that liberals stand on the victorious side of history, if not always the ballot box, because they have won every culture war battle since the nation's founding. Liberals win, Prothero contends, because conservatives launch culture wars to preserve a way of life that has already begun to change, an ill-fated effort that cannot turn back the progressive forces of history that churn ever forward toward fuller inclusion. That process not only grants victories to liberals but also mainstreams liberalism as the embattled liberal causes of one era become the accepted "American values" of the next.

Prothero, the author of several acclaimed books on American religious history, explains in his introduction that he came to this project because of the uproar over the so-called Ground Zero Mosque, the Islamic community center opened in lower Manhattan in 2011. Rather than seeing the contemporary crisis as shaped by the recent events of 9/11 and the rise of American anti-Islamism, Prothero looks to the earliest battles "over moral and religious questions" (p. 2) in the nation's history to understand how one group of Americans have repeatedly denied other groups full participation in American public life and sought to impose their own values and beliefs on the country. "I would

need,” Prothero explains, “to explore the culture wars before ‘the culture wars’” (p. 2).

In historicizing America’s culture wars, Prothero’s book joins a small group of esteemed recent works, including Andrew Hartman’s important *A War for the Soul of America*.<sup>1</sup> While Prothero notes that Daniel K. Williams’s history of the religious right traces the culture wars back to the 1920s, the bulk of this scholarship, however, has repeatedly told a story that begins in the 1960s. Disrupting the historical narrative of America’s culture wars as a post-1960s phenomenon is the book’s most significant contribution.<sup>2</sup> Prothero also challenges another dominant trope of the literature, one established by James Davison Hunter’s landmark 1991 book, *Culture Wars*, and reinforced by Patrick Buchanan’s barn-burner speech at the 1992 Republican National Convention (both cited by Prothero), namely, that the nation’s culture wars represented a series of skirmishes between religious conservatives and secular progressives.<sup>3</sup> Prothero’s longer view of the culture wars—he begins his account with the election of 1800—dismantles these governing frameworks and upends guiding assumptions. The book’s expansive time line means for Prothero that most of America’s culture wars played out between religious Americans and other religious Americans. These were fights for the soul of America indeed, but they were waged by religious people who could not allow minority religious beliefs and practices to take root in a Protestant nation. Before the 1960s, Prothero argues, America’s culture wars erupted over the challenges of pluralism, not the struggle between religion and secularism.

Prothero’s reconceptualization of the culture wars is inventive, but does it work? Unfortunately, the book’s structure and focus suggest not. Rather than a long history that examines how America’s culture wars

---

1. Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

2. Daniel K. Williams, *God’s Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

3. James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

arose and developed since the Early Republic, *Why Liberals Win* presents five carefully selected case studies that Prothero argues prove his debatable thesis. The first episode treats the election of 1800 that saw the Federalists and their Congregationalist minister backers square off against Jeffersonians and “infidels,” while the other four include the anti-Catholic crusades of the nineteenth century, the anti-Mormon era that followed, prohibition in the 1920s and 1930s, and, finally, the infamous culture wars that have taken place since the 1970s.

Prothero acknowledges that his approach is “episodic rather than exhaustive” (p. 8), but the selections highlight more brightly what is missing than they illuminate his thesis. The Civil War, the Scopes “Monkey” Trial, the New Deal, both world wars, and the civil rights movement, to name just a few battles that, at least in one case literally, tore the nation apart, are relegated to the sidelines or not mentioned at all. In their absence, the episodes under examination strain to support the argument drawn from them.

They also indicate the risk of projecting contemporary terms or usages onto the past. This becomes especially clear in the case of the book’s two most important terms, *liberal* and *conservative*. For Prothero, conservatives are the white (male) Protestant establishment, atavistic belligerents who defend their cultural and political dominance against each wave of demographic change in the nation. In this setup, nineteenth-century Catholics and Mormons thus become “liberals” because they represent the forces of change that spur the nation to more deeply embrace its democratic values, despite the fact that most Catholics and Mormons in the 1800s would hardly have identified as liberals. Prothero is right that Catholics, Mormons, and other persecuted minorities called upon the nation’s liberal principles, especially those expressed in the Constitution, to stake their claims to full citizenship and participation in American public life, but their causes were scarcely championed by liberals. With longer views of both anti-Catholicism and anti-Mormonism that extend beyond the discrete events of Prothero’s account, the scenario becomes even more complicated. In the name of progressivism, certain white Protestants backed all sorts of causes in the late

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, from public health initiatives to religious freedom arguments, which were inspired by latent if not outright hostility to Catholics and Mormons.

The book's chapter on the "Mormon question" may be most useful to explore, not only because it will likely be of greatest interest to readers of this journal but also because Prothero admits that of the five episodes under examination, "this one was the closest to a draw" (p. 135). In Prothero's telling, the nation really wrestled with two Mormon questions: polygamy and theocracy. Anti-Mormons branded polygamy as immoral and evil, an anti-Christian perversion that had to be driven out of the nation. But Mormonism's theocracy also threatened the American system because absolute loyalty to Joseph Smith or Brigham Young undermined individual conscience—the basis of a functioning democracy—and fostered tyranny and political corruption. No less than the fate of both Christian civilization and the American republic were at stake, Mormonism's critics loudly and violently contended, and Prothero correctly shows how nineteenth-century anti-Mormonism drew directly from the deep well of anti-Catholic and anti-Muslim arguments used in earlier moments.

None of this history will be new for readers here. Yet it is to Prothero's credit how he renders so many elements of early Mormonism so efficiently and engagingly. (Indeed, this is true of all the book; it is highly readable and often engrossing.) But, as in other chapters, the weight of examples does not amount to a persuasive argument.

Facing persecution and violence, Mormons defended polygamy with theological, sociological, and Constitutional arguments. In these efforts, "liberal defenders of religious liberty largely abandoned them" (p. 129), Prothero acknowledges, an admission that would seem to undermine the book's central argument while also suggesting that LDS polygamy looks liberal only when viewed from a contemporary political context that upholds sexual freedom as a cornerstone of liberalism. The resolution of the "Mormon question," however, presents the most damaging challenge to Prothero's thesis. Rather than winning the battle over polygamy, the LDS Church "finally bowed to government pressure"

and “conformed to the norm of monogamy” (pp. 135, 136). Prothero is right that the ban on polygamy paved the way for American acceptance of Mormons, although, as J. B. Haws has expertly demonstrated, this process continued late into the twentieth century with nearly as many setbacks as forward steps.<sup>4</sup> But the inclusion of Mormons into the American mainstream after the end of polygamy signaled the accommodation of Mormonism to traditional American values of sexual propriety and church-state separation, not a liberal culture war victory that marked the transition to a new norm of tolerating sexual diversity. That Mormons became some of the most steadfast defenders of sexual conservatism in the twentieth century, including spearheading critical political efforts against the equal rights amendment, abortion, and same-sex marriage, complicates both how we understand the polygamy battle as a “culture war” and how Mormons figure in its longer history.<sup>5</sup>

In his history of theological battles within the Southern Baptist Convention, Barry Hankins observes that “nuance . . . is the first casualty of culture war.”<sup>6</sup> This may be the case for culture war’s combatants, but it cannot be true of its chroniclers. In *Why Liberals Win*, Stephen Prothero reports that he “discovered a ‘culture wars cycle’ that propels the nation from one cultural conflict to the next” (p. 18). Locating historical patterns remains a fundamental task for scholars of the past, but history does not move in cycles, nor is it a propulsive story of secured progress, as Prothero concludes. Instead, as history shows us over and over again, everything is contingent; nothing is certain. Our job as historians is to wade into that messy past, armed with questions of causality, context, and change over time. At the same time, our obligation as citizens, it now seems increasingly clear, is to notice how the world constantly shifts under our feet and to understand not who ultimately

---

4. J. B. Haws, *The Mormon Image in the American Mind: Fifty Years of Public Perception* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

5. Neil J. Young, *We Gather Together: The Religious Right and the Problem of Interfaith Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

6. Barry Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon: Southern Baptist Conservatives and American Culture* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002), 115.

wins but instead how different peoples are made vulnerable by each new adjustment.

**Neil J. Young** is an Affiliated Research Scholar with the Schar School of Policy and Government at George Mason University. He is the author of *We Gather Together: The Religious Right and the Problem of Interfaith Politics* (Oxford, 2015).

---

William P. MacKinnon, ed. *At Sword's Point, Part 1: A Documentary History of the Utah War to 1858*. Vol. 10 of the series *Kingdom in the West: The Mormons and the American Frontier*, edited by Will Bagley. Norman, OK: Arthur H. Clark Company, 2008.

William P. MacKinnon, ed. *At Sword's Point, Part 2: A Documentary History of the Utah War, 1858–1859*. Vol. 11 of the series *Kingdom in the West: The Mormons and the American Frontier*, edited by Will Bagley. Norman, OK: Arthur H. Clark Company, 2016.

*Reviewed by Brent M. Rogers*

*Mormon Studies Review*, vol. 5, 2018, pp. 126–31

© 2018 Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18809/msr.2018.0117> Journal DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18809/mimsr.21568030>

IN TWO HEFTY AND WIDE-RANGING VOLUMES that represent the culmination of some sixty years of dedicated and careful labor, William P. MacKinnon delivers the most thorough investigation into the complex history of the Utah War to date. Readers will have to wade through more than eleven hundred pages of documents and editorial commentary—as well as more than fifty pages of bibliographic data—to realize the benefits of MacKinnon's sleuthing, but anyone who takes the time to carefully sort through the unexpected turns and intrigue of MacKinnon's presentation will ultimately be rewarded with a deeper