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Who Is Leaving the Church?

Demographic Predictors of Ex-Latter-day Saint Status in the Pew Religious Landscape Survey

Stephen Cranney

Who is leaving the Church? The blogosphere and informal ward council discussions have no shortage of speculation on this point, but there is surprisingly very little representative research to help shed light on this issue in a clear, systematic way. Because members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints make up a small fraction of the total population, most random surveys that ask about religion and former religion pick up only a handful of people with a Latter-day Saint background or affiliation in any wave. (For example, the 2016 General Social Survey reported only twenty-three members.) Numbers like this do not make Latter-day Saint research from standard surveys completely futile (especially if multiple years are combined), but they certainly dull the precision needed for advanced analysis and severely limit the range of questions that can be investigated.

However, in 2014 the Pew organization conducted their Religious Landscape Study, a survey that asked the right questions about current faith and childhood faith and had a large enough sample size (35,071 adults) to provide the necessary critical mass of Church members (641 respondents) and ex-members (221 respondents) to be able to investigate who they are beyond basic commonsensical characteristics, like a tendency for members to live in Utah. To investigate the question of who leaves the Church, I draw on two groups: respondents who were both raised as Latter-day Saints and continue to self-identify as such (446 respondents), and people who were raised as Latter-day Saints but no longer identify with the Church (221). These groups are pooled together to form a categorical subset of individuals in the Pew Survey

who have a Latter-day Saint background. By comparing the group of people in the latter group to the people in the former group (hereafter referred to as “lifelong Latter-day Saints”), this analysis tests for which characteristics are associated with people having left the Church, although this analysis does not cover people who may have converted after childhood and then left.

METHODS

The Pew Religious Landscape Survey (PRLS) was a large, random telephone-based survey conducted in the summer and fall of 2014. Interviews covered both Spanish and English speakers but did not cover institutionalized individuals or speakers of other languages who were not fluent enough in Spanish or English to participate in the survey. In all, the survey covered approximately 97 percent of the total population. This study focuses on the basic sociodemographics of the ex-Latter-day Saint population, although the PRLS contains much more information on different religious variables, such as beliefs about God and the Bible.

Table 1 presents the basic summary statistics along with comparison-of-means tests for ex-Latter-day Saints and lifelong Latter-day Saints in the United States. These tables are weighted using the provided weights, so the numbers do not add up to the raw numbers in the survey. (Survey weights are used to assign different values to each respondent so that taken together the sample reflects the characteristics of the general U.S. population. For example, if the survey had a higher proportion of white, college-educated people than the U.S. population, then the answers of people who fit into this category might be “worth” less when it comes to calculating averages.) Table 2 presents a binary logistic analysis of predictors for leaving the Church. The variable coding schema is presented in the footnotes of the tables. It is worth noting, especially in cases where the groups being considered are small, that the lack of significant difference does not necessarily mean the two groups are equal, since there may be a difference that the survey is not large enough to pick up.

RESULTS

How Many Are Leaving?

How many people are leaving the Church? According to these weighted estimates, 191 people with a Latter-day Saint background left, compared to 379 who did not, meaning that about one-third of those with

a Latter-day Saint background have left the Church.¹ Another relevant statistic is how this number compares to those who are joining the Church, since one number being higher than the other suggests a net shrinking or growing of the Church (not taking into account the “natural growth” from childbirths) over the long run. Here, about 172 members of the Church are converts (versus the 379 who were born in the Church), representing about 31 percent of the Church, which is not significantly different statistically from the number of people leaving. In other words, as of 2014 the Church appears to be treading water in terms of replacing those who leave with converts, meaning that any real growth comes from the natural growth of members of the Church having children. However, since these numbers represent the departure and conversion of members not only now but also in the past, it can be legitimately asked whether there is a net outflow from the Church in the more recent years that is obscured. For example, if in 2007 there was a net surplus of converts, but in 2014 there was a net surplus of ex-Latter-day Saints, then the Church may be hemorrhaging members and bringing the overall numbers in 2014 into stasis, when previously it would have been in positive territory.

Thankfully, we can investigate this claim, since the first wave of the PRLS was fielded in 2007, and performing the same calculations yields the same results—statistically equivalent outflows to inflows. The data may not be large enough to explore more refined variations, and the sample size may, as noted above, obscure smaller inflows and outflows that are not detectable with this data, but given the largest publicly available dataset of self-identified Latter-day Saints, the most warranted conclusion is that the Church is in a state of stasis in terms of religious switching. As noted previously, however, this does not take into account the potential natural growth of children being born versus members dying, or the potential growth from population momentum, which could cause the Church to grow in the medium term due to its age structure, even in the absence of above-replacement fertility or conversions in the Church.

1. Since these numbers measure self-identification and not necessarily formal membership, they may vary from numbers derived from official Church membership records.

Table 1: Weighted Means from the Pew Religious Landscape Survey

	<i>Ex-Latter-day Saint Mean</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>Lifelong Latter-day Saint Mean</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>Difference</i>
Age	5.01	.27	4.83	.19	.19
Male	.6	.04	.48	.03	.12*
White non-Hispanic	.8	.04	.93	.02	-.12**
Black non-Hispanic	.04	.02	0	0	.03*
Hispanic	.04	.02	.04	.01	0
Other race	.11	.03	.03	.01	.08**
Utah	.26	.04	.34	.03	-.09
Married	.5	.05	.72	.03	-.21***
Cohabiting	.13	.03	.01	.01	.12***
Divorced	.16	.04	.04	.01	.12**
Separated	.01	.01	.02	.01	-.01
Widowed	.02	.01	.02	.01	0
Never married	.18	.03	.19	.03	-.02
Education	4.4	.14	4.95	.1	-.55***
Income	5.2	.19	5.61	.15	-.43*
No. of children	1.78	.13	2.49	.13	-.71***
Politically liberal	3.17	.1	2.28	.05	.9***

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Age: 1 = <25, 2 = 25-29, 3 = 30-34, 4 = 35-39, 5 = 40-44, 6 = 45-49, 7 = 50-54, 8 = 55-59, 9 = 60-64, 10 = 65-69, 11 = 70-74, 12 = 75-79, 13 = 80-84, 14 = 85-89, 15 = 90+

Education: 1 = Less than high school, 2 = Some high school, 3 = High school graduate, 4 = Some college, 5 = Two-year degree, 6 = Four-year degree, 7 = Some postgraduate school, 8 = Postgraduate or professional degree

Income: 1 = < \$10,000, 2 = \$10-20,000, 3 = \$20-30,000, 4 = \$30-40,000, 5 = \$40-50,000, 6 = \$50-75,000, 7 = \$75-100,000, 8 = \$100-150,000, 9 = \$150,000+

Political orientation: 1 = Very conservative, 2 = Conservative, 3 = Moderate, 4 = Liberal, 5 = Very liberal

Table 2: Predictors of Having Left the Church (log odds)

Dependent variable: Ex-Latter-day Saint status

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Male	.43 (.22)	.25 (.24)	.24 (.24)	.22 (.24)	0.64* (0.26)
Age	-.01 (.03)	.06 (.04)	.07 (.04)	.13** (.05)	0.11* (0.05)
Utah	-.41 (.25)	-.52* (.26)	-.44 (.26)	-.39 (.26)	-0.64* (.29)
Cohabiting		3.17*** (.67)	2.85*** (.68)	2.44*** (.68)	2.95*** (.82)
Divorced		1.81*** (.38)	1.58*** (.42)	1.31** (.42)	1.53*** (.43)
Separated		.50 (.96)	.04 (1.09)	.32 (1.24)	.16 (.99)
Widowed		-.53 (.62)	-.76 (.74)	-.67 (.72)	-.37 (.84)
Never been married		.42 (.35)	.27 (.36)	-.42 (.40)	.21 (.40)
Black non-Hispanic		3.28** (1.17)	3.30** (1.23)	4.21* (1.71)	2.65* (1.29)
Hispanic		.28 (.63)	.19 (.67)	.13 (.70)	-.19 (.74)
Other race		1.73*** (.50)	1.69*** (.49)	1.59** (.49)	1.60* (.67)
Education			-.17* (.07)	-.16* (.07)	-.20** (.08)
Income			-.01 (.06)	.0002 (.06)	.05 (.06)
No. of children				-.35*** (.09)	
Politically liberal					1.02*** (.16)
Constant	-.74** (.26)	-1.51*** (.35)	-.65 (.60)	-.10 (.61)	-3.93*** (.77)
Observations	637	628	577	573	562
Log Likelihood	-391.66	-327.83	-302.84	-292.09	-239.28
Akaike Inf. Crit.	791.31	679.66	633.69	614.19	508.57

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Log odds are reported

Age: same as table 1

Education: same as table 1

Income: same as table 1

Political orientation: same as table 1

Where Do They Go?

Of those in the survey who left the Church, 34 weighted cases (about 18 percent) switched to evangelical Protestant groups. These groups are generally (but not exclusively) characterized by having a more conservative bent and are focused on salvation through grace and propagating the Christian message. Another 15 (8 percent) switched to “mainline Protestant” groups. These groups are characterized by more liberal leanings, with many ordaining women priests and performing same-sex marriages. Another 4 switched to other Latter-day Saint restorationist movement branches, 4 to Buddhism, 10 to generic Christianity, and a handful to the other categories. However, by far the largest group (58 percent) chose to become “nones” and have no religious affiliation.

Social/Political Issues

While this Pew Survey did not ask directly about why people leave, the characteristics of ex-Latter-day Saints can shed some light on this question. In particular, some speculate that a significant portion of Latter-day Saints leave the Church over the Church’s generally conservative bent toward social, gender, or political issues.

Ex-Latter-day Saints do appear to be more liberal than those who stay (see tables 1 and 2). However, the political switch may be less of a switch from “conservative” to “liberal” than from “conservative” to “moderate.” Contrary to stereotypes about liberal ex-Latter-day Saints, many ex-Latter-day Saints (27 percent) still identify as politically conservative, with 39 percent identifying as political moderates, and only a minority (35 percent) identifying as politically liberal.

Finally, it is telling that those who leave do not tend to switch to liberal denominations but rather into irreligiosity (a group that tends to be more liberal), although when they do switch into another religion, they are about twice as likely to move into an evangelical Protestant group as they are to move into a liberal Protestant denomination (the difference between the evangelical Protestant group and the liberal Protestant group is statistically significant at $p = .016$). The turn to irreligiosity does not suggest that otherwise religious people are leaving for denominations that better comport with their social liberalism, but rather that something is causing them to leave religion altogether in both its liberal and more conservative variations.

Gender

Related to the issue of leaving over social issues is the question of gender. For a religion with an all-male priesthood that treats the notion of gender seriously, it is worth investigating whether women are more likely to leave than men. In this sample, men are overrepresented among those who have left; these results comport with prior findings in the large American Religious Identification Survey that men tend to disproportionately leave the Church.² This difference may be a Latter-day Saint-specific manifestation of the fact that in the United States men tend to be less religious than women.³

Race and Hispanic Status

The fact that the Church in the United States is predominantly white raises the question of whether racial minorities are more likely to leave. As revealed in the summary statistics, black and “other race” individuals tend to be more likely to leave the Church. Hispanic status produced an insignificant effect. Furthermore, the racial minority effect remains in the regression analysis, suggesting that, for example, their lower likelihood of staying is not due to them being less likely to live in Utah. Furthermore, the effects here are substantively large. The log odds that are reported in table 2 are difficult to substantively interpret, but given table 2, model 2’s parameters and using predicted probabilities, a white non-Hispanic male who is married and living outside of Utah has a 28 percent chance of having left the Church, whereas his counterpart who is black but is otherwise similar has a 91 percent chance of having left the Church. However, these effects are derived from very small sample sizes, with only 0.5 (due to weighting) black members who have stayed versus the 6.7 who left, so the effect sizes are tenuous. The “other race” category is perhaps a little more reasonable at 8 who have stayed and 20 who have left, giving a predicted probability from model 2 above at 69 percent.

2. Rick Phillips and Ryan T. Cragun, *Mormons in the United States 1990–2008: Socio-demographic Trends and Regional Differences* (Hartford, Conn.: Trinity College, 2008), <http://commons.trincoll.edu/aris/files/2011/12/Mormons2008.pdf>.

3. Marta Trzebiatowska and Steve Bruce, *Why Are Women More Religious Than Men?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Age and Utah Residence

Ex-Latter-day Saints do not appear to be any younger or older than lifelong Latter-day Saints, either in the summary statistics (table 1) or in the regression analysis (table 2—except when controlling for liberalism and number of children, and in those cases directionality is difficult to discern). Ex-Latter-day Saints also appear to be less likely to reside in Utah in the summary statistics (34 percent versus 26 percent, but this barely misses the cutoff for significance at $p = .065$), and the Utah effect is sporadically significant in the regression analysis, suggesting that, whether because they are more likely to leave when growing up outside of Utah or because they are more likely to move outside of Utah after they leave (or a combination of both), ex-Latter-day Saints are disproportionately found outside of Utah compared to Latter-day Saints who did not leave.

Socioeconomic Status

In the summary statistics, ex-Latter-day Saints tend to be less educated, with lower income. While distinct, these findings conceptually support prior research that has shown that, unlike most religions, for Latter-day Saints education is positively associated with activity.⁴ However, when education is controlled for, income becomes insignificant, suggesting that those who stay in the Church are wealthier because they are more educated.

Marital Status and Children

Unsurprisingly, ex-Latter-day Saint couples are more likely to be cohabiting and have fewer children. Divorce is one of the strongest and most robust predictors of having left the Church. Again, the log odds that are reported in table 2 are difficult to substantively interpret, but given table 2 and model 2's parameters and using predicted probabilities, the divorced person with a Latter-day Saint background has a 70 percent chance of having left the Church, while a married person with a Latter-day Saint background has a 28 percent chance of having left.

4. Stan L. Albrecht and Tim B. Heaton, "Secularization, Higher Education, and Religiosity," *Review of Religious Research* 26, no. 1 (1984): 43–58; Ray M. Merrill, Joseph L. Lyon, and William J. Jensen, "Lack of a Secularizing Influence of Education on Religious Activity and Parity among Mormons," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42, no. 1 (2003): 113–24.

DISCUSSION

I have found a number of basic differences between those who have left the Church and those who have stayed: those who have left are more likely to be divorced, less educated, less wealthy, more liberal (or moderate, as the case may be); to have fewer children; to be cohabiting; and to be racial minorities.

Because there is no information on *when* people left the Church, it is difficult to speculate about why ex-Latter-day Saints tend to be divorced more than those who remain in the Church. It is theoretically plausible that the trauma of undergoing a divorce led to a loss of faith, activity, and ultimately identification with the Church; it is also possible that a loss of faith led to intermarital strife with a member spouse; finally, it is possible that Latter-day Saint marriages tend to have lower divorce rates overall. Some incidental support exists for this last point in the fact that the Latter-day Saint sample here has a significantly lower chance of being in the divorced category than the general non-Latter-day Saint PRLS sample, whereas the ex-Latter-day Saint sample does not show a statistically significant difference with the general sample. This suggests that ex-members may simply lose whatever Latter-day Saint-specific protections against divorce that may exist.

Similarly, there are a number of theoretically plausible stories for why ex-Latter-day Saints tend to be less educated and have lower incomes. It could be that there is a Latter-day Saint emphasis on education and occupational success that leads to higher incomes and more education, or it could be that people are more likely to stay in the Church if the lifestyle is working out for them socioeconomically.

Finally, the racial effects found here lend themselves to any number of interpretations, but perhaps the most reasonable is that being a racial minority in a predominantly white Church may cause its own stresses that make continued activity and identification with the Church less likely.

While on their face the political findings support the familiar narrative of liberal latter-day Saints leaving over social issues, the fact that only a minority of ex-Latter-day Saints identify as liberals and that hardly any of them switch to liberal Protestant denominations nuances this perspective. While social issues are undoubtedly salient for some people's exodus from the Church, it is likely that this narrative receives a disproportionate amount of attention in informal and online discourse on this subject, and the size of the liberal Latter-day Saint exodus over social issues should not be exaggerated.

This brief empirical treatment has outlined the general contours of who, sociodemographically speaking, is leaving the Church. Hopefully future surveys will continue to provide large-*N* data that include questions on both current and former religion.

Stephen Cranney is a Washington, D.C.-area statistician, married father of four, and lame-duck scoutmaster in his ward. He has a dual PhD in sociology and demography from the University of Pennsylvania, is a Nonresident Fellow at Baylor University's Institute for the Studies of Religion, and has published nineteen peer-reviewed articles, specializing in fertility intentions (why people want the number of children they do), religiosity, and sexuality.