Political Perceptions Among A Peculiar People: Conservatism in Committed vs. Less Committed Latter-day Saints

Jacob Robertson
Stephanie Cardon

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/sigma

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/sigma/vol21/iss1/6

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sigma: Journal of Political and International Studies by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
Katie A. Rees, photographer
As religion becomes more entangled with politics, scholars of political behavior must understand religion's impact. Drawing on Wald, Owen, and Hill's theory of political cohesion in churches, we hypothesized that as religious commitment increased among members of the LDS Church, so would adherence to the conservative ideology most members share. Measures of ideology, party identification, and vote for the House of Representatives taken from the 2002 Utah Colleges Exit Poll confirms this hypothesis. The pattern was most apparent in the vote for the House of Representatives. These findings raise important questions about the possibility of political diversity in churches that require high levels of commitment.

With the emergence of the Christian Right over the past twenty years, it has become apparent that the nature of religion's effect on politics is changing in the United States. Religion is becoming more politicized. Religion played a prominent role in the 2000 presidential campaign as George W. Bush and Al Gore both spoke openly and often about their faith. Since the election, George W. Bush has devoted substantial resources to "faith-based initiatives," which the White House calls a "bold new

Special Thanks
We would like to thank everyone who made this paper possible. We appreciate the diligent political science and statistics students who organized and carried out the exit poll under the direction of Kelly Patterson and Greg Snow. We would also like to thank Monica Francisco for her contributions to the methodology section. We are also grateful to Dr. Kelly Patterson and the editorial staff of Sigma for their patience and feedback on earlier drafts of the paper.
approach to government's role in helping those in need" (White House 2003). Olson and Jelen note the explosion of literature about politics and religion since Jerry Falwell promised to alter the political landscape when he founded the Moral Majority in 1979 (1998). As religion and politics become more intertwined in the United States, it is increasingly important to study religion's influence on political behavior.

Defining religion proves more difficult than other demographic variables such as income, education, gender, or race. Generally, scholars of politics and religion include three religious dimensions that affect people’s political orientations: belonging, belief, and behavior (Kohut et al. 2000, 12-14). Belonging refers to a person's religious tradition or denomination. In the past, this was political scientists' primary measure of religious influence. However, there is a growing sense that denominational associations are becoming less important because of the diversity of belief and practice within different denominations (Welch and Legee 1991). Additionally, defining religious affiliation is somewhat problematic because churches range from autonomous congregations to large hierarchical organizations. Kohut et al. (2000) have found a useful compromise by dividing churches into religious traditions which include Evangelical Protestant, mainline Protestant, black Protestant, Catholic, non-traditional conservative Christian (Mormons, Eastern Orthodox), and non-Christian (Jews, Muslims).

In order to explain the variation inside the different religious traditions, we look at various levels of commitment. Commitment includes the belief and behavior dimensions (Kohut et al. 2000). Belief refers to a person's religious orthodoxy. The two most common survey questions used to measure orthodoxy are whether respondents believe the Bible is the “literal word of God” and whether they have been “born again.” Christians who are more orthodox in their beliefs answer that they believe the Bible is the “literal word of God” and that they have been “born again.” The most common measures of behavior include questions about church attendance and private religious practices such as prayer. Of course, respondents who attend church meetings frequently and pray daily are highly committed.

The focus of this paper is to measure how commitment levels affect political behavior and attitudes. Instead of examining how different traditions or denominations influence adherents' attitudes and behavior, we will study the effect of different levels of commitment within a denomination.

**Religious Commitment and Political Cohesion within a Denomination**

Before asking whether or not religious commitment affects a person's politics, we must ask why it would. After all, the main purpose of most churches is not to influence politics but to find God. In spite of this, Wald, Owen, and Hill found that there were high levels of political cohesion in “strong churches” (1990). As a theoretical basis for measuring the political cohesion of churches, they surveyed existing theories of social cohesion in small
groups and created a model incorporating such factors as "social cohesion, social identity, cognitive style, and social similarity" (1990, 199–202). The most important part of their model incorporates Kelley's definition of "strong churches" (Wald, Owen, and Hill 1990, 207; Kelley 1977). Although Kelley's study seeks to explain the characteristics of growing churches, his model is helpful in understanding uniform political behavior in church groups. Both growing churches and politically cohesive churches exhibit high degrees of social solidarity.

Wald, Owen, and Hill identify five important qualities of churches with high solidarity. First, they are certain they have the truth. This promotes unity within the church because it reduces the number of possible positions a person can take down to two—right and wrong. Second, cohesive churches emphasize that they are different from other churches. This idea draws on Turner's analysis that cohesive groups emphasize their social marginality (1987). Third, unified churches adhere to an orthodox theology. They tend to score high on questions that ask if they believe the Bible is the literal word of God. This creates unity because there is less room for a variety of interpretations of church doctrine. Fourth, strong churches encourage members to pray frequently. Fifth, there are high rates of public worship. Public worship creates cohesion because church attendance increases interaction, and prayer reinforces the church's influence in daily behavior.

Wald, Owen, and Hill conclude that churches that exhibit the qualities of a strong church will be politically cohesive because, although churches are a secondary political organization, strong churches seek to become important in all aspects of their members' lives. Not only will committed members of the congregations share a similar religious perspective, but they will share similar social and political views. Based on this theory of political cohesiveness of churches, we hypothesize that as members become less committed to their church (if it is a strong church), their political views will become more diverse.

Political Solidarity in the LDS Church

To test our hypothesis of religious commitment and political cohesion, we chose to examine The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints because it meets Wald, Owen, and Hill's conditions for a politically cohesive church. First, the LDS church is a unique religion. Previously, many religious surveys grouped Mormons with Protestants. However, because "belonging provides a social context for behavior and belief," Mormons and Protestants should be classified separately (Kohut et al. 2000). In other words, a person could not move comfortably between the two traditions without significantly altering behavior and belief. By looking at a religion that so strongly distinguishes itself from other religions, we have a good example of a church with the first two characteristics of a strong church. The LDS Church distinguishes itself by claiming authority on matters of ultimate truth, and the LDS Church makes an effort to distinguish itself from other churches and religious movements.
In addition, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a good organization with which to test our hypothesis because it adheres to an orthodox doctrine. As previously mentioned, political scientists generally measure orthodoxy by asking respondents whether they believe the Bible to be the literal word of God and whether they have been born again. However, because the LDS Church distinguishes itself from other religious movements, including the born-again movement, it may score lower on a traditional orthodoxy scale. Results of questions about the Bible may also be misleading because members believe that there were errors in the Bible’s translation; nevertheless, they may be shown to hold more orthodox views when the Bible is combined with other LDS scriptures. Most important for the purposes of this paper is that the LDS Church maintains an authoritative interpretation on most of the key doctrines.

A conservative in Massachusetts is not the same as a conservative in Utah.

The high rates of private prayer and public worship also make the Mormon Church a good church for testing our hypothesis. Church members are strongly encouraged to attend their church meetings every week and to pray frequently. Data from the Utah Colleges Exit Poll suggests that for the most part, members of the LDS Church comply. Among Utah voters, the majority of which are Mormons, 68% attend a church meeting at least once a week, and 72% of Utah voters claim they pray more than once a day.

Another reason The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints will provide a good test for our hypothesis is its relative political unity. The LDS Church and Evangelical Protestants occupy the most conservative end of the liberal-conservative continuum (Kohut et al. 2000, 36-7). Unsurprisingly, 63% of Mormons are Republican or lean toward Republican (Kohut et al. 2000, 152; Wald 1992, 79–81). Mormons’ conservative identification could be a result of the combination of the church’s conservative stand on social issues such as abortion and gay marriage, its patriarchal structure, and its largely homogenous population within the United States. Thus, we know that the LDS tradition is largely conservative, which means that we have a good reference point to measure any divergence in political views among its members. Finally, since Wald, Owen, and Hill base their model on Kelley’s description of strong churches, it is important to note that Kelley uses The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as a key example of a strong church (Kelley 1977).

Measuring commitment and political attitudes and behavior

We operationalize our hypothesis that political cohesion will decrease as religious commitment decreases by asking voters, as part of the Utah Colleges Exit Poll, to rate themselves on a church activity scale of very active, somewhat
active, not very active and not active. We then separate the LDS voters and cross-tabulate the results with three different measures of political attitudes and behavior including placement on a liberal-conservative ideology scale, party identification, and vote in the race for the U.S. House of Representatives in three different congressional districts.

Scholars of religion and politics have discussed strategies for measuring religious commitment at length, but for the purposes of this paper, we use the level of activity question. While this may not be appropriate as a general measure of commitment for all religions, among Latter-day Saints "activity" is a broad term which denotes a member's participation in church worship services and activities. Members can "go inactive" for a variety of reasons, most of which account for traditional measures of religious commitment, namely orthodoxy, attendance, and personal worship practices. Thus, these three measures are essentially combined under the term "religious commitment." Patterns in answers to questions about church attendance and private prayer are similar to levels of activity (Appendix).

We choose three measures of political attitudes and behavior from the Exit Poll questionnaire to account for weaknesses in each of the individual measures. While the liberal-conservative scale provides a good sense of how a voter feels about certain issues, it is not precise. A conservative in Massachusetts is not the same as a conservative in Utah. Also, a person may be liberal on social issues but conservative on fiscal issues. Party identification is a more specific measure of political attitudes because the parties have specific platforms. However, people often say they do not identify with either party although their ideology and voting behavior show definite political beliefs. The vote is the most specific measure because it represents how voters translate their beliefs into actions. They may claim a certain party affiliation but regularly vote for candidates of another party. This sort of behavior is rare, however, because party identification and the vote are highly correlated. Thus, using these three measures of political behavior provides a more complete account of political belief.

Methodology

The data for the Utah Colleges Exit Poll were obtained through a stratified, multi-staged cluster sample with a small margin of error. Stratification was used to ensure that the sample provided a good representation of all Utah voters and minimized the margin of error. Some counties, which we termed "certainty counties," were automatically included in the sample for various reasons. Sanpete, Cache, Weber, Salt Lake, Utah, Washington, and Iron counties were all chosen because schools participating in the exit poll were located in each, and Davis County was chosen because of its large population.

The first stratum was designated by congressional district boundary so that all three districts would be represented. Because Utah is mostly Republican, and to ensure both parties were represented in the sample, each strata were created based on percent of Democratic vote. The percent Democratic vote (in one district, the percent non-Republican vote) was calculated by the votes from the 1998 House election. This was then used to stratify the non-certainty counties within each district. Neyman allocation was then used to select the non-certainty counties which would be polled and then used again to select which polling places from the certainty and non-certainty counties where interviewers would be sent.

Findings

A voter's self-placement on the liberal-conservative scale was the first survey question we cross-tabulated with the activity scale. We expected active members to rate themselves as conservative and less active members to be more likely to rate

Figure 1

On Most Political Matters do You Consider Yourself . . .

![Bar chart showing self-placement on liberal-conservative scale by activity level]

\(^2\)Neyman allocation uses the population in each strata to influence the likelihood of a polling place in that strata being chosen so that the larger the population of the strata, the higher the probability of a specific polling place being chosen. It should be noted that Uintah County was selected to be one of the non-certainty counties polled, but because of the difficulties of sending interviewers out to that county, Duchesne County was substituted. Polling places in San Juan, Uinta, and Grand counties were given a zero probability of being chosen for the sample because of the inconvenience of reaching these locations. Because of the small populations of these counties, the effects of this decision were insignificant.
themselves as liberals. We found that people who consider themselves very active are most likely to consider themselves moderately conservative. The percentage of those who consider themselves moderately conservative is significantly different from those who placed themselves in the other categories. The same pattern holds for those who consider themselves somewhat active. As we move down the scale of religious activity, we see this pattern diminish. We do not see any significant differences in adjacent categories for those who consider themselves not very active and not active because the confidence levels overlap; however, the respondents do seem to be moving away from the conservative end of the continuum as their activity decreases. The lack of statistical significance is most likely due to the smaller number of cases as activity levels decrease.

The results were even clearer when considering party affiliation and activity levels and vote choice and activity levels. This most likely occurs because of the high number of conservative Democrats in Utah. Thus, people will rate themselves as moderately conservative but still claim the Democratic party. As activity levels decrease, we see a striking shift in the ratio of Democrats and Republicans. Among very active members, there is a much higher percentage

---

3 The small number of cases at the less active end of the continuum probably occurs because
many in the "not active" or "not very active" categories do not consider themselves members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Also, respondents may also exaggerate their activity levels. For example, in the "very active" levels of our results there are around 2,200 cases, but the "not actives" only amount to around 115 cases.

4 This probably occurs because the statistical means are close to each other. This is because as the percentage of Republicans decreases, the percentage of Democrats rises, thus somewhere within these categories is the point when the percent of Democrats nears and possibly exceeds the percent of Republicans.
of Republicans than Democrats. Seventy-eight percent of very active members identify themselves as Republicans, whereas only 9.6% say they are Democrats. Somewhat active members are still highly likely to be Republicans, but at 62.4% to 17.8% the difference is not as pronounced. As with the ideological continuum, because there are fewer Mormons who identify themselves as less active, the number of cases decreases as we move to lower levels of activity. This widens our confidence intervals, making our results a little less certain. However, with not active members, there appears to be a higher percentage of Democrats than Republicans.

As expected, the findings for vote choice and religious activity were similar to our findings for party identification. Of very active members, 75.9% voted for the Republican candidate in the Utah House races, and 21.8% of very active members voted for the Democrat, which is higher than those who identify themselves as Democrats. Of somewhat active members, 66.2% voted for the Republican and 30.5% voted for the Democrat. Again, voters move toward the Democratic side as we move to lower levels of activity. With vote in the House of Representatives, the not very active and not active groups are the only categories where the confidence levels overlap, which gives us the clearest results.

**Figure 3**

*In the Race for U.S. House of Representatives, Who did You Just Vote For?*

![Bar chart showing vote distribution across activity levels.]

**Conclusion**

The results from this study confirm our hypothesis that as activity in the LDS Church decreases, so does political cohesion. In fact, not only does the cohesion decrease, but an inverse pattern emerges. Wald, Owen, and Hill's framework for political cohesion in churches was especially appropriate to use with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints because it meets their criteria for a "strong church." In a religious group that maintains such close social ties and demands high levels of conformity from its members, we see that as
members participate and identify less with the LDS Church, they think about politics in a new way.

These findings have interesting implications for scholars of politics and religion as well as for members within The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In an effort to dissuade members from propagating the popular notion within the LDS Church that “good Mormons must be Republicans,” over the past few years church leaders such as Marlin Jensen have said that the LDS Church encourages political diversity (Washington Post 1998). However, would The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have to back away from one or more of Wald, Owen, and Hill’s criteria for a strong church in order to actually achieve political diversity? In addition, studies have shown that members of congregations often take their political cues from their leaders (Welch et al. 1993). Although The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints claims to maintain political neutrality with respect to parties, candidates, and most issues, are members of the LDS Church perceiving political cues from the pulpit? An interesting question worth investigating is whether members of the LDS Church really believe that they will be better members if they are Republicans. If people associate The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints with the Republican party, perhaps as they distance themselves from the church, they distance themselves from the Republican party as well.

Another interesting question worth pursuing is whether the same principles of political cohesion apply in more liberal religious traditions. This would help scholars determine whether religious cohesion is more social or doctrinal. Wald, Owen, and Hill concluded that the nature of liberal religious traditions causes less rigid adherence to orthodox doctrine causes (1990). However, their study was conducted among different Protestant congregations. If researchers found that members of a liberal religious tradition, Jews for example, became more liberal as commitment increased, then we could conclude that the effects were more social as opposed to doctrinal.

Jacob Robertson is a senior from Orem, Utah, majoring in political science with minors in Spanish and management. He plans to attend law school this fall.

Stephanie Cardon is a senior from Carson City, Nevada. She is majoring in statistics (business emphasis) with minors in mathematics and management.

WORKS CITED

Olson, Laura R. and Ted G. Jelen. 1998. The religious dimension of political


APPENDIX

Apart from the occasional wedding, baptism, or funeral, how often do you attend religious services?

[Graph showing attendances by political orientation]
Outside of attending religious services, how often do you pray?

- Several times a day
- Once a day
- Few times a week
- Once a week or less
- Never
- Don't Know

How important would you say religion is in your life?

- Very
- Fairly
- Not Very
- Don't Know/No Opinion

SIGMA 81