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CHAPTER 5
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, Mormons¹ 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, Mormon ranks are swelling. Indeed, throughout the 1990s, the LDS Church grew 19.2%, faster than any other denomination in the United States with more than one million members (Jones et al. 2002).

In addition to their size and growth rate, the geographic concentration of Mormons in many Western states makes LDS 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. They also constitute 24.1 percent of the population in Idaho, 9.5 percent in Wyoming, 5.9 percent in Nevada, and 4.9 percent in Arizona. Even in areas where Mormons are not as numerous, they nonetheless have a considerable share of the religious market (Jones et al. 2002).

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-gay marriage initiative in Nebraska and opposed riverboat gambling in Ohio. Attention to Mormons is further warranted by the prominence of Mormon politicians on the national stage. Harry Reid (D—Nevada), the Senate Minority Leader, is a member of the LDS Church, as is Massachusetts Governor and likely presidential candidate Mitt Romney.

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 or ignore them entirely. This is generally because 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 a particular focus on how the LDS Church mobilizes members on select political issues. At the outset, let us be clear on how we define mobilization. Borrowing from Rosenstone and Hansen, we mean "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 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 their political mobilization. (1) Mormons 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 LDS Church facilitate adherence to the instructions of Church 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 Bush (Green et al. 2001). In their 2004 election survey, Green and his colleagues found that 85 percent of Mormons voted for Bush (Green 2005). The 2004 National Election Pool (NEP) exit poll conducted for the major networks included Mormons as a separate category and showed that 81 percent of them voted for Bush (two party vote).

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). Today, 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 1990-2000.² 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.³ 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. In terms of their cultural worldview, however, Mormons are more like Southern Baptists.

[Figure 1 About Here]

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 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 than members of these other groups toward the GOP.

[Figure 2 About Here]

While it is perhaps an 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 LDS bloc voting led non-Mormons to thwart Mormon 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. 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 achieving 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 Lyman 1986, 150-184). These efforts were quite successful, and the church, as reflected in the politics of Utah, enjoyed a relatively healthy balance between the two parties throughout much of the 20th century. Prominent church leaders were affiliated with both parties. For example, Ezra Taft Benson, one of the church’s governing authorities and eventually its president, was a conservative Republican of national stature, serving as Agriculture Secretary in the Eisenhower administration. Hugh B. Brown, a high-ranking church official in the 1950s and 1960s, openly identified as a Democrat, even speaking at the Utah party’s state convention in 1958.

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. 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...So I think that it would be a very healthy thing for the church – particularly the Utah church – if that notion could be obliterated. . . 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, respondents are asked to place themselves on a seven point scale where 1 indicates that “women should have an equal role with men” and 7 means that “a woman's place is in the home.” Nationally, the percentage expressing a traditionalist opinion (a 5, 6, or 7 on the scale) 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. In contrast, the national average fell from 27 to 12 percent. In other words, the mean for Mormons in the 1990s is about the same as the national average during the 1970s. Mormons are slowly liberalizing their views of gender roles, but at a slower rate than Southern Baptists or Catholics. This change among Mormon Church members mirrors statements by the church leaders that carefully reaffirm the traditional ideal while accommodating changing women's roles (Iannaccone and Miles 1990, 1231).

Another gauge of cultural conservatism consists of attitudes regarding abortion, perhaps the most salient issue driving the cultural divide between the parties (Adams 1997). Table 1 displays the distribution of abortion opinions among Mormons, Southern Baptists, and Catholics. In this table, responses from 1980 to 2000 are aggregated,⁴ to ensure 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 only for those who attend church a few times per month or more, 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 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 (60 percent) take this position than Southern Baptists (45 percent) or Catholics (38 percent). 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).

[Table 1 About Here]

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 danger to the mother, we see that Mormons are the most consistently pro-life group among the three. Among frequently attending Mormons, 76 percent take at least a “pro-life with limited exceptions” position, compared to 61 percent of Southern Baptists and 57 percent of Catholics who attend church regularly. 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).⁵

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. 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).⁶ 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 are generally 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. The Mormon Church imposes a lot of

“costs” on its members. In a sense, though, these costs may actually be the benefits of Mormonism. Scholars of religion employing the assumptions and methods of economists have advanced a compelling theory regarding the institutional advantages of what are called strict churches or churches that ask a lot of their members in terms of behavioral restrictions and financial commitment (Finke and Stark 1992; Iannaccone 1994). 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 to volunteer activity for their faith, reinforcing these social networks (Wuthnow 1999). Indeed, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a quintessentially strict church (Campbell 2004).

Even a brief description of the expectations placed upon members of the LDS Church underscores the level of commitment required within the Mormon faith. 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 worshipping 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, should provide a sense that the Mormon Church has high expectations for the amount of time its members invest in the church's activities. Mormons are also taught that they must pay a literal tithe, or ten percent of their income, to the church as well as contributions to other church funds, 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 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, 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.⁷ 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 who attend church “almost every week” or more. 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 ($p < 0.10$).

[Table 2 About Here]

Table 2 also includes another type of cost by displaying two measures of the resources that members of these three religious groups invest in their churches: money and time. A simple tabulation of financial donations by denomination reveals that Mormons have the highest giving rate. Mormons report giving more than Southern Baptists and Catholics in absolute dollars, but a more informative comparison accounts for differences in household income across the three groups. Table 2 thus displays a religious giving index which divides religious contributions by family income.⁸ Using this measure, Mormons still have the highest giving rate, although only the difference between Mormons and Catholics achieves statistical significance. The third row of Table 2 reports the extent to which members of the three religious groups have, over the previous year, participated in an activity with people at their place of worship other than attending services. The survey specifically mentions that such activities “might include teaching Sunday school, serving on a committee, attending choir rehearsal, retreat, or other things.” By this measure, 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, differences between Mormons and the others are significant at levels well beyond conventional thresholds.

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. Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 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 the Citizen Participation Study confirm that Mormons are well-trained in civic skills at church.⁹ For example, 53 percent of Mormons report having given a speech or 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, while twenty-eight percent of Southern Baptists and 8 percent of Catholics have done so.

Political Involvement

Having quantitatively confirmed the behavioral commitment Mormons make to their church, we can test 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: (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) having 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; and (7) belonging to a public interest group, political action group, political club, or party committee.¹⁰

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. Mormons score moderately higher on the participation scale than the two other religious groups (all of these differences are statistically significant).¹¹ Nor are these differences simply the result of demographic differences among the groups, as Mormons maintain their higher level of political involvement even controlling for potentially confounding factors like education, marital status, and political interest (results not shown). *Prima facie*, therefore, it seems that 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.¹² 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 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, 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.¹³

[Table 3 About Here]

Table 3 displays the results. As expected, we see that the coefficient for religious participation 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, for all three groups there is a positive relationship between religious and political participation, but the relationship is strongest for Mormons. The differences among the three denominations are graphically presented in Figure 3, where we see how each religious group's mean score is affected by 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 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 at 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.

[Figure 3 About Here]

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 to note, however, that the high rate of political activity of Mormons fully engaged with their church is not generally due to explicit mobilization on the part of LDS leaders. As we will explain in detail below, such direction comes infrequently. Instead, the high rate of political activity among participating Mormons is likely 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 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. 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 long 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 role in legislative and electoral politics, current LDS Church President Gordon B. Hinckley more recently explained the reasoning behind the church's occasional involvement 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. Together with his 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 officials known as the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Collectively these church officials are known as General Authorities or, more colloquially, as "the Brethren."¹⁴ 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 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 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 its 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 statements advocating specific candidates or parties for several decades. Before every major election, the First Presidency issues a letter that is read during Sunday meetings to every congregation in the United States, emphasizing the strict political neutrality of the church.¹⁵ And this neutrality is not simply a formality, honored only in the breach. Candidates are not to give political speeches in LDS meetings; campaign literature is not supposed to be distributed in church buildings; voter guides are not to be distributed to LDS members at church.

That the political neutrality advocated by the church's general leadership is largely honored by its leaders at the local level can be confirmed with data from the National Election Studies. The NES 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.¹⁶ We compare Mormons, Southern Baptists, and Catholics from 1994 to 2000 and we restrict our analysis to frequent church attenders to ensure that if respondents report that they did not hear any political cues at church, it was not because they were absent from the pews and thus unable 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 percent¹⁷ 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.

While Mormons rarely receive political direction from their church leaders, there are nonetheless occasions when such guidance is given. The church officially maintains partisan neutrality, but 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 initiatives, rather than campaigns for elected office. This is presumably because of the church’s reluctance to intervene 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 has been observed in many state initiative campaigns opposing gambling (Arizona, Idaho, Ohio, and Utah) and gay marriage (Alaska, California, Hawaii, Nebraska, Nevada).

The extensive involvement of the Mormon Church leading up to the March 2000 primary election in California is an instructive case study of LDS political engagement. 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).¹⁸

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 necessary conditions for Mormons to respond to their leaders on political questions (Campbell and Monson 2003). First, the position must receive the official 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). The

efforts to support these ballot initiatives, in turn, provided LDS officials with a template to encourage Mormons' involvement in an anti-gay marriage campaign in Nevada in 2000 (Damore, Jelen, and Bowers 2005).

While the example of Mormon mobilization in favor of California's Proposition 22 is an illustrative example of the potential impact of the Mormon Church's efforts to stir its members to political activity, we stress that the LDS Church picks its battles carefully—even on the issue of gay marriage. For example, responding to a press inquiry after the election, an LDS Church spokeswoman said that the church was not actively involved in the gay marriage ballot proposition campaigns in 2004 (Neff 2005). It is possible that church leaders monitored each of the 13 states with gay marriage ballot propositions closely and were confident of victory and thus reluctant to spend the political capital necessary to becoming heavily involved in the campaign.

Even in the absence of mobilization efforts coordinated by the LDS hierarchy, however, Mormons nonetheless have been periodically reminded that their Church opposes gay marriage and encouraged to work as individuals to thwart it. In July 2004, LDS Church leaders issued a one sentence statement generally supporting an amendment to the federal constitution prohibiting gay marriage, but not endorsing the language of any specific proposed amendment. In October of 2004 the Church issued another statement indicating general opposition to gay marriage. In May of 2006, LDS leaders went a little further and had a letter read from every pulpit across the United States implying that the Church endorses the specific anti-gay marriage amendment to the federal constitution that was soon to come before the U.S. Senate and encouraging church members to “express themselves on this urgent matter to their elected representatives in the Senate”.¹⁹ Statements such as these have reinforced Mormons' opposition to marriage for homosexuals, as suggested by exit poll results in Utah which demonstrate that

Mormons who perceived the LDS Church as being in favor of a gay marriage ban there were much more likely to support it as well (Monson et al. 2006). Undoubtedly, their Church's opposition to gay marriage has also led individual Mormons to work on anti-gay marriage campaigns. For example, during 2004 press accounts in Oregon noted Mormons' involvement in support of that state's ballot initiative to codify a ban on homosexual marriage in the state constitution (Graves 2004). However, numerous inquiries have confirmed the lack of a church-organized campaign to support that particular initiative (Graham 2005).

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 uniquely Mormon capacity to spark intense activity among the membership is highlighted by a final comparison to attempts at mobilization among Evangelical Protestants and Roman Catholics. Christian Right organizations like the Christian Coalition, which target Evangelical Protestant churches (including Southern 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 often meets with limited success. In the Proposition 22 case, Catholic leaders in California also endorsed the effort, but there is no evidence of a broad mobilization of lay Catholics 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 a time when LDS 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 offered formal endorsements on only a select few 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 causes—with enough firepower to 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 speak 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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Notes

¹ 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.

² In addition to strong and weak Republicans, this includes respondents who lean toward the Republicans. Results are substantively unchanged when the leaners are excluded.

³ 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

⁴ 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.

⁵ Contrast this with the Southern Baptist position (See <http://www.sbc.net/aboutus/pssanctity.asp>.) and the Catholic position as stated in Article 5 of the Roman Catholic catechism.

⁶ Although note that birth control is not formally proscribed by church policy.

⁷ 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 www.cfsv.org/communitysurvey/index.html. The dataset itself has been archived at the Roper Center, www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/dataacq/scc_bench.html.

⁸ 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 categories for donations to religious organizations are: (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. 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.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ The difference between Mormons and the combination of remaining groups is also statistically significant (not shown).

¹² The Cronbach's alpha of the index is .60, and exploratory factor analysis shows that these three activities load on a single dimension. The mean is 4.2 and the standard deviation is 2.1.

¹³ 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. Because the SCCBC 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), we report robust standard errors, accounting for clustering within communities. Alternative strategies, including estimations with fixed effects for each community and hierarchical linear modeling produce substantively identical results.

¹⁴ In addition to the First Presidency and the Twelve Apostles, there is another layer of General Authorities—the Seventies. Some of these officials serve for life, others for a fixed term.

¹⁵ Following is an excerpt from the letter read in LDS meetings in October 2000; a nearly identical letter is read prior to every election. For the full text of the letter see: “First Presidency Reaffirms Political Neutrality” at <http://www.lds.org/newsroom/showrelease/0,15503,3881-1-2947-666,00.html> (accessed August 10, 2006):

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.

¹⁶ “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.

¹⁷ Owing to the small number of Mormons in this sample, this is a grand total of *one* respondent.

¹⁸ Voluminous anecdotal evidence has been collected in a narrative about Mormon Church involvement in Proposition 22 at <http://www.lds-mormon.com/doma.shtml> (accessed August 10, 2006). The web pages include a set of documents that are referred to in some of the press accounts including precinct walking instructions, voter identification forms, and the letters from church leaders mentioned above.

¹⁹ For the full text of each statement see: “First Presidency Statement on Same-Gender Marriage” at <http://www.lds.org/newsroom/showrelease/0,15503,4044-1-20336,00.html> (released October 19, 2004 and accessed August 10, 2006); “First Presidency Issues Statement on Marriage” at <http://www.lds.org/newsroom/showrelease/0,15503,4044-1-19733,00.html> (released July 7, 2004 and accessed August 10, 2006); “Letter from First Presidency of the Church to Church Leaders in the United States” <http://www.lds.org/newsroom/extra/0,15505,3881-1---1-963,00.html> (released May 26, 2006 and accessed August 10, 2006).