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Dissent among Mormons in the 1980 Senatorial Election in Idaho

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Abstract

The ecclesiastical organization of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons; or LDS; or Saints) is rigidly hierarchical, extending downward from the President. An important exception to the Church's top-down approach lies in the area of partisan politics, where the Church as an organization dons the mantle of political neutrality. This official stance notwithstanding, politics does intrude itself into Church affairs, especially in hotly contested elections. The 1980 senatorial election in Idaho severely tested the Church's commitment to political non-involvement. Church leaders extended accolades to incumbent Democratic Senator Frank Church for his support of causes favorable to the organization, but polling data and documentary evidence indicate that rank-and-file members dissented from their leaders' positive attitudes, culminating in an important realignment in electoral behavior in the state.

Keywords: *Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; Mormons; Frank Church; Idaho politics; "morality issues".*

Introduction

The ecclesiastical organization of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons; or LDS; or Saints) is rigidly hierarchical, extending downward from the President, who cloaks himself in the mantle of "prophet, seer, and revelator" to the faithful, as did the Church's founder, Joseph Smith. The First Presidency (the President and his First and Second Counselors) along with the Quorum of the Twelve bear witness in the name of Jesus Christ and lead the Church in all matters, spiritual and temporal (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, n. d.). To guide the beliefs and behavior of church members, LDS leaders frequently take stands on hot-button societal issues, such as LGBTQ recognition, initiatives favoring alcohol or gambling, state-funded abortions, or similar ballot initiatives. For example, polling results indicate that LDS leaders' support for a 2004 constitutional amendment to the Utah Constitution defining marriage as between a man and a woman did affect the voting behavior of Mormons (Monson, et al., 2005).

An important exception to this top-down approach in temporal affairs lies in the area of partisan politics, where the Church's leaders forswear allegiance to organized political parties, and the Church as an organization preaches political neutrality. This official stance notwithstanding, politics does intrude itself into Church affairs and severely tests Church leaders' commitment to political non-involvement. A case in point centers on the 1980 senatorial election in Idaho that pitted incumbent Democratic Senator Frank Church against US Representative Steve Symms. In late 1978, LDS President Spencer W. Kimball and other members of the Church's leadership greeted Senator Church at LDS headquarters in Salt Lake City and praised him for his support of causes favorable to the body. Polling data of voters' attitudes and documentary evidence, however, indicate that rank-and-file members in Idaho dissented from their leaders' favorable attitudes. This essay probes the depths

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of this dissent and suggests that a dramatic shift in support for Senator Church among Mormon voters beginning in 1968 led to an important realignment in electoral behavior in the state and provided a signpost to more recent elections. Because voting behavior among Mormons has been less studied than that of other religious groups (Fox, 2006; Shafer and Spady, 2014), this study also has relevance for scholars who study the interplay between religion and politics.

I

In the fall of 1978, Idaho Senator Frank Church accepted an invitation initiated by a student group at Brigham Young University (BYU) to speak at the Provo, Utah, campus on the subject of foreign relations. As chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Church was eminently qualified to address the topic, and he chose as his title of the address, “The Yen to Make a Mark with the Dollar: A Franc Look at Our International Economic Policy”. An itinerary for the day indicates that following the talk the senator and his wife Bethine attended a luncheon with BYU officials, selected faculty, and guests; met with students and friends from Idaho; and had dinner with BYU President and Mrs. Dallin H. Oaks and guests (Church Papers, Ser. 8.2, Box 18, Folder 14; hereafter, Church Papers, 8.2, 18:14).²

Before returning to Idaho the next day, the Churches had breakfast with the First Presidency and other ranking officials in Salt Lake City. At the meeting, President Spencer W. Kimball presented the senator with a two-volume personal genealogy and thanked him for his work on two specific pieces of legislation—one to designate the Mormon Trail a National Historic Trail, the other to repeal portions of an 1862 law that limited the amount of land which churches could hold in US territories. The latter legislation was especially important to Church leaders because of their plans to build a Temple in American Samoa. In a letter of gratitude regarding the senator’s actions in behalf of both pieces of legislation in October 1978, President Kimball praised Church for his “high minded action. You have risen to a position of considerable influence in the United States Senate and we compliment you for your proper using of your influence in this matter. We have appreciated your friendship over the years and commend you for your integrity”. In reply, Church wrote, “Religious discrimination for whatever reason or causes, is abhorrent to a free people. That this law was allowed to remain on the statute books of the federal government for a century is an affront to every person who cherishes freedom of religion. I count it an honor to have had a hand in its repeal” (Church Papers, 8.2, 18:14; Kimball, Scrapbook Collection).

The invitation to meet with the First Presidency in the Church’s offices in Salt Lake City witnessed to the importance Church leaders accorded Idaho’s senior senator. The publisher of the *Deseret News*—the Salt Lake City newspaper owned by the Church—wrote to Church: “Your remarks touched us deeply. I think you know of the great affection and esteem that the leadership of the Church holds for you”. Another member of the Church Presidency echoed these sentiments: “You made a sincere impression upon the Presidency. We know you are a friend to our people”. In a handwritten note to President Kimball from the senator, Church expressed gratitude “for our breakfast together [;] I shall always remember and appreciate it as a highlight in my public career. Bethine joins me in thanking you for the generosity of your friendship, and for all the good work you do in God’s service”. According to Peter Fenn in an interview with the author (Fenn organized Church’s trip to BYU and later became the senator’s Chief of Staff), the senator was pleased with the Utah visit and

² Dallin H. Oaks is currently the First Counselor in the Church hierarchy. Oaks (Oaks, 1991) later praised Senator Church for his role in lobbying Chinese officials in early 1979 to allow a BYU variety show to go to China: “Idaho Senator Frank Church, then chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, wrote Chinese officials on our behalf. His enthusiastic endorsement of BYU was extremely helpful.”



“thought maybe it was a breakthrough” in cementing support from Church officials (Church Papers, 8.2, 18:14). At the same time that Senator Church was receiving and returning accolades from the LDS President and his top advisors, however, polling data that the senator’s staff was viewing painted a far different picture.

The first public opinion poll that appears in the senator’s files occurred in 1960. At that time, Louis Harris and Associates asked various questions of respondents, including their religious affiliation, which the poll divided into “Catholic and Protestant.” Mormon Church affiliation was added to the religious spectrum in 1962.

Table 1. “Polling Results: US Senate Race, 1962” (Church Papers, 5.3, 8:16)

	Church %	Hawley %
Statewide	62	38
By Area:		
CD #1	58	42
CD #2	66	34
By Religion:		
Protestant	54	46
Catholic	71	29
Latter Day Saints	76	24

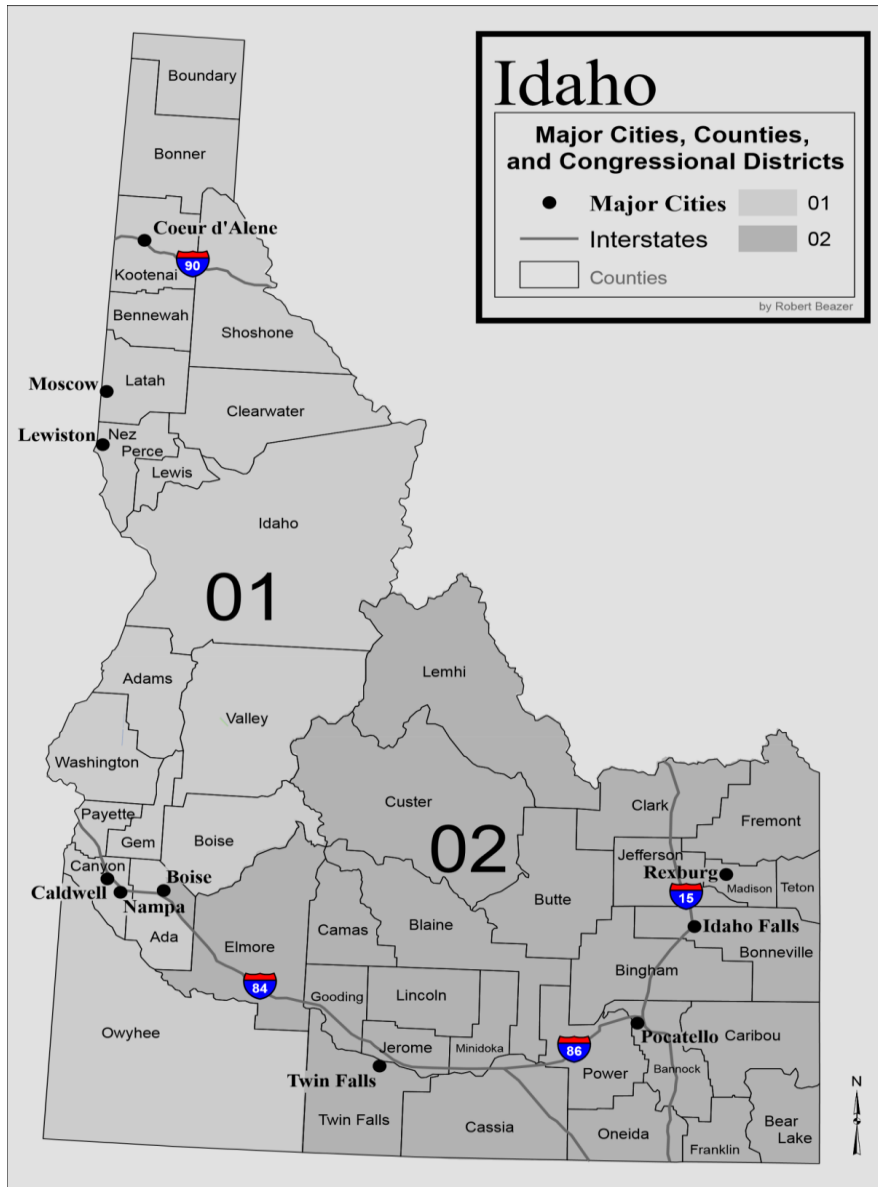
A couple of important conclusions may be drawn from Table 1. First, overall support for Senator Church was higher in 1962 in the predominately Mormon counties in Idaho’s second congressional district than in the first (66 to 58 percent).³ Second, although a majority of the respondents to the poll who self-identified as Protestant, Catholic, or Mormon indicated support for the senator against his Republican opponent, important differences existed in the level of support, with Mormons and Catholics indicating a higher level of support than Protestants (76, 71, and 54 percent, respectively). The text accompanying this report highlighted the fact that Church’s support was highest among self-identified Mormons, but it also noted that this group demonstrated a “heav[y] concentration of undecided voters”. This fact notwithstanding, the report observed, “It is abundantly clear...that the swing vote in this election are the members of the Church of Latter Day [sic] Saints. This was the group that broke heavily for Church six years ago.... It is a group that provides him with his comfortable edge today” (Church Papers: 5.3, 6:18).

In preparation for his 1968 contest with second congressional district US Representative George Hansen (who was a Mormon), the Church campaign contracted with John F. Kraft pollsters to conduct “A Study of Attitudes of Voters in Idaho,” and Mormon voters figured prominently in the analysis of the March 1968 poll. In a letter from the senator to Kraft early in the year, Church stressed, “I presume the classification questions you have included on the last page of your questionnaire are meant to enable you to break down, by area, occupation, income, religion, etc.... This is vital information, and...I draw your attention to the fact that the three important religious divisions in Idaho, listed in order of their respective importance, are: Mormon, Protestant, and Catholic. Your

³ Please see Figure 1. Southeastern Idaho counties in the second congressional district are adjacent to Utah (Interstate 15 runs from Butte, MT, through Salt Lake City, and Las Vegas, NV, to Los Angeles, CA. In contrast, Interstate 90 in northern Idaho runs from Seattle, WA, to Boston. A quip in line with the state’s regionalism posits that Idaho has three capitals: Boise, ID; Spokane, WA; and Salt Lake City, UT).

‘key groups’ should include these three groups in the religious category” (Church Papers, 5.3, 6:17).⁴ As a control on the popularity of Congressman Hansen with voters, Kraft’s pollsters also asked respondents for whom they would vote in a Hansen–Church race and a James McClure–Church race (McClure at that time was the congressman in Idaho’s first congressional district).

Figure 1. “Map of Idaho’s Major Cities, Congressional Districts, and Counties”



Source: (Beazer, 2010:75)

⁴ A Peter D. Hart Research Associates, Inc., poll in July 1979 assessed the strength of the groups in the electorate: Protestants, 50 percent; Catholics, 12 percent; and Mormons, 27 percent (Church Papers, 5.7, 1:8).



Table 2. “A Study of Attitudes of Voters in Idaho, March 1968” (Church Papers, 5.3, 6:18)

	% Hansen	% Church	% Not Sure	% McClure	% Church	% Not Sure
By Area						
C. D. #1	39	54	7	39	54	7
C. D. #2	38	50	12	12	67	21
By Religion						
Protestant	34	58	8	39	54	7
Mormon	41	44	15	12	65	23
Catholic	21	70	9	15	70	15

The results of the polling reveal both continuity and change in attitudes toward Senator Church since 1962. In a hypothetical race against Congressman McClure, support for Church was again higher in the second than the first congressional district (67 to 54 percent), but in a race versus Congressman Hansen, Church’s support was projected as stronger in the first than the second district (54 to 50 percent). Among respondents who volunteered their religious affiliation, Church’s support was highest among Catholics in both districts (70 percent in both), with Mormon support trailing in both (65 percent in District 1, but only 44 percent in District 2). The Kraft group concluded from its poll, “Mormons are apparently aware of Hansen’s religion and somewhat torn about voting for one of their own over a Senator with whom they are well pleased” (Church Papers, 5.3, 6:18).

Subsequent polls of political attitudes among Mormon voters reflect the persistence of these changes in attitudes revealed in the 1968 vote. An October 1973 poll conducted by Peter D. Hart Research Associates asked respondents to assess their degree of support for Senator Church along a spectrum from “Totally [Support]” to “Only Slight[ly] Support.” In comparison to the 1962 poll where Protestant voters were the group least likely to support Church (54 percent), by October 1973, the figure (without reservations) had climbed to 77 percent, and Mormon numbers during the same time period decreased from 76 to 64 percent. This trend continued, as reflected in a July 1974 poll conducted by the same Hart group, which showed that 63 percent of Protestants gave Church an “excellent” or “good” rating compared to 58 percent of Mormons (Church Papers, 5.7, 1:2).⁵

Beginning in July 1979 and continuing for the subsequent fourteen months, the Hart group conducted four polls of voters’ attitudes toward the senator and his likely opponent in the 1980 election, first district congressman Steve Symms. In the July 1979 poll, Catholic respondents favored Senator Church over the other groupings, but not by much (Catholics, 55 percent; Protestants, 52 percent; and Mormons 50 percent—these numbers combine “strong” and “weak” support for Church (Church Papers, 5.7, 1:8). By February 1980, however, important changes had occurred in both Protestant and Mormon respondents.

In February 1980, Mormons supported Church substantially less than either Protestants or Catholics, and the level of support among this group continued to plummet until by September 1980 only 29 percent supported Church, a decline of 11 percent since February 1980; 21 percent since July 1979; 31 percent since July 1974; and 47 percent since 1962.

⁵ A companion question, however, showed no difference between Protestants and Mormons who were “strong” Church supporters (49 percent Protestant; 48 percent Mormon; 54 percent Catholic).

Table 3. “Percent Support for Church and Symms by Religious Affiliation, 1980” (Church Papers, 5.7, 1:10)

	Church Voters, Feb. 1980	Church Voters, June 1980	Church Voters, Sept. 1980	Symms Voters, Feb. 1980	Symms Voters, June 1980	Symms Voters, Sept. 1980	Undecided Voters, Sept. 1980
All Voters	46	48	42	46	44	49	9
Religion							
Protestant	47	50	45	47	44	48	7
Catholic	55	66	46	37	23	43	11
Mormon	40	35	29	52	57	64	7

II

Documentary evidence from the 1980 election supports the polling data. Throughout the second congressional district, a brisk warfare developed in “Letters to the Editor” in small, rural newspapers concerning the Church-Symms election. These texts fall predominately into three groups: 1) writers who openly identified as members of the LDS Church; 2) authors who quoted from the *Book of Mormon* or high Church officials; and 3) individuals who charged that Senator Church’s stands on issues were not in line with LDS beliefs. The subjects of the letters cover many topics, but the so-called “morality issues” of the 1980 campaign—especially abortion—loom largest in eastern Idaho, compared to Senator Church’s role in shepherding the 1977 Panama Canal Treaty through the Senate and other topics statewide.⁶ Space permits only a small sampling from each type.

An example of the first type of letter may be found in a June 17, 1980 edition of the Rexburg (Madison County; see Figure 2) *Standard* by a self-identified church member who charged, “[Church] honors the LDS Church with headline-making rhetoric, but his heart and his voting record are far from the mainstream of Mormon thought both politically and philosophically”. Asserting that Church “gives US MORMONS lip-service in his speeches,” but his voting record supported funding for “government programs which will destroy the MORAL FIBER of OUR youth, undermine OUR families, and subject schools like BYU and RICKS [the LDS junior college in Rexburg, now BYU-Idaho] to government regulation”. In early September, the same newspaper published a letter refuting charges that Symms was a “womanizer” and “beer-drinker”. Claiming to know Symms personally, the writer said he had never seen Symms take a drink of alcohol—even in private—whereas Church went to all the Washington cocktail parties. The “womanizer” label was also false according to this “friend” of Symms, because Symms told him that he was as strongly committed to family life “as those who are members of the LDS Church”.⁷

⁶ See, for example, letters to the editor from September through the election in the Lewiston (Nez Perce County) *Tribune*. Church knew that his sponsorship of the treaty was unpopular and issued radio and newspaper ads speaking to the necessity of the agreement, largely due to the fact that the largest ships could no longer pass through the canal (Church Papers, 5.6, 7:6).

⁷ Church’s supporters were divided over whether to attack Symms on aspects of his personal life that Mormons might find objectionable. Specifically, it might have been pointed out that Symms’ family owned the St. Chapelle winery in southwest Idaho, and there were various



Also in the fall (Oct. 23, 1980), the Preston (Franklin County) *Citizen* printed a letter signed by seven men who said they were writing “not in any official LDS Church capacity, but as individual citizens who are disturbed by some of the things that are going on in the Church-Symms campaign as it relates to members of our church”. The men indicated that they appreciated Symms’ approach in the campaign, of not “being deliberately patronizing of any particular religious group,” whereas Senator Church had “directly embarked on a campaign to court the Mormon vote by utilizing Mormon surrogates who use their official stationery [sic] to imply broad LDS support for Senator Church and by presenting half-truths as to his position on vital issues”.

A second type of letter used Mormon Church authorities and scripture to lend support to the Symms campaign. The Montpelier (Bear Lake County) *News-Examiner* printed a letter in early October (October 9) where the author quoted from a respected Mormon leader to support his contention that people “in our lack of concern and desire, are letting government gain more and more control in our daily lives.... We need an individual who has personal restraint and integrity to follow the desires of his constituents. Steve Symms is such a man. Steve Symms [sic] is Idaho’s only TRUE friend”.⁸ Following the election (November 6), a writer to the Preston (Franklin County) *Citizen* quoted from the *Book of Mormon* in order to show how voters had rejected Church because he had “made fun of the people who came to hear him and did not stand up with his followers”. Instead, the people had chosen Steve Symms who believed “our [C]onstitution is inspired of God, and America did not just happen, it was a divine plan”.

The final type of letter continued the theme of the last letter, but more subtly. As political scientist Jeffrey C. Fox (2006:169-70) notes, abstractions like “freedom” and “free will” are ubiquitous in Mormon theology,⁹ and these terms—frequently juxtaposed with “socialism,” “Communism,” “liberalism,” or all three in combination—were prominent fixtures in many letters. Most notably, a person wrote to the *Citizen* (October 23) that Church deserved no support in that area of the state (bordering on Utah) because “[he] supports socialism, or as we call it liberalism. Do not trade your future freedom from Communism for seniority”. Another letter in the Soda Springs (Caribou County) *Caribou County Sun* (October 16) that purported to have been written by a girl in Rexburg (Madison County) stated: “I’m very concerned about the trend our government has been taking this past 25 years. I’m 19 and my future children are depending on me for a free society. Do I want to vote for Frank Church and continue wallowing in the present situation? No, no! I’m voting for Steve Symms. He and I are for America”.¹⁰

In addition to printing these letters, some editors directly involved themselves in the partisan warfare by officially endorsing Symms and by using the editorial page to support his candidacy. The editor of the Rigby (Jefferson County) *Jefferson County Star*, for example, made direct appeals to Mormon

news reports of the congressman’s “colorful” life in Washington. Independent of the official campaign, some Church supporters did print bumper stickers that read, “Wine, Women, and Symms”—a reference to Symms’ remark after a trip to Libya that there was “no chance to drink or chase women” in the Arab nation during a brief visit that he made there (*Wall Street Journal*, 1980). Peter Fenn, Church’s Chief of Staff in 1980, later told the author that he was one of those who wanted “to go after Symms hard.... If we had known then what we know now, we should have gone harder”. Mormon voters later became disappointed with Symms and his family’s ownership of the winery (Margolis, 1986).

⁸ The last line of this message turns upside down a Frank Church campaign button that read, “Idaho Never Had a Better Friend”.

⁹ John Harrington (1980), a reporter for *The Nation*, opined that a political action committee that called itself “The Freemen Institute” had LDS connections.

¹⁰ It should be noted that the authors of some of these anti-Church letters may have been non-Mormons who masqueraded as one of the faithful for the purpose of political manipulation, but the decision to print the letters rested with editors, who perhaps believed that their readers would approve of the stated position or who were themselves avowedly pro-Symms (i.e., the Rigby [Jefferson County] *Jefferson County Star*).

voters to oust Church from the Senate. On September 17, the editor urged readers to honor “Constitution Day”. Quoting from “a modern patriot, Ezra Taft Benson” (more on Benson later), the newspaper asked that the people of Jefferson County “study the Constitution in a meaningful way. Look for the principles of government that make America the first nation on earth to be truly free”. On the same page, there were four letters to the editor, two for Symms, one for Church, and one lamenting how immoral the city of Rigby was becoming.

In the final two weeks of the campaign, this editor devoted his columns to the candidates’ positions on “the two most important issues in the campaign—ERA [the Equal Rights Amendment] and abortion.” In an October 30 editorial entitled, “Candidates differ sharply on ERA, abortion issues,” the editor juxtaposed the positions of the two men, arguing that Church favored, and Symms opposed, ERA. The abortion issue was more complicated as Church claimed to hold “the same views as that of the LDS Church. To clarify that, I called the church offices, and—yes, they do permit abortion in cases of danger to the life of the mother, rape and incest. However, added to that is—after much fasting, and prayer and counseling with your Bishop.... Federally funded abortions will never parallel the guidelines of the LDS Church or most other churches I’m sure”.

On October 30, the editor of the *Star* encouraged his readers “not to lose sight of the importance of the freedom we enjoy that allows us to participate. We are each free to support and work for any party or candidate we choose”. Countless other editors across the US undoubtedly used similar language to encourage citizen participation in the 1980 election, but these words sounded a special call to Mormon readers. The faithful were being asked to reaffirm the most basic, core beliefs of their lives and witness to their faith in their religion, their nation, and themselves. “Tuesday is the day that we each have the privilege to show what this country is all about”.

III

Congressman Symms won the 1980 senatorial election with a plurality of 4,262 votes out of over 440,000 cast (approximately 2,200 more ballots, it should be noted, than in the presidential election, which marked a first in Idaho political history).¹¹ Tellingly, Church carried Idaho’s most populous county (Ada, where the capital Boise is located) and the first congressional district as a whole. Simply put, the outcome of the election hinged on voters in the second congressional district, as witnessed by the fact that of the twenty-four counties where support for Senator Church changed the most in 1980 from prior elections (and five of the top six), fifteen (62.5 percent) were in southern and eastern Idaho. Interest in the election among these predominately Mormon counties was also unusually high. Of the twenty-eight counties where turnout exceeded the statewide average, twenty (71.4 percent) were in the second congressional district, including the county with the highest turnout (Oneida), with 93.1 percent of eligible voters voting (Hatzenbuehler and Marley, 1987).¹²

¹¹ Voters cast 33,000 more votes for either Church or Symms than for President Jimmy Carter or challenger Ronald Reagan

¹² The Hatzenbuehler-Marley article (1987) investigates—and downplays—the importance of three other possible explanations for Church’s defeat: the involvement of national conservative political action committees in the election; the “Reagan landslide” in 1980; and President Jimmy Carter’s early concession of defeat when polling places were still open in Idaho’s ten northern counties in the Pacific Time Zone.



Table 4 uses linear multiple regression analysis to compare the decline in support for Church from previous elections among Mormon voters with other possible factors—including economic and other demographic variables—that may have influenced voters' behavior.¹³

Table 4. “Decline in Support for Senator Church, 1956-1980: Linear Multiple Regression Analysis”

Variable	R	Multiple R	Multiple R ²	Beta
FIRST CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT				
Average Acres/Farm, 1979	-.57	.57	.32	-.57**
Number Catholics/Registered Voter	-.47			-.34
Percentage Unemployment, 1979	-.40			-.29
Average Value Farm/Acre	.41			-.07
Percent Population Change, 1970-1980	.29			.19
Number Mormons/Reg. Voter	.29			.21
Per Capita Income, 1979	.16			.08
Percent Private Land, 1979	.17			.01
Percent Federal Land, 1979	-.20			-.03
Percent Rural, 1980	-.39			-.23
Totals		.95	.89	
SECOND CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT				
Number Mormons/Reg. Voter	-.54	.54	.29	-.54***
Percent Population Change, 1970-1980	.19	.65	.42	.37*
Average Value Farm/Acre	.22			.27
Percent Rural, 1980	.13			.4
Percent Federal Land, 1979	.12			-.32
Number Catholics/Registered Voter	.26			.09
Average Acres/Farm, 1979	.05			-.12
Percent Private Land, 1979	-.12			.32
Per Capita Income, 1979	.38			.03
Percentage Unemployment, 1979	.08			-.13
Totals		.81	.66	

(* = $p < .05$; ** = $p < .01$; *** = $p < .005$)

The correlations of two variables with Church's decline in the second congressional district were statistically significant—the numbers of Mormons per registered voter ($p < .005$) and the percent of population change between 1970 and 1980 ($p < .05$). The directions of these associations are also

¹³ Simply put, multiple linear regression analysis models the linear relationship between two or more (in this case, 10) explanatory, or independent, variables and a single response, or dependent, variable (average decline in support for Church from prior elections). The Office of the LDS Church Historian supplied the numbers of Mormons per county in 1980; numbers of Catholics per county, 1980, supplied by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Boise.

important. The Mormon variable correlated negatively with Church's decline, meaning that the higher the concentration of Mormons (+), the greater was the extent of Church's decline (-). Concerning population change, however, the positive correlation coefficient indicates that the largest decline in Church's support came in counties where population change was the least. Interpretively, these explanations are persuasive since the highest concentrations of Mormons per county lie in the predominately rural counties in the second congressional district that did not experience substantial population changes between 1970 and 1980. Together, the two variables account for approximately 42 percent of the variance in the model, and the remaining eight variables—predominately economic in nature—that were not statistically significant added little to the overall fit of the regression, as the ten variables together accounted for about 66 percent ($r^2=.66$) of the variance.

Interestingly, when the same variables are applied to Church's decline in the first congressional district, a different fit occurs. Although farms are larger on the average in the second district, the average size of farms per acre correlated most strongly with Church's decline in the first district, and in a negative direction. In other words, Church's decline was the highest in those counties with the largest farms.¹⁴ Also, the ten variables taken together fit the nature of Church's decline better for the first district than for the second ($r^2=.89$), indicating that economic variables better explain Church's decline there. Of note from the perspective of religious affiliation, Catholics are the predominant religious group in the first congressional district, and their stands on ERA, birth control, abortion, and other similar issues conform in many respects to those of Mormons. In the regression analysis, however, the Catholic variable (similarly in the negative direction) only *approached significance* ($p<.09$).¹⁵ While it is true that both the Catholic and LDS Churches oppose abortion, it is not at all clear that the abortion issue played out similarly in both groups in 1980. For example, one Idaho Catholic wrote a letter to the editor in the *Idaho [Catholic] Register* stating that Symms' stated views favoring a constitutional amendment banning abortion were closer to the Catholic Church's than Senator Church's, but "the position that all morality is in one corner or the other is not understandable. The Catholic Church of Idaho is in very real danger of being used by those who want to paint Senator Church as an evil man because he is opposed to the Constitutional amendment. We cannot allow the Catholic Church to be misused in that way. Nor can it be used by the other side" (Church Papers, 5.6, 2:10).¹⁶

Psychologists and political scientists tell us that many people guard their political opinions for fear of introducing unwanted conflict into their lives (Dunham, 1991, Ch. 2). In 1980, however, the desire of voters to weigh in on the two candidates in the Idaho senatorial election comprises the most interesting aspect of this election. For especially Mormon voters, the timing of the 1980 election appears to have been significant in this regard. A steady erosion in support for Senator Frank Church beginning in 1968, but accelerating beginning in July 1979, and the "morality issues" of the 1980 election invited Mormon voters to project their attitudes and values onto the senatorial election (Bennett, 1980a, 1980b; Greenfield, 1982; Westen, 2007). It is also possible that Mormon voters were

¹⁴ The average size of farms in 1980 was 721 acres, with a standard deviation of 437 acres, in the first congressional district compared to 907 acres, with a standard deviation of 879 acres, in the second.

¹⁵ Political scientist Fox (2006) notes that in addition to holding similar views on many social issues the hierarchical nature of the Catholic and Mormon Churches lead members of these denominations to "seek spiritual guidance to dealing with the complexities of the political world. If religion teaches eternal truths, the religious doctrine should offer cues for understanding earthly events and provide a framework of values and principles that one can apply to the social and political spheres. Messages spoken from the pulpit by church leaders are especially important in reconciling the two worlds" (p. 37).

¹⁶ Historian James T. Patterson (2005) notes that by 1980 "[m]ost American Catholics...made it clear that they did not subscribe to church teachings concerning birth control, abortion, and divorce" (p. 140).



attending to important changes that were occurring in the late-1970s among non-LDS believers. According to historian James T. Patterson (Patterson, 2005:139-40), Jerry Falwell's creation of his "Moral Majority" and other evangelicals' endorsement of direct involvement in political affairs "encouraged a surge of grass-roots religious activity that boosted socially conservative Christian ideas after 1979 and...ultimately propelled cultural issues into the center of public debate in the United States".

Subsequent presidential elections have reinforced this voting realignment among Idaho's Mormons, as the same southeastern Idaho counties that demonstrated the greatest decline in voting for Senator Church have recorded the highest support for Republican presidential candidates since 1980 (Hatzenbuehler and Swanson, 1988; Beazer, 2010).¹⁷ An interesting exception to this consistent trend, however, occurred in the presidential election of 2016. When former CIA operations officer Evan McMullin (a BYU graduate, Utah resident, and self-professed Mormon) declared as an independent candidate for president in August 2016, he injected turmoil into the presidential election in Idaho. Not only did McMullin outpoll Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton in five of the predominately Mormon counties in southeastern Idaho but also he dramatically weakened support for Republican candidate Donald Trump. Of the top quartile of counties supporting Trump in the election, nine were in Idaho's first congressional district compared to seven in the second (in the top two quartiles, the split was 50-50).

McMullin's disruption of Mormons' support for Trump was equally significant in Utah. In the 2012 election, Republican presidential candidate (and self-professed Mormon) Mitt Romney garnered 73 percent of the vote in Utah, whereas candidate Trump received only 45 percent in 2016 (McMullin's share was 21 percent; Hillary Clinton's, 27 percent). As BYU Political Science Professor Quin Monson opined (Roche, 2018), "[Mormons are] happy with some of [Trump's] policies but unhappy with his style—very unhappy in some cases. With a normal Republican president, I would expect his approval among Mormons to be in the high 70s". Monson—who also is a pollster—criticized the Gallop Poll in 2016 for having a single category that lumped all Protestant denominations together (including Mormons). "What I say with a lot of confidence," Monson said, "is the percentage of Mormons who voted for Donald Trump in 2016 was much lower than the percentage of white evangelicals".¹⁸

IV

One final note. As noted earlier, considerable angst existed among Senator Church's campaign staff in his 1968 matchup with second district Congressman George Hansen. Not only was Hansen Mormon but also he touted his membership in the John Birch Society (an anti-Communist society founded in the 1950s), which had a strong following in eastern Idaho. In February 1967, John Rousselot (the Birch Society's national public relations director) came to Idaho Falls (Bonneville County) and told a reporter for the local *Post-Register* that there were "about 25 chapters in East Idaho" with approximately 500 members "because people here have strong constitutional beliefs [and] strong religious convictions.... Most of our goals are educational in nature, and we like

¹⁷ Historian Thomas G. Alexander's study (1995) of gubernatorial and legislative elections in Utah from 1970-1992 reveals a similar shift in Mormon voters to the Republican Party beginning in the 1960s. Alexander also notes that the Republican Party's political culture of social conservatism attracted Mormon voters, but he attributes Mormons' voting alignment more to economic than social factors (esp. p. 260).

¹⁸ Recent polls (Guarnieri, 2018; Burr, 2018; Schwadel and Smith, 2019) indicate that current support for Trump among Mormons is even higher than among evangelicals.

situations in which people can articulate and understand the conservative point of view” (Church Papers, 5.3, 6:9).

A contemporaneous visit by Ezra Taft Benson—former Secretary of Agriculture under Dwight Eisenhower, member of the Birch Society, and later President of the LDS Church (Fox, 2006:1-2)—to Pocatello (Bannock County) led Church’s staff to fear that LDS leadership might be throwing its support behind Congressman Hansen. Speaking at a Religious Emphasis Week program at Idaho State University (ISU), Benson castigated the US Supreme Court for “leading the nation down the road to atheism and Communism by one tragic decision after another. The Communists have held victory rallies to honor the Supreme Court and its decisions. The Book of Mormon tells us what corrupt judges can do to freedom” (Church Papers, 5.3, 6:9). Finally, an often-Xeroxed letter in the Church Papers from a member of the LDS First Presidency in March 1967 to a bishop of the Church in Thornton, Idaho (Madison County) further documents the danger that Senator Church felt in this regard. The letter informed the bishop that the First Presidency had issued a statement “disclaiming any contact with or sympathy with the Birchites” and advised “our people everywhere to do their duty to the Church and keep out of this kind of entanglement”, but it also acknowledged “that the Birchites are still trying to make it appear that the President of the Church and the Church itself favors their society.... You are at liberty to say to your people that the Church, as such, does not endorse the Birch Society nor does the President of the Church, although he allows all members to exercise their free agency. But when they attempt to invoke the Church in their policies they are out of line and our people should remain true to the truth and not be upset by these obvious efforts to divert their interests and activities” (Church Papers, 5.3, 6:9).

As described above, Church’s level of support fell in 1968 in the second congressional district from prior elections and sensitized the senator to the importance of reaching out to Mormon voters. Following a June 23 speech at the LDS Institute of Religion at ISU, he received a letter from the acting chair of the Department of Government at ISU who attended the event and expressed concern to the senator that

there were small things that kept some people from accepting you wholeheartedly. One such thing to a Mormon...may be the fact that you are non-Mormon and Hansen is L.D.S. Although I don’t believe that the Mormon people as a whole are highly biased against non-Mormon candidates...the fact that Hansen is a Mormon in good standing and espouses many “principles” being articulated by Ezra Taft Benson—who appears to be highly respected in this area—may cause some members to feel a tinge of disquiet over abandoning one of the “brothers in the faith”.

To counter this situation, the author of the letter suggested that Church use “key phrases in your comments...to establish a stronger identity with L.D.S. audiences.... I am persuaded that political decisions are influenced by nuances and seemingly inconsequential behavior that voters notice and rely upon in making judgements. These small points may help to strengthen the impression that you leave with Mormon audiences. At least, it may help you to overcome any initial advantage that Congressman Hansen may have with this significant group in Eastern Idaho” (Church Papers, 5.3, 6:17). In response to the author, Church thanked him for “the list of phrases taken from the L.D.S. literature and dialogue, which will be most helpful” (Church Papers, 5.3, 6:17). And helpful they were. From 1969 onward, Church’s speeches on important Mormon holidays increasingly used direct quotations from Mormon scripture, Mormon settlers’ diaries, and prominent Church leaders. In 1978 Pioneer Day remarks, for example, Church relied on the Mormon precept, “The glory of God is



intelligence,” and in sponsoring legislation the same year to mark the Mormon Pioneer Trail from Nauvoo, Illinois, to Salt Lake City, Utah, he quoted from LDS prophet Brigham Young, histories of the Mormon trek westward, and a prominent Mormon hymn during the course of his remarks (Church Papers, 8.1, 6:13; 8.1, 12:9; and 8.1, 10:96 and 97).

In light of fears in the 1968 election that the political opinions of LDS leaders might sway Mormon voters to support his opponent, it is possible that Senator Church relied on a false sense of confidence that the respect accorded him by LDS Church hierarchy in December 1978 would positively influence the voting behavior of Idaho’s rank-and-file Mormons. Unfortunately for him, however, LDS voters in Idaho were moving in opposite directions from the Church’s leaders. Senator Church’s relationship with the Church’s principals may have been at its zenith in late 1978, but this position of respect did not carry over to the 1980 election, which brought to culmination a quarter century of change in political attitudes among Mormon voters.

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