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Living Blue in a Red Church: Experiences of Liberal Mormons in the United States

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Abstract. This study examines the experiences of politically liberal members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, a church with a strong conservative lean in its membership in the United States. In interviews, participants were asked about the intersection of their religious and political identities in both internal and external contexts—an individual's own thoughts and feelings, and interpersonal or social experiences. The findings reflect a general feeling that even if individuals have not experienced stigmatization themselves, they are still aware of the presence of a stigma attached to being a liberal Mormon. Also of note is the way these individuals reconcile the two conflicting identities, as well as the varying levels of conflict—both internal and external—that they experience. Finally, participants expressed ways they believe this issue can be addressed by making the social culture of the Church more accepting of diverse political beliefs. Implications for the theories of Role Conflict, Spiral of Silence, and stigmatization are discussed.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, more commonly referred to as the LDS Church, does not officially endorse any political candidate, party, or platform as an institution. It does, however, encourage its members to be involved in their communities and nations, and advises that individuals vote according to their conscience for candidates that hold the same values as the Church (see "Political Neutrality"). In the United States, a large majority of Latter-day Saints—around 70%—identify as or lean Republican (Lipka, 2016). As a result, within the culture of the Church there has grown a sense among the conservative majority that the Gospel (the term used for Latter-day Saint doctrine) can only ever be aligned with traditional conservative or Republican political stances, and that anyone who believes differently either must not understand the doctrine, or not fully believe in or live it. A great many Church members view the strong Cold War-era anti-communist teachings of Ezra Taft Benson before he became President of the Church as doctrine. These elements

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have combined to create a strong cultural precedent in the Church to vote Republican. It is important to note, however, that this is a cultural belief only, and not one publicly held or currently propagated by the leaders of the Church itself. Nevertheless, the problem remains of a possible cultural stigma attached to those who identify as liberals or Democrats by politically conservative members of the Church in social settings. This is especially worthy of attention given that there is a distinct culture common among Latter-day Saint congregations across the entire country, complete with unique jargon, social norms, and even stereotypes. Much of the distinctive and complex social culture of the LDS Church stems from the practice of having geographically based congregations called “wards” that meet at a specific time every Sunday for worship services. This, along with the emphasis on knowing and caring for everyone in that geographic area, contributes to what is called a “ward family.” In short, members of the same ward are expected to act somewhat like an extended family if the need arises. As such, there exists the potential for social conflict and stigmas. These phenomena will be more fully explored and explained in the section below discussing theories of deviance and stigmatization.

The main purpose of this research is to better understand the extent of conflict that Democratic or liberal-leaning Latter-day Saints experience in their social interactions with Republican or conservative-leaning members of the Church. Attention will specifically be paid to any stigmatization that occurs by fellow Mormons in response to liberal church members making their liberal political beliefs known. This research is not meant to focus on the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as an institution or political body, or to explain why Latter-day Saints vote the way they do, or to demonize or demean the Church or its members. It is meant only to explore the social interactions of individuals related to their political identity or leanings among co-members of the Church. Similarly, this research does not aim to influence or promote specific policy views. Instead, it seeks to understand the conflict and stigmatization that self-identified liberal or liberal-leaning Mormons experience in their social relations with other members of the Church.

This purpose can be summarized in the main research questions: To what extent does conflict and stigmatization of Democratic or Democratic-leaning Latter-day Saints occur in their social interactions with Republican and Republican-leaning church members? If so, what does it consist of and how does this conflict and stigmatization work? The answers to these questions are analyzed in both internal and external contexts—the individual liberal church member’s own thoughts and feelings about their religious and political beliefs

and identities, as well as any external social stigmatization they have received from conservative church members for holding those beliefs. This analysis is performed by investigating three areas: minority church members' religious and political beliefs, the consequences of holding those views in their social interactions with members of the conservative/Republican majority within the Church, and the ways in which the political minority believe their stigmatization by the conservative majority can be addressed. The interview questions were constructed with these three areas in mind (see Appendix).

With the details and nuances afforded by the nature of qualitative research, this study gives a greater understanding of the predominance of conservative culture in the LDS Church by examining the mechanisms of conflict and stigmatization that help it to prevail (see Creswell 2013). This includes documenting the degree, extent, and characteristics of the stigmatization minority members undergo as a result of their differing beliefs, as well as the extent that such stigmatization affects both the religious and political identities of minority members.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Symbolic Interaction Theory

As this research design deals with social interactions between politically and religiously liberal and conservative Mormons and the consequences of these interactions, it is natural to view this study through the lens of Symbolic Interaction Theory. This theory scrutinizes the symbolic meanings of social exchanges, particularly how individuals present themselves to, receive, or understand each other in their communication and behaviors (see Mead, 1934). In other words, human beings often engage with others with the unconscious intent to influence the other person, or to be seen and received by that individual in a certain way. According to Turner (2011), who builds off the work of George Herbert Mead and Erving Goffman, the concept of self is presented and reinforced through interaction with others. Within social interactions, individuals seek to both present their identity and have it affirmed within the larger group, which can involve taking on or reciprocating roles, statuses, or identities. As this study's interviewees illustrate, Latter-day Saints deeply value how they are viewed by other Church members. Further, they also intuitively understand that there is a symbolic meaning attached to both religious and political identities within the Church.

Role Conflict Theory

Role Conflict Theory, a subsection of Symbolic Interaction Theory, occurs when someone concurrently inhabits two social roles that place contradictory demands upon the individual (see Biddle, 1986 and Mead, 1934). Most often in the literature, research incorporating Role Conflict Theory examines the conflicts that are created by societal gender roles, such as for working women (Beutell and Greenhaus, 1983; Chassin et al., 1985; Coverman, 1989) or for gay men (Blashill and Vander Wal, 2010). Van de Vliert (1981) lays out a three-step theory of conflict reduction for individuals who experience or anticipate experiencing conflict between two or more roles that they inhabit. First, the individual may choose to fully embrace one identity while discarding the other. If such a choice cannot be made, the person might compromise—conforming to some, but not all, of the expectations of each role. Finally, an individual may also decide to avoid conforming to either role at all, if neither is palatable. This study focuses on the second option, compromise, through the experiences of people who choose to retain both liberal and Latter-day Saint identities and who attempt to conform to both to at least some degree.

Rhodes (2011) analyzed the behaviors of those who identified both as Democrats and as Evangelical Christians through the lens of Role Conflict Theory. He predicted that Evangelical Democrats would compromise between the two identities by maintaining lower levels of both religious behavior and Democratic-leaning political beliefs than a typical Evangelical or a typical Democrat, respectively. Rhodes found that Evangelical Democrats seemed to selectively withdraw from higher levels of religious activity, possibly to help resolve the social pressures that they experienced between their two conflicting identities. Given that the LDS Church also has a strong association with conservative political views, it is likely that liberal-leaning Mormons will also experience some form of cognitive dissonance, consistent with Role Conflict Theory, and will also engage in some degree of compromise between their two conflicting roles, consistent with van de Vliert's model and Rhodes's findings.

Theories of Social Stigmatization and Deviance

The study of stigma and deviance dates back to the beginnings of social science. Today, these topics are studied in multiple social scientific fields, such as social psychology, sociology, and criminology. Research discussions regarding both stigma and deviance deal with societal reactions toward individuals

who violate social norms. Hirschi (1969) theorized that strong social bonds make deviating from social norms more costly for individuals, while weak bonds make deviation easier. Hirschi also identified four elements that make up social bonds—attachment to the community, commitment to conforming goals, involvement in conforming activities, and belief in the accepted norms of the group. In theory, an individual who is strong in these four elements is much more likely to conform to social norms. Empirical analysis of these elements found particularly strong correlations among both attachment and commitment and conforming behavior, and a moderate correlation for belief (Krohn and Massey, 1980). While the current research does not attempt to measure these elements, they are important to keep in mind, especially given the involved nature of socialization in the LDS Church and the greater costs of deviation for those more involved in a group.

Social stigmatization, or the labeling of individuals as having some unwanted characteristic in relation to the group, also carries the potential for social consequences. Erving Goffman also hypothesized on the nature of social stigma. Of particular relevance here are his theories regarding stigmatization of characteristics that are not immediately apparent. Goffman differentiated between an individual who is *discreditable* and one who is *discredited* (Goffman, 1963, see also Jones, 1984). A discreditable individual is one who possesses an attribute subject to stigmatization but has not yet been revealed to the group as possessing it. This characteristic might be revealed to the rest of the group in the future, either intentionally or unintentionally, but currently the individual modifies their behavior in order to pass as a conforming member. A discredited individual, on the other hand, is one whose attribute has been made known, thus affecting the person's treatment by others. Both circumstances involve the changing of behaviors on the part of the stigmatized individual, including the management of one's public identity, but only the latter condition subjects the individual to the potentially negative behavior of others. This is potentially relevant to how liberal-leaning Latter-day Saints may modulate their expressions of political views around other members in order to pass as conforming members of the group, and thus avoid the effects of stigmatization. Stigmatization, and the threat of it, may also affect how individuals view their own social identities (Major and O'Brien, 2005, Link and Phelan, 2001).

Both deviance and stigma are relevant to the conversation of the lived experiences of politically liberal Mormons. Among Latter-day Saints in the

United States, it has become a social norm that most members lean conservative in their political views. One 2016 Pew Research Center study found a 51-point margin between those who identify themselves as Republicans and those who identify as Democrats (Lipka, 2016). Given that partisan antipathy has been rising to record highs, with members of each party holding increasingly unfavorable views of each other (Pew, 2019), it can be inferred that violations of this social norm would bring some sort of social conflict among Church members. This is especially cogent given that social identities have become increasingly aligned with partisan identities, especially among Republicans (Mason and Wronski, 2018). If conservative Latter-day Saints view their political views as tied to their religious views, even subconsciously, then they may be more likely to defensively place a stigma on those who hold liberal political beliefs within the faith, possibly even more than against those holding liberal views outside of the Church.

This same type of intra-sect social conflict can also be seen in other Christian denominations in the United States. Indeed, Wuthnow (1988) described the “symbolic warfare” that takes place between religious conservatives and religious liberals. More recently, Starks (2013) utilized qualitative interviews to document how, among Catholics, the self-identification of an individual as a traditional, moderate, or liberal Catholic served to represent self-understood divisions among American Catholics. Goldstein (2011) also asserted that much of contemporary religious conflict occurs socially between conservatives and progressives within denominations. Thus, it can reasonably be expected that there will be a similar social conflict between political liberals and conservatives among Latter-day Saints.

Spiral of Silence Theory

The Spiral of Silence Theory holds that those who perceive that they hold a minority opinion will refrain from expressing it in order to maintain their social position, either in a specific group or in society as a whole (Noelle-Neumann, 1974 and 1993). Consequently, those minority opinions will become less and less prevalent as those who hold them become less and less willing to share them, until minority beliefs are espoused only by hard-liners who do not care about the social ramifications. While the literature shows that this theory does not hold up in every circumstance, there are certain factors in the case of liberal-leaning Latter-day Saints that make it likely to generally apply. For example, it has been shown that fear of social isolation will make someone less likely to

share their minority opinion (Petric and Pinter, 2002; Scheufele et al, 2001), as will a perceived gulf between one's personal views and a group's generally accepted views (Hayes, Glynn, and Shanahan, 2005).

When it comes to sharing political opinions, Carlson and Settle (2016) have shown that individuals will hide or deflect away from their true political beliefs when they feel they are a political minority in that group. These so-called “political chameleons” do not actually change their beliefs in such situations; instead, “motivated by a desire to avoid the social consequences of political disagreement, ... individuals will temporarily conform to a group's political opinion” in a phenomenon called political conformity (ibid., para. 4). The study found that people both expect a hypothetical person to conform in such a scenario, and that they will perform this conformity themselves in a laboratory setting. A similar study by Hayes (2007) found that most individuals will modify their responses toward people they know will disagree with them. When asked how they would respond to someone who they knew held a contrary position who asked for their opinion, participants cited several ways that they “censor their own opinion expression, such as expressing indifference or ambivalence, trying to change the subject, or reflecting the question back without answering it” (ibid., p. 785). Hayes cites these strategies as ways that people avoid social isolation in accordance with the Spiral of Silence Theory.

Given the fact that Latter-day Saints who espouse conservative political stances make up a supermajority of Church members in the US (Campbell et al, 2014), it is likely that a great many liberal-leaning members will engage in this sort of political conformity in order to escape negative social consequences, including stigmatization. This may include refraining from weighing in on political conversations with other Church members, either in person or online, or minimizing their views in an attempt to maintain social harmony.

Method, Sample, and Limitations

To qualitatively study the political minority of liberal LDS Church members in the United States, a phenomenological approach was chosen to better understand the “essence” of interviewees' lived experiences (see Creswell 2013; Moustakas 1994). Specifically, these lived experiences include the conflict and stigmatization that occurs over in their relationships with politically conservative Mormons, and the choice liberal members face to either make their political views known and face being stigmatized as a result, or to practice political conformity and keep their views hidden. To this end, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve participants from four US states.

At the time of their interviews, all twelve were participating members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Demographically, seven were men, five were women (including two trans women); eight were Caucasian, three were African American, and one was Hispanic; ten were between the ages of 21 and 30, and the other two were in their 40s. This limited sample is a potential weakness in the method, although it is large enough to discover similarities and differences across the study's participants as well as common experiences shared between them. In other words, the size of the sample is large enough to achieve an appropriate level of saturation.¹ For this research, saturation was determined when new interviews, while still lending supporting details and evidence to the themes and patterns already identified, did not add any new or unique angles to the experiences of liberal-leaning Latter-day Saints (see Dworkin, 2012). While twelve individuals is indeed a small sample, there is precedent for this size of sample being sufficient when utilizing in-depth qualitative interviews, especially in a narrowly focused topic that utilizes cross-case analysis, as is the case here (see Malterud et al, 2015, and Mason, 2010).

Further, the participants who were interviewed for this research possessed other diverse characteristics that helped give a wider perspective. Two were openly gay, another two were transgender, one at the time of the interview was running for public office in Utah, several were members of the LDS Democrats Caucuses in Utah and Idaho, three were college students, one was an author, several had lived in multiple states, and one was disabled. Each participant was formally interviewed once, although other informal contacts and follow-up interactions were also included in the analysis. Each interview lasted between 30 minutes and two hours, depending on the participant, and was conducted either in person or through an online video chat service.

The participants in the study were found through a variety of sampling methods. The initial participants were previously known to the researcher through personal relationships to fit the criterion of the study—members of the Church who held liberal-leaning political beliefs—or convenience sampling (Bailey 2008). Many of these individuals were able to recommend others who they felt could contribute their experiences to the study, thus increasing the reach of the research through snowball sampling (*ibid.*). Additionally, mes-

¹Saturation is the standard that qualitative researchers use to guide their data collection—the point at which they conclude that “further data collection would yield similar results and serve to confirm emerging themes and conclusions” (Faulkner and Trotter, 2017). It is worth noting, though, that the concept of saturation is subject to ongoing debate and can be inconsistently applied.

sages were sent to groups such as the LDS Democratic Caucus and prominent LDS blogs over social media to recruit more participants through criterion sampling (*ibid.*). The individuals recruited also were targeted for their specific and diverse demographic characteristics in order to maximize the variation of the sample, which in turn increases the trustworthiness of the conclusions drawn from their experiences through variation sampling (*ibid.*). Thus, although the traditionally weaker convenience and snowball sampling methods were employed to recruit the initial participants, criterion and variation sampling were concurrently employed to reinforce the strength of the sample. The sampling methods employed here, particularly convenience and snowball sampling methods, introduce the possibility of error through sampling bias, though it is impossible to tell to what degree.

Another limitation is the inherent problem of finding Mormons who hold liberal political beliefs, a challenge acknowledged by phenomenological researchers (see Creswell 2013). It is easier to find those who are not afraid to be vocal about their views, which influences their experiences and perspectives. In order to understand the experience of the typical liberal Mormon, greater effort must be put forth to find those who are more subdued, or even closeted about their political beliefs—those who, in accordance with the Spiral of Silence Theory, keep their views private. This can be addressed by conducting more interviews with a larger range of individuals in order to frame better the experiences of liberal Mormons regarding how their political and religious lives intersect.

While representativeness of the population and generalizability of findings beyond the sample are not possible using interviews with relatively few individuals—statistical analysis alone can accomplish that—interviews do provide nuanced details that help to answer the research questions through interviewees' elaborated responses and their answers to follow-up probe questions (Bailey 2008; Creswell 2013). Although statistical analysis can establish broad trends and patterns, detailed interviews provide deeper insight into the phenomenon being studied, including correlations between and among variables.

The interview questions were developed by breaking down the key variables in the research question: the religious and political views of participants, and their intersection in their lives; the conflict and stigmatization they undergo in their social interactions with conservative members of the LDS Church as a consequence of holding liberal religious and political views; and the re-

sponses of liberal church members to stigmatization by conservative members (Bailey, 2008; Creswell, 2013). Participants' answers to the interview questions were transcribed from audio recordings made during interview sessions. The transcripts then were analyzed for both similar and contrasting responses that emerged across interviews concerning the aforementioned variables in the research question. Quotes with similar themes were grouped together and analyzed further to glean insights from both the similarities and differences that arose between and among participants' experiences.

Findings

As is to be expected, the experiences of politically liberal Latter-day Saints vary widely from individual to individual. As one participant noted, "mileage varies greatly in this church." There was not a single question that got a uniform answer across the board, and this range of perspectives must be kept in mind when discussing any specific individual's responses and experiences. Those differences notwithstanding, two broad categories of experiences emerged from the interviews, both of which will be discussed in detail. The first is social experiences and interactions with other Mormons, or external experiences; the second is an individual's own thoughts and feelings, or internal experiences.

External Experiences

Emerging as themes in interviewees' social experiences and interactions with other Mormons are: the initial reactions of others to their political views, the long-term consequences of making those views known, the way that every participant knew of someone else who had suffered worse treatment, the choosing of location and audience for political discussions, and the differences of experiences based on geographic location.

Initial Reactions. Of particular interest to the researcher was the initial reaction of another Church member upon finding out that a participant leans to the left. The most disparaging reactions included "pejoratives, and questions about my sanity, and whether or not I actually believed in LDS Doctrine" and making a mother-in-law burst into tears. Several interviewees indicated that in their experience, the revealing of a liberal political identity made for an awkward, tension-filled situation. For example, one participant, a new member at the

time, was told that, “if you vote for a Democratic candidate, then you can’t be a temple recommend-holding member of the Church.” While untrue, this illustrates the extent of the stigma that exists in the culture. On the less extreme side of the spectrum were raised eyebrows, awkward silences, and quick changes of subject, although one individual shared how, by sharing their own leftist views, they had met other liberal members who were closeted about their political beliefs. These responses are expected under the Spiral of Silence Theory, which predicts that conservative members of the Church would underestimate the prevalence of liberal-leaning members. That underestimation would then lead to an increase in the likelihood of a negative reaction by a typical conservative Latter-day Saint.

The age of the person in question also made a difference in the reaction. As one individual observed, “It depends very much on the age cohort of who it is. For fellow millennials, they’re just like okay, whatever. Not too big of a deal. For older people it’s a bit of a shock.” Another factor that plays in the mix is race: two African American individuals both shared how they felt that people were less surprised about their more liberal-leaning views because of their race. One summed it up by saying, “I feel like people would expect it from me because I’m Black.” The typical reaction, however, seemed to be somewhere in the middle—not immediately condemning or outrightly supportive, but a silent reception without voicing an opinion one way or another. What exactly goes on in the thoughts of these individuals is impossible to say, but it is apparent that even though average Mormons in the US are not vehemently opposed to Democrats in general, they do regard it as something of an oddity when they meet one in the Church—supporting the notion that holding liberal political views is seen as deviant behavior in the social culture of the Church.

Long-term Social Consequences. Making their liberal political identity known placed a strain on individuals’ social relationships with conservative Latter-day Saints to one degree or another. A few participants shared experiences of shunning and “complete dissociation” by both family members and acquaintances, although this was far from the typical response. More common was the feeling that perhaps disclosing their political affiliation prevented them from forming friendships with other ward members, or inhibited the growth or depth of those relationships. They rightly pointed out that it was impossible to know if sharing their political identity had diminished their social position, but the nagging feeling remained that they may have pushed away people who otherwise would have been friendlier had they not revealed their political identity.

It was not rare to hear of participants being muted on social media for posting pro-Democratic material or receiving condescending or offhand remarks that were critical of their political views, both online and in person. One participant was reticent to discuss political views around conservative friends and family members, commenting, “Whenever I’m vocal about my political opinions, there’s a lot of pushback. I don’t feel comfortable talking about [politics] because I feel that walls go up.” Of note, however, is the theme that among those interviewed, none identified their experiences with the term “discrimination,” with some explicitly stating that they did not feel that they had been discriminated against in the traditional sense. Still, the generally negative response to these members making their political views known affirms the application of the Spiral of Silence Theory, where liberal leaning members will often not reveal their true views or beliefs in order to minimize the social consequences that can come from holding a minority view.

“Know Someone.” One of the more unexpected and interesting themes that emerged in the context of interpersonal interactions was the observation made by nearly every one of the participants that although they themselves had not been treated too terribly, they had heard stories about or personally known people who had been on the receiving end of particularly poor treatment. As one individual put it, “I have seen worse things happen, though, mostly to other people. I remember Gary [the name has been changed], who is a member in Texas. He felt totally ostracized by members of the ward for his political views.” This perception seems to be shared universally among liberal Latter-day Saints, meaning that even if a certain individual has not faced negative social consequences, they are aware that there is still a stigma attached to being a Democrat and/or liberal in the church. This also is in accordance with the Spiral of Silence Theory, as knowledge that others have been mistreated due to their minority political views serves as a disincentive for them making their own beliefs known. The fact that none of the participants had personal experiences in this area might indicate that full saturation may not have been reached. However, finding respondents to address this particular dynamic is difficult, as those who have been treated poorly by other Church members because of their political beliefs may be less willing to continue to publicly espouse those beliefs or may have stopped associating with the Church entirely as a result.

Location and Audience. Another external theme that was observed revolved around location and audience while talking about political issues: inside of church

versus outside, and with Mormons versus with a non-Mormon audience. For the most part, interviewees agreed that they tried not to bring up political issues during church services, “because that’s not the focus of those three hours on Sunday,” although more than one felt compelled to speak up during church to correct any perceived wrongs that they observed. One such self-described “troublemaker” said, “I don’t care where I am, if I’m in sacrament meeting, or an activity, or Relief Society, I’ll say exactly what I feel and I’ll let people know that they are absolutely wrong.” This theme included several who felt that speakers or teachers at church had inappropriately infused conservative or Republican rhetoric into sermons or lessons at least once in their experience, although it is not an overwhelmingly recurring incident. Another participant noted, “I don’t go to Sunday school anymore because I’m tired, when I share my opinion, [of] getting the verbal equivalent of a pat on the head and a chuckle about how naive I am.” Furthermore, almost all of the participants felt that the difference in location was much more of a factor in their willingness to talk about politics than whether they were speaking to Mormons. They noted that their non-Mormon friend groups also were much more likely to be Democrats than not, which means on the one hand that they were more likely to be comfortable talking about political issues with their friends outside of church, but, on the other hand, they were more likely to disagree with fellow Mormons, meaning that they were more likely to voice a contrary opinion and discuss politics in that context. One participant summed it up this way: “More often than not, that’s why I avoid [talking about politics at church], not because I feel like I can’t talk about it, but because I don’t think it would bring a good atmosphere or spirit into the room.”

Geographic Differences. Also of note were geographic differences in the experiences of participants who had lived in more than one state. One individual found that Utah, the state with the highest concentration of Latter-day Saints in the country, also had the highest incidence of negative backlash toward their political views. The interviewee said they felt that there were “orders of magnitude” of difference between Utah, Texas, and Massachusetts in descending order in terms of how much opposition they had experienced. However, even in New England, a traditionally liberal region of the country, they still faced a stigma from other members, although it was less severe than in the more consistently red states.

Internal Experiences

Just as interesting as the external, interpersonal experiences of liberal Latter-day Saints are their internal experiences in regard to the intersection of their religious and political identities, with an even wider range of variation found in the interviews. Internal experiences are the thoughts and feelings that liberal Church members possess about their own identities, exclusive of any interactions with others. Themes emerging in interviewees' own thoughts and feelings are: the way that participants matched doctrine, policies, and political parties; the foundation of their political beliefs in relation to their religious beliefs; the reasons they offer to account for the Republican supermajority within Church membership; the contrasting levels of internal conflict different participants feel; and the solutions they proffer to make the social culture of the Church more inclusive to diverse political opinions.

Matching Doctrine, Policies, and Parties. Interviewees' internal experiences are readily apparent in the way that their religious and political beliefs inform, shape, and interact with one another. For those interviewed, the majority felt that the Democratic Party best reflected the doctrine and values of the Church in its policy platform, although all were sure to note that it was not a perfect match. One individual thought that third parties were closest to the mark, but that of the two major parties, the Democrats were the better option. Participants shared that in their mind, LDS doctrine would translate into policies that emphasize compassion, empathy, the intrinsic value of human beings, the importance of families, helping the poor, personal agency and accountability, serving others, and honesty. Some even explored specific policy stances, such as protections for Dreamers and other immigrants, ensuring that all individuals have healthcare, strengthening social safety nets, providing more support for those in poverty, and promoting education for women and children globally. More than a few participants noted that in the rare instances that the Church itself has issued a statement on political events, its positions seem to be more in line with Democratic talking points, such as an August 2017 statement denouncing white supremacist rallies, a January 2018 announcement backing opportunities for DACA recipients, or Dreamers, and a June 2018 condemnation of the forcible separation of families at the border ("Church Issues Statements on Situation in Charlottesville, Virginia," 2017, "Church Statement on Separation of Families at the US-Mexico Border," 2018, "Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) Statement," 2018).

Several pointed out that the ultimate translation of doctrine into policy is, in their minds, what is known inside the Church as the Law of Consecration, which one participant described as “theocratic communism.” They said that this law, which reflects the all-things-in-common society practiced by New Testament Christians and is believed by Latter-day Saints to be the system that Christ will enact during his millennial reign, is much closer to current liberal ideals than the conservative platform, in that it redistributes wealth, property, and other resources according to every person’s needs. The participants indicated that LDS doctrine favored a good balance between self-reliance and communal action, which again they found more of in the Democratic Party platform. These interpretations of Latter-day Saint doctrine may serve as a strategy to reduce potential cognitive dissonance, consistent with Role Conflict Theory, as it may quell the internal mental conflict that exists between their religious and political identities.

Foundation of Political Beliefs. It is unclear and undoubtedly different for each individual to what extent either of these identities—the religious and the political—comes first, and to what extent the two identities directly interact. One participant summed it up thusly: “Ultimately, when it comes to politics, we have to look at them through the lens of the Gospel, and not look at the Gospel through the lens of our politics.” This statement reflects the conventional wisdom in social science literature, which asserts that the relationship between religious identities and political identities is largely unidirectional, with religious beliefs informing political stances. However, Margolis (2018) challenges that assumption in *From Politics to the Pews: How Partisanship Affects Religious Behaviors and Identifications in America*. She argues that instead of individuals adopting political stances based on their religious views, both identities inform each other, with partisanship having a large effect on the type and frequency of religious behaviors practiced. This discussion of the primacy of both religious and political identities and how they interact within individuals is essential to understanding the experiences of Democratic Latter-day Saints, as it underscores how deeply held these two identities are, and how threats to either identity can cause a great deal of both internal and external social conflict.

It is impossible to tell to what extent this interviewee’s ideal of regarding politics “through the lens of the Gospel” holds true across the population as a whole, as the internal psychological interaction between these identities can only be studied in their outward manifestations. These identities are often so deep-rooted in an individual’s mind as to be beneath active scrutiny, even with

profound self-reflection and introspection. The level of belief and trust held in these institutions—the Church and the political process—is unique to each individual and thus creates a similarly unique interplay in each person’s internal experiences as they grapple with and seek to find a comfortable balance between the two identities (Turner, 2011, Margolis, 2018).

Explaining the Republican Supermajority Within the Church. Participants offered a wide range of answers as to why a supermajority of American Latter-day Saints identify as or lean Republican versus any other party affiliation. All thought that it was a result of a combination of factors, although each individual gave a unique amalgamation of reasons. Overall, they attributed the supermajority mainly to factors in the early history of the church, alongside other, more contemporary, reasons involving the American political landscape and LDS culture. One participant explained the historical component: “Mormons have a particular history in that we have been treated very badly by the government in our history. ... [This] distills in those Pioneers’ minds that the government cannot be trusted, which is the conservative basis for all of their policies: Make the government smaller because they can’t be trusted. ... The Mormons actually lived that, and when you live something that traumatic over and over again you will teach it to your children, and they have.” Since its admission to the Union in 1896, Utah has gone for the Republican candidate in 24 out of 32 presidential elections, and in every election since Richard Nixon won the presidency in 1968. This creates a unique cultural heritage of voting Republican among Latter-day Saints—a heritage that, similarly to Evangelical Protestants, has become embedded in the social identities of Republican Mormons (Mason and Wronski, 2018).

In addition to politically conservative Church members voting the same way their predecessors have, the participants thought that ending abortion and same-sex marriage was important enough to the conservative majority of Mormons to prevent them from even considering voting for a Democrat when they would otherwise likely support many of that party’s policies and goals. In addition, one said, the modern-day Republican Party has been successful in portraying itself as the party that is more patriotic and champions both religious and individual freedoms, values that are cherished in contemporary Latter-day Saint culture. The Republican Party also has successfully framed Democrats, as that same individual above put it, as godless heathens who promote “moral turpitude.”

This creates a unique sense of conflict in those inside the Church who do not identify as Republican, as they go against a very large majority of mem-

bers, some of whom question liberal members' strength or sincerity of belief. The degree to which the participants experience this internal conflict between their religious and political identities is possibly the most fascinating of the themes that emerged during the research, as the responses were clustered at the far ends of the spectrum: either the participants experience high levels of internal conflict or little-to-no cognitive dissonance at all.

Contrasting Levels of Dissonance. Those who professed to have experienced this inner struggle between their religious and political identities pointed to a variety of factors. Some indicated that the official policies of the Church give them pause, such as the Church's stances toward LGBTQ individuals or the history of the Church's policies toward men of African descent receiving the priesthood or all members of African descent having access to temple rites. Others pointed to contemporary cultural issues that they perceive within the social fabric of the Church, such as undervaluing the voices of women and people of color, the quickness of Mormons to pass judgment, and, of course, the conflation of LDS doctrine with Republican rhetoric by members. One interviewee even went so far as to say that they must make a conscious choice every day to stay in the Church, although they made clear this ambivalence is not for lack of faith in the doctrine. A common theme was the distance between the perfection of God and the fallibility of the people who run the Church, similar to the religious sequestration noted by Edwards (2016). Sequestration allows them to believe that although God and His doctrine are perfect, the implementation and administration of the Church is left to imperfect humans, which results in mistakes. As one participant asserted, "[I believe] that this is the Church of Jesus Christ, this is where His full doctrine lies. It is also run by man, and men make mistakes." This sort of mental compartmentalization is compatible with Role Conflict Theory as one strategy liberal Mormons may use to reduce internal conflict.

At the other end of the spectrum, several participants felt no conflict between their two identities or could only think of one or two times they had experienced such dissonance. More than one of these had used their religious identity as a foundation and sought a political identity that built upon that foundation. This ordering of identities seems to lead to less cognitive dissonance, possibly as a result of reframing or reinterpreting scripture or other Church teachings to explain how progressive political policies are compatible with traditional LDS doctrine. As one interviewee stated, "I feel like there is not a huge disconnect [to me], because a lot of my political views center

around helping the oppressed, and giving people the ability to make choices ... to me that's very in line with the gospel." Or, as another stated pointedly, "I'm a Democrat because of my religion." On both sides of the divide, however, participants employed compartmentalization techniques to help reduce their dissonance. By keeping their political views and religious beliefs in relatively separate mental boxes, they were able to avoid some of the potential internal conflict that can arise when the two identities collide—which is also to be expected under Role Conflict Theory.

One individual related feeling stuck in an exposed state of limbo between the two identities, an experience that is no doubt shared by a great many liberal-leaning Latter-day Saints:

I don't fit what you might consider the typical Mormon mold. ... The thing is, I don't fit the typical liberal mold either, and lately, I've seen the breadth and consequence of that contrast. I've had many days where I've simultaneously had Mormon friends telling me that I'm doing Mormonism wrong because of my politics and liberal friends telling me I'm doing politicking wrong because of my love for my religion. I'm too liberal to be a good Mormon, too feminist for my ward, too concerned for the oppressed and not enough for the law; I'm too Molly² to contribute anything worthwhile to liberalism, not angry or extreme enough to be a "good feminist," too content with my religion, et cetera. It's exhausting to live every day with people telling you that because you don't fit the mold/standard of liberalism or feminism or Mormonism or Christianity, [because it feels like] you have very little to contribute to either side. You aren't "us" enough.

Role Conflict Theory, as discussed earlier, predicts that individuals with two competing identities will attempt to find a middle ground between the two. Attempting this type of mental reconciliation, however, can lead to the exact predicament this individual experienced of feeling somewhere in between, simultaneously in both cultures yet not fully accepted by either. This clash between roles presents a unique challenge when it comes to religious and political identities, two of the most deeply held and intensely personal identities in modern society. When individuals in one or both of those cultures accuses an individual of being less than fully committed to the group, it can be extremely discouraging to that person.

² "Molly Mormon" is a slang term for a female teenager or young woman who is perceived to be a goody two-shoes. The corresponding male term is "Peter Priesthood."

More research is needed to understand more fully how liberal Mormons resolve their inner conflict between their religious and political identities. One potential strategy is that they may internally reinterpret their political beliefs to align with core theological values, such as justice and tolerance. Other coping strategies might also be employed to reduce dissonance and mentally align liberal political views with commonly accepted doctrine.

Perceived Ways to Foster a More Inclusive Culture. The final theme of note is that every one of the individuals interviewed sees potential ways to make the social culture of the Church more inclusive of diverse political opinions. This was perhaps the theme with the widest variation of responses, with no two interviewees giving quite the same ideas. Some would like to see more statements from top Church leaders, encouraging members to engage in civil discourse about political issues, and reminding members that compromise is an important facet of government. Others favor more bottom-up approaches. One individual called on liberal members to “lift up their voices,” borrowing a phrase from Latter-day Saint scripture, meaning to be more vocal about their beliefs. Publicly communicating their liberal political views around other Church members, they claim, would help dispel the stigma around those views by making more members realize just how many progressive Mormons there are.

In a similar vein, another participant pleaded with fellow Mormons simply to listen to those whose opinions and experiences might differ from the norm. In this way, Church members could overcome the natural human tendency to place labels on others, which in turn would lead to increased compassion and empathy for those who hold diverse opinions. Another individual suggested that members of the Church refrain from using phrases such as “the gays” or “the leftists,” saying, “We need to get rid of the idea that we are talking about people who couldn’t possibly be in the room listening to us.” By simply using more inclusive language and not assuming that all people think the same way, this interviewee said, Church members could help those who feel isolated begin to feel they are welcomed and valued in Church social settings. This, in turn, will lead them to feel comfortable enough to add their voices to the discussion and make their perspectives known, further helping the cause of inclusivity.

Conclusion

This research makes several important contributions to the literature. The first and perhaps largest is the qualitative exploration of the experiences of

politically liberal members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Qualitative interviews, an oft-underutilized methodology, present an approach that is uniquely suited for deepening the understanding of a political minority group that has been routinely overlooked in previous research into Mormonism, as Cornwall (2014) points out. Although the study's sample size is limited, the interview responses make clear that there is indeed a social stigma associated with being a politically liberal Mormon, and that social conflict stems from that identity. This conflict includes the possibility of strained relationships, feelings of ostracization or isolation socially, and the experience of cognitive dissonance as a result of holding both identities.

This study also provides evidence that liberal members' social conflict plays out in ways that are consistent with the theories presented in the literature review. For example, in keeping with Symbolic Interaction Theory, liberal Church members view their political and religious identities as having important symbolic meanings in their interactions with others. Moreover, their differing political views are regarded as deviant within the social context of the Church and are consequently stigmatized, consistent with the theories of deviance and social stigmatization. Indeed, it appears true that greater levels of socialization increase the social cost of deviating from group norms. Further, the actions that some liberal-leaning Latter-day Saints take to avoid revealing their political views are consistent with Goffman's (1963, see also Jones, 1984) ideas about discreditable individuals, in addition to the negative effects that those same members often experience when their political views are made known—in other words, when they are *discredited*.

The current study also advances Role Conflict Theory by applying it to Mormon Democrats. It examines conflict both anticipated and experienced, and both avoided and dealt with, depending on the individual. It also complements Margolis's (2018) work by illuminating the ways these individuals work through any perceived conflict they may have between their political and religious identities. Those who stay in the faith and remain Democrats, thus declining to choose between the two identities, make compromises to some extent by not meeting all of the expectations of each role, in keeping with van de Vliert's (1981) model. While the level of compromise will obviously vary between individuals, at the very least the expectation of being a Republican Latter-day Saint is subverted. Further study may refine our understanding of how the mechanism of creating a compromised or middle identity works, both externally and internally.

The research findings also extend the theory of the Spiral of Silence by showing in greater and more nuanced detail how silence works strategically as

the mechanism by which individuals navigate role conflict. Many participants admitted to engaging in political conformity in order to maintain social harmony, as expected by Carlson and Settle (2016). However, some participants did not keep silent about their political identity, choosing instead to make their views known. Although the timing of these occurrences varied between individuals, this inconsistency in behavior supports the wider literature regarding the Spiral of Silence Theory—that while it applies in certain social conditions, a great many other factors also affect an individual’s choice to reveal or not reveal a minority opinion.

Further research could expand upon this subject in numerous additional ways. For example, a quantitative analysis could be undertaken to measure the levels of many of the feelings expressed in interviews, such as cognitive dissonance and social isolation. Additionally, it could help reveal how the social stigma attached to being a liberal Latter-day Saint is felt between genders, races, socioeconomic classes, and geographic regions. Further, a qualitative or mixed-methods study could look into the extent that liberal members’ beliefs and religious practices differ from conservative members, if at all, and whether the experiences of those who were raised in the Church differ from those who converted later in life.

Appendix

Interview Questions:

1. What kind of political stances do you believe the Gospel of Jesus Christ lends itself to?
 - a. What party do you feel is the closest to promoting these ideals? In what ways do they achieve that?
2. Is there a difference in how vocal you are about your political views when you are around Mormons versus non-Mormons?
3. What do you think makes more Mormons identify as Republican than Democrat/other?
4. What experiences have you had when a fellow Mormon initially finds out that you are a liberal/left-leaning/Democrat Mormon?
5. Have you ever faced later social consequences (conflict, tension, etc.) from Church members in any setting for making your political leanings known?
 - a. Would you be comfortable sharing some of those experiences with me?
6. Have you ever felt a sense of internal conflict between your religious and political identities and/or beliefs?
7. What form does that take in your life?
8. What do you think can be done to change the culture within the Church to be more open to different political beliefs?

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