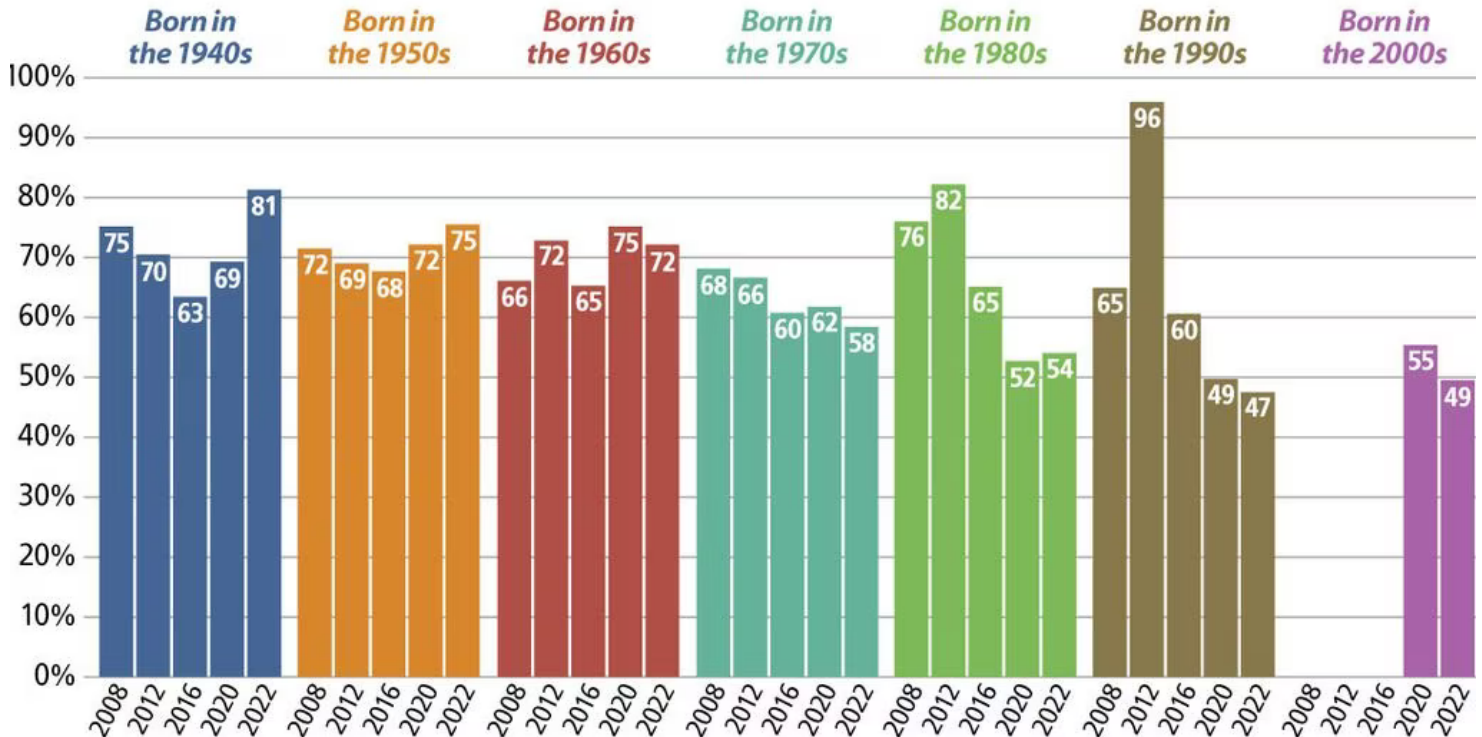


Donald Trump is scaring younger Latter-day Saints away from the GOP

Will this trend last? Will they switch and stick with Democrats?

Share of U.S. Latter-day Saints who identify as Republicans



Source: Ryan Burge, Data: Cooperative Election Study, 2008 to 2022

GRAPHIC BY CHRISTOPHER CHERRINGTON | The Salt Lake Tribune

(Christopher Cherrington | The Salt Lake Tribune)

By Peggy Fletcher Stack | April 23, 2023, 6:00 a.m. | Updated: 12:17 p.m.

For at least a half-century, American Mormonism has seemed politically [synonymous with the Republican Party](#), but that is changing with the faith's newest voters.

There's a "seismic political shift" happening with this generation, [Ryan Burge](#), who teaches political science at Eastern Illinois University, writes in a [recent online essay](#). Younger Latter-day Saints are "significantly less conservative than their older counterparts."

Among retirement-age members, 70% say they are Republicans and 20% are Democrats, Burge notes, while among the college-age crowd "just over half of them align with the GOP and 35% are Democrats."

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That's quite a gap.

Both age groups see the Republicans as moving steadily rightward, the political scientist explains, but "the average younger Mormon is noticeably more moderate today than in 2016. They also see the GOP and Donald Trump as moving significantly to the right since 2016."

And Trump's election likely was the turning point for many.

When [Quin Monson](#), John Green and David Campbell published "[Seeking the Promised Land: Mormons and American Politics](#)" in 2014, they caught the connection between the Republican Party and Latter-day Saints "at its peak," says Monson, a [Brigham Young University political science professor](#) and pollster.

When Sen. Mitt Romney, R-Utah, [made history as the first Latter-day Saint](#) to top a major party's presidential ticket, the connection between the GOP and members seemed irreversible.

“We saw our data going up and up,” Monson says now, “projected into the future, you would assume it would get to 90%.”

What nobody understood in 2012, he says, was that Trump loomed on the horizon.

“Older voters may not like Trump, but they are not leaving the party yet,” he says, “while younger Latter-day Saints don’t have a lifetime of socialization for loyalty to the party.”

Still, Monson urges caution in overinterpreting Burge’s data.

It definitely reveals “weakening ties to the Republican Party,” he says, “but I don’t know that I am persuaded yet that these younger voters are running into the arms of Democrats.”

The Trump effect

(Sue Ogrocki | AP)Former President Donald J. Trump poses for photos at the NCAA Wrestling Championships in March 2023, in Tulsa, Okla.

McKay Coppins, political reporter for The Atlantic, points to research by **BYU sociologist Jacob Rugh**, who surveyed students and recent alumni in summer 2020 and found that 22% of them planned to vote for Trump. More than half (52%) backed the eventual winner, Democrat Joe Biden, for the White House.

“To me, that gets at what’s going on in Mormon politics,” **Coppins** says. “I’ve spent a lot of time reporting on this since 2016, talking to Mormons, covering the long-shot **Evan McMullin** campaign, etc. It’s hard to overstate how offensive Donald Trump’s rise was to a certain segment of Latter-day Saints, especially younger, college-educated ones. Everything about him — **the vulgarity, the affairs, the ostentatious meanness** — was at odds with Mormon culture and values. And the fact that the Republican Party so fully embraced him was disorienting to a lot of members who’d grown up believing the GOP had the moral high ground.”

Like Burge and Monson, Coppins doesn’t necessarily see these disaffected Republicans joining the Democrats, but, rather, remaining “in a sort of hazy, center-right space, politically speaking, and they’re

just waiting for the party to return to the days of George W. Bush or John McCain.”

(Chris Samuels | The Salt Lake Tribune) U.S. Sen. Mitt Romney, speaking to reporters at Utah Capitol in Salt Lake City in February 2023, may attract younger Latter-day Saints.

These are the Latter-day Saints who feel most represented by Romney and his brand of Republicanism, says Coppins, whose [book about the Utah senator is due out this fall](#). They’re “still politically conservative, but temperamentally moderate, and very much in opposition to Donald Trump.”

On social issues

(Courtesy photo) Rachel Rueckert, editor-in-chief of Exponent II, has noticed a political shift among younger Latter-day Saints.

How will this move affect [policies like abortion](#)?

“Among older Mormons, it’s nothing but the status quo. Thirty percent favored access to a legal abortion for any reason in 2014. Today, it’s basically the same,” [Burge writes](#). “...For younger Mormons, there’s clearly a trend towards more abortion access. In 2014, 35% of LDS under the age of 40 were in favor. That share has slowly crept up in the last eight years. Now, the trend line puts it around 42%.”

Speaking anecdotally, Coppins says he has met and interviewed “a number of Mormons who continued to drift leftward over the last few years. They’re becoming more progressive on race, guns, immigration, even abortion and LGBTQ issues.”

That has been writer-editor [Rachel Rueckert](#)’s experience, too.

Having lived in Boston for the past 10 years, Rueckert definitely sees this shift among her Latter-day Saint acquaintances.

“I recognize my friend circle is flavored by where I live and work, but I think the vast majority of my friends are pro-abortion rights,” says Rueckert, [editor-in-chief of Exponent II](#). “Even if it is not a choice some would make themselves, they recognize the need for legal and safe access. There was a [lot of mourning after Dobbs](#).” last year’s [Supreme Court decision](#) ending the constitutional right to an abortion.

When she moved to Boston in 2012, there was a Latter-day Saint dodgeball group that used to play every week.

“We divided teams by who voted for Mitt Romney vs. Barack Obama, and that pretty much gave us an even split,” Rueckert says. “I bet now — a decade later — it would skew more liberal.”

Will they turn back?

(Francisco Kjolseth | The Salt Lake Tribune) Utah Gov. Spencer Cox, giving an update flooding conditions in April 2023, is seen by some observers as the type of Republicans younger Latter-day Saints would support.

Burge’s data is a “cautionary tale” for Democrats, says BYU’s Monson. The sides “could snap right back to where they were if the Republican Party rights itself.”

For that to happen, [Utah Gov. Spencer Cox](#), seen by many as a centrist, “cannot be the exception but the rule,” he says. “And Democrats would have to build a world where [Ben McAdams](#), also seen as moderate, is not the exception but the rule.”

The political scientist is unsure which scenario is more likely.

“I would like a world where there is more competition for Latter-day Saint votes,” Monson says. “I think that would be good for states like Utah, Nevada and Arizona [with sizable Latter-day Saint populations.]

Even if the current liberalizing trends among younger members “don’t totally hold and some of these people return to the GOP as they get older,” Coppins says, “it’s hard to see American Mormonism ever being as politically conservative as it used to be.”

Such “increased political diversity in the church,” he says, “will have fascinating repercussions in the coming decades.”

Not just for the country — but for the church.

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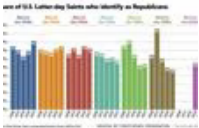
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