What was the research purpose of the paper?

We are interested in how men and women talk together in small groups. This is an important issue because men and women talk together in small groups all the time in contexts that are important to politics. Think, for example, about any sort of commission, committee, board, or panel in state, local, and national politics; anything from the Supreme Court on down. In those contexts, we have groups of people talking together and trying to make decisions about important issues. Understanding what happens in those settings is what motivated this research. We decided to take an experimental approach, and our research design was inspired by the scholars Norman Frohlich and Joe Oppenheimer. We expanded and developed their approach with the goal of creating a more rigorous experiment. We randomly assigned those who volunteered for the experiment to different types of 5-person groups, varying both the gender composition and the decision rule each group used. We ran the experiment in two locations -- Provo, UT and the Princeton, NJ, and overall, we examined 94 groups of men and women. We find that these group-level factors -- the decision rule and the gender composition -- really matter for the conversation dynamics. Who speaks, and how much they speak influences how they are seen by other members of the group. So this paper focuses on how much men and women speak and will eventually be part of a large book that also examines other aspects of group functioning.

What are the basic conclusions of your research?

We find that, when men and women get together under majority rule and women are in the minority, the average woman speaks far less than than the average man. When men are the gender minority in the group, they do not experience a similar participatory deficit. But as you increase the number of women in the group in majority rule, the average woman speaks more, and when there are four women in the group the women achieve a level of equality with the average man in the group. With unanimous rule it goes in the opposite direction. Unanimous rule seems to empower the gender minorities in the group. That makes sense because unanimous rule requires everyone's assent. It sends the message that everybody voice is valued and everyone needs to speak up. When women are the minorities in unanimous rule they come closer to equality of speech with men. But unanimity is also a double-edged sword. When men are the minority under unanimous rule, they go well beyond equality; they seem to take it as a signal that they should speak much more. The basic finding, then, is that the nature of the group matters. There is a powerful interaction between the gender composition of the group and the group's decision rule. What's more, the amount someone speaks affects how other members of the group see them and how much influence each person has on the group. Those who speak more are generally considered to be much more influential.

How should the findings of this research affect policy and decision makers?

If you care about gender equality in deliberating groups, you want to pay very close attention to how the group is structured. Most of the time we make decisions using majority rule. If you are going to use
that structure and you want women’s voices to be more represented, then you need more women in the group. But you can also think about other ways of structuring the group, and unanimity is a different way. Unanimity helps women find greater voice when they are in the minority. Unanimity comes with other challenges. It makes it more difficult to come to an agreement since it gives everyone veto power. What seems to be really valuable for women is an environment in which they are taken seriously -- an environment that is positive, that gives women positive reinforcement and support when they speak.

**How would you apply your research findings to Mormonism?**

In my opinion, our findings apply to a wide variety of settings, and certainly group councils within the church are one of those settings. If you want to empower the voices of women in those settings, then more women need to be present. In settings where women are likely to be a minority, we need to think about other ways to empower them. Again, paying attention to how the group is structured and the kinds of signals that structure sends to women is key. Leaders can play an important role in structuring councils in ways that will emphasize the value of women’s perspectives. The more women are regarded as being valuable members of the group whose voices contribute something important, the more women are likely to speak up and the more likely we will be able to hear women’s voices more clearly.

**This paper has been featured in a variety of news outlet including Huffington Post. How do you feel about all of the attention?**

It is gratifying to have large numbers of readers, especially women readers. It’s especially gratifying to hear women say, “Yes, this fits my experience, I lived this.” The fact that we can provide some rigorous evidence for something that a lot of women experience while providing ideas about how the nature of the group affect those experiences seems to me to be really important. Beyond the substance of the argument, it’s also nice to bring some positive attention to research being done in the department. My colleagues are doing some extraordinary work, so I hope to see much more of this kind of attention for our faculty in the near future.

**What’s the next step?**

We have finished a book manuscript that looks at how gender composition and decision rule affect a wide variety of variables -- not just how much people talk, but also what they say, what the group decides, and a host of other issues. The manuscript is currently under review at an academic press. Our next step is to look at social identities other than gender. We will probably look at race and ethnicity. These group level projects are big projects and they take a lot of funding, so we are in the process of thinking about funding and thinking about where we might want to conduct our next experiments.