



Latter-day Saints are overrepresented in Utah's Legislature, holding 9 of every 10 seats

How this dominance, particularly among Republicans, influences policy.



(Scott Sommerdorf | Tribune file photo) The Salt Lake LDS Temple and the Utah Capitol are seen together in 2017.

By Lee Davidson | Jan. 14, 2021, 8:00 a.m. | Updated: Jan. 19, 2021, 10:28 a.m.



But there’s an even more lopsided supermajority, one that some say wields even more influence than the GOP — though often in a more under-the-radar way.

Eighty-nine of the 103 lawmakers to be seated Jan. 19 (with one current vacancy) are members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. That’s 86%. Utah’s population is 60% Latter-day Saint, according to research by The Salt Lake Tribune. Latter-day Saints also hold 100% of the state’s congressional seats and statewide political offices, such as governor.

“That Mormon dominance is the most important fact about Utah politics, and it determines political outcomes. People don’t talk about it, but that’s what it is,” said retired Utah journalist Rod Decker, who wrote a book on the topic, “[Utah Politics: The Elephant in the Room.](#)”

One-time Democratic state Sen. Jim Dabakis, a former Latter-day Saint, sees religion as the main reason Utah laws are more conservative on liquor, gambling, abortion and gay rights, than the positions supported by voters in polls.

The Utah Legislature's religion gap

Latter-day Saints outnumber others in the Legislature by a 89-14 margin, with one vacancy. Here's how many of them are Democrats and Republicans.





80 LDS (99%)
1 non-LDS

GRAPHIC BY
CHRISTOPHER CHERRINGTON
The Salt Lake Tribune

(Christopher Cherrington | The Salt Lake Tribune)

“The Utah of the 1950s, which is represented by that clique of people [LDS legislators], is not the Utah of 2021, particularly the urban Utah,” Dabakis said. Latter-day Saint lawmakers “see their job somewhat paternalistically. They pat people on the head and say, ‘Well, you have your opinions on medical marijuana, but we know better.’ It is the kind of thing that erodes democracy.”

Utah Senate President Stuart Adams, an active Latter-day Saint, sees things differently.

“I don’t think it’s a problem,” the Layton Republican said about the religious gap between residents and their elected leaders. “I do believe that we do a pretty decent job reflecting those who elected us. ... I think people come to Utah because they love what Utah is. And I think we’re reflecting what Utah has been and currently is.”

The LDS influence

Utah House Minority Leader Brian King is a Latter-day Saint, too, so he is part of the LDS supermajority. But, as a Democrat, he is also part of a superminority — 22 to 81 in the Legislature.

Religion plays a big role, King believes, but it’s often misunderstood.

“It is a lot more subtle and nuanced than most people think,” the Salt Lake City Democrat said. “Many people wrongly think [LDS leaders] big-foot their way around.”

Instead, he said, LDS legislators often, in private conversations, argue a bill helps



(Rick Bowmer | AP file photo) Democratic Rep. Brian King poses for a portrait at the Utah Capitol on Feb. 7, 2020.

“The problem is, many of them get it wrong.” King asserted. “There are a lot of unspoken, unexpressed assumptions that exist on the part of many legislators about where they think the church is, where, in fact, the church may or may not be.”

He said church officials weigh in only rarely to clarify or correct such assumptions.

Adam Brown, a political science professor at church-owned Brigham Young University, studies the Legislature and said direct lobbying by the faith isn’t common and often is unnecessary.

“The church doesn’t need to actively lobby to get outcomes it often likes,” he said. Action “is less likely to come as a direct result of church lobbying influence than as a result of legislators attempting to apply their personal values — including religious values — to policymaking.”



said, it sometimes attempts to be a moderating influence.

“It’s as likely to be prodding conservative legislators left as prodding liberal legislators right.” He pointed, as an example, to church pushback against a right-wing anti-illegal immigration movement a decade ago.

In a recent instance, church support proved decisive for bills to [ban discrimination against gays in employment and housing in 2015](#). King added that [banning “conversion therapy” for gay youths](#) also likely would not have occurred without eventual support from the church. The same goes for [removal of the “Zion curtain,”](#) a barrier to prevent children from seeing alcoholic drinks being mixed in restaurants.

Dabakis, who is gay, said as a lawmaker he pushed for the 2015 anti-discrimination bill only after working with Latter-day Saint leaders to find a compromise.

“Once we worked that out with the church, it was not a problem,” he said, and colleagues who had opposed such legislation in the past quickly fell in line.





(Jeremy Harmon | Tribune file photo) Former Sen. Jim Dabakis at an election night party on Aug. 13, 2019.

Dabakis talked about another time, however, when he said church backing propelled a bill lowering the [legal limit for drunken driving](#) from a blood alcohol level of 0.08 to 0.05, the lowest in the nation.

“We were told that it wasn’t going anywhere, that it would never get out of the House Rules Committee,” Dabakis said. When it suddenly emerged, he asked a House leader why and was told it had the church’s blessing. The leader said, according to Dabakis, “while I’m not thrilled with it, I’m not voting against my church.”

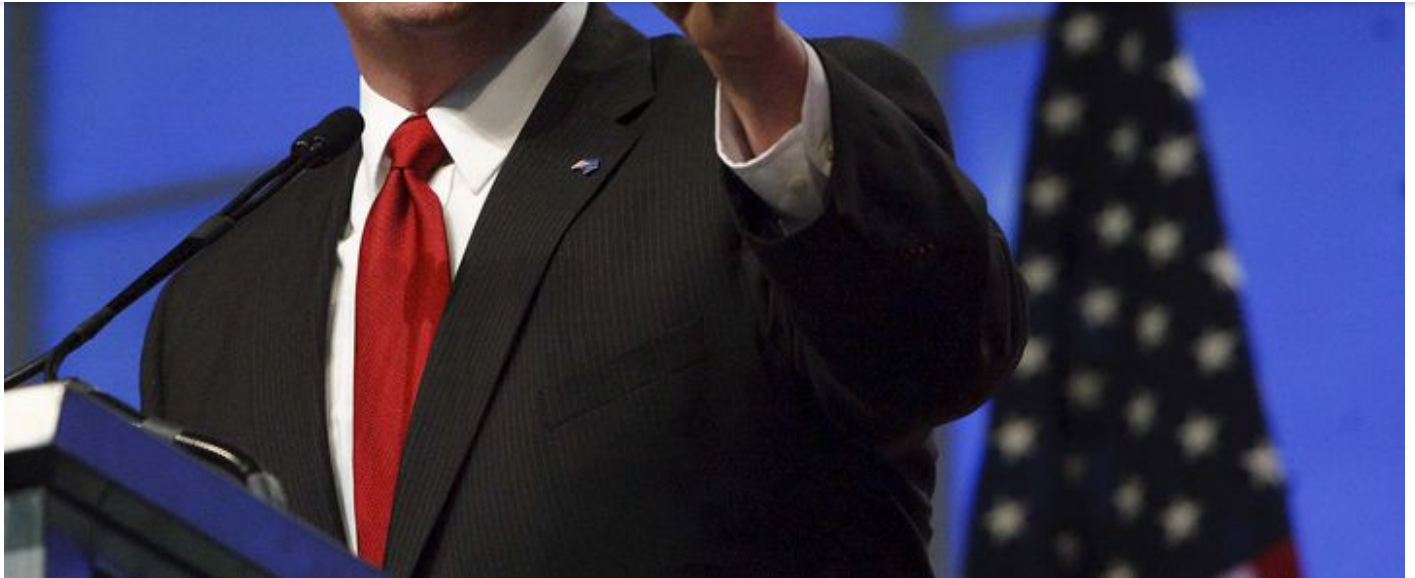
Some GOP criticism about transparency

That raises questions about how forceful the church is at the Legislature, and opinions vary widely.

For example, former GOP Rep. Carl Wimmer, [who left the LDS Church to become an evangelical Christian](#), created a stir in 2015 with a blog that [accused the church of bullying lawmakers on illegal immigration and alcohol](#).

“What bothered me most,” he wrote, “was when my local ecclesiastical leader contacted me and attempted to persuade me to vote for the bill.”





(Leah Hogsten | Tribune file photo) Former state GOP Rep. Carl Wimmer speaks at the Utah Republican Convention on April 21, 2012.

The church issued a statement then saying elected officials who are members “make their own decisions and may not necessarily be in agreement with one another or even with a publicly stated church position.”

In 2017, former GOP state Sen. Steve Urquhart, who [more recently formed a church dedicated to psilocybin mushrooms](#), also created a stir with Facebook posts critical of LDS lobbying.

He said the church is “seemingly incapable of finding the front door and walking through it,” and instead “whispers to a few members of Republican leadership, and things magically happen.”





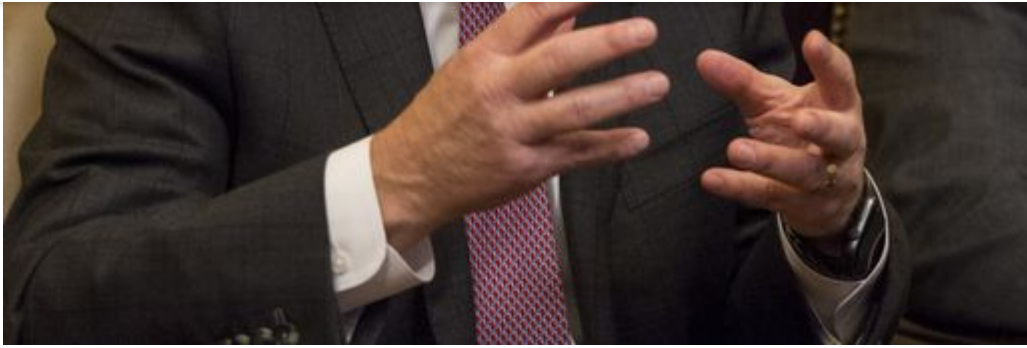
(Francisco Kjolseth | Tribune file photo) Former Republican state Sen. Steve Urquhart has created a church built around the use of psychedelic mushrooms.

The Senate president, for one, said he's unaware of such things.

"I very seldom see the church lobbying on anything," said Adams, who like all but one of his Republican colleagues is a Latter-day Saint. "When they do it, they do it very openly."

He added, "It's just a handful of issues that they weigh in on," including "alcohol issues and some others."





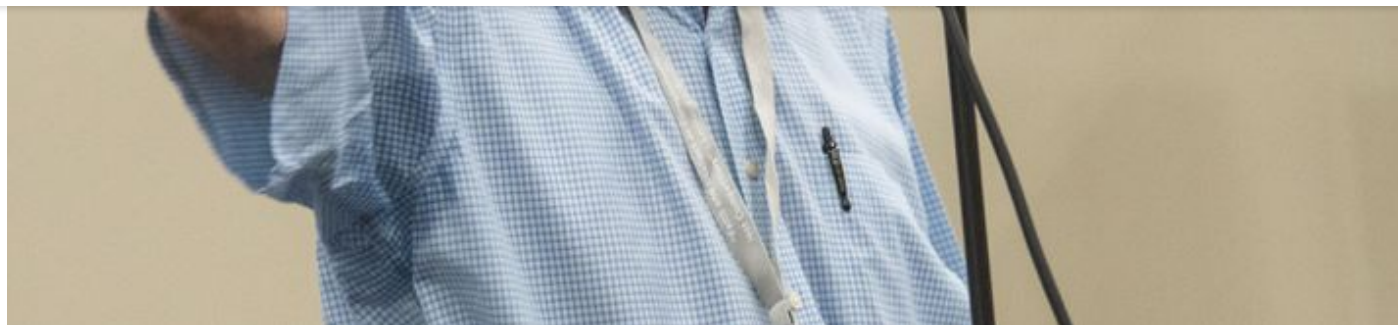
(Rick Egan | Tribune file photo) Senate President Stuart Adams talks during a news conference on Nov. 8, 2018.

How Republicans became so dominant

Decker, the retired television reporter, said Utah's non-Mormons are liberal, voting overwhelmingly for Hillary Clinton in 2016 and Barack Obama in 2012. While the Latter-day Saint majority is one of the most loyal Republican voting blocs. This wasn't always the case.

“From 1896 to 1972 in the first 20 presidential elections after statehood, Utah voted for the winner in 17. Utah was politically normal.”





(Rick Egan | Tribune file photo) Rod Decker chants "Sex, drugs and rock & roll" as he talks about his new book on Utah Politics during an Aug. 1, 2019, session of the Sunstone Summer Symposium at the Mountain America Expo Center in Sandy.

He said that changed after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in the landmark abortion case *Roe v. Wade*. Research shows more Latter-day Saints moved to the Republican Party, Decker said, seeing it as more aligned with them on abortion and other pro-family issues.

Virtually all officials interviewed do not foresee the Legislature weakening Utah's conservative laws in areas the church sees as [moral issues](#) — [abortion](#), gay marriage, gambling, alcohol — which leads to some complaints that the Legislature doesn't hear constituents or care.

Critics note that a [former House speaker, Marty Stephens](#), is the church's top lobbyist and that another recent [lobbyist was appointed to head the Legislature's legal and policy review office](#).

What Utah's non-LDS lawmakers say

Several non-LDS lawmakers say they have some influence despite being outnumbered — at least outside the areas of highest LDS concern, such as abortion and alcohol.

"I've never had a negative issue with my religion," said Senate Democratic leader Karen Mayne, a Methodist, who passes among the most bills of any senator.

The West Valley City Democrat said her religion rarely comes up beyond playful banter. "I ask them [Latter-day Saint members] how many liters of Coke they're going to drink



Mayne says, depending on the topic, legislators may worry less about religion and more about gender or ethnicity.

For example, [all six women in the Utah Senate walked out last year to protest a bill that would require women to undergo an invasive ultrasound](#) and be presented with video and audio of their developing fetus before terminating a pregnancy. Then-Sen. Deidre Henderson (now lieutenant governor), who is a Latter-day Saint, and Baptist Sen. Ann Millner — the Senate's only two Republican women — joined the boycott.

“It was a horrible bill,” Mayne said, “and all the women joined together to show it.”

Millner is the only Republican out of the 81 in the Utah Legislature who is not a Latter-day Saint. She did not return a call for an interview.

King, a Latter-day Saint Democrat, argues that Utah politics shifted because of issues like abortion. He said, “There is a regrettable cultural expectation that if you're LDS, you have to be, or you are, Republican.”

That's erroneous, he said, noting [church leaders annually send out letters stating that all political parties promote issues compatible with LDS teachings](#).

Another factor, said Brown, the BYU political science professor, is that Utah is broken into House and Senate districts that tend to magnify local majorities. Latter-day Saints may make up only 60% of the whole state, but what matters is who gets elected in each district.



Dabakis contends that the way these districts have been drawn has worsened that effect.

“Utah is absolutely and totally gerrymandered by religion,” he said. “They throw all the non-Mormons together, and then they win their small allotment of seats — and then they have control of the other 90%.”

Dabakis warns that Democrats may take up a court challenge if redistricting in 2021 continues to hurt religious minorities. “I had several attorneys from around the nation contact me and said they thought we could sue because of how it affected religious groups.”

Latter-day Saints may have oversized representation because their large majority scares away political challengers.

Newly retired Rep. Patrice Arent, D-Millcreek, who has been the Utah Legislature’s only Jewish adherent, says when she first ran in 1996, some people told her she had no chance because she was not LDS, but she believes it never impacted the results.





(Courtesy Patrice Arent) Retiring Rep. Patrice Arent.

“People who are looking at running sometimes have this idea that they have to be part of the predominant culture or they’re not going to win,” she said. “That’s not true. And that’s true for other areas, not just religion.”

[Ashlee Matthews](#), who won a state House seat in West Jordan in November, is not affiliated with any church, and said religion never really came up in her campaign against longtime Rep. Eric Hutchings, R-Kearns, who is LDS. It was the only new seat added by Democrats this year.

“My husband’s name is Hyrum. So, I’m sure a lot of people may have made assumptions,” she said. Hyrum was a common Mormon pioneer name. “If they don’t ask, I don’t tell because if you’re a good person, you’re a good person — and it doesn’t really matter where you go to church.”

Thirteen of the 14 Utah legislators who are not Latter-day Saints are Democrats. Brown, the BYU professor, notes that while almost all Utah Republican legislators have been LDS, so have about half the state’s Democratic lawmakers. Currently, 13 of the Legislature’s 23 Democrats are not Latter-day Saints, or 56%.

Decker notes that in territorial times, Utah had one party for Mormons and one for non-Mormons. He said, “We essentially do now, too.”

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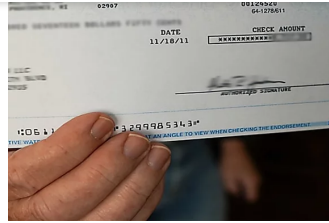
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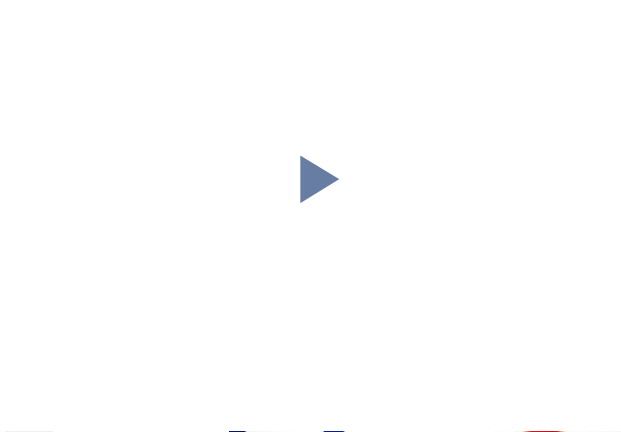
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