Mormons’ close-knit nature, values drive them to GOP

Politics • Republicans can count on LDS vote more than nearly any demographic.

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Since the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, Mormon voters have become more and more ensconced in the Republican Party, to the point that today they represent the most reliable, cohesive bloc of voters for the GOP of nearly any demographic.

The reason for the shift, argue three scholars in a new book on the topic, is that Mormons live in a tight-knit, insular subculture that sets itself at odds with the evolving social norms and shares conservative social values.

LIVE CHAT: On Wednesday, Sept. 17 at 12:15 p.m., join the book’s authors and Trib staffers to talk about the rising influence of Mormons in politics.

Since the 1960s, cultural politics have focused on patriotism, gender roles, the sexual revolution, abortion, same-sex marriage, religion and race.

“On each one, Mormons hold conservative attitudes that over time have come to align much more closely with the Republican Party,” argue authors David Campbell of Notre Dame University, John C. Green from the University of Akron and Quin Monson of LDS Church-owned Brigham Young University in their new book, “Seeking the Promised Land.”

The authors traced the evolution of Mormon politics — from a time when church founder Joseph Smith ran his own presidential campaign, through a period of isolation after the Mormons’ flight to Utah, to a re-entry into the political system after statehood when Mormons leaned to the Democrats, and up to the 2012 election, when a member of the faith, Mitt Romney, was the Republican nominee.

According to their research, 65 percent of Mormons identify as Republicans, and the figure is even higher — 79 percent — for those who are “very active” in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

“There is no reason to think the lock that the Republican Party has had on the Mormon vote is going to change in the short to medium term,” Campbell said in an interview. “The reason I say that is because I think one of our interesting findings in the book is young Mormons are more likely to be Republican than old Mormons.”

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Age and political leaning • That statistic bucks the general trend. In fact, the research showed that Latter-day Saints over age 65 are much more likely than younger ones to be Democrats — a holdover from their politically formative years when Mormons split their votes among Republicans and Democrats.

Fifty-one percent of Mormons over age 65 are Republicans, compared to 69 percent of those under 30.

“We have a lot of evidence in political science,” Campbell said, “that the party attachment you have when you’re young, sticks with you for a lifetime.”

However, Rob Taber, national chairman of LDS Democrats and the former national director of Mormons for Obama, believes the trends could change as “the social questions that were so burning in the 1970s sort of fade in importance, nationally speaking.”

Romney actually garnered less of the Mormon vote — 77 percent — than George W. Bush did during his presidential campaign.

The LDS culture presents an interesting study, the authors write, because Mormons have become more isolated from and at odds with secular culture at a time that other religious and ethnic groups, including evangelicals, are more assimilated into mainstream society.

“Many of those groups that have been very important in the United States — Irish Catholics, for example — the boundaries have become less and less strong, where with Mormons they’ve actually become stronger,” Green said in an interview.

Campbell and Monson, who are Mormons, and Green, who is a Methodist, point to the secular social issues that have driven political debate during the past several decades as a primary reason for Mormons’ affinity to the Republican Party:
• Their faith is closely tied to a strong sense of patriotism: 94 percent of Latter-day Saints believe the Constitution and Bill of Rights are divinely inspired, nearly the same number that believe the Book of Mormon — the church’s signature scripture — is an accurate portrayal of real events.

• Mormons have a traditional view of the role of women with 73 percent believing it is best for men to work outside the home and women to take care of the family. By contrast, 30 percent of the general population agrees with that view.

• Just 12 percent of Latter-day Saints support legal same-sex marriage, less than half the support among evangelicals, the next closest group.

Issues on the forefront • “Mormons always had distinctive views on these topics, but many of the issues that came to the fore in the sexual revolution were not political issues in the past,” Green said. “Now they are. Now abortion and same-sex marriage are very much on the forefront and Mormons are very much distinct, and they’ve found allies in evangelicals and [black Protestants].”

But the data also show Mormons don’t march lock step with conservative Republican ideology.

On immigration, the authors show, Latter-day Saints are perhaps more centrist, with a more favorable impression toward immigrants, with 52 percent saying immigrants strengthen the country and 48 percent saying they are a burden. The split nationally is 45-44.

The more liberal LDS views are explained, they contend, in part by exposure to other cultures Mormons receive while serving missions.

Those who served a foreign-language-speaking mission are even more favorable to immigrants.

And church leaders have been outspoken in supporting a more moderate policy. In March 2013, Dieter Uchtdorf, a member of the church’s governing First Presidency, left a White House meeting saying the Obama administration’s proposed immigration policy is in line with the faith’s view.

And, while there is little support for same-sex marriage, 49 percent of Mormons support civil unions, the highest level of support among the faiths, perhaps showing that Latter-day Saints are seeking some middle ground on the issue, in light of the church’s public statements supporting Salt Lake City’s anti-discrimination ordinance, the authors suggest.

“‘The thing that really, for me, sticks out is when faced with a choice between their church and their political party, we find even very conservative Mormons will favor church leaders on political issues,’” Campbell said. “Here you have the church leaning left when the church membership might otherwise lean right.”

It’s findings like those on immigration and LGBT tolerance that prompt Taber to believe Democrats can make inroads with LDS voters.

“It’s the political landscape of the Latter-day Saints is diversifying,” he said.

Taber said he is less focused on cutting into LDS affiliation with the Republican Party than he is making the case that Mormons should become Democrats.

“One of the big things involved in that,” he said, “is making sure we keep politics out of our Sunday meetings and recognize, as Latter-day Saints, that we agree on gospel principles, we agree on doctrine, we agree President [Thomas] Monson is a prophet of God, but that doesn’t mean we have to all agree in the voting booth.”

Top LDS leaders have said as much, stating in official pronouncements that the church “does not endorse, promote or oppose political parties, candidates or platforms” and that members “may have differences of opinion in partisan political matters.”

The three authors warn that having the church linked too closely with the Republican Party could undermine church interests — both for missionaries proselytizing among non-Republicans and for Mormon Democrats and independents who might feel out-of-place in the church and stop attending services.