BOOKSHELF

Book Review: 'Seeking the Promised Land' by David E. Campbell, John C. Green and J. Quin Monson

Mormons are unlikely to hear politics preached from the pulpit. So how are they one of the most politically cohesive groups in the U.S.?

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"In many ways, we don't always agree with this administration," Dieter F. Uchtdorf, one of the leaders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, said after meeting with President Barack Obama in the spring. The comment was an exercise in understatement, of course: From gay marriage to government-funded social programs, the president and the Mormons are on opposite ends of the political spectrum. Oddly, though, they have roughly similar views about immigration. In addition to pushing for national immigration reform, the LDS church supported a guest-worker initiative in Utah a couple of years ago. Rank-and-file Mormons, heavily Republican, are much less likely than other Republicans to see immigrants as a burden to the American economy.

What accounts for this gap? "When LDS leaders speak, Mormons listen." So say the authors of "Seeking the Promised Land," an investigation of the political dimensions of Mormonism by David Campbell of Notre Dame, John Green of the University of Akron and J. Quin Monson of Brigham Young University. The authors are veteran researchers who present their findings in clear, readable prose. (Mr. Campbell helped to do survey research for my own 2013 book on interfaith marriage.)

That the views of Mormons generally follow the church's official positions may seem unsurprising, but other top-down religious institutions can show a different pattern. The views of American Catholics, for instance, on abortion, gay marriage and contraception are not different from the general public's, despite the Vatican's doctrines and teachings. But Mormons are also the least likely of any religious group in the country to hear politics preached during religious services. So how did they become, as the authors put it, one of the "most politically cohesive groups in the nation"?

For one thing they have "tight-knit social networks." According to Mr. Campbell and his co-authors, Mormons "are more likely to have family members, friends, and neighbors of the same religion than most other Americans." These ties tend not only to reinforce a particular set of political views but also to produce a "sense of trust and reciprocity" that can encourage political mobilization. Mormons, it turns out, volunteer at high rates for both church activities and civic ones.

Mormon wards are run by lay bishops, who serve for a few years at a time. But almost all the members of a congregation are also given a "calling," a job they perform for several hours a week. They may teach
classes in religion, keep track of the community’s titling or organize ways to help fellow congregants in need. “Mormons’ congregational activity leads them to develop many civic skills,” the authors write. “And additional skills are developed by Mormons who have served as missionaries, including initiating conversations with complete strangers.” A business-school professor once told me that the deliberate cultivation of these skills is one reason why Mormons have a reputation for holding a competitive advantage in the corporate world.

All this means that when the church does want to involve itself in politics—as it did with Proposition 8, the 2008 California ballot initiative to ban gay marriage—the Mormon population is ready to be mobilized. But there is a problem with political involvement, too. It can inspire the kind of backlash that was provoked by Proposition 8, when Mormons were branded as bigots by gay-marriage proponents. Such politically inspired malice only adds to an acceptance problem that Mormons generally face. According to a 2011 Quinnipiac poll, only a Muslim or atheist presidential candidate would have made voters more uncomfortable than a Mormon.

For any Mormon going into politics, these problems are compounded since the people most likely to have strongly negative views of Mormons are those with a secular outlook and those with a strongly religious one. The secularists will be more likely to be Democrats and cast a vote against a Mormon who is a Republican anyway. But as we saw in the case of the 2008 and 2012 elections, plenty of Christian evangelicals are deeply suspicious of a Mormon presidential candidate. In the 2008 election primaries, the authors found, “identifying [Mitt] Romney as an active Mormon . . . produced a substantial, negative drop in his support . . . comparable to the effect of Obama’s association with Pastor Jeremiah Wright.” The good news for Mormons is that the negative effect was lower in the 2012 election. “It was small and likely inconsequential,” the authors say.

Is this a sign that Americans are becoming more fully accepting of Mormons? Messrs. Campbell, Green and Monson reserve judgment. In "Seeking the Promised Land," they present the "paradox of Mormonism." On the one hand, Mormons are seen as a fringe group, even a cult, by some Christians, who are troubled by the story of sacred golden tablets in upstate New York, the fairly recent history of polygamy and other aspects of the religion. Prejudice against Mormons may be among the last acceptable ones in polite society.

On the other hand, Mormonism is a quintessentially American religion, founded in the U.S. and kept alive by a persecuted group that eventually sought out a land of its own and rose through piety, self-sufficiency and hard work into prosperity and community well-being. Mormons are more likely than any religious group to say that they believe in “American exceptionalism,” and little wonder: It is hard to think of a group that better represents American ideals. Whether that will get a Mormon into the White House is another story.
Ms. Riley is the author of "Got Religion? How Churches, Mosques, and Synagogues Can Bring Young People Back" and "’Til Faith Do Us Part: How Interfaith Marriage is Transforming America."