

2008

Mormons in the United States 1990-2008: Socio-demographic Trends and Regional Differences

Ryan Cragun

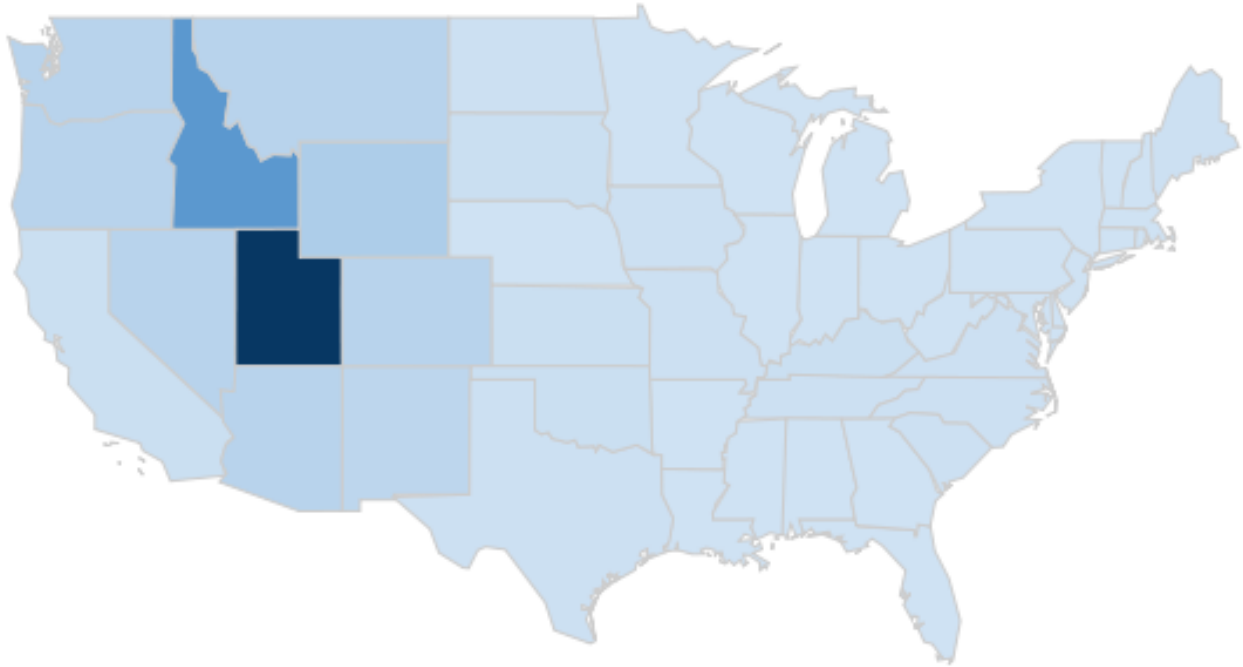
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Mormons in the United States 1990-2008: Socio-demographic Trends and Regional Differences

Rick Phillips and Ryan T. Cragun



A Report Based on the American Religious Identification Survey 2008

Principal Investigators
Barry A. Kosmin & Ariela Keysar



Trinity College
HARTFORD CONNECTICUT

Rick Phillips & Ryan T. Cragun

Highlights

Mormons were 1.4% of the U.S. adult population in 2008, a proportion unchanged since 1990.

The Mormons of Utah are the only religious group in the U.S. today that comprises a numerical majority of a state's population (57% of Utah).

Mormons remain the most geographically isolated and uniquely distributed American religious group (only 19% are found east of the Mississippi River).

The Mormon population increase 1990-2008 was more modest than claimed by the LDS Church.

ARIS data shows that apostasy rates are rising among young men in Utah.

There is a growing gender imbalance and surplus of women as a result.

There are regional differences among Mormons on several socio-demographic variables. Mormons outside of Utah are different to heritage Mormons in Utah.

Utah Mormons in 2008 had significantly larger households than Mormons elsewhere (4.2 persons per household in Utah vs. 3.7 persons per household elsewhere), suggesting that the traditional norm of large families endures in Utah.

Mormon women are more likely to be housewives and less likely to work full-time than other American women.

The period 1990-2008 saw rising prosperity with above average increases in household income among Mormons in Utah.

In 2008 Mormons had very high rates of voter registration (90% in Utah).

Mormons are more than twice as likely to be Republicans (59%) than non-Mormon Americans (27%).

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Introduction

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the LDS or Mormon Church) is one of the nation's largest religious groups, and American Mormons are found in all walks of life, including the highest echelons of business and government. Though it was founded in 19th century America, Mormonism is poorly understood and poorly regarded by the general public. According to national polling data, Mormons are viewed less favorably by the American population than any other major Christian group, and barely edge out Muslims¹. How can Mormons be so prominent, and yet regarded with such suspicion? In this brief report, we present a demographic portrait of Mormons in the United States using data from the American Religious Identification Survey series (hereafter "ARIS"), and argue that despite its putative size and rapid growth, Mormonism in America still retains some of the characteristics of the regional subculture founded in Utah by separatist pioneers in the second half of the 19th century. This "guilt by association" with the exoticism and esotericism of early Mormonism continues to this day, and Mormons in Utah and the Rocky Mountain States, where they are both heavily concentrated and a large proportion of the local population, look different from their coreligionists in other parts of the country in several noteworthy ways as this report will demonstrate.

About the Data

The data for this investigation comes from the American Religious Identification Survey series. The ARIS series is based on a large, nationally representative sample of adults in the 48 contiguous United States utilizing random digit dialed telephone interviews. The survey questionnaire asks respondents to identify their religious preference, and also collects information on important demographic and sociological variables. In this report, we draw on data from the 1990 and 2008 waves of the survey, and we specifically examine those who identified themselves as Mormons. The 1990 ARIS surveyed 113,723 respondents, including 1,742 self-identified Mormons. The 2008 ARIS has an overall sample size of 54,461 people with 783 Mormons. To our knowledge, the various waves of the ARIS, using a consistent methodology and replicated questions constitute the largest representative national samples of American Mormons available to social scientists. By way of comparison, scores of peer-reviewed papers and books on Mormonism have been based on data from the General Social Survey, which has been conducted annually or biennially since 1972. Yet there are less than 850 Mormons in all waves of the GSS combined. Hence, the large ARIS samples we use here provide a unique opportunity to make confident assertions about the trends and properties of American Mormonism over the past two decades.²

In order to make this report accessible to the general reader, we do not include the technical details of our statistical tests. However, all of the assertions and generalizations we make about American Mormons are based on statistically significant findings. (Indeed, we often use the word “significant” in this document in lieu of numbers and coefficients to refer to such findings.) Interested readers may contact the authors for specific information about our analyses.

Part I

COUNTING MORMONS

Mormonism is often regarded as America's most successful indigenous religious movement, rising from just six original members in 1830 to over 6 million U.S. members today.³ The expansion of Mormonism has been used by social scientists as a model of successful denominational growth.⁴ But the impressiveness of LDS church growth depends on how one counts Mormons. The church's own method for counting members is quite liberal. Anyone baptized and confirmed as a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is counted as a Mormon, regardless of their level of religious activity, or whether or not they consider themselves to be members. Even those who have joined and actively participate in other denominations are not routinely expunged from church rolls. Studies of worldwide church membership show that outside the United States, between half and two-thirds of those on church rolls no longer self-identify as LDS when asked about their religion by census takers.⁵ Thus, it is hard to know just how to count Mormons, because there are far fewer people who claim to be Mormon than are reported in official church statistics.⁶ The American Religious Identification Surveys allow scholars to look at self-identified members of the church in the United States. These are people who voluntarily tell survey researchers and census takers that they identify with the LDS church when asked *What is your religion, if any?* Many social scientists think that self-reported membership is a better way to count members, since people responding to a survey are not likely to consider things like the public relations impact or "bandwagon" appeal of their answer. Organizations, however, sometimes have an incentive for overstating their membership.

Comparing self-reported Mormons in the ARIS with official church statistics illuminates the dynamics of LDS growth in the United States. In early 1990, the LDS Church claimed 4,175,000 members in the United States, or 1.7% of the U.S. population.⁷ At the end of 2008, the church claimed 5,974,041 members, or 2% of the U.S. population.⁸ This constitutes a 30% increase in membership over an eighteen year span, as well as a 0.3% increase in Mormonism's "national market share."

Numbers from the ARIS tell a slightly different story. From 1990 to 2008, the survey reports that the adult Mormon population in the United States rose from 2,487,000 to 3,158,000 but remained a steady at 1.4% of the U.S. population. (ARIS population numbers are smaller, partly because only adults were surveyed, whereas official church statistics count children as well.) These figures show a more modest 16% increase in LDS membership—a rate of increase in line with general U.S. population growth over this time span. Because research shows that Mormon birthrates are declining, the difference cannot be attributed to large increases in people too young to be sampled by the ARIS.⁹ Rather, self-report data captures both those who join the church and those who defect, and discrepancies between ARIS numbers and figures reported by the LDS Church are due to large numbers of ex-Mormons who continue to be counted by the organization. Kosmin, Mayer and Keysar report: "[Mormonism] appear[s] to attract a large number of converts ('in-switchers'), but also nearly as large a number of apostates ('out-switchers')." ¹⁰ Thus, despite a large missionary force and a persistent emphasis on growth, Mormons are actually treading water with respect to their per capita presence in the United States.

A. GEOGRAPHY

The nationwide population dynamic is also evident in Utah, although the ARIS and official LDS statistics are more aligned here. Utah is the traditional Mormon homeland, and site of the church's sprawling headquarters in Salt Lake City. At the beginning of 1990, official LDS statistics record a Mormon population of 1.3 million members in the state, or 77.2% of Utah's population.¹¹ At the end of 2008, the church claimed 1.8 million members, and 68% of Utah's citizenry.¹² This is a drop in "market share" in Utah, but a 30% increase in the number of members. The ARIS records a more modest 21% increase in the adult Mormon population in Utah between 1990 and 2008. This increase has failed to keep pace with growth in the state's overall population. ARIS data estimates that the LDS "market share" in Utah fell from 69% in 1990 to 57% in 2008.

Nevertheless the Mormons of Utah are the only religious group today that forms a numerical majority of a U.S. state's population. Mormons are also high proportion of neighboring Idaho's population at 23%. The regional concentration is such that currently 53% of Mormons are resident in the Mountain states and only 19% located east of the Mississippi River. This means Mormons are the most geographically isolated and uniquely distributed religious group in the U.S. as the cover map of the proportion of Mormons by state demonstrates.

Part II

THE MORMON CULTURE REGION

While membership trends in Utah are similar to those in the rest of the United States, there are some important differences between Utah Mormons and those residing in other states. Utah was settled in 1847 by Mormon pioneers escaping the persecution they experienced in their enclaves in Missouri and Illinois.¹³ The Mormons established Salt Lake City and other towns in Utah and adjacent territories, and have dominated the region—both demographically and politically—ever since. Mormon influence in Utah politics is well documented.¹⁴ Social geographers argue that Utah is the hub of a “Mormon Culture Region,” where dense concentrations of Latter-day Saints, coupled with intergenerational family ties, fuse church and community norms, and make good standing in the church a marker of social respectability around town.¹⁵

Most Latter-day Saints living in Utah are born in the faith, steeped from infancy in the religious ethos of the Mormon Culture Region (hereafter MCR), and live in neighborhoods and cities where Mormonism is the majority faith.¹⁶ Many trace their roots to polygamous families, including both Mitt Romney and John Huntsman—candidates for the 2012 Republican Presidential nomination. By way of contrast, in most other states, the majority of Latter-day Saints are first generation converts, or the children of such converts, living in places where Mormonism is a minority faith with little power to affect local politics and culture.¹⁷

These differences have prompted scholars to posit that Latter-day Saints residing in the MCR are a different “species” of Mormon from those who live in the “mission field”—a term Mormons use to describe places where the church is just one denomination among many. One “species” inhabits a place where the tenets of Mormonism are axiomatic and an LDS identity is inculcated from birth. Their colorful and sensational history—which many Americans find intriguing or bizarre—is inextricably intertwined with their geography and genealogy. The other species practices an esoteric faith in pluralistic environs with little or no support from kin. While they may be proud of the accomplishments of the early western pioneers, the legacy of 19th century Mormonism is more history than heritage for them.¹⁸

Data from the ARIS can indicate how Utah Mormons differ from their counterparts elsewhere, and to what extent. Previous studies examining the social and demographic characteristics of American Mormons have been unable to address regional differences among Latter-day Saints because of small sample sizes.¹⁹ Thus, the various waves of the ARIS provide an ideal opportunity to uncover differences and similarities between the two species of Mormons. In the pages below, we compare Mormons in the United States, noting how they are alike and how they differ.

Part III

SOCIAL AND DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

A. AGE AND GENDER

Between 1990 and 2008, the average age of the adult Mormon respondents in the ARIS increased from 42.5 years to 44.9 years. This pattern parallels the general aging of the U.S. population, as Americans are living longer and having fewer children. The mean age of adult Latter-day Saints is not significantly different from non-Mormons in either the 1990 or 2008 waves of the survey.

Comparing the average age of Utah Mormons with non-Mormons over time reveals an interesting change. In 1990, Mormons in Utah were significantly younger than their counterparts in other states (41.4 years vs. 43 years). But by 2008 this gap had closed, and the average ages were essentially the same. It appears that Mormons in Utah have been aging faster than their counterparts elsewhere in the nation. This trend is curious, because Utah has the nation's lowest median age at 29.2 years, and ranks 49th among states in the number of seniors aged over 65 years.²⁰ Utah has been among the youngest states for decades, and demographers have traditionally attributed this to high birthrates among Latter-day Saints.²¹ Findings from the ARIS on Mormon household size coincide with this conclusion. In 2008, Utah Mormons had significantly larger households than Mormons elsewhere (4.2 persons per household in Utah vs. 3.7 persons per household elsewhere), suggesting that the traditional norm of large families endures in Utah. Given this, what can explain Utah's persistent youthfulness while the mean age of LDS adults in the state has been rising?

There are two possible explanations for this pattern. First, the age of new converts to Mormonism throughout the nation may be getting younger and younger, partially curtailing the general aging trend among members of the faith outside Utah. Another possible explanation is that adolescents and young adults—especially men—in Utah are leaving the faith in greater numbers.

Recent research shows that rates of apostasy have been rising in Utah and adjacent states where Mormons have enjoyed numerical majorities and cultural prominence. In a study based on data from the General Social Survey, Phillips and Cragun show that between 1972 and 2000, 92.6% of Mormon respondents in the MCR who reported being LDS at age 16 were still members of the church when they were surveyed. Between 2001 and 2010, this number had fallen to 64.4%.²² GSS data also show that before 2000, self-identified Mormons in the region were slightly younger than apostates, but since 2000 this pattern has flipped, and Mormons in the MCR are now older than those who have left the faith. Unfortunately, the GSS uses much smaller samples than the ARIS, so it is premature to draw firm conclusions from these data, but the findings mesh neatly with recent statements from LDS leaders about the increasing frequency of apostasy among young Utah Mormons. The *Salt Lake Tribune* reports that these worries stem from “massive losses of members in [the 18 to 30] age group.”²³

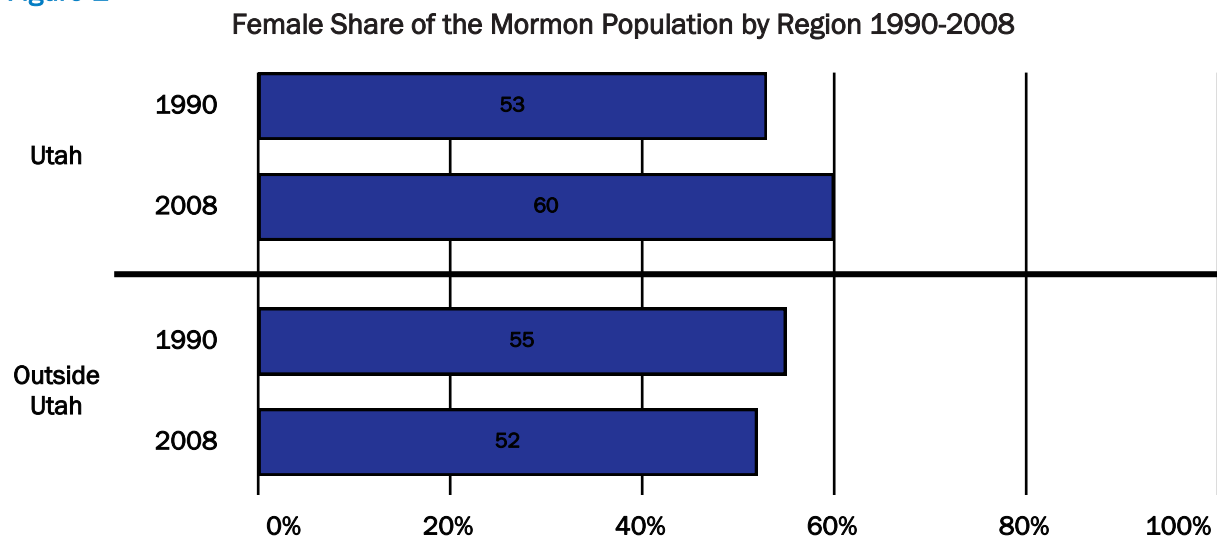
Changes in the ratio of male to female church members in Utah help confirm the assertion that young men in the Mormon Culture Region are defecting at substantially higher rates than young women. Mormonism, like most Christian denominations in the United States, has a surplus of

women.²⁴ In 1990, this surplus was more pronounced among Mormons outside Utah, where 54.9% of Latter-day Saints were female, compared to 52.5% in Utah. By 2008, a dramatic shift had occurred. While the male to female ratio actually narrowed somewhat in most of the nation, it widened significantly in Utah. Females now outnumber males in Utah 3 to 2.

One possible explanation for this gap is that declining Mormon majorities in Utah has made it easier for men to defect. Research shows that men are generally more secular than women.²⁵ Nevertheless, a strong religious culture in Utah has traditionally tied men to the faith by linking status in the church with status in the community. However, declining Mormon majorities may have weakened that link, and Mormon men who lack a strong subjective religious commitment to the church are now free to apostatize without incurring sanctions in other social settings.

A large surplus of women in Utah can also have corrosive effects on Mormon religiosity. For example, because of skewed sex ratios, LDS women in the state are increasingly likely to marry non-Mormon men.²⁶ Mixed faith marriages have higher divorce rates than when both partners share the same religion,²⁷ and children born to such unions are less likely to remain in the church.²⁸ Moreover, there are important theological considerations for women considering a non-Mormon mate, since mixed faith couples are not allowed to have a temple wedding, and only those married in the temple can achieve complete salvation within Mormonism.

Figure 1

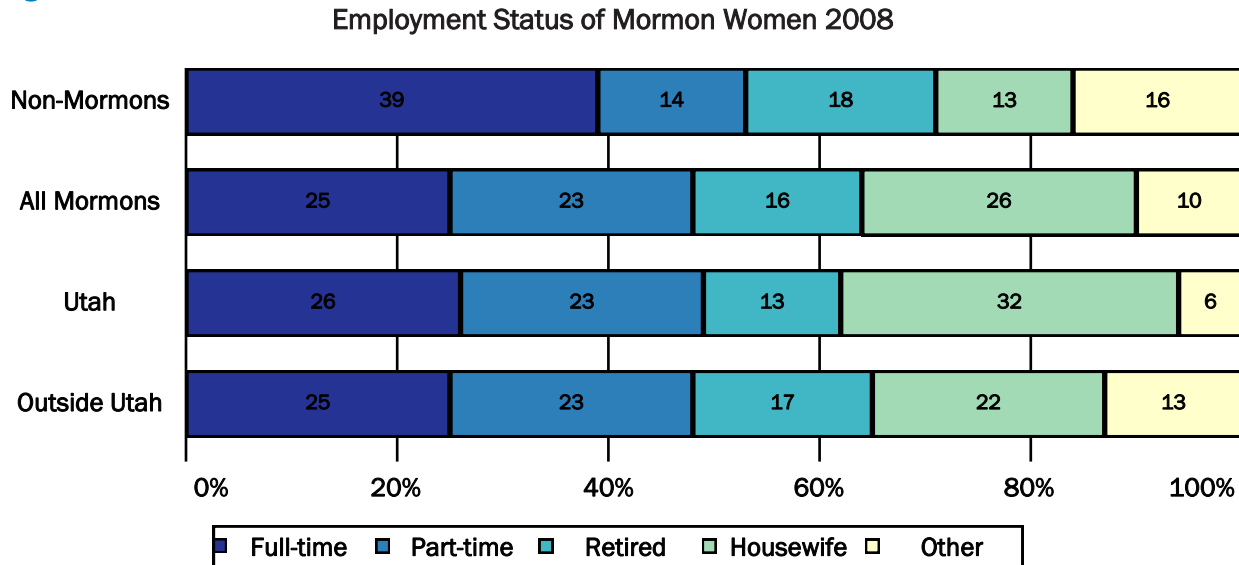


Pressures on Mormon women extend beyond unfavorable sex ratios in the Church. A number of influential Mormon leaders have taught that the ideal family structure is one in which men are the sole breadwinners, and women stay home to raise children. This advice amplifies and reinforces a cultural preference for large families that pervades the Church, particularly in Utah.

The proposed relegation of women to the domestic sphere has caused great consternation among Mormon feminists.²⁹ In actual practice, however, there is little stigma or scorn directed at women who work outside the home or pursue careers requiring advanced degrees. Indeed, according to the ARIS, Mormon women are no less likely to have college degrees than other women. Nevertheless,

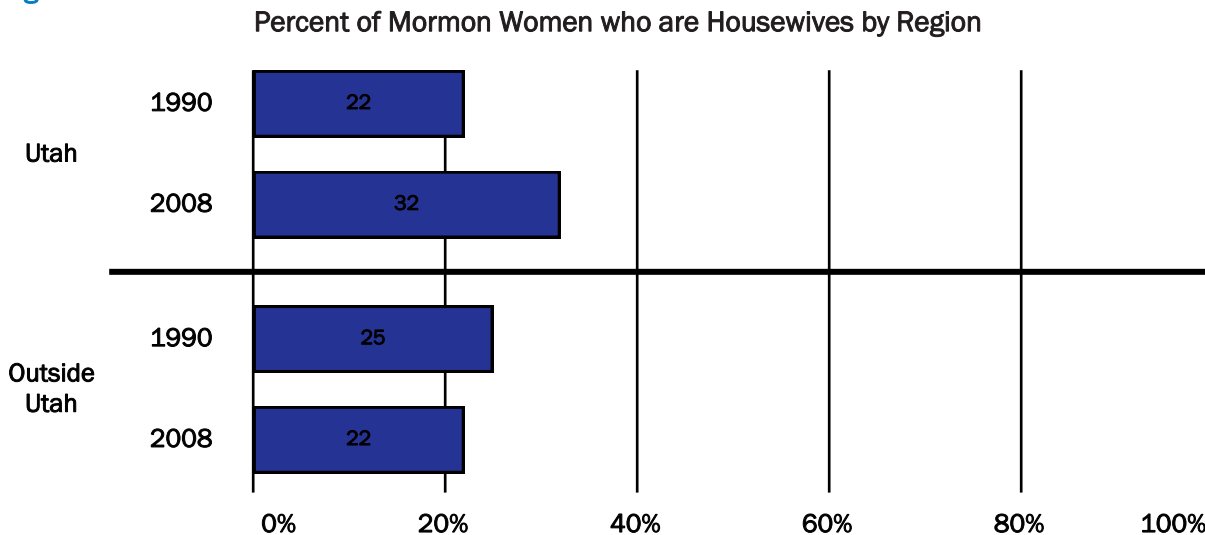
the norm of being a housewife does seem to remain embedded in Mormon culture. The 2008 ARIS reports that Mormon women are twice as likely to report that they are housewives as non-Mormon women (26% vs. 13%). They are also less likely to report that they work full-time (25% vs. 39%).

Figure 2



Among Mormon households, the percentage of women claiming to be housewives did not differ by region in 1990, but by 2008, being a housewife had become considerably more common for Mormon women in Utah (32% vs. 22%). This suggests that many rank-and-file church members seem to agree with their leaders about the ideal family structure, and as Utah Mormon households became more affluent between 1990 and 2008 (something we will examine shortly) more and more LDS women in the state chose to leave the work force and stay home.

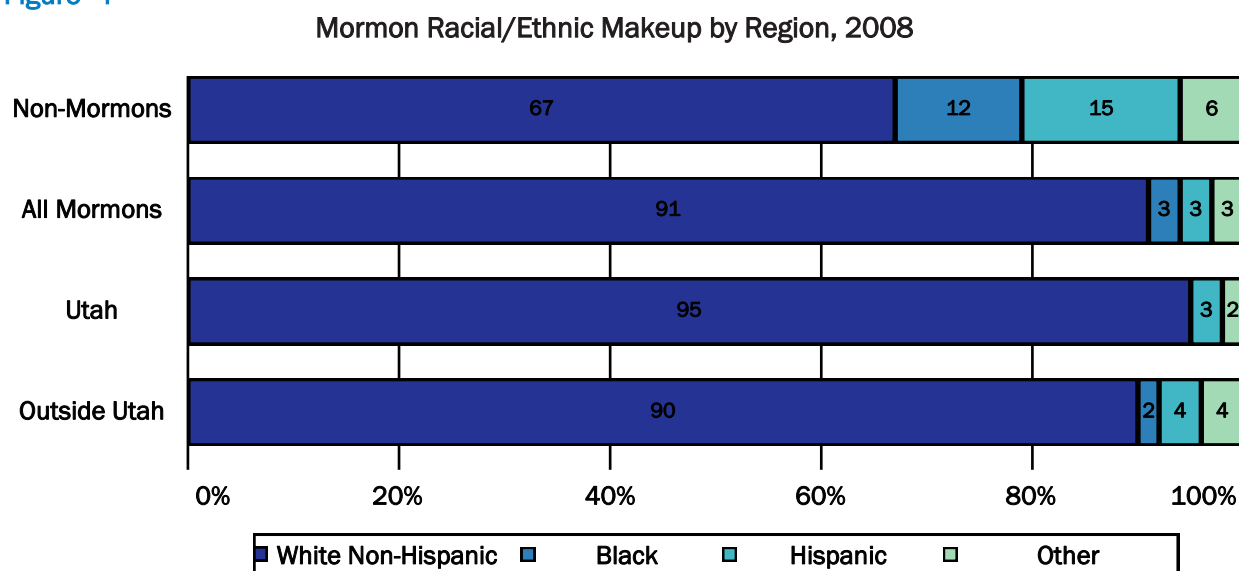
Figure 3



B. RACE

Race is a complicated and sensitive issue for Mormons. Until 1978, men of African descent were denied full participation in the church—a policy that continues to haunt church leaders to this day. The policy was based on a Mormon folk belief—which was also espoused and taught by important church leaders—that people of African descent were the cursed descendants of the first murderer, Cain. Since the policy change, however, the church has demonstrated a remarkable enthusiasm for proselytizing, converting, and integrating African Americans and indigenous Africans into the fold. Church missions in Africa are among the most successful in the world, and Mormon growth in Africa exceeds growth in most other regions.³⁰

Figure 4



Beyond Africa, the church is well established in Latin America, with a strong presence in Mexico, and most of the nations of Central and South America. At the beginning of 2010, about 38% of Mormons on official church rolls were in Latin American nations, although the percentage of self-reported members is substantially fewer.³¹ Aside from the United States, Mexico and Brazil are the only nations with over 1 million official members. Mormonism has also made important inroads in Asia, particularly in the Philippines and Japan.

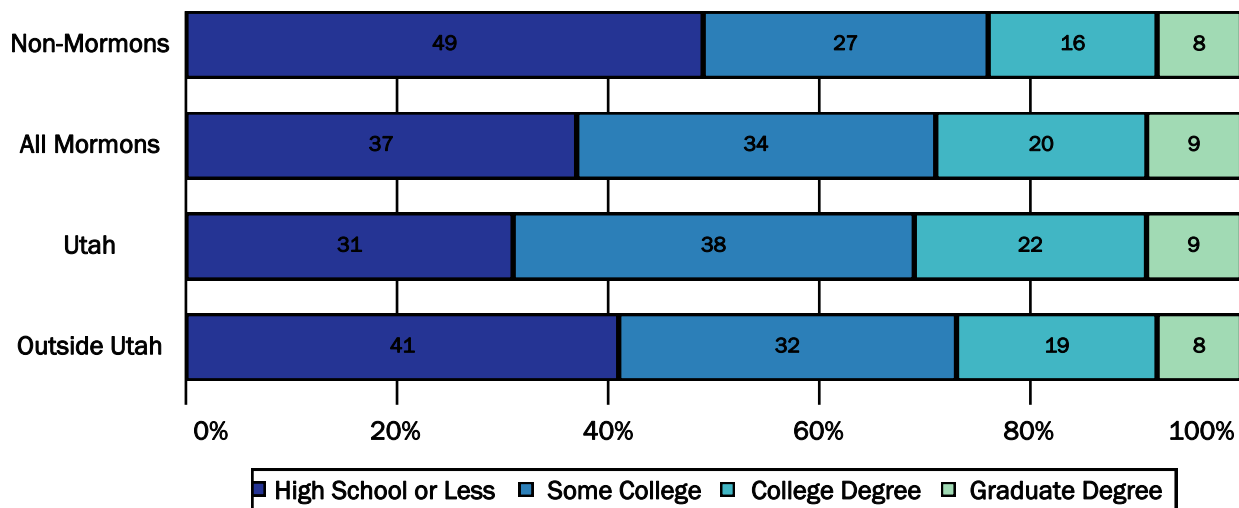
Nevertheless, despite the church's global outreach and ethnic diversity abroad, Mormons in the United States are remarkable for their racial homogeneity. The 2008 ARIS reports that 91% of self-identified American Mormons are white, 3% are Black, 3% are Hispanic, and 3% describe themselves as "other." Utah is even more homogeneous, and ARIS data show that 95% of the state's LDS population is white. Mormonism is slowly getting more diverse, both inside and outside Utah. Gains in Hispanic members account for most of this change. Between 1990 and 2008, Utah experienced a substantial increase in its Latino population, and the church has been working diligently to convert them.

C. EDUCATION, ECONOMICS AND EMPLOYMENT

Mormons are strongly committed to education, often citing a verse from one of their holy books which states, “The glory of God is intelligence.” Evidence suggests that education and religiosity have a positive association for Mormons: as years of education increase, so does religious orthodoxy.³² ARIS data show that Mormons are generally better educated than non-Mormons. College graduates comprise 29% of all Mormons and 31% of Mormon adults in Utah.

Figure 5

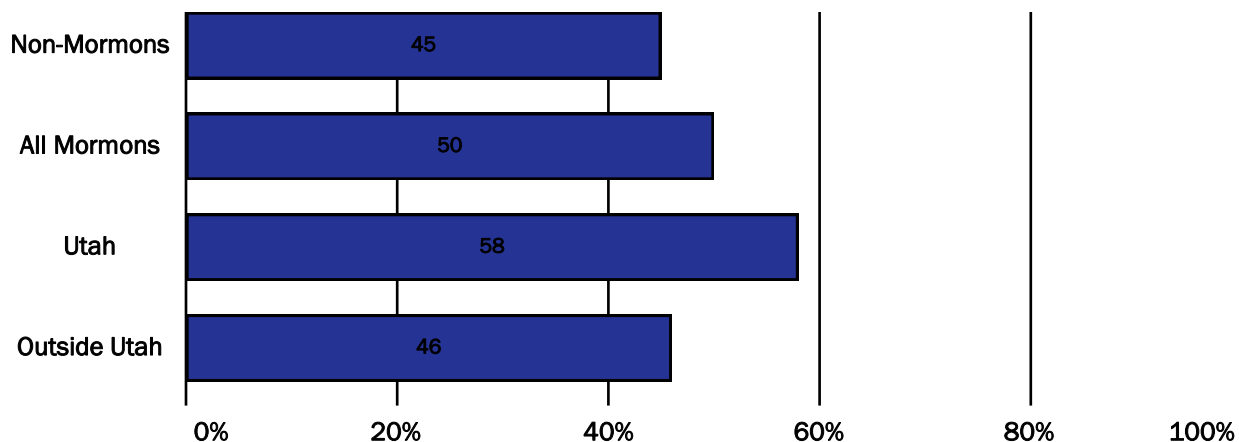
Educational Attainment of Mormons by Region, 2008



With respect to household income, in 1990 Mormon households outside Utah were more likely to have incomes exceeding \$50,000 than those within Utah. But between 1990 and 2008, this relationship seems to have reversed itself. In the 2008 ARIS, Mormon households inside Utah were significantly more likely to earn at least \$50,000 (58%) than Mormons outside of Utah (46%) and U.S. households in general (45%).

Figure 6

Percentage of Mormon Households with an Income of \$50,000 or Higher by Region. 2008

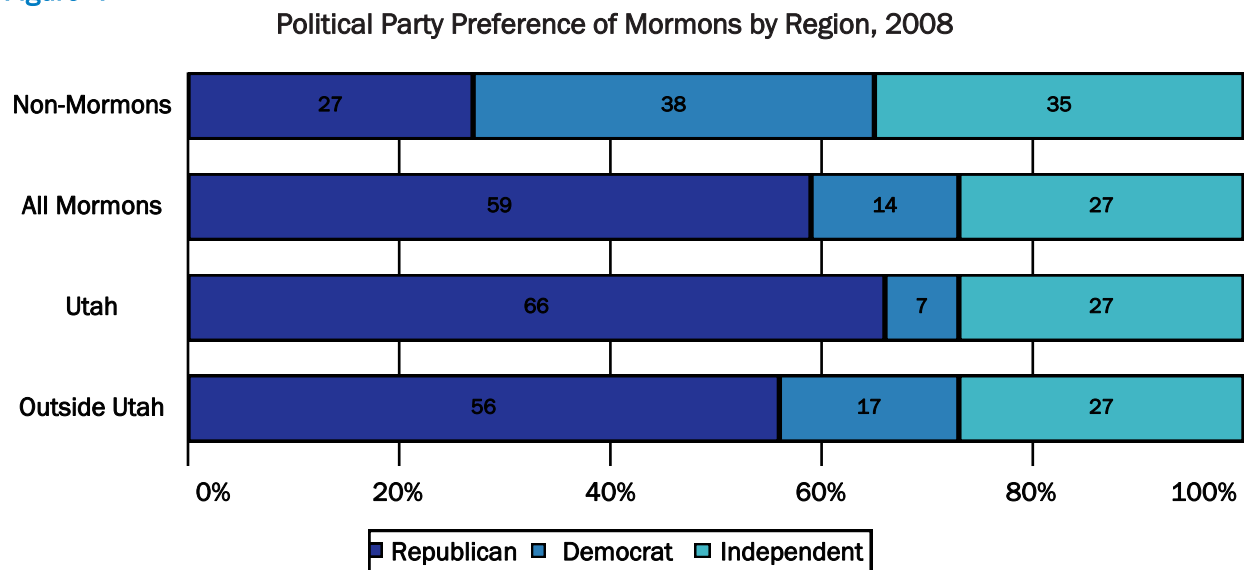


Mormon households in Utah have also gained in earning power relative to non-Mormons. While differences between Mormon and non-Mormon households outside Utah are negligible in both the 1990 and 2008 ARIS, Mormon households in Utah seem to have increased their incomes relative to their non-Mormon counterparts. In 1990, far fewer Mormon households made over \$50,000 per year than did non-Mormon households (13.4% vs. 21.7%) but by 2008, this difference had disappeared and there is now no significant difference between LDS and non-LDS household income in Utah.

D. POLITICAL VIEWS

Mormons are much more likely to favor the Republican Party than other Americans. The percentage of Mormons that identified as Republicans rose from 51% in 1990 to 59% in 2008. Among Latter-day Saints in 2008, Mormons in Utah are more likely to be Republican (66% to 56%) and less likely to be Democrats (7% to 17%) than Mormons outside the state.

Figure 7



Interestingly, Mormons have higher than average rate of voter registration, 90% in Utah and 84% overall compared to 78% for non-Mormon Americans. This suggests the Mormon community has above average interest in politics.

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The Authors

Dr. Rick Phillips is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of North Florida in Jacksonville, Florida. He is a former president of the Mormon Social Science Association. Dr. Phillips received his Ph.D. from Rutgers University and has published widely on the subject of Mormonism.

Dr. Ryan Cragun is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Tampa and a former President and currently the Secretary/Treasurer of the Mormon Social Science Association. He is a Research Associate of the Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society & Culture at Trinity College and of The Center for Atheist Research. Dr. Cragun is Joint Editor of the new academic journal, *Secularism and Nonreligion*. His research focuses on the nonreligious, secularization, and Mormonism.

Dr. Barry A. Kosmin is Research Professor in the Public Policy & Law Program at Trinity College and Founding Director of the Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture. A sociologist, Dr. Kosmin has been a principal investigator of the American Religious Identification Survey series since its inception in 1990 as well as national social surveys in Europe, Africa and Asia. His publications on the ARIS include the books *One Nation under God: Religion in Contemporary American Society*, 1993 and *Religion in a Free Market: Religious and Non-Religious Americans*, 2006.

Dr. Ariela Keysar, a demographer, is Associate Professor, Public Policy & Law Program at Trinity College and the Associate Director of the Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture. She is a principal investigator of the American Religious Identification Survey 2008 and the recent Worldviews and Opinions of Scientists-India 2007-08. Dr. Keysar was the Study Director of the American Religious Identification Survey 2001. She is the co-author, *Religion in a Free Market: Religious and Non-Religious Americans*, Paramount Market Publications, Ithaca, N.Y., 2006.

Program on Public Values
Trinity College
300 Summit Street
Hartford, Connecticut 06106
USA
Phone: (860) 297-2381
E-mail: isssc@trincoll.edu
www.americanreligionsurvey-aris.org

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