

Mormon leaders told to stay out of politics

by [Lee Davidson](#)

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SALT LAKE CITY (RNS) Mormon officials are telling their top, full-time leaders that they and their spouses should not participate in political campaigns, including making donations or endorsing candidates.

However, part-time leaders -- including local and regional congregational leaders -- are still allowed to do that, but are cautioned to make clear they are acting as individuals and do not represent the church.

Local leaders are also told not to engage in political fundraising or campaigning focused on members of congregations they oversee.

The new, clarified written policy was sent in a June 16 letter from the church's First Presidency over the past week to church leaders.

It comes as two Mormon Republicans are running for U.S. president -- Mitt Romney and Jon Huntsman -- and amid division among some rank-and-file Mormons about church involvement in a Utah immigration bill and California's Proposition 8 to ban same-sex marriage.

The policy shift will still allow Jon Huntsman Sr. -- father of the presidential candidate, who is an area authority of the church, and one of Utah's larger political donors -- to continue to contribute to his son and to campaign for him.

The First Presidency letter said that "General Authorities and general officers of the Church and their spouses and other ecclesiastical leaders serving full-time should not personally participate in political campaigns, including promoting candidates, fundraising, speaking in behalf of or otherwise endorsing candidates,

and making financial contributions."

LDS spokesman Scott Trotter said the letter "is a restatement and further clarification of the church's position on political neutrality at the start of another political season."

He also clarified that it applies to "full-time general authorities, general auxiliary leaders (such as presidents of the church Relief Society, Primary or Young Women organizations), mission presidents and temple presidents. The policy is not directed to full-time church employees" in other positions.

After some uncertainty about whether the ban extended to involvement on ballot initiatives such as Prop 8, Trotter clarified on Wednesday (June 29) that the statement was directed at partisan politicking.

"The church does reserve the right as an institution to address, in a nonpartisan way, issues that it believes have significant community or moral consequences or that directly affect the interests of the church," he told The Salt Lake Tribune.

The initial letter advised local and regional leaders that they are not to use church-generated lists, stationery, email systems or church buildings for political purposes.

Mark Button, a political scientist at the University of Utah who has written on religion in politics, said LDS leaders "might be learning" from widespread criticism after they put the church's weight behind Prop 8.

"The church might be responding to criticism it has faced about its very active, very critical role in California's referendum initiative about gay marriage," Button said. "That was a visible role that the church was playing, and it was clearly one that divided people in the church."

With Huntsman and Romney gaining attention as Mormons, Button also said "the statement may be an attempt to maintain an equal playing field for those candidates without coming out strongly for one or the other"

or any other candidate.

On Monday (June 27), the church's website included a statement proclaiming neutrality in matters of party politics but said the church still reserves "the right as an institution to address, in a nonpartisan way, issues that it believes have significant community or moral consequences or that directly affect the interests of the church."

Former U.S. Sen. Bob Bennett, R-Utah, who is Mormon and a descendant of former LDS Church President Heber J. Grant, said the new letter seems to represent what basically had been recent church policy, "but it's never been quite that specific."