

Liberal Mormons: A minority within a minority

by [Brian Passey](#)

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ST. GEORGE, Utah (RNS) U.S. Mormons overwhelmingly share the party affiliation of Republican presidential nominee and fellow Mormon Mitt Romney, but there are liberal-leaning members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who are finding their voice and supporting President Obama in the election.

Crystal Young-Otterstrom, chairwoman of LDS Dems, an official caucus of the Utah Democratic Party, said the caucus met with other Mormon Democrats across the nation for the first time during this summer's Democratic National Convention in Charlotte, N.C.

Still, Young-Otterstrom described Mormon Democrats as a "minority within a minority."

According to a Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life study released in January, 74 percent of Mormons in the United States are Republicans or lean toward the Republican Party. Only 17 percent are Democrats or lean toward the Democratic Party.

Romney's candidacy might give some the impression that Mormonism aligns with conservatism, but Jen Nuckols, a 31-year-old Seattle social worker, said that is not always the case.

"I'm a Democrat because I'm a Mormon," she said. "So much of what Jesus taught about in the New Testament was about caring for the poor, the fatherless, the oppressed, and not judging people who have less than us. I think those are things that are taught from the pulpit at church, and I see those beliefs reflected in the Democratic Party."

The website [Mormonliberals.org](#) invokes a similar statement by the most prominent Mormon Democrat, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev.: "I'm a liberal because

I'm a Mormon, not in spite of it."

"Mormonism has a complicated political history," said Joanna Brooks, ReligionDispatches columnist and author of "The Book of Mormon Girl." "It was only in the late 20th century that we saw a strong rightward turn."

Brooks said many LDS liberals were disappointed by Romney's now infamous comments about the 47 percent of Americans who do not pay income tax. They believe his remarks conflict with what their shared faith teaches about caring for the poor.

However, they also recognize Romney is the face of their faith right now. Brooks said she respects the burden Romney carries as the most public Mormon in the country.

"I feel incredibly protective of Romney," she said. "As much as I may disagree with his political stances, I don't want his religion to be an unfair target."

Yet Brooks said Romney represents only "one slice of our faith."

"I think where Mormon progressives are coming from is a commitment to the common good, a commitment to loving others and contributing to the communities where we live," she said. "It's as Christian as it is Mormon."

Kacee Garner, a Mormon in Waverly, Iowa, said her Christian beliefs inform her liberal politics. "I'm a Democrat because I believe in Jesus Christ," she said. "I believe in what he taught about love and compassion."

Despite the church's stated political neutrality, many left-leaning Mormons still find themselves defending their worthiness to fellow church members.

Daniel Magleby, a visiting assistant political science professor at Duke University in Durham, N.C., said he doesn't see any contradictions between his Mormon faith and his liberal politics. Growing up in Utah, though, he faced scrutiny from fellow Mormons who questioned his worthiness to take the sacrament (Communion) or serve in a church assignment.

"If you are a liberal and a Latter-day Saint, you learn to grow thick skin," he said.

Brooks said this election is an important opportunity for Mormon progressives to clear up the misconception that all Mormons are politically conservative. Romney's

conservatism has motivated more Mormon liberals to add their own voices to the mix.

Still, too many liberal Mormons feel as if they are all alone, Magleby said.

"There are quite a few Democrats in the church," he said. "We need to feel more comfortable talking about it." —RNS