

Why Good Mormons Must Be Democrats

by Brian Ferguson

Part One – Seeking Understanding

Chapter 1 - Introduction

I hope the title of this book caused you to stop and think twice. I would imagine some of you are thinking, “He must be kidding!” Perhaps you thought this might be a book of cartoons or satire a la Calvin Grondahl or Robert Kirby. Perhaps you wonder if I am some kind of religious apostate or political radical. Or maybe you picked up this book thinking, “Could this at last be the book that helps awaken the Saints to a broader understanding of modern American politics?”

The reader will, of course, make his or her own judgements as to the value of this work. Readers will also, if they wish, make their own judgements about my intentions and moral character. My hope, however, is that those who wish to judge this work (or judge me because of this work) will at least have the integrity to read the book before praising it or denouncing it.

For, while I am determined to take responsibility for what I say here, I do not wish to be congratulated or attacked for things I do not say. As we shall see, one of the corrosive characteristics of modern politics is the tendency to evaluate someone’s position not on the merits of what they say, but on the effect their ideas will have on the balance of political power. Or, put more bluntly, on whether the position validates or challenges our own political biases.

Thus, if this harmless little exposition of one person’s religious and political point of view is seen as being influential in some way, it will immediately attract both friends and enemies. The friends, of course, are welcome. Some of them have been alone and lonely for a long time and I welcome their companionship in the struggle to bring more balance into the Mormon political discussion. The enemies are also welcome because the strength of their attack will be an indicator of the success of this book.

The Republican Party has had a powerful and, as I will show, unnatural influence on the members of the Mormon Church for many years. It will not give up this power willingly. The Republican rhetoric machine has successfully planted in the minds of many people the idea that “I am a Mormon, so I will vote Republican.” This linking of Mormonism with Republicanism has many times benefited some of the least qualified candidates for public office at the expense of highly qualified candidates who have lost elections solely because they were Democrats.

I plan to show in this book that the presumptive link between Mormonism and Republicanism is politically motivated, not religiously motivated, that the Republican grip on many Mormons is based on rhetorical tricks, and that the basic philosophical, moral, and political tenets of the Mormon religion are far more closely aligned with the Democratic Party than the Republican Party.

About the author

A book with a title that many may consider outrageous might cause people to ask, “Who does this guy think he is?” The answer is that I don’t really consider myself important. There is a strategy in debate called the “ad hominum” argument (please excuse the Latin) that is basically designed to divert attention from a person’s argument, or point of view, by attacking them personally. Republicans are very good at this type of attack and I am wary of setting myself up to have my ideas ignored because I am not some type of “expert” or “authority,” or because I may be somehow “less Mormon” than someone else

On the other hand, if I say nothing about myself, the ideas presented in this book could be ignored because I “must have something to hide” or because I “must have a hidden agenda.” (See how easy it is to use rhetoric to distort things?). So let me tell you a little about myself.

I am a divorced man with two wonderful grown children. The mortgage company and I own a modest home which is very cluttered and full of books. I taught English for 20 years at the same junior high school that I attended as a kid and am now the school’s library media teacher. I have a Master’s degree in Educational Studies. I enjoy both classical and rock music, and I have less hair and more belly than I used to.

As far as my Mormonism is concerned, I was baptized at the age of eight, graduated from high school Seminary, and served an LDS mission to the Alabama-Florida mission. I have had such church assignments as Primary pianist (for non-Mormon readers, this means I played for the children, not that I was first chair among ward pianists!), Nursery teacher (baby sitter?), Sunday School teacher to the 14 and 15 years olds, and Elder’s Quorum instructor. I have never held (nor ever sought) any major leadership position. (I assume counselor to the Sunday School President doesn’t count!)

I generally consider it irrelevant to most political discussion, but because of the nature of this book I want you, the reader, to know that I am a believing Mormon. I believe the Joseph Smith story to be literally true, the Book of Mormon to be a true history of an ancient people, and the President and Apostles of the LDS church to have literal, legitimate, even miraculous, authority from our Father God. To my non-LDS readers, the preceding sentence means that I have what Mormons call a “testimony” of the Church. And I do.

My credentials as a Democrat go back almost as far. In the spring of 1972, just before my 18th birthday, I attended my first neighborhood political party caucus. (In Utah back then they were known as mass meetings). I was eligible to participate because 18 year olds had just been given the right to vote and the caucus was open to anyone who would be 18 by Election Day in November.

I attended the Republican caucus with my mother. The precinct boundaries overlapped the boundaries of our Mormon ward, so I knew many of the people there. I did not, however, in the idealistic innocence of my youth, recognize their behavior. You see, the previous summer I had attended that marvelous weeklong course in the American political system known as Boy’s State, which is sponsored annually by the American Legion. There I had been taught that the purpose of the neighborhood caucus was to

discuss current political issues with your neighbors and to elect delegates to your county and state party political conventions.

I don't remember what particular issue I wanted to discuss with my neighbors that evening, but I remember that the chairman (in whose basement we were sitting) was not interested in discussing anything. He wanted to vote for the (uncontested) delegates and adjourn. Well, as an experienced (and probably a bit arrogant) high school debater, I knew how to get an opportunity to speak. I began to make motions. Thanks to my debate class, Robert's Rules of Order were my friends and I knew that the chair could not just shut off all discussion without permission from the entire group.

I was wrong. He refused to let me speak by using that unwritten parliamentary procedure known as "because I say so and I'm the boss." The telling point for me was when I looked around the room for support and found that I had none.

I walked out, crestfallen and disillusioned. I had gone to that meeting looking for democracy in action and I had instead found dogmatic authoritarianism. Even more disappointing to me was the room full of people who failed speak up when the chair ran roughshod over the rules in order to shut me up. I'm sure many didn't really realize that the chair was punishing me for knowing the rules as well as he did. The scary ones are those who knew what was going on. Their silence allowed the chairman to stifle an idealistic new potential Republican. I didn't yet realize that the principles of "because I said so," and "don't let the rules get in the way of results" are basic tenets of modern American Republicanism.

I wish I could say that I've been a Democrat ever since that night, but I have to confess here my most shameful political secret. In the election of 1972, my first time voting, I voted for Richard Nixon. At the time I thought that I just couldn't vote for George McGovern because he thought the Vietnam War was wrong and that we should get our troops out of there. Talk about 20/20 hindsight. Even Nixon figured that one out before he resigned from office in disgrace.

On a more positive note, in 1976 I heard Jimmy Carter speak at the Utah Education Association annual convention in Salt Lake City. I was deeply impressed, even moved. It was clear that here was a man of principle and intelligence. Strangely, during his Presidency it was his strong moral positions, such as basing U.S. foreign policy on human rights issues, that got him into political trouble, especially with the so-called "Christian right." They, along with most Utah Mormons, for some reason preferred the pseudo-religiosity of Ronald Reagan to the honest Christianity of Jimmy Carter, the man who still occasionally taught Sunday School in Plains, Georgia even during his Presidency. Again, subsequent history has amply demonstrated that Carter was and is the better man, and the better Christian.

I mention Carter because during his 1980 election loss to Reagan, I, too, was defeated in my first and only run for political office. I ran as a Democrat for the Utah State House of Representatives in what was then District 57, the south end of Davis County. My opponent was Robert Garff, who not only had considerably more money than I did, but also had the unassailable Utah political advantage of being a Mormon Stake President. I take pride in the fact that I actually carried one of the 20 precincts in our legislative district.

Since then I have continued to watch the political scene, while continuing to study Mormonism, politics, media, advertising, and the tricks of political rhetoric. I believe I have some worthwhile insights and perspectives to offer here.

What this book is about

I am a Mormon Democrat. I firmly believe in the ideals, positions, people, and programs of both the Mormon Church and the Democratic Party. I not only find no contradictions between the two, but actually find that they complement and support each other strongly. I am very aware that my beliefs in this regard are not only uncommon in Utah, but are so rare as to make me appear strange and perhaps a bit crazy.

I have grown used to having the minority opinion in almost every gathering of people I find myself in. In family and religious gatherings I avoid discussions about politics. In political gatherings I don't call attention to my Mormonism. Frankly, I'm tired of keeping my mouth shut. I have heard many outrageous, intolerant, ignorant, racist things said by Mormons who ought to know better, by Mormons who clearly are not Saints, and I have remained silent. (Actually, I have a habit of leaving such gatherings early.)

I am writing this book to speak out and I hope this book will encourage other Mormon Democrats to do the same. I want to tell the members of my party that my Mormonism is not just something I do on the side, and that they are not free to assume they know my political beliefs because I am a Mormon. I also want to tell the members of my Church that I am a Democrat and that I am proud of it. They have no right to judge me or question my religious beliefs because I am a Democrat.

I am also writing this book because I believe the one-sided political conversation in Utah for the past thirty plus years has done a great disservice to the people. One party government is, de facto, a breeding ground for corruption and abuse of power. Have we already forgotten the lessons of the Soviet Communist system? Entrenched, single-party government in both the executive and legislative branches for a long period of time is a prescription for disaster.

Further, by claiming to be sanctioned by the predominant Mormon religion (an example, by the way, of the propaganda technique known as the "big lie"), the Utah Republican Party often acts as if it somehow governs by divine right. This "holier than thou" attitude distorts the true order of things by putting God in the service of the politicians rather than the other way around. This book is an attempt to cast a spotlight on this self-serving political sophistry and help clarify for the reader the distinction between the things of Caesar and the things of God.

What this book is NOT about

This book is addressed to my Brother and Sister Mormons, both Democrat and Republican, in Utah and other western states in the U.S. It is also addressed to anyone, Mormon or not, who may have an interest in the political philosophies of the Mormon

Church or the moral philosophies of the U.S. Democratic Party as seen through the eyes of one interested, educated, but non-expert and non-professional member of both.

This book does not speak in any way, officially or unofficially, for either the Mormon Church or the Democratic Party. It is the sole work and opinion of one man.

With that said, I want to go further and say that it is not my desire or goal to change the Mormon Church, or any of its doctrines or policies. Frankly, the Mormon Church is concerned with much bigger issues, and on a much wider scale, than the political concerns that will be discussed here. The Mormon Church is a large and very rapidly growing worldwide religion, and our petty politics here in Utah, or even the United States, are, and I believe rightfully should be, an increasingly minor concern for the Church. I am personally very much concerned about the politics I see in Utah, but I have no worries at all about the Church.

I believe many Utah members of the Mormon Church have a mistaken idea about the relationship between the Republican Party and the Mormon Church, but I do not believe the Mormon Church itself has fostered or encouraged those beliefs at all. In fact, I believe it is the Utah Republican Party and its leaders who promote the idea that all Mormons must always and only vote for Republicans. The Mormon Church issues statements of official political neutrality practically every election cycle and I take the Church at its word. What disturbs me is how few Mormons seem to take their Church seriously on this point.

A new view of the world

Most Utah Mormons will consider the title of this book to be audacious, if not downright outrageous. If I seriously intend to advance this idea, that good Mormons not only should be, but *must be*, Democrats. I have taken upon myself quite a burden of proof. I welcome the challenge, but ask the reader to bear with me as I lay some groundwork in the first few chapters before I get to the heart of my case.

My thesis is that Mormonism is more compatible with the modern Democratic Party than the modern Republican Party. A person's reaction to this idea could range anywhere from delighted agreement with me to stunned surprise to outraged disagreement. These reactions, and their emotional manifestations, are caused by a person's worldview, one's overall sense, picture, or concept of what the world is and how it works.

If your worldview is similar to mine, then my thesis tends to reinforce your worldview, and you feel comfortable, even pleased, by what I am saying. If, however, you have a worldview that is significantly different from mine, then the chances are good that my thesis will make you uncomfortable, perhaps even angry. It is important to remember that these reactions are as varied as the readers who may pick up this book, and that these varied reactions to the same stimulus are normal and expected.

It is not easy to change one's own worldview and even harder to try to influence someone else's. It is human nature to cling to our "comfort zones" and avoid, even fight against, anything that tries to challenge our concept of the world. The point I want to make is that one's worldview is entirely subjective. It is based upon each individual's background, personality, and life experiences. Accordingly, it makes no sense to say that

one person's worldview is correct and another's is wrong. All we can do is listen respectfully to each other's ideas and prayerfully ask the spirit of God to lead us to ever-higher truths.

The challenge for me as the writer of this work is to present my case as clearly and as honestly as I can. To help the reader understand my position, I shall endeavor to present the scriptures, readings, reasoning, and life experiences that have led me to believe as I do.

The challenge for the reader is to become aware of the assumptions and biases of his or her own worldview and set them aside long enough to read this book with an open mind. It is highly unlikely that this book will convert Utah overnight from being a strong Republican state to being a strong Democrat state. (One can always wish!). However, this book will point out some serious inconsistencies in the political thought and actions of many Utah citizens who claim to be temple-endowed Mormons. This effort, then, is bound to be controversial.

The things I say here may change your worldview or they may strengthen your current worldview. You may wish to share your support of, or disgust with, my opinions with others, or you may decide to ignore my challenge completely and go back to your comfortable shell. (Please put the book back neatly on the shelf so the next person can find it). At the very least, I believe this book will provide the serious reader with some interesting things to think about.