

INTERVIEW WITH J. QUIN MONSON

Much of your research focuses on religion and American democracy. How do the two interact?

The separation of church and state in the First Amendment to the Constitution is actually the key to a flourishing religious marketplace. Because the United States does not have a state church, religious denominations are free to compete for adherents and this competition makes for a flourishing and constantly evolving religious landscape.

You recently co-authored *Seeking the Promised Land: Mormons and American Politics*. The book focuses on the prominence of Mormons in national politics, despite making up a relatively small percentage of Americans. What has contributed to this outsized influence?

Two things come to mind. First, one of the things we show in the book is that Mormons participate in politics and community volunteer work at higher rates than other religious groups. And this political and community participation is true even though Mormons also generally spend a lot of time and effort within their congregations too. Second, American Mormons are also highly concentrated in the American West (especially Utah, Idaho, Nevada, and Arizona).

Have Mormons always been so involved in politics, or is this a recent phenomenon?

Seeking the Promised Land addresses many examples of institutional involvement by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in political issues going back as far as the vote in Utah to repeal Prohibition in 1933 up through the campaign for Proposition 8 in California in 2008. However, one of the challenges to understanding the political activity and attitudes of individual Mormons has been the lack of data. Good polling data exists for Utah Mormons going

back into the 1980s, but until recently no nationally representative survey data existed of Mormons. The book is based on a wealth of new and previously unpublished data, including two national surveys that were specially commissioned for the book.

How does *Seeking the Promised Land* apply to other American religious groups?

As a religious subculture in a pluralistic society, Mormons are a case study of how a religious group balances distinctiveness and assimilation—a question faced by all faiths including Catholics, evangelical Christians, Jews, and Muslims. In other words, how do Mormons maintain the balance between the religious distinctiveness versus assimilating enough with the broader American culture to find acceptance from other Americans, religious and secular?

It's common to hear complaints that the American political system is "broken." What can be done to change politics for the better?

American politics work best with the right mixture of good institutions and good people. In other words, having a political system that works well (produces good policy, is free of corruption, and other good

things) requires "rules of the game" like the Constitution, other laws, and even informal norms that help us make thoughtful political choices. But a healthy political system also requires good people to step forward and serve in public office.

