

How much does the LDS Church influence the Utah Legislature?

The Salt Lake Tribune asked all 104 members of the Legislature if they would list their religion, positions they have in their church, and how much direct or indirect influence they believe the LDS Church has in the Legislature.

The following members responded.

House	Name	Party	City	Church	Current/past church positions	Excerpt of response
Sen	Margaret Dayton	R	Orem	LDS	Organist now, many leadership and teaching positions	I think the most obvious church directive that affects legislators in Utah is that we (and all members of our faith) are encouraged to be involved in ... community affairs and be willing to serve.
Sen	Pete Knudseon	R	Brigham City	LDS	Currently a service missionary at the Joseph Smith Building as a host	My church has influenced my life. But when I decide on an individual piece of legislation, I don't call the church to see how I should vote.
Sen	Wayne Niederhauser	R	Sandy	LDS	Varsity scout coach	I have experienced very little direct involvement from the LDS Church in six years. The few occasions I have been contacted would be characterized as a "soft sale." I was never told how to vote. Church representatives merely stated the Church's position on the issues. The meetings were short and respectful. The fact that a high percentage of my constituents are LDS has had more impact on my positions than any direct involvement from Church representatives
Sen	Ross Romero	D	Salt Lake	Catholic	None	On issues such as alcohol, LGBT and immigration, it is clear that the LDS voice is important in the Legislaure....
Sen	Todd Weiler	R	Woods Cross	LDS	Former bishop, now a Sunday School teacher.	Weiler says the church has some direct and indirect influence, and adds, "I think it is important to remember that the LDS Church is also a large employer and land owner in Utah. Also just invested \$5 billion into City Creek. It deserves to have a say."
Rep	Patrice Arent	D	Millcreek	Jewish	Member of several boards, including board of the United Jewish Federation of Utah, served as Vice Chair of the National Association of Jewish Legislators	Sometimes LDS legislators are more concerned about the position of conservative groups (like the Eagle Forum) than the position of the LDS Church, when the church position is considered more "moderate." For example, I recall one year an abortion bill was being considered. An amendment was made for an exception which would have allowed for an abortion in very limited circumstances. This was the precise position of the LDS Church. In fact the language came from the LDS Church. Everyone in the Senate knew that, but only Democrats would vote for the position of the LDS Church. I think the same thing happened in the House. This is certainly not the only example. So perhaps the moral of the story is that Democrats often follow the positions of the LDS Church more than Republican legislators. In terms of other areas of law, the most involvement I've seen from the LDS Church is on liquor legislation.

Rep	Steve Handy	R	Layton	LDS	Bishop, stake president	As an elected official, I have never had the church reach out to me regarding issues of liquor control or illegal immigration, or any other matter for that matter. I have, however, approached the church on one matter of public policy to ascertain whether it had a position. I was told on this matter that I should proceed or not according to my conscience. I think it's only normal for members of the Legislature, whether they are LDS or not, to consider the views of the state's largest constituency. The LDS Church attempts to strike a reasonable balance and I think in Utah it would be stifling for Church lobbyists to be highly visible. In fact, I wouldn't know the chief LDS Church lobbyist if he walked in the door and sat right down next to me
Rep	Derek Brown	R	Cottonwood Heights	LDS	Youth leader, choir conductor, organist, early morning seminary teacher.	I've only been in the legislature for over a year now, but honestly believe that any sort of connection between the LDS Church and the Legislature is wildly overstated. During my first session last year, I heard that the LDS Church had a government relations person, but never saw him or knew who he was. And, I didn't even find out about the LDS Church's support of HB 116 [an immigration bill] until after I cast my vote and heard that an LDS Church leader was at the signing ceremony. So, as far as any actual connections between the LDS Church and the legislature is concerned, if they exist, I haven't seen it.
Rep	Rebecca Chavez-Houd	D	Salt Lake	Episcopal	Diocesan Standing Committee member, past chairperson for the Diocesan Commission on Ministry	I'm sure that at a formal and an informal level, my LDS colleagues connect the values of their church teachings to what they do as legislators. I'd be kidding myself if I didn't own up to the fact that I do, too.... While I don't need to extricate my spiritual self from what I do as a legislator (and I actually see it part of my baptismal vows to work toward social justice, equity and harmony as part of my legislative work), I remind myself every day that not all my constituents view those positive values through a religious prism. If we are a true representative democracy, then I believe that those of us who serve in public office should reflect the growing diversity that is occurring in our Utah community. I believe when diverse perspectives are articulated in the legislative process, this brings strength to our public policy dialogues. Public officials should reflect the ethnic and religious diversity of our State.
Rep	Fred Cox	R	West Valley	LDS	Currently High Priest Group leader. Has served on the High Council, Bishopric, Elders Quorum President, service mission to the prison, etc.	I didn't hear directly from representatives of the LDS Church last session or this session. When the church sent a statement directly to the Utah Legislature at the end of the session last year, I tried to contact the individuals behind the clarification re: 2011 HB 116, which initially did not help increase civility. They wouldn't return my emails or phone calls, but did eventually send our a updated statement that did help some with civility on immigration. This one: http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/immigration-church-issues-new-statement I don't make decisions on bills based on the party of the sponsor, nor their religion.
Rep	Brad Daw	R	Orem	LDS	Scoutmaster, member of bishopric, young men's president	I have been lobbied by the church exactly zero times in eight years in the House. I most certainly listen to the wishes of my constituents and quite a few of them are LDS.

Rep	Brian Doughty	D	Salt Lake	None	None	The LDS Church is very involved in the liquor regulations that take place at the Legislature. I ran HB193 that would have required consumers of alcohol spots on the Liquor Commission. I was told amongst other interest groups I would have to have the approval from the LDS Church for something such as that to be considered. I did not consult with the LDS Church and got the bill out of committee. It was next to be debated on the board when the board was wiped of all remaining bills as we finished our work on House bills. Other issues are not driven by the LDS church but by very conservative ideology that seems to prevail the Legislature.... Having been my first term it was interesting to see that the Legislature is not as much of a puppet to the LDS church as I had assumed. Having said that, I do feel there is some influence there when it is needed or wanted.
Rep	Susan Duckworth	D	Magna	LDS	Primary teacher	No response to question.
Rep	Becky Edwards	R	N. Salt Lake	LDS	Currently ward organist. Past Relief Society president, Sunday School teacher, Cub Scout leader, etc.,	I think you can make a valid argument that while the majority of the individuals serving in the Legislature are LDS, they are representing the views of most of their constituents who, while maybe not LDS, share many similar political perspectives.... To the extent that the LDS Church weighs in or gets involved in an issue, I think it is appropriate. They view themselves as a shepherd of their congregants and as such have a stake in issues seen as detrimental or enhancing to their religious mission and focus. I have never been lobbied on a bill by the church, either on a local or 50 E. North Temple level. I truly don't believe the church is pulling puppet strings of legislators up here.
Rep	Keith Grover	R	Provo	LDS	Currently in a High Priest Group leadership. Has been in three bishoprics.	I believe that members of the Legislature follow the tenets of their religion., regardless of what the religion is. My religious beliefs are part of who I am and those definitely factor in when I am deciding how to cast my vote. This would include moral issues (abortion, same sex marriage) and personal responsibility issues, fiscal responsibility, among others. Without concrete data I would suggest that the vast majority of my constituents (90%+) are LDS. I represent a very conservative Provo/Orem population and their political opinions and religious beliefs go hand in glove. I have been here for six years -- long enough to battle through some tough issues which are important to the LDS Church such as immigration and alcohol policy. The LDS Church is undoubtedly a force in the Legislature.... I have never spoken to anyone in the leadership of the LDS Church, nor have I ever been approached, regarding any issue that has come before the Legislature. Furthermore I have never been queried regarding any of the positions I have taken by the Church (outside of constituents who are LDS that may not have been f
Rep	Lynn Hemingway	D	Holladay	Methodiist	None	I do believe that the LDS Church has a huge impact on what goes on at the Legislature.... I'm not sure why, but the Republicans have a major foothold in the LDS Church. If you look at the records of some of the representatives, they don't seem to be very Christian. I have said many times that the people of Utah vote against themselves and what they believe in more than anywhere in the country. Can you imagine anyone wanting this group of legislators or the current governor in charge of the national parks? Can you imagine that same group of people being in charge of your health care? We can't or won't even do the simplest of tasks like fund public Education correctly. And God forbid if we were to tax the oil and gas industry or the coal industry properly to fund education. If we protected our ordinary citizens the way we protect the industries we would be in fine shape monetarily and health wise.

Rep	Greg Hughes	R	Draper	LDS	Primary teacher, past youth leader and Elder's Quorum presidency	It has been my experience that the decisions that Utah's Legislature arrives at is a product of personal perspective, spiritual or otherwise. The overall sentiment of the constituencies that we represent are obviously weighed and considered also. Given the demographics of Utah, few lawmakers I know have confronted a contradiction between their personal beliefs and the beliefs of those they represent. There have been some issues that religious leaders have participated in the public square by expressing their opinions and engaging lawmakers directly..... I worry that there is a secular push to ban religious leaders and organizations from open dialogue regarding issues of public policy. If we were to lose the voice and instruction from our religious institutions, it would be a tragic disservice and would harm this country, a country born on the principle of religious liberty.
Rep	Eric Hutchings	R	Kearns	LDS	Primary teacher	In all my time serving in the Legislature I have never once been approached by anyone from the LDS Church on any bill, or any other legislative issue. Literally. Not once.... Never have I been approached about how I vote or what to appropriate.
Sen	Karen Morgan	D	Cottonwood Heights	LDS	Former Relief Society president & ward and state primary president	Most of the legislation we work on is secular in nature. Occasionally, however, an issue comes up where leaders of various churches weigh in, including LDS leaders, Catholic leaders, etc. I have seen situations where those leaders' wishes have been agreed with and times when they have been ignored. I believe that most legislators, regardless of their church affiliation, respectfully listen to all of these religious leaders and take into consideration what they have to say. They then usually vote according to what they believe is in the best interest of Utah citizens. There are strong LDS members on both sides of the aisle, and although they share similar religious beliefs, they differ greatly in how they put those beliefs into action and how they vote. An example of this on the national level is Senator Harry Reid and Senator Orrin Hatch, both very active members of the LDS Church.
Rep	Jim Nielson	R	Bountiful	LDS	Choir director, youth leader, merit badge counselor, Sunday School teacher, neighborhood float committee chairman.	There have been times I suspected there were attempts to influence decisions made by the body. I had these instances second or third hand. I suspect there are many, though, who do our best to make decisions based on the principles we stand for and strive not to be influenced by any particular church, corporation, non-profit, or lobbyist. That is what I try to do. I think most would say that is their approach; most are successful to some degree. So if there are efforts by the LDS Church or other organizations, they may not be uniformly effective with all.
Rep	Mike Noel	R	Kanab	LDS	Past Bishop, High Council, Stake Presidency, Scoutmaster (3 times), teacher	In ten years I have only seen the church registered lobbyist weigh in on a few issues....alcohol, illegal immigration and gay marriage. The lobbyists may be more involved with leadership, but if so, to my knowledge, that information has not been passed on to the individual members of the Legislature. I think that in any area where a particular religion is in the majority, there will be some influence in the state legislative body where legislators make up the majority of elected officials from any given religion. However the LDS Church is a big tent, otherwise, how could you have a Harry Reid, a Mike Lee, a Jon Huntsman and a Mitt Romney all serving as elected officials and of the same religion? Most of my constituents are LDS. I believe they support my efforts to follow the Constitution, which we believe was inspired by God. The same holds true for family values and the issue that marriage should be between a man and a woman. The majority of my constituents support the church's positions on these issues.

Rep	Lee Perry	R	Perry	LDS	Past position included bishopric counselor, ward clerk, ward mission leader, elders quorum president.	I am sure that because of my beliefs and the beliefs of many of those I represent are members of the same church or have similar religious and moral attitudes I vote the way I do. I have never been officially lobbied by any official from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I have heard of their positions on certain issues but I still have to represent the people who live within my district. I don't think legislators in Utah vote any different than what the communities they represent would want them to and I think if you look at certain areas of the southern U.S. you will find legislators who have a strong Baptist leaning or perhaps another area of the Country that might have a strong Catholic emphasis. Just look at the Presidential Primary and it is hugely evident that religion affects how people think and how they vote.
Rep	Kraig Powell	R	Heber City	LDS	Ward choir director	I believe that any legislator will be influenced by his or her package of relationships, interests, associations, experiences, etc. That definitely happens with LDS legislators. But from the diversity of views that you see among LDS legislators in our body, you can tell that there is no "official LDS position" on nearly any bill. It is not that much different, in my opinion, than the culture of Oregon influencing its liberal legislators or the Bible belt influencing Arkansas legislators.
Rep	Doug Sagers	R	Tooele	LDS	Leadership positions including service in abishopric, stake presidencies, and as a branch president	My votes and political positions are not based upon the desires of any institution or organization, but do reflect the best interests of my constituents and those of the state of Utah. The principles that govern my personal actions are based upon my beliefs, but the political decisions I make are based on the desires of the people who elected me to the Legislature.
Rep	Steve Sandstrom	R	Orem	LDS	Sunday school teacher	The beliefs and principles formed by my faith do have influence on how I approach legislation. There is a difference between how I address issues based on my faith vs. my church. I think the fact that in my district, which is 90% LDS, the views of my constituents obviously align on faith. I have never had direct pressure applied by church officials to vote a certain way or to run or not run legislation. I do listen to them as I would any church organization on their issues and desires regarding legislation. I do the same with other religions and I have met with Bishop Wester of the Catholic Diocese on issues along with LDS officials. People should understand that on a few occasions, the LDS church does give input on issues, but that is all and I am always told to vote my conscience and represent my constituents. The myth that they tell you how to vote is just that, a "myth."
Rep	Jennifer Seelig	D	Salt Lake	Methodist	Sunday school teacher	I grew up in the Bible belt. In comparison to Kentucky, the LDS Church is not that directly active in politics... Everyone makes decisions based on their values, and religion is a big part of those values. Some show it more than others, though.
Rep	Evan Vickers	R	Cedar City	LDS	Bishop (twice), counselor in bishopric, counselor in stake presidency, high council	It is my opinion that often decisions are made based on the beliefs and value system that the individual legislator and his/her constituents that he/she represent hold to. I do not see legislators looking to the church for guidance but rather to their beliefs and value system which in many cases their religious affiliation will have an effect on.

Rep	Christine Watkins	D	Price	LDS	Currently a Sunday School teacher. Held many positions in Primary, Young Women, Relief Society, Sunday School.	From my personal experience during the last four years I have voted and filed bills on what constituents indicate they want. I did have one bill this session (Biological Fathers Bill HB308) that an attorney told a committee member that "the church" would take a position against. I contacted Bill Evans from the church and he indicated that was news to him. I have never had the church or anyone affiliated with the church lobby me on any issue. Having said that, the vast majority here on the hill are LDS, so if an issue is against or part of the LDS beliefs the support for or against it shows up in the votes.... I have attended one luncheon with church leaders and there was no mention of specific issues. The conversation was light and nonspecific. I would like people to understand that in any state where there is a dominance of any religion or political thought, it can't help but show through in issues and votes.
Rep	Curt Webb	R	Logan	LDS	Former bishop	The Legislature's voting patterns on moral issues are heavily influenced by the teachings of the church. LDS legislators are a large majority in both houses and they tend to share a common set of values taught from an early age. This applies regardless of party. It is also true that those same values are shared by those here of other faiths. It is interesting to note that in spite of that, we constantly war over issues of policy. Often when we agree on a moral issue we will battle over approaches to that issue, even when the church weighs in. My constituents are overwhelmingly LDS but reflect the same pattern: common values and vastly diverse opinions about policy and approach.
Rep	Mark Wheatley	D	Murray	Catholic	None	I believe the LDS Church has a lot of influence on our legislative body due to the high number of legislators who are of the LDS faith. I also believe the LDS Church has direct involvement on issues such as the sale of alcohol, gambling, immigration, polygamy and any other issues. Also, because so many legislators have heavy concentrations of LDS constituents, these legislators hear from them and try to act and vote in accordance with the wishes of their constituents. I also feel there are a lot of legislators who can and do separate church and state.
Rep	Brad Wilson	R	Kaysville	LDS	Teacher	I have never been lobbied by the church. I live in Kaysville which is highly LDS but I'm often surprised how divergent my constituents views are on issues considered important to the church (alcohol, sex ed, immigration, education, welfare).