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Race and Ethnicity in American Politics

Minority Religions and Officeholding

KEY TERMS:

normalization, Protestant-Christians, Congress, Mormonism, Islam

DESCRIPTION:

Through the process of normalization and mainstreaming, minority religions can achieve political success in the public realm.

KEY POINTS:

- Protestant-Christians constitute 45% of Americans, 54% of Congress
- Mormons constitute 1.7% of Americans, 2.6% of Congress
- Muslims constitute 0.6% of Americans, 0.4% of Congress
- "Normalization" refers to the social processes through which ideas and actions come to be seen as mainstream and commonplace in everyday life (Focault)

The history of the United States has a strong religious background. Men and women, in the face of European religious persecution, refused to compromise strong religious convictions and fled Europe for the New World. Most of these founding Americans were Protestant Christians, who diligently followed the tenants of their faith that they had come so far to protect. In the United States, Americans continue to take pride in exercising the right to practice various religious beliefs, and freedom of religion is a vital component in the life of an American. Today the religious make-up of our country is as diverse as ever. A great number of religions and denominations have found a home in the United States. There is still, however, a majority religion in the United States. Protestant-Christians constitute around 45% of Americans, with Catholics a distant second at about 24%.

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It seems as though the religious affiliation of Congress aligns similarly with that of the US citizens. The majority of our Congressional officeholders are Protestants, accounting for more than half of the 111th Congress. Again, Catholics are the second largest group at just over 30%. However, it is of note that some minority religious groups are better represented in Congress than they are in the population as a whole. Mormons in particular constitute only 1.7% of the population but make up 2.6% of Congress. Muslims however are .6% of the population but are only .4% of Congress. The political success of minority religions is dependent on their ability to appeal to the mainstream American community, the majority of which are Protestant-Christians. This “normalization” of minority religions, Mormonism in particular, is what has allowed them to gain

high political status in America.

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Mormon theology is far from the mainstream Protestant religious tradition in America. The prophet Joseph Smith founded the religion in the 1830's and dictated the Book of Mormon, a sacred text in the religion. Right from the start,

Smith's fundamentalist followers were persecuted by non-Mormons. They continually fled from city to city, avoiding persecution. It wasn't until the assassination of Smith that the new leader Brigham Young led the Mormons to Utah where they made their home and organized The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Mormon ideology is unique, and this sets it apart from mainstream Christianity. They have sacred temples, enshrined in secrecy. Mormons also use other texts besides the Bible to teach their faith. Particularly the issue of polygamy within the faith has caused friction between Mormons and non-Mormons.

With all these differences stacked against them, Mormons have still been able to overcome in the political realm. They have achieved this political success by appealing to the Protestant majority in America. Mormons have "normalized" in several ways, but in particular they have relied on the avoidance of talking about the tenants and practices of their faith. "Now that plural marriage is out of the picture, the less said the better about the particular teachings of the church, including such practices as the baptism of the dead and the doctrine of the perfectibility of mankind into divine form" (Feldman). When Mormons do publicly speak on their faith, they relate themselves as just another denomination of the Protestant-Christian faith. They do a lot of mission and charity work world-wide, which is appealing to Protestants who seek similar aims. Mormons actively seek to participate in government, both at the local and national levels. By continuing to stay quiet and vague on their faith, and attempting to identify with the greater Protestant majority, minority Mormon candidates are being elected at an elevated rate. There are several prominent Mormons in office, like Senators Harry Reid and Mike Crapo.

The same success cannot be said for all minority religious groups in Congress. Muslims, for example, have had little success getting elected to Congress. As previously noted, they make up .6% of the population but only .4% of Congress (2 members). Islam, like Mormonism, is a very different type of faith compared to Protestant-Christianity. Islam believes in the holy book Qur'an, and does not see Jesus Christ as the Savior. Muslims also practice fasting, praying several times a day, and must make a pilgrimage to the holy city Mecca.

Muslims have not overcome these religious differences with the same success Mormons have. Their lack of "normalization" has prevented them from achieving more political power on both the state and national levels. In order to hold more offices in Congress, Muslim candidates would need to appeal to the masses on both a theological and political level. As opposed to highlighting their differences with the Protestant-Christian faith, they should capitalize on the similarities. For example, Islam is a monotheistic religion, and the belief in one God is a tenant Muslims share with Christians. There has yet to be a Muslim presented and they remain largely out of Congressional offices, but they do have the opportunity to change that in the future.

Minority religions will continue to achieve political success through the process of normalization. Buddhists, Jews, Hindus and other minority religions who model themselves after the Mormon's achievements will also gain a stronger political foothold. If these minority religions can work hard on their image, and

demonstrate that they fit into the mainstream American model, they will be accepted as viable political candidates in the future.

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