The Paths of Jews and Mormons toward the Center of American Politics
My research will focus on the experiences of ‘outsiders’ who have long struggled against cultural obstacles in their attempts to become insiders. Specifically, this project will be a comparative assessment of the path traveled by Jews and Mormons in the United States from political outsiders to political insiders. I will explore how interpretations of prominent religious texts, the possibility of “divine” revelation, the demographics of immigration and missionary work, and the socio-historical circumstances of the development of the identities of these two religious communities in the United States have been influential in determining the ease in which these two groups have been and will be assimilated into the broader culture.

The interpretations of religious texts I will be investigating include mainstream understandings of the Book of Mormon, specifically “The Articles of Faith,” and the Jewish Torah. I believe that parts of the “Articles of Faith” dictate Mormon political identity and have been influential in determining the path of Mormons. Within the Book of Mormon, I will be focusing on the significance of Articles 7, 9, 11, and 12—the theological foundations for Mormon political engagement. Similarly, for the Jewish population in the United States, there have been crucial interpretations of the key passages in Books of Genesis and Exodus (in particular) that have served as a guidepost for the evolution of the beliefs and practices that have defined the contours of Jewish political engagement in America.

The possibility of divine revelation, as present in the Mormon Church, has been a pivotal factor in allowing the church to change with the times. These revelations are said to come through the authoritative prophecy of the President of the Mormon Church. Among the key issues at the intersection of Mormon theology and political identity that I will be examining are the evolving status of LDS women and the transformative “revelation” in the mid-1970s concerning the status of black people in the eyes of the Church.

In contrast, in Judaism, there is far less reliance on the possibility of divine revelation to transform the Jewish community’s beliefs and behaviors in relation to the broader culture. In American Judaism, there is no central authority figure to dictate the path the religion must follow. This “lack” has allowed for the politics of the Jewish identity to be more internally contentious. Although the lack of authorized revelation does allow the faith to remain rooted in tradition, it has perhaps stunted their acceptance into broader culture.

Finally, I will examine the quite different demographic paths toward the center of American political life taken by Jews and Mormons. Whereas, the Jewish population in the United States has historically been fed by immigration—particularly during the first quarter of the 20th century—the growth of the population of the Church of Latter Day Saints has largely been a result of concerted missionary efforts and a high birth rate. I will be exploring how these very different paths from the margins to the center of American political culture have affected broader cultural attitudes towards these two religious groups.
This research will be crucial not only for our understanding of the intersection of religious and political identity in the United States, but also for my undergraduate experience. I am thrilled to be given the opportunity to study politics outside the classroom. Being part of an academic research project will help me to gain a unique perspective and apply it to other academic forums and experiences. I also view this as a great way to develop my analytic and writing skills, which will be vital in achieving my goal of attending and succeeding in law school.