

The Puzzling Politics of American Jewry

Kenneth D. Wald
University of Florida



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Apart from biographical or antiquarian interest, why should social scientists study the political behavior of American Jews? If a group's importance is assessed by size, then empirical research on American Jews is barely possible, let alone desirable. According to the most recent American Religious Identification Study (Kosmin and Keysar 2009), there are about as many Jews as Episcopalians in the population and it's hard to find even a single empirical study about the politics of Anglicans.

Most surveys with general population samples yield Jewish subsamples of only 1 to 3 percent, barely large enough to draw confident conclusions. In the 2010 midterm election exit polls — a much larger sample than a typical election survey — the number of Jewish voters was apparently too small even to generate a reliable estimate. The Jewish vote breakdown thus went unreported. Even if Jews are as electorally single-minded, politically hyperactive and strategically concentrated in large states as often alleged (cf. El Azhary 1980), they remain a tiny stitch in the American electoral mosaic. Whatever makes Jewish voting patterns interesting to academic observers, it's certainly not the percentage of Jews in the electorate.

Rather than size, American Jews are theoretically interesting to a political scientist like me because their political behavior is puzzling and because existing research hasn't offered satisfactory explanations for the puzzles. The first and most famous of three intellectual puzzles associated with Jewish voting was succinctly captured in Milton Himmelfarb's colorful yet politically incorrect aphorism that "American Jews earn like Episcopalians and vote like Puerto Ricans."

To put that puzzle in the less inflammatory language of social research, why do Jews, who on average resemble Republican-oriented high-status groups in education, income and occupational status, vote not for the party of low taxes and limited government regulation — as do other such groups — but rather favor disproportionately the party more committed to unions, the poor and spending on social programs?¹ While it is tempting to answer cavalierly that this is simply how Jews are, that response actually hints at the second puzzle of American Jewish political exceptionalism.

Contrary to being a universal trait, Jewish liberalism has in fact been predominantly an *American* phenomenon and Jews in most other democratic societies tend toward centrism rather than the left side of the political spectrum. There is yet a third puzzle: American Jewish liberalism is not invariant across time but changes in ways that are not obvious. American Jews trended toward the right from the late 1960s through the

1970s, as did other traditional Democratic constituencies (Barone 1990, Rieder 1985), but then swung back to the Democrats in the 1980s when few other voter groups moved in that direction.

These three puzzles — the relative liberalism of American Jews, their political differences from Jews elsewhere and the temporal variability of this liberalism — require what Paula Hyman (1992) calls a situational interpretation of Jewish politics that emphasizes contextual factors. I will present such an approach below by arguing that the three puzzles of American Jewish political behavior have a common root in the uniquely American “regime” of religion and state that incorporates a distinctive and classically liberal model of citizenship. As “strangers in a strange land,” a phrase I borrow from the late Robert Heinlein, American Jews have developed a political ethic that reflects what is unique about the American religious economy.

In the next section, I unpack each of the three puzzles, considering the challenge they pose to explaining Jewish political behavior and the efforts of scholars to account for the strong pro-Democratic/liberal skew. Finding these explanations inadequate to the task, I then present a theory of Jewish liberalism that attempts to accommodate the patterns of political behavior that stimulated the inquiry and offer some supportive evidence from history and contemporary opinion data. The paper concludes by discussing exceptions to the general pattern among Jews and speculating about the relevance of the new approach to the anticipated growth of religious diversity in the United States.

The Puzzles of Jewish Liberalism

Puzzle #1

The central puzzle of American Jewish political behavior is apparent from Figure 1 which contrasts the self-reported presidential vote of Jews and the entire electorate for the period from 1948 through 2008.ⁱⁱ Since at least the New Deal, American Jews have exhibited disproportionate attachment to the Democratic Party, typically giving Democratic presidential candidates 20 to 30 percent more of their vote than the entire electorate.ⁱⁱⁱ

Similar patterns have emerged in off-year Congressional elections (Greenberg & Wald 2001). In the 2010 midterms, for example, an election-night poll of Jewish voters found that 66 percent supported the Democrats on the generic House ballot — 20 percent more than the electorate as a whole, and almost 30 percent

more than whites (Gerstein|Agne 2010, “Portrait” 2010).^{iv} Other indicators tied to general partisanship—self-described ideology, presidential approval, group ratings, economic and racial policy preferences—reveal the same pattern.

(FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE)

Despite the evidence in Figure 1, not everyone accepts that American Jews are politically liberal on all issues. Of course, no one disputes that Jews sometime favor Republican candidates for local or statewide office under specific circumstances. However, some skeptics contend that scholars have emphasized issues where Jews do cohere on the left side of the political spectrum but ignored evidence that Jews are not particularly liberal on economic questions or other cultural issues. The principal proponents of this view, Steven M. Cohen and Charles Liebman (1997), assembled evidence from a variety of surveys to document the lack of a difference between Jews and non-Jews on a range of issues in American politics — government spending, the death penalty, and sympathy for black Americans. However, rather than undermine the case for Jewish liberalism, this analysis indicates the hazards of analyzing highly skewed dependent variables with multivariate normal models.^v

Many of the items used to gauge attitudes were so heavily skewed that it would be difficult if not almost impossible to discern any statistically significant relationships with predictor variables in a standard model based on variables with a normal distribution. Other research conducted with methods appropriate to non-normal dependent variables has affirmed that Jews are appreciably more liberal than comparable non-Jews on the racial and economic issues that have been the core of the American political agenda since the New Deal (Glaser 1997).

To appreciate why the American Jewish affinity for the Democratic Party constitutes a puzzle, one must first recognize that students of political behavior have long regarded elections through a quasi-Marxist framework as “the democratic expression of class struggle” (Anderson & Davidson 1943). Reflecting that dominant perspective, W. G. Runciman (1969, 94) once opined that “nothing needs to be explained about a South Wales miner voting Labour or a General Motors executive voting Republican” beyond the “simplest model of rational self-interest.” Voters obviously, if not tautologically, favor parties that reward them economically. Social choice models, which have dominated voting studies since Runciman offered his conclusion, reinforced the norm that voters make electoral choices principally or exclusively to advance their material interests.

In the American context, it was assumed that voters with high levels of socioeconomic status (measured by education, income, occupational prestige and like indicators) would turn to the more conservative of the two parties to defend their class interests while working-class voters would perforce flock to the more liberal party. In fact, despite some exceptions, that has been the general pattern of electoral politics in the post-war United States: Income and other measures of status predict higher levels of support for Republicans than Democrats (McCarty, Poole & Rosenthal 2006, Bartels 2008, ch. 3).

One finds the same pattern over time. As (white ethnic) American Catholics moved from a predominantly working-class background into the middle classes, they increasingly left behind their once fierce identification with the Democratic Party to become swing voters (Brewer 2003, ch. 3). Apart from Hispanic Catholics, in fact, non-Hispanic Catholics now tend to favor the Republicans in most elections. Jews have experienced no such partisan transformation despite their rapid upward mobility after World War II.

Social scientists should be fascinated when a group marked by high levels of education and socioeconomic status, such as Jews, shows a decided preference for the more liberal of America's two parties. That pattern confounds the paradigm that guides voting studies and challenges the core generalization that political science has developed about why people vote as they do. For Jewish neoconservatives, the pattern is not merely fascinating but infuriating because it illustrates what the late Irving Kristol (1999) repeatedly condemned as "the political stupidity of the Jews."

Showing an affinity for the concept of false consciousness, apparently a residue of his youthful Marxism, Kristol raved against Jews for their failure to follow self-interest and support the party that most benefited them, the GOP. Instead, he fumed, Jews continued to support a Democratic party that, he alleged, did not advance their economic interests, denied their values, and failed to support the state of Israel. To the age-old question of "is it good for the Jews?" Kristol asserted that American Jews simply didn't know what was good for them.

Puzzle #2

In trying to resolve puzzle #1, scholars have inadvertently identified puzzles #2 and #3. To explain the apparent failure of Jews to pursue economically self-interested voting, scholars have deployed a number of what I call "Judaic" theories. These approaches emphasize something about the tradition of the Jewish people to

explain the distinctive patterns of American Jews in presidential voting from 1948-2008. I have classified these explanations as (1) theological, (2) historical, and (3) social.

The theological interpretation received its fullest expression in the classic work on Jewish liberalism by Lawrence Fuchs (1956), *Political Behavior of American Jews*. While not ignoring Jewish history or the experience of discrimination, factors emphasized by other scholars, Fuchs emphasized the political impact of three core values in the Jewish tradition: *tzedakah* (charity), respect for education (*Torah*) and non-asceticism. The communal emphasis on helping those in need — the still-powerful norm that enabled Bernard Madoff to perpetrate his colossal ethnic affinity fraud — creates a powerful sense of moral responsibility that, Fuchs contended, drives Jewish political attitudes.^{vi} Imbued with the sense that society owes its members a decent standard of life, Jews transfer that idea into support for social programs design to alleviate poverty and secure economic justice.

Jews were thus instrumental in building the American welfare state as policy advisers and administrators — witness Wilbur Cohen, credited as the father of both Social Security and Medicare — largely because this impulse was so strong. Given their respect for education, Fuchs argued, Jews accept and value intellectual achievement, voting disproportionately for candidates who themselves reflect such values and supporting the recommendations of credentialed experts regarding governmental programs.

In the politics of the post-World War II era, these values exhibited an elective affinity with the Democratic agenda. The emphasis on experiencing the pleasures of life, Fuchs hypothesized, not only makes Jews leery of restrictive policies about sex, alcohol, drug use and other cultural issues, but imparts a “this-worldly” mentality that lends urgency to improving human life through state action. Taken together, then, Fuchs contends that Jews are liberal politically because their religious tradition emphasizes liberal values.^{vii}

The historical explanations of Jewish liberalism give primacy to the European heritage of most Jews, particularly to the lessons drawn during the struggle for what is called Jewish Emancipation in the 18th and 19th centuries. As Jews sought the rights of citizenship on equal grounds — that is, without having to give up their Jewishness — they found friends and allies on the left. As a rule, emancipation was championed by labor unions, socialists and other progressive reformers in the face of opposition from traditionalists who dominated the

monarchy, the military, the established churches, big business, the nobility and other privileged groups (Mendes 1999).

From this, it is argued, Jews learned to think of people on the left as their friends and those on the right as their enemies (and anti-Semites to boot). Levey (2001) contends that these leftist political orientations were already apparent among the small American Jewish community in the colonial period and during the protracted debate over slavery and the Civil War. The change in the composition of the community due to the arrival of Eastern Europeans only reinforced the tendency.

The European Jews who migrated to the United States during the great wave from 1870-1935 came mostly from societies where they were subordinate by law and social practice. Many carried with them an affinity for political progressivism that was nourished by their involvement in radical and socialist political movements in the Old World (Sorin 1985). Once across the Atlantic, they bequeathed to American Jewish politics an orientation to social change that reinforced the liberal values in the Jewish tradition.

The final set of explanations draw on the concepts of social marginality and minority consciousness. Although Jews have attained remarkable success and acceptance in the United States, their self-image still does not correspond with their objective social standing. Repeated opinion surveys of Jews by the American Jewish Committee reveal that a solid quarter consider anti-Semitism a “very serious problem” in the United States, twice the size of the cohort that sees virtually no anti-Semitism and strikingly close to African American judgments about the seriousness of racial discrimination.^{viii}

American Jews tend to see themselves as socially marginal and thus emphasize the insecurity of their status. Both a sense of empathy and the notion that the enemy of my enemy is my friend have encouraged Jews to make political common cause with other outcast groups and fight jointly against conservative forces perceived as hostile to their interests.

Do these hypotheses adequately explain Jewish liberalism and the apparent tendency of American Jews to vote against their economic self-interest? Without considering each explanation on its own terms, there is something more fundamentally flawed about them as solutions to the puzzles of Jewish voting. If American Jews behave politically as they do because of something intrinsic in the Jewish experience, as these theories posit, we should find similar political behavior among Jews in other societies who share that common experience.

However, Puzzle #2 arises precisely because Jews elsewhere do not demonstrate the single-minded political liberalism of their American coreligionists.

Consider Jews in the United States and Israel. As Liebman and Cohen (1990) demonstrated persuasively in *Two Worlds of Judaism*, Israeli Jews are much less liberal than their American coreligionists. Whether measured by party choice, attitudes to the Arab minority, political tolerance, or other similar measures, Israeli Jews are much more right-wing than their American counterparts. But one does not have to depend entirely on Israel to make the same point.

Studies of Jewish voters in a variety of nations outside the United States reveal that Jews are not noticeably to the left of their fellow citizens and often exhibit centrist or right-wing political orientations (Greilsammer 1978, Kotler-Berkowitz 2002, LaPonce 1988, Rubinstein 1982; MacGregor 2008). In other cases, they split their political loyalties in the same manner as the general population. For example, faced with a straight choice between a Conservative and Labor candidate, British Jews surveyed in 1995 exhibited a 45 to 55 percent preference for the Tory and showed an even stronger three to one preference for the Conservative candidate in a straight-up race against a Social Democrat.

In a 1998 South African survey, Jews exhibited roughly a 2 to 1 preference for a member of the more progressive Democrats against a nominee of the National Party. While that suggests a predominantly progressive political stance, it is mitigated both by the absolute support of a third of Jews for a party with roots in apartheid and anti-Jewish exclusion policies and by the finding that South African Jews would overwhelmingly favor a National candidate against a nominee of the African National Congress.

During the period from 1953-1983, Canadian Jews did tend to prefer center or center-left parties but, unlike their American coreligionists, were not very different from other religious groups in the country's electorate. From the late 1970s on, Australian Jews developed and exhibited a strong preference for the country's conservative party, the Liberals, giving the party's candidates roughly three-fifths of their support in most elections.

Well into the Fifth Republic, the Jews of France were not perceived as a unified political constituency and seem to have divided their vote across the political spectrum. Responding largely to the Six Day war, members of the community gradually coalesced into a more or less equal division between a centrist bloc and a group that largely supported parties of the non-Communist left.

These findings will come as a great surprise to the American Jews who believe that liberal/leftist politics is simply applied Judaism. In fact, as neoconservatives and other critics have long insisted, the Jewish political tradition encompasses both liberal and conservative components. The same prophets who condemned kings and societies for their ill treatment of the widow and orphan — the passages that liberal Jews tend to stress — were equally if not more vociferous in denouncing the licentiousness and moral laxity of Jews.

Yet Jews do not, in the main, read their tradition as hostile to homosexuality or other forms of liberalism that are central to the community. In fact, most American Jews consider liberal and progressive political action the essence of Judaism and the core quality that defines someone as a “good Jew” (Cohen 1989, 5-6).

Indeed, a classic survey of Jews in a Chicago suburb revealed that supporting humanitarian causes, promoting community improvement, working for racial equality and helping the underprivileged were considered equally or more important as markers of the good Jew than knowing the fundamentals of Judaism and considerably more important than religious attendance or obedience to the dietary laws (Sklare and Greenblum 1958, 322).^{ix} American Jews seem to have foregrounded only those aspects of the tradition that comport with liberal values, suggesting that theology is not the cause but a consequence of other factors peculiar to the American Jewish experience.

The variability of Jewish politics by locale, the source of Puzzle #2, is not a new or unexpected finding in Jewish politics. Mendelsohn (1993) discovered that Jewish communities in close geographical proximity to one another and with similar population traits frequently diverged markedly in their political loyalties depending upon the balance of political factors in their immediate area.

These differences prompted the historian Paula Hyman (1992) to suggest that scholars abandon the search for a mythic and singular Jewish politics in favor of a more nuanced approach that took account of local political conditions. Hyman’s situational approach to Jewish politics is precisely what we need to explain the distinctively liberal/pro-Democratic voting of American Jewry.

Puzzle #3

In any such situational approach, scholars must also confront puzzle #3, the temporal variability of Jewish voting over time. As Figure 1 noted, American Jews deviated from their traditional high levels of

Democratic voting in the late 1960s and 1970s, prompting some scholars to anticipate an impending “realignment” of the Jewish vote (Fisher 1982).

Scholars could identify rather easily the proximate sources of such movement — Jewish disappointment with the “Black Power” turn of the civil rights movement, growing hostility to Israel from progressives around the world, the embrace of “quotas” by the Democratic party, the rise in crime afflicting Jewish neighborhoods in major cities and other factors. Indeed, the neoconservatives described themselves tellingly as former liberals who had been mugged by reality, inviting fellow Jews to wake up and smell the coffee.

Yet expectations of massive permanent shifts to the GOP were dashed when Jews returned to their customary Democratic voting bias in the 1980s. After their apparent flirtation with Ronald Reagan in 1980, Jews were one of the rare electoral blocs that actually moved in a pro-Democratic direction when Reagan ran for re-election in 1984. Much to the surprise of the realignment advocates, the gap that opened in 1984 has remained more or less constant in the subsequent six presidential elections. While the absolute magnitude of Jewish support for Democratic nominees has oscillated over time in response to immediate conditions, the gap of 20-30 percent between Jews and other voters remains intact.

The neoconservatives had few compelling arguments to explain the unexpected shift of Jewish voters back into the Democratic camp during the age of Reagan. All the factors that had been pushing Jews in a Republican direction during the “long sixties” did not suddenly disappear in 1984 and indeed some were heightened. Concerns about black-Jewish relations and liberals’ supposed hostility to Israel were fused in 1984 in the person of Jesse Jackson, a candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination who both used well-publicized anti-Semitic slurs and physically embraced Yassir Arafat, then the symbol of Palestinian terrorism to most American Jews. Yet Jews began to return to their pre-World War II political loyalties at the very time that Jackson personified many of the doubts that had supposedly driven them away since the 1960s.

It is not as if the neoconservatives gave up trying to bring about the partisan realignment of American Jews. Events nearly quarter of a century later in 2008 seemed to raise anew the salience of some of the concerns that were said to have pushed Jews away from the party in the 1970s. Rather than nominate a familiar face in 2008, the Democrats bestowed the presidential nomination on Sen. Barack Obama, an African American who was not well-known to Jews outside Chicago.

Obama's candidacy raised concern among some Jews because he attended a church with a pastor who had spoken unfavorably about Israel and had rubbed shoulders with Louis Farrakhan, the head of the Black Muslim movement who had previously made incendiary statements about Jews. A concerted campaign to raise the alarm among Jews used email, the web and other electronic means to spread charges about Obama, many of them patently false.

Nonetheless, early surveys suggested that 2008 might produce a sizable swing against the Democratic nominee by what had been the most loyal Democratic constituency among whites (Cohen 2008). In the end, these efforts seem to have counted for naught, offset both by concerns about the collapsing economy and other factors. Obama maintained a wide margin over his Republican opponent among Jewish voters (Wald 2010).

Nothing in these ad hoc theories can explain why Jews began trending left in the 1980s and the broader Judaic theories of Jewish liberalism, precisely because they portray a static orientation, are equally unable to account for the partisan swings away from or toward the Democrats. Jews did not suddenly lose respect for *tzedakah*, grow distant from their Russian/East European forebears, or lose their minority consciousness in the late 1960s and 1970s nor were these sensibilities somehow recovered in the mid-1980s. Something more short-term, more immediate, more situational, in Hyman's term, must be responsible.

To summarize, the anomalous political behavior of American Jews cannot be satisfactorily accounted for by the usual models of American political behavior or by extant theories of Jewish liberalism. The dominant economic model in political science cannot encompass the counter-intuitive voting of American Jews. "Judaic" explanations based on sacred and/or secularized religious values, immigrant heritage and minority consciousness do not address the political divergence between American Jews and their coreligionists elsewhere (the second puzzle) or the variability in American Jewish voting over time (the third puzzle.) These anomalies require a situational model (Hyman 1992) that takes account of the context of Jews in the United States.

Toward an Alternative Approach

What is it about the United States that can explain the puzzling political behavior of American Jews — why they vote disproportionately for a party that appears less responsive than the opposition to their economic self-interest, why they are far to the left of their coreligionists abroad, why they move politically in ways that sometimes mimic and other times confound broader political trends.

To summarize the argument, I contend that Jews are attracted to the classical liberal polity of the United States because they believe that its disregard of religion as a basis for citizenship/legal status has permitted them — more wholeheartedly and consistently than elsewhere — to participate fully in society. Following a calculus of self-interest that is not primarily economic, they vote and choose political allies on the basis of who most strongly defends — and who attacks — the liberal nature of the political system.

Because the American “regime” of religion and state is not immutable, neither are American Jews’ political preferences. They move against the left when it appears to threaten this regime but move to the left if the liberal polity is endangered by the right. This approach appears to explain why Jews don’t vote their economic self-interest in the manner of other groups (self interest is defined by different criteria), why they differ politically from their counterparts elsewhere (who do not live in liberal polities), and why this behavior is not static but responds to the behavior of left and right toward the core values of the regime.^x

This argument is not entirely new but rather draws on the insights of various scholars who have speculated about Jewish political behavior. The ground for this argument was cleared by the work of scholars who raised important critiques of the Judaic arguments in terms of both historical accuracy and the capacity to explain behavior long after their impact was blunted.

The argument that Jewish voting is contrary to self-interest was challenged by Leonard Fein’s (1988) contention that Jews calculate political self-interest in ways that transcend economic values and considerations. By showing that Jews do respond politically to economic change in a manner consistent with non-Jews, Lee Sigelman (1991) helped qualify a common political overstatement.

Paula Hyman’s insistence on considering Jewish politics contextually provided an important corrective and established an approach that helps better integrate the study of Jewish political behavior with the scholarly literature. When he emphasized Jewish political behavior as a reaction to threats emanating from the political system, Peter Medding (1977) identified a critical factor largely overlooked in studies of American Jewish mass politics.

I have woven strands from these and other theories into a common thread that should enable us to improve our understanding of the puzzling politics that animates this inquiry. In the process, I have altered some of the insights or combined them in different ways, producing an account that exhibits continuity with previous scholarship but also suggests new departures.

I start with James Madison's idea of a liberal regime from his famous *Memorial and Remonstrance*:

Before any man can be considered as a member of Civil Society, he must be considered as a subject of the Governor of the Universe: And if a member of Civil Society, do it with a saving of his allegiance to the Universal Sovereign. We maintain therefore that in matters of Religion, no man's right is abridged by the institution of Civil Society and that Religion is wholly exempt from its cognizance.

A properly constituted state, following this logic, did not claim authority over religion or demand certain codes, beliefs or behavior as a condition of admission to full citizenship. Fundamentally, liberal theory adjudges the state incompetent in all matters of religion. In writing the Constitution, Madison intended to insure that "no legitimate claims could be made by the state against the individual" regarding religious beliefs or requiring assent to any doctrine (Kloppenber 1998, 45). The fear that his Antifederalist opponents intended to put such language in the law prompted Madison to change his long-held opposition to a Bill of Rights.

The initial arena of debate involved citizenship, the right of Jews and other religious minorities to enjoy what were called the "full immunities" of membership in the civic community. Under liberal democratic theories of citizenship, that status is conditional on "the abstraction of self from particularity" (Peled 1992, 433). Citizenship is a right to be conferred on individuals as individuals without regard to any "extraneous" trait other than the basic competence to participate in society.

Unlike Republican or ethnocultural approaches, which assume that societies require "ethnic homogeneity and common cultural backgrounds" as sources of social integration, liberal regimes condition citizenship upon acceptance of the polity's legitimacy and consent to very broad political values (Smith 1988, 227). One might argue that such a philosophy requires acculturation rather than assimilation by newcomers seeking civic membership.

This philosophy of liberal citizenship for the new American state was implemented in the Constitutional Convention through both positive and negative action. The positive statement was contained in Article VI, clause 3: "... no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States." That language reflected the Madisonian perception that fitness for public office — and by extension full membership in the civic community — did not require any particular set of religious values or patterns of behavior.

Yet arguably even more compelling as an indication of the document's embrace of liberalism was the "failure to acknowledge God and man's dependence on Him" which "suggested to many that the Constitution

was manifestly nonreligious and, perhaps, even hostile towards traditional religion” (Dreisbach 1996, 274). Although the religious test language was apparently non-controversial in Philadelphia, it generated serious criticism during ratifying conventions among those who felt that the success of the new state required a more explicitly Christian political culture than the Constitution allowed. Many states maintained their own test oaths by constitution.

By contrast, American Jews in the early republic embraced this aspect of constitutionalism with fervor, seeing it as their emancipation proclamation.^{xi} Although they had long enjoyed religious and economic rights, progress in the crucial realm of political rights was much slower to develop. The link between test oaths, office holding and citizenship was evident to Jewish community leaders of Philadelphia who complained in 1783 that their state’s restriction of public office to Christians deprived Jews of “the most important and honourable part of the rights of a free citizen” and cast “a stigma upon their nation and religion” (ibid.). Concerned that the same restrictive language might be picked up in the national constitution, Jonas Phillips, a Philadelphia merchant, petitioned the Constitutional Convention late in 1787 on behalf of “all the Isrealetes through the 13 united States of america [sic]” (Kurland and Phillips 1987). It would not be fair, he declared, to exclude from public office the Jewish residents of the colonies who “faught and bleed for liberty” just as determinedly as their Christian neighbors. He called on the delegates to avoid the kind of exclusive language that appeared in the Pennsylvania constitution in favor of a more inclusive policy.

The religious test language that appeared in the federal document met with the enthusiastic approval of the small Jewish communities of the time who appreciated the Constitution long before the first amendment was adopted in 1791. A sermon preached in a New York synagogue in 1789 noted in passing that “we are . . . made equal partners of the benefits of government by the constitution of these states” (quoted in Kramer 2003, 17).

In a memorial to George Washington, the Savannah Jewish community noted that the government he helped to create had “enfranchised us with all the privileges and immunities of free citizens” (quoted in Rabinove 1990, 136). Their coreligionists in four cities observed in 1790 that the freedom Washington won in the Revolutionary War was not “perfectly secure, till your hand gave birth to the Federal Constitution.”

Rhode Island thanked George Washington for his part in producing a state that, by offering to all the “immunities of citizenship” made them “equal parts of the great governmental machine” (quoted in Kramer 2003, 18). According to an influential rabbi, the credit was not due to humans alone but to divine will.

During a sermon delivered in 1798, Gershon Seixas asserted that God “established us in this country where we possess every advantage that other citizens of these states enjoy” (quoted in Schappes 1971, 92). As such comments attest, the contemporary Jewish community understood that the Constitution’s prohibition on religious tests, the sole religious language in the document before the first Amendment, conferred on them the full citizenship no other society had offered (or offered without demanding conversion as the price of admission).

Apart from its obvious advantages for them, it is not difficult to understand why the liberal conception of citizenship resonated so powerfully with American Jews. Without falling prey to the temptation to reduce the history of the Jewish people to one long pogrom, it is nonetheless important to understand that the Jewish experience under non-liberal regimes brought home the value of citizenship under equal terms. A subject people for most of their history, lacking sovereignty and agency, Jews were unusually dependent on the goodwill of rulers.

Beneficent rulers could provide guarantees of residence, shield Jews against religiously-inspired violence, provide opportunities for their welfare, and allow them considerable self-government. But rulers not so inclined could and did expel Jews when in need of a scapegoat, promote physical attacks on their communities, tax Jews at rates that effectively impoverished them, and deny them many forms of autonomy.

Jews were often treated well if they could provide services that benefited the leaders of state. This might involve filling essential positions that were debarred to others (such as tax farming or money lending), providing access to global credit through international familial connections, or even lending the regime experts in medicine through court physicians. But it was a precarious existence because favors bestowed on a whim could equally suddenly and for no apparent reason be withdrawn.

Examining the pattern of expulsions and anti-Jewish violence in late medieval Europe, Kenneth Stow detected an important underlying factor—the degree to which rulers conceived of themselves as Christian sovereigns. As various monarchs consolidated centralized rule over the centuries, they increasingly vested their legitimacy in a mystical bond sanctified by divine will. This was not cynical opportunism, Stow contends, but rather sincere acceptance of a distinctive world view that demanded integrating religious and national forces.

In France, for example, “the vision of itself and its people as constituting an unblemished *corpus mysticum*, propaganda was destined eventually to become accepted as fact . . .” (Stow, 296). Jews, the eternal alienated people who rejected the Christian God, could not be a permanent fixture in such a society. Hence the favorable treatment or limited tolerance granted them in earlier periods grew increasingly anachronistic and subject to revocation.

With due regard for local conditions, similar conclusions were reached across Europe until, by the mid-sixteenth century, Europe was largely devoid of professing Jews. Even when they returned to the continent in the 18th and 19th centuries, Jews were still not considered equal. In the words of Benjamin Nones (quoted in Schappes 1971, 95) an immigrant from France who fought in the Revolutionary War, “Among the nations of Europe we are inhabitants everywhere — but Citizens no where [sic] *unless in Republics*” [emphasis in original].

Given that heritage, little wonder that Jews associated a religious definition of society as a permanent threat to their status in society and proved so receptive to a liberal regime that disclaimed any religious character. Even when American social practices violated the liberal model, an important theme in modern scholarship, Jews could still embrace the ideal type as the source of their civic legitimacy.

Defending and extending this secular definition of the American state became the core political priority of America’s organized Jewish community. Mindful of the widely shared belief in the necessity of some religious belief as a condition of fitness for public office, Madison notwithstanding, Jews did not initially push for purely secular laws but rather sought to achieve incorporation on a par with Christians (Sarna 1997, 4-8). In the short run, the major goal was to remove from state constitutions the various disabilities and Christian test oaths that had survived the Constitution.

By 1833, after intense battles, all states had eliminated their formal religious establishments. Most other legal constraints based on religious identity, such as public office holding, being admitted as witnesses, and other limitations, had similarly been nullified by the end of the 19th century. The Jewish community’s focus thus shifted to addressing de facto segregation that Jews still encountered in housing, job opportunities, education, and other sectors of life (Svonkin 1997). The Jewish community played an important role in further secularizing the law by sponsoring and arguing cases challenging state support for religion (Ivers 1995). As Leonard Fein (1988) noted, Jews defined their principal political interests as the maintenance and defense of this regime.

By the 1970s, with the passage of civil rights laws that extended the nondiscrimination principle to most spheres of life, the liberal regime of religion and state seems to have been fully realized in the United States. Yet rather than subscribe to a Whig conception of history as unidirectional, Jews remained alert to what they perceived as threats to the liberal principle of state religious neutrality.

Medding (1989) is correct to note that American Jews reacted with alarm to any signs of predation but tends to interpret such efforts as reflecting hostility or antipathy toward Christianity rather than a positive embrace of classic liberalism because of its possibilities for Jewish self-realization in all spheres of society.

Jews reacted intensely to any sign that the generic principle of liberalism, citizenship of the “unencumbered self,” was threatened by the identification of the state with any form of particularism. Christianity may well have been perceived as one such threat but it was not the only factor that appeared to undermine full citizenship.

In the aftermath of the 1960s, the threat to Jewish civic equality seemed to originate with forces on the left. In New York, still the largest Jewish community in the United States, the immediate issue was the demand for “community control” of schools by activists in Brooklyn’s Ocean Hill-Brownsville area. This conflict pitted a largely Jewish public education system against advocates of race-conscious hiring and was perceived by many as a choice between meritocracy and quotas.

The issue went national in the guise of debates over the larger principle of affirmative action, perceived by many Jews as a perversion of liberalism because it enshrined group privilege in the law. Other concerns about Jewish survival, manifested in a variety of causes that included Israel and Russian Jewry, also seemed to range Jewish interests against the predominant ethos of Sixties liberalism (Staub 2002).

The turn to the right in mass political behavior was eventually offset in the 1980s when Jews sensed another challenge to the liberal regime in the newly-resurgent Christian traditionalists who made common cause with the Republican Party. While careful to frame its policy preferences in the language of “Judeo-Christian” values and to swear unstinting allegiance to Israel, the social movement nonetheless appeared to embrace a sectarian conception of citizenship and national identity that privileged the values and institutions of evangelical Protestant Christianity. Its adherents stood out in opinion surveys by their eagerness to use the state to promote or reject specific religious groups (Smith 1996).

Even Jewish Republicans were concerned about this constituency as was evident in 1980 when a Christian Right stalwart, Pat Robertson, ran for the GOP presidential nomination. Based on survey data, Jewish Republicans were as likely to consider deserting the GOP if Robertson became its presidential nominee as were Jewish Democrats to forsake their party when asked about the prospect of Jesse Jackson on the top of the Democratic ticket (Wald & Sigelman 1997). Analysis of a 2004 survey indicated that Jews both disliked the Christian Right and rejected the Republican Party because it was seen as too close to a movement committed to Christianizing the public square (Uslaner & Lichbach 2009).

To what extent is this merely an anti-Christian reaction, as Medding suggested, rather than a policy-related vote based on concerns about the movement's commitment to a Christian America? Consider data from a 2007 survey by the Pew Organization reported in Figure 2 (below).^{xii}

Mimicking a periodic set of questions from the Gallup Poll, the survey asked respondents about their willingness to support presidential candidates with specific ethnic, racial, gender and religious traits. Figure 2 compares the percentage of Jews and the entire sample that indicated they would be more or just as likely to support a presidential candidate based on each specific trait. Jews tracked the general population quite closely, showing a slightly greater inclination to support black, Hispanic, female and/or Catholic candidates. Jews were considerably *more* receptive than the population to the prospect of a Muslim candidate and an atheist nominee. Yet the otherwise tolerant and politically ecumenical Jewish subsample strikingly resisted an Evangelical Protestant candidate, being 36 percent less supportive of such a nominee when compared with the entire sample.

If this was hostility to Christianity or religion in general, it's hard to understand why Jews had no trouble with a Catholic candidate and proved even more receptive than the population to a Mormon nominee. And while Jews may have substantial political differences with Muslims over American policy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict, they did not express that by showing any more reluctance (compared to the general population) to the prospect of a Muslim president.

In fact, Jews were more willing than others to vote for a Muslim candidate for the presidency. Rather than indicate a religious animus, the negative feelings about an evangelical Protestant candidate (and the corresponding willingness to support an atheist) suggest that this was an expression of concern about the maintenance of the liberal regime of religion and state. Analysis of other questions in the survey confirm that it is not religion but invocation of religion in candidate discourse, something most common among evangelical

Protestants, that worries Jews and accounts for their particularly negative reaction to an evangelical candidate and, by extension, to a Republican party that now has an evangelical base.

Discussion

How does this approach overcome the problems of previous theories of Jewish political behavior? Does it explain why Jews are more Democratic than equivalent voter groups, why this pattern is unique to American Jews, and why they adapt and adjust their liberalism from time to time?

In terms of the first puzzle, I argue that Jews do indeed vote consistently with their self-interest as they understand it but that interest is largely conceived in terms of maintaining the liberal regime of religion and state. The salience of the goal explains the fervency and distinctiveness of Jewish voting. The uniqueness of this pattern among American Jews reflects the unique quality of the United States as the most secular of political systems.

Jews defend the liberal regime because they believe it has allowed them unparalleled success and comfort. In non-liberal democratic states, Jews have no expectation of a state that disregards religious factors entirely and thus develop a different set of priorities, trying to obtain the same legal benefits and privileges that accrue to the dominant religions of the state (Wald, forthcoming). But as the dean of American Jewish historians put it, such halfway incorporation would not be acceptable to American Jews.

Speaking of a Jew at the time of the Revolution, Jacob Rader Marcus wrote “Had he lived in Europe, he would have been very content to receive the rights enjoyed by American Jews. Not so here; . . . He was not satisfied with a partial liberty; he wanted it whole” (quoted in Chyet 1958, 20). Finally, Jewish support for the Democratic Party varies over time according to the direction of the threat to the liberal regime. This approach thus addresses the skew in Jewish political behavior, its unique manifestation among American Jewry, and temporal variations in the magnitude of the partisan gap.

Auxiliary theories are necessary to explain two exceptional groups among American Jewry who differ politically from their coreligionists, the Orthodox and the Russian Jews who arrived in the US in large numbers during the 1980s. A variety of sources suggest that these two communities are less committed to Democratic and liberal policy values than the large majority of American Jews.

For the religiously-observant, it is worth remembering, the gap is a matter of degree rather than kind. On the one hand, analysis of attitudes toward gay marriage based on 2004 survey data showed that religiously observant Jews were more supportive than other Jews of legislation to reserve marital status for heterosexual couples. Yet the observant Jews were still considerably more supportive of same-sex marriage than equally observant and otherwise comparable members of the other major religious families in the United States (Wald, forthcoming).

In the case of the most religious, the political differences with other Jews stems largely from a different set of political priorities. The Orthodox, particular the ultraorthodox communities, have tended to practice a pronounced form of ethnic particularism which trades electoral support for tangible policy benefits. This priority is especially apparent among sects that largely attempt to live outside the purview of the dominant American (and Jewish) society and thus do not seek integration in the manner of most other Jews. As such, the religious claims of the state are not deemed threatening to the major goal of communal survival and some of the public benefits sought by Christian religious conservatives — particularly funding for religious education — may even be perceived as means toward preserving communal integrity.^{xiii}

Ironically, given the importance of the Russian heritage in forging liberalism among Jews who immigrated to the US from the 1870s onward, the most recent cohort of Russian Jewish immigrants appear to be carrying with them an overriding hostility to parties and political forces on the left. This may be a transitory phenomenon or a long term behavior pattern.

These exceptions notwithstanding, solving the puzzles of American Jewish political behavior requires looking more carefully at structural factors such as political regimes and the political opportunity structure (meaning the political attitudes of potential allies and opponents) rather than focusing exclusively on Judaic explanations of American Jewish political behavior. As the United States gradually becomes even more religiously diverse with the greater presence of other world religions such as Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism (among others), the patterns observed in the case of Jews may become more common and thus present additional cases with which to test and refine the arguments presented here.

Figure 1

Self-reported Presidential Vote of Jews and the Entire Electorate, 1948-2008

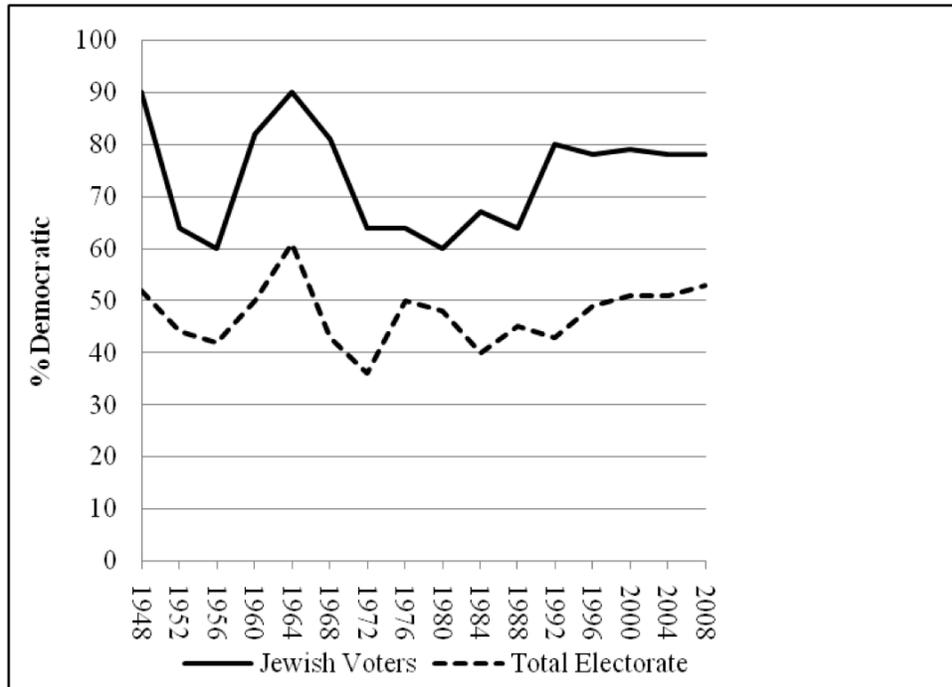
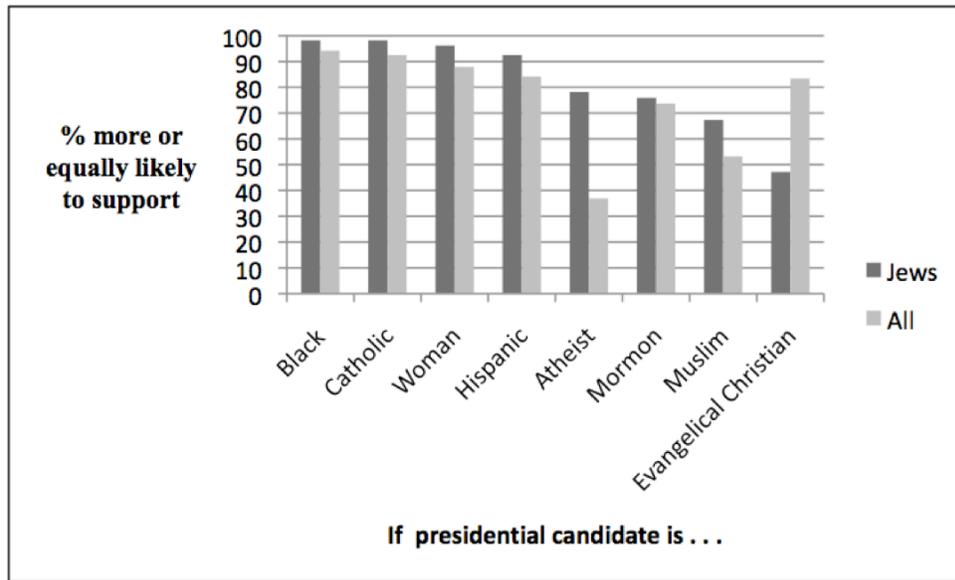


Figure 2

**Support for Presidential Candidates by Candidate Trait,
Jews and the Population, 2007**



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Notes

ⁱAllinsmith and Allinsmith (1948) provided the first empirical confirmation of this pattern based on nationwide survey data.

ⁱⁱThe data from 1972-2008 are based on exit polls conducted under various names for a consortium of news organizations. The data from 1948-1968, based on data compiled by Stephen Isaacs, are available at Forman (2001), 153.

ⁱⁱⁱFocusing on the slope differences between Jews and other voters (as in the figure) makes much more analytical sense than divining Jewish political behavior from the intercept, the absolute percentage of Jews who vote for the Democratic party. As Lee Sigelman (1991) demonstrated in probably the best-titled article in the history of social science, Jews are not and should not be expected to be immune from the election-specific factors that influence other voters. Hence we should not be surprised if, in 2010, a relatively high percentage of Jews voted for Republican candidates for the US Congress in what was an extremely good year for the GOP. The important datum, however, is the difference between the response of Jews and other voters, the partisan gap that allows for temporal fluctuations in partisanship from one election to the next.

^{iv}The Jewish-nonJewish gap may have been larger than that because the post-election survey generated a sample that was somewhat less Democratic based on its reported presidential vote in 2008.

^vThe dependent variables were all dichotomized, thus losing a substantial amount of variance, and items were combined into scales with no indication of internal validity.

^{vi}Ian Urbina, “A Palm Beach Enclave, Stunned by an Inside Job,” *New York Times*, December 14, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/15/business/15palm.html>.

^{vii} The principal challenge to this view is the evidence that those Jews most likely to perceive any liberal values implicit in the Jewish religion tradition are the least politically liberal members of the community. For critiques of the entire Judaic values approach to American Jewish politics, see Liebman 1973 and Levey 1995.

^{viii}The results of the AJC surveys are available at http://www.ajc.org/site/c.ijITI2PHKoG/b.846741/k.8A33/Publications_Surveys/apps/nl/new_sletter3.asp. See CNN Politics (2009) for comparative data on African Americans.

^{ix}Strikingly, the “Lakeville” Jews thought that “to be a liberal on political and economic issues” was equally as essential to a being a good Jew as membership in a synagogue or temple and far more of them were liberals than congregants.

^xFor such auxiliary theories, see the Discussion section of this paper below.

^{xi}These two paragraphs draw on Wald (forthcoming).

^{xii}The 2007 Religion and Public Life survey is available from <http://people-press.org/report/353/>.

^{xiii} The prospect of state funding for religious education has also attracted support from the Neoconservatives who see it as a means to insure Jewish continuity through Jewish day schools. See Dalin (2002).