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# From Tea Party to J Street: Jews and American Politics

*Understanding the Changing Landscape of the Jewish Vote*

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*This article reports on a spring 2011 study of Jewish voters that sought to uncover some core trends related to how Jews see the contemporary political environment. In addition to examining generic patterns of Jewish voter priorities, it explores the impact of emerging external elements, including the Tea Party Movement and Occupy Wall Street. In advance of the 2012 elections, the article seeks to lay out some of the likely voting patterns among key Jewish constituencies. This political study also introduces a series of core questions about the changing character of Jewish influence and power.*

There are significant and permanent changes taking place within American politics and corresponding changes within the landscape of American Jewish political behavior. Today, in the absence of a shared Jewish political agenda, one finds a deep and, at times, angry social divide. For some observers of the American Jewish scene this new reality portends a serious crisis; as a minority community, it is problematic to be seen as a house divided, embroiled in controversy and discord, in which civility has given way to partisanship and communal conflict. These observers argue that ethnic communities operate within a limited framework of influence and credibility, and when their power is understood to be compromised or weakened by internal discord, the capacity to be politically effective is proportionally reduced.

Other voices within the community welcome this reconfiguration of power and diversity of opinion, suggesting that it reflects the maturing of our community. They argue that Jewish access and participation within the political system on an individualized basis in contrast to group representation and engagement represent the triumph of the Americanization process.

Over the past several years, with the emergence of the Tea Party and more recently with the presence of Occupy Wall Street, Jewish connections to new political voices within the American landscape have broadened. The research reported in this article focuses on the impact of the Tea Party, but also addresses the role of Jews in the Occupy Wall Street phenomenon.

## **AN INTRODUCTION**

An array of factors appear to be reshaping the American story. The decline of civility, the politics of anger, a loss of confidence and trust in this nation's political institutions and its leadership, and the absence of a shared and coherent national political agenda reflect this pattern of disconnection and disengagement. All these negative indicators are accentuated by the dislocation of the American economy. In addition, some social scientists have suggested that the Internet

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represents the most significant social development since the invention of language. With one click, all social and political ideas become uniformly and instantaneously available and compete equally as “the truth.” As a result of these changes, America’s societal arrangements, philosophical and cultural underpinnings, and the spiritual moorings that had anchored our civilization are in transition.

The 1999 Hart-Rudman Commission Report on National Security noted, “Americans are now and increasingly will become, less secure than they believe themselves to be.” Among the changes noted in this study was “the unraveling of the fabric of national identity itself...democracy may be hollowed out from the inside.”

### **CHANGING DIMENSIONS WITHIN THE JEWISH POLITICAL LANDSCAPE**

Parallel challenges face the American Jewish community. Numerous studies, editorials, and commentaries have recently suggested that a political sea change is underway involving “the Jewish vote” (Grossman, 2011) and have raised two core questions: (1) *Is American Jewry losing some of its political clout, or is the nature of Jewish political influence undergoing a significant and important transition?* and (2) *What factors may be contributing to some of these political changes beyond the more recent data marking a decline in support of the president?*

In some measure Jews are mimicking the general patterns of discomfort and anger that mark the state of American politics and the uneasiness related to the country’s current economic direction. In more particular terms, the liberalism that framed the traditional Jewish political identity is undergoing a reformulation. On issues of foreign policy and security, Jews appear to have moved to a more conservative place on the political spectrum. Yet there is evidence that many Jews retain their core loyalties to an array of liberal domestic values and social interests. A third core question emerges: *How deep is the divide between an intense and growing concern for Israel’s well-being and the abiding commitments that many Jews retain for advancing the American Dream, as expressed through their support of economic concerns and social values?*

In the spring of 2011, I conducted a political study of Jewish voters to address these three questions. This survey was intended to provide a snapshot of a number of Jewish voters, and it offers some interesting insights into the depth and intensity of Jewish political engagement. Although *its design does not permit one to make any defining conclusions*, a number of its findings related to contemporary Jewish beliefs are being verified and confirmed by an array of more recent national polls focusing on the Jewish vote and the 2012 elections.

Individuals could access the survey instrument through an array of links, including the JTA and a number of Anglo-Jewish publications. Various organizations agreed to distribute the survey link to their membership constituencies, including the URJ (Union for Reform Judaism), OU (Orthodox Union), USCJ (United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism), and JCPA (Jewish Council for Public Affairs). Other organizations and groups accessed this link and in turn shared the information with their members.

The findings confirm that this particular cohort (2,300 respondents) of Jews hold deeply embedded positions on key domestic and international issues.

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A distinctive Jewish conservative voice is emerging on Israel-related matters and selected domestic social issues. The data also suggest that highly engaged Jews, those who are active within Jewish religious and communal life, are sharply divided on various issues. This liberal–conservative split mirrors the political landscape of the country.

The intensity of this political and social divide could also be seen in the comments offered by many respondents. In many ways these personal and policy reflections confirmed the findings of Frank Luntz (see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frank\\_Luntz](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frank_Luntz)) and others who have written about the growing presence of angry American voters. Many of these commentaries focused on negative depictions of the “other” voting group (namely, liberals offering viewpoints on conservatives or conservatives providing comments about liberals). Those individuals who embraced strong pro-Israel sentiments were more likely to critique J Street, whereas more mainstream liberal Jewish participants expressed significant reservations about the Tea Party movement.

This voter sample also demonstrated a high level of Jewish institutional connection. There appeared to be congruence around shared class values, educational achievements, income capacity, and institutional affiliation patterns. The data around personal achievement and institutional connection reaffirmed the extraordinary levels of accomplishment that in many ways have defined American Jewry. This cohort specifically reflected the perceived make-up and character of the Jewish communal activist, fully aligned with the “organized” Jewish community enterprise, while socially linked to the broader society and culture. Yet this commonality of background resulted in highly divergent political outcomes and social priorities.

Absent from this study were various key voices within the community: less engaged “just Jewish” (individuals who identify as Jews but often do not hold the array of affiliations and social connections as seen in this survey), “millennial Jews” (younger Jewish participants), and “New Jews” (including those who are converts to Judaism or who have over the past two decades entered the United States as new citizens from other parts of the world).

### **THE TEA PARTY AND THE JEWISH VOTE**

At the outset it is important to note that there is no single Tea Party organization but rather a number of political organizations that have coalesced around a shared ideology:

*The Tea Party is an American populist political movement which is generally recognized as conservative and libertarian and has sponsored protests and supported political candidates since 2009. It endorses reduced government spending, opposition to taxation, in varying degrees, reduction of the national debt and federal budget deficit, and adherence to an originalist interpretation of the United States Constitution ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tea\\_Party\\_movement](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tea_Party_movement)).*

Four core organizations represent the different political strains and interests of this movement: the Tea Party Patriots, an organization with more than 1,000 affiliated groups across the nation; Americans for Prosperity and Freedom Works, which each claim a membership of 1 million members; and the Tea Party Express.

One of the more intriguing elements of my study dealt with attitudes associated with the Tea Party movement. Here, one finds a strong impulse on the part of participants to declare themselves as either highly engaged or “refreshed” by this new set of political voices or highly “alarmed” or concerned about this movement. One of the overriding understandings extracted from this research was the “deep and growing political division among American Jews ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frank\\_Luntz](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frank_Luntz)).

According to the 2010 Pew Center Study on the Tea Party and American Politics, nearly one-half of American Jews (49%) disagree with and 15% support the Tea Party’s ideas (Clement, 2011). There appear to be corollary patterns between the Pew findings, other studies conducted on the Tea Party movement, and my survey.

I found that men were more than twice as likely to be Tea Party members than women, which reflects the overall demographics of the movement. Surveys have found that Tea Party supporters are “mainly white and slightly more likely to be male, married, (and) older than 45” ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tea\\_Party\\_movement](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tea_Party_movement)).

In my study participants were asked to respond to the following statement: *I find the Tea Party to be “Refreshing” or “Alarming.”* Table 1 shows responses by sex, age, and education. Older voters rather than younger ones in this survey seemed to identify more readily with this cause, confirming the findings noted in various polls. Less well educated Jews were more likely to be associated with the Tea Party movement than their more educated counterparts. This finding appears to run counter to the national polling data concerning levels of education, as most studies suggest that members of this movement are “likely to be more wealthy and have more education” ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tea\\_Party\\_movement](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tea_Party_movement)).

In keeping with the findings of other studies, I found that the more religiously conservative or traditional a person was in practice or belief, the more likely that individual would resonate to the views and values of the Tea Party movement. In the Pew Center Study, the Religious Right overwhelmingly identified with the social views of the Tea Party movement (Clement, 2011). On such issues as same-sex marriage, health care, and gun ownership, Jewish Tea Partiers in my study expressed positions contrary to mainstream viewpoints found within the Jewish community.

### THE JEWISH VOTER

As has been frequently documented, Jews are among the most highly engaged political constituencies. In this study 99% of the participants indicated that they had voted in one or more elections over the past 10 years. Similarly, one of every two respondents had given money to a political party, and 87% had supported Jewish organizational and civic causes over the past year.

**Table 1.**  
Responses to the Question, “I find the Tea Party to be “Refreshing” or “Alarming,” by Sex, Age, Education, and Denomination (number of responses)

	Refreshing	Alarming
Gender		
Males	603	380
Females	277	486
Age Cohort		
20–30	26	72
30–40	44	82
40–50	204	152
50–60	257	224
60–70	132	109
Educational level		
Ph.D.	127	140
M.D.	91	21
M.A.	265	419
B.A.	289	220
Some College	99	38
High School	9	6
Religious denomination		
Reform	175	344
Reconstructionist	6	20
Nondenominational	15	37
Conservative	253	221
Orthodox	142	12

Older participants in this study demonstrated a more traditional connection to liberal values, candidates, and causes. Younger voters in turn appeared to be more independent in terms of party connections and political outlook. This assertion has been confirmed in other recent surveys. Similar to other studies, younger Jewish voters also appeared to be less ideologically or politically connected to the case for Israel.

Of the voters who participated in this survey, four distinctive “types” seem evident.

### **The Red State Jewish Voter**

These individuals reflect in their political behavior a particular commitment to social conservative principles; some within this camp often demonstrate less of an ideological or policy interest in domestic affairs. This cohort of the Jewish vote is particularly supportive of a strong U.S.–Israel relationship and values the importance of a strong American military, along with an American foreign policy agenda that is specifically designed to respond to international terrorism and the nation’s security concerns.

### **The Tea Party Jewish Voter**

This may be the newest classification of the contemporary Jewish voter. Joining with other Americans who are specifically concerned with the financial well-being of the nation, these voters reflect a particular commitment to what they define as traditional values. Similar to other conservative voters, they have embraced the idea of limited government and the affirmation of the rights of the individual.

### **The Blue State Jewish Voter**

This bloc represents the more traditional democratic liberal Jewish activist; over the course of decades these voters have dominated the Jewish political scene. Their politics reflects an alignment of their Jewish and civic values on behalf of an array of social causes.

### **The Blue-Dog Jewish Voter**

This subset of the Democratic Party consists of Jewish voters whose views on the social and economic agenda tend to be more conservative than the standard ideological positions of the party; they have adopted a strong defense policy and a commitment to protect and support American interests, including Israel.

### **Shared Concerns and Divisions**

Crossing many of these definitional categories, one can identify a “*passionate quotient*” that served to align Jewish participants from several ideological camps. A shared concern for the well-being and security of Israel, a commitment to national security, and a collective endorsement of support to fight international terrorism are core elements that engage many of those participating in this study, regardless of political party or socioeconomic status.

The most significant divisions among voters centered around domestic issues. When asked about their involvement with “special political and social causes,” the divide between Jewish Democrats and Republicans can be seen most clearly, as shown in Table 2.

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**Table 2.**  
Involvement with Political and Social Causes (number of responses)

Issue:	Democrat	Republican
Civil Liberties	342	74
Church-State	417	99
Environment	314	178
Hunger and Homelessness	310	47
Women's Issues	422	40

Some 2,025 respondents noted their preferences at this time for the 2012 campaign: President Obama, 886 (44%); Another Candidate, 244 (12%); Mitt Romney, 228 (11%); Newt Gingrich, 119 (6%); Rudy Giuliani, 114 (6%); and Tim Pawlenty, 104 (5%). (By way of reminder, this survey was conducted in the spring of 2011, so some of the possible Republican candidates had yet to surface).

Here is the breakdown by gender, religious affiliation, and region of the 886 individuals who identified President Obama as their current "preference" for the 2012 elections:

*Gender:* 499 were women, as compared with 387 men.

*Religious Affiliation:* 61% of Reform Jews endorsed the president, whereas 40% of Conservative Jews did so. Only 17% of Orthodox Jews supported President Obama.

*Region:* Jews from the Far West (49.7%) and Northeast (53.7%) supported the president, in contrast to only 32% of the Jews from Florida.

**Jewish Organizations and their Political Clout**

Those surveyed were asked to name the Jewish institutions that they consider as the "most influential" politically. The percentages naming each of these four institutions as most influential were as follows: AIPAC, 58%; ADL, 7%; Republican Jewish Coalition 6%; and Federations, 6%. A clear majority ranked AIPAC's influence significantly higher than any other organization.

**Religious Affiliation and Political Participation**

The participants in this study held a much higher level of affiliation with Jewish institutions than the norm (see Table 3). For example, some 71% of the respondents indicated that they had a synagogue affiliation.

In the study, 64% of Reform Jews identified as "Democrats" and 24% as "Republicans"; 50% of Conservative Jews consider themselves "Democrats," whereas 38% noted that they were "Republicans"; and among Orthodox Jews 51% were "Republicans," and 30% listed themselves as "Democrats." The remainder either declined to identify their party affiliation, classified themselves as "independent," or indicated they belonged to a third party (i.e., Green, Libertarian).

**SOME REFLECTIONS ON OCCUPY WALL STREET**

Some of us may well remember the Vietnam antiwar movement and the emergence of a significant Jewish presence among the protesters. One of the interesting cohort groups in my study involved Jews who were identified as "Red Diaper Babies," activists whose parents but more likely grandparents had identified earlier in the 20th century with socialist and communist causes (Stromberg, n.d.). Are we seeing in the Jewish activists at Wall Street another generational iteration expressing their antiestablishment viewpoints?

**Table 3.**  
Religious Affiliation of Survey Respondents

Denomination	Number (Percentage)
Reform	645 (39%)
Conservative	567 (35%)
Orthodox	212 (13%)
Other	111 (7%)
Nondenominational	75 (5%)

In fact, one of the interesting aspects of the Occupy Wall Street phenomenon is the active presence of individual Jews who are seeking to align their participation to Jewish religious imperatives:

*Organizers said, the protests afford American Jews an opportunity to rethink their relationship to their own religion. One of the organizers of Occupy Judaism, Daniel Sieradski, was involved in putting together the New York Kol Nidre service by the protest site which attracted between 700 and 1,000 participants last week. Sieradski called such services "civil disobedient davening (praying)." "It started with one Tweet and got 1,000 people," Sieradski said, adding that New York's Kol Nidre Occupy service was traditional egalitarian, and included secular and ultra-Orthodox Jews alike (Horn, 2011).*

Yet the message and impact of Occupied Wall Street apparently have not galvanized or engaged the established Jewish communal system (Weiner, 2011). An exception involves the neo-conservative Emergency Committee for Israel, which posted a video identifying anti-Israel and anti-Semitic slogans being displayed during demonstrations at Occupy Wall Street. This group has directed its criticism against President Obama's Israel policies, urging Jewish voters to support Republicans in the 2012 presidential election. "Its video asks President Obama and U.S. Representative Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), the House of Representatives' minority leader, to 'stand up to the mob' of Occupy Wall Street protesters" ("Video," 2011).

The larger issues surrounding the emergence and growth of both the Tea Party movement and Occupy Wall Street involve the deep social and economic divisions within the country. The disparity in income, the decrease in upward mobility opportunities that were once a defining feature of American society, and the decline in job creation are all reflected in a recent Pew Economic Mobility Study, which identifies the negative trends related to the growing divide among economic groups within this country (see <http://www.economicmobility.org>). Polling data also reflect a heightened distrust of government and public institutions. "The poll findings underscore a dissatisfaction and restlessness heading into the election season that has been highlighted through competing voices from the Occupy Wall Street and Tea Party movements, a broad anti-Washington sentiment and the crosscurrents inside both parties about the best way forward" (Zeleny & Thee-Brenan, 2011).

Concerns over the state of the American economy and the loss of confidence in public institutions will be reflected in themes associated with the 2012 elections. At this juncture in the campaign, there are already indicators suggesting that the support garnered by President Obama in his 2008 election bid may be eroding as a result of the growing economic and political crisis within the country (as reported in *Time Magazine*, November 14, 2011).

## **CORE CHALLENGES**

Several factors are now combining to reduce the political clout of the Jewish community so that, even though Jews vote in disproportionate numbers to any other ethnic or religious group, this tendency will not offset over time the declining impact of the "Jewish vote."

The size of the Jewish population remains at best stable, but is more likely shrinking, while the size of other ethnic and religious communities and, in turn, their political clout are increasing. Correspondingly, Jewish financial support for

ected officials remains static, whereas other interest groups are rapidly increasing their economic influence with government officials and political party leaders, which will contribute to changes within the political landscape. In addition, as a result of the 2010 Census, key states within the Northeast corridor are losing congressional seats to southern and western states with smaller Jewish populations.

Our community's strongest allies within the Congress on both domestic and international concerns are stepping away; some such as Rep. Barney Frank (D-MA) have elected to retire, whereas others were defeated over the course of the past several election cycles. In fact, one-third of members of Congress over the past two years were replaced by a new generation of representatives. A significant number of Jewish elected officials at all levels of government are also concluding their service at this time, further reducing the presence of Jews in some key elected positions. Despite the loss of specific leaders, a new generation of Jewish elected officials is beginning to emerge. Strikingly, many of these emerging Jewish politicians are identified with the Republican Party.

For possibly the first time in nearly 100 years Jews may be shifting their political loyalties away from the Democratic Party. For some time, Jewish voters have demonstrated a bifurcated political behavior, often voting on the state and local level according to their more narrow economic and social interests and in doing so moving into the ranks of supporting Republican Party candidates, yet preserving for national elections their ideological connections and historical loyalties to the Democratic Party. This study revealed the "Obama Factor" in which Jews seem to be moving away from the Democratic Party on the national level as well. Yet, as this article goes to press, there remain unknown factors that might compel Jews next year to reconnect with the president or, in turn, move away from their traditional base within the Democratic Party.

There is evidence to suggest that younger voters are less connected to some of the core political issues of specific interest to the Jewish community and that this age cohort also exhibits a greater propensity to declare themselves as "independent" voters, rejecting the traditional pattern of party affiliation that defined prior generations of Jews. Traditionally observant Jewish voters and Baby Boomers with shifting political loyalties represent a growing base of support for the Republican Party.

Over time there appears to be a more general reshaping of "liberalism" by the Jewish electorate, in which moderate positions are replacing the more traditional left-of-center political perspective. This shift seems evident as voters become more selective in identifying with liberal causes and, in turn, are redefining how they interpret the nature of their ideological credentials and voting positions.

### **FOCUS ON THE FUTURE**

A number of questions dominate the Jewish political landscape:

*In an age of growing political intolerance and recrimination, and in an environment of incivility, are we likely to see a rebirth or increase in anti-Semitism and/or racism?*

*As we move deeper into a bifurcated political environment where collaborative action is negated, what will be the impact on minorities' ability to advance their particular agendas and protect their interests?*

***Traditionally observant Jewish voters and Baby Boomers with shifting political loyalties represent a growing base of support for the Republican Party.***

*As the demographic landscape undergoes further change and as new constituencies grow their base of influence, Jews will represent a decreasing voice on the American political stage. What will be the long-term implications of this reconfiguration of power and access?*

*As politicians on the right and left seek to extract the United States from its international commitment in light of the economic challenges facing the nation, in favor of an internally directed agenda, what will be the implications for America's special relationship and commitment to the State of Israel?*

*The genius of Jewish political influence was constructed around a compelling and shared agenda, an engaged and energized constituency, and the presence of credible leaders. Are these ingredients still in place as we enter the 2012 election cycle?*

Jews have succeeded in societies with stable political environments and generally thrived in democracies where there existed an educated and engaged polity. They have flourished in those few nation-state systems where there was no history of state-sponsored or supported anti-Semitism. The American story is unique and has represented a special opportunity for Jews, along with all other citizens, to fully embrace democracy and the politics of engagement. Acknowledging the challenging and complex political and economic issues facing our society, the unfolding of this special relationship enjoyed by Jews with America now must be viewed through a changing and uncertain lens.

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