PART I

THE PROBLEM(S) OF AMERICAN JEWISH LIBERALISM

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America Is Different

> The United States is the only nation in the world which, from the moment of its birth, gave the Jew all the rights and the privileges of citizenship, placed him upon a par of equality with his neighbor, and recognized him as an integral and essential part of the nation.
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> –Ferdinand Isserman, "Keeping America," 1937 (p. 4)

On June 5, 1868, Cincinnati's Bene Israel congregation laid the cornerstone for a new synagogue building at 8th and Mound Streets. Following a venerable custom, the celebrants deposited a time capsule in the foundation stone. According to contemporary accounts, they filled a metal box with a copy of the first Jewish sermon preached in the city, a congregational history, coins from the Roman era in Palestine, a roll of contributors to the new building, and a list of Cincinnati's Jewish institutions (*Cincinnati Inquirer*, June 6, 1868, 1; Philipson 1915, 453). They also placed an unexpected object among the relics and mementos in the box: a copy of the United States Constitution.

Why did they think the Constitution belonged with the other memorabilia in the cornerstone of their synagogue? On its face, the decision was curious. The US Constitution consigned religious organizations to the private realm, forbidding the state from either rewarding or punishing citizens for their religious views and prohibiting the nation from adopting any official religion. There was no reference to God or other religious language in the entire document. Given that state and religion were so clearly separated in the national charter, why would a Jewish religious organization choose to store a copy of it among its precious keepsakes?

Interring the Constitution alongside other sacred objects could have been a rebuke to anti-Semites who habitually charged Jews with greater loyalty to their own "nation" than devotion to country.[1] By placing the Constitution in the bedrock of their new tabernacle just three years after the end of the Civil War, perhaps the congregation merely intended to reaffirm its loyalty to the Union. I believe, however, that the congregants had a deeper motive in planting the US Constitution in the groundwork of their new building.

By 1868, the American Jewish community had come to consider the Constitution as part of the underpinning of Judaism in the United States. By creating a secular state that disclaimed any religious identity, the Constitution provided conditions that enabled Judaism to thrive in the new nation. Beyond religious freedom, the Constitution gave Jews equal citizenship and an ownership share in the country. As a prominent Jewish leader told President John Quincy Adams in 1820, the United States provided Jews with "perfect civil and religious liberty," enabling them to thrive in America as nowhere else (quoted in Kleinfeld 1999, 70).

In the United States under the Constitution, for the first time in centuries, Jewish well-being thus depended neither on the patronage of a prince nor on an evanescent spirit of toleration. Whether they intended to or not, the Bene Israel members who sealed the Constitution in the base of the new building effectively declared that the Jewish stake in America rested symbolically and literally on a constitutional foundation.

In the following pages, I demonstrate that American Jews have attributed their success to a political climate steeped in classic liberalism and have therefore given priority to defending the political system that made it possible. They developed a political culture that reinforced their interpretation of the American Jewish experience, emphasizing above all else the importance of maintaining the principle of equal citizenship in a secular state. The culture first emerged in nascent form at the time of the founding of the United States in the late eighteenth century and was largely consolidated by the end of the nineteenth century. The political culture based

[1] The old building was full of objects attesting to the congregation's patriotism. The area above the ark was dominated by a tableau featuring an American eagle with the Ten Commandments in its talons (*Cincinnati Enquirer*, June 6, 1868, 1). Just above the eagle's head, there was an American flag inscribed with God's reminder to Moses that the Jews had been borne from Egyptian slavery to freedom on an eagle's wings. As the guests recessed from their old building for a short walk to the new structure, a band played the national anthem.

on classic liberalism continues to define the foundational political priority of American Jewry today.

Political scientists use the concept of "political culture" to denote core beliefs about politics and government among the members of a population. The ideas that compose a political culture are important because they generate "rules that govern behavior in the political system" (*International Encyclopedia* 2008). In all aspects of their political decision-making – identifying and framing political issues, developing strategies and tactics for action, articulating their concerns in public discourse, defining their political interests – American Jews have operated within the framework of a distinctive political culture. For stylistic purposes, I will sometimes refer to political culture as a "political ethic," worldview, or perspective. I distinguish political culture from ideology, which I take to define the direction rather than the content of political beliefs. I do not use the concept of "political theology" because it suggests a worldview that locates political authority in God or the divine (Lila 2007). The political culture developed by American Jewry explicitly rejected this connection.

WHY THIS BOOK?

Although scholars have delved deeply into the American Jewish experience, they have given relatively short shrift to the explicitly political dimensions of Jewish life in the United States. That omission is curious given that virtually all accounts recognize that American Jews identified democracy and equality as a source of the exceptionally positive situation they enjoyed in America. But in most research on American Jewry, the political system has been a backdrop, not the main story. Mentioning the democratic character of the United States has become a ritual invocation rather than a means to investigate systematically how a Jewish politics was created and sustained in the United States.

Traditional histories of American Jewry give little emphasis to how Jews responded to the favorable political conditions in North America by crafting a political worldview and deploying it when they needed to mobilize the community against developments that threatened their standing. Enfleshed in newly formed organizations charged with defending the community's interest, this political culture provided a discourse that articulated grievances in a way that reinforced Jewish claims to belong fully to the nation. The Jewish political culture was the operational link between the design of the American polity and the subsequent political behavior of American Jews. Overlooking this critical intervening

variable amounts to denying the agency of American Jews in the ongoing work of their own emancipation.

The failure to emphasize the importance of the American political context has also left unsolved the key puzzle in the study of modern American Jewish political behavior. Jews today rank among the most pro-Democratic and politically liberal constituencies in the United States. This fact contradicts the dominant academic theories of voting that attribute political behavior principally (though not exclusively) to economic interests. As a relatively wealthy, highly educated, and upper-status community, Jews should be more Republican and politically conservative than other Americans. They are not and, in fact, are decidedly more Democratic and liberal than the electorate as a whole *and* more so than that portion of it that shares similar socioeconomic traits. Scholars have attempted for more than sixty years to resolve this anomaly without taking account of the unique qualities of the American political system.

In this volume, I draw out the consequences of the American emphasis on the Enlightenment values of liberty and equality for the development of a political worldview by American Jews. I focus closely on the kind of democracy that American Jews favored, the way they constructed an image of citizenship and the secular state, how this image was transmitted to newcomers, and how it sometimes generated conflict over political issues but also provided guidelines to help the community when it entered the public square on behalf of its interests. This study focuses on the political worldview crafted by American Jews and how that perspective, encompassed within a distinctive political culture, continues to shape their otherwise puzzling politics.

The Foundations of American Jewish Liberalism differs from other works about American Jewish politics in three respects: time frame, theoretical lenses, and methodological pluralism.

Although he acknowledges earlier historical roots, Henry L. Feingold (2014) considers American Jewish political culture as essentially a twentieth-century phenomenon. Most scholars follow the timeline adopted by Beth Wenger (2010) in her chronicle of how American Jews constructed their heritage in the United States. She emphasizes the period from the late nineteenth century through the early 1950s when Jews embraced the principle of "Americanization." This meant pushing newcomers toward acculturation, encouraging them to adapt to the norms of the United States outside the synagogue. In looking for the underpinnings of American Jewish liberalism, I begin much earlier – at the founding of the United States in the late eighteenth century – and the analysis extends

through the presidential election of 2016. The Jewish embrace of liberal political values began much earlier than is commonly supposed and still matters greatly today – even if the meaning of "liberal" has changed over the course of American history.

This study also differs by its social scientific perspective. I treat the political experience of American Jews as a case study of how a very small group, its members often despised as outsiders and aliens, managed nonetheless to carve out a political role enabling adherents to advance their interests in a majoritarian political process. Although their religious heritage was largely responsible for their status as strangers and outsiders, it was incidental to the process by which American Jews developed a distinctive political role. Hence, where appropriate, I invoke general theories of political behavior rather than emphasizing strictly "Judaic" explanations to account for the distinctive features of American Jewish political action. Such an approach is more accurate, I contend, and also enables me to bring this study into conversation with other research on ethnic and religious political activism.

The work is anchored principally in three such theoretical approaches: contextual analysis, political opportunity structure, and threat perception. I deploy other frameworks when necessary to place the American Jewish experience in comparative perspective. I realize that viewing Jewish political life via these theoretical angles may strike some observers as producing an "overly schematic" account running roughshod over the intricacies of the American Jewish experience (Fetter 2016). Although this may result in a less fine-grained approach, it provides a basis to explain a wider range of cases than a more insular, Judeo-centric account. Given my commitment to developing theory about political mobilization by ethnoreligious minorities in general, I am comfortable with that trade-off.

Finally, because they complement one another, the book uses both qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis. Recognizing that qualitative data may be more helpful in hypothesis formation and quantitative tools more appropriate for hypothesis testing, I have never perceived conflict between them (Brady, Collier, and Seawright 2017). Nor do I put much stock in arguments that one approach is intrinsically superior to another.

To understand the gestation of American Jewish liberalism, I thus dug deeply into all sorts of written materials: books and articles, memoirs, reports, organizational records, private correspondence, newspapers, sermons, lectures, and the like. Reading these archival sources exposed me to the assumptions, concepts, and imagination of the people who

contributed to the liberal political tradition within American Judaism. The experience was not unlike an in-depth interview. I also compiled numerous quantitative datasets using systematic surveys of Jewish (and, at times, non-Jewish) respondents and other kinds of numerical information. These sources were subjected to various forms of statistical analysis. I incorporated this material because I do not believe that qualitative methods alone can plumb "the soul or psyche" of Jews, where, it is said, we will find the buried secrets of Jewish political behavior (Feingold 2014, ix, xv). Rather, we need to test systematically the intuitions arising from qualitative analysis to ensure that they are more than fanciful impressions. Using both methods enables me to assess the impact of a liberal political culture on the attitudes and behavior of American Jews.

In undertaking this project, I had no ambition to write a comprehensive history of American Judaism, a task that has been ably handled by several scholars. Nor is this book meant to be a full history of American Jewish politics. Rather than cover every significant political choice point, I focus more narrowly on issues and controversies that contributed to the formation, institutionalization, and evolution of the dominant political worldview that contemporary American Jews inherited from their eighteenth- and nineteenth-century ancestors. I leave out pieces of the story less vital to my central concern.

PLAN OF THE BOOK

The remaining chapters in Part I identify the central intellectual puzzles posed by the contemporary political behavior of American Jews. Chapter 2 discusses how Jews' strong commitment to the Democratic Party and political liberalism violates dominant theories of American political behavior and then assesses the "Judaic" theories that scholars have developed to explain why American Jews are so politically exceptional. Apart from my uncertainty that these theories do in fact explain the anomaly of American Jewish liberalism, such approaches raise more puzzles than they solve, being unable to explain (a) why American Jews are politically unique among Jewish communities around the world; and (b) why the attachment of American Jews to the Democratic Party and political liberalism oscillates over time. Because these ad hoc explanations do not account satisfactorily for the anomalous political behavior of American Jews, Chapter 3 begins the work of developing a new perspective on American Jewish political behavior. It attempts to unpack the common scholarly observation that "America

is different" for Jews by asking how and why it is different. This leads to a discussion of the importance of two social science approaches, the theory of political context and the concept of political opportunity structure.

With the theoretical building blocks in place, Part II traces the development of the American Jewish political culture from the American founding through World War II. Chapter 4 concentrates on how the pioneers of the American Jewish community embraced the classical liberal values underlying the political architecture of the US Constitution. Chapters 5 through 7 trace the subsequent development of the Jewish political culture, covering, respectively, the early national period, the state of the culture at the end of the nineteenth century, and how the culture operated on crucial public issues during the first half of the twentieth century.

The chapters in Part II address liberalism as an idea, a set of norms that strongly conditioned the way Jews dealt with various political issues. Until the 1930s, Jewish political culture was not firmly attached to any single political party. In a fluid political economy, organized Jewry worked with whatever party was in power when an issue of Jewish interest or concern arose. Individual Jewish voters were divided along party lines. Although that changed in the 1930s when Jews joined with other groups in the New Deal electoral coalition, their attachment was less to classic liberalism than to support for the welfare state and other public programs associated with Franklin Roosevelt's Democratic administration. It's worth remembering that even under Roosevelt, the Democrats were a socially conservative party focused primarily on economic concerns and reluctant to address questions of race or gender.

Part III examines the fusion between Jewish political culture and the Democratic Party that became particularly marked in the postwar era and beyond. Chapter 8 examines the post–World War II tensions between Jews and the Democrats that seemed likely to disrupt the Jewish attachment to both liberalism and its political carrier, the Democratic Party. In Chapter 9, I show that these breaches were healed or overlooked when most Jews perceived an immediate threat to their status and well-being from the new coalition between the Republican Party and politicized Christianity in the late 1970s. Conflict over church and state, a critical issue in the formation of Jewish political culture, returned to the political agenda and cemented the connection between Jews and the Democratic Party. As Chapter 10 shows, that concern was reinforced during the presidential campaign of 2016.

Please keep some caveats in mind while reading this book. First, this study is *not* meant as a critique, positive or negative, of the American Jewish political culture. I wish to understand how this culture arose and its impact on Jewish political action, but I don't take a stand on whether contemporary Jewish political behavior is wise or not. That important philosophical question cannot be answered with data. Second, I am agnostic about whether the pro-Democratic skew in Jewish voting – so powerfully reinforced in 2016 – will last over the long haul. As political scientists like to say, predicting the present is hard enough without trying to forecast the future. Finally, when I talk about Jews, I usually mean ordinary Jews, what I would call "Jews in the pews" if Jews attended synagogue at the same rate that other Americans go to church. In any case, when talking about Jewish political behavior, I mostly refer here to the Jewish rank-and-file. Jewish elites play an important role in this study but the focus remains on the politics of the Jewish masses. That is my dependent variable.

JEWS IN THE UNITED STATES: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

To understand why Jews behave politically as they do, it's important to know some basics about them: the size of the community, basic traits, origins, and development. Hence I conclude this chapter with a profile of the Jewish community in the United States and a brief account of its origins.

Agencies of the US government do not ask residents to disclose their religious affiliation or identification, depriving us of official information about the size of the Jewish population. Even if the government could put such questions on the census or surveys, that would not eliminate the challenge because Jews don't agree on the markers of Jewishness. And even if the organized Jewish community could somehow achieve consensus on who is a Jew and who isn't, individuals would remain free to identify as Jews without paying any attention to Jewish or secular authorities. After all, as the Hebrew Bible teaches in Exodus 32, Jews are a "stiff-necked" people no easier to herd than cats.

Considering the individualism that permeates American thinking, it's not surprising that people develop their own standards to define Jewishness or any other religious identity. In the traditional definition, individuals are Jewish by birth to a Jewish mother or conversion by a recognized rabbi. But when asked who they would more likely classify as Jewish – a person who has a Jewish mother but does *not* practice Judaism

or somebody whose mother *isn't* Jewish but who regularly attends synagogue – barely a quarter of self-described American Jews endorsed the traditional criteria of birth to a Jewish mother (*Los Angeles Times* Poll, 1988, 6).[2] Many American Jews think of Jewishness principally as a matter of ethnic and cultural heritage rather than religious commitment (*Los Angeles Times* Poll, 1988, 6). More than a few of these who do have a Jewish heritage based on the traditional criteria select "no religion," atheist, or agnostic when asked their religious identity in surveys.[3]

Asked by researchers what makes someone a "good" Jew, most self-identified Jews endorse qualities that have very little to do with the standards set by rabbinic authorities. For example, when the Pew Research Center asked Jewish respondents which aspects of being Jewish were central to their own identity, respondents ranked "observing Jewish law" next to last among the nine options presented to them (Pew Research Center 2013). Because of the elasticity in the way people define Jewish identity, Barry Kosmin (1992, 30) quipped, everyone can be a "Jew by choice" (a term often used to describe converts to Judaism).

That makes it difficult to develop firm estimates about the size of the American Jewish community. Despite these ambiguities and the use of different techniques to locate Jews, most demographers estimate the American Jewish population at around 6.5 to 7 million people or roughly 2% of the entire US population (Sheskin and Dashefsky 2017; Tighe et al. 2013). How significant is this community? In absolute terms, the *number* of Jews has been fairly static over the last half century, and there are today about as many Jews as Presbyterians (Pew Research Center 2015, 102). On the other hand, the Jewish *share* of the total American population has dropped significantly because the non-Jewish population has grown so much faster than the Jewish community. But even that claim is challenged by studies that identify an additional 6 million or so Americans who are not counted as Jews in the demographers' estimates based on birth or conversion but who are "Jewishly-connected" or have some legitimate tie to Jewish heritage (Tobin and Groeneman 2003).

Although *Look* magazine inspired panic among Jewish organizations with its 1964 article about "the vanishing American Jew," it turns out that

[2] Asked the same question in a parallel survey, 43% of Israeli Jews took the traditional position.

[3] The Pew Research Center (2013, 7) indicates that somewhere between a fifth and a quarter of individuals who identify as Jews and claim Jewish ancestry and/or upbringing nonetheless report themselves as having no religion. Previous research suggests that most members of this subpopulation consider themselves ethnic or cultural Jews.