

Why are American Jews so Liberal?



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Editor's note: *I recently participated in a two-person panel discussion with Professor Laurence Cooper on why Jews in the United States are so disproportionately liberal in their politics. I thought my own remarks that evening were pretty good, but Larry's were exceptionally insightful – historically and philosophically grounded as they were – and he graciously said yes when I asked if American Experiment might publish them. I trust you will find them fascinating and informative on a number of levels.*

Dr. Cooper is an associate professor of political science at Carleton College as well as chairman of the department. He teaches courses in ancient and modern political philosophy, and is the author of Rousseau, Nature, and the Problem of the Good Life, and just this year, Eros in Plato, Rousseau, and Nietzsche: The Politics of Infinity. His doctorate is from Duke and he and his wife Vicki and their two children live in Northfield.

As with everything the Center does, I very much welcome your comments.

MITCH PEARLSTEIN
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Introduction

In the current campaign season, as in all campaign seasons in this golden age of marketing, much attention is being paid to key demographic groups. “Key” in this context means two things. First, that the group in question is large enough to influence the outcome of the election. Second, that a significant portion of the group’s vote is uncommitted or weakly committed. By these measures American Jews do not really qualify, being relatively small in number (constituting just over two percent of the American population) and overwhelmingly and persistently liberal or left of center in outlook. Certainly in a close election Jews

could prove crucial in a swing state such as Florida. But that’s to say only that in a close election all groups are key.

“Key,” however, can mean something else: key to understanding. And in this sense American Jews perhaps do qualify. The very ideological settledness that makes American Jews relatively unimportant numerically might provide access to liberalism’s appeal to all of its adherents, or at least to a great many of them. No, Jews are not representative of liberals altogether, and not only because there are in fact a good many Jewish conservatives: Jewish history and the Jewish American experience are particular and idiosyncratic, as are all peoples’

histories and experiences. But no group's history and experience are simply particular. If this is so—to the extent it's so—the case of American Jews makes for a potentially very revealing case study. Perhaps what is decisive among Jewish liberals is decisive among liberals from all backgrounds. And in any event it's an awfully interesting case.

Liberalism's Metaphysics

Why has liberalism or left-of-center politics been so powerfully appealing to Jews?

The first task is to try to understand what we mean by “liberalism.” As familiar as the concept might seem, its inner logic, its coherence, is not so easy to see. Does contemporary liberalism even have a defining core? Consider the following liberal policies and dispositions: Liberal economic policy is centered on redistributionism and distrust of markets. The liberal approach to national security is centered on diplomatic engagement and “peace processes” that are sundered from the credible threat of the use of force—it effectively presupposes that the causes of conflict are psychological and that they can be addressed by diplomatic engagement that amounts in essence to educational therapy. The therapeutic tendency is also evident in liberal social policy, as seen in its reluctance to demand personal accountability. Finally, it's important to note liberalism's general impatience with, if not disdain for, constitutionalism, by which I mean the principles of limited government, federalism, and separation of powers. In principle, one could be a liberal in one or two of these areas and conservative in the others. And some people do fit that description. But not very many people. There is a strong correlation between liberalism in one of these areas and liberalism in the others, which suggests strongly that these positions are connected by, that they're different expressions of, a single set of principles.

What principles? The following four seem to me especially important. We might think of these as liberalism's “metaphysics,” so to speak, or as its essence.

- First principle: Human nature is essentially good. When things go bad, it's because of outside forces; i.e., the social environment.
- Second principle: Human nature is highly malleable. Society has distorted human goodness or else overlaid it with alien and alienating elements (think especially of traditional religious teaching), but this can be undone. If society's institutions are the cause of evil, then remaking those institutions can undo that evil.
- Third principle: Human beings may be complicated but ultimately they're understandable and predictable and governable by scientific Reason.
- Fourth principle: The world is not structured by any transcendent, permanent, moral order or will.

It's worth noting that traditional Judaism opposes every one of these tenets, as do other great pre-modern intellectual traditions, including Christianity as well as most classical Greek and Roman philosophy (though each of these traditions has occasionally given rise to radical exceptions).

How do these four core principles take us to liberal economics, liberal foreign policy, and the rest? The connection lies in some of the beliefs and tendencies that necessarily follow from the principles I have just listed.

To begin with, these principles give rise to a tendency to interpret political problems as essentially technical problems, meaning that laws

and institutions are seen as more important than individuals' character. According to this approach, a good society will create good people, rather than the other way around. Think about that and about what a radical reversal it is of traditional religious and moral thought. If political problems are essentially technical problems, then they ought to be amenable to essentially technical solutions. Reason—abstract, scientific reason—can point the way to solutions to all problems and in principle to a perfect society. And there's no reason to restrain the state from exercising all the power it needs to achieve this perfection, so long as the state is controlled by the right people.

Thus we arrive at the liberalism we know so well: an ideology that is rationalistic (not reasonable, but rationalistic); universalistic (and therefore suspicious of particular attachments); and utopian. It's an ideology that sanctions a powerful state which asks little of individuals other than they acquiesce in its collectivist impulses.

Notice, too, that there is often something functionally religious in all this. Not only is the liberal worldview grounded in faith (there's much in it that just doesn't square with observable experience), it offers its adherents many things that people have traditionally sought from religion: it gives meaning to life; it explains and justifies life's difficulties and disappointments; it promises redemption. Surely this is a great part of its appeal. There are skeptical liberals, but there are also a good many dogmatic and zealous liberals (as well as intolerant liberals). And, especially this year, there are messianic liberals.

There is something wonderfully hopeful about liberalism's core principles—something attractive—especially to people who've grown out of a tradition infused with a passion for justice and an unflagging hope for redemption and a messianic

age. Then again, this description covers Christians as well as Jews. Christianity, too, preaches justice and redemption (though perhaps with a more pointed emphasis on the next life).

What's the Appeal?

What is it that has made Jews so much more open to the appeal of liberalism? Doubtless there are many reasons, and what follows in no way claims to be comprehensive even in outline. Yet I do believe it is an important start, and maybe more than a start.

The first reason for Jews' adherence to liberalism is surely the historical experience in Europe. As Jews still remember vividly, the European Right and European conservatism were typically anti-Semitic, often virulently so. Moreover, it was the secular-humanistic European Left that fought for Jewish emancipation and civic equality. American Jews, who mostly came from Central and Eastern Europe, were secular-humanist or Leftist even before they became American Jews. For the most part their descendents haven't seen fit to break with them on this. Now it's true that American conservatism is a very different thing from that old European conservatism. American conservatism is really a liberal conservatism—what it wants to conserve is a liberal regime, a regime devoted to limited government and personal freedom and responsibility—which is why I consider it unfortunate that the label "liberal" has become attached to the Left. But old memories die hard, and matters aren't helped by the fact the American Left persists in depicting American conservatism as if it's much more like the old European conservatism than it really is. (In fact, in many respects it's today's liberalism or Leftism that's closer to the old European Right.) This is a powerful legacy that still needs to be overcome.

A second likely source of Jews' particular attraction to the political Left is the decline in traditional religiosity, or the increase in secularism, that took place (particularly among non-Orthodox Jews) roughly between the mid-19th and mid-20th centuries. This is part of a larger, not-specifically-Jewish phenomenon. Wherever people have become more secular—where religious belief and religious practice are not felt to be central to life—we tend to find a more liberal or Leftist politics. Think of Europe today. Or think of the United States, with its more intensely religious “Red States” and its more secular “Blue States.” It’s hard to know why this correlation exists between secularism and political liberalism, but it’s worth noting the view of many Western political philosophers who held that people to whom religious faith and practice are relatively unimportant will tend to turn to politics for the meaning and consolation and direction that they no longer find in religion.

Now in principle this could mean a turn to any number of varieties of romantic “politics of meaning,” not necessarily liberal or Leftist politics. But in our time, and especially among Jews, with their unique history, that turn is almost bound to be a turn to the Left. The philosophers to whom I was referring didn’t claim that there is a perfect correlation between secularism and romantic politics. There isn’t. There are plenty of secular conservatives. And there are plenty of religious Jews who adhere to the political Left. But there are many more religious conservatives and secular liberals than there are secular conservatives and religious liberals. The correlation between secularism and liberalism is strong. And in politics, strong correlations add up to important facts.

Now, to my third and final suggestion regarding the devotion of so many Jews to left-of-center politics. The first two phenomena—the European experience and the increase in secularism—help

explain why liberalism might be so particularly attractive to Jews. The third phenomenon speaks not to the source of the attraction but to the lack of resources with which to resist the attraction. Here I have to acknowledge my indebtedness to Irving Kristol, who wrote an article in 1995 with the charming title, “The Political Stupidity of the Jews.” Kristol observed that, for all its enormous riches, the Jewish intellectual tradition just doesn’t have much to say about statesmanship, constitutionalism, and the like for the simple reason that, for most of Jewish history, there was no opportunity to develop and employ such thought. Jews were a stateless people, and a stateless people has little occasion for thinking about statesmanship.

I don’t want to leave the matter there because, in my view, certain elements of Jewish moral and social thought can be considered as a kind of political wisdom. The understanding of human nature and society that’s conveyed by the Hebrew Bible seems to me a foundation for political wisdom, irrespective of whether one reads it from a religious or from a secular perspective. Recent decades have seen the appearance of several impressive studies by secular scholars who demonstrate the truth of this claim. I would also suggest that the extraordinary richness of Jewish moral and community life over the ages has been rooted in a kind of moral and social wisdom which is also, in a sense, political wisdom. But Kristol’s point still stands in one crucial regard, and this is all that he meant in any case: There simply isn’t much of a Jewish tradition of thought regarding statesmanship, constitutionalism, how to wield power, and how to defend one’s interests successfully. More particularly, there isn’t anything approaching a conservative Jewish tradition of political thought. Therefore, there’s no ready and natural secular source of skepticism and resistance to the pull of the Left. To be sure, there’s always been a kind of conservative religious resistance. But that kind of resistance doesn’t resonate in the minds of secular political people.

This last observation points us toward the future and to the question of what, if anything, could be done to weaken American Jews' adherence to the political Left.

To the extent that this adherence is rooted in the cultural and intellectual sources on which I've concentrated, the task is essentially educational, which means that it's bound to be a long-term project. Conservatives and "old-style" liberals need to show, patiently and persistently, the failings of contemporary liberalism's policies and assumptions and the merit of conservative and classically liberal ideas. The project is long term but not hopeless, because so many conservative and classically liberal ideas are good ones. And in some cases it should be possible to show that the Left has been antagonistic to Jewish, or at least Israeli, interests. Today one finds far more anti-Israel sentiment and even anti-Semitism on the Left than on the Right. This should help overcome the long-standing Jewish suspicion of conservatism rooted in the old European experience.

Another reason that the project isn't hopeless is that contemporary liberalism's sources have been subjected to sustained critique and great strain. I am referring here not so much to the four core principles I outlined above but to the animating faith of liberalism, which surely has flowed, in part, from those principles. The rationalism, universalism, and, especially, the humanism so characteristic of liberalism have been found wanting—intellectually wanting, beginning with the powerful critiques of Nietzsche and his postmodern progeny, and, even more so, practically wanting. The promise of meaning, of consolation, of redemption, has lost much of its power. Even as secular humanism was triumphing institutionally during the 20th century, it was being repudiated in the philosophic realm and losing power spiritually.

One might ask: Isn't this claim refuted by the near-messianic appeal of Barack Obama to so many of

his supporters? It is not. Whether Mr. Obama is liberal or not, he is not running as a liberal. Indeed, the hope and change of which he speaks, to the extent that they mean anything, specifically entail overcoming the old ideologies, liberalism very much included. Yet in no way does this constitute a victory for conservatism or for classical liberalism. Secular humanism, even assuming its continuing demise as a widely held faith, might give way to a radical or romantic or irrational successor. But the weakening of secular humanism does at least constitute an opportunity for conservatism and for classical liberalism.

McCain and Obama

Even a sympathetic reader might wonder whether it pays to be thinking and talking about "metaphysics" in an election year. It might be better to save such analysis for the years that follow, particularly if they are years spent in the political wilderness. Yet in a strange way, the current presidential campaign underscores the decisive and immediate importance of "metaphysics" to politics. Neither John McCain nor Barack Obama is particularly ideologically oriented or even consistent. Each, however, somehow seems to represent a kind of metaphysical tendency. Consider how each candidate seems to stand for timeless principles. Indeed, notice that an account of the appeal of each of them virtually requires recourse to the language of timelessness. The contest between them consists in what "timeless" means. Mr. McCain champions principles such as honor and nobility whose meaning and worthiness are timeless in that they hold true in all ages. Mr. Obama, by contrast, champions an ahistorical or rather post-historical timelessness: His promised New Politics is nothing less than a promise to overcome all prior history. A match-up that is not particularly ideological turns out to be a philosophic contest.

Whatever its deeper meaning, this election, like all elections, puts before us a practical and short-term set of concerns. Are there short-term opportunities to encourage liberal Jews to rethink their liberalism? The American Jewish Committee's most recent Annual Survey of American Jewish Opinion, conducted in November 2007, reveals that although the majority of American Jews are decidedly liberal in their political opinions, there are a few issues on which the majority of American Jews depart from liberalism or at least from its worst excesses. A majority see the prospect of Iranian nuclear weapons as a serious threat. A majority are skeptical that any agreement can bring peace to Israel in the near future. A majority even think that the West is engaged in a "clash of civilizations" with radical Islam. These aren't conservative positions, exactly. And these same survey respondents reject, for example, the use of military force against the Iranian threat. But what's

interesting is that these positions all reflect awareness that Israel and the West in general face implacable, committed enemies. This is something. People who see things this way might be reachable—not through an ideological appeal, but through an appeal to facts and good sense—by those who articulate a non-liberal, non-utopian approach.

Who knows? Perhaps short-term gains grounded in appeals to facts and to good sense might set the stage for longer-term progress: Ideology and "metaphysics" may transcend any particular set of facts and ordinary good sense, but ideology and metaphysics that are worth propounding begin with facts and ordinary good sense and indeed never stop taking note of them. This is one of conservatism's greatest insights.



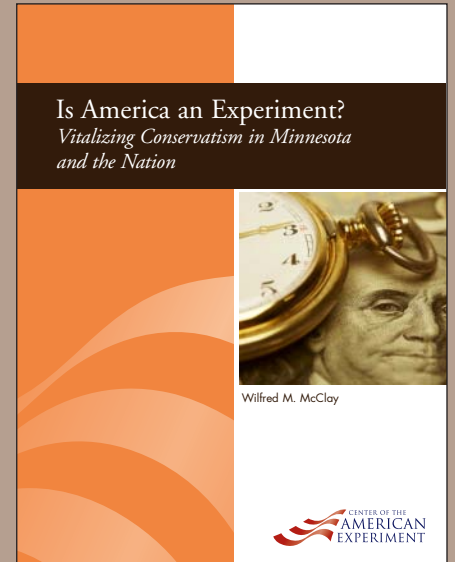
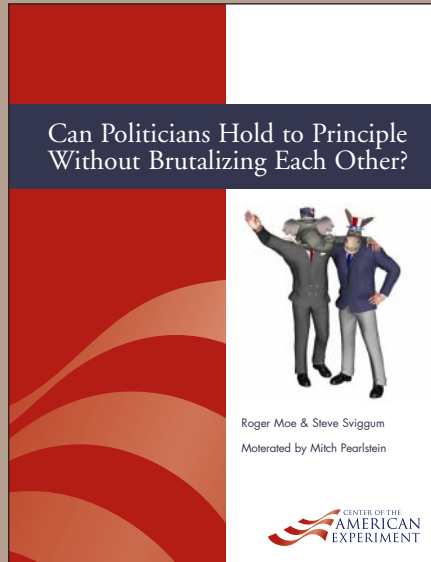
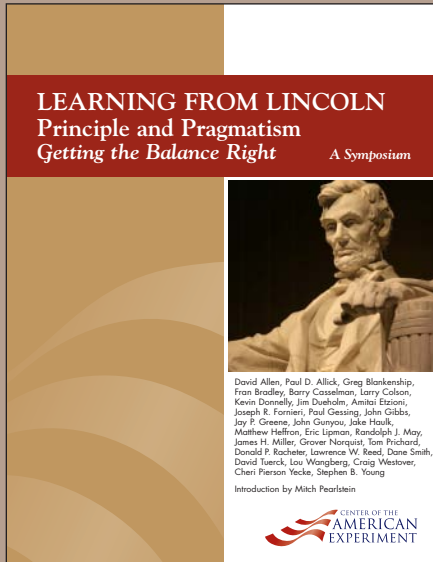
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