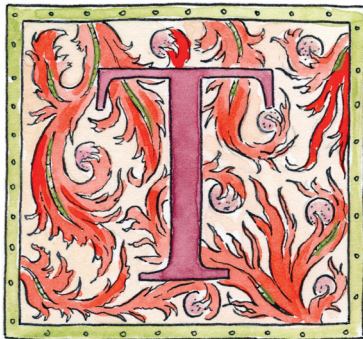


SARA FORMAN

# Politics

*Jews can win back the Democratic Party*



THE AMERICAN Jewish community's long track record of pluralistic activism reflects a deep commitment to (largely) progressive governance. For decades, its contributions focused on issues with a universal focus: the advancement of labor rights, religious freedom, feminism, disability accessibility, voting rights, and civil rights. These commitments are chiefly why American Jews have historically made the Democratic Party their political home as voters and as donors. But the problems inside that home, namely increased hostility toward Israel and apathy toward distinctly Jewish concerns, have become impossible to ignore.

It's not the first time Jews had to question their sense of home. In his seminal work, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States*, the noted German-born

Jewish economist and World War II resistance leader Albert O. Hirschman explained that when an organization exhibits signs of decline, its members are confronted with the choice to exercise their right to voice their grievances and exert pressure for improvement, or their right to *exit*, with *loyalty* being the measure of the two.

Legacy Jewish organizations, both nonprofit and political, such as the Anti-Defamation League, the American Jewish Committee, the Federation system, and AIPAC exemplify the centrist institutional convergence by working as advocates within established political and social frameworks. These groups have long been pillars of bipartisan Jewish political advocacy, with their focus on combating antisemitism and other forms of hatred, promoting civic engagement, and supporting Israel. With their strategic use of what Hirschman referred to as *voice*, these traditional organizations leverage their institutional credibility and access to policymakers to push for stronger hate crime laws, access to relevant social services, and, in AIPAC's case, support of Israel as a bedrock of American foreign policy. Much of the Jewish community has historically been happy to be represented by such institutions.

But unlike legacy community organizations, individual Jews can operate as free agents, and many on the political Left have opted to exit these organizations, some because their voice failed to persuade, some because they were never all that at home in the first place. Born out of this disaffiliation are groups such as J Street, Jews for Racial and Economic Justice (JFREJ), and IfNotNow. And where are they now exercising their voice? The Democratic Party.

The left-flank insurgency in the Democratic Party has been growing at least since 2004. It began with the presidential campaign of then-Representative Dennis Kucinich. It gained nearly unstoppable momentum with Bernie Sanders's reshaping of inter-

nal Democratic discourse, which in turn helped lead a weakened Hillary Clinton to lose to Donald Trump in 2016. Today, the Democratic Party finds itself relatively rudderless in its domestic squabbling over social justice issues and support for Israel.



The question is: Which Jewish voices will determine the future of the Democratic Party? Will it be those of House Democratic Steering Committee Co-Chair Debbie Wasserman Schultz and Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, two of the highest-ranking Jewish elected officials in American history, the latter of whom recently wrote a book about antisemitism, including in his own party? Or will it be Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP)?

The latter group has made powerful use of its identity-based affiliation by becoming a vocal contingent within both the identity-based activist insurgency and the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). These groups have been smart to treat internal party politics as the crucial battleground. They have exercised their voice to elect far-left politicians in low-turnout primary contests, particularly in locales that are so solidly Democratic that non-Democrats can't plausibly expect to win. The candidates they have elected since 2018 can now serve as a bench for ever-higher offices. This new generation of elected illiberals now holds more than a dozen state and municipal offices in New York alone, many running on a blatantly anti-Israel agenda, presented in intersectionalist language, whitewashing the Trojan horse of antisemitism.

A prime example of how Democratic Party infrastructure can be exploited for far-left purposes is the mayoral campaign of current New York City candidate and New York State Assemblymember Zohran Mamdani. Mamdani is running on a populist platform that includes

things such as “free” buses (never mind that the mayor doesn’t control the MTA), city-owned grocery stores that will fix prices, and an unrelenting commitment to calling the war in Gaza a “genocide.” He has led all candidates in the race in fundraising; his total number of donations (16,000 donors) dwarfs that of his closest competitors, including formidable front-runner Andrew Cuomo (2,800 donors).

At the same time that the far-Left has gained ground in the Democratic Party machine, some Jews have chosen to exit the party entirely to become Independents or Republicans. While some have trumpeted this “Jexit,” the numbers have been debated. (What is certainly true is that Trump won a larger share of the Jewish vote in 2024 than he did in 2016.)

The time is past due for liberals and moderates to save the party from its own activist class. In New York, a state governed almost entirely by Democrats on a municipal, legislative, and executive level, and home to the world’s second-largest Jewish community, failure to do so will undermine Jewish causes precipitously. The moderates and Jewish mainstream still hold the clear advantage — organizationally, financially, and politically. There is no reason to give it up and back down from this fight.

The New York Solidarity Network (NYSN), a first-of-its-kind centrist Jewish membership organization, mobilized in the wake of this anti-Israel activism to focus on local races and stave off the wave of extremist anti-Israel lawmakers headed for federal office. Since October 7, NYSN membership and involvement have grown exponentially, after many Jews realized it was the now-or-never moment.

The network’s membership structure is novel yet critical: Its members provide financial support directly to candidates facing DSA opponents in New York’s Democratic primary. Disgruntled Independents or other would-be exiters are encouraged to reclaim their voice by registering

as Democrats to vote in such primaries, where New York's races are effectively decided. These races are often won by a handful of votes, not to mention for a fraction of the campaign cost. (A competitive New York State Assembly race, for example, will cost around \$450,000, which amounts to a rounding error in a competitive U.S. House race).

NYSN has also built strong coalitions outside the community, sharing pragmatic and realistic goals for reshaping communal activism. By building alliances with like-minded moderate and pragmatic groups (many of which were formerly part of the progressive infrastructure), the network is helping to write a new playbook for grassroots intersectional alliances.

But it is not only in such coalitions that Jewish activism has seen a resurgence. New York also has a robust sphere of independent expenditure committees and super PACs with strong ties to, and interest in, traditional Jewish voices, including New Yorkers for a Better Future, Stand Up PAC, Brooklyn BridgeBuilders, and Jewish Voters Action Network. Unlike the traditional Jewish organizations that have aimed to speak for the Jewish community (as, ironically, have organizations such as JVP), this new model empowers Jews to take political action as individuals. Other states and cities ought to follow this model. In Pittsburgh, for instance, the Beacon Coalition, a group currently focused on the mayoral race and battling anti-Israel ballot initiatives and city council votes, has had a wave of successes, bringing the Jewish community together to work toward common liberal anti-leftist goals.

With new vehicles of participation, these constituencies are choosing voice over exit. Restoring New York as a safe place for Jewish life and ensuring that the Democratic Party remains a worthy home for American Jewry are causes as crucial today as they have ever been. And they go hand in hand with maintaining a cohesive center and finding like-minded communities with whom to partner and uplift.



We have refused the option to exit and are building a new and reliable base for Jews and non-Jews alike who align with our values. Whether through traditional philanthropy, political activism, or grassroots efforts, we will need to engage in complex battles to ensure that the illiberal activists remain a fringe element and do not replace the mainstream. The Hirschman paradigm, and a firm commitment to voice rather than exit, is possible only if our activism is focused on opposing the acceptance of casual and overt antisemitism, support for Israel, and our community's safety.

Hirschman didn't publish *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* until 1970. After trying to prevent the Nazi rise to power, he left Germany for Paris in 1933, taking a leave from his graduate studies in 1936 to fight the Fascists in Spain, working with the Emergency Rescue Committee during World War II, and then for the U.S. Army during and after the war. The lesson of his indefatigable wartime life of non-surrender is simple: Wherever you have a voice, use it. Dare them to take it from you. \*

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