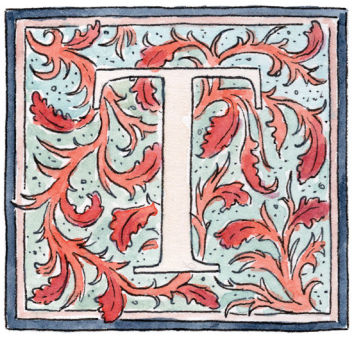
DAVID BERNSTEIN

The Center Can Hold

How Jews can rebuild a middle-ground politics



THE political contest in America today is not merely between Left and Right. The United States is going through a profound political realignment, and the political center is the great casualty of the upheaval. Loud voices and well-organized activists on the ideological fringes have reshaped the incentives of political and civic life, and their baited meddling has eroded the political center. The institutions, norms, and coalitions that once rewarded moderation, compromise, and cross-partisan cooperation have steadily weakened under this pressure. The result is a political ecosystem that amplifies extremes while marginalizing the broad middle.

This transformation is the predictable result of several reinforcing forces: Gerrymandered districts with supermajorities of

one-party voters reward candidates who appeal to ideological passions rather than mainstream sensibilities; social media platforms elevate outrage, speed, and moral certainty over deliberation; emboldened activist networks proliferate on both the Left and Right. Candidates must now move so far toward their party's fringes to win primaries that they can no longer credibly pivot back to the middle to compete for moderate voters, further amplifying the most extreme voices.

The result is a political culture in which moderation is treated as weakness, compromise as betrayal, and nuance as moral confusion, the perfect societal conditions for increasing antisemitism. Most Americans do not share these attitudes. As of early 2026, 45 percent of Americans identify as political independents, a new high, with slightly more of them leaning Democrat than Republican. But today's politically homeless lack the organizations, institutions, networks, and strategies to translate their preferences into power in a way that transcends these obstacles. In short, what is needed is the politicization of the independent middle. And for American Jews, this is not just a civic but an existential concern.

Political scientists often define the center as the midpoint of public opinion, where the median voter resides. This is not quite right. The center is not a point on a graph. Most Americans, even today with the high number of political independents, identify with one of the two major political parties. On many concrete policy questions, that center is defined not by rigid ideology but by a blend of instincts. On immigration, for example, large majorities of Americans say immigration is good for the country, roughly two-thirds support a path to legal status, and yet many of those same voters also favor

stronger border enforcement and reject permissive approaches. This "both/and" pattern — combining order and openness, rights and limits — appears in issues and reflects a more nuanced public than our polarized politics suggest.

The center can also be understood as a set of people, coalitions, and norms capable of sustaining pluralism. It includes citizens and leaders who may disagree on policy but who remain willing to engage despite differences, deliberate in good faith, and operate with a shared commitment to democratic rules. The political center, then, is not simply equidistant from the Right and the Left; it is the combination of both/and thinking and the civic capacity to translate that thinking into cooperation and governance.

American Jews have flourished in a system defined by liberal democratic norms: constitutional protections, equal citizenship, religious liberty, and a culture of pluralism. Our security has never depended on numerical strength but rather on the strength of the system itself.

On parts of the progressive Left, ideological frameworks divide society into rigid categories of oppressor and oppressed, often casting Jews — and especially Israel — the embodiment of unjust power. On parts of the populist Right, conspiracy thinking, nativism, and illiberal impulses are no longer confined to the margins but are increasingly shaping party agendas and political behavior.

These are different phenomena with different origins. But both flourish in environments where the center is weak. In such an environment, Jews become vulnerable, not only to explicit antisemitism but also to the erosion of the civic framework that has historically protected Jewish life. This is why the Jewish response cannot be limited to fighting antisemitism alone. What we are facing is more than a rise in hostility; it's a weakening of the whole system that has made American Jewish life possible. We cannot litigate our way out of a political culture that incentivizes polarization, and we cannot rely on existing institutions

if those institutions themselves are being reshaped by illiberal forces. The appropriate response is therefore not defensive but constructive. American Jews must take on a new mission: rebuilding the political center of American society.

This is not a call for more dialogue across differences, valuable as those efforts may be, or an appeal to civility. It is a call to build power.

Many of the underlying drivers of polarization, such as gerrymandering and social media, are deeply entrenched and unlikely to be easily reversed. The task, then, is not to wish them away but to identify and activate other pressure points in the system that can help restore centrist norms and incentives. Rebuilding the center will require sustained investment in multiple domains. Several strategic priorities, however, stand out.

1 | *Re-anchor American civic values*

At the heart of any functioning center is a shared civic framework. American Jews are uniquely positioned to champion values that transcend partisan divides: constitutional democracy, pluralism, equality under the law, free expression, and individual rights. These are not "right-wing" or "left-wing" values. They are the preconditions that allow a diverse society to function. In recent years, these principles have often been treated as abstractions or even as ideological positions themselves. They must instead be reclaimed as the common ground on which American life depends. Jewish institutions — communal organizations, philanthropies, educational initiatives — should play a leading role in re-centering these values in public discourse. Major Jewish organizations, in all of their work, should lead the way by articulating a robust American-pluralism narrative, both patriotic and self-critical. When I worked at the American Jewish Committee beginning in the late 1990s, the organization

took out regular full-page ads in the *New York Times* featuring notable members of the Jewish community describing "What America Means to Me." The old civic-pluralism narrative is the compact that enabled a golden era of Jewish thriving. If we don't reclaim and give voice to it, who will?

2 | *Build political capacity at the local level*

As the Jewish community exercised influence on the national stage for the past couple of decades, disciplined activist networks took root locally and then entrenched themselves. Political power in America is built from the ground up on school boards, in city councils, in state legislatures, and within party machinery. What was cultivated in those local spaces inevitably moved upstream, reshaping the tone and trajectory of national politics. Local politicians have become national and international political celebrities.

Rebuilding the political center requires setting foundations from the ground up, competing in local contests by organizing moderates, recruiting candidates, and building durable local coalitions. The Jewish community needs to establish an array of national, state, and local 501(c)(4)s and other political funding vehicles that allow us and normie Americans more broadly to regain our footing in American politics.

There are emerging models for this work. Efforts such as the Commonground Collective in Chicago, a 501(c)(4) organization, illustrate how cross-partisan, values-based organizing can shape local governance and counteract ideological capture. The collective was formed by leaders in the mainstream Jewish community in the wake of Brandon Johnson's election as mayor, a moment that crystallized the community's realization that they had lost meaningful influence in local politics and risked being sidelined altogether.

The collective has focused on shared commitments — educational excellence, institutional neutrality, and accountability — while investing in candidate recruitment, coalition-building, and year-round participation in local governance. It successfully supported several winning candidates against their progressive opponents in the recent primary elections in Illinois. This success offers a replicable model — now embraced in New York City, Seattle, and Pittsburgh — for how moderates can reassert themselves through organized, persistent civic action. There must be formal networking between these local organizations as well so they can share resources, learn best and worst practices from one another's experiences, and drive proliferation in other locales.

3 | *Strengthen cross-partisan leadership networks*

One of the most significant losses in American political life has been the erosion of relationships across ideological lines that once made compromise possible, particularly in the U.S. Congress. In earlier eras, lawmakers, civic leaders, and institutional actors maintained personal and professional ties that enabled cooperation even amid deep disagreement.

Rebuilding the center requires intentional investment in cross-partisan leadership-development programs that bring together leaders from different political backgrounds, foster trust, and create channels for collaboration. Nancy Jacobson, the founder of No Labels, has long championed this approach and is currently working with members of Congress from both parties to build a new coalition of centrist lawmakers working on centrist policies. These networks need not produce agreement on every issue. Their purpose is to ensure that cooperation remains possible and that moderates can act collectively when it matters most.

American Jews should get behind such efforts and help catalyze others at every level of government.

4 | *Rebuild the academic and intellectual center*

Universities have long played a central role in shaping the intellectual culture of the country. Today, disciplines in the humanities and social sciences are dominated by ideological frameworks that crowd out alternative perspectives. Predictably, the impact is evident far beyond academia. Ideas developed in universities flow into media, policy, philanthropy, and education systems.

As Tao Tan has observed, the humanities are often shaped by relatively small pools of funding. Entire subfields, journals, and faculty pipelines can be shaped with investments in the low tens of millions. A small academic center can operate on $1–3 million annually. A coordinated $25–50 million philanthropic strategy, deployed over time, can materially shift hiring, research agendas, and the training of future scholars.

One very positive development is the movement to create civics centers and schools of civic thought, often within existing universities across the country; it's creating institutional homes for scholars committed to intellectual pluralism and open inquiry. These centers provide a viable career path for less ideological or more heterodox academics, and they're a magnet for students seeking serious engagement with foundational texts and competing schools of thought. These centers are slowly rebuilding an intellectual infrastructure that can cultivate viewpoint diversity over the long term.

American Jewish philanthropy, in partnership with others, should invest in expanding this ecosystem, supporting centers and programs and developing pipelines for scholars committed to open inquiry, methodological rigor, and pluralistic debate. This is not about imposing a

counter-ideology. It is about restoring the conditions in which knowledge can be pursued without political orthodoxy.

5 | *Build new coalitions*

The Jewish community has remained too fixed on maintaining coalitions with progressive activist groups and the legacy civil rights establishment, much of which has grown increasingly ideological in recent years. That paradigm proved badly wanting in the wake of October 7 when many Jews confronted a painful reality: Long-standing partners were either silent, equivocal, or openly hostile, particularly on issues related to Israel and, at times, American Jewish life itself.

Rebuilding the center will require breaking out of that pattern and developing new, values-based coalitions rooted in shared commitments to American civic values rather than historical alignment alone. While this effort must extend to many sectors, K–12 education offers a particularly important opportunity. Across the country, parents from diverse backgrounds — Jewish, black, Latin, Asian, and others — are increasingly worried about declining academic standards, politicized curricula, and the erosion of shared civic norms. Jewish organizations should work in partnership with these emerging activists to build broad coalitions committed to educational integrity, strong academics, viewpoint diversity, and respect for all students.

To be sure, these networks are still nascent and far less developed than the well-established civil rights infrastructure. At this stage, the work is necessarily person-to-person rather than organization-to-organization. But that is precisely how durable coalitions begin. American Jews must bring the same energy and creativity that once helped catalyze the early civil rights movement, investing in new relationships and helping to knit together

a coalition of the center, committed to American civic values, capable of shaping the future.

6 | *Confront extremism where it takes institutional form*

Finally, rebuilding the center requires a willingness to confront extremism when it captures institutions. This does not mean policing individual beliefs but rather recognizing when ideological agendas undermine the core purposes of institutions — whether in education, civic organizations, or public agencies — and using available levers to restore balance.

The Jewish community will not thrive where radical activists are in charge of setting the educational agenda. In 2024, the Toronto District School Board moved to formally recognize "anti-Palestinian racism" (or "APR") as a distinct form of discrimination, and it began integrating it into its broader antiracism strategy, with plans to embed it in training, curriculum, and reporting systems. In the APR framework, it's racist to question the Palestinian narrative of the Nakba. How can Jewish life sustain itself in metropolitan areas that embrace such policies? Avoiding these conflicts may feel prudent. In reality, it cedes ground to actors who are more organized and more willing to exercise power. The Jewish community must do everything possible to neutralize and remove extremists from positions of power by exposing them in the media and leveraging existing relationships with elected officials.

Rebuilding the political center will not be quick or easy. It will require patience, resources, and sustained leadership. It will involve setbacks

and internal disagreements. But the alternative is clear. If current trends continue, American politics will become increasingly polarized, institutions increasingly politicized, and civic trust increasingly fragile. In such an environment, Jews face growing risks that may make the current tumultuous environment seem calm and secure.

We cannot afford to be passive observers of this civic meltdown. The task before us is not simply to defend against rising antisemitism and extremism. It is to build the conditions in which extremism cannot dominate. That means organizing the center by giving it voice, structure, and power. For American Jews, this is both a strategic necessity and a moral calling. We have done this kind of work before. We can do it again. ✳

DAVID BERNSTEIN is the founder and CEO of the North American Values Institute (NAVI).