The first scientific study of American religious groups’ voting patterns, published in 1948, disclosed that Catholics, Jews, and Baptists favored Democratic candidates by margins of two to one or better. Five denominations we would now lump together as Mainline Protestants supported Republicans by equally lopsided ratios. Sixty years later—an eternity in politics—exit polls from the 2008 presidential election showed that white Baptists had swung completely across the spectrum: Together with other Evangelical Protestants, they had become the single most pro-Republican religious bloc. Catholics, previously staunch Democrats, now divided their votes pretty evenly between Democrats and Republicans, while Mainline Protestants, long the GOP’s core constituency, increasingly identified as Independent, favored Democrats by small margins, or abstained from voting altogether.

Only Jews stood pat over the 60-year span. In 1948, Jews gave around 75 percent of their votes to the Democratic nominee, Harry Truman. In the election of 2008, Barack Obama received about 74 percent of the votes cast by self-identified Jews. Although these figures mask subtle changes occurring over the time period—some erosion in self-reported Democratic partisanship, slippage in both issue-based and self-identified ideological liberalism, and growth of Republicanism among the most Orthodox in the community—they nonetheless testify to the extraordinary stability of Jewish political loyalties in a period of dramatic political change.

This pro-Democratic persistence is puzzling, because American Jews’ high rates of education and elevated socioeconomic status are typically correlated with Republican voting. To explain why Jews “earn like Episcopalians and vote like Puerto Ricans” (the phrase inspired by Milton Himmelfarb), why Jews seemingly ignore their own economic self-interest in low taxes and limited government, scholars have usually invoked what I call “Judaic” explanations. These approaches find sources of Jewish political distinctiveness in Jewish social values, historical experience, and social marginality. We are told in some accounts that traditions of tzedakah and tikkun olam provide Jews with core social values that incline them to political liberalism. Other scholars write in this vein that Jews learned from history to distrust the Right, which opposed their emancipation in 19th-century Europe, and/or they continue to think of themselves as outsiders who have more in common with other ethnic and racial minorities that have benefited from the expansive civil rights policies associated with the Democratic Party.
Whatever their uses, these static theories cannot account for two other less prominent but equally salient puzzles: the short-term oscillations of the American Jewish vote over the past 40 years and the political distinctiveness of American Jews, not only when compared to other Americans but in contrast to Jewish communities elsewhere. From 1972 through 1988, roughly two-thirds of Jews favored the Democrats over the Republicans—a distinctive pattern to be sure—but still a sizable drop from the 1960s when Democratic candidates typically garnered 80 percent of votes cast by Jews. Without any reason to think that Jewish values, history, or self-image changed dramatically, the Jewish Democratic vote share rebounded to the 75-to 80-percent range in presidential elections.
between 1992 and 2008. Looking abroad to Jews in Canada, Britain, France, Australia, South Africa, or the Jewish homeland in Israel, we discover that in other democratic countries Jews do not vote like their American cousins. Nowhere else in the contemporary world, in fact, do we find Jews who follow their American coreligionists in voting so disproportionately for the most left-wing major party. If there is something intrinsically liberal about Jewish values, experience, or social standing, as Judaic explanations imply, it does not seem to manifest itself in Jewish voting outside the United States.

Thus a satisfactory theory of Jewish political behavior must simultaneously explain why American Jews vote for the party that does not seem to advance their economic self-interest, why this pattern was interrupted during the 1970s and 1980s and subsequently restored in the 1990s and thereafter, and why American Jews behave so differently in the political realm than Jews in other advanced industrial societies. My project seeks to develop and test a unified theory that can solve simultaneously the three puzzles embedded in American Jewish political distinctiveness.

I argue that the politics of American Jews have been driven largely by concerns about citizenship. The United States was the first and only society to admit Jews to full citizenship with comprehensive political rights and embrace a political system that neither conferred benefits nor apportioned costs on the basis of religious affiliation. The critical action was the prohibition on religious test oaths in the federal constitution ratified in 1788 and the First Amendment guarantees of religious freedom adopted officially in 1791. In the formative years of American Jewish politics, Jews worked to make these doctrines operative in the states and, subsequently, to ensure that there would be no backsliding into a sectarian state that would invariably reflect the perspectives of the numerically dominant Christian community. That concern has not abated over the centuries. For most Jews, it seems, political self-interest is not principally about economic policy but rather about maintaining the classic liberal polity and its distinctive regime of separation of religion and state. Having those freedoms put American Jewry on equal terms with other citizens of the United States, a very different experience from Jews residing in even relatively tolerant nations that still defined citizenship in religio-ethnic terms. As such, American Jews had a political stake in their societies that was quite different from Jews elsewhere. An emphasis on citizenship thus helps to explain both why Jews have tended to support the Democratic Party, which has been more committed than its opponent to an inclusive conception of citizenship, and why their status as equals in an officially religion-blind state has bred a political style unique among contemporary Jewish societies around the globe.

The model is not static in the manner of “Judaic” theories because it also recognizes that Jewish partisan loyalties will shift if the parties change their positions on the overriding question of defining citizenship. In the 1960s and 1970s, it seemed to many Jews that the Democratic Party’s embrace of affirmative action, community control, and other race-conscious policies departed from the principle that the state did not condition citizenship (broadly construed) on race, religion, or other demographic traits. This prompted significant partisan defection to the GOP. By the late 1980s, many Jews took alarm at the religious sectarianism of the Christian Right, a social movement that had penetrated and begun to remake the Republican Party. This anxiety encouraged a decisive shift back to the Democrats.