

The Los Angeles Jewish Community: An Examination of its History of Activism for Human Rights

(Brief Version)

by

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Jews have played a pivotal role in the struggle for human rights in Los Angeles. From the early days of Los Angeles's development as an American city, through the political struggles for minority representation and equality throughout the 20th century, Jews have played a critical role as an unusually progressive white community in a city where liberalism had only a tenuous hold for many decades.

Despite this long history and its contemporary manifestations, it is remarkable how little is known in Los Angeles about the role of the Jewish community in advancing the human rights of minority communities. This study will explore the relationship between Jews and minority groups in the City, with particular reference to African-Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans.

Coming to terms with the unique status of the Jewish community's relationship with minority communities has special importance in Los Angeles. No group has the numbers or mobilization to control Los Angeles by itself. The 1990 Census showed that Latinos were nearly 40% of the City's population, with African-Americans at 14% and Asian Americans at 9%. But these numbers are deceiving. Even though minorities represent two-thirds of the city's population, whites represent two-thirds of the registered voters.

As power shifts in Los Angeles, Jews represent a balance wheel. Their political mobilization is very high; the Los Angeles Times exit poll in 1993 found that with 6% of the population, Jews cast 19% of the votes in the mayoral runoff election. And Jews have demonstrated an extraordinary interest in the politics of coalition building, participating in a network of interminority activities beyond the political arena.

Jews represent a unique constituency among whites in Los Angeles. The Times exit poll during the 1993 mayoral election found that 82% of Los Angeles Jews were registered Democrats, compared to only 48% of white non-Jews. In addition, Jews were twice as likely as white non-Jews to select the more liberal opinion on racial issues (Sonenshein and Valentino 2000). But Jews differed strongly from African-Americans (although not from Latinos) by supporting Richard Riordan's re-election in 1997.

As one of the earliest groups to migrate to Los Angeles, Jews were extensively involved in the building of modern Los Angeles. They played an important role in the civic life of Los Angeles in the second half of the 19th century. As a restless, growing city, Los Angeles was multiethnic, and drew migrants of all races from around the country. The city became a place where African-Americans could own property and buy homes, and where segregation was not entrenched.

As Los Angeles entered the 20th century, conservative migrants from the midwestern states dominated its civic leadership. Their vision of Los Angeles was based on the hope that Los Angeles could be a great metropolis, but without what they perceived as the corruption of the big eastern and midwestern cities. The freewheeling diverse politics of 19th century Los Angeles gave way to a rigid, nonpartisan political system that made the attainment of human rights by various minority groups a significant challenge. Among the obstacles to minority success was the restrictive covenant that made it illegal to sell homes in white areas to minority buyers. Labor organizations were weak, and the then-conservative Los Angeles Times dominated elite opinion.

The Jewish community's civic role became constricted in this new Los Angeles, and Jews became outsiders to the governing structure of the city. Officeholders in the 19th century, Jews disappeared from the ranks of elected officials for the first half of the 20th century. In this sense, Jews were much like African-Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans – all outsiders in a homogeneous, conservative community.

The base of Jewish population until the Second World War was the eastside Boyle Heights' area. Jews were extremely active in the labor movement, and organized some of the most successful unions in the garment industry. Jewish labor organizing was particularly noteworthy because of the avid opposition of the powers-that-be in Los Angeles, including the Los Angeles Times and the notorious Red Squad of the Los Angeles Police Department. Jewish labor organizers were particularly successful in industries where there were large numbers of Jewish workers, such as needle working (Vorspan and Gartner 1970). The Boyle Heights Jewish community was working-class and often militantly progressive in its politics.

According to Moore (1994:191), “the visible, immigrant, Yiddish-speaking community centered in Boyle Heights ardently supported FDR, and the New Deal.” Jewish support was critical to the election of the first minority city council member in the 20th century, Edward Roybal, who won his campaign in the Boyle Heights area.

A sign of Jewish progressive commitment came in 1946, when California voters turned down a ballot measure to institute a Fair Employment Practices Commission. Moore (1994:195) found that: “When Los Angeles Jews went to the polls in November, 1946, they voted overwhelmingly for a Fair Employment Practices Committee, although only 30 percent of the California electorate did. Whether they lived in Boyle Heights or Beverly Hills, Jews lined up in favor of the anti-discrimination proposal.”

The pattern was to be repeated in 1964, when the notorious and unconstitutional Proposition 14 was passed by a two-thirds majority of state voters. Proposition 14 would have overturned the Rumford Fair Housing Act, and would have allowed housing discrimination. Proposition 14 failed only in largely Black and Jewish areas of Los Angeles (Wolfinger and Greenstein 1968).

There was a large influx of Jews in the first decades of the 20th century, and their small share of the population continued to grow (Kohs 1944). Then, a massive in-migration after World War II created a major Los Angeles Jewish community (Moore 1994). By the 1950’s, nearly a half million Jews lived in the Los Angeles area, making Los Angeles the second largest Jewish community in the United States after New York City, and the third largest in the world behind New York City and Tel Aviv. At its height, the Jewish population of Los Angeles represented 7% of the City’s residents; today it is roughly 6%.

In the 1950’s and 1960’s, Jews moved south and west. For a time they comprised an important part of the West Adams community, and then the bulk of the Jewish community moved west and north to the Fairfax area. A major migration into the San Fernando Valley created today’s Jewish community, which is about evenly divided between the Westside and the Valley.

As Jews migrated westward and southward to the West Adams and Fairfax areas, they continued their progressive role in the 1950’s. They became active in the reform wing of the Democratic Party,

embodied in the California Democratic Club (CDC) movement. As a Midcity and Westside constituency, they elected their first officeholder in 50 years, when Rosalind Weiner (later Wyman) was elected to the City Council in 1953. Weiner joined Roybal as the lonely liberal coalition in the Council.

Shared outsider status laid the groundwork in the 1950's for a remarkable, historic coalition that challenged the white-dominated conservative hegemony of Los Angeles. Beginning with Edward Roybal's election to the city council in 1949 with Latino and Jewish support, biracial and multiracial coalitions grew in strength and scope through the 1960's. The apex of the coalition was the mobilization behind Councilman Tom Bradley's campaigns for city council and then for mayor.

Bradley's coalition began in the 10th council district, where a large bloc of African-American and Jewish activists came together to seek minority representation and political reform. Joined together in the reform wing of the Democratic Party, this biracial group of Bradley supporters built a bridge between minority aspirations and the concerns of middle-class whites. As a result, Bradley was able to obtain an extraordinary level of support from a cross-section of the city's voters, and defeated incumbent Mayor Sam Yorty in 1973.

Jewish support for Bradley's mayoral campaigns helped him to forge one of the nation's most historic biracial coalitions, perhaps the most remarkable one in modern times. In 1973, Bradley received the largest share of the white vote of any African-American mayoral candidate in a major American city, with 46% of the white vote. Jewish votes, which went overwhelmingly to Bradley, were crucial elements of that performance.

With Bradley's election in 1973, Jews, African-Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans emerged from the wall of civic exclusion to a central role in the governance of Los Angeles. For twenty years, the Bradley coalition dominated Los Angeles government, and the civic and social role of Jews and other minority groups expanded. City offices, public policies, and the spirit of government were opened up as never before.

The Black-Jewish coalition behind Bradley thrived during most of the Bradley years. It helped Bradley's regime to survive the bitter wars over school busing. Black-Jewish ties were strong enough to

carry Los Angeles through the busing controversy of the late 1970's and the Black-Jewish struggles over President Carter's firing of U.N. Ambassador Andrew Young in 1978 for unauthorized meetings with the Palestine Liberation Organization.

The Black-Jewish coalition provided key political backing for Bradley policies that most impacted minority communities: diversity in appointment of city commissioners, affirmative action in hiring and promotion of city employees, and civilian accountability for the actions of the Los Angeles Police Department (Sonenshein 1993: Ch. 9). Thus, Jewish involvement in the political climb of African-Americans helped improve the standing of a range of minority groups in Los Angeles, along with access to City Hall for the previously excluded Jewish community.

Bradley's coalition made Los Angeles the exception to the type of Black-Jewish conflict that crippled progressive politics in New York City. During the same years that African-Americans and Jews forged a historic coalition to take power in Los Angeles behind Tom Bradley, conflict between Jews and African-Americans over the public schools in New York City ensured the election and re-election of conservative Mayor Edward Koch (Mollenkopf 1992). Koch himself had once been one of the most liberal Jewish politicians in New York City, but had steadily moved to the Right. Some described New York City's Jews as in virtual revolt against traditional liberalism (Reider 1985; Sleeper 1990).

Strains developed, however, in the mid-1980s when intense disagreements over Louis Farrakhan split the communities and Bradley was unable to provide a bridge. In addition, the pro-growth policies of the Bradley administration generated a slow-growth movement on the Westside areas where Jews lived in great numbers.

But even with these conflicts, the climactic battle over police reform that was set off by the beating of Rodney King in 1991 found Jews solidly in Bradley's camp. Jewish voters provided massive support for Proposition F in 1992, which embodied most of the recommendations of the Christopher Commission. Once again, Jews voted differently and in a more progressive direction from non-Jewish whites, and were critical to the passage of a historic measure for social change.

With the end of the Bradley mayoralty in 1993, the massive coalition of outsiders became fractured. The civil unrest of 1992 caused many Jews to reevaluate their support for liberal citywide policies and candidates, and helped lead many Jews to support Republican Richard Riordan's candidacy for mayor in 1993, and even more strongly to back Riordan's re-election in 1997. By the end of the Bradley years, and in the ashes of the civil unrest of 1992, the Jewish community of Los Angeles was showing considerable evidence of caution about radical or sudden change. And with personal ties among leaders weakening, the linkages with minority communities were bound to erode.

On the other hand, a study of the 1993 mayoral election (Sonenshein and Valentino 2000) showed that Jews remained distinctive from other whites, even as they found the Republican Riordan a comfortable fit. In 1993, Jews split between Woo and Riordan; obviously, by comparison with the huge Jewish vote for Bradley in previous elections, this was a shift. But white non-Jews were far more likely to vote for Riordan than were Jews, and the Riordan votes by white non-Jews were more connected to conservative ideology than were Jews.

Jews remained insiders, whose access to government continued even with the election of a white Republican, Richard Riordan, as mayor. African-Americans were now outsiders, but a majority of Latinos were Riordan voters. With their rising mobilization, Latinos seemed to have a powerful future ahead of them. But there was little contact with Jews.

The lack of contact between Jews and Latinos was particularly striking, because on so many issues Los Angeles Jews and Latinos have voted in very similar fashion. Jews in contemporary Los Angeles vote more like Latinos than like either non-Jewish whites or African-Americans. Both strongly supported Riordan's re-election in 1997, heavily supported Proposition BB for school construction in 1997, backed Charter reform in 1999, and continue to register and vote Democratic in large numbers in partisan elections.

In the post-Bradley years, some began to fear that Jews were turning inward, away from the open-handed stance of previous decades. However, a broader view indicates that Los Angeles Jews have always been pulled between an inward-looking vision of protecting the group's interests, and an outward-

looking orientation toward other groups. In that sense, Los Angeles Jews resemble other minority groups who grapple with the appropriate mix of group self-interest and attachment to the aspirations and needs of other groups.

The prospects of a split among Jews and other minority groups concerns those who believe that Jewish residents have an important function in fostering the progressive development of Los Angeles. As whites with progressive attitudes compared to non-Jewish whites, Jews offer a possible bridge between minority aspirations and a still-powerful white community.

Los Angeles is entering a transitional era that is likely to create discomfort, as well, as hope. Latinos are likely to emerge dramatically at the forefront of the city's political and economic life, and that transition will have consequences not only for whites, but also for other minorities. Their new presence is likely to be felt most conspicuously by African-Americans, already reeling from the decline of political influence they have experienced since the end of the Bradley coalition.

Tensions among minority groups mean that there is no simple route to "rainbow coalitions." Jews are likely to represent a key group of whites whose presence in progressive coalitions may expand the options that minority groups possess.

In their daily lives, Jews do not live in similar circumstances to Los Angeles's minorities (except in some ways to Asian-Americans). The anomaly of Jewish behavior has always been the contrast between their socioeconomic status and their political stance. Bringing economic issues to the forefront (such as labor organizing and the living wage) will not have the same resonance with Los Angeles Jews that these issues had in the days when Jews were the core labor organizers in the city. Jewish support for these labor issues will derive more from beliefs about what is right than about mutual self-interest, but such support can nonetheless be extremely valuable. There is a potential for serious conflicts of interest over class-based issues. But the possibility also exists of a reforging of ties based on shared beliefs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This research suggests that both Jewish leaders and leaders of other minority communities should take a fresh look at the potential for Jewish involvement in the advancement of human rights for minority

groups. In order to foster a positive relationship, the communities need to meet as equals, to look for issues of common concern, and to examine the values that they offer each other during the transition to a different kind of Los Angeles. All minority communities in Los Angeles, including Jews, must constantly work and rework the fundamental balance between turning inward to group mobilization and reaching outward to build alliances.

(1) There needs to be a greater understanding within the City's minority communities of the role the Jewish community has played in enhancing human rights and equality. Misperceptions about the role of Jews in the local community have rarely been corrected. Many people erroneously believe that Jews behave politically much like other whites, or that Jews have abandoned the progressive arena. The history of the Jewish community's involvement needs to be presented through voting and survey data, and an analysis of organizational linkages to common action.

A greater effort should be made to incorporate Jewish participation in events that explore issues of diversity. The history of Jewish involvement in these issues should bring a seat at the table to Jewish activists, even at the risk of raising issues of power and control that make such interactions difficult. Jews represent an important bridge between minority and non-minority communities. Even the defensiveness and occasional conservatism of the Jewish community provides an important guidepost to issues that are unlikely to sustain broad, interracial coalitions.

(2) There needs to be a greater understanding within the Jewish community of the evolving needs and aspirations of minority communities in Los Angeles. Because there is much less day-to-day contact between Jews and other minority communities than in the past, media images of minority aspirations and agendas have increasingly replaced a more direct and personal understanding. Minority issues are rarely communicated fully and in all their complexity by the media, which tends to focus on the more sensational aspects of the minority agenda.

Jews will also need to be aware that issues of power and control among groups complicate discussions in diverse Los Angeles. While a seat at the table is an important step for Jews, they will also need to be aware that members of minority communities often fear, not without reason, that whites

(whether Jewish or non-Jewish) will seek to impose their own view on them. Providing room for minority activists to speak honestly, and even to air conflict with the Jewish community will ease the concern that perceived power imbalances cause.

(3) Forums for group interaction need to be established that are based on equal status of participants that enhance human relations but move toward practical, pragmatic projects in areas of shared interest. Seeking out multiple forums where people feel at home will enhance the hope that coalitions can be formed on an equal basis. Even more important, the agendas for such meetings should allow each community to express its hopes and fears accurately and honestly.

(4) Existing leadership networks must be enhanced and new leadership networks constructed so that group relations are not solely in the hands of candidates and elected officials. Politicians have often played a very constructive role in the development of intergroup alliances in Los Angeles, with Tom Bradley serving as a prime example. However, the winds of political ambition can often dictate electoral strategies that make intergroup alliance difficult, even while such strategies may contribute to victory at the polls for particular politicians. Politicians will likely continue to be a crucial resource for linking communities together, but they may also be the most likely to tear communities apart.

Leadership networks that do not depend solely on political candidates and elected officials can present a consistent set of linkages that are not subject to the shifting winds of politics, especially in an era of term limits and office-holding musical chairs. Such leadership networks can also become vehicles for settling conflicts that arise in the political arena, or at least keeping such conflicts focused on issues and not on perceived slights between and among diverse communities.

For the full report, see <http://fdcweb.fullerton.edu/lajewishcomm/>.

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