

FORWARD

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The Vanishing Jew

Almost 20 years have elapsed since New Yorkers last elected a Jew - Jacob Javits to the U.S. Senate. More than 50 years have passed since Herbert Lehman, New York state's first and only Jewish governor, held office. New York City and state - once the sources for Jewish political talent in the nation - are no longer fertile ground for Jews seeking high elective office. Ironically, as more Jews have won elective office outside of New York, they have become notably less successful within New York City and state.

Today, there are 10 Jewish members of the U.S. Senate, but none are from New York. While the neighboring states of New Jersey, Connecticut and Pennsylvania have elected Jews to the U.S. Senate - Frank Lautenberg, Joe Lieberman and Arlen Specter - the short-lived tradition of a Jewish senator from New York is now history. In two states, Wisconsin and California, both U.S. senators are Jewish, an achievement that was once unthinkable.

Of the 33 Jewish members of the U.S. House of Representatives, eight are from California and just seven are from New York, although New York State has more than twice as many Jews as California. Furthermore, Jewish Congressmen from states other than New York, such as Sidney Yates, Howard Berman and Henry Waxman, have more power and seniority than most of the Jewish members of the New York state delegation, with the notable exception of Brooklyn Democrat Charles Schumer. The reduction in the size of the New York delegation and the 1990 redistricting - done in accord with the Voting Rights Act - led to the loss of three of New York City's most senior Jewish representatives: Stephen Solarz, William Green and James Scheuer.

Within the state of New York, the most powerful Jewish politicians for many years have been the speakers of the State Assembly: Brooklyn-based Stanley Steingut, Stanley Fink and Melvin Miller, Saul Weprin of Queens and now Sheldon Silver, an Orthodox Jew from Manhattan's Lower East Side. While former Bronx assemblyman Oliver Koppell, the newly chosen attorney general, is Jewish, he faces a serious primary challenge from Kings County district attorney Charles Joseph Hynes, a highly regarded Irish prosecutor with a strong following among the Orthodox community of Brooklyn. Although Edward Koch, the mayor of New York from 1978-1989, was probably the best-known Jewish politician in the state, if not the nation, the most powerful politicians in the city and state today are Catholic: the governor, the two U.S. senators, the newly elected mayor, Rudolph Giuliani and the majority leader of the City Council, Peter Vallone. This does not mean that Jews have been shut out of elective office; two city-wide Jewish candidates, Mark Green and Alan Hevesi, easily won in 1993, and three of the five borough presidents - who have substantially diminished authority under the revised City Charter - are Jewish as well. Perhaps there is a "glass ceiling" for Jewish candidates that we don't fully appreciate.

For most of this century, there have been approximately 2 million Jews in New York City, about one-fourth of the total population. As the 1991 UJA-Federation of Jewish Philanthropies study

showed, New York City now has just more than 1 million Jews, or 12% of the total city population. Brooklyn and Manhattan account for two-thirds of New York City's Jewish population while the liberal Jewish communities of the Bronx and Queens have almost evaporated with their residents moving to the suburbs where their political clout is diffused, retiring to Florida or aging out.

Within the Jewish community, the influx of new immigrants from Russia and North Africa (many of whom are not yet citizens), the rise of the yuppie Orthodox and the widespread concern about safety have reinforced the Jewish move to the right. Jews are increasingly voting for non-Jews over Jews, a trend that was first manifest when Mayor Wagner won the Jewish vote in the 1961 Democratic primary against ' Arthur Levitt. In the 1993 Democratic primary on Manhattan's Lower East Side, City Councilman Antonio Pagan was strongly supported by Orthodox Jews over long-time liberal Miriam Friedlander, who was trying to regain her council seat. In 1992, Alphonse D'Amato did remarkably well against Robert Abrams in all the outer-borough Jewish neighborhoods. Although liberal Jewish voters make up a sizable portion of the city's electorate, they are not growing in size or political influence. It is no accident that there were two dozen Chasidic rabbis on the podium when Rudolph Giuliani was inaugurated as mayor; Borough Park superseded Park Avenue as a source for votes for the victor in the 1993 mayor's race.

Clearly, the changing fortunes of Jews in New York politics is a product of several forces. Many of the Jewish politicians who emerged from the anti-war and civil-rights movement of the '60s are more liberal than the bulk of Jewish voters. Further, black-Jewish tensions have weakened the multiracial coalition that once dominated Democratic politics, while the Voting Rights Act has virtually eliminated multiracial legislative and congressional districts where Jews joined forces with other minorities to oppose conservative Catholic politicians. Successful New York Jewish politicians such as Arthur Levitt, Louis Lefkowitz, Robert Morgenthau and Edward Koch have not built political dynasties, as the Kennedys have in Massachusetts, the Browns in California or as the Cuomos may in New York. Finally, ambitious and talented Jews have found new opportunities for success in careers once closed to them, such as university presidencies, CEO's of major corporations and even white-shoe law firms. For the New York Jewish community, politics may simply have lost its glamour as other fields have opened up to them in the 1980s and 1990s.

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