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THE ROAD TO DECISION-MAKING:
AN ANALYSIS OF JEWISH COMMUNITY RELATIONS PUBLIC POLICY

Steven Windmueller

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The Function of Community Relations

In the United States, the Jewish community relations enterprise has historically represented the Jewish community within the political arena. In many ways, the community relations field has functioned for American Jewry as its *shtadlanut*, the community's emissary to the non-Jewish world. The art of communal politics has helped to frame a body of American national and community policy and a set of practices that has emerged as the American Jewish political tradition. Four features give it a unique American perspective.

1. The core policies of this enterprise have for sixty years shaped and/or reflected a social activist ideology, thereby creating a synergy between this community's political identity and the interests and behavior of democratic liberalism.

2. The process of decision-making itself duplicates the federalist model of geographically dispersed centers of authority and action, a local-national configuration of power, and a series of checks and balances.

3. The presence of competing institutional players and individual elites, not too dissimilar to the American political process, seeks to access and shape both Jewish and general public opinion, and, in the process, attempts to capture the mantle of "who speaks for the Jews."

4. The basis of Jewish political behavior is the modality of "consensus-building," a variant of the majority-minority voting system, where special attention is given to the notion of linking a plurality of opinions in order to fulfill a core requirement for action.

Thus, in each principle area of ideology, geography, leadership competition, styles of decision-making, and the concept of consensus, this field has taken on the attributes and behavior of a distinctive subculture of the American polity.

Periods of U.S. Jewish Political Advocacy

The history of Jewish political advocacy reflects the social and behavioral changes of an evolving and maturing constituency. Five primary time segments help to define the Jewish political agenda in twentieth century America:

■ *"Politics of Security" (1906-1938)*

As the community began to evolve and stabilize, the process of Americanization witnessed a period of defensive responses designed to offset nativism and anti-Semitism.

■ *"Politics of War and Death" (1939-1945)*

A period dominated by an almost uncomfortable accommodation to the ideals of Zionism and a Jewish state, yet a preoccupation with the issues of war and refugees.

■ *"Politics of Accommodation" (1948-1967)*

To make it ın America was a notion not only to be offered to white Christians but also to Jews, and one that required a civil rights revolution to insure that Americans of color could rightfully participate.

■ *"Politics of Self-Interest" (1967-1980)*

This era was defined by the startling events surrounding the Six-Day War and the rediscovery of Soviet Jewry. Correspondingly, the American Jewish community would be infused with a new sense of Jewish identity and assertiveness.

■ *"The New Challenges: Internal Dissent, External Threats" (1981-Present)*

This period has been dominated by the emergence of the religious right from without and the changing character of Jewish political advocacy from within. The rise of AIPAC, the dissent over the Lebanon war, and the rapid growth of single issue constituencies resulted in a new set of parameters which would dominate Jewish communal policy-making.

Another way to access this field's evolution is through the insights of its leading practitioners, who have given, over the past five decades, a series of definitive characteristics to this discipline. Among them is John Slawson, who in 1959 outlined a vision of this field, which called for Jews to have full and open participation in all aspects of American life, which he labeled the "core-relations aspect" of the life for this community.[1]

Nearly twenty years later, Earl Raab, writing in the *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, would comment: "It is necessary to integrate again the Jewish point of view, and reorient it to social actions and the nature of Jewish self-interest in America....It is not unhealthy to ask what "is good for the Jews."[2]

In 1992, Albert Vorspan and David Saperstein, in their book *Tough Choices*, offer yet another level of core involvement: "Our tradition, therefore, has not dictated specific answers but rather provided values to be applied to life....Our role is to test these human theories and policies by the standards of our tradition."[3]

These three visions, one that asserts full Jewish core integration, another that defines issues through the lens of Jewish self-interest, and a third which suggests that the Jewish religious tradition be applied to the core issues of the society, reflect several of the dimensions of how this community ought to engage the larger culture.

It is the process of how issues are presented, defined, and processed that ultimately measures the effectiveness and impact of a JCRC decision. As Jerome Chanes of the NJCRAC has noted, "the process is often highly nuanced."[4] The institutions involved must enter into a "reflective assessment" as a component of its policy-making process. In the course of this evaluation, a number of basic questions formally or informally help shape and give definition to the decision-making exercise. Three such themes might be applied, along with others, in order to place the central policy questions into some type of Jewish context. For example:

(a) What does Jewish law and tradition offer us?

(b) What has been Jewish communal experience and past practice?

(c) Who are the primary stakeholders, including individuals and institutions, both within the community and outside of it, that can or ought to affect policy outcomes?

Exploring Four Types of Jewish "Decisions"

Presented below are four specific types of decisions that the Jewish advocacy community is called upon to render:

Category	Examples	Definition
Civic Tradition	Church-State issues	Policies associated with American liberal practice
Religious Imperative	Civil rights/Human rights	Obligations as understood from the Jewish tradition
Politically Expedient	Ethnic-Intergroup relations	Actions that can enhance the community's credibility with others
Tribal Obligations	Case for Israel	Policies and practices consistent with the internal interests of the Jewish people

Decision-making analysis and interest group theory afford some insights as to the methodologies for measuring and assessing the behavior and effectiveness of advocacy groups. Four components appear specifically useful in helping to define such characteristics: Size; Prestige; Financial strength; Unity and motivation.

Historically, minority interest groups have maintained an issue-specific focus to their agenda, reflecting the unique and special considerations of their constituency. The Jewish community's record incorporates both this intensive internal dimension and an exten-sive external framework. However, for this community to be effective with its core agenda, the four criteria cited above are of particular significance and have been useful measures in judging the sub-political culture's capacity to perform.

Understanding the Components of Decision-Making Power

Outlined below are the *ten* elements of priority to effective decision-making:

Component	Keys
a) Clear, achievable agenda	Vision
b) Infrastructure (internal communications systems)	Organization
c) Economic resources	Organization
d) Access to influentials (Political-Civic-Religious-Ethnic)	Access
e) Access to the external communications systems	Access
f) Credibility – track record of success	Legitimacy
g) Moral credibility to the agenda	Legitimacy
h) Leaders – who have credibility and access	Access
i) Allies and coalition partners who share or support your agenda	Legitimacy
j) Issues presented in a historical and/or ideological context	Legitimacy

Goals and Targets in Jewish Communal Decision-Making

Presented below are the goals to be achieved (Part I) and the principal targets toward which the decision-making process is to be directed (Part II):

Part I

Goals	*Examples*
To articulate the Jewish community's specific agenda	The case for Israel
To define and advance shared political interest	The cause of public education
To reinforce or to oppose political decisions of others	Women's right of choice (abortion)
To advance and promote core civic values and practices	The principle of freedom of speech

Part II

Primary Targets
(To deliver messages to and to work with leadership elites)

1. Political Arena
2. Media and Public Affairs
3. Civic and Business Community
4. Ethnic and Racial Elites
5. Religious Leaders
6. Academic Representatives

A Decision-Making Case Study

In the outline below, one can follow a specific arena of action and policy, as a means of understanding the core components of the decision-making process:

Subject Area:	Inter-Religious Relations
Case:	Catholic-Jewish Dialogue
Strategic Goals:	To change Catholic teachings regarding deicide charge against Jews.
Tactics:	To work with Catholic educators and publishing houses in developing new teaching materials and textbook editions. To train Catholic educators involved in training the religious and laity.
Desired Outcomes:	To develop a new generation of teaching materials, texts, and educators sensitive to this issue.
Geo-Political Considerations:	To understand that this issue is part of a broader agenda toward improving Catholic-Jewish cooperation and to lead ultimately to improving relations between the Holy See and the State of Israel. To pursue this matter not only on the national level but also on the diocese-community level.

Patterns in Jewish Community Decision-Making

Presented below are locus, geographic, and time sequence patterns of decision-making and the types of communal activity:

Part I

1. Communal	Focusing on internal matters to the community (E) - *Intra-religious dispute*
2. Inter-Community	Operating between or among community groups (E) - *Black-Jewish issue*
3. Local	Encompassing public matters (E) - *City-wide election*
4. State	Including an entire state (E) - *State ballot initiative*
5. Regional	Covering a portion of the country (E) - *Israel VIP missions*
6. National	Impacting the entire nation (E) - *Federal legislative policy*
7. Trans-national	Affecting two or more nations (E) - *US-Israel relations*
8. International	Involving the entire world community or a significant part of the globe (E) - *UN policy on Israel*

Part II

1. Ad-hoc	Occurring unexpectedly	Terrorist attack
2. Seasonal	Happening in a pattern	Christmas-Hanukkah observances
3. Single event	Developing only once	A particular memorial activity
4. On-going	Evolving and continuing	Inter-group relations
5. Annual	Consisting of a once-a-year activity	Holocaust memorial

Data Analysis

The summary findings presented below were based in part on a random survey of a number of community relations councils in the United States, varying in size, location, and organizational sophistication.

1. The actual number of decisions by local community relations agencies has diminished over time.

2. The perception of what constitutes a decision varies among agencies, in part based on local practice or tradition.

3. There is a marked recognition that the notion of "consensus" has varying definitions and numerical quotients. In some settings, a simple majority can affect a decision, while in others, a measure of two-thirds or greater serves as a barometer for action.

4. The role of *community education* has accelerated as the activity of preference, especially as agencies face fewer options on policy-making due to a narrowing of consensus within the community, as the core agenda becomes less clear and as new constituencies emerge or are reconstituted.

5. Community relations entities increasingly are refocusing the scope and substance of their decision-making activities to issues uniquely and specifically associated within the realm of their state and/or local policies. This is in part based on the belief that community relations entities have a declining impact on national policy matters and where there are emerging

challenges to the core agenda.

6. These agencies, as could be expected, face an increasingly difficult burden of achieving policy concurrence in at least three sensitive areas: church-state, affirmative action, and welfare reform.

Correspondingly, the growing pressures from their federation funders, who as a whole tend to be less interested in or even sympathetic to the more liberally-based Jewish political advocacy groups, has resulted in a more muted if not silent reaction by some communities to such items as the proposed balanced budget amendment. A second such example accounts for an increased and growing presence of a "religious constituency" (not exclusively Orthodox) which seeks to counter or mute JCRC activities in such an arena as school vouchers, in which this particular sub-group differs from traditional Jewish policy.

7. The downsizing of community relations agencies appears to be linked both to the economic limitations of weakened federation campaigns and to the perception, in some quarters and within certain communities, of the notion that community relations agencies may have outlived their usefulness. Those matters critical to the security and welfare of the overall Jewish community can be managed, it is argued, by national structures.

8. The competition of new political instrumentalities, primarily single issue and ideologically-centered organizations, has increasingly challenged and at times replaced the traditional multi-issue and umbrella instrumentalities within this field.

Through its various transformations and mutations, the community relations enterprise has had a profound impact on galvanizing the Jewish community around its central interests. In certain settings, these instrumentalities have effectively drawn upon their primary strengths (a highly-defined agenda, the availability of community-organizing tactics, and targeted audiences) in order to dramatically, at times, attain desired and necessary outcomes. Correspondingly, this political advocacy network, over several generations, has contributed, both on a community level and in a national context, to the broader civil rights and social welfare agenda, the framing of this nation's discourse on church-state relations, and the politics of organizing through various coalitional models.

Conclusions

The contemporary field of community relations faces a number of challenges that may impede its continued effectiveness as an advocacy instrument:

1. The changing windows of consensus.

2. The external shifts in political attitudes and behaviors.

3. The redefining of federations' public advocacy agendas and communal priorities.

4. The transition of generational leadership within the Jewish community: the movement away by younger activists to sustaining the same levels of involvement and interaction with traditional coalition partners, as an example.

5. The weakening of points of connection between established institutions and grassroots constituencies, as patterns of affiliation and participation change.

6. The emergence of single issue, highly assertive organizations that have successfully challenged the authority and roles of these more diffuse, multi-issue institutions.

The impact of these factors has resulted in both a non-specific redefinition of the mandate and focus of the community relations agenda, and a corresponding functional change in the operational patterns of these entities. This will require the remaking of the community relations structure and the reconstitution of its agenda.

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Notes

1. John Slawson, "Basic Assumptions Underlying Jewish Community Relations," in *The Turbulent Decades*, Vol. 1 (New York: Conference on Jewish Communal Service, 1981), pp. 550-551.

2. Earl Raab, "The End of Jewish Community Relations," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* 54:2 (1977):107-115.

3. Albert Vorspan and David Saperstein, *Tough Choices* (New York: UAHC Press, 1992), p. 4.

4. Jerome Chanes, "Conflict and Consensus," Address to Charleston Jewish Federation, 26 April 1994.

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Dr. Steven Windmueller is Director of the Irwin Daniels School of Jewish Communal Service at Hebrew Union College, Los Angeles. From 1985 to 1995 he served as Director of the Jewish Community Relations Committee of the Los Angeles Jewish Federation Council. Currently, his research is focused on Jewish political and economic power.