



קבוצת ראות  
Reut Group

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**TRACKING DEVELOPMENTS IN  
THE 'PROGRESSIVE FIELD'**

# SMART MONITOR, NO.7



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## HIGHLIGHTS

**In the past two weeks, as elections draw near, the specter of a Democratic sweep brings to the fore discussions of how such an outcome could affect Jewish and pro-Israel communities.**

While a President Biden's relative continuity on Israel is considered likely, the era of his presidency has the potential to usher in future-defining dynamics. Solid signs of shifts in policy circles appear barely discernable; however, more dramatic changes may manifest in the further mainstreaming of progressive worldviews within the political left – and with it, increased exposure to the brand of anti-Semitism that has emanated from radical progressive circles.

Though many efforts to combat progressive anti-Semitism reflect a failure to coalesce a broad ideological spectrum of Jewish leaders and organizations; this document highlights the new opportunities to counter progressive anti-Semitism generated through the increasing number of authentic voices of U.S. Jews in progressive politics. Indeed, progressive movements are increasingly home to a cohort of U.S. Jews super-engaged in progressive politics, who inhabit the frontier of battles waged on the left on defining the Jewish experience in relation to identity politics frames and prevalent racial constructs. **The 'definition question' on Jewish identity in these contexts emerges as a key area requiring internal and external clarity.**

## INTRODUCTION

**This product summarizes developments that affect the positioning of Jewish and pro-Israel communities within the U.S. progressive left. Spanning a two-week period, October 4 – October 17, and relying solely on open-source information, the document covers events and highlights 'weak signals' with potential for developing significance.**

This product is part of the 'Grand Pivot of the Pro-Israel Network Project,' for which the Reut Group received a grant the Genesis Prize as part of "Speak Out for Israel," a global initiative in honor of 2019 Laureate Robert Kraft to combat anti-Semitism and efforts to delegitimize Israel,

both of which are on the rise again in confluence with the onset of the novel coronavirus pandemic.

## CONTEMPLATING PROGRESSIVE ASCENDANCE

In the past weeks, a number of analyses looked at potential implications of a Democratic election sweep, and on the creeping institutionalization of the ideological bases of radical progressive thought. Discussions mainly focused on vulnerabilities to Israel's status, and on the potential for further exclusion of Jewish voices speaking as Jews on Jewish agendas – including on Israel – on the progressive left.

## CHANGING PARADIGMS: RADICAL PROGRESSIVE ORTHODOXY AND AN AGE OF ABSOLUTISM

While the danger posed by extreme right-wing ideologies are far more stark and violent, the more insidious downsides of radical progressiveness lay, as per [Bari Weiss](#), in its “cultural dominance, capturing America's elites and our most powerful institutions.” Critical race theory – which [assumes](#) a binary view that divides the world into opposing forces of justice and oppression, with Jews falling neatly into the ‘oppressor’ category in this framing – provides a conceptual foundation that is operationalized through identity politics-based frameworks. Diverse voices expressed concern that in the event of a Biden victory, it is hard to imagine progressive worldviews meeting significant resistance. New York Times columnist [Ross Douthat](#) cautioned that an eventuality of “a zealous progressive vanguard and a monopoly in the commanding heights of culture... won't be the salvation of American pluralism; it will be the unification of cultural and political power under a single banner.”

In discussing AOC's cancellation of her scheduled appearance at the APN Rabin memorial event, [Bari Weiss](#) contended that AOC's stark rejection of the perceptions of the Jewish majority resulted from her ability to “read the room” and that she “was sending a clear signal about who belongs in the new progressive coalition and who does not.” J Street's Jeremy Ben-Ami labeled it “a really bad sign of where the progressive Democratic head is,” and the New York Times' [Roger Cohen](#)

described her decision as “typical of the effects of an age of absolutist moral judgments, where Twitter bombardments allow for no nuanced positions and people cave or are canceled,” concluding that AOC’s decision opens further space for “demagogues and their barked certainties.”

## CHANGING LEADERSHIP: SHIFTING IN CONGRESSIONAL IDEOLOGICAL GUARD

**The need for new leadership in stark relief** – highlighted for example by the [Washington Post](#) in the context of questions that the president’s hospitalization raised regarding the continuity of government. Indeed, if Biden wins he [plans](#) to work to fulfill a pledge to build the Democratic Party on a new generation of leaders, likely to include assembling the most diverse Cabinet in U.S. history. Thus, while a President Biden’s relative continuity on Israel is considered likely, the era of his presidency has the potential to usher in future-defining dynamics. In recent weeks, a couple of developments gained attention in the context of areas of potential shifts in Congress:

- **The conditional funding agenda mainstreaming?** – In a J Street webcast, House Foreign Affairs Committee Chair-hopeful Rep. Joaquin Castro [spoke](#) in multiple forums on his view that Congress should examine what Israeli activities are being funded by U.S. aid, including annexation, settlement building, and home demolitions. He elaborated his desire that members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee in the next Congress hear from a wider array of voices on issues related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and to bring Palestinian voices before the committee.
- **Potential for new credibility for radical progressive campaigns on Israel?** – More than 65 movement organizations – including the Democratic Socialists of America BDS and Palestine Solidarity Working Group and Jewish Voice for Peace Action, and signatories including Rashida Tlaib, Linda Sarsour, and Rashid Khalidi – sent a [letter](#) to Congress. The letter called for the U.S. to stop funding Israel’s military and cited shifts on the ground in justifying the demand, including that a “whopping 75% of Democrats prefer democracy and equality to Israel’s status quo, and 56% of Democrats polled supported sanctions on

Israel for its settlement expansion.” It also cited supportive Congressional initiatives such as AOC’s ‘Dear Colleague’ letter on advancing legislative accountability measures and Rep. Betty McCollum’s bill to prohibit U.S. recognition of and funding for Israeli claims of sovereignty “over any part of the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem.”

## PROGRESSIVE JEWISH VOICES

**Highly engaged U.S. Jews in progressive politics, including many Jews who have found their political voice and motivation for action in the Trump era, are also finding new and innovative ways to participate and to organize.** This engagement spike is shaping the map of Jewish organizing; it may also hold potential for countering progressive anti-Semitism<sup>1</sup> given the greater number of authentic voices, many newly minted activists exposed for the first time to far-left anti-Semitism, now in progressive movements. Reports in the last couple weeks described an emerging base of an engaged grassroots of Jewish mobilization and activism within progressive movements and on progressive agendas, highlighting:

- A new [survey](#) from AEI's Survey Center on American Life [revealing](#) that when it comes to the election, members of the Jewish American community are among the most engaged citizens across the nation. This engagement is not limited to online activism or donating money but is real, active, and on-the-ground.
- Coordinated action by Jewish groups such as the 41 liberal Jewish groups that [signed](#) a letter with other faith-based organizations appealing to senators not to confirm Supreme Court nominee Amy Coney Barrett.
- Local level ‘Get Out the Vote Work,’ mainly focused on battleground states, such as [here](#) and [here](#).

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<sup>1</sup> [The Reut Group defined](#) ‘progressive anti-Semitism’ as hostility, prejudice and discrimination against Jews coming from the progressive left, mainly expressed by (condensed): 1. Presumption of or actual Jewish association with, defense of, or support for the Jewish state, holding all Jews responsible for the ‘original sin’ of Zionism; 2. Rejection of the exceptionalism of the Jewish experience, including pertaining to historic and continuous vulnerability, and exclusion of Jews from identifying as a collective with other oppressed groups; and 3. Holding Jews uniquely responsible for oppressive power structures, and demanding of Jews and Jewish communal organizations to acknowledge their privilege and power status by renouncing claims of prejudice, discrimination, or insecurity experienced individually or collectively.

- Outcomes of individual innovations, such as Snapchat’s voter registration campaign, [led](#) by the company's public policy manager, Sofia Gross, who cites her upbringing in Jewish day schools as contributing to her sense of civic responsibility.

**Progressive Jews are also emerging as the future Jewish voices.** Notably, Democratic strategist Joel Rubin, who served as director of Jewish outreach for Bernie Sanders's 2020 presidential campaign, was [tapped](#) as executive director of the American Jewish Congress. According to AJC President Jack Rosen, Rubin's hiring reflects the ideological shift within the American Jewish community in recent years, and the hope that a progressive like Rubin can [reach](#) younger Jews as well as today’s influential people on policy. Additionally, Peter Beinart’s [joining](#) the New York Times as a contributing opinion writer can be seen as a signal on the voices seen as representative of the Jewish community externally.

## **THE IDENTITY ISSUE OBSTACLE**

**Identity politics-based framing has profound influences on progressive politics. It meets an American Jewish community struggling for internal and external clarity as it questions Jewish identity as it relates to contemporary contexts** and dominant racial and class constructs. Importantly, progressive anti-Semitism seeks to define the collective Jewish experience – for Jews in Israel and in the U.S. – within the binary framing of oppressor/oppressed. In reaction, an increasing number of Jewish conversations are engaging in defining Jewish vulnerability in terms that do not always align with dominant notions of privilege. Doing so, as reflected in several developments in the past two weeks, is critical for effectively combating anti-Semitism from the left.

### **Grappling with Jewish identity in the context of identity politics:**

- Two opposing Jewish viewpoints reflect a broad range of perspectives, for example: [one](#) characterizes the notion of contemporary Jewish vulnerability as illogical given that “the lived experience of most Jews in America today is not one of being discriminated against, of being attacked by police.” [Another](#) explores the inadequacy of the reigning categories in capturing ‘Jewish particularism’: “We don't fit into 'oppressor' or 'oppressed' categories. We

are both privileged and marginalized, protected by those in power and yet targeted by the same racist lunatics as those who target people of color.” Active discussions thrive in this area in growing number of memes and discussions on social media and in Jewish Facebook communities.

- Outside arbiters of the categories Jews belong in: Notably, Kwame Anthony Appiah’s New York Times [column](#) evaluating whether a Jew is ethically compelled to identify as white, and concluding that “it is not up to us as individuals to determine the meaning of our racial terms.” He provides the context of contemporary Jewish life in the U.S. to underscore the point that, “being white is not just a matter of identifying as white; it involves being treated as white.” Also, this [assessment](#) of Jews’ lived experiences in an article on ‘How Irish, Jewish, and Italian New Yorkers Benefitted From Their Whiteness in Post-World War 2’ labels Jews as white privileged on the basis that they benefitted while post-war boom color lines were drawn, and “were often the ones drawing the lines.”
- Indigeneity versus whiteness: Invoking DNA-based arguments – Debates that posit Jewish Middle Eastern roots as the rationale for why Jews should not be lumped into the “white” category have proliferated (for example [here](#)), especially following Gal Gadot’s announcement that she would be playing Cleopatra in an upcoming movie (for example, [here](#) and [here](#) – “Gal Gadot is not a white woman. Nor are Ashkenazi Jews writ large. Gadot is Levantine-Middle Eastern, ethnically as well as nationally, as are all Ashkenazi Jews”).

#### **Relevance to fighting anti-Semitism:**

- The way in which anti-Semitism is defined – and whether definitions capture the main characteristics of progressive anti-Semitism – frame the way anti-Semitism can be identified, understood, and combatted. For example, the ADL’s [Online Hate Index](#), a platform designed for better understanding and tracking hate speech on the internet, predetermines types of speech that falls into categories of more and less explicit anti-Semitism. Definitions will also be crucial for the way social media platform’s navigate these issues; indeed, the ADL [called](#) on social media companies to craft identity-based frameworks for analysis of hate speech and to invest more in enforcing policies designed to

curb discriminatory rhetoric. The significance of defining extends to being able to assertively fight anti-Semitism in the form of, for example, Holocaust denial (see, for example the case of the Florida school principal fired for equivocating regarding whether the Holocaust took place, who was fired and then [re-instated](#)).

- An [op-ed](#) by two AJC directors affirmed the critical nature of a working definition of anti-Semitism in the context of fighting anti-Semitism in Europe; for example, in obstructing the non-constructive ambiguity exploited by people substituting the word “Zionist” for “Jew” in anti-Semitic speech. It also calls for social media platforms to adopt the IHRA definition that is the European Council’s benchmark and has received bipartisan American support.
- Notably, many efforts to combat anti-Semitism reflect a failure to coalesce a broad ideological spectrum of Jewish leaders and organizations:
  - Jewish left-wing activism in this area is mobilized to fight right-wing anti-Semitism, while the right tends to dominate in activism against anti-Semitism in campuses and other arenas associated with the political left (see recent example in this recently written joint [letter](#) that 30 Jewish organizations, absent major Jewish institutions or organizations associated with the Jewish left, issued to U.S. colleges and universities).
  - The recent [complaint](#) levied against the New Israel Fund to the IRS, viewed as an attack from within the Jewish community on the Jewish left, risks intensifying polarization within the American Jewish community, also raising concerns in Jewish philanthropic circles.
  - A surfacing approach to coalescing support against anti-Semitism from the left is rooted in enlarging the definition frame of anti-Semitism, so as to universalize Jew-hatred among other forms of discrimination-based hatred and to promote solidarity. (See this [piece](#), which frames the common enemy as the radical left, arguing for fighting anti-Semitism as an American problem; and this [example](#) on creating a platform that aims to broadly unite on this premise).

## MAPPING A BRAVE NEW INFLUENCE ENVIRONMENT

**An information environment of accelerant change since the domination of Internet-mediated communication is super-charged in today's extreme political and societal turbulence. Changes drive how people organize for social and political activism; who influences the discourse and what forms influence takes; and the ways that people identify, group, and engage. Developments in recent weeks cover implications of these new realities as they manifest on the political left to Jewish and pro-Israel communities, and efforts to contend with their outcomes.**

### EROSION OF COLLECTIVE TRUTH

**The prevalence of viral disinformation, defined as falsehoods aimed at achieving a political goal, is a concern that [spans](#) the ideological spectrum.** Recent weeks have seen a significant focus on the [extent](#) to which the emerging information environment is rocked by disinformation, often in the form of conspiracy theories. Social media, and the internet more broadly, [erode](#) the authority of mass-media gatekeepers, replacing them with "vital communities" of digital insurgents who are united around shared interests.

**While much discussion centers on the extraordinary prevalence of this phenomenon on the radical right, recent reporting has also covered the role conspiracy theories have played in a [spike](#) in anti-Semitic violence in New York, often from non-white people.** Indeed, anti-Semitism is heavily reliant on conspiracy theories regarding Jewish power to replicate itself.

**Moreover, widely covered clashes resulting from the refusal of some members of New York's ultra-Orthodox communities to comply with efforts to contain the spread of COVID-19 have promoted a backlash that in some instances echo conspiracy theories** and show signs of anti-Semitic hate and generalization. Some Jewish groups warned of the ease with which venomous sentiment is directed towards the ultra-Orthodox community; for example, [this](#) Zioness post calling attention to the tendency of progressive Jews to comfortable single out and generalize about the ultra-Orthodox community, and an [op-ed](#) by Jonathan Greenblatt and Devorah Halberstam urging against the blaming of the community for disease and warning of the ease with which the kinds of words being used could snowball into anti-Semitism.

## FIGHTING ANTI-SEMITISM ON SOCIAL MEDIA

The past two weeks saw positive developments following a spike of attention in recent months to the importance of social media platform regulation of anti-Semitic expression:

- The [YouTube](#) decision to remove the Nation of Islam from its platform represents progress in combating the mainstreaming of deeply anti-Semitic thought into the left. While the Nation of Islam is not considered a bastion of progressivism, its intersection with key figures that emerged in the ‘resistance’ against Trump (notably Tamika Mallory and Carmen Perez), and the positioning of the movement within the Black right’s struggle, render it a significant force with potential to influence progressive thought.
- Facebook cited a recent survey that found that nearly a quarter of American adults ages 18 to 39 believed the Holocaust either was a myth or was exaggerated or they weren’t sure whether it happened, as influencing its [decision](#) to ban content that “denies or distorts the Holocaust.” It also [announced](#) a decision to remove any group, page, or Instagram account openly identifying with QAnon.