

Introduction: Special Issue on Jewish Demography in the United States

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Social scientists played a prominent role in the 2012 United States presidential campaign, both advising candidates on strategy for engaging their base and developing widely discussed narratives about the race between President Obama and his Republican challenger, Mitt Romney. One of the most influential narrators was a statistical analyst, Nate Silver, a columnist and blogger for the *New York Times*. His blog, *FiveThirtyEight* (<http://fivethirtyeight.blogs.nytimes.com/author/nate-silver/>), provided statistical summaries and analyzed poll data about the presidential race. Along with the poll data, Silver gave probability estimates of the likelihood of each candidate winning. Although routinely excoriated by advocates for candidates who appeared to be losing, his predictions of the election outcome proved to be highly accurate. His methods, as well as his approach to reporting on surveys, are relevant to our study of the socio-demographic state of American Jews.

Key to Silver's approach, developed in his recent book, *The Signal and the Noise: Why So Many Predictions Fail—But Some Don't* (2012) is acknowledging the complexity and the difficulty of predictions. Even with the aid of statistics, prediction of societal trends is difficult. Good prediction is the result of both theory and data, usually multiple forms of data. Silver's cautionary approach is especially relevant in the case of "predicting" the Jewish population of the United States. Because of the nature of Jewish identity—as a religious-ethnic identity that is both ascribed and achieved—as well as the small number of Jews relative to the overall population, US Jews are difficult to locate and track over time. The challenge for socio-demographers of American Jewry is to use survey data and other sources to

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