

Conservative Jewry in the United States: Evolution Through Denominational Switching¹

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Denominational identification is a prominent feature of the American Jewish community. Yet, a major characteristic of American religious life generally and of Judaism has been the ease with which individuals can move from one denomination to another and, indeed, from one religion to another (Roof, 1993). This high degree of religious fluidity parallels the social and geographic mobility that are also characteristic of the American and the Jewish populations (Goldstein and Goldstein, 1996). America's changing religious profile and the shifting denominational composition of specific religious groups thus often mirror other changes in the social and demographic characteristics of the country's population, especially the extent to which immigrant groups and their descendants assimilate to the larger society.

That the organization of American Judaism is no exception is clear from the changing size and composition of the Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Reform movements. They have grown or declined not only as a result of natural increase and the influx of newcomers through immigration and conversion, or the loss of some affiliates to other religions or secularism, but also because of exchanges among the denominations.

Especially important is the decline in the attractiveness of more traditional ideologies and practices, and the extent to which children reared in a particular denomination by their parent(s) remain identified with that denomination as adults or whether they switch to another denomination, become non-denominational, or in some instances reject their Jewish identity entirely. Factors contributing to denominational switching include marriage between persons raised in different denominations, becoming a Jew by choice, and location in areas where institutions associated with the preferred denomination are either not available or easily accessible physically and/or financially. Social pressures by peers, colleagues, family, and neighbors may also contribute to denominational switching. For some, efforts to achieve upward mobility may be a motive. And among older parents a change in denomination may stem from the desire to worship with adult children and with grandchildren who changed denomination earlier. Departures from the

¹ An expanded version of this paper appears in Goldstein and Goldstein (1998). Fuller documentation for textual references in this paper to switching between Conservative Jewry and specific other denominations (when data are not presented) can be found in that chapter.

Jewish fold to adopt the non-Jewish religion of a spouse among the mixed married may also impinge on the size of particular denominations.

Because just over one-third of Jewish Americans identify as Conservative, the movement constitutes a critical dimension in the vitality of American Judaism as a whole, especially given its status as the centrist denomination. Conservative Judaism evolved over a century ago in response to the need to integrate the waves of East European immigrants into American life while enabling them to maintain their sense of ethnic and religious identity (Sklare, 1972). The new movement was particularly important as the immigrants moved out of their initial areas of settlement into second and then third areas located toward the peripheries of cities. Conservatism responded not only to their increasing Americanization, but also to the changing class status of the second generation as they left their working class origins and became business owners/managers and professionals. Conservative Judaism was designed to preserve traditional Judaism but in a form modified to fit more closely to American styles of worship and to be responsive to general societal changes. The growth of the movement, as well as of Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism, within the framework of American Jewry as a whole testifies to the exceptional freedom that America has offered Jews to determine the content and form of their religious practices and behavior.

Since its inception, Conservative Judaism's response to the larger society within which it operates has led to changes in some of its religious positions as well as its organizational format. By mid-century, it had developed religious schools to reinforce social and religious programs among the youth and to provide a cadre of future adherents. Congregations had also expanded their activities to encompass not only worship and education, but also opportunities for association and voluntarism similar to that of non-sectarian organizations. Ramah camps and a growing number of day schools helped to strengthen the sense of Conservative Judaism as a movement among the laity.

Nonetheless, the earlier contradictions between official Conservative ideology and individual observance persisted. Assimilation posed an increasing threat to continuity, and the appeal of Conservative Judaism to younger Jews has become questionable. In the large metropolitan centers a significant number of Jews identified themselves as "Conservative" but remained unaffiliated. The movement's constituency has also changed, reflecting both general socio-demographic changes in the larger American population and the flow into and out of the denomination of selected segments of Jews. It is this latter change that is the focus of this paper.

Cognizant of the need for a thorough reassessment of Conservative Judaism at the end of the twentieth century, the Jewish Theological Seminary's Ratner Center for the Study of Conservative Judaism, with funding from The Pew Charitable Trust, has undertaken a broad, multifaceted study of the movement (Wertheimer et al, 1997a, 1997b). The study's overall emphasis is on understanding what contributes to success in fostering a strong commitment to Conservative Judaism. Part of that project has been the investigation of the socio-demographic profile of Conservative Jewry in the United States (Goldstein and Goldstein, 1998), of which the current analysis of switching is one segment.

Data Source

Our study used the data collected as part of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS-1990) to examine the characteristics and behavior of Conservative Jews. The national representativeness of the NJPS-1990 data, based on completed interviews in 2,441 households (Kosmin et al, 1991; Goldstein, 1992), allowed comparisons of the Conservative population with those identifying with other denominations or with no denomination.

The NJPS-1990 data have the great advantage of covering both persons who are both affiliated and unaffiliated with synagogues/temples. Most studies of a particular denomination, including earlier studies of Conservative Judaism and other segments of the JTS study, have relied almost exclusively on information provided by synagogues or by respondents drawn from synagogue membership lists. This means that with affiliation rates at a low 41 percent nationally, a large segment of the population who identify themselves as adherents of a denomination are overlooked. Any comprehensive analysis of the members of a denomination must include both those formally affiliated and those who identify with the movement but are unaffiliated. The data from NJPS-1990 allow such comparisons.

NJPS-1990 included a core set of questions on current and earlier denominational identity. Used together with the wide array of information collected on other demographic, economic, and social variables as well as on behavioral and attitudinal indicators of Jewish identity, this data set offers the best opportunity yet available to assess switching into and out of Conservative Jewry and other denominations nationally. (See Lazerwitz, et al, 1997 for assessment of denominational switching among all segments of American Jewry. Also see Lazerwitz, 1979 and Rebhun, 1993).

In this paper, we use the NJPS data first to describe briefly the denominational composition of American Jews, and then to assess the switching that has occurred into and out of Conservative Jewry in particular. In doing so, we use the rich array of background data collected by NJPS-1990 in conjunction with the information on current denomination of the respondent and the denomination in which the respondent was raised. We can thus compare the current characteristics and behavior of those who joined and left Conservative Jewry with those who did not change their Conservative affiliation. Moreover, because the NJPS sample encompassed both respondents who were currently Jewish and respondents who were either born to Jewish parents or raised Jewish even though not professing to be Jewish in 1990, the analysis allows attention to movement into and out of the Conservative movement both of Jews by choice and of individuals who, although raised as Conservative Jews, no longer consider themselves Jewish.

Despite the strengths of NJPS-1990, we must recognize that a full assessment of the socio-demographic and economic characteristics of Conservative Jewry and other Jewish denominations in the United States and of the impact of switching on each denomination's characteristics requires far more data than are available from an omnibus study such as NJPS-1990. Three particular caveats are necessary: First, denominational identification was self ascribed and not determined on the basis of any cluster of practices that might be thought to identify that denomination. Second, the survey does not allow us to determine when the switch

occurred or why. Third, the NJPS data are limited to adult Jews who were living in 1990 and do not, therefore, present a fully accurate cross-section of the denominational affiliation of Jews at any given time in the past. Within these limitations, the data point to substantial changes in the denominational identity of currently Conservative Jews.

Magnitude and Direction of Change

In 1990, 36 percent of adult Jewish Americans identified as Conservative Jews. Conservative Jewry was thus the second largest denomination, exceeded slightly by Reform Jews who accounted for 38 percent. Constituting a small minority in 1990 was the Orthodox population, at only 6 percent. In fact, Orthodox Jews were slightly outnumbered by both the 10 percent who regarded themselves as Just Jewish and the 9 percent classified as Other. Reconstructionist Jews were only a little more than 1 percent of all Jews.

The largest proportion of adult core Jews were raised as Conservative (34 percent); just over one-quarter were raised as Reform Jews and approximately another one-quarter as Orthodox Jews (Table 1). Only 8 percent reported being raised as Just Jewish, 6 percent as Other, and 3 percent as non-Jews.² A comparison of the denominational profile of adult Jews in 1990 with the denomination in which they were raised as children shows that the proportion of Conservative Jews among all American Jews has changed minimally, remaining just over one-third of the total. By contrast, the Orthodox population experienced a sharp decline, while the proportion of Reform Jews increased. Since this realignment occurred within the lifetime of the surveyed individuals, it points to substantial shifting in denominational identity. In fact, the relative stability in the proportion that Conservative Jews constitute of the total is misleading since it is the end result of specific individuals switching in and out of the denomination, with the gains and losses largely cancelling each other out.

The degree of switching can be understood better by examining the denominations in which those defining themselves as Conservative in 1990 were raised (Figure 1). Only about six in ten currently Conservative Jews were also raised in that denomination. Thus, four in ten adults who were Conservative in 1990 were drawn from other denominations, the non-denominational, or from non-Jews. The pattern is very similar for Reform Jewry. Among the currently Orthodox Jews, however, the large majority (89 percent) had been raised in that denomination. These data thus point to the importance of denominational switching in the growth of the Conservative and Reform movements. Where did the switchers to Conservative Judaism come from and where did those who left the movement go?

In total, about 1,644,700 adults indicated that they had been raised as Conservative Jews; of these, 916,800, almost six in ten, still identified with Conservative Judaism in 1990.

² The percentage raised as non-Jews is well below the intermarriage rate because these data are based on respondents, and the survey preferred respondents who were identified currently as Jewish.

TABLE 1. CURRENT DENOMINATION BY DENOMINATION RAISED OF ADULT CORE JEWS, 1990^a

Denomination raised	Current Denomination					Total
	Conservative	Orthodox	Reform	Reconstructionist	Just Jewish	
Column percents						
Conservative	58.0	3.0	24.2	45.4	17.4	33.9
Orthodox	32.5	88.9	11.8	15.6	14.4	23.4
Reform	3.9	0.7	55.5	17.5	13.2	26.2
Just Jewish	1.6	3.4	3.3	16.1	48.7	7.7
Other	2.5	2.5	2.2	5.4	4.2	6.0
Non-Jewish	1.5	1.5	3.0	—	2.1	2.8
Total Percent	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Row percents						
Conservative	60.9	0.5	27.3	1.9	5.1	4.4
Orthodox	49.4	23.2	19.3	0.9	6.1	1.0
Reform	5.3	0.2	80.9	0.9	5.0	7.7
Just Jewish	7.4	2.8	16.0	0.9	63.9	8.9
Other	15.1	2.5	13.8	1.3	6.9	60.3
Non-Jewish	18.4	3.3	41.0	—	7.1	30.2
Total	35.7	6.1	38.2	1.4	9.8	8.8

a. Excludes those of unknown denomination raised.

Of the estimated 650,900 Conservative adults who were not raised as Conservative Jews, the greatest number, some 492,400 — three of every four of the in-switchers (Table 2) — had had an Orthodox upbringing; they thereby went from a more to a somewhat less traditional orientation. Only 63,400 — 10 percent of the switchers to Conservative Judaism — were drawn from Reform Judaism. The small remainder were drawn from those indicating a Just Jewish or non-Jewish upbringing and from the heterogeneous Other group.

Some 727,900 adults who had been raised as Conservative Jews had switched to another denomination or to another religion. The largest number who switched out of Conservative Judaism became Reform Jews (429,100), almost 60 percent of the out-switchers. Thus, just as Conservative Jewry attracted the largest number from the more traditional Orthodox adherents, it lost the greatest number to the less traditional Reform movement, reflecting the general shift of American Jewry from more to less traditional religious orientations and practices. Consistent with this trend, 11 percent of the switchers from Conservative Judaism became Just Jewish and another 10 percent identified as Other. Only 2 percent moved in the more traditional direction, to Orthodox Judaism. About 4 percent became Reconstructionist Jews. Especially striking is the 13 percent of out-switchers who were raised as Conservative Jews but by 1990 identified as Protestant or Catholic.

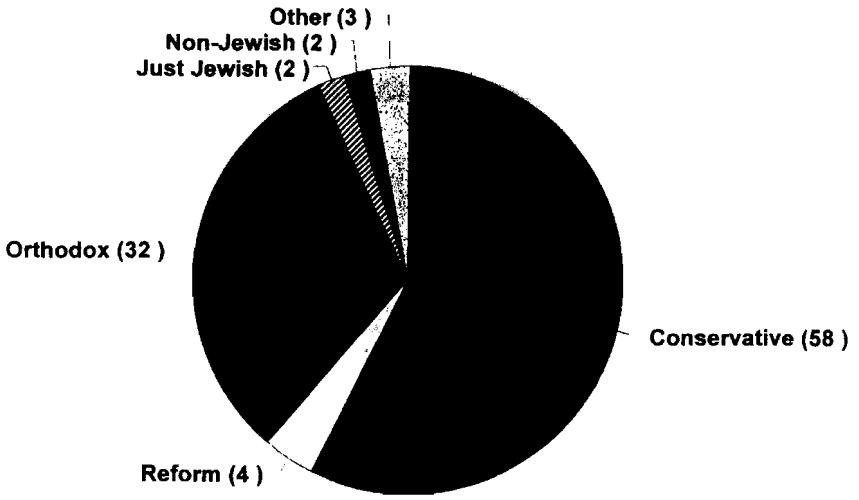
TABLE 2. MOVEMENT INTO AND OUT OF CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM OF ADULT RESPONDENTS

Denomination/Religion Raised Compared to Current Denomination/Religion	Estimated Population	Percent Distribution of Gain/Loss	Net Gain/Loss
No change	916,770		
To Conservative from:			
Orthodox	492,400	75.6	+477,400
Reform	63,400	9.8	-65,700
Just Jewish	23,400	3.6	-9,900
Other	43,700	6.7	-2,600
Non-Jewish	28,000	4.3	-5,100
Total Gain	650,900	100.0	
From Conservative to:			
Orthodox	15,000	2.1	+477,400
Reform	429,100	58.9	-65,700
Reconstructionist	31,100	4.3	-1,100
Just Jewish	83,300	11.4	-9,900
Other	76,300	10.5	-2,600
Non-Jewish	93,100	12.8	-5,100
Total Loss	727,900	100.0	
Net change			-7,000
Total current Conservative population	1,588,100^a		

a. Includes about 20,000 for whom information on denomination raised is unknown.

FIGURE 1. PATTERNS OF SWITCHING INTO AND OUT OF CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM (PERCENTAGES)

A. Denomination Raised of Adults Who Are Currently Conservative Jews:



B. Current Denomination of Adults Raised as Conservative Jews:

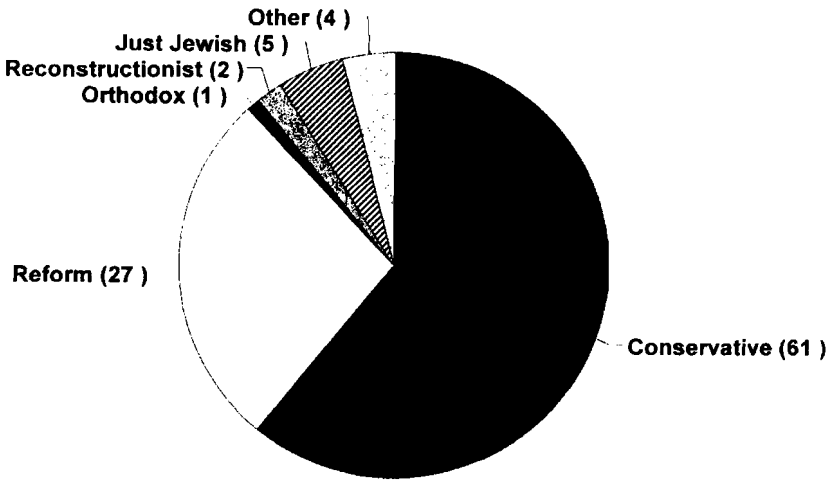
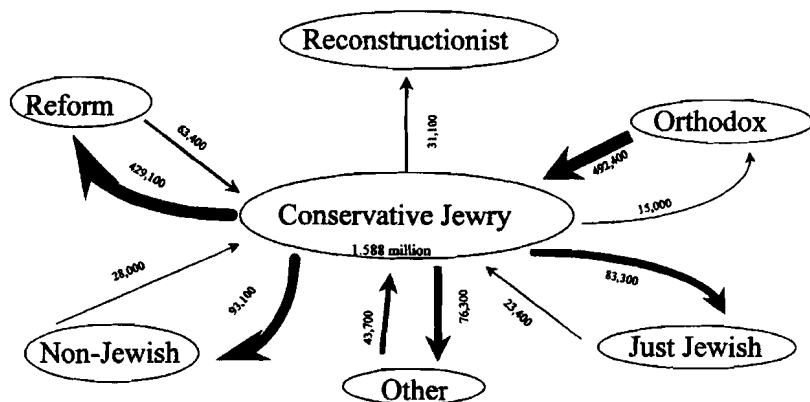


FIGURE 2. DENOMINATIONAL FLOWS INTO AND OUT OF CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM

The large exodus from the movement means that the substantial gains made from Orthodox Judaism were cancelled out (Figure 2): Conservative Judaism actually experienced a small net loss of an estimated 77,000 persons over the course of the lifetime of the respondents encompassed in NJPS-1990, largely to the Reform movement. This net loss, resulting from a very high volume of switching, explains why the proportion of Conservative Jews in the total Jewish American population has remained quite stable at just over one-third. By contrast, the number of Orthodox Jews has declined by about 731,000 adherents, or 73 percent, from the approximately one million adults who reported they had been raised Orthodox (Goldstein, 1992:132). The number of Reform Jews grew by about 533,000 persons, or 46 percent from the 1,170,000 raised Reform.

In view of the small pool of Orthodox population in the United States in 1990, and because a substantial part of that pool is either strongly committed to Orthodox Judaism or elderly, the Conservative movement can no longer look to Orthodox Jewry as a source of "replenishment" of the losses it sustains to denominations on its left. Rather, to remain stable, and especially to grow, it must develop an internal dynamism to retain those raised as Conservative Jews and to attract Reform and Reconstructionist Jews and/or those not currently identified with a denomination. Failure to do so will lead to declining numbers.

Socioeconomic Characteristics of Switchers

The extensive turnover in the Conservative population argues for better understanding of the characteristics of those who have left the movement, those who have joined it, and those who stayed. We assume that these three groups differ in their sociodemographic profile and religious practices and that the characteristics of the Conservative population identified for 1990 are quite different from what they might have been if no switching had occurred. Our

assessment therefore will determine how the characteristics of those Conservative Jews moving to and from other denominations (switchers) compare to those raised and remaining Conservative (stayers). In undertaking this evaluation, we stress that the characteristics refer to 1990, the year of the survey, and do not necessarily reflect conditions at the time the switching occurred; in fact, we do not know when the actual change in denominational identity took place or under what circumstances; we have information only on denomination in which the respondent was raised and denomination at the time of the survey.

Age

The 1990 age profile of persons who had switched to Conservative Judaism is considerably older than that of Conservative stayers (Table 3 and Figure 2); 43 percent of the in-switchers were age 65 and over in 1990 compared to only one in five of the stayers. Much of this differential reflects the considerably older composition of the large number of switchers from Orthodox Judaism, of whom over half were age 65 and over in 1990. This differential suggests that switching from Orthodox to Conservative occurred some time ago. Much of it may have involved the children of late 19th and early 20th century immigrants who were raised in the traditions of their parents, but who were attracted to the more modern and "American" style of the Conservative movement once they formed their own households. By contrast, the numerically smaller group of switchers from Reform to Conservative Judaism were much younger than the Orthodox switchers and even somewhat younger than the Conservative stayers; only 19 percent were elderly. Only 12 percent of all those who switched to Conservative Judaism were under age 35 compared to 32 percent of the Conservative stayers.

TABLE 3. CHANGES IN DENOMINATIONAL IDENTIFICATION OF ADULTS MOVING INTO AND OUT OF CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM, BY AGE, LIFE-CYCLE STAGE, AND GENERATION STATUS

	No change	To Conservative	From Conservative
Current age			
18-24	9.3	2.1	4.9
25-34	22.9	10.4	19.9
35-44	26.0	18.8	31.4
45-64	21.8	25.4	28.3
65 and over	20.0	43.3	15.6
Total percent	100.0	100.0	100.0
Median age	48.7	59.7	44.3
Life-cycle stage			
One person <45	14.5	4.1	6.8
One person 45+	11.5	23.5	7.7
Adults only	28.2	40.0	33.6
With children <15	27.1	19.0	34.6
With children 15+	18.7	13.4	17.2
Generation status			
4 grandparents US-born	11.0	12.1	64.9
No grandparents US-born	58.5	75.0	9.3

How do these age profiles compare with those who left the Conservative movement? Only 16 percent of the out-switchers were age 65 and over, far fewer than the 43 percent who switched in and even fewer than the 20 percent of the stayers. Three in every five of the out-switchers were age 35–64 in 1990, compared to only 44 percent of the in-switchers and 48 percent of the stayers. And, compared to the in-switchers, twice as many of the out-switchers (one-in-four) were age 18–34, somewhat below the proportion of stayers who were in this young group. Interestingly, more of those who switched to Reconstructionist Judaism and Just Jewish were under age 35 (about 40 percent) than those who became Reform Jews.

On balance, the cumulative effect of switching in and out of Conservative Judaism is an aging of the Conservative population. Almost three times as many joiners as leavers were, by 1990, elderly. The higher average age of the adult joiners (59.7 years) compared to the lower average age of both the leavers (44.3) and the stayers (48.7) has had the net result of raising the average age of the 1990 adult Conservative population.

Life-cycle Stage

Family life-cycle stage is highly correlated with age of respondent. Not surprisingly, therefore, a disproportionately large number of switchers to Conservative Judaism were in 1990 either members of adults-only units or persons age 45 and over living by themselves (64 percent in all); only 32 percent were units that included children, somewhat more of them with children under age 15. This contrasts with only 40 percent of the stayers who were in units consisting of adults only or persons age 45 and over living alone. Almost 46 percent of the stayers were in units with children.

The impact of age is also apparent in the family composition of those who shifted out of Conservative Judaism: only 41 percent were either in adults-only units or, to a far lesser extent, persons age 45 and over living alone. More of the out-switchers (52 percent) were in units with children, and of these many more had children under age 15.

While these data refer to life-cycle stage in 1990 rather than at the time of switching, they do point to selective in- and out-movement to and from Conservative Judaism of persons with different family situations. On balance, the movement has lost more persons at early stages of the life cycle and gained more who in 1990 were in adults-only units or older persons living alone.

Generation Status

Denominational identity is correlated with generation status, in large part reflecting the earlier noted differences in age composition (Goldstein, 1992); more Orthodox Jews are foreign-born and more Reform Jews have all four of their grandparents born in the United States. Conservative Jews are intermediary. Even with age controlled, this relation holds. Given this pattern of generational variations, we expect that persons who joined Conservative Jewry from Orthodox Judaism would be closer to their immigrant roots than would be switchers from Reform or even Conservative stayers. Conversely, more of those who have left Conservative Judaism for less traditional groups would more likely be "more American." The data generally support such a thesis.

Of all those who switched to Conservative Judaism, three-fourths had no American-born grandparents. Only 12 percent had all four of their grandparents born in the United States. This contrasts with the 58 percent of the stayers who had no American-born grandparents; the percent of stayers with four US-born grandparents (11 percent) closely resembles that of the in-switchers.

Almost the reverse pattern characterizes those who left the Conservative movement. A large majority (65 percent) were persons with all four grandparents born in the United States, that is, third or higher generation Americans. Only 9 percent of the out-switchers had four foreign-born grandparents. Generation status is thus a key factor associated with the loss of persons raised as Conservative Jews to less traditional denominations or to the non-denominational categories.

Overall, the cumulative net impact of switching has been to produce a Conservative Jewry that is more heavily first and second generation. This suggests that, in the absence of changes that would make Conservative Judaism more attractive to higher generation Americans and thereby reverse this pattern of switching, Conservative Jewry runs the risk of continuing to lose members as Jews become increasingly American, as indexed by generation status.

Educational and Occupational Composition

Is the shift into and from Conservative Jewry selective of persons in different social classes as indexed by education and occupation? Probably reflecting a combination of the older age and generational composition of the Orthodox switchers to Conservative Jewry, more in-switchers than stayers had no more than a high school education, and fewer had either a college or post-graduate education (Table 4).

TABLE 4. CHANGES IN DENOMINATIONAL IDENTIFICATION OF ADULTS MOVING INTO AND OUT OF CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM, BY EDUCATION AND OCCUPATION

	No change	To Conservative	From Conservative
Education			
High school or less	26.8	34.6	22.6
College	44.3	39.9	49.2
Post-graduate	28.9	25.5	28.2
Total percent	100.0	100.0	100.0
Occupation (for those in labor force only)			
Professional	40.6	38.9	34.0
Manager	19.1	15.9	13.4
Clerical/Sales	27.1	35.7	37.4
Blue collar	13.2	9.5	15.2
Total percent	100.0	100.0	100.0

The losses through out-switching had the reverse effect, however. Whereas 27 percent of the stayers had no more than a high school education, this was true of only 23 percent of those who have left Conservative Jewry. Almost four in five out-switchers had at least some college education and 28 percent had post-graduate schooling. On balance, therefore, switching somewhat lowered the overall educational profile of Conservative Jews.

A somewhat different pattern emerges from the comparison of the occupational composition of switchers and stayers.³ The switchers into Conservative Judaism generally resemble the stayers in the proportion of professionals and managerial persons among them; but the in-switchers have more lower white collar workers, and the stayers have somewhat more manual laborers. Compared to those who had switched into Conservative Jewry, fewer of the switchers to other groups were professionals or managers; slightly more of those switching out were lower white collar workers, and considerably more were manual workers. Overall, switching into and out of Conservative Judaism has, on balance, had little effect on the occupational profile of Conservative Jews.

Region of Residence

More Conservative Jews in the United States live in the Northeast than in any other region (Goldstein and Goldstein, 1998). Is this pattern replicated among both stayers and switchers? The 1990 regional distribution of those switching to Conservative Judaism, mainly persons of Orthodox origin, very closely resembles that of the stayers, with both groups largely concentrated in the Northeast (39 percent of the switchers and 45 percent of the stayers) (Table 5). This is followed by a secondary, but substantially smaller, concentration in the South (29 percent of switchers and 24 percent of stayers). The least numerous group among those switching to Conservative Judaism lived in the Midwest, but their percentage was almost equally matched by the stayers. A close similarity characterized the regional distribution of the in-switchers and stayers in the West. The regional distribution of those who left the Conservative movement is virtually the same as the stayers, suggesting that region of residence per se is not associated with switching away from identifying as Conservative.

On balance, the regional distributions in 1990 of the in- and out-switchers point to a slight change in the distribution of Conservative Jews among the regions of the United States. More of the leavers lived in the Northeast and more of the joiners in the South, but minimal differences characterized the proportions of in- and out-switchers in the Midwest and West. The net impact of switching per se may have helped to make the Conservative population somewhat more widely distributed across the United States, but clearly other forces largely account for the regional redistribution of the Conservative population.

³ The comparison is restricted to persons in the labor force at the time of the survey. The data are not disaggregated by sex because of the limited number of cases.

TABLE 5. CHANGES IN DENOMINATIONAL IDENTIFICATION OF ADULTS MOVING INTO AND OUT OF CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM, BY REGION OF CURRENT RESIDENCE AND LIFETIME MIGRATION STATUS

	No change	To Conservative	From Conservative
Region of current residence			
Northeast	44.9	39.2	44.3
Midwest	11.2	10.4	10.1
South	24.4	29.0	24.2
West	19.4	21.4	21.4
Total Percent	100.0	100.0	100.0
Lifetime migration status			
Migrated	83.2	82.6	83.8
Interstate migrant	52.8	56.6	50.4
Interregional migrant	35.9	44.9	35.9

Lifetime Migration

The reasons for changing denomination undoubtedly vary considerably from individual to individual, sometimes being based on changing ideological orientations, but more often on the impact of peers or conditions associated with life cycle events such as marriage. Still another factor may be geographic mobility. Movement away from locations with particular denominational institutions may lead to a change in denomination for those persons whose ties to a particular denomination are weak. For some, a change in denomination may actually stimulate a move as individuals seek an environment more compatible with their religious outlook. For others, denominational identity may in fact preclude mobility, or at least limit the choice of destination. Observant Orthodox and Conservative Jews, more so than less traditional Jews, generally require relatively easy access to such facilities as kosher butchers, synagogues, Jewish schools, and a mikveh. These needs limit the communities and even the neighborhoods in which they can live.

For the core Jewish population as a whole, although not with total consistency, switching denomination was found to be associated with both higher levels of migration and greater involvement in interstate and interregional movement (Goldstein and Goldstein, 1996:180–184). Is there any evidence that those Conservative Jews who were raised in another denomination or who left Conservative Judaism differ in their mobility patterns from each other and from those who have remained within the Conservative group? Since we do not know when changes in denomination occurred, we focus here on lifetime migration patterns rather than on short-term movement.

Our discussion will particularly consider distance of movement. We do so by comparing the percent of switchers and stayers who have migrated at all (including intrastate migrants), those who have moved interstate, and those who moved interregionally (Table 5). Since our concern is with the relation between shifting

denomination and the redistribution of Conservative Jews within the United States, we omit the foreign born.

Indicative of the generally high mobility levels, over eight in ten American-born Conservative stayers had migrated beyond their community of birth by 1990; over half were living in a different state than that in which they were born; and 36 percent were living in a different region. How did the mobility patterns of the switchers to and from Conservative Judaism compare with that of the stayers?

Almost the same proportion of stayers and of those switching to Conservative Judaism had changed community of residence, just over eight in ten. Compared to the stayers, somewhat more of the switchers had moved interstate, but the largest differential was in the percent of in-switchers who had migrated interregionally, 45 percent compared to 36 percent of the stayers. Clearly, for these in-switchers, migration was associated with shifts among the various regions of the country. The lifetime migration experience of those raised as Conservative Jews who switched out was virtually the same as that of the Conservative stayers with respect to all levels of migration. This suggests that factors other than migration largely explain the shift of Conservative Jews to other denominational groups.

For Conservative Jews, the relation between denominational switching and migration is thus not consistent for all categories of switchers. It depends on the direction of denominational change and also on the specific denominations involved. For most Conservative Jews, geographic mobility, as it relates to denominational change, is undoubtedly part of a larger social mobility complex that involves alterations in an array of social, economic, and contextual characteristics, among which religious concerns do not seem to play a dominant role in the decision-making process.

Jewish Identificational Characteristics of Switchers

Our analysis of the socioeconomic differentials among in- and out-switchers and stayers has indicated that the most salient characteristic is age and those other characteristics (life-cycle stage and generation status) that are most closely related to age. Other factors do not show as strong or consistent a pattern to denominational change. But in any assessment of denominational switching and of the changing profiles of the various denominations, the Judaic component and behavior of the stayers and the switchers is especially important. Our attention therefore turns to Jewish identificational characteristics to determine if switching has affected the Judaic profile of the Conservative population. For this analysis, we use synagogue membership, Jewish education, ritual practices, and intermarriage as indicators.

Household Synagogue Membership

Among all respondents who identified themselves as Conservative Jews, 46 percent reported that they personally or other members of their household were affiliated with a synagogue or temple. This contrasts with only 39 percent of the Conservative stayers, suggesting that the higher rate for the total group is a function of higher membership rates among switchers into the movement. The data support this assumption (Table 6). Just under half of all in-switchers were synagogue members, serving to raise the overall level characterizing the

Conservative group. Apparently, the motivation to join Conservative Judaism involves a stronger than average commitment to involvement in a synagogue.

In sharp contrast, out-switchers from Conservative Judaism have much lower rates of membership than in-switchers. Just under one-quarter of those shifting out of Conservative Jewry were members of households affiliated with a synagogue, far below the level characterizing Conservative in-switchers and even substantially lower than the stayers. As expected, far fewer of the former Conservative respondents who reported themselves as Just Jewish, hardly any of the Other, and none of those who had become non-Jewish belonged to a synagogue/temple in 1990.

Switching therefore seems to work as a filtering process with respect to synagogue/temple affiliation rates. Those who switch in are twice as affiliated (49 percent) as those who leave (24 percent). The net effect is a higher level of membership. Because of the limited reservoir of Orthodox Jews who might switch to Conservative Judaism in future years, other things being equal, Conservative membership rates may decline unless the movement is successful in raising the affiliation of its stayer constituency.

TABLE 6. CHANGES IN DENOMINATIONAL IDENTIFICATION OF ADULTS MOVING INTO AND OUT OF CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM, BY JEWISH IDENTIFICATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

	No change	To Conservative	From Conservative
% Synagogue members	38.7	49.3	24.0
Jewish education			
None	31.9	24.6	33.6
Low	9.6	12.8	15.3
Medium	29.8	28.4	30.9
High	28.7	34.2	20.2
Total percent	100.0	100.0	100.0
Ritual index			
None	11.1	9.2	18.3
Low	27.3	17.3	39.0
Medium	41.0	45.1	34.0
High	20.6	28.4	8.6
Total percent	100.0	100.0	100.0
Intermarriage			
In-marriage	69.3	72.2	44.4
Conversionary	4.8	12.6	5.3
Mixed	25.9	15.2	50.3
Total percent	100.0	100.0	100.0

Jewish Education

The overall Jewish educational level of Conservative Jewry has been raised slightly by the influx of so many persons raised as Orthodox Jews. Whereas 58 percent of the stayers in Conservative Judaism had either a medium or high level of Jewish education, 63 percent of those switching from other groups did. Virtually all of the differential was concentrated in the high education category and attributable to joiners from Orthodox Judaism, but even the small influx from Reform Judaism brought persons with more Jewish education than the Conservative stayers. By contrast, fewer in-switchers than Conservative stayers had no Jewish education, again pointing to the richer educational resources the switchers brought to the Conservative population.

This reinforcement was enhanced by the fact that many of those leaving Conservative Judaism tended to be somewhat less Jewishly educated than the stayers. Only 51 percent of the out-switchers were in the medium or high-level categories, compared to 58 percent of the stayers; more of the out-switchers had either no Jewish education or only a low level.

Together these profiles of the Jewish educational levels of switchers to and from Conservative Judaism suggest that the movement has benefited on balance by the attraction of persons with higher than average Jewish education. At the same time, as evidenced by the lower educational level of those leaving Conservative Jewry, the movement seems to have had greater success in retaining a higher percentage of Conservative Jews with more Jewish education. This suggests the important role of Jewish education in developing closer identity with Conservative Judaism. At the same time, it emphasizes, as did the data on synagogue membership, that, in the absence of future large shifts from Orthodox Jewry, improvements in the educational levels of Conservative Jews will depend largely on the movement's success in educating its own members — children and adults — and in continuing to attract those from other denominations who have higher levels of Jewish education.

Ritual Observance

Conservative Jews are intermediary between Orthodox and Reform in their level of ritual observance, as shown by the Ritual Index.⁴ One-quarter of Conservative Jews had high levels of observance and another 41 percent scored in the medium category. Conservative stayers scored somewhat lower on the Ritual Index than the total Conservative population.

Persons joining Conservative Judaism raised the level of observance of all Conservative Jews. About 28 percent of those who became Conservative Jews, mainly consisting of those switching from Orthodox Judaism, scored high, compared to only one-fifth of the Conservative stayers; more of the in-switchers were also in the medium category (45 percent compared to 41 percent of stayers). Only 26 percent of the in-switchers reported no or low levels of observance, compared to 38 percent of those raised and remaining Conservative Jews. The in-

⁴ The Ritual Index is a composite score of the frequency of lighting Shabbat candles and Hanukkah candles, maintaining Kashrut, attending a Seder, and fasting on Yom Kippur. See Goldstein and Goldstein (1996).

switchers have clearly brought a stronger commitment to observance than that held by the stayers whom they joined.

Interestingly, even more of those joining Conservative Judaism from a Reform or Just Jewish origin (data not shown here) scored high or medium on the Ritual Index, and fewer fell into one of the two lower level groups. They evidently were attracted by the greater traditionalism in observance of the Conservative movement. This is similar to their higher levels of synagogue membership compared to Conservative stayers.

Those switching out of Conservative Judaism consist clearly of persons who place less value on ritual observance. Among the leavers, only 9 percent scored high. Over half (57 percent) of the out-switchers scored low or none. This pattern is almost identical to that of the Reform population as a whole, with whom a large majority of the out-switchers identify.

Not surprisingly, those Conservative Jews who became Just Jewish or Other, and especially those who became non-Jewish, were the least observant; as many as three-fourths of the switchers to Just Jewish and 95 percent of those shifting to Other scored either none or low, as did 86 percent of those becoming non-Jewish. As one might expect, observance of Hanukkah and attendance at Seder remain rituals observed by some of the respondents in these categories. Evidently, even among those becoming non-Jewish, family ties lead to some observance of Jewish ritual.

In sum, these data show that the level of ritual observance among Conservative Jews as a whole benefited from the influx of switchers from other groups. By contrast, those leaving Conservative Judaism were generally less observant, or at least became less observant, than the stayers upon joining another denomination or giving up their denominational identity. As with synagogue membership and Jewish education, selective switching constitutes an important factor affecting the ritual practices and Judaic profile of Conservative Jews.

Intermarriage

To the extent that the rate of intermarriage varies among denominations, being higher among the less traditional and lower among the more traditional, we would expect that fewer of the persons joining Conservative Judaism and more of those leaving would be intermarried. Switching to Reform Judaism might have a particularly strong appeal to the intermarried because that denomination recognizes Jewish patrilineal descent, allowing any children of mixed marriages to be considered Jewish if they are raised Jewishly. Reform congregations have also had a more active outreach program to the mixed married. We expect many of those shifting to Conservative Judaism from the Other group (which includes former non-Jews) to be Jews by choice, with many in a conversionary marriage. Conversely, a large proportion of those leaving Conservative Judaism, especially to become Just Jewish or Other, are likely to be in a mixed marriage. Overall, the data support such expectations, but again, it is important to remember that they do not allow us to determine when the switching occurred or whether it was in conjunction with marriage.

Of those raised as Conservative Jews and still Conservative, about seven in ten were in-married, and another 5 percent were in conversionary marriages. Yet,

indicative of the rising levels of intermarriage, as many as 26 percent were in mixed marriages. By contrast, more of the switchers to Conservative Judaism were in-married or in conversionary marriages, 85 percent in all. This included 79 percent of those shifting from Orthodox Judaism and 83 percent of the small number moving from Reform Judaism (data not shown in table). The Other category had a small proportion of in-married, only 17 percent, but 62 percent were in conversionary marriages, confirming the earlier expectation. The fact that as many as 12 percent of all in-switchers were in conversionary marriages, three times as many as among the stayers, points to the growing importance of conversion as a source of new recruits to Conservative Judaism.

A very different pattern emerges for those who have switched out of Conservative Judaism. Compared to the 72 percent of joiners who were in-married, only 44 percent of those leaving Conservative Judaism had in-married; half were in mixed marriages, reflecting the high proportions of out-switchers to Just Jewish and Other groups who were in such marriages at the time of the survey. Two-thirds of the switchers to Reform Judaism were in-married. The fact that only 5 percent of all out-switchers were in conversionary marriages (7 percent of those becoming Reform) suggests that easier standards of conversion do not yet account for the high levels of switching out of Conservative Judaism.

Overall, judged by both shifts into Conservative Jewry and switching out of it to Reform Judaism and other less traditional categories of denominational identity, intermarriage seems to be an important variable associated with the shift. Continuing high levels of mixed marriage among Conservative Jews may thus be an important factor in leading to loss of adherents as they seek less stringent and more accepting religious environments in which to function. In addition to programs designed to reduce intermarriage, these data point to the need for concerted efforts to integrate the mixed married into Conservative congregational and community life.

The Multiple Correlates of Denominational Change

In order to gain some insights into the relative importance of the various characteristics discussed above for movement into and out of Conservative Judaism, a multivariate analysis was undertaken. In doing so, we focus on two segments of the population — those persons who joined Conservative Judaism from Orthodox origins and those who left the Conservative movement to identify as Reform Jews; in each case, they are compared to Conservative stayers. Regression analyses were performed separately for the two groups; the results generally reiterate the findings based on bivariate analyses (Table 7).

Those who joined Conservative Judaism after having been raised Orthodox are clearly and significantly older. They are also less likely to live in the Midwest than in the Northeast, but residence in either the South or West has little relation to switching. Both intrastate and interstate migrants are less likely to switch from Orthodox to Conservative Judaism than are nonmigrants. The stronger Judaic identification of in-switchers that has been apparent from earlier findings appears also in this regression analysis. In-switchers have significantly higher levels of Jewish education and score higher on the ritual scale. That they are also more

likely to be in conversionary marriages suggests that converts in such marriages may feel more comfortable and accepted in a Conservative milieu than in an Orthodox congregation.

The characteristics associated with leaving Conservative Judaism for the Reform movement are different. Out-switchers are younger, and least likely to be interstate migrants. Since much of the mobility of American Jews has been from the older, more traditional areas to newly emerging, less traditional centers of settlement, switching from a more to a less traditional denomination is not surprising. Those with college education are also more likely to be out-switchers than those with only high school. Out-switchers are clearly more likely to be in mixed marriages, for reasons indicated above. Nonetheless, with other characteristics controlled, leaving Conservative Judaism is also associated with higher scores on the ritual scale.

TABLE 7. REGRESSION OF SWITCHING TO CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM FROM ORTHODOX AND SWITCHING FROM CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM TO REFORM, CONTROLLING FOR SELECTED CHARACTERISTICS

	To Conservative from Orthodox	From Conservative to Reform
Age	.009*	-.004*
Current residence		
Midwest	-.092*	.021
South	.034	-.015
West	.018	
Lifetime migration		
Intrastate	-.128*	.028
Interstate	-.099*	.093*
Education		
Some college	.027	.171*
College graduate	-.046	.251*
Post graduate	-.044	.155*
Synagogue member	-.021	.022
Intermarriage status		
Conversionary	.127*	.007
Mixed	.004	.247*
Index of Jewish education	.034*	.032
Ritual scale	.080*	.155*
R ²	0.179	0.066

* significant at least at .05

Reference groups are: Current residence in Northeast; Lifetime non-migrant; High school education or less; In-married.

These varying patterns highlight the complexity of denominational change. Factors that attract one group of persons to Conservative Judaism may impel others to leave the movement. Personal characteristics and Judaic background form only a small part of the overall motivating factors that are involved in switching.

Nonetheless, they are an important component in helping us to understand who joins and who leaves the movement and in explaining the composition of Conservative Jewry at any given time.

The Dynamics of Choice

Because denominational identification for American Jews is a matter of choice, it is easy for a person to switch from or into Conservative Judaism or any of the other denominations, or out of any specific denomination altogether. Our analysis has shown that the cumulative impact of switching into and out of Conservative Judaism has resulted in a relatively small net loss to the total number of Conservative Jews, because the large in-movement was more than cancelled by an equally large out-switching. Nonetheless, who is raised and remains a lifelong Conservative Jew, who joins the movement, and who leaves have an impact collectively on the profile of Conservative Jewry. While NJPS-1990 does not provide information on why denominational change did or did not occur nor when it occurred, it has allowed us to take some measure of that change.

At the time of the 1990 survey, almost 1.6 million adults identified as Conservative Jews, accounting for 36 percent of all adult Jews in the United States. This closely resembled the 34 percent of the study population who were raised as Conservative Jews. Yet, this close similarity is misleading because the small net loss of 77,000 masks a very substantial turnover in the composition of the Conservative Jewish population. Of the 1.588 million Conservative Jews in 1990, only 916,800 reported that they had also been raised Conservative; the other 650,900 grew up in another denomination (a small number of these were raised Christian and for about 20,000 denomination raised was unknown). Another 727,900 indicated that they had been raised as Conservative but in 1990 identified with another denomination or none at all.

Thus, almost as many persons who were raised in a denomination other than Conservative have become Conservative Jews as the number of persons who were raised in Conservative Judaism and no longer identify with the movement. This loss may well continue to grow into the twenty-first century, because by the 1990s the Orthodox pool, from which the Conservative movement has largely drawn its affiliates, is quite small and unlikely to contribute new members, while Conservative Judaism's losses to Reform Judaism and away from Judaism may continue. To date losses of Conservative Jews to Reconstructionist Judaism have been small (only 2 percent of persons raised as Conservative Jews identified with Reconstructionist Judaism in 1990), but these persons have been highly selective of the more Jewishly identified. If Reconstructionist Judaism continues to grow and the number of Conservative Jews becoming Reconstructionist increases, their switching may weaken the most committed core of Conservative Jews. Overall, these patterns suggest that unless Conservative Jewry is able to attract members from other denominations or from among those who have no denominational identity, it seems likely to remain stable in size or even to experience some decline.

The shifts into and out of Conservative Jewry have had a profound impact on its profile at the end of the twentieth century. Because much of the switching from Orthodox Judaism occurred several decades ago while switching to Reform

Judaism is more recent, Conservative Jewry has become older, more likely to be immigrants or the children of foreign born, and somewhat less educated.

The data on intermarriage show that the in-switchers have particularly low levels of mixed marriages, but notably more of the in-switchers are in conversionary marriages than is true of either the stayers or the out-switchers. Most striking, however, is the high proportion of out-switchers in mixed marriages. This suggests that switching is very often directly related to intermarriage.

While it is doubtful that many individuals would change denominations for theological reasons, switching is clearly related to strength of adherence to a number of Jewish practices and behaviors. The Conservative movement has gained persons with higher levels of synagogue membership, Jewish education, and ritual index scores than characterized those who had been Conservative Jews all their lives. On the other hand, those switching out of the movement scored lower on these indicators. The net result has been to heighten the level of Jewish identification of Conservative Jews.

Continuation of the past trend of interdenominational flows into the future is unlikely. Just as American Jewry as a whole can no longer count on transfusions of Yiddishkeit from immigrants, Conservative Jewry can no longer count on large numbers of strongly committed Jews to switch into the movement from Orthodox Judaism. It can, however, expect to continue losing members from among the more peripherally identified. This would have the effect of continuing to increase the level of commitment of those remaining — if continuing members retain current levels of identification, but it would also serve to reduce the size of Conservative Jewry. Such heightened commitment may also occur if Conservative Judaism attracts the more committed persons from less traditional denominations. Most important for the movement is the challenge of reducing its losses and strengthening the Judaic credentials of those raised as Conservative Jews so that they will want to remain identified with the Conservative movement.

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