



Alix Smullin

Stoked by her Jewish roots, Swampscott's Smullin campaigns for justice

BY STEVE MARANTZ([HTTPS://JEWISHJOURNAL.ORG/AUTHOR/STEVE-MARANTZ/](https://jewishjournal.org/author/steve-marantz/))

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Swampscott resident Alix Smullin went to Reading, Pa., to knock on doors in early November. Her mission: To get out the vote for Democrats on the Pennsylvania ballot. She remembers an apartment in a low-income neighborhood. A young man came to the door.

“It was the day before the election. I reminded him of voting hours,” Smullin recalled. “He said he was in bad health, on dialysis, and didn’t think he could vote. Then he asked me where he could vote. And I said, ‘Right over there, nearby.’ And he said, ‘Oh, I think I can do that.’ ”

Bingo. Smullin chalked up another vote for her side. She estimated she brought in five additional votes over five days of door-knocking. There were 100 activists just like her in Reading, Pa., and more throughout the state. The result: A Democrat won the U.S. Senate and gubernatorial races. Democrats won four of five congressional races, and a majority in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives.

Smullin, 76, is an organizer of Swing Left North Shore/Cape Ann, a get-out-the-vote group intent on electing Democrats who have a reasonable chance of winning. Democratic candidates in Pennsylvania, Georgia, New Hampshire, Maine, Colorado, Texas, Florida, and North Carolina have gotten her group's support. Thousands of postcards and letters, along with occasional phone-calling and door-knocking, are the tools.

"I focus on where there's an opportunity to win," said Smullin.

Her activism is rooted in her Jewish upbringing in Providence, where her family belonged to a Reform temple. Her three children, Sam, Rachel, and Sarah, had their bar and bat mitzvahs at Temple Emanu-El in Marblehead. Her fourth grandchild will be bar mitzvahed in May.

"I have a strong sense of Jewish identity that very much informs my sense of right and wrong, and what I do to try to make the world conform more to my sense of righteousness and justice," she said.

But her Jewish identity didn't include a Yom Kippur fast until her son Sam, at age 7, announced his intent.

“If he could try to fast, I ought to be able to do it,” she recalled. “Yom Kippur is an important day in my year, a day I recommit myself to my world view and the fact that I have a responsibility to do something about it.”

Smullin’s Swing Left North Shore/Cape Ann group, numbering about 450 participants, arose from the explosion of grassroots activism after Donald Trump’s election in 2016. Swing Left came first and spawned Swing Left Greater Boston, which evolved into the Swing Blue Alliance, which affiliated with another group called Indivisible. Swing Left North Shore/Cape Ann was started early in 2019.

“Since 2018 we’ve come to understand the importance of governors, secretaries of state and state legislators, and local school committees,” said Smullin.

Another Democratic organizer, Susan Labandibar of the Massachusetts-based Swing Blue Alliance, said of Smullin, “She’s a member of the get-it-done school, highly pragmatic, never lets things get in her way. Our job as organizers is to take people who care and give them enough hope and agency to feel like they can make a difference. Alix does that. She has a huge network of people who rely on her to help them take effective action to align our federal government with their values, in a state where you can’t do that by going to the voting booth.”

Smullin’s personal history of activism reaches back to February 1968, when she and her husband, Joe Smullin, canvassed for presidential candidate Eugene McCarthy in New Hampshire.

The Smullins moved to Swampscott in 1979 and raised their three children while Alix served on the School Committee, worked for Lieutenant Governor Evelyn Murphy, and managed City Council and mayoral races for Rosaria Salerno in Boston.

Asked to define the difference between a Republican and a Democrat, Smullin prefaced her response by warning that her view of the current Republican Party is “cynical and ugly.”

“I believe the Republican Party is manipulated by a set of economic interests that are completely amoral and detrimental to our country,” she said. “They employ a set of tactics around choice, religion, and guns to manipulate and stir up people who are willing to vote just on those issues.

“I’m only slightly less cynical about Democrats, but I still think there’s a core within the Democratic Party trying to make this country a more integrated, fair, and equal place. One that respects people, respects the Earth, respects the truth, and has some sense of justice and fair play, some sense of continuity. And that actually is law-abiding.”

She shook her head, sadly.

“I’m pretty discouraged about the country,” she said. “It feels like a lot of things our generation got involved fighting for in the ’60s, ’70s, and ’80s – civil rights, women’s rights, a less bellicose country – that we just backslid terribly. The ability of monied interests to influence the country’s agenda in ways that are totally self-serving is a very sad state of affairs.

“You have to wonder what these people – the Kochs and DeVoses – what they’re looking for. Take Israel. Trump completely manipulates the Israel issue. Part of his support for Israel has to do with the crazy evangelicals who think Christ won’t come until the Temple is rebuilt. Really? That’s a reason to support Netanyahu and plowing Palestinian settlements under? Because evangelical Christians are waiting for the second coming of Christ? I didn’t make that up.”

Next up for Smullin and her band of activists: In April, a state Supreme Court race in Wisconsin.

“It could tip the balance of that court,” she said. “They have four-year terms on the court there.”

Asked how friends and family react when she opines about a state Supreme Court election in Wisconsin, Smullin allowed herself a grin.

“It doesn’t come up much over coffee.” Θ

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