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RESEARCH NEWS

Berman Jewish Policy Archive at NYU Wagner Releases Survey Showing Jews Are Far More Likely to Vote for Obama Than Are Other Americans

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American Jews are far more likely to vote for Democratic Senator Barack Obama for president than are non-Jewish voters, according to the results of a national survey released today by the Berman Jewish Policy Archive at NYU Wagner (www.bjpa.org).

The survey, conducted in early September - before the economic crisis hit with full force, and when Obama and Republican Senator John McCain were running nearly even in national polls - shows that Jews who have made up their minds about who they will vote for support Obama over McCain by an overwhelming 2-to-1 margin, or 67 percent to 33 percent.

In comparison, non-Jewish voters are split, with 50 percent of those who have made up their minds saying they will vote for Obama and the other 50 percent saying they will vote for McCain.

In all, 3,116 voters were surveyed a representative sample across the U.S. that included 1,596 Jews and - surveyed simultaneously with identical questions— 1,520 non-Jews. The margin of error is plus or minus 3 percent.

Since the survey was conducted, Obama's lead has widened in the general population to approximately 8 percentage points among those who say they've made up their minds. If Jews have shifted proportionally since then, according to projections by the study's authors, they will vote 3-to-1 for Obama, or 75 percent for the Democrat compared to 25 percent for McCain.

Interpreting the survey results were: Steven M. Cohen, Research Professor of Jewish Social Policy, Hebrew Union College, Jewish Institute of Religion/New York, and Director of the Berman Jewish Policy Archive at NYU Wagner; Professor Samuel J. Abrams, Fellow at the Hamilton Center for Political Economy at NYU; and Dr. Judith Veinstein, Research Associate, Berman Jewish Policy Archive at NYU Wagner. The survey was fielded by the research firm Synovate, Inc., which has been gauging American Jewish opinion for more than two decades.

"The findings point to overwhelming support for Senator Obama among American Jewry, even though concerns about Israel's security worked somewhat to the advantage of the McCain candidacy," said the study's authors

The authors added that the level of affluence and the age of respondents had little effect on Jews' overall support for Obama. Approximately 24 percent of Jewish voters surveyed said they were as yet undecided.

Journalists, please note: The Berman Jewish Policy Archive at NYU Wagner will hold a public forum entitled "American Jews and the Presidential Election" on Monday, October 27, 2008, from 4:30-to-5:30 p.m., at the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service at New York University, located in the historic Puck Building, 2nd Floor, 295 Lafayette Street, New York, N.Y. To RSVP, visit <http://wagner.nyu.edu/events/policy-10-27-2008>.

In the sampling, Jewish and non-Jewish voters responded to dozens of identical questions on their vote intentions, political attitudes, and political identities. Statistical weighting assured that the distribution of characteristics for the General Population resembled those reported by the US Census, while the demographic and Jewish identity characteristics of the Jews closely paralleled those reported in recent national studies of American Jews (Pew Research Center in 2007; and National Jewish Population Study in 2000-01).

The gaps between Jews and other white Americans are even more dramatic than those between Jews and the entire electorate. In line with the high levels of support for Obama among blacks and Hispanics, the Obama-McCain balance among whites alone emerges as a lopsided 37percent for Obama to 63 percent for McCain. Thus, non-Jewish whites (i.e., those who are neither black nor Hispanic, nor Jewish) tilt heavily toward McCain. Jews, at the same time, tilted heavily toward Obama. In fact, the Jewish-white gap in voter intentions reaches a striking 30 percentage points.

What can explain "Jewish electoral exceptionalism," or their readiness to support the Democratic candidate far more than other Americans show, particularly other white Americans? A similar question has been asked of Jews' political leanings generally: If they are as a group so affluent, then why are they also so liberal and Democratic? For years, analysts and advocates have been anticipating a rightward shift toward the American political center on the part of American Jews. This election is no different, with the issue of Israel's security thought to work in favor of John McCain's candidacy.

Indeed, the survey demonstrates how Jews differ from other Americans in their approach to this historic election.

Non-Jewish whites are more concerned than Jews about immigration, gas prices, and taxes (issues which tilt voters toward McCain). Jews, though, are more concerned about health care, environment, appointments to the Supreme Court (issues that tilt voters toward Obama). Moreover, whites in general are more inclined than Jews to favor a government role in protecting morality, while Jews are more favorably disposed than others to support government assistance to the needy. Jews are less likely to view favorably reliance on military strength rather than diplomacy. At the same time, they are more concerned than others about Iran, and about the Israel-Palestinian conflict.

With the possible exception of their concerns for Israel's security and Iran, Jews' political values incline them to support Obama. However, multivariate analysis demonstrates that the Jewish/white gap in vote intentions cannot be well-explained by their differences in political values, by such demographic factors as education and income, or by religiosity-secularity, a factor that has been shown to influence the vote even more than economic standing.

Only one factor substantially explains the Jewish/non-Jewish white gap in vote intentions: "Political identity," the tendency for Jews to identify as liberals and as Democrats rather than conservatives and Republicans. Nearly all the 30-point variation in support for Obama or McCain between Jews and non-Jewish whites can be statistically explained by their wide variations in political identities. Among Jews, liberals outnumber conservatives by roughly two-to-one, nearly the reverse of the white, non-Jewish distribution. Whereas among Jewish Democrats outnumber Republicans by more than three-to-one, among white non-Jews, Republicans exceed Democrats.

Further analysis demonstrates that Jews are "excessively" liberal and Democrat in their identities. That is, they are more liberal and more Democratic than their values would statistically predict. Given their view on the major issues, Jews are "too Democratic" and "too liberal."

Beyond these findings, several interesting intra-group variations characterize the American Jewish electorate:

- The Orthodox support McCain far more than the non-Orthodox.
- Those who see Israel as a major consideration in the Presidential election, move toward John McCain. At the same time, even those attaching high importance to the issue of Israel in the election still favor Obama over McCain.
- Among Orthodox Jews, those with more Jewish friends favor McCain even more than others. Among the non-Orthodox, those with more Jewish friends favor Obama, even more than others.
- Among Jews, education and income bear little relationship to vote intentions.

"To us, these results speak to the power of political identity as a driving force behind Jewish vote intentions and political activity more generally," commented the study's authors. "Values and interests alone cannot explain why Jews will be voting so heavily for Obama on November 4. Rather, for Jews, as for other Americans, electoral behavior is very much a reflection of political identities as Democrats or Republicans, and as liberals or conservatives."

"Ironically," they added, "Jews and other highly educated voters often view other Americans as responding to instinctual, historic habits, to their political heritage, if you will. People like to think of themselves as totally rational and driven by carefully considered values.

"In fact, Jews in the upcoming election also respond to their identities. In their case, they will be reflecting their long-held, multi-generation attachment to the liberal camp in America, and to the Democratic Party."

The entire report can be found at www.bjpa.org, the website of the Berman Jewish Policy Archive at NYU Wagner. The website will contain thousands of social scientific articles that will be text-searchable and downloadable. Associated with the Robert F. Wagner School of Public Service at NYU, and funded by the Mandell L. and Madeleine H. Berman Foundation and the Charles H. Revson Foundation, the Berman Jewish Policy Archive at NYU Wagner's website will be fully operational in February, 2009.

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