

## CAMPAIGN CONFIDENTIAL: Study of Jewish Dems, Obama in the Sukkah, Scholars for Obama

Thu. Oct 23, 2008

### Study of Jewish Dems

Jews continue to lean heavily Democratic, but not necessarily because of the issues, according to a new study.

A report released by New York University's Berman Jewish Policy Archive argues that while Jews will likely continue to vote disproportionately Democratic in the upcoming election, that tendency is due less to Jews' liberal stance on issues than due to their strong sense of affiliation as liberal Democrats.

Jews are "still tribally Democratic. They like that affiliation," said Sam Abrams, a political science professor at NYU who co-authored the study. But, he added, "A Jewish Democrat may not be what a typical Democrat in the population would be."

One common explanation for the tendency of Jewish voters to vote Democratic is that Jews are more liberal on social issues. The study, however, undercut that explanation. On a variety of social issues, ranging from foreign policy to the government's role in setting public morality, the study found that the disparity between Jewish respondents and the general population was too small to explain the discrepancy in voting patterns. In fact, Jews were slightly less likely than the general population to say that social issues such as health care, poverty and education were important to their vote for president (33% of Jews versus 37% of the general population).

Instead, the authors found, the strongest statistical correlation with voting patterns for Jews was not stances on issues but affiliation as Democrats and liberals.

The report comes toward the end of a campaign where the depth of Democratic nominee Barack Obama's connection with Jewish voters has been heavily discussed. Throughout the campaign, Obama has appeared to poll lower among Jews compared to other recent Democratic candidates.

The survey, taken in early September, found that Jews were roughly twice as likely to support Obama for president as they were John McCain, by a count of 51% to 25%, with 24% undecided. Although the undecided figure is higher than other recent polling on the issue, the distribution is roughly consistent with other Jewish opinion polls on the subject, which have generally found Obama's support hovering near 60% and support for McCain in the range of 30%.

One of the study's co-authors, Steven M. Cohen, recently signed a statement by Jewish studies scholars in support of Obama.

— *Anthony Weiss*

## Obama in the Sukkah

The Obama campaign plunged into the heart of the ultra-Orthodox community at a Sukkot event hosted by a rabbi in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn.

Rep. Jerrold Nadler of New York, wearing a yarmulke with “my bubbe votes for Obama” written on it, spoke in a Sukkah with a delegation of rabbis and members from different ultra-Orthodox sects. As at most Jewish Obama events, Nadler spoke about Obama’s pro-Israel credentials, but his campaign also talked about social services, which are a key issue for the ultra-Orthodox community.

“Other more affluent communities have less social issues than we do,” said Rabbi David Niederman, head of the United Jewish Organization, a community-wide advocacy group in Williamsburg. “But for people here, social services are really important.”

The Obama campaign was invited to speak by a variety of Brooklyn ultra-Orthodox groups and took place at a Sukkah outside the home of Joseph Menczer, a rabbi from the Pupa Hasidic sect.

Williamsburg is a stronghold of Hasidic Jews who trace their roots to Hungary, including the neighborhood’s dominant sect, the Satmar Hasidim. The Satmar community traditionally votes en bloc by following the recommendations of its leader. Since the death of its grand rabbi Moshe Teitelbaum, however, the community has been divided as two of his sons have feuded to take over leadership of the community.

One of the sons, Zalman Teitelbaum currently heads the Williamsburg-based branch, and the event took place before a Zalman-affiliated crowd. Another son, Aaron Teitelbaum leads the sect in the Borough Park neighborhood of Brooklyn and the enclave of Kiryas Joel, in upstate New York. The two camps split their endorsements in a state senate race earlier this year and it is still unclear who they will support in the presidential race.

Jeremy Goldberg, Obama’s Jewish outreach director for the tri-state area, told the Forward that the campaign had reached out to a variety of Hasidic communities, including the other main Satmar branch, and was working on holding similar events before the election.

“We firmly believe in trying to get every vote and that our platform resonates with everyone,” he said, adding that the campaign felt optimistic about getting support from the whole Satmar community.

Nadler focused his talk on foreign policy but the conversation quickly turned to social issues and what the Obama administration would do to ensure funding for education, healthcare and housing. Goldberg stressed that the Democratic presidential nominee had spelled out the importance of religious groups in education and vowed to make funding more transparent and accessible, especially for small religious organizations.

Niederman said that the community was waiting to hear from the McCain campaign and would then reach a decision, “through a vote.”

“We wanted to hear from them because there is an unknown aspect to this candidacy,” Niederman said. “The community leaders will get together and reach a decision.”

— Marc Perelman

## Scholars for Obama

The latest group of Jewish professionals that is banding together to support Barack Obama's candidacy are professors in Jewish studies.

A group of more than 240 scholars of Jewish studies have signed a letter endorsing Obama. The statement urges fellow Jews to vote for the Democratic candidate and decries the persistent fears about Obama that have circulated among Jewish voters.

The endorsement comes with Obama still facing doubts about whether he can attract the levels of Jewish support that Democratic candidates have traditionally garnered. In response, a number of left-leaning Jewish professionals and activists have organized to show their support in ways that some observers say is unprecedented. In September, more than 300 rabbis announced the formation of Rabbis for Obama. More recently, a political group called the Jewish Council for Education and Research organized a Web site to counter false information about Obama and coordinated an event for young Jews to travel down to Florida and urge their grandparents to vote for Obama.

"I've never seen as much organization on the Democratic side in the Jewish community as in this year," said Ira Forman, executive director of the National Jewish Democratic Council.

No similar efforts have been planned on behalf of John McCain's campaign. McCain supporters argued that the frantic efforts by Jewish elites to mobilize for Obama were, in fact, a sign of Obama's weakness among grassroots Jewish voters.

"I think they're organizing out of a concern about Barack Obama's underperformance and erosion of support among Jewish voters," said Matt Brooks, executive director of the Republican Jewish Coalition. "What that tells me is that, by and large, these elites, in many regards, just speak for themselves, that they don't have a lot of coattails."

Daniel Soyer, a professor of American history at Fordham University and one of the main organizers behind the letter, said the group was hoping to counteract the well-publicized concerns that have taken root in some parts of the Jewish community.

"In our opinion, those misgivings are misguided, based often on false rumors and malicious kinds of falsehoods that have been spread, if not by the McCain campaign, then by people who are friendly to it," Soyer said.

[Full disclosure: The signatories of the letter included several members of the Forward Association — including Forward Association secretary Paula Hyman — which owns this newspaper. Those who signed the letter did so as individuals. This newspaper does not support or oppose candidates for public office.]

— *Anthony Weiss*

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