

THE ISRAEL SWING FACTOR: HOW THE AMERICAN JEWISH VOTE INFLUENCES U.S. ELECTIONS

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The Jewish Vote Can Be Decisive

There are two clashing myths on the political power of American Jewry. One claims that the community is too small to affect national elections; Jews make up less than 3 percent of the U.S. population. A contrasting view holds that U.S. Jews play a disproportionately large role in national politics thanks to their campaign donations and media influence.

According to evidence confirmed in the most recent elections, however, American Jewish voters maintain the potential to be *the* decisive factor in national election results. Yet, this ability does not emanate from any financial or public relations clout, which is overestimated. ¹Rather, American Jews wield power through their high concentration in key states, and their tendency to behave as a swing vote in ways that set them apart from virtually all other groups in American politics.

Anyone recalling the recent hair-splitting tally of individual ballots in a few Florida counties will realize that every vote counts. It should also be noted that Jews happen to comprise a high proportion of the Florida electorate, especially in those counties that remained in suspense. Yet, on closer examination, Florida emerges as just one of a handful of equally influential states across the country where Jews are similarly concentrated. In fact, Jews make up a significant portion of the electorate in several key "swing states," the hard-fought electoral battlegrounds that make or break candidates for president.

But the greatest political strength of American Jewry lies in the fact that it is a *uniquely swayable bloc*. The issue of support for Israel has proven capable of spurring a sizable portion of Jews to switch parties - in large enough numbers to tip the scales in national or statewide elections. Moreover, the "Israel swing vote" is especially open to political courtship because, unlike the interests of other minority groups, support for Israel has long been compatible with traditional Republican and Democratic agendas. By contrast, most other issues (abortion, affirmative action, etc.) cannot be embraced by Republicans or Democrats without alienating certain support bases. A pro-Israel stance runs no such risk. On the other hand, being distinctively unsupportive of Israel can significantly hurt a candidate's chances.

The Jews that Count

In the 2000 election, Florida was one of several "swing states" where Republicans and Democrats expended most of their energies, on the theory that these electorates could be swayed to either party. Other such states included Michigan, Wisconsin, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and even - according to the Bush campaign - California, along with a handful of smaller states considered to be "in play." ² Although Michigan boasts just over 100,000 Jews (as contrasted with over 200,000 Arab-Americans), and Wisconsin is home to barely 30,000, Pennsylvania and California have among the largest and most influential Jewish populations nationwide. ³

Pennsylvania has about 280,000 Jews, who reside largely in the greater Philadelphia area. ⁴ Although they make up roughly 2.5 percent of the state's population, Voter News Service reports that Jews comprise 4 to 5 percent of the electorate. California hosts some 970,000 Jews, who are 2.9 percent of the state's population but a full 6 percent of the electorate, according to a *Los Angeles Times* exit poll. ⁵ Florida has a Jewish population of approximately 640,000, about 4.2 percent of the state's residents, who comprise close to 5 percent of the state's electorate. ⁶

A study of American Jewish voting habits over the past five decades suggests that some 55 to 60 percent of the Jewish electorate pick Democrats almost automatically, while 10 percent are similarly loyal Republicans. But the remaining 30 to 35 percent can be lured by any party depending on its position. ⁷ That adds up to a swing vote representing up to 2 percent of the electorate in states like Florida and Pennsylvania. In both cases, a shift of that amount (or less) would have changed the result in that state and, in all probability, single-handedly crowned the American president. Put another way, the Jewish swing vote, mobilized behind a particular candidate, would have given him the 2000 election. (Florida and Pennsylvania have 25 and 23 electoral votes, respectively.)

This explains why the Bush and Gore campaigns fought so vigorously to hold onto as much of the Jewish vote as they could. It explains why Gore, though confident he would carry the majority of Jewish voters, sent his Jewish vice presidential candidate, Senator Joseph Lieberman, to Florida on a string of sudden, unscheduled visits throughout September. ⁸In fact, Lieberman's potential to draw Florida Jews was cited as one of the reasons for his nomination in the first place. And while Gore was more confident of taking Pennsylvania and California, the GOP believed that these states were close (they turned out to be right about Pennsylvania). ⁹Both states had Jewish populations large enough to be worth courting.

Indeed, Governor Bush was careful to take clearly pro-Israel positions. He chose California, for example, to announce that, if elected, he planned to move the U.S. embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. He also publicly criticized Clinton's ambitious peace plans as too "aggressive." ¹⁰In September and October, the GOP sent a mass mailing to some 100,000 (presumed) Jewish residents of Florida, along with a phalanx of speakers popular with Jews, such as Ambassador Jeanne Kirkpatrick, to tour the state.¹¹In Pennsylvania, host to the Republican National Convention, Newt Gingrich led a series of forums attacking Clinton's Middle East policies as harmful to Israel. ¹²

Fear of the Swing Factor

As it turned out, efforts to contain the Jewish swing vote paid off. The voting pattern of Jews nationwide more or less mirrored that of the previous two elections, suggesting that there was no particularly strong reaction to either of the candidates that offset party loyalties.

Nationwide, some 79 percent of American Jews voted for Gore, 19 percent for Bush, and 1 percent for Green Party candidate Ralph Nader, according to Voter News Service. Similarly, in 1996, Clinton reportedly took 78 percent of the Jewish vote, with Bob Dole garnering 16 percent for the Republicans, and 3 percent going to Ross Perot's Independent Party. Pennsylvania Jews voted in a similar pattern in 2000, with an estimated 77.6 percent voting Democratic, 18.6 percent Republican, and 3.8 percent supporting the Green Party. ¹³

This consistency with previous elections is somewhat surprising, given two new factors that might have been expected to influence the Jewish community. The nomination of Lieberman, the first Jewish vice presidential candidate and an openly affiliated Jew, might have been expected to lure even more Jewish voters to the Democrats. In addition, some predicted that Bush's association with his father, the ex-president whom Jews overwhelmingly rejected in 1992, would have scared some Jews away from the GOP. Given these factors, Bush's showing is actually quite impressive. Seth Lipsky, former editor and publisher of

the *Forward*, notes that Bush's success could be viewed as "a sign that the Republicans will gain ground if they court the Jewish vote, as they did in this election." Bush has "taken a hard line on Israel," adds Lipsky, and "surrounded himself with a wonderful set of advisors on Jewish-related foreign policy issues." ¹⁴ What is important is that the potential influence of the Jewish swing vote affects any party, regardless of whether most Jews vote for its candidate.

Why Israel Still Matters in U.S. Elections

American Jews not only have a swing vote - a constituency that can be swayed in any direction - they also have a swing issue: support for Israel. The evidence shows that when the Jewish community judges a candidate to be distinctly problematic on Israel, it will desert that candidate or his party in decisive numbers. This shift can be so significant that it could easily decide the outcome in a swing state in a close election like that of 2000.

Consider the presidential election of 1972. Although Jews had overwhelmingly supported Democrats in the three previous presidential races, from John F. Kennedy (82 percent in 1960), to Lyndon Johnson (90 percent), to Hubert Humphrey (81 percent), they were apprehensive about George McGovern in his challenge to Richard Nixon. McGovern, a left-liberal isolationist, was seen as likely to weaken U.S. support for Israel if elected. ¹⁵ At the time, McGovern's positions on Israel had been assaulted by the Humphrey campaign during the Democratic primaries, particularly in California. In June 1972, Israeli Ambassador to Washington Yitzhak Rabin went so far as to express a preference for Nixon over McGovern. The election saw an unprecedented exodus from the Democratic party: 16 percent of the American Jewish electorate shifted away from the Democrats, with McGovern taking only 64 percent of the Jewish vote. By contrast, the shift from the Democratic party on the part of the overall national electorate was a mere 4 percent. ¹⁶

In March 1980, President Jimmy Carter faced a primary challenge from Senator Edward M. Kennedy. Polls taken a month earlier indicated that Carter would beat Kennedy in the New York Democratic primary by a margin of 54 to 28 percent. But on March 1, Carter's UN Ambassador, Donald F. McHenry, voted for a viciously anti-Israel resolution in the UN Security Council condemning Israeli settlement activity in Jerusalem. Three weeks later, Kennedy beat Carter in New York by 59 percent to 41 percent. In an interview with the *Washington Post*, Carter directly linked his loss in New York with his ambassador's support for the anti-Israel resolution at the UN three weeks earlier. ¹⁷

Over time, American Jews appeared to view President Carter as favoring Arab interests, particularly those of Egypt, at Israel's expense. On the other hand, Republican challenger Ronald Reagan was viewed as exceptionally pro-Israel. In

the end, 20 percent of the Jewish electorate deserted the Democrats in the 1980 election. A full 39 percent backed Reagan and 15 percent went to third party candidate John Anderson. Carter was left with a mere 45 percent of the Jewish vote. ¹⁸

The most dramatic case was the 1992 presidential election between Republican George Bush, Democrat Bill Clinton, and Independent Ross Perot. Bush had drawn the ire of American Jewry through a number of policies relating to the Jewish state. Openly disdainful of Israel's Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, Bush threatened to deny Israel much-needed loan guarantees to help absorb Soviet Jews, a threat meant to pressure Israel on its settlement policy. Moreover, Bush famously alluded to Israel's supporters in Congress - perhaps to the Jewish community as a whole - with his foreboding reference to his struggle as a "lonely man" against "powerful political forces." ¹⁹

In the 1992 vote, some 23 to 25 percent of the American Jewish electorate, that had once supported President Reagan, dumped Bush, leaving him with a mere 10 percent, according to an American Jewish Committee survey. That is clearly the most dramatic shift in Jewish support to coincide with a candidate's controversial stance on Israel. Four years earlier, Bush had received 27 percent of the Jewish vote in his 1988 race against Governor Michael Dukakis. Yet, the fact remains that *any* of the shifts cited here, had they taken place in the 2000 election, could have determined who would become the next U.S. president. Notably, they all took effect when a candidate seemed conspicuously threatening to Israel.

Impact of the Swing Vote

It has been suggested that Jewish voters tend to shift their support along with the larger electorate. ²⁰ In this light, it may be argued that part of the changes cited in these cases (1972, 1980, and 1992) merely reflect political shifts in the U.S. electorate as a whole, rather than a decisive reaction to Israel-related policies. After all, support for Bush declined among the American electorate as a whole by about 10 percent from 1988 to 1992.

But this explanation does not suffice for several reasons. First, the Jewish vote did not always correspond to larger American political changes at other times. For example, in 1984, when the U.S. electorate gave Reagan 59 percent, some 67 percent of the Jewish community supported Walter Mondale, the highest degree of support for a Democrat since Humphrey. ²¹ In other words, when the Israel swing factor no longer applied - once Carter was swept out in 1980 - Jewish voters returned to their previous party loyalties in defiance of national trends. Indeed, even as the American electorate underwent various shifts since 1960, Jews showed significant change *only* in elections involving candidates with controversial stances on Israel. Even in the cases when their shift paralleled the

general electorate, as in 1992, Jews switched by twice as much as the general electorate.

In short, support for Israel is a unique issue capable of swinging very large sectors of the American Jewish electorate. Given that this electorate is concentrated in swing states that hold the key to national elections, where Jews may number as much as 5 percent of the potential voters, the Israel swing factor may indeed be decisive. The factor works visibly when a candidate's positions toward the Jewish state significantly provoke the American Jewish electorate. It works latently when, as more often occurs, candidates seek to insure themselves against the Israel swing factor by taking sufficiently pro-Israel positions. That is what happened in 2000, for example. Of course, there are other reasons why candidates might take a staunchly pro-Israel stand. They may feel that the U.S. has an interest in a strong Israel as the only democracy and reliable U.S. ally in the volatile Middle East. Nevertheless, the Israel swing factor provides a strong incentive.

Looking ahead to the 2004 presidential election, President George W. Bush might be well advised to carefully weigh how his Middle East policies might affect the next election results in a variety of swing states. In 2000, when Bush actively courted the pro-Israel swing vote, he received much greater Jewish support nationally than his father received in 1992, pulling nearly 20 percent of the Jewish vote in comparison with just 10 percent for his father. A clearly supportive policy on Israel as president could raise George W. Bush's share of the Jewish vote in 2004 to at least 27 percent (like Bush in 1988) or higher (like the 39 percent achieved by Reagan). Yet, should President George W. Bush be perceived as hostile to Israel, his support in the Jewish community could plummet to the levels that his father received back in 1992, a showing that would have denied him victory in the most recent election. In short, these possible trends in the Jewish vote, in Florida alone, could affect whether Bush is ever re-elected in a close race four years hence.

The Growing Arab-American Constituency

Arab-American voters resemble their Jewish counterparts in that they, too, benefit from the importance of swing states (mainly Michigan), and that issues unrelated to party politics can sway them in large numbers. They are seen as particularly threatening to Israel because it is one of the issues that "swings" them, but in an adverse way.

Arab-Americans were driven to support Bush, it seemed, partly because of the Middle East. The President of the American Arab Institute, James Zogby, cited disappointment with Clinton's Middle East policy as the main factor drawing Arab-Americans to Bush, this despite the fact that, on balance, the majority seem

to favor Democratic party policies. ²² In particular, many shunned the Gore ticket because of Lieberman. An umbrella organization representing Michigan's Arab and Muslim groups tagged Lieberman "an activist for and a champion of the Israeli agenda." ²³ A poll of Arab-American voters found that 69 percent said Lieberman affected their vote. ²⁴

It would seem, then, that the Arab swing vote could cancel out the influence of its Jewish counterpart in the "battleground state" of Michigan. As it turned out, however, the group did not pose a significant threat to the pro-Israel camp, even as it gained influence. True, both Bush and Gore actively courted the more than 200,000 Arabs in Michigan. But they did so by appealing chiefly to those Arab-American concerns that did not contradict the candidates' supportive stances on Israel. ²⁵

Bush took the lead in this regard when he met in early October with 30 Arab and Muslim leaders in Dearborn, Michigan, seen as the unofficial headquarters of the Arab-American community. There he expressed his concern about racial profiling and secret evidence apparently employed in immigrant cases - a major gripe of Arab-Americans. ²⁶ He then repeated those concerns days later in the second presidential debate. Although Gore followed suit, echoing these themes in his own remarks, Bush was credited for the stance.

"After being ignored for so long, to hear those words from a major candidate in public was a pleasant surprise," Nade Meri, an Arab voter in Michigan, told the *Detroit Free Press* after voting. ²⁷ Shortly thereafter, Bush received the official endorsement of the coalition of Arab-American organizations in Michigan and the American Muslim Political Coordinating Council. ²⁸ In the end, some of this support apparently stemmed also from a perception that Bush would have a different approach to the Middle East, as polls indicated. Notably, though, Bush did not stray from his pro-Israel positions on issues like Jerusalem in order to court the Arab vote.

Another outcome that may encourage the pro-Israel camp is that the Arab swing vote in Michigan did not prove a particularly potent factor in the end. The Arab community did, in fact, swing from its Democratic loyalty to favor Bush over Gore by 45 percent to 38 percent, according to a poll. ²⁹ But with its 48 percent voter turnout, the bloc did not bring Michigan significantly closer to the GOP. In fact, Gore prevailed even though Michigan's Jews, numbering 2 percent of the electorate, also tilted towards Bush, a stance that partly reflects the decades of GOP support built by Detroit's Republican Jewish icon Max Fisher. ³⁰ For the time being, the Arab swing vote draws neither the numbers of votes, nor the positions of candidates, that would be necessary to significantly undermine the clout of the Israel swing factor, though this could change in future elections.

The New York Senate Race

If 1992 proved a landmark year for the Jewish swing vote nationally, as the senior Bush was swept out of office, it was an equally illustrative year for that swing vote in the New York Senate race. Republican incumbent Alfonse D'Amato defeated Democratic challenger Robert Abrams by a mere two percentage points.³¹ Since Republicans can always count on at least 10 percent of the New York Jewish vote, and Democrats usually take well over 60 percent, the remaining 30 percent is the Jewish swing vote. As Jews are between 12 and 14 percent of the state's electorate, the swing vote comes to just over 3 percent.³² D'Amato, therefore, depended upon that swing vote for his 2 percent victory margin - and he received much more than the usual Republican share, taking 40 percent of New York's Jewish electorate.³³

That shift did not play exactly the same role as in presidential elections, where candidates with distinctly controversial stances on Israel are punished. Instead, in the 1992 New York Senate race, Jews were mobilized to *reward* a candidate regarded as extremely pro-Israel.³⁴ In his 12 years of service to that point, D'Amato had not only supported every pro-Israel initiative in the Senate, but often was the initiator of such efforts. Fellow Republican Jack Kemp had aptly nicknamed him "Rabbi D'Amato." Moreover, D'Amato was as hard-line as anyone in the Jewish community in his defense of Israeli policy. Most important, he had stood out in the Senate as a lone defender of Israel's 1982 bombing of the Osirak nuclear reactor in Iraq.³⁵

In light of these factors, Seymour Reich, past chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, urged Jews to support D'Amato, even though he was running against Abrams, an observant Jew and an outspoken supporter of Jewish concerns. "Very simply, you have to be loyal to your friends, you have to return loyalty with loyalty," Reich wrote in a letter. "If we don't support D'Amato - one of the best, if not the very best senator for Israel - it will send a message to non-Jewish legislators that we Jews only vote on ethnic grounds."³⁶

In 2000 the electoral shift, on the part of New York's Jewish swing vote, was even more dramatic. Not only did the traditional 30 percent swing vote side against Democrat Hillary Clinton, but even the uncontested 60 percent "base" of the Democrats was eroded, bringing Clinton's Jewish support down to between 53 and 56 percent.³⁷ As she lost even more than the Jewish votes that were seen to be in play, it could be said that Hillary Clinton completely failed in her appeal to the Jewish community.

But this would be a mistaken interpretation. It ignores a basic difference between the 2000 race and nearly every one that preceded it in recent memory: the normal expectations - of a 60 percent base, a 30 percent swing, etc. - rely on the typical condition that all the candidates are above suspicion with regard to Israel. Even

in the case of Robert Abrams, who lost the entire Jewish swing vote, there was no doubt that he was supportive of Israel, not to mention other Jewish concerns. It was simply a matter of what the Jewish community felt it owed Senator D'Amato for his past record.

Hillary Clinton, on the other hand, entered the New York race on the defensive about her support for the Jewish state. Voters quickly became familiar with her famous call for the establishment of a Palestinian state two years earlier, at a time when even the Israeli-Palestinian terms for negotiation explicitly prohibited taking such steps. That and her public embrace of Suha Arafat, immediately after the Palestinian icon's libelous speech about alleged Israeli practices, became the bane of her campaign in New York's Jewish community. Republican Rick Lazio, by contrast, had been a particularly strident supporter of Israel, even for a Long Island Congressman, although this may not have been widely known. From the onset, Clinton seemed headed for a disastrous showing among Jews.

A poll taken by Zogby International in both May and July had Clinton taking a mere 48 percent of the Jewish vote, which is unprecedented for a Democrat.³⁸ By September, however, Clinton had gained an advantage, with a new Zogby International poll showing her winning 52 percent of the Jewish vote, a closer approximation to what she actually received.³⁹

The evidence suggests that Clinton made considerable headway with her aggressive attempts to persuade the Jewish community of her support for Israel, which were intensified during the period between the two Zogby polls. These efforts culminated in her public condemnation of a U.S. decision undertaken by her husband's administration: The U.S. abstained rather than vetoing a United Nations resolution faulting Israel entirely for the violence that had broken out at the end of September. If the polling data are any indication, it appears that New York Jews took Hillary Clinton seriously in this regard. Nevertheless, Clinton's 12 percent victory margin was twice the support she received from the Jewish community in its entirety. In particular, Clinton gained considerable blocs of Catholics, women, and upstate voters.⁴⁰ In a future election, with those blocs perhaps less reliable or drawn to an opponent, the Jewish community - and its swing vote of 3 percent of the state's electorate - may prove more essential to victory.

If Israel is Threatened

Recent years have seen signs - and commentators - suggesting that American Jews view their identity less in terms of the collective. Judaism in America has increasingly become a function of one's spiritual outlook, private ritual observance, and family celebrations like bar mitzvahs. Even in the ritual realm, Jewish identity may be more individualized, with a decline in the influence of

denomination, community, and ideological affiliation. The implication for politics is clear: issues that affect the Jewish community as a group, like U.S.-Israel relations, should decrease in influence. Israel, the communal issue par excellence, may suffer.

In fact, this has not occurred. The extent of the Israel swing factor remained constant through the 1990s, and was reflected in the elections of 2000. There are several reasons for its stubborn persistence. First, we have seen that the Israel swing factor is largely defensive, often responding when Israel's interests seem distinctly threatened by a particular candidate. Yet the decline in Jewish communal identification appears to coincide mostly with a view that Israel and the community do not need it - they are not on the defensive. This may explain why in the exceptional cases when a candidate does pose a distinct and noted challenge to the Jewish state, or when for other reasons Israel and the community are threatened, Jewish attitudes might mobilize to its defense, after all.

Arnold M. Eisen and Steven M. Cohen, in their new book *The Jew Within: Self, Family, and Community in America*, explain why Israel may figure less in the identity of American Jews: "The once-beleaguered Jewish state no longer seems to require the financial and political assistance it once did." ⁴¹ If this assessment is correct, and Jewish involvement with Israel depends on a view that Israel needs help, then it remains consistent with the continuing Israel swing factor, which responds to policies and positions that openly threaten the Jewish state. In this past election, when both candidates made sure to take positions that would only strengthen Israel's interests, the swing factor was neutralized (and in this way worked as a deterrent).

It may be argued that in the 1992 Senate race between D'Amato and Abrams, neither candidate posed a threat to Israel or the Jewish community. Yet that election occurred in the shadow of the 1991 Crown Heights Riots, in which Hasidic Jews were beaten, terrorized, and in one case killed by an anti-Semitic mob. D'Amato pointedly invoked this event, dubbed "the Crown Heights Pogrom," in the 1992 race.

In any case, Israel in the year 2000 is still the premier Jewish issue for American Jewish voters. A September 2000 survey of likely Jewish voters in the state of New York, conducted by John McLaughlin and Associates, revealed that when New York Jewish voters were asked, in an open question, to cite the most important Jewish issue facing the Jewish community today, security and peace for Israel ranked first - with 11.8 percent of respondents. By comparison, anti-Semitism received 8.5 percent, education and schools 2.5 percent, senior citizens 0.5 percent, and health care 0.2 percent.

In fact, the perceived decline in communal identity may be misleading. In their survey of American Jews, Cohen and Eisen found that 27 percent consider

themselves as at least "very attached" to Israel; 69 percent described themselves as "somewhat attached" or more. ⁴²These numbers represent a decline from previous years. But recall that the Israel swing factor involves, at most, 30 percent of the American Jewish electorate - a group so attached to Israel that it will abandon party. That core is all it takes to swing an election. Moreover, it works in states like Pennsylvania, Florida, or California, where the Jewish communities are concentrated and organized. This means that in order to threaten Israel's political clout, the erosion in Jewish communal attachment would have to impact upon the most Israel-directed 30 percent, and in some of the most identified Jewish centers in America. There is no indication that is likely to happen.

In fact, a decrease in communal identity could erode certain traditional Jewish political ties, to the extent that such activism has expressed Jewish identity. This might liberate more Jews of their party loyalties, and increase the size of the potential swing vote. But it remains to be seen how support for Israel will be affected by the trend towards individual spirituality. The impact may depend on whether Israel could be redirected as a vehicle for personal religious expression, with the biblical and spiritual symbols of the Jewish state serving as milestones in a spiritual journey. If that happens, traditional Israeli themes like Jerusalem will take center stage as the focus of an American Jew's personal transcendence.

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