

## Revisiting the 2008 Presidential Election: Reflections on the Jewish Vote

*Steven Windmueller*

- Despite a strong effort to portray this election as a watershed moment in redefining the Jewish vote, American Jews remain overwhelmingly Democratic and liberal.
- Initially, Jews engaged in a "dating game" with the candidacy of Barack Obama, ultimately leading to their embrace of his message and his campaign. Those Jews who favored President George W. Bush's foreign policy goals represented the base of support for John McCain's campaign within the Jewish community.
- The 2008 election evoked a significant and at times heated debate within the Jewish community over which presidential candidate would best serve Jewish interests.
- A number of specific personalities and issues seemed to define the campaign for Jewish voters, including Barack Obama's pastor, Jeremiah Wright; the nomination of Sarah Palin; the political "wars" among Jewish groups; the role of political elites in seeking to shape Jewish political opinion; and an array of "myths and messages" that were conveyed within the community about the candidates.

A debate has been raging in the American Jewish community about the "state of the Jewish vote." Some had already assessed during the presidency of George W. Bush that a shift to the Republican Party was underway among Jewish voters. That transition did not in fact occur, as evidenced by Jews' overwhelming support on 4 November 2008 for the Democratic nominee, Barack Obama.

Obama received 78% of the Jewish community's vote, the seventh highest percentage in history. The Illinois Democrat trails only Franklin Roosevelt (1936-1940-1944, 90%), John Kennedy (1960, 82%), Lyndon Johnson (1964, 90%), Hubert Humphrey (1968, 81%), Bill Clinton (1992, 80%), and Al Gore (2000, 79%) in receiving such Jewish support.[1]

In some cases during the past three decades, Republican presidential candidates made inroads into the Democratic Jewish voting bloc. Ronald Reagan did so in 1980, garnering 38% of the Jewish vote; George H. W. Bush received over 30% in the 1988 election. In 2004, George W. Bush raised his total among Jewish voters from 19% in 2000 to 25%.

### Jews as Liberals

Although Jews remain overall embedded in the Democratic Party, their voting patterns and political inclinations reflect a wide array of policy interests and changing priorities. In terms of generational voting, Jews born before 1945 identify with the Democratic Party in higher numbers-55%-than do Baby Boomers (people born from 1946 to 1964) and Generation Xers and Yers (people born from 1965 to 1983), where Democratic Party support decreases by 12% to 43%.[2] One of the primary characteristics of Jewish voters, wherever they are found on the political spectrum, is an overwhelmingly negative reaction to mismanagement, scandal, or ineffective leadership. The demand for competency is shared with other key constituencies. The current disgust with government has been a major contributor to the growth of a significant segment of Jewish voters-currently one-third-who describe themselves as "independent." In

this context, "independent" means either not belonging to any specific party or that the individual "declines to state."

Data on Jewish voting attitudes, and views on specific domestic issues in particular, show that they remain more liberal than other, white, ethnic constituencies. As J. J. Goldberg noted in 2000, drawing on an array of statistical indicators:

...Jews are more likely to identify themselves as liberals than any other group. Some 49 percent of Jews called themselves "liberal" or "very liberal," compared to 42 percent of blacks and about one-third of every other group. By contrast, about 19 percent of Jews called themselves "conservative" or "very conservative," compared to 25 percent of blacks and about one-third of every other group. The lopsided liberalism is reflected in party identification: About two-thirds of Jews are registered as Democrats and 15 percent as Republicans. That makes Jews slightly less partisan than blacks, who are 78 percent Democratic and 6.5 percent Republican.

...The lopsided liberalism of the Jews shows up in their responses to issues on the public agenda, particularly on abortion. Jews are overwhelmingly pro-choice, with 61 percent saying the decision should always be left to the mother. Among other groups, the figure ranged from 40 percent of blacks and Asian Americans to 29 percent among Italian and Arab Americans and 24 percent of Hispanics who were fully pro-choice. Similarly, fewer than 50 percent of Jews believe in notifying parents when a minor seeks an abortion, compared with nearly 80 percent in every other group.

Jews are also the most supportive of letting the federal government set education policy, the most supportive of campaign donation limits and the least supportive of increasing the military budget. In general, Jews showed a greater faith in the power of the federal government to do good than any other group. That good will does not spill over to the United Nations, which received lower marks from Jews than from any other group surveyed.[3]

In an American Jewish Committee poll conducted from 8 to 21 September 2008, Jews were asked to locate themselves on the political spectrum. Nearly 45% identified themselves as "liberal," another 30% as "moderate," and only 22% as "conservative." [4]

Regarding American Jewish college students, Leonard Fein noted that:

In 2002, Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life did a study of America's Jewish freshmen. The study found that 50.9% of Jewish students entering college describe themselves as "far left" or "liberal," another 39.5% as "middle of the road," leaving a paltry 9.5% who say they are "conservative" or "far right."

...The National Jewish Population Survey roughly supports the Hillel findings: 33% of Jewish college students identify themselves as Democrats, 22% as independents, 16% as Republican and 17% as "something else." [5]

## The Emergence of Barack Obama

Before the fall campaign, Barack Obama first needed to establish himself as a credible Democratic figure. A March 2008 survey of 9,204 Democratic voters found that 48% of Jewish Democratic voters preferred Hillary Clinton as the party's presidential nominee, while 43% of them favored Obama.[6] Early in the campaign, a segment of Jewish Democrats that can best be described as politically pragmatic was drawn to the candidacy of Clinton and other "moderates" who take centrist positions that may involve compromise and consolidation. This type of political gamesmanship typically includes building coalitions to achieve consensus in such areas as health coverage, trade practices, and foreign policy initiatives. Such voters saw such politics as contrasting with the more divisive and ideological approach of the Bush presidency.

Throughout the winter and early-spring primaries, Obama began to show significant strength among Jewish voters in key states. In many of the most liberal districts with high-density Jewish populations,

Obama outpolled Clinton in the early primaries. In Massachusetts, for example, Obama received over 50% of the Jewish vote, and in Connecticut he took 60% of it. Among Jewish voters in California, he defeated Clinton by 49%-47%, and figures were similar in certain other states including Maryland, an important marker of Jewish voting behavior.[7]

Although the national campaign was in full swing by late August, it would take until mid-October for the Jewish vote to coalesce around Obama. As one commentator noted at that time: "Jewish voters nationwide have grown increasingly comfortable with voting for Barack Obama for president since the Illinois senator secured the Democratic nomination in June. They now favor Obama over John McCain by more than 3 to 1, 74% to 22%." [8]

Even though Obama scored considerable successes with Jewish voters in the earlier primaries, many Jews still saw him as an unknown entity:

He was an unfamiliar figure to many as a result of his short U.S. Senate career. His Muslim-sounding middle name, Hussein, unsettled some Jews. And his former pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, has in the past praised Louis Farrakhan, who has made a host of anti-Semitic statements over the years. In Florida, most Jews backed Sen. Hillary Clinton during the primaries (though neither candidate competed there due to a dispute over the pushed-up voting date) and were sorely disappointed when she lost. Moreover, Obama has been the subject of a malicious-and mendacious-Internet smear campaign that has sought to stoke Jewish fears about his loyalty to Israel and supposed support for Palestinian causes.[9]

The same *Newsweek* article quoted this author as suggesting these developments had "created an air of uncertainty." It was that "level of doubt that ha[d] weakened [Obama's] base of support that would normally be for the Democratic ticket."

The October 2008 tracking results of the *Gallup Daily* showed growing Jewish support for Obama. The U.S. economic downturn may have galvanized Jewish voters to embrace his campaign:

Support for Obama among all registered voters was fairly stable from June through September, but then rose sharply in October-in apparent reaction to the U.S. economic crisis. By contrast, support for Obama among Jewish voters has expanded more gradually, from the low 60% range in June and July to 66% in August, 69% in September and 74% today.... Recent support for Obama is a bit higher among older Jews than among Jews younger than 55. According to combined Gallup Poll Daily tracking data from Sept. 1 through Oct. 21, an average of 74% of Jews aged 55 and older supported Obama for president across this period, compared with about two-thirds of younger Jews.[10]

In late October, the *Gallup Daily* noted that Jewish voters "have grown increasingly comfortable with voting for Barack Obama...." The polling data showed little difference among Jewish voters by age category in their basic party identification. Gallup reported that 55%-57% of Jewish voters identified as Democratic, 28%-30% as independent, and only 13%-17% as Republican.[11]

Liberal Jewish voters were driven by a multi-issue agenda encompassing a woman's right of choice, an aggressive environmental policy, gay rights, and other selective social and public policy concerns. A growing component of this Jewish voting sector is described as the "gentry liberals," who are the primary beneficiaries of both globalization and the financial investment markets. They reside in some of the wealthiest congressional districts, in and around New York, Boston, Washington, San Francisco, and West Los Angeles.[12]

This new constituency can be seen actively participating at MoveOn.org and the *Huffington Post*, and supporting specific Jewish progressive and environmental priorities. According to polling data and funding sources, many of these Jews were early supporters of the Obama campaign.

Obama, drawing on his organizing instincts, the influence in his life of religious and cultural values, the rhetoric and style of the black church, and his sense of American politics and history, represented a fundamentally different type of American politician. This phenomenon appealed to a particular type of Jewish liberal instinct, especially for ideologically driven Jews who had either grown up in political or social movements themselves or whose family roots were tied to the labor-union tradition. Obama's focus

on community-organizing themes resonated with their connections to the labor movement and to an array of social causes.

A second factor concerned the candidate himself in a more personal fashion. Obama represents a new, cosmopolitan generation of leadership: well educated, well spoken, and with a diverse set of life experiences. Hence, the "gentrified liberal" sector of the emergent Jewish class of wealthy technologists and business entrepreneurs found that both Obama's style and message comported with their abovementioned multi-issue agenda. In response they rallied to his campaign, offering their resources and their votes.[13] For some Jews in this category, Obama also signifies the continuation of the traditional antiwar/antiestablishment trend within American politics.

Thus, "for some Jewish voters, the strangeness of Barack Obama was like a recurring dream: unsettling and then settling in, and then, suddenly revelatory." Some credited the intensive organizing by certain Jewish groups for ultimately bringing Jewish voters into the Democratic column, moving the candidate from "stranger to standard bearer for a Jewish ethos." These organizational efforts included the "Great Shlep" led by Jewsvote.org, along with other initiatives to get young adults to encourage their grandparents in Florida to vote for the Democratic nominee. Ultimately, these endeavors transformed Obama's negative image into a positive one, allowing some to express the belief that "his biography feels so Jewish, it feels like an Ellis Island archetype." [14]

## Core Issues for Jewish Voters

A number of other factors contributed to this turn by Jewish voters toward reconnecting with their political roots. These included frustration with the tenor of the campaign rhetoric, which they found to be divisive, and the negative reaction to Governor Sarah Palin's presence and message on the Republican ticket.

Similarly, many Jews' ties to the civil rights era apparently led them to value the historical significance of the Obama candidacy. They used this opportunity to realign themselves with African Americans and others in launching a new era in American political history. The October polling numbers suggest that Jewish voters across the nation joined with African American and Latino voters to shape a new Democratic Party coalition of minorities. Such a development rekindled memories of the earlier Roosevelt and Kennedy eras, when coalitional politics enabled the Democrats to win national elections.

A similar pattern obtains along religious lines. Of all religious constituencies, Jews vote for the Democrats in the strikingly greatest percentages.

Apart from the ultimate outcome, the Jewish vote was a factor throughout the campaign cycle. Five elements played a particularly important role for Jews in the 2008 elections.

### 1. *The Jeremiah Wright Issue*

Many Jews felt that Obama should have dissociated himself years earlier from his minister and father figure, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, pastor emeritus of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago. Following the 9/11 attack, Wright had stated that "America's chickens are coming home to roost"; he had also said Israel represented a "dirty" word and characterized Israel as a practitioner of "state terrorism," sparking a backlash in the Jewish community.[15] Moreover, the controversial Louis Farrakhan had also been honored by Wright's church. The fact that Obama held a totally different worldview than his pastor raised the question of why he remained committed to Wright for so long without challenging his ideas or actions.

Obama's opponents used the matter of Wright and his ministry as part of their campaign against the senator. The Jews for Obama campaign group declared: "And so, in typical smear-monger style, Obama's attackers take the plain fact that Obama has nothing whatsoever to do with Farrakhan and espouses none of his offensive views, turn it on its head, and claim that Wright's and Trinity's praise for Farrakhan somehow taints Obama." [16] A commentator sympathetic to Obama remarked, "One common

speculation is that Obama, whose father abandoned the family, saw Wright as a father figure, and since Wright had brought him to Christianity, married him and his wife, and baptized their children, Obama psychologically couldn't break away from him." [17]

Once Obama did finally break with his pastor, however, his campaign gained further credibility with Jewish voters, among other groups.

## 2. *The Sarah Palin Nomination*

Ira Forman, executive director of the National Jewish Democratic Council, emphasized what he called the "cultural distance" between Palin and American Jews: "She's totally out of step with the American Jewish community," he said. "She is against reproductive freedom-even against abortion in the case of rape and incest. She has said that climate change is not man-made. She has said that she would favor teaching creationism in the schools. These are all way, way, way outside the mainstream." [18]

Regarding Palin and the Jewish vote, *beliefnet* editor Steven Waldman commented:

...the Sarah Palin pick may end up scaring some Jews. Two weeks ago, she sat in church as her minister introduced David Brickner, executive director of Jews for Jesus, according to Politico. "He's a leader of Jews for Jesus, a ministry that is out on the leading edge in a pressing, demanding area of witnessing and evangelism," said Rev. Larry Kroon of Wasilla Bible Church. [19]

Palin's broad support from Republican leaders hardly increased her popularity among Jews. The choice of Sen. Joe Biden as the Democratic vice-presidential candidate, however, resonated immediately with the Jewish leadership: "Jewish Democratic politicians are very supportive of...Biden, whom they consider 'mishbuchta' or 'member of the family.' His choice as running mate is expected to help Barack Obama's chances with Jews, who believe he is a mensch or 'fine human being' but not yet a 'mishbuchta.'" [20]

In September, an American Jewish Committee survey of Jewish leaders found that 54% disapproved of Palin as the Republican choice for vice-president while 37% approved. Seventy-three percent of the same sample endorsed Obama's choice of Biden. [21]

## 3. *The "War" among the Jews: NJDC vs. RJC*

The Jewish political arms of the Democratic and Republican parties-respectively, the National Jewish Democratic Council (NJDC) and the Republican Jewish Coalition (RJC)-campaigned intensely, and battled for the Jewish vote very publicly, vocally, and even expensively through organized debates, ad campaigns, and rallies in many states. Tensions between these two political bodies involved disputed ad campaigns and the use or misuse of a candidate's policy positions, among other charges and countercharges.

As a Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA) blogger observed on 28 October:

The Republican Jewish Coalition on Tuesday released the last in its controversial series of advertisements attacking Barack Obama for his foreign policy views and advisers, which will be appearing in Jewish newspapers later this week. The ad was essentially a round-up of the "greatest hits" from the previous eight ads, asking "Concerned about Barack Obama? You should be," calling the Democratic presidential nominee "dangerously naive," and charging that "history has shown that a naive and weak foreign policy has resulted in tragic outcomes for the Jewish people."

...Meanwhile, the NJDC, which called the RJC "remarkably sloppy," has directly responded to the RJC with its final ad of the election cycle. Entitled, "The Facts about the Republican Jewish Coalition's dishonest campaign," the advertisement responds directly with "the truth" to RJC ads which it says falsely attacked Obama's positions on the IRGC [[Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps](#)] and [Jerusalem](#)-and concludes with the tagline "The RJC Should Be Ashamed." [22]

In response to the RJC's campaign, the dovish pro-Israeli group J Street tried to get Anglo-Jewish newspapers to stop running these ads. J Street's executive director, Jeremy Ben-Ami, asserted that "there is a deep well of anger in the broader Jewish community over the questionable tactics used by the RJC and the lies and distortions they and others have circulated during the campaign." [23]

Matt Brooks, the RJC's executive director, stated that the "ads raised legitimate questions about Obama's judgment" and that "we had an important and meaningful debate in the community." [24]

To counter the RJC's advocacy, Jewish Democrats sponsored a series of opinion pieces, ads, and events featuring high-profile Jews who supported Obama. One of these, former New York mayor Ed Koch, wrote:

I have concluded that the country is safer in the hands of Barack Obama.... Protecting and defending the U.S. means more than defending us from foreign attacks. It includes defending the public with respect to their civil rights, civil liberties and other needs, e.g. national health insurance, the right of abortion, the continuation of Social Security, gay rights, other rights of privacy, fair progressive taxation and a host of other needs and rights. [25]

No previous election campaign had evoked such tensions within the Jewish community, with the possible exception of 1972. At that time it was claimed that the Nixon administration and the Republican Jewish leadership were calling on Jews to support the Vietnam War in return for continued U.S. support for Israel. Such an implied threat evoked a strong backlash among Jewish antiwar activists.

#### 4. *Myths and Messages of the Campaign*

Numerous such messages dominated the campaign, including:

- Obama had a decade-long relationship with pro-Palestinian leaders in Chicago.
- Ahmed Yousef, a leader of [Hamas](#), had expressed support for an Obama victory.
- Jimmy Carter's anti-Israeli national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, was one of Obama's foreign policy advisers.
- Obama had been a member of a board that had funded a pro-Palestinian charitable organization.
- Obama, if elected, called for holding a summit of Muslim nations that would exclude Israel. [26]

Beyond all these, the charge that Obama was in fact a Muslim may have had the greatest impact on some Jewish voting groups. As novelist Anne Roiphe wrote:

Phone calls and e-mails have gone out saying that Obama is a Muslim and an anti-Semite. This is a big lie, but it is spreading through a community that is already wary of a black man. Some Jews, however, have taken action to combat these misrepresentations. On January 15, Rabbi Marvin Hier of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, along with other Jewish organizational leaders, sent an open letter to the Jewish community saying, "We feel compelled to speak out against certain rhetoric that we find abhorrent," and calling the smearing of Obama despicable. These Jewish leaders stood up for decency in a way that I like to think is Jewish through and through. [27]

Some thought Obama's campaign went overboard in denying these charges:

Obama's handlers are so bent on passing their biracial, binationally-raised man as a pure-blooded American—a new commercial plays up his "values straight from the Kansas heartland"—that they are reinforcing the perception that Muslim Americans are impure.

...Fellow Democrat Hillary Clinton, when asked whether Obama is a Muslim, tactily peeped, "there is nothing to base that on, as far as I know." Despite nearly hitting the third rail over his former Christian pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, only 58 percent of Americans think Obama is a Christian, according to a *Newsweek* poll in May. [28]

Over the course of the campaign, Jews for Obama, the NJDC, and the Obama campaign itself sought to set the record straight. During the primary season, Anti-Defamation League national director Abraham Foxman and eight other prominent Jewish leaders "issue[d] an open letter to the Jewish community...to quell what they called 'despicable and false' e-mails." [29] Numerous news stories and opinion pieces sought to clarify specific issues regarding Obama. For instance, Roiphe wrote in the *Jerusalem Report*:

Although he had a non-denominational upbringing, Obama was baptized in his 20s. He has said, "I decry racism and anti-Semitism in every form and strongly condemn the anti-Semitic statements made by Minister Farrakhan." He has also declared that he profoundly supports Israel and has called for continuing American-Israeli cooperation on the development of missile defense systems. During the 2006 [Lebanon](#) war, he stood up for Israel's right to defend itself against [Hizballah](#) rocket attacks. He insisted that Israel not be pressured into a premature cease-fire that would leave it vulnerable to Hizballah assault. [30]

Beyond the controversy surrounding Obama himself, the campaign strategists on both sides expected that certain key messages delivered by the two candidates would determine the outcome among Jewish voters. The *Jewish Week* cited ten such indicators, [31] including the Arab-Israeli conflict, the U.S. involvement in [Iraq](#), U.S. policy toward Iran, restoring the U.S. economy, and federal judicial appointments. Another of these ten key indicators was race: "Jews like to talk about how the black-Jewish alliance helped to create the civil rights revolution of the 1960s, but there is also a palpable uneasiness about a black community that, according to some, is a primary source of anti-Semitism in this country and whose leaders have been hostile to Israel." [32]

The unity of Jerusalem proved to be another issue that sparked controversy.

In a speech to the AIPAC Policy Conference in early June, Obama stated that "the bond between the United States and Israel is unbreakable today, unbreakable tomorrow, and unbreakable for ever. Jerusalem will remain the capital of Israel, and it must not be divided." [33] This address received wide support both within Israel and among American Jewish groups.

Yet, the day after the speech, a campaign adviser clarified the statement, saying that Obama believed "Jerusalem is a final status issue, which means it has to be negotiated between the two parties" as part of "an agreement that both can live with." [34] Several Jewish groups, including the Orthodox Union and the Zionist Organization of America, expressed disappointment over this emendation.

Each of these issues had the potential to trigger support for one candidate over the other, depending on how it was presented or "sold" to the voter.

## 5. *The John McCain Candidacy*

Part of the pro-Israeli bloc saw the candidacy of Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) as a kind of stabilizing influence that could challenge the Jewish voter's historically strong link to the Democratic Party. Unlike Bush at the start of the 2000 campaign, McCain has had a long relationship with the pro-Israeli community, and some Republican strategists believed that over the past eight years a new class of "red-state Jewish voters" had emerged to whom McCain would appeal.

While not confined geographically to the Republican base, these voters embraced Bush's commitments to Israel and supported the continuation of a strong U.S. military and diplomatic focus on the Middle East aimed at containing the growing influence of Iran and its allies. Some in this camp were neoconservatives who favored Bush's policies in Iraq and emphasized his support for Israel's 2006 military operation in Lebanon.

The central elements defining these voters' political orientation were the rise of global anti-Semitism and the need to support Israel. A certain component of this bloc particularly emphasized strong reservations about the Obama candidacy including his inexperience, naiveté, alleged views on Israel, and so on. Overall, this bloc viewed McCain as a forthright advocate of the positions they held.

Some commentators criticized Jewish voters of this ilk for abandoning rational standards they might otherwise apply to foreign policy questions and staking everything on a candidate's position toward Israel. Such Jewish voters have tended to make broad-brush condemnations of politicians, be they liberal or conservative, as being anti-Israeli or even anti-Semitic for opposing specific Israeli policies. In some cases, these voters made little distinction between political figures who are seen as hostile to Israel's very existence and those who raise particular objections.

Beyond the concerns over his choice of Palin as running mate, McCain's main difficulties with the Jewish community as a whole concerned his views on domestic issues. His support for overturning *Roe v. Wade*, his health-care proposals, and other domestic positions evoked opposition among key Jewish constituencies. Even when it came to foreign policy, polls show that the bulk of American Jews rejected the major elements of the foreign policy, especially regarding Iraq, advanced by the Bush administration and endorsed by McCain.

## The McCain-Obama Contest

Despite the alarm over the Obama candidacy among segments of the Jewish community, even early polling data gave him a lead over McCain. According to Gallup's aggregated tracking data for all of April, 61 percent of Jewish voters were prepared to vote for Obama, much higher than the national average of 45 percent of all registered voters. From March to April, the margin of Jewish support for Obama over McCain had already increased from 58%-35% to 61%-32%.[35]

Sociologist Steven M. Cohen notes the link between, on the one hand, Jewish assimilation and declining religiosity, and on the other, Jewish political liberalism: "We have seen that Jewish liberalism increases with declines in ritual observance.... Thus any declines in ritual observance through assimilation should generally advance Jewish liberalism." [36]

Leonard Fein describes American Jews' strong adherence to liberalism:

The most that can be said of the political opinions-and behaviors-of American Jews is that they have moved along with the rest of the nation-which means that they remain left of the ever-changing national center.... In most instances where comparisons with recent nationwide studies of public opinion have been undertaken, Jews emerge as decidedly more liberal on a variety of issues, including gun control, abortion, school prayer, tuition tax credits, the nuclear freeze, and defense spending.... Whether it is inertia or policy that keeps Jews liberal even as liberal affect wanes, we cannot say-but the liberal inclination of the Jews has plainly survived the decline of liberal rhetoric.[37]

As for Israel's reaction to the two candidates, in August 2008 Natan Sharansky noted that Obama said "all of the right things which Israelis wanted to hear." [38] Nevertheless, Sharansky viewed Obama as "a risk because of his lack of a record and dubious experience." [39] Regarding McCain, conversely, "we know exactly where his policy is.... He is a person of principle, and he's also a person who has absolutely a great record of supporting Israel." [40] The same article reported that "McCain...enjoys a comfortable lead among Israelis...," [41] and that situation continued.

## Conclusions

If the "religion of American Jewry is politics," then the 2008 elections once again confirmed this principle. Jews were seen in all phases of the process, advising candidates, funding campaigns, generating volunteer activity, and voting in considerable numbers. In key "battleground" states such as Florida, Pennsylvania, and Ohio, Jewish activists and voters played a significant role.

Several decades ago, the late Milton Himmelfarb was reported to have said with some frustration that "Jews live like Episcopalians, yet vote like Puerto Ricans." Today, such sentiment still appears to be valid.

In light of the intensity of this campaign and the strong investment by pro-Israeli Jewish activists in building support for McCain among Jewish voters, the inevitable question remains: why, then, are

Republicans unable to attract larger numbers of Jewish voters? The Bush administration's incompetence in the foreign policy sphere, the low number of Jews in key Republican leadership roles, and the prevalence and influence of evangelical Christians, whose views and beliefs are seen to conflict with liberal Jewish positions, are some of the factors that contributed to how Jews voted in 2008.

Some have argued that, in its party platforms, the Republican Party was only prepared to offer the Jewish voter the GOP's commitment to Israel. In contrast, the Democratic Party provided a broad array of domestic positions that are seen as comporting with other Jewish interests, in addition to backing Israel in both the diplomatic and military spheres.

Beyond the presidential campaign, Jewish candidates won elections across the nation. As the 111th Congress convened this past January, over forty Jewish politicians were sworn into office including thirteen senators and thirty representatives, not to mention the large numbers of state, county, and city officials.

Much will be written about the 2008 elections and the historic results that emerged. Jews once again appear to have played a significant role in reshaping America's political landscape, confirming once more the ability of minorities to help define the country's destiny.

\* \* \*

## Notes

[1] Ira N. Forman, "The Politics of Minority Consciousness," in L. Sandy Maisel and Ira N. Forman, eds., *Jews in American Politics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 153.

[2] Frank Newport and John Carroll, "Just How Democratic Is the Jewish Vote in America Today?" Gallup News Service, 16 September 2002, [www.freerepublic.com/focus/news/754902/posts](http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/news/754902/posts).

[3] J. J. Goldberg, "How Do Jews Stack Up against Blacks, Hispanics?" JTA, 24 April 2000, <http://jta.org/news/article/2000/04/24/5492/HowdoJewsstackup>.

[4] "2008 Annual Survey of American Jewish Opinion," American Jewish Committee, Global Jewish Advocacy, [www.ajc.org/site/c.ijIT12PHKoG/b.4540689/](http://www.ajc.org/site/c.ijIT12PHKoG/b.4540689/).

[5] Leonard Fein, "A Generational Shift That Isn't," *Forward*, 16 January 2004, [www.forward.com/articles/6123/](http://www.forward.com/articles/6123/).

[6] Jeffrey M. Jones, "Clinton, Obama Closely Matched among Jewish Democrats," *The Gallup Poll*, 24 March 2008, [www.gallup.com/poll/105595/Clinton-Obama-Closely-Matched-Among-Jewish-Democrats.aspx](http://www.gallup.com/poll/105595/Clinton-Obama-Closely-Matched-Among-Jewish-Democrats.aspx).

[7] Steven Windmueller, "For Jewish Voters, the '08 Race Raises Interesting Challenges," JTA, 25 September 2008.

[8] Lydia Saad, "Obama Winning Over the Jewish Vote: Three Quarters of Jewish Voters Now Plan to Back Obama for President," Gallup News Service, 23 October 2008, [www.gallup.com/poll/111424/Obama-Winning-Over-Jewish-Vote.aspx](http://www.gallup.com/poll/111424/Obama-Winning-Over-Jewish-Vote.aspx)

[9] Catharine Skipp and Arian Campo-Flores "The Fight for the Jewish Vote," *Newsweek*, 10 October 2008, [www.newsweek.com/id/163348](http://www.newsweek.com/id/163348).

[10] Ibid.

[11] Lydia Saad, "Obama Winning Over the Jewish Vote."

- [12] Josh Getlin, "West Side Story for the '90s," *Los Angeles Times*, 19 December 1997, <http://articles.latimes.com/1997/dec/19/news/mn-173>.
- [13] Joel Kotkin and Fred Siegel, "The Gentry Liberals," *Los Angeles Times*, 2 December 2007, <http://articles.latimes.com/2007/dec/02/opinion/op-kotkin2>
- [14] Ron Kampeas, "Jews Looked past Worries to Embrace Obama," *Jewish Journal*, 6 November 2008.
- [15] Jeremy P. Jacobs, "Obama's Wright Problem Persists," *Washington Independent*, 25 April 2008, <http://washingtonindependent.com/1534/obamas-wright-problem-persists>.
- [16] "The Jeremiah Wright Controversy," <http://www.jewsforobama.com/>. This group was organized in April 2008.
- [17] Larry Derfner, "If Obama Were White," *Jerusalem Post*, 3 April 2008, [www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull&cid=1207159745523](http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull&cid=1207159745523).
- [18] Ben Smith, "Jewish Voters May Be Wary of Palin," *Politico*, 2 September 2008, [www.politico.com/news/stories/0908/13098.html](http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0908/13098.html).
- [19] Steven Waldman, "Palin and the Jewish Vote," *beliefnet*, 3 September 2008, <http://blog.beliefnet.com/stevenwaldman/2008/09/palin-the-jewish-vote.html>.
- [20] Paul Starobin, "Obama's a Mensch, but Not Yet Mishbucha," *National Journal*, 6 September 2008, 20(1).
- [21] American Jewish Committee, "2008 Annual Survey of American Jewish Opinion," [www.ajc.org/site/c.ijlTI2PHKoG/b.4540689/](http://www.ajc.org/site/c.ijlTI2PHKoG/b.4540689/).
- [22] Eric Fingerhut, "Checking the Footnotes," Jewish Telegraphic Agency Blogs, 28 October 2008, <http://blogs.jta.org/politics/tags/tag/NJDC>. <http://blogs.jta.org/politics/tags/tag/NJDC>
- [23] Quoted in Ron Kampeas, "Don't Run Republican Jewish Coalition Ads, Pro-Israel Group J Street Tells Jewish Newspapers," *Jewish Journal*, 13 October 2008.
- [24] Quoted in Kampeas, "Jews Looked past Worries."
- [25] Ed Koch, "Why I'm Voting for Obama-Biden," *Real Clear Politics*, 9 September 2008, [www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2008/09/why\\_im\\_voting\\_for\\_obamabiden.html](http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2008/09/why_im_voting_for_obamabiden.html).
- [26] Ben Smith, "Jewish Voters Complain of Anti-Obama Poll," *Politico*, 15 September 2008, [www.politico.com/blogs/bensmith/0908/Jewish\\_voters\\_complain\\_of\\_antiObama\\_poll.html](http://www.politico.com/blogs/bensmith/0908/Jewish_voters_complain_of_antiObama_poll.html).
- [27] Anne Roiphe, "Barack Obama and the Jews," *Jerusalem Report*, 17 March 2008.
- [28] Derrick Z. Jackson, "Holding Muslims at Arm's Length," *Boston Globe*, 28 June 2008, [www.boston.com/news/nation/articles/2008/06/28/holding\\_muslims\\_at\\_arms\\_length/](http://www.boston.com/news/nation/articles/2008/06/28/holding_muslims_at_arms_length/).
- [29] Liz Halloran, "Jewish Voters Still Have Questions about Obama," *US News & World Report*, 18 April 2008, [www.usnews.com/articles/news/campaign-2008/2008/04/18/jewish-voters-still-have-questions-about-obama.html](http://www.usnews.com/articles/news/campaign-2008/2008/04/18/jewish-voters-still-have-questions-about-obama.html).
- [30] Roiphe, "Barack Obama and the Jews."
- [31] James Besser, "Political Insider: 10 Indicators for the Jewish Presidential Vote," *Jewish Week*, 21 April 2008, [http://blog.thejewishweek.com/post/10\\_Indicators\\_for\\_the\\_Jewish\\_Presidential\\_Vote.html](http://blog.thejewishweek.com/post/10_Indicators_for_the_Jewish_Presidential_Vote.html).
- [32] Ibid.
- [33] Larry Rohter, "Obama's Comments on Israel Stir Criticism in US," *New York Times*, 7 June 2008.
- [34] Hilary Leila Krieger, "Obama Clarifies United J'lem Comment," *Jerusalem Post*, 6 June 2008.

[35] Lydia Saad, "Obama Beats McCain among Jewish Voters; Trails Clinton by Slim Margin among Jewish Democrats for the Nomination," Gallup News Service, 7 May 2008, [www.gallup.com/poll/107059/Obama-Beats-McCain-Among-Jewish-Voters.aspx](http://www.gallup.com/poll/107059/Obama-Beats-McCain-Among-Jewish-Voters.aspx).

[36] Steven M. Cohen, *American Modernity and Jewish Identity* (New York: Tavistock, 1983), 152.

[37] Fein, "Generational Shift."

[38] Quoted in "Sharansky Calls Obama 'A Risk' for Israel, Candidate Panders to US Jews," *Israel Insider*, 10 August 2008, <http://web.israelinsider.com/Articles/Politics/13046.htm>.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Ibid.

\* \* \*

*Dr. Steven Windmueller was appointed dean of the Los Angeles campus of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in June 2006. He also holds the college's Rabbi Alfred Gottschalk Chair in Jewish Communal Service. From 1995 to 2006, Dr. Windmueller was director of the college's School of Jewish Communal Service. Previously he served for ten years as executive director of the Community Relations Committee of the Jewish Federation of Los Angeles, and for twelve years before that as a federation director in upstate New York. Dr. Windmueller, who holds a doctorate in international relations from the University of Pennsylvania, was named a fellow of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs in 1999.*