

Barack Obama's Real Problem with the Jewish Vote

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Now that the Democratic Primary is finally and definitively over, we will probably begin to hear even more about Barack Obama's relationship, even his problem, with Jewish voters. Barack does have a problem with Jewish voters--there aren't enough of them. Lost in all the noise about Obama's supposed problems winning Jewish support, is that the latest polls show him winning this group by [a margin of almost 2-1](#). If this constitutes a problem, Obama should wish for such problems with Christian and other voters as well.

The Jewish vote is often misunderstood by many who think it is larger or more likely to vote Republican than it actually is. Poll data, however, indicate Jews are a small but reliably Democratic block of voters. Jews only constitute between 3-5% of the vote in a typical presidential election; and typically 70-80% of Jews vote for the Democratic presidential candidate.

In 2004, for example, according to exit polls, 74% of Jews voted for Democrat John Kerry, a higher Democratic percentage than some groups generally thought of as part of the Democratic base including Latinos, Asians, women and labor union members. African Americans and gays and lesbians were the only major demographic groups that were stronger in their support for Kerry than Jews. Kerry's showing among Jewish voters was no aberration. In fact, Kerry got a slightly smaller proportion of the Jewish vote than either Gore in 2000 ([79%](#)) or Clinton in 1996 ([79%](#)). In all three elections, the Democratic candidate got roughly the same proportion of the overall vote.

Casual followers of American politics could be forgiven for being unaware of these numbers. The media has been filled with stories about Obama's inability to win Jewish voters, fear among some Jewish voters that Obama is really a Muslim, Republican attacks on Obama as being essentially anti-Israel, and Obama's alleged connections to prominent anti-Semites such as Louis Farrakhan. Efforts to peel Jewish voters away from Obama have been somewhat successful. It is likely that the Jewish vote will not be as strongly Democratic in November as in previous cycles. Obama will probably get at least 60-70% of the vote, less than his Democratic predecessors, but still a comfortable margin.

Obama will win the Jewish vote handily because he speaks to the values of the Jewish community. While most American Jews care a great deal about Israel and will not support a candidate who does not support the State of Israel, Jews are not single issue voters. Jews, who are among the most affluent ethnic groups in the US, are, in many respects similar to lower income religious Christian white voters. Both groups are values voters; and both groups vote against the narrow interests of their economic class. The majority of Jews in America continue to vote on values, such as tolerance, equality and fairness. These values push them to the Democratic Party and its standard bearer in this election.

My point is not to write a philo-Semitic paean to Jewish liberalism, but to explore the reasons why this gap between the media coverage and the reality of the Jewish vote exists. The stubborn refusal of Jewish Americans to abandon the party of Roosevelt and Truman is a story that runs counter to the recent narratives of both the left and the right. The conservative narrative is that Jews are becoming increasingly Republican because Democrats are weak on terrorism, unconcerned about Iran and not committed to the security of Israel. George W. Bush's failure to win more than 25% of the Jewish vote in the 2004 election, where terrorism and security were the dominant issues, is not exactly consistent with this narrative. On the contrary, it suggests that appeals to Jewish voters on these issues, as framed by the Republican Party, are simply not working. In fairness, if the poll numbers hold up, Jewish support for the Democratic candidate will have declined in three straight elections, but winning one third of the Jewish vote hardly constitutes a major victory for John McCain or the Republican Party.

The conservative hope that Jews will begin voting Republican in substantial numbers, thus demonstrating the increased diversity of the Republican Party, has led conservative pundits, journalists and others to overstate Jewish support for the GOP and to try to spin, or more accurately, create, the story that Jews will not vote for Obama. This, however, is not the only reason that this notion gets the support it does in the media more broadly. Progressive rhetoric also downplays Jewish support for the Democratic Party and for the left more generally.

The progressive narrative regarding the Jewish vote is as misleading as the conservative one. This narrative describes the Democratic Party as building its base on multi-racial support and lower income whites. This is an appealing and logical narrative, but less than empirically accurate. Latinos and Asians, while at times key parts of the Democratic coalition, do not consistently support the Democratic Party in proportions comparable to Jews. Lower income whites are more accurately described as swing voters who generally split their vote between the two parties, or evince a slight preference for the Republican Party. Saying that the Democratic Party base is a coalition of African Americans, Jews, gays and lesbians, and other liberal whites is more accurate, but it presents an image of the Democratic Party that may not be appealing to key swing voters. More notably, recognizing this means recognizing that the broad progressive coalition that many on the left would like to see, has not yet come to fruition.

There are also less benign narratives why Jewish support for the Democratic Party goes unrecognized. Jews are one of the most Democratic and, yes, pro-Obama segments of the population, but this is an inconvenient reality for the disturbingly large anti-Israel and, in some cases anti-Semitic, voices in the anti-war movement and the left more generally. Those on the left who believe that the US went to war in Iraq because of Israel, or that Israel is somehow the cause of all problems in the Middle East and American foreign policy and that American Jews are somehow behind that, do not want their theories about American Jews inconvenienced by actual data regarding the political behavior of American Jews, so they ignore it.

Should McCain defy expectations and manage to defeat Obama in November, they will likely be efforts on the right to attribute that victory in some small degree to the increased Jewish support for McCain. It is even more likely that there will be voices on the left accusing American Jews of abandoning the Democratic Party in this election. That kind of irresponsible and offensive blame placing, while not grounded in reality, could quickly become accepted progressive political

wisdom, have a destructive impact on progressive politics and contribute to the growth of anti-Semitism on the left. Of course, we won't have to worry about Obama losing if he develops the same problems with Christian voters that he now has with Jews.