

The Jewish Vote in Presidential Elections

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The Jews... are numerous enough to defeat our ticket," the editor of the *Chicago Tribune* warned in a private letter to an Illinois Congressman. The year was 1868 and Republicans worried that Jews would punish Ulysses S. Grant at the ballot box. Six years earlier, Grant had issued his infamous General Orders No. 11 expelling "Jews as a class" from his war zone for alleged violations of rules against smuggling. Although Abraham Lincoln had overturned that order, many Jews had neither forgotten nor forgiven the general. An anonymous pamphlet signed "A Jew" promised that "every Jew... will endeavor to defeat and with God's blessing *will* defeat you."

The 1868 election was the first presidential campaign to focus widespread national attention on the Jewish vote. Pundits greatly exaggerated the size and influence of that vote, which probably did not exceed 75,000 nationwide, and they likewise exaggerated Jewish unity. In fact, a number of prominent Jews supported Grant, preferring his message of unity and peace to the openly racist message of his Democratic opponents, who opposed Reconstruction and promised to abolish black suffrage. Jews in that election faced a conundrum that may sound familiar to readers today: Should they vote for a party they considered bad for the country just to avoid voting for a man who had been bad to the Jews?

Following 1868, Jews once again divided politically. Northern Jews tended to vote for the "Party of Lincoln," Southerners for the Democrats. When the Jewish community perceived its group interests to be at stake, however, political allegiances shifted. In 1896, when the Democratic standard bearer, William Jennings Bryan, injected religion into the presidential race and employed Christological language ("You shall not crucify mankind on a cross of gold") to win over Populists, many Jews deserted the Democratic party and voted for William McKinley. Conversely, in the bitterly contested election of 1912, many Jews abandoned the Republican incumbent, William Howard Taft, owing to his timid response to the pogroms and his opposition to the abrogation of a trade treaty with Russia. They split their votes among three candidates: the Democrat (Woodrow Wilson), the Progressive (Theodore Roosevelt) and the Socialist (Eugene V. Debs).

The great Jewish political shift to the Democratic Party began in 1928 when, by a margin of 72 to 28 percent, Jews supported Al Smith, who favored immigrants and opposed prohibition, over the more conservative Herbert Hoover. Franklin D. Roosevelt won as much as 90 percent of the Jewish vote in 1940 and 1944 — but that level of Jewish support for any presidential candidate of either party was never again so large.¹

Contrary to popular belief, however, Jews did not become reflexively Democratic. Popular Republicans like Dwight Eisenhower (1956) and Ronald Reagan (1980) attracted some 40 percent of the Jewish vote. Unpopular Republicans like Thomas Dewey (1948), Barry Goldwater (1964), and George Bush (1992), meanwhile, received but 10 to 11 percent of the Jewish vote. On the Democratic side, popular candidates like Bill Clinton and Al Gore won close to 80 percent of the Jewish vote. The unpopular Jimmy Carter, on the other hand, captured but 45 percent of that vote in 1980, the only Democratic candidate in 80 years not to win a Jewish majority (14 percent of Jews that year voted for third-party candidate John Anderson.)

Focusing on presidential elections since 1980, it appears that about 30 percent of Jewish voters may be characterized as swing voters, swayed by general as well as Jewish issues, particularly the economy, Israel, and church-state issues. When the majority of these voters swing toward the Republicans, it sends a warning to the Democratic Party. In close presidential elections, swing voters like these hold the balance of power on election night. Consequently, as politicians since 1868 have recognized, neither party can take the Jewish vote for granted. 

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¹ For the estimated Jewish vote in presidential elections since 1916, see www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsources/US-Israel/jewvote.html.

"There Is No 'Jewish Vote'"

Secretary of the Board of Delegates of American Israelites Myer S. Isaacs wrote to President Abraham Lincoln on the eve of the presidential election, October 26, 1864, that "the 'Jewish vote' which does not exist." Isaacs nevertheless assures Lincoln that "the majority of Israelite citizens must concur in attachment for the Union and a determination to leave no means untried to maintain its honor."

From a letter of Myer S. Isaacs, Secretary of the Board of Delegates of American Israelites, to President Abraham Lincoln, Oct. 26, 1864, Abraham Lincoln Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress

This box is reprinted from a Library of Congress feature, "From Haven to Home: 350 Years of Jewish Life in America" on the library's Web site, www.loc.gov/exhibits/haventohome/haven-home.html.