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THE BATTLE FOR THE JEWISH VOTE ; A CONSTITUENCY UP FOR GRABS; [THIRD Edition]

JONATHAN D. SARNA. **Boston Globe**. Boston, Mass.: Oct 10, 2004. pg. D.12

Abstract (Summary)

The "Jewish vote" has become a coveted prize in the 2004 election. The Republican Party seeks to improve on the dismal 19 percent of the Jewish vote that George W. Bush won in the 2000 election and is targeting, in particular, Orthodox Jewish voters, young Jewish voters, and pro-Israel activists. At one point, Republicans even harbored hopes of equaling the 39 percent of the Jewish vote that Ronald Reagan garnered in 1980.

Third, pundits believe that the Jewish vote is up for grabs. As the American Jewish community grows wealthier, more suburban, more deeply rooted in America, and more estranged from liberal critics of Israeli policy, Jewish voters - so the argument goes - are growing restless. They do not want either party to take their votes for granted. Already, conservative politicians have captured the majority of Jewish voters in England and Israel, as well as in some local races in the United States. Might traditional Jewish liberalism be on the wane?

Knowing this, both parties have now redoubled their efforts to win Jewish votes in 2004. Republicans are counting on the president's strong stance on fighting terror and his unwavering support for Israel to win Jews over. They scored particularly well at the annual meeting of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee last May. There, Bush explicitly linked "the freedom and prosperity and security of Israel," to "serving the cause of America." Privately, Israel's representatives tell Jewish audiences that Bush has been the "best president ever" as far as Israel is concerned. They worry aloud that a US withdrawal from Iraq, under John Kerry, would embolden terrorists and pose a danger to Israel's very existence.

Full Text (1337 words)

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The "Jewish vote" has become a coveted prize in the 2004 election. The Republican Party seeks to improve on the dismal 19 percent of the Jewish vote that George W. Bush won in the 2000 election and is targeting, in particular, Orthodox Jewish voters, young Jewish voters, and pro-Israel activists. At one point, Republicans even harbored hopes of equaling the 39 percent of the Jewish vote that Ronald Reagan garnered in 1980.

The Democratic Party, which has won at least a plurality of the Jewish vote in every presidential election since 1924, is likewise courting Jews. It argues that traditional Jewish interests - the security of Israel, the wall of separation between church and state, and liberal social policies - should impel Jews to vote for the Democratic ticket again.

The bare-knuckled campaign for Jewish votes seems surprising. After all, Jews comprise less than 2 percent of the national population, and have for years defied the laws of political gravity by earning like the wealthiest of America's voters and voting like the most disadvantaged ones. Why then are both parties focused upon them?

First, Jews are known for participating actively in civic affairs. They vote with their pocketbooks before Election Day, contributing heavily to political campaigns, and they vote in reliable numbers on election day, with as many as 80 percent of eligible Jewish voters turning out at the polls. In a close election where both money and votes count heavily, a small number of Jews can make a very large difference.

Second, Jews are geographically concentrated. Some 85 percent of them live in just 20 metropolitan areas. Winning votes in those areas is critical to any presidential candidate's election prospects. In 2004, even a small shift of Jewish votes to the Republican Party in states like Florida, Ohio, and Pennsylvania could spell the difference between a clear Electoral College majority for Bush and another election cliffhanger.

Third, pundits believe that the Jewish vote is up for grabs. As the American Jewish community grows wealthier, more suburban, more deeply rooted in America, and more estranged from liberal critics of Israeli policy, Jewish voters - so the argument goes - are growing restless. They do not want either party to take their votes for granted. Already, conservative politicians have captured the majority of Jewish voters in England and Israel, as well as in some local races in the United States. Might traditional Jewish liberalism be on the wane?

The 2000 election, while hardly a referendum on liberalism, did demonstrate that the Jewish vote remains highly significant. More than two-thirds of Al Gore's electoral votes four years ago came from eight of the nine states with the highest overall percentages of Jewish voters: New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Maryland, Connecticut, California, Pennsylvania, and Illinois. In some of those states - though not Massachusetts - the Jewish vote arguably made the difference that helped carry Gore to statewide victory. Without those states he would have lost the election by a landslide.

The only state with a large Jewish minority (about 4 percent of the population and a higher percentage of registered state voters) that Gore failed to capture in 2000 was, of course, the one that became mired in dispute: Florida. Even there, the fact that the race proved so incredibly tight was heavily due to the Jewish (as well as the African-American) vote. Those South Florida counties where Gore scored best, dangling chads notwithstanding, were precisely the ones where the bulk of Florida's Jews live.

Knowing this, both parties have now redoubled their efforts to win Jewish votes in 2004. Republicans are counting on the president's strong stance on fighting terror and his unwavering support for Israel to win Jews over. They scored particularly well at the annual meeting of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee last May. There, Bush explicitly linked "the freedom and prosperity and security of Israel," to "serving the cause of America." Privately, Israel's representatives tell Jewish audiences that Bush has been the "best president ever" as far as Israel is concerned. They worry aloud that a US withdrawal from Iraq, under John Kerry, would embolden terrorists and pose a danger to Israel's very existence.

Democrats have not been shy to respond. They tout the senator's "perfect" 18-year voting record on Israel and mention his Jewish background (the family name was once Kohn). They lament that the president has done so little to advance the Middle East peace process and attack the Republicans for sowing fear that Kerry, despite his actual record, is some kind of closet enemy of the US-Israel friendship. In addition, they point to a whole range of issues from stem cell research to the Patriot Act that distance Jews from the Republicans. Based on recent polls that show Jewish voters supporting Kerry on election day by around a 3-1 margin, Democrats gloat that GOP attempts to woo the Jewish vote for Bush have failed.

A closer look reveals that three groups of Jewish voters are edging toward the Republican camp. How many additional votes they will provide to Bush remains unclear, but as the election nears these trends bear watching:

- * Orthodox Jewish voters are increasingly likely to vote Republican. A just-issued poll by the American Jewish Committee finds 60 percent of Orthodox voters supporting Bush. Four years ago, Orthodox Jews were also more positive toward Bush than their Reform or Conservative Jewish counterparts. A majority of them did in the end vote for the ticket that featured an Orthodox Jew, Joseph Lieberman, in its second spot, but by a much smaller margin than did the Jewish community as a whole. Only 10 percent of American Jews define themselves as Orthodox today, but that number is likely to grow since, according to demographers, the total Orthodox population is dramatically younger than the total Jewish population. As a group, Orthodox Jews tend to vote the way Protestant Evangelicals do, and for many of the same reasons.

- * Younger Jews are more likely to vote Republican than their parents. The American Jewish Committee poll reports that one-third of Jews under the age of 40 support Bush. Another study finds that 26 percent of Jews under 35 identify themselves as Republicans as compared with only 11 percent of Jews over age 65. Revealingly, a New Jersey poll finds that the only group of Jews in that state that supported Bush by a small majority four years ago were young Jews, 18-29 years of age. Many of these were Orthodox Jews and others more inclined to vote like their economic peers than like their radical grandparents. If the same pattern continues, Jewish support for Republican candidates should rise over time.

- * Jews from the former Soviet Union prefer the Republicans to the Democrats. Some 400,000 of these Jews have emigrated to the United States over the past 30 years, and many of them cast their first votes for Ronald Reagan, whose anticommunism they admired. They then continued to vote for his Republican successors. In New York, these Jews have consistently supported candidates known to be tough on crime and conservative on moral issues, notably New York's Mayor Rudolph Giuliani. A recent poll of 789 Russian Jews in New York has them supporting Bush by a margin of 54 to 14 percent, with the rest undecided.

These three pockets of burgeoning Jewish Republicanism notwithstanding, there is little doubt that, come November, the American Jewish community will support Kerry over Bush by a wide margin. But how wide that margin is bears careful watching, for it will reveal much about changing Jewish voting patterns nationwide. Should the election be as close as the 2000 election, the margin may even prove decisive. The much-coveted Jewish vote could determine the next president of the United States.

[Table]

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[Illustration]

Caption: JASON FORD ILLUSTRATION

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