

The Fight for the Jewish Vote

Obama was trailing, but Palin may hurt McCain.

Like many Jews in south Florida, Todd and Jamie Ehrenreich are registered Democrats who have faithfully cast ballots for their party's presidential nominees as long as they can remember. But this year, they'd decided to back Sen. John McCain, the Republican candidate. "We are over the \$250,000 tax bracket, and we didn't want to lose our money," Jamie says. "We wanted to benefit from our own American dream."

Then McCain selected Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin as his running mate—and "lost us in one fell swoop," says Jamie, who lives with her husband and two kids in Miami. She finds so much about Palin objectionable that she almost doesn't know where to begin. There's the abortion issue, for one. Palin "wouldn't want anyone to have an abortion even for rape or incest," says Jamie. "Who is she to judge by telling me how to live my life and overturning the things women have worked so hard for?" Equally disconcerting is Palin's seeming shallowness on some of the most pressing matters facing the country. "She doesn't know what she is talking about and makes it up as she goes along," says Jamie. "The fact that she had to be coached for two weeks [to prepare for the vice presidential debate] tells me she doesn't know anything. She just talks in circles."

The Ehrenreichs' reaction is hardly isolated. Many Florida Jews who had previously been open to McCain appear to share the couple's aversion to Palin, according to political scientists, polling data and anecdotal reporting. "She stands for all the wrong things in the eyes of the Jewish community," says Kenneth Wald, a professor at the University of Florida. Among the examples he cites: Palin seems to disdain intellectualism, she's a vociferous opponent of gun control and she attended a fundamentalist church that hosted Jews for Jesus, which seeks to convert Jews to Christianity. (Palin apparently sat through a speech by a leader of the group in which he said terrorist attacks on Israel were punishment for Israelis' failure to accept Jesus as the Messiah.) An American Jewish Committee poll taken in the weeks after Palin was picked found that 54 percent of respondents disapproved of her selection, compared to 37 percent who approved. And that was before the onslaught of withering criticism of her interviews with CBS's Katie Couric.

Such rejection of Palin could prove decisive on November 4. The Sunshine State has emerged once again as a key battleground, and "in a close election, Florida Jews could tip the scales," says State Rep. Adam Hasner, co-chair of McCain's Jewish steering committee there. Though Jews account for only 5 percent of Florida voters, they turn out reliably on election day. In 2004, Sen. John Kerry, the Democratic nominee, captured about 78 percent of the Jewish vote nationally—roughly in line with recent historical trends (Ronald Reagan's 39 percent in 1980 marked the high point for Republicans). But this year's Democratic nominee, Sen. Barack Obama, has appeared to lag among Jews. The AJC poll showed only 57 percent of Jews nationwide supporting Obama, with 30 percent backing McCain and 13 percent

undecided. "There's no question that Obama came into this election with probably less going for him than most Democratic nominees," says Wald. But the Palin pick "probably blunted any gains the Republicans had made."

Obama's underperformance among Jews has numerous explanations. 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. All of this "created an air of uncertainty," says Steven Windmueller, a professor at Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles. "It was that level of doubt that has weakened his base of support that would normally be for the Democratic ticket."

McCain has sought to capitalize on those suspicions. For instance, he has hammered Obama relentlessly for saying he'd be willing to meet with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who has called Israel a "stinking corpse." And McCain has touted himself as a foreign-policy hawk and a longstanding friend of Israel. He has also benefited from the backing of Sen. Joe Lieberman, an "independent Democrat" and the first Jewish vice presidential candidate, who has been barnstorming Florida and other states on McCain's behalf. Lieberman "is a rock star," says Florida State Rep. Ellyn Bogdanoff, the other co-chair of McCain's Jewish steering committee in the state. "I call him the Jewish Elvis Presley." Frank Luntz, a GOP pollster, says that McCain was polling higher than 30 percent among Jews in early September. If those numbers have since dropped, he would attribute the decline to the economic downturn, not to Palin. "Everyone keeps wanting to link it to Palin," he says. "No one cares about Palin. They care about the collapse in the stock market."

Obama has worked strenuously to combat Jewish misgivings about his candidacy. His campaign has highlighted the prominent role Jews played in his rise in Illinois politics. And he has appeared before numerous Jewish groups, including the American Israel Public Affairs Committee in Washington, D.C., in June, when he declared Israel's security "sacrosanct" and "non-negotiable." The speech was well received and earned him a sort of "hechsher," says Wald—the certification from a rabbi that food is kosher. In Florida, Obama has dispatched well-regarded Jewish surrogates like U.S. Reps. Robert Wexler and Debbie Wasserman Schultz, who have been making an emphatic case for the Democratic nominee. The Republicans "are wrong on funding and improving education, they are wrong on health care and wrong on civil rights and civil liberties," says Wasserman Schultz. "Barack Obama supports all our values, not just some of them."

Obama is also getting support from a recently announced campaign called The Great Schlep. Sponsored by the Jewish Council for Education and Research, its goal is to

get young Jews from around the country to "schlep" to Florida to persuade their *bubbies* (grandmothers) and *andzaydes* (grandfathers) to vote for Obama. The group enlisted comedian Sarah Silverman to shoot a humorous, expletive-filled video to promote its Web site, TheGreatSchlep.com. In it, she suggests that grandkids use threats if necessary. "If they vote for Barack Obama, they're going to get another visit this year," she says. "If not, let's just hope they stay healthy until next year."

Another boon for Obama: his choice of Sen. Joe Biden as his running mate. "He generally reflects the values of Jews even though he isn't one, and no one can question his credentials vis-à-vis Israel," says Ira Sheskin, a fellow at The Sue and Leonard Miller Center for Contemporary Judaic Studies at the University of Miami. In the AJC poll, 73 percent of respondents approved of Biden's selection, compared to only 15 percent who disapproved. Wexler, who recently toured the state with Biden, recounts how the Delaware senator regaled some elderly Jewish voters at Century Village in Deerfield Beach with stories of meeting Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir and her successor, Yitzhak Rabin. "It's great to be with *mishpocheh* [family]," Biden told them.

Biden is one of the reasons Hannah Handler Hostyk, an Orthodox Jew who lives in Hollywood, Fla., is planning to vote for the Democratic presidential ticket—a first for her. But Palin was the deciding factor. "I was shocked," she says. "I watched some of the speeches at the [Republican] convention and some of the debates. Each time, I was more and more appalled." Hostyk finds a number of Palin's traits disturbing: her hard-line position on abortion, her extreme religiosity and her apparent ignorance on economic and foreign-policy matters. "Basically, on every issue, Sarah Palin is not coming from where I'm coming from," says Hostyk. In the aftermath of the Palin pick, "Obama and Biden became the perfect ticket." If enough Florida Jews share such sentiments, they may help propel that ticket all the way to the White House.