EXPANDED ISSUE

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42/686 January 2012 | Tevet 5772



A JOURNAL OF JEWISH RESPONSIBILITY

The Jewish Electorate: 2012

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ever in recent memory has Israel — or Jews in general — loomed so large on the national political scene. As the essays in this issue observe, the reasons for this attention can't be demographic — at about 2 percent of the population, our votes aren't significant; and despite the disproportionate financial support provided by Jews for political causes, neither is our money. Part of the reason, as this issue explores, is the perceived distance in some quarters between the Obama administration and Israel, coupled with the rise of a sabre-rattling, nuclear agile Iran, which some feel presents Israel with an existential threat. But as our writers note, this is far from the only reason. Our Roundtable and "letter exchange" explore whether Jews vote as a block, and how that may be changing in this election cycle. Several writers examine the determining features of Jewish voting patterns, historically and regionally. Several contributions return to the question: To what degree does Israel, as a singular issue, really move Jewish voters? This expanded issue of *Sh'ma* takes a careful look at these questions as we hurtle toward 2012.

-Susan Berrin, Editor-in-Chief

Stunning Stability: A Consistent Jewish Vote for 60 Years

KENNETH D. WALD

In 1948, two social scientists published the first scholarly study of religious group voting patterns in the United States. According to the authors, Catholics, Jews, and Baptists were Democratic by margins of two to one or better. Five denominations that we would classify as mainline Protestants were Republican by equally lopsided ratios. Although the authors did not report on black Protestants, most of whom were still forbidden to vote by Jim Crow laws, data collected at the time showed African-Americans evenly split in loyalty between the two parties.

Sixty years later, the exit polls from 2008 show that almost nothing is the same. Baptists have swung across the spectrum; they and their fellow Evangelical Protestants now constitute the single most pro-Republican religious bloc. Catholics and African-Americans have traded places, the former now divided almost evenly between Democrats and Republicans and the latter overwhelmingly favoring Democratic candidates. Once the core of the Republican vote, the shrinking body of mainline Protestants increasingly sits out elections or, while still identifying as Republican, tends to favor Democrats

by small margins.

Every group has changed but one. In 1948, in a close presidential election won by Harry S. Truman, the Democratic nominee, Jews gave around 90 percent of their vote to Truman. In the close election of 2008, also won by the Democrats, Barack Obama received around 80 percent of the votes cast by self-identified Jews. Given the extraordinary political changes over the intervening 60 years, the stability of Jewish political loyalties — both in absolute and comparative terms — is stunning.

BEZLA ABZUG SENATE CAMPAIGN

Jews are not politically unchanged since the mid-20th century. Careful scholarship has revealed some erosion in self-reported Democratic partisanship, slippage in both issue-based and self-identified ideological liberalism, and the growth of Republicanism among most Orthodox Jews in the community. Yet these are small changes compared to the wholesale realignments evident among other religious groups. Notwithstanding these shifts, Jews remain well to the left politically of those non-Jews whom they most resemble in socioeconomic status.

Assuming that Jewish political distinctiveness





"REPUBLICANS FOR ISRAFI" **BUTTON, 1993**

Kenneth D. Wald is

Distinguished Professor of Political Science at the University of Florida, Gainseville. His most recent books include Religion and Politics in the United States (Rowman & Littlefield) and The Politics of Cultural Differences: Social Change and Voter Mobilization Strategies in the Post-New Deal Period (Princeton University Press, coauthored). He wrote this article while a fellow at the Frankel Institute for Advanced Judaic Studies at the University of derives from certain intrinsic features of Jewish experience, scholars have explained that distinctiveness in three ways. The "values" theory asserts an affinity between core Jewish theological tenets — most notably tzedakah, Torah, and tikkun olam — and liberal political ideals. The

> "historical" approach emphasizes how Jews remember that their emancipation was opposed by forces of tradition on the right and championed by the left. For all their objective success in modern society, the "social marginality" thesis asserts, Jews remain psychologically insecure and prone to

making common cause with other persecuted minorities favored by the left.

Despite differences among these theories, they share fundamental weaknesses. First, if Jewish liberalism is the product of Jewish historical experience/values/minority consciousness, it should be the major motif of Jewish politics elsewhere. Yet only American Jews show this consistent political preference for the left while Jews in other democracies sometimes divide equally between left and right, mimic the rest of the electorate, or favor the right. Second, even American Jews vary in the extent of their loyalty to the Democratic Party, something that cannot be explained by static theories that posit an essentially unchanging Jewish political ethic. We need a situational theory that emphasizes what is unique about American Jewry.

One such theory starts by recognizing that American Jews have accorded political priority above all else to maintaining the classic liberal regime of religion and state. James Madison's bold claim in 1785 that religion was "wholly exempt from the cognizance" of civil authority became part of the U.S. Constitution in the form

of a ban on "religious tests" for holding public office. That clause in Article VI was greeted by the Jewish communities of the day as their Declaration of Independence, conferring upon them "the full immunities of citizenship" as no other nation had. It would enable them, they believed, to achieve more success, power, and security than any other Jewish community in the world. Over the years, Jews mobilized politically to extend this system to the state level and, in time, to counter any efforts to encroach upon the secular character of the American regime. When American Jews perceived policies (like affirmative action) as threats to what Roger Smith called citizenship of the "unencumbered self," many resisted even though the policies were generally favored by the left. When the secular state was challenged by Christian conservatives on the right, as far back as the Civil War or as recently as the 1980s, Jews also mobilized and cast their votes accordingly for candidates on the left.

The Constitution's prohibition against religious tests gave Jews a stake in a liberal regime that opened a new era in the Jewish experience. American Jews largely defined political self-interest as protecting this secular state. Jews who lived in societies where national identity was infused with religious identity — most of the rest of the world — could seek only equal status with favored religions, while American Jews worked consistently to defend a state that paid no heed to religion in apportioning benefits or costs, moving left if the threat came from the right, veering rightward if they perceived challenges from the left. This alternative theory explains why Jews do not vote like Episcopalians despite their exalted economic status, why they differ from their counterparts elsewhere, and why they swing one way or the other depending on circumstances. Such an explanation is better than neo-conservative writer Irving Kristol's sclerotic claim about "the political stupidity of the Jews" or a simplistic isomorphism between rabbinic Judaism and political liberalism.

No simple theory can encompass the fullness of Jewish political behavior. An emphasis on the perceived value of the liberal regime of religion and state does not explain the Republican orientations of Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Jewry nor the apparent preference for the GOP among post-1989 Russian Jewish immigrants. But such a theory suggests that recurring claims about an imminent realignment of the American Jewish vote are unlikely to be realized in the near future.

Discussion Guide

Michigan.

Bringing together a myriad of voices and experiences provides Sh'ma readers with an opportunity in a few very full pages to explore a topic of Jewish interest from a variety of perspectives. To facilitate a fuller discussion of these ideas, we offer the following questions:

- 1. Is Israel being used in the election as a wedge issue? When did bipartisanship on Israel change?
- 2. What would you want to ask each presidential candidate?

- 3. Have Jews become more polarized as an electorate? Is there a "Jewish vote"? If so, is it more divided today into separate cohorts than in previous elections?
- 4. Is Judaism by nature "conservative" that is, it conserves tradition? Or is it "liberal" - a tradition based on prophetic vision? Or both?
- 5. What role will jobs creation, the economy, and other domestic issues play in the election - and do your Jewish sensibilities influence your opinions on these issues?