

How Can Mitt Swing Florida Jews?

GOP Candidate Needs Sunshine State To Win White House

By Ira M. Sheskin

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During my 35 years at the University of Miami, I have asked hundreds of Jews why they moved to Florida. The most common answer has been that they came here to join friends or relatives. Some came to retire, others for employment. Some wanted a place with a large Jewish community. Many mentioned the climate. But not one said anything about Florida's large number of electoral votes.

It is a fact, however, that Florida is a "swing state" in national elections and has the most electoral votes of any swing state (29, the same as New York). This results in an extraordinary amount of attention being focused on Florida and its Jewish community in presidential elections.

At first glance, the attention paid to Jews in Florida may be a bit puzzling. After all, Florida is only 3.4% Jewish (639,000, excluding 77,000 snowbirds — although some snowbirds do vote in Florida). Because Jews tend to have fewer children than others, Jews comprise a larger percentage of the population age 18 and over. (In fact, about half of Florida's Jews are age 65 and older.) Since well over 90% of Jews in Florida are registered to vote (nationally in 2008), and about 96% of registered Jews claim to have voted, Jews may actually constitute as much as 6% to 8% of Florida's electorate in 2012.

Most elections are won by tiny margins: 51% to 49%, 52% to 48%. (Some people call 55% to 45% a "landslide.") Thus, even a population group that is only 6% of the electorate can affect the outcome of an election, particularly in a state in which only 537 votes determined the winner of the 2000 presidential election.

A number of analysts believe that Mitt Romney must win Florida to unseat President Obama. That being the case, both candidates will pay significant attention to the Florida Jewish community. Traditionally, a parade of yarmulke-wearing politicians will visit the state's synagogues and Jewish community centers, making speeches focusing on the unbreakable bond between Israel and the United States, a strategy that assumes that Israel is the most important issue to Jewish voters.

The evidence suggests that while Israel is indeed an important issue to Jewish voters, it is not the key factor in determining how they vote. A national survey of Jewish voters just before the 2008 election showed that among 15 issues related to how Jews vote, Israel ranked eighth. Only 15% chose Israel as one of their top three issues.

If a candidate's stance on Israel was the exclusive deciding factor, then Florida would have voted for John McCain in 2008. Barack Obama was a relative unknown, and his policies on Israel were in doubt. Obama had to send Joe Biden to Florida to attempt to reassure the Jewish community that his heart was in the "right place." McCain, on the other hand, was a known quantity, with a long record support for Israel. Yet, 74% of Jews nationally voted for Obama (according to a new analysis of the Jewish vote by The Solomon Project, released this summer).

Does this mean that a candidate's stand on Israel does not matter to the Jewish community? Absolutely not. It certainly does. Any candidate with a clearly unacceptable stand on Israel will no doubt receive little Jewish support.

But it is other issues will help to determine the vote of the Florida Jewish community.

About half of Florida's Jewish population is elderly in comparison with 17% of other Floridians and only 13% of all Americans. This makes matters like Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid and end-of-life issues particularly important to them. As most Jews age 65 and over are retired and many of those still working are self-employed professionals, the unemployment rate affects fewer of Florida's Jews directly than is the case for other groups. Many, however, are concerned about or are providing financial assistance to unemployed children and grandchildren directly

affected by the economy. Furthermore, the sense of social justice places the unemployment rate among the issues of concern.

The vast majority of Florida's Jewish elderly have been life-long staunch members of the Democratic Party. They are not about to change affiliation now, particularly when the differences in the parties are more pronounced than ever before. The current Republican Party is very different from that of 30 years ago, as illustrated in the 2010 book "American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us" by Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell. The Republican Party's base has become one made up largely of right-wing religious conservatives.

Thirty years ago, one could be a Republican and be pro-choice, pro-gay and lesbian rights, pro-immigrant and pro-science. In 2011–2012, Republican candidates (in the primaries) tried to outdo one another with their opposition to abortion, gay rights, immigrants and science. Issues of social and economic justice are very important to most Jews, as Jews support abortion rights, same-sex marriage, birth control, stem-cell research as well as a reasonable and humane solution to the illegal immigrant issue at much higher rates than other Americans. Jews have graduated college at twice the rate of other Americans. They have an appreciation and a reverence for science, and cringe at statements doubting or denying the facts of evolution and climate change.

Paul Ryan's even more extreme views on some of these issues only exacerbate Romney's problem.

But doesn't Miami have a large Orthodox population, and aren't the Orthodox more likely to vote Republican? Yes, but only about 17% of Florida's Jews live in Miami, and only about 9% of them are Orthodox. No other Florida Jewish community is more than 4% Orthodox. Furthermore, the propensity of the Orthodox to vote Republican, while higher than that of other Jews, is still less than half.

In 2008, 23% of Jews supported McCain. The liberal Republican Romney who was governor of Massachusetts might have had some chance to make more than a minimal increase in that percentage. The Romney that Romney had to become to be chosen as the Republican nominee in 2012 will, at best, do about as well as McCain did in 2008.

Ira M. Sheskin is the director of the Jewish Demography Project of the Sue and Leonard Miller Center for Contemporary Judaic Studies at the University of Miami.