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IS THERE A FRENCH JEWISH VOTE?

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The Idea of a Jewish Vote in France / Methodology of the Poll / Drastic Shifts in the Jewish Vote / Absence of a Dominant Ideology Among Jews / A Dynamic, Young Community

THE IDEA OF A JEWISH VOTE IN FRANCE

During the 1981 French presidential elections, there emerged an issue without precedent on the French political scene—that of the “Jewish vote.” Notwithstanding that its existence is taken for granted, and that the Jewish segment of the French population is now carefully considered by French parties and candidates in their bid for votes, its parameters remain vague. Having become a political argument and electoral tactic for some, and a symbol of self-affirmation for others, it is still questionable as to whether a Jewish vote, as such, exists at all.

Few facts were available that would enable careful investigation of the issue until two years later, when a large-scale exit poll¹ was conducted by the Institut Francais d'Opinion Politique (IFOP) during the two rounds of municipal elections in March 1983. Thus, we can now begin to work out an understanding of the question, and in the process perhaps also reveal some hitherto little-known aspects of the French Jewish community.

METHODOLOGY OF THE POLL

Of the 13,745 people interviewed by pollsters as they left voting booths across the length and breadth of France, 180 (1.3 percent) were Jewish. While caution must be applied in assuming that such a sampling is representative, there are indications that it does reflect, in broad terms, the Jewish population in France. First, the percentage of Jews obtained in the sampling correlates with the current estimate that the French Jewish community numbers between 600,000 and 700,000. Second, the polling points were chosen at

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random with no effort to select localities with a high Jewish population density. Third, the polling procedure consisted of interviewing one out of four or five voters leaving the voting booth, with no prior knowledge of their religion or ethnic origin. Finally, the question of origin came at the end of the questionnaire so that it could not influence the respondents.

It should be noted that this is the first time such a method has been used in France in an attempt to obtain a representative sample of the French population and, indirectly, of French Jewry.

DRASTIC SHIFTS IN THE JEWISH VOTE

The poll shows that the Jewish electorate differed from the rest of the electorate in the 1981 and 1983 elections in that it voted more sharply to the left in 1981 than did the nation as a whole (65 percent as compared to 57 percent) and showed a more pronounced shift to the right in 1983 (59.7 percent as compared to 49 percent).

It is the latter shift which is significant. Among those who changed their vote from the left (in the second round of the presidential election) to the right (in the first round of the municipal elections), Jewish voters are three times more numerous than other voters. We can say, then, that generally the Jewish electorate is characterized by greater than average electoral mobility.

The Jews provided a proportionately large share (14 percent) of the Mitterrand supporters won over by the right. In this category we find 24 percent of Jewish voters, mainly trade unionists of the Force Ouvriere and young voters who were unemployed.

Finally, only 44 percent of Jews (as compared to 59 percent of the rest of the electorate) claimed to have voted on the basis of longstanding preference. However, this mobility seems to have manifested itself recently, at the most just several months after the 1981 presidential elections (31 percent of the Jews as opposed to 19 percent nationally).

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS	MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS	PERCENT OF JEWS	PERCENT OF OTHERS
From the left ⁽¹⁾ to	the left ⁽²⁾	40	49
From the right ⁽³⁾ to	the left	1	2
From the left to	the right ⁽⁴⁾	24	7
From the right to	the right	34	41

(1) Francois Mitterrand

(2) PC (Parti Communiste), PS (Parti Socialiste), PSU (Parti Socialiste Unifie), MRG (Mouvement des Radicaux), Extreme Gauche, Union de la Gauche-PS, Union de la Gauche-PC, Divers Gauche

(3) Valery Giscard d'Estaing

(4) UDF (Union pour la Democratie Francaise), RPR (Rassemblement pour la Republique), Extreme Droite, Union de la Droite-RPR, Union de la Droite-UDF

Thus, at least according to the balloting of 1981 and 1983, there does seem to have been an "electoral behavior" specific to the Jewish electorate, which, for the moment, is marked by a shift to the right.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that in the 1981 and 1983 elections the Jewish electorate voted in a way that reflected the voting pattern of the majority of the country. It was differentiated only in that it expressed itself more strongly in the direction of the electoral majority. That is why it is more accurate to refer to the concept of "electoral behavior" rather than to the "Jewish vote"—a notion which is more a product of political myth and ideology.

The concept of a "Jewish vote" presupposes the fulfillment of three conditions: (1) an exclusive, dominant ideological choice held by the electorate in question; (2) monolithic commitment of that electorate to the choice; and (3) effective, joint action by that electorate to influence the national vote in the direction of its choice.

As far as the results of these polls, though, we find that the Jewish electorate is neither dominated by a single, ideological choice, nor is there any sign of massive commitment in its electoral behavior. This being the case, there can be no coordinated effort by the electorate to influence the outcome of the national vote.

ABSENCE OF A DOMINANT IDEOLOGY AMONG JEWS

Regarding ideological choice, the data indicate that although Jewish voters express a strong inclination toward opposition (27 percent)—which is less, incidently, than the rest of the French population (29 percent)—they also display a high level of indecision, higher than the rest of the electorate (32 percent, as opposed to 23 percent).

The largest group of voters in the Jewish electorate, divided between the left and the right, is composed of people who do not vote in accordance with the classical rules of electoral debate (support, opposition, admonition), but who appear to decide on the basis of other criteria, of which we can learn little or nothing within the framework of the poll. We can say that there is, however, a high likelihood of a future shift from the present positions. Again, this points to the opposite of any strong ideological position.

The absence of a dominant ideology is also indicated by the issues which the Jewish voters see as determining their electoral choices: unemployment (46 percent), inflation (18 percent), and insecurity (13 percent). These are the same issues, by and large, that concern the rest of the French people. The issue of immigrants did not occupy the national electorate to a large degree in 1983 (only 7 percent); it occupied the Jewish voters even less (5 percent). In general, then, the concerns of this electorate are similar to those of the national electorate.

A major issue in the 1983 elections was the Mitterrand government's plan to virtually nationalize all private schools, including Catholic and Jewish schools. The Catholic establishment vehemently opposed this effort. Jews, however, were concerned three times less with this issue than was the rest of the electorate (3 percent versus 10 percent), although Jewish education is a central Jewish concern. Thus, response on the issue of private education goes furthest in disproving the hypothesis of a Jewish vote.

Just as we are unable to discern a single, ideological commitment, so there seems to be no massive and monolithic commitment in the electoral behavior of the Jewish group.

Asked to place themselves on a scale ranging from the extreme left to the extreme right (numbering from 1 to 8), the bulk of the Jewish voters placed themselves in the center (4 and 5) as did the majority of the general electorate, (although they placed themselves more strongly to the left of the center).

	Left							Right
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Jews(%)	3	5	12	28	22	11	3	1
Others(%)	4	10	15	16	18	13	5	3

This distribution is further confirmed by the distribution of the declared Jewish affiliation to the various political parties. They are divided among all parties (18 percent support the Rassemblement pour le Republique (RPR), as compared to 19 percent support by the overall French population), although with a closer affiliation to Parti Socialiste (PS) (32 percent as against 23 percent) and to the Mouvement des Radicaux Gauches (MRG) (9 percent versus 3 percent).

The Jewish community is even less "monolithic" when we examine details of its social structure. Here we find that the political and ideological choices come from diverse classes.

PROFESSION OF HEAD OF HOUSEHOLD

	Unemployed	Manual Workers	Employees	Junior Executives	Manu- facturers/ Tradesmen/ Artisans	Senior Executives	Profes- sionals
Jews	9	8	12	17	14	18	12
Others	12	15	16	18	7	10	5

Of the sample indicated, 44 percent are to be found in the upper half of the socio-professional scale (as opposed to 22 percent in the general population). In contrast, 29 percent of the sample belong to the middle-class category, which is almost equal to the middle-class percentage in the overall population (34 percent). Finally, 17 percent of this sample is at the lower end of the social scale (as opposed to 27 percent of the population as a whole).

Thus, it can be seen that the distribution of the French Jewish population covers the entire social spectrum. Within the Jewish community there exists the same number of tradesmen and artisans as junior executives. The percentage of employees and junior executives is very similar to that in the overall population.

This social distribution has not existed for more than one generation. When subjects were questioned as to the profession of their fathers when they (the respondents) were ten years old, 20 percent answered that their fathers were manual workers; 17.8 percent, employees; and 25 percent, that they belonged to the category of manufacturers/tradesmen/artisans. The share in the liberal professions has grown to 13.1 percent, junior executives to 6.4 percent, and senior executives to 6.2 percent. Thus, within the new generation of Jews, there exist half as many manufacturers/tradesmen/artisans, half as many workers, and three times more junior and senior executives.

The way the population votes is generally associated with the socio-professional class to which they belong. To the left, we find primarily the junior executives (25 percent) and senior executives (27 percent), as well as the unemployed (16 percent) and to a slightly lesser degree, employees (13.5 percent). To the right, one finds primarily the manufacturers/tradesmen/artisans (14.5 percent), professionals (19.5 percent), junior executives (21.5 percent), and manual workers and employees (12.5 percent). Although the socio-professional distribution of the Jewish electorate cuts right across the political spectrum, it can be noted nonetheless that the Jewish junior and senior executive vote far to the left of their colleagues, while Jewish workers and employees vote far more to the right.

Thus, while the Jewish population has different voting patterns from the general electorate, it is in itself not monolithic, but diversified. Regarding the "free" (experimental) schools issue, for example, it can be found that, despite the low interest displayed by Jewish voters as a whole (3 percent as opposed to 44 percent for the unemployed), Jewish employees view it as a decisive factor in their electoral choice (33.3 percent),³ with manual workers and professionals expressing no interest whatsoever (0 percent), and all other categories expressing only average interest (16.7 percent).

A DYNAMIC, YOUNG COMMUNITY

The results of the poll underline the diversity of the Jewish population and its presence in all sectors of the society. What emerges is a picture of a very dynamic, young community with fewer women at home; four times fewer retired people; more members employed, as compared to the rest of the population—a community imbued with a greater sense of optimism and a more enterprising spirit. The 18-25 and 35-49 age groups are better represented than their counterparts, and compared to their compatriots there are three times fewer Jews over the age of 65.

The degree of involvement in public life is higher: 32 percent regularly read a daily newspaper, as opposed to 27 percent of the rest of the population; 26 percent regularly read a news weekly, as compared with 20 percent; and 38 percent listen to the independent radio stations, as contrasted with 29 percent.

The essential question remains: How to understand the nature of this distinct electoral behavior which is not supported by a dominant ideology or by a strong awareness of identity? What comes into play, perhaps, is the concept of "community," that is, a social milieu with a distinct character, distinguished by common historical, cultural and ethnic origins, whose members interact in a particular way.

Such a relationship produces certain shared norms of behavior, but not necessarily a common political ideological choice. At this stage, the existence of a clearcut "Jewish vote" is unproven. The voting pattern of most Jews parallels that of French society at large, but apparently is subject to special concerns not yet identified. Thus, the initial results of this pioneering exit poll have only broken the ground for a large and more comprehensive study of the meaning of Jewish identity, or, on a wider scale, of communal and minority identities in modern France.

Notes

1. Sondage Sortie des Urnes (Post-Election Poll), March 6 and 13, 1983.
2. All figures are given unweighted.
3. Figures combined from both rounds of balloting.

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