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HOW NEW YORK JEWS VOTE: MYTHS AND REALITIES

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Among the many myths in popular circulation today are those which surround Jewish voting behavior in the United States. There are six common myths about the Jewish vote which do not bear up well under the scrutiny of research.

Myth 1: All Jews Vote

Voting participation involves two components: the proportion of eligible voters who are registered to vote and the number of eligible voters who actually turn out on election day.

True, the proportion of Jews who are registered and do vote (as compared to the general population) is inordinately high. Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC) figures indicate that at the beginning of 1984, three out of four eligible Jews in the New York metropolitan area were registered to vote. This compares favorably to the rest of the population of New York City who registered at a 50 percent rate.

However, the Jewish community cannot rest on its laurels. According to a 1983 JCRC study sponsored by the Scheuer Foundation, these statistics translated into 325,000 eligible Jews in the New York metropolitan area who were not registered to vote. Worse yet, four out of five of the unregistered Jews are under the age of 45.

During 1984, the JCRC mobilized its member agencies and other groups in New York in a major effort to increase the number of registered voters residing in 19 target New York state assembly districts in the metropolitan area. Jews represented a high proportion of the registered voters in each sample district.

A tracking of Board of Election registration figures between April, 1984 and April, 1985 disclosed a 9.8 percent increase in Jewish registration during that year. Some "yuppie" districts such as the Upper West Side of Manhattan showed a 33.6 percent increase in voter registration. Orthodox districts also showed major

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increases (e.g. Borough Park, +18.3 percent and Far Rockaway, +21.5 percent). The increase in Jewish voter registration in the five boroughs of New York City was estimated at between 85,000-90,000.

Registration is of no value if people do not vote. A study of the same 19 assembly districts indicates a slight absolute decrease in the Jewish voter turnout rate (68 percent in 1984 vs. 70 percent in 1982), but a rise in the total number of Jewish voters of 35,000-40,000. The 68 percent figure still represented a significant rise over the Jewish turnout rate in 1980, when less than half of New York City's eligible Jews (47 percent) voted.

Factors Affecting Turnout

This rise in voter participation was the result, at least in part, of a serious effort by the JCRC and others to increase Jewish turnout, but it must be noted that the presidential choices offered to the Jewish community in 1984 were certainly more palatable than in 1980. Walter Mondale, even with the "liability" of Jesse Jackson, was viewed much more positively than Jimmy Carter.

A reliable indicator of candidate satisfaction rather than party satisfaction can be found in the presidential primary elections. Carter was defeated 4:1 by Ted Kennedy in the 1980 New York presidential primary. Walter Mondale won the 1984 New York primary, with Gary Hart taking less than half (44 percent) of the Jewish vote.

Although Mondale was viewed more positively than Carter, he still had to deal with his association with Jesse Jackson. The National Exit Survey of the American Jewish Congress indicated that the votes of one out of three (34 percent) Jewish voters for Republican candidates in 1984 were strongly influenced by Jackson's campaign.

Even considering the Jackson factor, Mondale managed to consolidate most of the Carter and Anderson vote of 1980, and pick up some 1980 non-voters as well, according to precinct poll analyses by the JCRC. Reagan slightly increased his percentage of the New York Jewish vote, and also gained some 1980 non-voters. Even so, a third of the registered Jews did stay away from the polls, perhaps feeling that their vote would not make a difference in light of the "inevitable" landslide, or that they did not want to vote for either candidate.

The New York City mayoral primary of 1985 again demonstrated that the slippage of Jewish voting has been reversed. According to the NBC Exit Poll, close to one-third (32 percent) of the primary voters were Jewish, and the Jewish turnout rate (52.3 percent of the enrolled voters) was almost twice that of the non-Jewish rate. In the 1984 presidential primary, by comparison, Jews had comprised 26 percent of the primary voters.

Myth 2: Jews Always Vote Democratic

The JCRC Election Study indicated that in 1984, the New York City Jewish vote split 62:38 in favor of Mondale. NBC's New York State figure was 63:37. ABC reported a 70:30 split. In Massachusetts the split was 78:22. Yet although Mondale won the Jewish vote by a significant margin, he did not gain the plurality of many of his Democratic predecessors.

This vote represented another step in the steady erosion over the years of automatic Jewish identification with the Democratic party. Early survey data dealing with the Roosevelt years are unreliable, but most point to FDR garnering 90-95 percent of the Jewish vote. According to the Gallup Poll Index (November, 1972), Truman received 75 percent of the Jewish vote, Stevenson tallied 64 percent (1952) and 60 percent (1956), Kennedy received 82 percent, Johnson, 90 percent, and in 1976, Carter won 76 percent of the Jewish vote.

The JCRC Election Survey shows, however, that the pattern has not always been smooth. For example, although Humphrey did poll over 80 percent of the Jewish vote in 1968 in his race against Nixon, McGovern polled only 58 percent of the New York Jewish vote in 1972. It seems that a strong, sitting President who is known as a friend of Israel could gain a significant portion of that vote. The return of the Jewish vote to Carter and the Democrats in 1976 did not hold true in 1980. Then, 60 percent of the Jewish vote went to the Republican and Independent candidates - Reagan, 36 percent, and Anderson, 24 percent.

Jewish self-identification with the Democratic party also seems to be slowly eroding. ABC poll data indicate that 56 percent of Jews called themselves Democrats in 1980, but only 53 percent did so in 1984.

In New York, Jews have supported Republican candidates such as Jacob Javits for the

U.S. Senate, Nelson Rockefeller for Governor, and John Lindsay for mayor. A study of Jewish voting patterns in Westchester County shows considerable ticket splitting among Jewish voters. In 1985, the NBC Exit Poll of Democratic voters indicated that the favorable performance rating of Republican Senator Alfonse D'Amato by Jews was significantly higher than that of non-Jews.

Myth 3: Jews Vote as a Bloc

The aforementioned numbers indicate that Jews do not vote as a bloc. A close analysis of precinct data reveals that approximately one in four Jewish voters will consistently opt for conservative candidates, and approximately one in five can be labelled as a regular "swing voter," one who will readily change his/her vote based on candidates and issues. Similarly, ABC Poll data indicate that 16 percent of Jews call themselves Republican and 31 percent are Independent.

Two other phenomena bode for continued change in Jewish voting patterns. First, young Jews are becoming more conservative. Recent studies of entering college freshmen (see *Jewish College Freshmen - An Analysis of Three Studies* by Geraldine Rosenfeld of the American Jewish Committee) show that while these freshmen are more liberal than their non-Jewish peers, they are more conservative than their parents. This is borne out by Survey Research Center (University of Michigan) data that show that younger Jews are voting more conservatively, although not as regularly, than those of their parents' generation. In 1984, there emerged a Jewish "Yuppies for Reagan" that paralleled similar non-Jewish phenomena.

Second, the 1984 campaign focused attention on the Orthodox Jewish community, which currently comprises approximately 12 percent of the population in the New York metropolitan area. The Satmar Hassidic community of Williamsburg voted 4:1 in favor of President Reagan, and communities such as Kew Garden Hills and Borough Park voted 2:1 for the Republican ticket.

Myth 4: Jews are a Single Issue Constituency

True, support for Israel among the American Jewish community is solid. Yet, in the 1984 Presidential race, Israel barely emerged as an issue.

Once both candidates were perceived as being strong supporters of Israel, the forum quickly shifted to other issues.

In its Exit Poll, ABC asked which issues were important to respondents in making their presidential choice. Interestingly, the option mentioned most often was "My candidate's stand on the nuclear weapons freeze (30 percent)," followed by "My candidate's stand on abortion (25 percent)," followed by "My candidate's stand on equal rights for women" and "the Reagan/Mondale debates (22 percent)."

One area in Brooklyn covered by the JCRC Election Study had an overwhelming majority of senior citizens. This area voted for Mondale 4:1. One might say that these voters had Social Security and Medicaid on their minds more than any other voter preference criterion.

Although the Jewish community's advocacy on behalf of Israel and Soviet Jewry are often perceived as particularly Jewish issues, the Jewish community often approaches these issues from a universalist standpoint. Soviet Jewry is not only an issue of Jews living under an oppressive regime, but one of basic human rights. As such, it is logical that the Jewish community is in the forefront of the fight to end apartheid in South Africa and of many other "decent" causes.

On the other hand, in ABC's Exit Poll, only one Jew in six mentioned "the Moral Majority's support of Ronald Reagan (17 percent)" as an important issue in their choice for president. Still, the majority of Jews do espouse many liberal positions which are diametrically opposed to those of the Moral Majority.

While looking at the data, one might posit that the key variable in Jewish voting behavior is that of individual freedom. There is a perception that when society starts to dictate issues of private morality, then it might also impose sanctions restricting the rights of minority groups, including Jews.

According to Steven M. Cohen, who conducted the study, *The Political Attitudes of American Jews, 1984*, for the American Jewish Committee, Jews still perceive themselves as "outsiders" in American society and, therefore, Jews identify with those who are left-of-center. 77 percent of Jews believe that anti-Semitism in America may become a serious problem. Of all

respondents, 35 percent believe that most or many conservatives are anti-Semitic, while only 7 percent of liberals are labelled as such. They perceive more danger from the right than from the left.

Jewish attitudes toward issues of individual freedom manifest themselves in interesting ways in this study. For example, although Jews are clearly troubled by the visibility of gays, they are pro-gay rights by 9:1. Similar splits are found on questions of abortion and equal rights for women, which are also issues of individual freedom. Both these issues are supported at a 9:1 rate in the Jewish community. However, it should not be assumed that Jews embrace the entire liberal agenda - Jews are in favor of capital punishment by 2:1.

Another facet of the personal freedom issue relates to church-state separation. While Jewish views on church-state issues are the inverse of the general population's, Jews are only 2:1 against tuition tax credits or silent meditation.

Perhaps one explanation for the comparatively lower status of the church-state issue in the collective Jewish mind is the comparatively lower status of religion itself within that psyche. According to the Religion in America Gallup Poll of March, 1984, only one in four Jews indicated that religion was "very important in their life." This answer is less than half of any other major group. Many in organized religion feel that Jewish efforts against school prayer, etc. are based on an anti-religion view, rather than as supporting religious freedom.

Myth 5: Jews Vote for Jews

As stated earlier, Jews vote on the basis of issues, and on their evaluation of the qualities of individual candidates. Rockefeller was able to attract a significant portion (and often the majority) of the Jewish community against Jewish opponents. Robert Wagner defeated a Jewish opponent in the Democratic mayoral primary (Arthur Levitt) and went on to victory over a Jewish Republican opponent (Louis Lefkowitz). In both races, Wagner carried the Jewish vote. In recent years in dozens of races, be it Moynihan vs. Abzug, Carey vs. Samuels, or Cuomo vs. Lehrman, Jews broke ethnic ranks and voted for the non-Jewish candidates in greater numbers than for their Jewish rival.

Myth 6: There are Too Few Jews to Make a Difference

The 1984 Reagan landslide was, most likely, a statistical aberration. Unless the fabled historic realignment among the nation's voters has taken place, results of future presidential elections are more likely to resemble those of 1980.

Reagan's 1980 plurality in New York was only 165,000. 90,000 of those votes can be identified as Jewish "shiffters" from 1976 Carter voters, in addition to the 100,000 Jewish votes for Anderson. Similar results occurred in Florida, Illinois, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Ohio and Pennsylvania, all states with high Jewish populations. If Carter would have maintained his 1976 edge among the Jewish population in 1980, the results might have been different.

In New York, Jews comprise approximately 13 percent of the November electorate. Yet because of turnout patterns, they comprise up to 40 percent of the primary voters. In the foreseeable future, the primaries are where the greatest Jewish electoral impact will be felt.

Future Jewish Clout

With more and more Jews voting in differing patterns, no party or candidate can take the Jewish vote for granted. A more realistic approach to Jewish political behavior should reveal targets of opportunity for both parties. The Jewish vote is up for grabs and this vote can make a difference for the foreseeable future.

Future Jewish clout will be felt in three arenas: the polling booth, political education (the direct lobbying of legislators by concerned constituents), and campaign contributions.

The Jewish population in the United States is shrinking and, without intervention, Jewish clout will ultimately decrease. Yet Jewish political power, if honed to perfection and used effectively, could and should achieve a net increase in the immediate future. And that, to answer the time-honored question, is good for the Jews.

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