

To: Interested Parties
From: Jim Gerstein
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Making Sense of the Jewish Vote

As November 2012 approaches, we can expect the familiar election year battle cry of Republican, conservatives, and Middle East hawks to intensify as they argue that “the Jewish vote is up for grabs” or Democrats are on the verge of losing their Jewish support. Most of the time, these arguments invoke anecdotes from pundits or unnamed Jewish leaders who are “concerned about President Obama’s Israel policy.” Other times, they distort or confuse a data point from a survey to generate an entertaining headline. The problem with these efforts is that they are divorced from historical and current evidence, yet somehow manage to drive a false narrative that takes on a life of its own.

This memo seeks to help observers make sense of the Jewish vote and put it in perspective by drawing on decades of voting behavior, current polling, and noting how to assess the ongoing releases of Jewish survey data that will take place between now and the election. With a national election fast approaching and efforts to politicize national security issues, it is important for observers to distinguish between conjecture about Jewish voters’ attitudes and evidence of Jewish voters’ attitudes.

Historical Perspective

It is no secret that Jews constitute a base constituency for the Democratic Party, voting consistently in large majorities for Democratic congressional and presidential candidates. Recent elections and longer term vote history provide a solid guideline for putting the Jewish vote into perspective as people try to understand how the latest news or unfolding events may impact the Jewish vote.

- **Presidential Vote.** With the exception of the 1980 election, exit polls have reported that the Democratic presidential candidate has received between 64 and 80 percent of the Jewish vote in every election going back to the first national exit

poll conducted in 1972.¹ Even on Republicans’ best election day with Jewish voters, Ronald Reagan only received 39 percent of the Jewish vote (compared to Jimmy Carter’s 45 percent and John Anderson’s 14 percent).

- ***The Last Election: 2010 Mid-Terms.*** In the 2010 mid-term election landslide – which cost the Democrats 63 seats and was the biggest loss for any party in a House election since 1938 – Jews still voted for Democrats by a 66 to 31 percent margin.² In fact, the 2010 Jewish vote was more Democratic than other Democratic base groups such as unmarried women (61 percent), Hispanics (60 percent) and voters under 30 years-old (55 percent). Compared to other religious groups, Jews voted less Democratic than “other” (74 percent) and “none” (68 percent), but more Democratic than Catholics (44 percent), Protestants (38 percent), and white Evangelicals (19 percent).³

2010 Mid-Term Election Results	
	% Democrat / % Republican
Jewish	66 / 31
Unmarried women	61 / 38
Hispanics	60 / 38
Voters under 30 years-old	55 / 42
Catholics	44 / 54
Protestants	38 / 59
White Evangelicals	19 / 77
Other (religion)	74 / 24
None (religion)	68 / 30

- ***Jewish Vote History vs. Jewish Vote Prognosticating.*** The 2010 Jewish vote is notable for how well Democrats performed with Jews in the Republican landslide. But it is also a reminder that prognostications of a Jewish revolt against the Democrats have yet to come true. Some of the off-base predictions in recent years include:

¹ It is important to emphasize that exit poll results should not be overstated and have their own limitations, particularly with small constituencies such as Jewish voters. In fact, the 2010 mid-term election exit poll did not ask a vote question with enough Jews in its national survey for the poll administrators to release a result. In order to gauge the Jewish vote, we need to look at a variety of pre- and post-election sources. For an excellent analysis of the 2004 presidential vote which effectively highlights the complexity in determining the Jewish vote, see *The Jewish Vote in 2004: An Analysis*, conducted by The Mellman Group and GQR for the Solomon Project. http://www.gqr.com/articles/1215/727_The%20Jewish%20Vote%20in%20in%202004.pdf

² There were no exit poll results reported for Jewish voters in 2010. The figure cited is from J Street’s election night national survey of 1,000 Jews who voted in the 2010 election.

³ There were no exit poll results reported for unmarried women. The figure cited is from Democracy Corps’ election night national survey of 897 voters in the 2010 election, including 184 unmarried women.

- In January 2004, the Director of the Republican Jewish Coalition forecasted: "It is now undeniable that there is a major shift taking place among Jewish voters. At this point, the question isn't will more Jews support the president, but rather, how many more will do so?"⁴ The result: John Kerry received 74 percent of the Jewish vote.
- In August 2008, the Republican National Committee's Vice Chair of Jewish Outreach predicted: "I believe he [McCain] is going to get unprecedented Jewish support... Hopefully, 40 percent."⁵ The result: Barack Obama received 78 percent of the Jewish vote.
- It is not only Republicans who misread or make erroneous speculation about the Jewish vote. The May 2008 headline from the JTA, "Dems Voice Real Fears over Obama's Appeal" and an August 2010 New York Times op-ed by Charles Blow reflect some of the fundamental misunderstandings of the Jewish vote. Blow's argument is particularly worrisome because of the influence of his publication and the baselessness of his claim that, "Is President Obama good for the Jews? For more and more Jewish-Americans, the answer is no."
- ***Impact of the Jewish Vote.*** While it is often reported that the Jewish vote can determine the outcome in key swing states such as Florida or Pennsylvania and ultimately decide the election, this argument disregards historical precedent and ignores the many other constituencies that constitute a much larger portion of the electorate. Jews constituted four percent of the electorate in Florida and Pennsylvania in 2008, which means that it requires a drop of 25 percentage points in a candidate's Jewish vote to move one percent of the electorate in those states. For example, let's assume Obama received 78 percent of the Florida Jewish vote in 2008 (the same Jewish percentage as he received nationally). If the composition of the 2012 electorate remained the same and all other constituencies had the same partisan vote breakdown as in 2008, the Jewish vote would need to drop to 53 percent in order to push Obama from his 51 percent Florida vote share in 2008 to 50 percent in 2012. Not only is that an incredibly unlikely shift that defies history and current polling, it is even more preposterous when looking at past results in Florida. With the exception of the infamous 2000 election, Florida has never had a presidential election decided by less than one percent since it joined the Union in 1845.

⁴ http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/03/05/AR2006030500898_2.html

⁵ <http://www.njjewishnews.com/njjn.com/081408/njMcCainAllyPredicting.html>

	Jewish Population %	2008 Vote Results (Obama/McCain)
New Jersey	7	57 / 42
Florida	4	51 / 48
Pennsylvania	4	55 / 44
New York	3	63 / 36
Nevada	3	55 / 43
Ohio	2	52 / 47

Understanding New Polls and Releases

Despite the voting results of the past 40 years and the track record of claims that *this will be the election when Jews vote Republican*, history suggests that the stories will continue in the 2012 election. As new polls of Jewish voters get released and shape storylines between now and the 2012 election, there are several aspects to consider when examining the results.

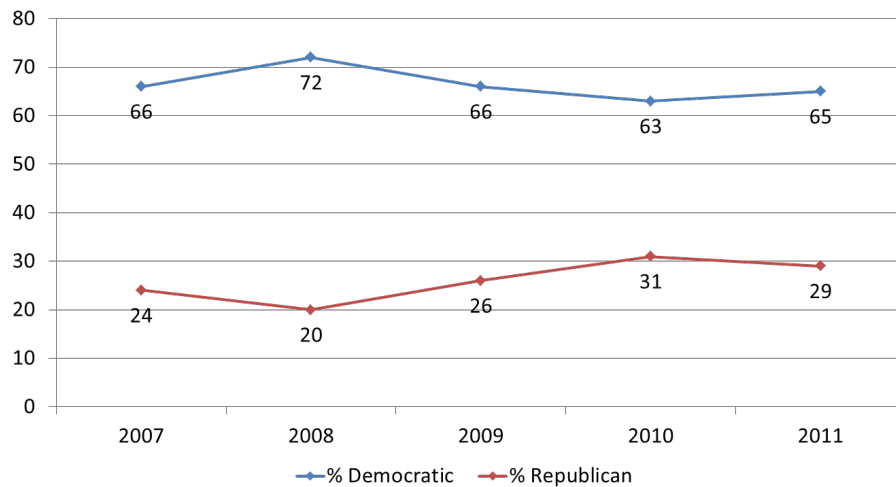
- **Job Approval – Part I.** Gallup will periodically aggregate its Jewish respondents from its nightly tracking surveys over an extended period of time, and report on President Obama’s job approval among American Jews.⁶ This standard measure is an excellent way of understanding where a president stands with the public, and it is particularly relevant for understanding Jewish voters because the trends can be compared with other constituencies and the country as a whole.
- **Job Approval – Part II.** While Gallup has consistently shown a 13-15 point gap between President Obama’s job approval among Jews and his job approval among all Americans, the results undercut a frequently made, but factually erroneous, claim that Obama has a policy toward Israel that alienates Jewish voters. Gallup concluded that its results “call into question attempts to link a decline in Obama’s approval among Jews to his statements or policies on [Israel] matters important to Jewish policymakers and lobbyists.”
- **Job Approval – Part III.** Job approval is an important measure, but it is critical to understand that job approval does not equate with a candidate’s vote share. That is, Obama’s 54 percent job approval in Gallup’s last release in mid-September does not mean the President will get 54 percent of the vote. In fact, job approval with a base constituency often lags behind a candidate’s vote due to a variety of

⁶ Along with Pew, this is the most reliable source of Jewish data because the respondents are reached on landlines and cell phones through random digit dialing (RDD) which provides a true probability sample. The samples in other Jewish surveys, such as the American Jewish Committee or J Street, are derived from listed sample or panels. These surveys enable researchers to dig deeper into questions that are not asked in Gallup or Pew, and are reliable but have limitations.

dynamics, most important of which is the antipathy toward the other political party.

- **Party Identification.** The other political measure which is often reported by taking aggregate results of Jews over time in national surveys is party identification. The Pew Research Center recently released data among different religious groups, providing a good opportunity to highlight how to look at this data.
 - Pew's release showed that 65 percent of Jews currently identify themselves as Democrats, reinforcing their standing as a base Democratic constituency.
 - The headlines from this data focused on Democratic decline from 72 percent in 2008 and a Republican increase from 20 percent in 2008 to 29 percent in 2011.⁷ But this emphasis fails to portray the full picture and provides a misleading sense that Democrats are falling with Jews. Looking back to Pew's 2007 data (which shows Democratic Party identification at 66 percent) and Pew's 2009 data (which also shows Democratic Party identification at 66 percent), it becomes clearer that the 72 percent Democratic Party identification in 2008 was a high point that took place in the midst of a strong Democratic showing at the end of a historically unpopular Republican presidency. While George W. Bush had an 18 percent job approval with American Jews toward the end of his presidency, this was likely the primary driver in the higher Democratic Party identification and serves as a good reminder for us to keep perspective when looking at the latest releases.

⁷ <http://www.jta.org/news/article/2012/02/03/3091503/pew-poll-suggests-jewish-shift-to-gop>



- The Pew results are very similar to Gallup’s and J Street’s results during the same time period, which ranged from 65 to 70 percent. The bottom line: Jewish party identification has fluctuated in the mid-60s to low 70s for Democrats and low 20s to high 20s for Republicans over the past five years. These fluctuations reflect a mixture of minor shifts, small sample sizes, the Bush dynamic at the end of his presidency, and provide one key lesson – Jews remain one of the most highly Democratic constituencies in the United States, and we are not in the midst of anything approaching a sea change.
- **Head-to-Head Match-Ups.** As horserace numbers become available, it is necessary to keep in mind that polls taken more than a few weeks before the election historically understate a candidate’s support among voters in a base constituency. For example, a J Street poll in July 2008 showed Obama leading McCain 62-32 among Jews. Gallup’s polling showed Obama ahead of McCain 61-32 among Jews in May 2008, and then increasing his lead to 69-25 in September and 74-25 in October. Similarly, among Hispanic voters, Obama’s margin over McCain moved from 59-29 in June 2008 to 67-31 in the exit polls.⁸

The Driving Forces Behind the Jewish Vote

The consistent and enduring Jewish vote for Democrats is rooted in shared progressive values, intense opposition toward political conservatives and the Republican Party, and easily passing the threshold of providing sufficient support for Israel. This is a potent combination that

⁸ <http://www.gallup.com/poll/108532/hispanic-voters-solidly-behind-obama.aspx>

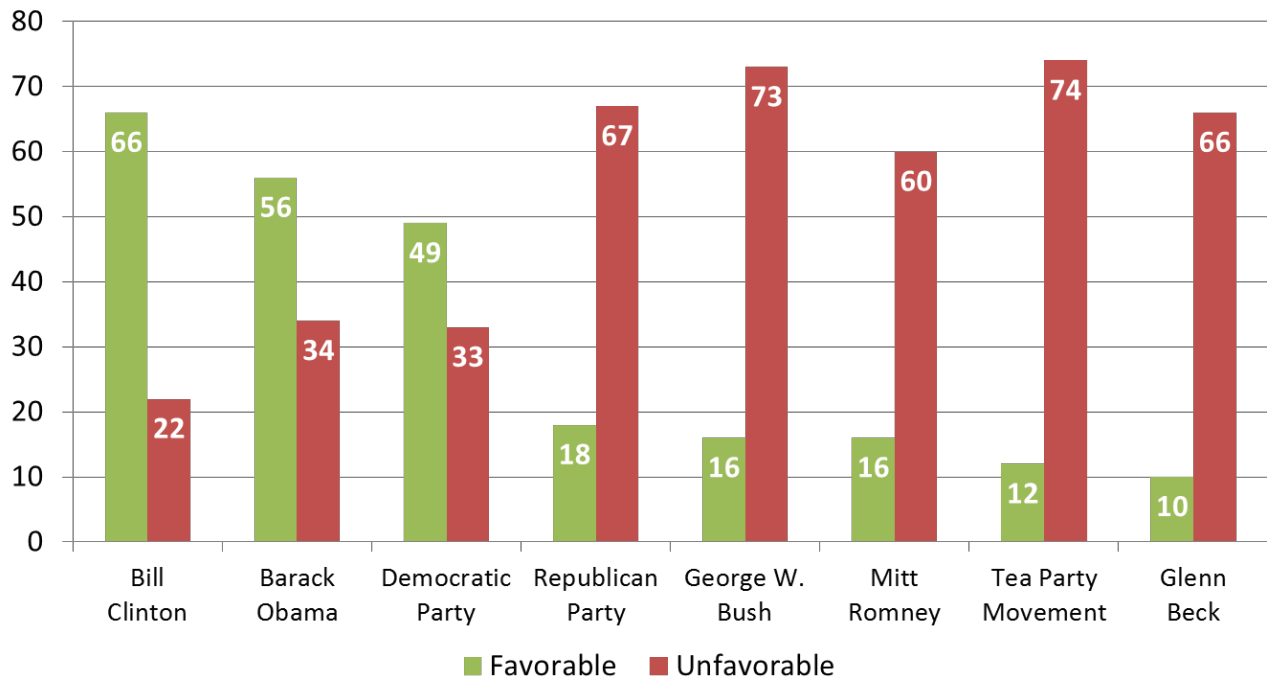
has withstood strong political winds such as the 1984 and 2010 Republican landslides, and make Jews one of the most reliable Democratic constituencies.

- ***Shared Values.*** According to Gallup, Jews are the most liberal religious group in America – and more than twice as liberal as the country as a whole. In Gallup’s last release of ideology by religion in January 2010, Jews (43 percent liberal / 20 percent conservative) were more liberal than Catholics (19 percent liberal / 39 percent conservative), Protestants/other Christians (16 percent liberal / 46 percent conservative), and no religion/atheist/agnostic (39 percent liberal / 19 percent conservative).⁹ And on a different measure, but one that conveys Jews’ political beliefs and values, Gallup found in 2007 that Jews opposed the Iraq war far more than any other religious group. The fact that no high profile Jewish organization actively opposed the war underscores the gap between the priorities and positions of most Jewish groups and most Jewish voters.¹⁰
- ***Intense Opposition to Republicans.*** It is hard to overstate the antipathy that Jews express toward political conservatives and the Republican Party. Whether it is Glenn Beck (66 percent unfavorable) and the Tea Party movement (74 percent unfavorable) or George W. Bush (73 percent unfavorable) and Mitt Romney (67 percent unfavorable), Jews fundamentally distrust the individuals and institutions that define the various wings of the Republican Party.¹¹

⁹ <http://www.gallup.com/poll/125021/mormons-conservative-major-religious-group.aspx>

¹⁰ <http://www.gallup.com/poll/26677/among-religious-groups-jewish-americans-most-strongly-oppose-war.aspx>

¹¹ http://2011poll.s3.amazonaws.com/J_Street_Survey_July%202011_Final_Results.pdf



- Jewish Voting Priorities.** The economy was overwhelmingly the dominant issue for Jews (and the rest of the country) in the 2008 and 2010 election, and it will be again in 2012. Other top issues in the past two elections were the war in Iraq, health care, and national security and terrorism. Not only do these issues represent stark contrasts between Republicans and Democrats, but they also mark the areas where President Obama has had the signature accomplishments of his first term — ending the war in Iraq, the Osama bin Laden operation and health care reform. With unemployment falling in recent months and consumer confidence rising,¹² the possibility of an economic recovery this year raises Obama’s prospects with Jewish voters. Conversely, Obama’s support among Jews will suffer if the recovery stalls, though the political fallout is likely to be mitigated by the progressive ideological leanings of American Jews whose perspective tends to be more like Warren Buffett’s than Mitt Romney’s.
- The Role of Israel.** Contrary to pundits’ incessant focus on the impact that Israeli-related issues have on the Jewish vote, the fact is that Israel is simply not a voting priority for American Jews. Candidates need to pass a threshold of being sufficiently supportive of Israel, and then Jewish voters quickly move on to other issues that affect their daily lives.

 - Unlike the economy which dominates the issue environment (62 percent of Jews cited it as a top voting determinant in 2010), Israel

¹² <http://www.bloomberg.com/consumer-comfort-index/>

ranks toward the bottom of the list of top issues and was only cited by 7 percent of Jews who voted in the 2010 election as one of the top two issues determining their vote.

2010 Vote Priorities for Jewish Voters	
	Top 2 Issues
The economy	62
Health care	31
The deficit and govt spending	18
Social Security and Medicare	16
Taxes	14
Terrorism and national security	13
Education	12
Israel	7
The environment	7
Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan	6
Illegal immigration	6
Energy	4

- Even though they do not vote based on Israel, American Jews do follow news about Israel and tend to hold progressive positions about America’s role in the Arab-Israeli conflict. A large majority (57 percent) support a comprehensive agreement along the Clinton parameters and 67 percent want the United States to play an active role in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict even if it means publicly stating its differences with both parties. While there is some opposition to President Obama’s handling of the Arab-Israeli conflict – 30 percent of Jews say they disagree with his policies on the conflict – this is largely driven by the bloc of Republican voters that constitute about one-quarter of American Jews. The low impact of Israel-related issues is apparent in the finding that President Obama’s overall approval rating is 16 percentage points higher (60 percent) than his approval on handling the Arab-Israeli conflict (44 percent).¹³

¹³ http://2011poll.s3.amazonaws.com/J_Street_Survey_July%202011_Final_Results.pdf and http://jstreet.org/wp-content/uploads/images/J_Street_National_Survey_Results.pdf

Jewish Financial Support Continues

There has been speculation about Jewish donors and whether their campaign contributions to President Obama are up or down. Given Obama's prodigious fundraising, it is rather silly to claim that his Jewish (or other) fundraising is drying up. Because the FEC does not require religion on contribution disclosures, there is no systematic accounting of whether Jewish giving is rising or falling. But we do have over \$250 million worth of evidence thus far¹⁴ that Obama continues his remarkable fundraising, leaving us with the two possibilities that either Jewish support has not fallen or it is not as central as assumed.

- ***Equal Enthusiasm Among Republican and Democratic donors.*** In a July 2011 J Street survey of American Jews, 16 percent reported giving to Obama's 2008 campaign and 4 percent reported giving to McCain's 2008 campaign. Interestingly, this 4-to-1 ratio reflects the ratio in the 2008 Jewish vote. But more importantly, virtually the same number of past donors to either Obama (82 percent) and McCain (80 percent) said they already have contributed or will contribute to the campaign. This data suggests that there is no gap in enthusiasm between Democratic and Republican Jewish donors.

Conclusion

Last July, Obama held a 63-24 lead over Mitt Romney in a J Street poll of 800 American Jews, and the Obama lead grew to 70-27 after allocating undecided voters by their party identification. The 2012 election is a long way off, and much can change between now and November, but the President is well-positioned to have another strong showing with Jewish voters. As the bi-annual claims of Democratic decline with Jews resurface over the next 8 months, it is important to keep perspective: the only problem that Obama and Democrats have with Jewish voters is that there are not more of them.

¹⁴ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/02/17/obama-fundraising-january-29-million_n_1284114.html