

Where Jews Stand: A Roundtable

Tune in to a heated conversation on what Jews think as we head into the 2012 election cycle.

Judith L. Lichtman: *What do we know about ourselves as Jews that will inform how we think about the upcoming election?*

Raphael Sonenshein: The Jewish dilemma in politics is always Hillel's dilemma: "If I'm not for myself, who will be for me? If I'm only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?" Jews have to find a balance between protecting their interests and pursuing a moral vision. It's been most clearly stated by Milton Himmelfarb: "Jews live like Episcopalians and vote like Puerto Ricans." Jews are overwhelmingly white but don't follow the behavior pattern of white voters. Balancing self-interest and belief is really at the heart of the Jewish political stance.

Larry Greenfield: The Jewish political conversation and vote are broadening as we increasingly find Jewish intellectual diversity, instincts, and influence in both parties.

With left-wing politics deteriorating vis-à-vis Israel, the Jewish agenda and Jews are being welcomed into the heights of conservative economic and foreign policy thinking.

Peter A. Joseph: There are bedrock issues that will always speak to the progressive voter, the self-image of most American Jews. These issues include reproductive rights, gun control, environmental protection, and concern for the needy. Regrettably, Israel is fast becoming a less important issue for the broad span of American Jewry. Thinking about Israel requires a nuanced conversation. I wouldn't necessarily characterize left-wing politics as detrimental to Israel. Rather, the issue is: If you are committed to a secure state of Israel at peace with its neighbors, can you respectfully disagree with the policies of a particular government? Some of the divisiveness we see today goes directly to this point. However, at base, the Jewish community is still very committed to a democratic and pluralistic vision of Israel and to a progressive agenda.

Judith L. Lichtman: *A couple of you have hinted at a polarization in the Jewish electorate. Is there, anymore, a Jewish vote? Is there a gender gap in the Jewish vote? Is there a generational gap in the Jewish vote?*

Peter A. Joseph: I think the community is moving in a variety of directions. Will we embrace the pluralism of the next generation and

the different directions they choose to go? For young people, will Israel be a central concern? What Jewish sensibilities will determine their political outlook?

Raphael Sonenshein: I think there's still an overwhelmingly Jewish vote. As far back as 1948, every presidential election begins with a discussion of whether this is the year when the Jewish vote evaporates or becomes a Republican vote. And astonishingly, it never seems to happen. The most recent time was in 2008. The biggest political division among Jews is religiosity, not age. Answering the question: "Are you Orthodox?" will determine a lot of internal faction questions.

The great majority of Jewish voters will vote for the Democratic candidate for president and, historically, even greater numbers vote for Democratic congressional candidates. There seems to be a greater defection of Jews in presidential races than in congressional races. Though I hate to make predictions, I'd be willing to say that the Jewish vote will be largely in the Democratic camp in 2012.

Larry Greenfield: I will boldly predict that the national Republican Jewish vote will grow from 22 to 35 percent. The growth is partially a result of the fact that younger voters are not voting for FDR's 20th consecutive term. Some of the sociological ties to the urban Democratic agenda are fading as liberal politics is fading — it's a comment that Obama's policies are not succeeding. The presidency is failing, and the independent voter in America has turned sharply against President Obama.

There is a coalition to broaden the Jewish vote: Persian Jews, Israelis, Russian Jews, religious Jews, younger Jews, national security Jews, post-9/11 Jews, and, frankly, Jews who are warmly reciprocating the friendship from pro-Israel Christians. That coalition is getting stronger, not weaker. It's true that urban, secular Jews historically have leaned Democrat when both parties offer pro-Israel candidates. But it's not our father's Democrat party anymore. While JFK, "Scoop" Jackson, and Joe Lieberman were once Democrat centrists who advocated for peace through strength, that wing of the party has been eclipsed by an ideological tax and spend, bullying big government crowd, and an

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ISRAEL

"DEMOCRATS FOR ISRAEL" BUTTON, DATE UNKNOWN

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Peter A. Joseph is president of the Israel Policy Forum, a policy and advocacy organization that mobilizes communal leaders within the mainstream American Jewish community in support of a two-state solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. He serves on the board of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. Mr. Joseph is the chair of Trenton Fuel Works LLC, a start-up company that converts compostable food waste into various chemical and energy products.



Raphael Sonenshein is chair of the division of politics, administration, and justice at California State University, Fullerton, where he is a professor of political science and public administration. He writes about Jews and American politics, and has a regular column called "The Jewish Vote" in the *Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles*.

Judith L. Lichtman moderated the conversation. Lichtman is senior adviser and past president at the National Partnership for Women & Families, a firm that helped ensure passage of some of the most important legal protections for American women and families, including the Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978 and the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993.

irresolute approach to national security affairs. In 2012, Obama is a different kind of foreign policy candidate. He said that he wanted to put daylight between the U.S. and Israel. He said that he has to "deal" with the prime minister of Israel. He has broken the tradition of bipartisan foreign policy support for the U.S./Israel relationship, and I think he's going to pay a big price in the polls.¹

Peter A. Joseph: I take strong issue with the statement that President Obama has broken a tradition of bilateral support for Israel. The administration's efforts on behalf of Israel at the U.N. and elsewhere are a case in point. There is often some level of tension between the White House and Jerusalem during times of active U.S. engagement. Furthermore, to say that Republicans will capture 35 percent of the Jewish vote is hardly a major mandate for the GOP.

Judith L. Lichtman: Will Israel be used as a wedge issue in 2012?

Raphael Sonenshein: The Republican gamble with Jews is a mistake. Aside from Israel, Republicans adopt positions that are in opposition to where most Jews are. The most pro-choice group in the U.S. is Jewish women, according to the polls. The Republican position is largely unacceptable to whole sectors of the Jewish community. And the economic positions of the Republicans are just not friendly to what most Jews believe.

To argue that Jews will abandon their beliefs because of a fairly over-the-top argument that the Democrats are not supportive of Israel — when the great majority of the party's members of Congress are overwhelmingly pro-Israel — seems unconvincing. And it was President Obama who sent bunker-buster weapons to Israel that can be used to destroy Iranian nuclear sites — weapons that President Bush refused to send. While Obama has gotten himself in some hot water with [Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu, Netanyahu has picked fights with both of the last Democratic presidents, Clinton and Obama, by playing American domestic politics, which is never a good idea for an Israeli leader. I really think support for Israel is pretty much bipartisan.

Larry Greenfield: Let's break this down into domestic issues and national security, foreign policy, Israel issues. Of course, I kindly disagree that Jews vote monolithically on domestic issues. Jews have thrived under free enterprise

economics. But Obama's progressive bureaucratic state is different from the economies of President Kennedy or centrist members of either party. The Occupy Wall Street movement, big government liberalism, crony capitalism, corruption, the failed economy, high unemployment, and the lack of a budget out of the Democratic Senate — these are all turning off centrists and independents, among whom I would count many Jews.

On national security and Israel, Obama's foreign policy is a disaster for the bipartisan U.S.-Israel relationship. That's not overheated rhetoric. That's the analysis of Israelis. Left-wingers can't tolerate a Likud leader in Israel. Obama once said, "You don't have to be pro-Likud to be pro-Israel,"² an astonishingly partisan position and meandering into the internal politics of another country, our closest ally.

Raphael Sonenshein: I could basically argue all of your points. It's not my practice to leave political arguments unanswered. But since we're not debating Obama's record, I'll stipulate that I disagree completely with Larry, but I'll leave it with that.

Peter A. Joseph: For the record, I completely agree with Raphe's sentiments here. It is difficult to respond to such a series of statements proffered as self-evident.

Larry Greenfield: I have a different view, a different impulse, and a different library. I don't think Israel is a wedge issue. Rather, the president's foreign policies have served to appease our enemies and bully our allies — from Honduras to Poland, the Czech Republic, and Israel. And the administration's strategies — from "engaging Iran" to resetting policy with Russia — have failed. The appointment of an ambassador to Syria, the tilt toward Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the failure to stand with the dissidents of Iran, and the hostile remarks by administration officials about Israel all send signals to Israel's enemies.

Judith L. Lichtman: Raphael spoke about Jewish women being among the strongest segment of the pro-choice voting electorate. What role do you think this issue and other domestic issues will play in the election?

Peter A. Joseph: In its broad reach, the American Jewish community is highly sensitive to core social issues, and it still believes that government can be a positive force in the quality of life of its citizenry. Clearly, the current poisoned partisanship is corrosive, but

¹ See "Obama and Israel," November 2011, at discoverthenetworks.org: A Guide to the Political Left, www.discoverthenetworks.org/viewSubCategory.asp?id=1521.
² Ibid.

it is not solely the result of “failed” policies. President Obama inherited the worst conceivable set of economic conditions and made some very tough decisions. American Jewish voters will see that and they are not going to allow political rhetoric to lead them away from their principles.

Raphael Sonenshein: The economy is driving support for Obama down in every group: Hispanics, Jewish voters, etc. People from all walks of life are waiting for the economy to get better. The great majority of Jews are more to the left than white voters as a whole, but they also fall along a wide spectrum from the left to the center, and, with some, to the right. In two areas, the Jewish community is quite distinctive: the issue of choice and, believe it or not, the issue of science. The Republican Party is becoming anti-science, and that is as damaging among Jewish voters as the Republican’s position on abortion.

Larry Greenfield: I would consider that an unfair characterization. There’s a wide respect for science among conservatives, from doctors and scientists to philanthropists to those advocating pathways to domestic energy exploration. Conservatives are not shutting down scientific debate on global warming; the left is. Obama promised to be for everybody — the purple states, not just red states and blue states. But, it’s been very much “my way or the highway.” He’s been unable to gain bipartisan support. As independents abandon Obama, Jewish voters will also abandon what turns out to be a left-wing administration.

Judith L. Lichtman: *This conversation is a microcosm of the polarization of the Jewish electorate. I have the sense that we’re talking past each other. Is the Jewish vote more polarized than ever?*

Larry Greenfield: I don’t agree that Jews are instinctively progressive. In fact, one could argue that Jews are naturally conservative; they’re loyal to a text and tradition, and they think fondly of security and liberty and not just reform or radicalism. The left-right divide now in the Jewish community mirrors a similar situation in America. President Obama started off with a lot of goodwill among Jews and among most Americans. I think it’s collapsed. I don’t think he had, for example, a successful energy policy, something that could have unified Americans and rid us of our dependency on Middle East oil. It’s a failed presidency, and

therefore we’re not a unified country as we enter 2012.

Raphael Sonenshein: I’m suggesting an analysis of the circumstances under which Jewish voters don’t vote Democratic as well as the circumstances under which they do. What I’m trying to do is analyze the data about how

We continually hear concerns about President Obama’s policies on Israel, although it is a simple fact that the American-Israeli relationship — militarily, and on the intelligence level — is at a higher level than ever before... I can only fault Obama’s administration for its failure to communicate more effectively regarding the president’s policies.

Jews vote, rather than suggest what Jews should do. I’m a Democrat, so I’d love it if 100 percent of Jews would vote Democratic, but I have to point out that in 1972 and 1980, a lot fewer Jews voted Democratic, and I think I can tell you why.

It’s not that Jewish voters are so polarized. But we’ve been discussing whether the Jewish community is liberal, conservative, or moderate, rather than looking at the numbers, which reflect hard answers. We could discuss whether or not Jews feel polarized about how successful Obama’s presidency has been, but we are not “polarized” on what percentage of Jewish voters voted for Obama or might vote for Obama in 2012.

Larry Greenfield: I certainly don’t argue with numbers. But I’m willing to predict that the outcome of the 2012 election — because of the unsuccessful economy and the concerns about President Obama vis-à-vis Israel — will swing about 35 percent of the Jewish vote to the Republican candidate, as long as the nominee is pro-Israel and center-right. Both Newt Gingrich and Mitt Romney would fit this bill. Gingrich offered Ambassador John Bolton — who helped repeal the U.N.’s “Zionism is Racism” resolution 20 years ago — as a possible Secretary of State.

Peter A. Joseph: We are talking by one another because we are looking at the political context through completely different lenses. We continually hear concerns about President Obama’s policies on Israel, although it is a simple fact that the American-Israeli relationship — militarily, and on the intelligence level — is at a higher level than ever before: Strategic cooperation between Israel and the U.S. concerning Iran is at a higher level, and Obama has



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repeatedly intervened on Israel's behalf — both at the U.N. and in Cairo when Israel's embassy was attacked. I can only fault Obama's administration for its failure to communicate more effectively regarding the president's policies.

Judith L. Lichtman: *A final question: What would you want to ask each presidential candidate?*

Larry Greenfield: The United Nations is very much front and center as a foreign policy question. Americans are becoming uneasy with the dues the U.S. pays the U.N., especially given the U.N.'s lack of reform and accountability, its bias, and, of course, its hostility to Israel, all of which I think we could cite. So, my question to a presidential candidate of either party would be: "Are you willing to consider a Liberty Alliance? A League of Democracies? An alter-

native to the U.N. that might challenge the U.N. to reform?"

Peter A. Joseph: I'd ask the presidential candidates to clearly articulate their policies on Iran. It is very easy to criticize but more difficult to articulate a clear pragmatic strategic alternative.

Raphael Sonenshein: I would ask both candidates: "If everybody else was not on your side, and you were the president of the United States, are you completely committed to protecting Israel from any enemy? Do you consider Israel to be a vital interest of the United States?" And, most important, I'd want to hear this answered in a way that I really believe it. From both Democrats and Republicans, I want to hear something that reassures me that I can go about my business knowing that Israel is in safe hands. 

Religion Matters, Regionally

MARK SILK

In American politics, religion matters in three ways. First, religious identity matters. Mormons and evangelical Protestants vote solidly Republican. Jews and the non-religious are in the Democratic camp. Catholics, who used to be loyal Democrats, are now a swing constituency, divided between strongly Democratic Latinos and modestly Republican-leaning whites.

religious body in New England. At the same time, the West has lower levels of religious commitment than the East, with the exception of the "Mormon corridor" that stretches from southern Idaho through Utah and into northern Arizona. The least religiously identified region of the country has long been the Pacific Northwest (including Alaska).

Voting patterns reflect these religious variations. The turn of the South toward the Republicans is intimately related to the increased appeal of the GOP to religious voters. The same goes for the Plains states, where religious commitment is every bit as strong as it is in the Bible Belt.

By contrast, the Pacific Northwest, which once was narrowly divided between the parties, has turned increasingly Democratic. New England, which has seen a notable growth in the proportion of the nonreligious, has likewise shifted in a Democratic direction.

But the religious variables do not operate in a social vacuum. Historically, they have interacted with other demographic, geographic, and economic factors to create distinctive regional political cultures. And politicians bring these cultures with them when they go to Washington.

In New England, for example, bitter tensions between Protestants and Catholics during the 19th and early 20th centuries led to a tacit understanding after World War II that overt

Jews carry the greatest weight in the Middle Atlantic States — the region where ethno-religious communities remain potent players in a political culture grounded in tribal identity.

Second, the intensity of religious commitment matters. Over the past two decades, the more religious have become disproportionately likely to vote Republican; the less religious, disproportionately likely to vote Democratic. This so-called "God gap" is substantially larger than the older and better-known gender gap, and it shows no sign of disappearing. It applies to all ethno-religious groups except for African-Americans. In the Jewish community, Orthodox Jews are more likely to vote Republican than either Conservative or Reform Jews.

Finally, religion matters regionally. That's because regions vary significantly according to religious identity and intensity. Evangelicals dominate in the South, Lutherans and Catholics have a hold on the Upper Midwest, and Catholics remain by far the largest reli-

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