



Editor's Column

Is Rush right on the Left?



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If the exit polls are accurate, it looks like the Republican Jewish realignment will have to wait for yet another election.

For months, Barack Obama struggled with Jewish undecideds, and McCain supporters predicted their candidate might win close to 40 percent of Jewish voters. Instead, polls show Obama winning about 78 percent of the Jewish vote against 22 percent for McCain.

To understand why, it's worth consulting no less a political analyst than Rush Limbaugh.

The conservative talkster recently chatted with a McCain supporter from Michigan who identified herself as Jewish. She asked Rush why her Democratic coreligionists weren't as concerned as she about Obama's associations with Jeremiah Wright and William Ayers.

Limbaugh responded that the Jewish vote is emotional, not rational. "Liberals and Democrats are Democrats and liberals first. That's the only explanation for this," said Limbaugh, adding, "And no matter what you tell them factually, they're going to reject it because their attachment to all their things politically are actually emotional."

Normally I'd assume that more Jews vote Democratic because their values and the policies they support are more in line with the Left's than the Right's. As long as there are clear splits between the parties on major issues like abortion and tax policy, isn't it rational to vote for the party you agree with?

And yet, a new survey by the Berman Jewish Policy Archive at NYU Wagner seems to bolster Limbaugh.

The survey, led by sociologist Steven M. Cohen, confirms that when it comes to health care, government largesse, and defense, to name three issues, "Jews' political values incline them to support Obama."

And yet (and here's where Limbaugh is on to something) the survey also suggests that the Jewish affinity for the Democrats "cannot be well-explained by their differences in political values."

In fact, "they are more liberal and more Democratic than their values would statistically predict."

To put it another way, other cohorts with similar demographics and positions on the issues vote for Republicans in greater numbers.

So what's with the Jews?

It's all about "political identity," according to Cohen and his team.

"People like to think of themselves as totally rational and driven by carefully considered values," they write. "In fact, Jews in the upcoming election also respond to their identities. In their case, they will be reflecting their long-held, multi-generation attachment to the liberal camp in America, and to the Democratic Party."

In other words, "my father was a Democrat, my grandfather was a Democrat...."

Or, as Limbaugh says, "emotional attachment and the Democrat Party or liberalism comes first."

Of course, a Jewish Democrat might argue that such loyalty was *earned* in the course of party history. By this theory, Jews were attracted to the Democrats not just on specific issues, but thanks to Democratic attitudes that seemed more hospitable to the Jewish majority in the 20th century.

Such Jewish Democrats may well remember the "paleoconservatives" and their anti-Semitism. Or the isolationists who opposed FDR and America's entry into World War II in the coded, and not-so-coded, language of Jew-baiting. While academics debate if FDR could have done more to halt the Shoa, bubbes and zaydas tell stories of how he surrounded himself with Jewish advisers when Jews were struggling for a toe-hold in corporate and academic life.

Fast forward to Pat Buchanan, an anti-Semite whose "cultural war" speech at the 1992 Republican convention prompted Molly Ivins to quip that it "sounded better in the original German." Or the last few Republican presidential conventions, notable for their lack of black or brown faces. Most Jews may be white, but they still consider themselves a minority.

This obviously selective history suggests why many undecided Jews came back to Obama after getting to know Sarah Palin. According to a slew of interviews, her attacks on "elites"—educated, urban, active in academia and the media—did not go down well with Jewish voters who are disproportionately well-educated, clustered in the big cities, and over-represented in academia and the media. "Main Street." "Real America." For folks whose ancestors came through Ellis Island, Palin's rhetoric sounded like a like a political "no vacancy" sign.

As the *New York Times'* conservative, and Jewish, columnist David Brooks lamented, the Republican Party "has lost the educated class by sins of commission — by telling members of that class to go away."

Jewish Republicans deny the Palin factor or say that it pales next to what should be a Jewish priority: defending Israel and defeating Islamism. On these counts, they say, Republicans are the Jews' best friends, while the Democrats, with a Jimmy Carterish wing that is hostile to Israel, are becoming increasingly bad news.

GOP optimists are also placing their chips on an actuarial solution: Indeed, an Oct. 23 analysis of Gallup polls, reported in the *Forward*, had Obama winning 74 percent of Jews aged 55 and over, compared to only 67 percent of those under 35.

But if Rush is right, Republicans have their work cut out for them. So long as Republicans send mixed cultural signals, and Democrats continue to pledge fealty to Israel, changing the Jewish vote will be like turning a battleship. There are powerful historical currents still pulling it in one direction.



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