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Coming Home To Their Roots



Gov. Sarah Palin's nomination was bad for Republicans but good for comedy, said Rabbi Andy Bachman of Congregation Beth Elohim in Brooklyn.

by Steve Lipman
Staff Writer

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In Queens, Beth Goldberg, a committed liberal and member of a Conservative congregation, said she is “so conflicted” about her choices in next week’s presidential election. Neither Democrat Barack Obama nor Republican John McCain “represents a very good choice,” she said. Early this week, a week before the vote, she hadn’t made a choice, but hinted that she was leaning, as usual, toward the Democrat.

In Florida, Joan Chabrowe, a self-described “pretty secular Jew,” said she favors Obama, but notices a high degree of uncertainty among her peers, retirement-age Jews. The election is “very problematic here,” she said. “It’s very much split.” Many of her friends, she suspects, will vote in the end for Obama, largely because of dissatisfaction over McCain’s choice of Alaska Gov.

Sarah Palin as his running mate. “Sarah Palin is a big detriment to John McCain’s candidacy.”

In Texas, Steven and Suzanne Levine, registered Democrats and members of a Reform temple, had intended to vote for McCain — but Palin complicated things. “I wanted to form a ‘Democrats for McCain.’ Until he picked Palin,” said Suzanne. She disagrees with

Palin's personal and political conduct. "There's no way in hell I could vote for her." Across the United States, during a presidential campaign that experts call the most competitive and nastiest in recent history, the preferences of many voting blocs have become the focus of political leaders and social activists. And the Jewish vote, disproportionately influential in several highly populated, highly urbanized states, is especially coveted.

As recently as several weeks ago, the Jewish vote — the vast majority of it is made up of the non-Orthodox — was up for grabs. But interviews this week with members of the non-Orthodox community, including secular Jews and affiliated members of liberal denominations, have found support for the Democratic ticket that is approaching levels reached in past presidential elections.

An American Jewish Committee survey conducted in September, before the credit crunch triggered a national slide into recession, indicated a preference for Obama over McCain by Jewish voters by 57-30 percent, with 13 percent undecided. That support for Obama was far less than the figures reached by other Democratic candidates in recent elections. With Election Day approaching, the tide appears to be turning in favor of Obama. According to a Gallup poll released late last week, Obama was leading McCain 74-22 percent among registered Jewish voters. And a Quinnipiac University poll of Jewish voters in Florida, also released late last week, found support for Obama at 77 percent. Those figures, should they hold up on Election Day, would put Obama's Jewish support on a par with the numbers garnered by Democrats John Kerry and Al Gore in the 2004 and 2000 elections.

Anecdotally, Jonathan Prosmitt, a rabbinical student at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, said he found overwhelming support for the Democratic ticket while canvassing in Jewish neighborhoods near Philadelphia last month.

Prosmitt led a group of 15 HUC rabbinical and cantorial students, joined by peers from Philadelphia's Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, who went door to door speaking in favor of Obama. He said residents there, many of them elderly, expressed concern about the declining state of the economy.

People who reported that Obama was the subject of excessive suspicion among American Jews and would receive less-than-usual support on Election Day were indulging in "speculation. ... None of them had scientific evidence," said Steven M. Cohen, director of the Berman Jewish Policy Archive at NYU's Wagner Graduate School of Public Service. A recent study he co-authored found that "American Jews are far more likely to vote for [Obama] than are non-Jewish voters." According to projections by the study's authors, they will vote 3-to-1 for Obama.

"For years, analysts and advocates have been anticipating a rightward shift toward the American political center on the part of American Jews," Cohen's study reported. "This election is no different, with the issue of Israel's security thought to work in favor of John McCain's candidacy."

“Jews over the years ... remained exceedingly loyal to the Democratic Party, with the Orthodox community a notable exception,” another recent study co-authored by Cohen states.

“The reports of the demise of the Democratic majority” in the American Jewish community “have been greatly exaggerated,” said Jeremy Ben-Ami, executive director of J Street, a progressive, pro-Israel advocacy group. American Jewish voters are still “an unbelievably progressive group,” he said. “The American Jewish community is perhaps the most Democratic demographic in the United States.”

Despite initial uncertainty about Obama’s qualifications, claims about his alleged anti-Israel background, lingering bitterness over the primary battle with Sen. Hillary Clinton and a feeling that some older Jews were reluctant to vote for a black candidate, Jewish voters are remaining loyal to their Democratic roots, Ben-Ami said.

“Voters come home to their underlying party loyalty,” said Ken Wald, a professor of political science at the University of Florida.

Momentum has swung in the direction of Obama, observers said, because of a growing feeling of comfort with the Illinois senator during the campaign and televised debates with McCain, because of the downturn in the economy that many voters blame on the incumbent Republican administration and largely because of McCain’s selection of Palin.

While many Orthodox voters were reportedly supportive of Palin’s nomination, “most people” in non-Orthodox circles “have viewed [her candidacy] as the last straw,” influencing them to vote Democratic, said Rabbi Niles Goldstein, spiritual leader of The New Shul, an “independent, progressive” congregation in Greenwich Village. “Sarah Palin’s nomination clearly damaged the ticket, though it was a boon for Jewish comedy writers,” said Rabbi Andy Bachman, spiritual leader of Congregation Beth Elohim in Brooklyn.

Since Palin’s nomination, many undecided Jewish voters “have begun to jell in favor of Senator Obama,” said Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism. He said many Jewish voters are concerned about Palin’s views on “abortion, gay rights, the Supreme Court [nominations], terrorism ... a range of issues.” Though Israel’s security is an important issue for many Jewish voters, the economy ranked as their primary concern, according to the AJCommittee survey.

Jewish voters “didn’t buy” negative reports about Obama, that he is a closet anti-Semite or a closet Muslim, Rabbi Goldstein said. “None of that washed.”

Are Jews hesitant to vote for a black candidate?

“It’s certainly applicable to [part of] the older generation of Jews in America,” Rabbi Goldstein said. “Just as older, white Americans have certain biases, there are [older members of the American Jewish community] with those attitudes.”

Younger, non-Orthodox Jews do not share such negative feelings about black candidates, the rabbi said.

“Not in our circles,” said J Street’s Jeremy Ben-Ami. No one he knows opposes Obama because he is black. But, he said, “Everyone says they know somebody who falls into that category.”

E-mail: steve@jewishweek.org