

The Two Front War:
Jews, Identity, Liberalism, and Voting

Eric M. Uslaner

Department of Government and Politics

University of Maryland–College Park

College Park, MD 20742

euslaner@gvpt.umd.edu

<http://www.bsos.umd.edu/gvpt/uslaner>

Mark Lichbach

Department of Government and Politics

University of Maryland–College Park

College Park, MD 20742

mlichbach@gvpt.umd.edu

<http://www.bsos.umd.edu/gvpt/lichbach>

Even though Jews comprise approximately two percent of the American electorate, the Democratic and Republican parties have courted the Jewish vote in every elections. Jews have high turnout rates and most Jewish-Americans live in states that have traditionally swung back and forth between the two parties. The highly contested election of 2004 was no exception.

The two parties approached Jews with strikingly different messages. The fight for the votes of American Jews in 2004 was a “two-front war,” with Republicans stressing the security of Israel and Democrats the threat from the Christian Right. Well after the election, the leaders of the two parties stood by the same rhetoric. At a meeting of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the major lobbying arm of American Jews, in November, 2005 Republican National Committee chair Ken Mehlman (himself Jewish) said that the Republicans’ stronger position on terrorism would better protect Israel. Democratic National Committee Chair Howard Dean held that Democrats “believe that Jews should feel comfortable in being American Jews’ without being constrained from practicing their faith or be compelled to convert to another religion.”

We have analyzed the voting behavior of American Jews in the 2004 election based upon a survey conducted by the Greenberg Quinlan Research for the National Jewish Democratic Council—and we compare the results to vote choice among non-Jews in the 2004 American National Election Study.

Our key findings echo the words of the two party chairs. Jews who were most strongly concerned with the security of Israel were more likely than other Jews to vote for President George W. Bush, who championed himself as a great friend of Israel. The larger number of Jews who strongly disliked evangelical Christians voted overwhelmingly for John Kerry. Overall, almost 80 percent of Jews voted for Kerry (compared to 46 percent of non-Jews), similar to the

share of Jews who voted for Al Gore in 2000. Some Jews who voted for Gore shifted to Bush, mostly on concerns for Israel. Other Jews who voted for Bush in 2004 shifted to Kerry, largely because of fear of evangelicals.

The President's commitment as a born-again Christian was a double-edged sword among the Jewish community in 2004. To the extent that it led to a strong commitment to Israel, especially notable since his father was widely reviled in the American Jewish community as a critic of Israel, it helped bring him some Jewish votes. When American Jews looked at Bush as an evangelical, they saw the first President in recent times who was committed to a "low wall" of separation between church and state—and many Jews saw this as a threat to their identity.

American Jews are uncomfortable with the evangelical call for Jews to convert and especially comments by religious leaders such as Pat Robertson that God doesn't hear the prayer of Jews—and especially the recent charge that Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's stroke was God's punishment for Israel's withdrawal from Gaza. Jews feel threatened, collectively if not personally, by the evangelicals—and especially their close ties to the Republican party.

American Jews have almost uniformly negative attitudes toward evangelicals, in contrast to non-Jews, who are more likely to have positive views of Christian fundamentalists. More critically, for non-Jews, negative attitudes toward the Christian Right are part of a larger "culture war" focusing on ideology and social issues. For Jews, ideology and social liberalism are only weakly connected to attitudes toward evangelicals. The Christian Right is at least as much a threat to Jewish identity as it is to traditional Jewish liberalism.

In our paper, we seek to explain why American Jews are more Democratic and more liberal than non-Jews. In most ways, the behavior of Jewish voters is similar to that of non-

Jewish voters. Jews and non-Jews base their votes on the direction of the country, ideology, and party identification. However, attitudes toward evangelicals and Israel *only mattered for Jewish voters*. Attitudes toward fundamentalists are far more important to Jewish voting behavior than for non-Jewish voters. *As the Christian right gets more power within the Republican party, Jews are likely to remain Democrats even as Republicans “tempt” them with stronger positions on Israel.*

Much of the explanation of Jewish loyalty to the Democratic party stems from Jewish liberalism and the traditional attachment to the Democratic party. In 2004, 75% of Jews identified as Democrats and only 18 percent considered themselves to be conservatives, in contrast to just 49 percent of non-Jews identifying with the Democratic party and 42 percent saying that they are conservative. Eighty-two percent of Jews saw the United States “on the wrong track” in 2004, compared to 56 percent of non-Jews who believed that the country was heading in “the wrong direction.”

Jews also stood apart from non-Jews in favoring gay unions and unrestricted access to abortion to a much larger extent. These issues played an important role in vote choice for non-Jews. The greater agreement within the Jewish community limited the impact of these issue on the Jewish vote in 2004.

Apart from ideology, party identification, and the state of the country, Jews stood out in their concern for Israel and for evangelicals in American life. Neither factor shaped voting behavior for non-Jews. Only 15 percent of American Jews said that Israel was a key voting issue. Among these voters, 55 percent voted for Kerry (compared to 83 percent of Jewish voters not concerned with Israel). The Republicans were able to characterize on the President’s strong

support for Israel and the fraying of support for Israel among some Congressional Democrats. In our statistical model of vote choice in 2004, a Jewish voter who felt that Israel was a critical issue was 18 percent less likely to vote Democratic, once we control for all other factors shaping vote choice among Jews in 2004.

However, a much larger share of Jewish voters had negative views of evangelicals than were strongly motivated by Israel. The survey asked Jewish voters to rate evangelicals on a “feeling thermometer” ranging from 0 (very cold) to 100 (very warm). The mean rating for American Jews on the evangelical thermometer was 24. For non-Jews, the mean rating of Christian fundamentalists is 58.3, above the “neutral” score of 50. (The American National Election Study did not ask about evangelicals.) Even when we exclude self-identified evangelicals, the mean rating for non-Jews is a positive 54.2.

Even more critically, 37 percent of Jews rate evangelicals at zero (very cold) on the 101 point scale. Eighty-six percent of those most fearful of evangelicals cast ballots for Kerry (compared to 72 percent of other Jews). Only four percent of non-evangelical non-Jews rated Christian fundamentalists at zero. Jews had distinctly more negative views of evangelicals than did non-Jews. *And attitudes toward evangelicals shaped the Jewish vote, but not the non-Jewish vote in 2004.* Controlling for all other factors in our statistical model, a Jewish voter who rated evangelicals at zero was nine percent more likely to vote for Kerry than a Jewish voter who rated evangelicals very highly. There was no measurable impact for attitudes toward Christian fundamentalists for non-Jews.

While the statistical impact of Israel on the Jewish vote may appear to be greater than the effect for attitudes toward evangelicals, Israel appeared less salient than did the perceived threat

from evangelicals. Fifteen percent of Jewish voters placed Israel at the top of their agenda (mostly Orthodox Jews), while 37 percent rated evangelicals at the extreme negative end of the scale.

One of our key findings is that *attitudes toward fundamentalists do not shape vote choice among non-Jews in 2004*, even as attitudes toward evangelicals were among the most powerful factors shaping the Jewish vote in 2004. The simple correlation between vote choice and attitudes toward evangelicals/fundamentalists is higher for Jews, but there is something else at work. For non-Jews, there are strong correlations among attitudes toward fundamentalists, ideology, and policy issues such as gay marriage, abortion, and (to a lesser extent) gun control. This is the familiar “culture war” on social issues in American politics. For Jews, the ideology and issue variables are highly correlated: Liberals favor gun control, abortion rights, and gay unions. *Yet for Jews, attitudes toward evangelicals are only weakly correlated with attitudes on social issues and ideological identification.*

The evangelical thermometer for ideologically conservative Jews (mean score of 35.3) is lower than the fundamentalist thermometer for liberal non-evangelical non-Jews (40.3). Jewish liberals are the most hostile to evangelicals and the percentage gap between ideological liberals and conservatives is about 20 percent for each bloc. However, even non-evangelical non-Jewish Kerry voters on average are neutral (thermometer score of 49.3) toward fundamentalists, compared to just a 19.9 percent mean for Jewish Kerry supporters and 38.0 for *Jewish Bush voters*. Thus, we interpret our findings as supporting the claim that attitudes toward evangelicals among Jews are based more on identity than upon ideology.

We see this clearly in the small number of vote changers among both Jews and non-Jews

in 2004. For non-Jews, vote change from 2000 largely reflects a return to previous habits. Non-Jews who voted Republican in 2000 but Democratic in 2004 were largely moderate liberals more likely to call themselves Democrats than Republicans. Neither party identification nor ideology shaped vote change among Jews in 2004. Sixty-two percent of Jews who switched to the Republicans said that Israel was their key voting issue. Jewish voters who shifted toward Kerry in 2004 *were largely motivated by fear of evangelicals*. Jews who switched to Kerry not only had strongly negative views of evangelicals (mean rating of 15.4), but their average score was *five percent less favorable to evangelicals than were Jews who voted Democratic in both 2000 and 2004*. Half of all Jewish voters who switched to the Democrats rated evangelicals at zero; three quarters of switchers to Kerry rated evangelicals at 30 or less and 95 percent had a negative rating—compared to only two-thirds of non-Jews who shifted to Kerry (and the non-Jewish result is insignificant statistically).

We have no data on the importance of attitudes toward evangelicals in shaping the Jewish vote in earlier elections. However, we believe that the impact of these attitudes is likely to be greater (based upon our analysis of the small number of vote changers) in 2004 than previously. No other Republican President or Presidential candidate has so clearly aligned himself with the Christian Right as has George W. Bush. The power of the Christian Right in American politics is on the rise and many Jewish leaders are concerned.

There is an irony in our findings. We might expect that supporters of Israel would have positive views toward evangelicals. The Christian Right strongly identifies with Israel. It sees Israel as “a blessing to all the peoples of the earth,” in Pat Robertson’s words. We examine evangelicals’ attitudes toward Jews and Israel and find that, contrary to what some believe,

evangelicals are neither more pro-Israel nor more favorable to Jews than are other non-Jews in the 2004 American National Election Study. Other surveys indicate that evangelicals in the past have been *more anti-Semitic than other non-Jews* and that today overwhelming shares of evangelicals insist that Jews must convert to Christianity to be saved.

However, there is little overlap between the two issues. Only 6 percent of Jewish voters both cited Israel as one of their top two issues and had positive views of evangelicals. We might expect that Orthodox Jews would be more favorable to evangelicals, since some Orthodox leaders have welcomed the support of the Christian Right for Israel and the Orthodox and fundamentalist share conservative views on religion in public life and on moral issues. Yet, even Orthodox Jews had negative feelings on average toward evangelicals. Their mean thermometer score for evangelicals is 41, and only 25 percent rate evangelicals positively (above 50).

Many Jews are especially sensitive to the Christian Right's belief that the renewal of the Jewish state is a prerequisite for the second coming of Jesus—and that the end of times, the final conflict between good and evil, will be played out in Israel, in Armageddon (the Israeli village of Meggido). The final conflict between God and the devil will end in a fiery battle in which Jews will either convert to Christianity and join others in leaving the earth or perish in the blaze that consumes all non-believers.

As long as the Democratic party continues to be divided on Israel and the Christian Right continues to be strongly influenced by the Christian Right, we would expect this “two-front war” for the Jewish vote to continue.

Paper availability:

The complete paper is available at Eric M. Uslaner's working papers website:

<http://www.bsos.umd.edu/gvpt/uslaner/working.htm>

or directly at:

<http://www.bsos.umd.edu/gvpt/uslaner/uslanerlichbachjewishvotingbehavioriii.pdf>

or from the authors. The principal contact is Eric M. Uslaner (euslaner@gvpt.umd.edu, 301-405-4151 or 301-279-0414).