

About Who Thinks What

A couple of phrases pop up these days which deserve a healthy portion of skepticism: The San Francisco Jews believe..." Or: "The grass-roots Jewish population thinks that..."

In the first place, there is almost no specific social issue on which Jews have anything approaching unanimity of opinion. In the second place, we are all usually deluded by what we believe "Jews think", because we tend to gauge Jewish opinion by the small number of Jews with whom each of us happens to come in contact. And, more than we realize, that tends to be a pretty selected lot.

Another kind of delusion is created by "participatory democracy." If 400 individuals come to a given meeting and vote 3-1 to oppose high-rises, that's no indication of "community opinion". On another night, in other circumstances, under other auspices, the vote might be 3-1 in favor of high-rises. And in neither case will the majority of interested citizens be accurately reflected. It's always a temptation, or course, to solemnly invoke such figures.



Raab

How many times have you heard someone say gravely: "I have heard from many people this morning supporting my position that..."—when actually he may have heard from 14 people, 12 of them close relatives? And then there's the common phenomenon of those 14 people sending out 10,000 letters, or holding six press conferences in order to give the impression of a mass movement. Of course, even if there is some hard numerical evidence about how the entire population feels on an issue, that does not solve the problem of how to express "Jewish community opinion."

The JCRC, which never claims to represent more than the consensus of representatives of the major larger Jewish organizations, periodically conducts a survey of general Jewish opinion, in order to get an idea of what really is on the minds of the "Grass roots". It's a scientifically valid poll, as these things go, involving a sample proportionately 25 times greater than those California polls which regularly come within two or three percentage points of accurately reflecting the opinions of the total population.

The last one, for example, found that the Jewish population of San Francisco, Marin and the Peninsula can make some pretty sophisticated distinctions. About seven out of every 10 of our local Jews express themselves in favor of (and about two out of 10 against) "affirmative action" for the racial minority population, when that's spelled out to mean special efforts to raise the employment levels of the minority work force—by special efforts to find qualifiable minority workers, to train qualifiable minority workers, and so forth. But only one out of 10 Jews supports the idea of quotas for minority workers. In another example about six out of 10 local Jews oppose (and about three out of 10 support) the idea of tax credits for private and religious schools. About eight out of 10 say that they prefer their children to go to public schools.

But, at its best, not even a structured political community—which the Jewish community is not—operates rigidly on the basis of public opinion poll. To begin with, even a minority opinion should be given some consideration if any voluntary community is to work. So, a majority opinion may be adjusted in order to meet some of the minority needs.

In addition, a society or community carries with it certain traditions which cannot be tampered with just because of a majority position on any given day. Thus, we have in recent years seen a California referendum, passed by majority vote, cut down by Supreme Court as unconstitutional. And, for the "Jewish community" traditions of Jewish education, of communal Kashruth, of social justice, presumably must be balanced with majority opinion on any given day.

So, such public opinion polls, as are quoted above don't provide a rigid mandate for the organized Jewish community. When they do exist, they may provide some perspective; and at least a reminder to be skeptical about airy statements of what "all", "most" or "many" Jews believe.