

ARE JEWISH POLITICAL LOYALTIES CHANGING?

One question emerging from the election has to do with that new word "realignment." Are American Jews changing the pattern of their political party loyalties?

In trying to answer that question, a fundamental mistake is often made by comparing the Jewish presidential vote over the years. If, for example, 90 per cent of the Jews voted for Johnson in 1964, and, say, 67 per cent of the Jews voted for Mondale in 1984, does that mean that the Jewish attachment to the Democratic Party is fading away? The answer is "no": that voting evidence, in itself, does not mean a long-range Jewish "realignment."

Why not? Well, 61 per cent of Americans voted for Johnson in 1964, and only 41 per cent of them voted for Mondale. In other words, there is about the same distance between Jewish voters and other American voters in 1984 as there was in 1964.

Many of the same factors that caused the general American voters to move towards or away from a party candidate, in each election, caused Jews to move towards or away from him. However there have always been additional factors which caused Jews to constantly vote more Democratic than other voters. So, if the question is whether the Jewish voting pattern is becoming more like the general voting pattern, then we have to look at the history of the distance, of the "Democratic difference" between Jews and the general vote over the years. That "difference" between Jewish and general electorate is what the graph above measures (redistributing third party votes), and it does not show a general decline.

Jews were already voting more Democratic when we entered the Roosevelt era in 1932. That was largely a matter of social liberalism. After all, in 1920 about 38 per cent of the Jews voted for the Socialist candidate, as compared with 6 per cent of the general population. The "Democratic difference" jumped rather heavily from 1940 to 1948; undoubtedly because of the German Nazis. The difference dropped significantly from 1952 to 1956, partly perhaps because of Eisenhower's role in the war. It rose again with Kennedy, Johnson and Humphrey -- and declined most sharply, not with McGovern, but with Carter in 1976 and especially in 1980. But this year the Democratic difference between the Jewish and general electorate jumped back to 26 points, just one point below the average and median for all sixteen elections. So much for any current Jewish realignment based on voting figures.

However, despite all the hoopla about the Jewish vote, it is not the most important factor in Jewish political effectiveness. The Jewish vote did not make a difference in this election, and in the past 16 elections, the Jewish vote only made a difference once, in 1976, under conditions which are not likely to occur again. The most important factor in Jewish political effectiveness is the strength of Jewish political activism, which means Jewish financial and energy involvement in campaigns.

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Jews represent about two and a half per cent of the population, perhaps five per cent of the voting population, but at least 30 per cent of the funds and energy which go into a presidential campaign. That is a significant figure, which makes a difference.

And this year, while the Jewish Democratic difference in voting bounced back to "normal," there was more Jewish activist involvement in the Republican campaign than there had been in recent times. It has not just been a matter of a few Jewish Republican fat-cats. A somewhat broader base of leadership and younger Jews were becoming involved in the active Republican campaign.

That may be a more accurate indication of a future party realignment among Jews. Voting patterns are heavily conditioned by family and group habit, and barring drastic events, change slowly. And at the least, an increased Jewish activism within the Republican Party may mean more access to that national party at a time when it seems to be gaining some new enduring strength.