

THE CANDIDATES AND THE JEWS

Are you offended by the spectacle of the Jews being the apparent "sex object" of this political campaign? Or are you pleased that the Jews seem to have enough political clout to be so strenuously wooed?

Back in Teddy Roosevelt's day, when the American Jews expressed joy about the U.S. responding to a Jewish plea, Roosevelt's Secretary of State referred to them with some amusement as "the Hebrews, poor dears."

In the last few weeks, Mondale and Hart have sometimes given the impression that they were running for Prime Minister of Israel. The national media recorded them as desperately trying to outdo each other as loyalists to Israel. And this week, the Republican side was heard from as Bush proclaimed in the front pages of many newspapers, including the San Francisco Chronicle, that the Democratic candidates' chief sin was complicity in anti-semitism.

The fact is that in one state, the Jews comprise 12 per cent of the population; in another, 6 per cent. In a few states they are 2 to 4 per cent of the population. In two thirds of the states, they are less than one per cent of the population. What's all the excitement about? Is it good or bad for the Jews?

Well, at the polling booths, the Jews do have more influence than their population percentages would indicate. About 90 per cent of eligible Jewish voters actually vote, as against about half of the rest of the population. So, the political rule of thumb is that you multiply by two the Jewish population to get their polling strength. In Democratic primaries, you can multiply by three. But when it comes to political activism, including contributions of energy and money, you can multiply the Jewish population by five times in order to get a sense of proportionate influence.

So, the Jews, as a statistical group, can make a difference, at least in some key states and localities. Mondale would have lost to Hart in New York if a strong majority of Jews had not voted for him. (Of course, that marginal power exists for other groups as well.) And it is true that American support of Israel and anti-semitism are prevalent Jewish concerns.

It is of course proper for politicians to pay attention to group concerns. That is what the democratic system is all about. But there is a difference between "paying attention" and "pandering." This modern version of "the Hebrews, poor dears" is bad medicine. Not only does it suggest that the Jews have nothing but

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Israel on their minds; it suggests that the only reason America supports Israel is because its politicians get Jewish votes and money. That is not only false; it is the surest way to erode American public support of Israel -- and to spur some anti-semitism in the bargain.

When the candidates come to California, wouldn't it be great if they came to synagogues and Jewish organizations with this line: "I made my chief speech on Israel at the Knights of Columbus meeting a couple of nights ago -- and I am pointedly not going to repeat that here because I believe that strong, unwavering American support of Israel is in the interests of America. It is an American issue, not a Jewish issue. So, tonight, I'd like to speak to you about another set of issues which affect all American citizens ..."?

Northern California synagogues and Jewish organizations which have invited or are inviting candidates, should now specifically ask them to take such a posture when appearing. It would serve well our dignity, America and the cause of Israel. It should even win more Jewish votes.