



Obama fared better than feared with Jews

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Remember Barack Obama's Jewish problem?

You know, the one discussed in most every outlet, including this one, and that that was going to cost him Florida and the election?

Neither did Jewish voters, it turned out.

Seventy-eight percent of Jews voted for Obama, 3 percentage points more than backed Kerry. Obama won the group by 57 points — greater than his margin with Hispanics or single women without children.

Then why all the fuss?

Obama did improve about 15 points with Jews during the general election, as his person and positions became better known, the Democratic primary divide mended, the economy took central stage and McCain came to be seen as less moderate, a trend that Democratic pollster Mark Mellman, an authority on researching the Jewish vote, believes was worsened when McCain tapped social conservative Sarah Palin as his running mate.

Still, looking back, the problem was hardly as bad as the coverage it received.

Jews did favor Clinton in the primaries and at times, Obama did poorly with them. While he won the Maryland primary, 60 percent of Jewish voters favored Clinton, roughly matching her support among white women.

But in the California primary, Jewish voters split between Obama and Clinton.

A Gallup report in early May showed that Obama did only slightly worse with Jewish voters than Clinton. Jewish voters preferred Clinton to Obama 50 to 43 percent. In a hypothetical race against McCain, Obama was winning 61 percent of Jews and Clinton 66 percent.

When Ira Forman, executive director of the Democratic Jewish group, saw that 5-point gap it "actually heartened me [since] there was no reason Hillary should be that low. What it told me was that McCain's image was not of the right wing Republican. What it told me is we got work to do, but it's doable."

In other words, persuadable Jewish voters did not have a problem with Obama as much as some affinity for McCain, a view hardly unique to Jewish-leaning Democrats.

"There is no question the Jewish community became more comfortable with Obama as the campaign went on," Mellman said. That increased comfort level was most evident with

older, 55 and up, voters.

Between June and August only about 60 percent of older Jewish voters backed Obama, according to Gallup. That number rose to 75 percent in September and on election day they were Obama's most loyal generation of Jewish support, as they had been for Kerry.

Another likely factor was partisanship.

Gallup estimates that about 55 percent of Jews identify as Democrats, 30 percent as independents and 15 percent as Republicans.

Obama's rise in Jewish support tracked loosely with his gains among Democrats and independents overall. Between summer and autumn, Democratic support for Obama moved from the mid 70s to the mid 80s. Over that same period, Independents as a group moved from leaning to McCain to splitting their support between the two candidates.

Part of Obama's initial under performance with Jewish voters also came from Hillary Clinton supporters, many of whom were slow to return to the party after her loss. Before the Democratic Convention, just 70 percent of Clinton voters backed Obama. By September, that had gone up to 81 percent.

As he did with other blocs that leaned toward Clinton, Obama came up with a specific strategy to court wayward Jews.

In spring, Obama spoke at synagogue in Boca Raton, Fla., in large part to alleviate any perceived concerns and face down rumors about his stance on Israel. Obama also spoke to prominent Jewish reporters, like Jeffrey Goldberg of the Atlantic, hoping to permeate the Jewish zeitgeist. He had staff charged with Jewish outreach, and specifically focused on refuting a viral email campaign that falsely painted Obama as a Muslim and/or anti-Israel.

There was speculation that Obama's middle name Hussein and efforts to paint him as a Muslim would tamp down Jewish support, particularly if opponents could frame him as anti-Israel. Though like the speculation that latent white prejudice would lower Obama's white support, the theory did not pan out.

"I was concerned," Foreman said. "Conservative Republican Jews were throwing the kitchen sink at him. And everything else being equal, moderate Republicans do dramatically better than conservative Republicans. Three, we had Republican Jewish Coalition with a lot of money. They were doing things like running television ads in Palm Beach, Miami, Cleveland, and Las Vegas. And we've never seen anything like that before."

Polling, however, never showed Obama below 60 percent with Jews in the general election. And Forman and Mellman said in conversations throughout the campaign that they did not think McCain could actually win the Jewish vote.

This is why both men believe Obama's so-called Jewish problem was always exaggerated in the chattering class.

"The media always over hype this," Foreman said. "Jews voting Republican is a man bites dog story. Every cycle this is the story."

Jews have voted at more than a 3-to-1 ratio for Democrats since 1992. Even in the GOP landslide 1972 and 1984 wins, two-thirds of Jews favored the Democratic nominee. In fact, Jews have only voted Republican once since the first voter tracking began in 1916. The exception, 1920, when Socialist Eugene Debs siphoned off a large portion of the Jewish vote.

By late August, Mellman's own private polling of likely Jewish voters led him to the conclusion that the bloc was under performing less because of uniquely Jewish issues, like Israeli security, than because of McCain's moderate appeal.

"McCain nearly matches Obama's appeal as a change maker," an internal September 16 memo read, which was written by Mellman for the Jewish Democratic organization.

"Our results indicate that pro-Israel positioning is necessary but not sufficient for a presidential candidate to win the Jewish vote," the memo continued. "Our most effective positive messages addresses choice and energy, while we must also hit McCain on choice, energy, and his ties to the religious right."

And therefore "a portion [of Jewish voters] were undecided," remained undecided until late in the race said Kenneth Wald, a political scientist at the University of Florida who has long tracked the Jewish vote.

"Obama was unknown. And he came from the African American Chicago where anti-Semitism is suspected because of Jessie Jackson and Louis Farhakan," Wald continued. "There was also Hillary factor. A lot of Jewish women and reform Jews were very committed to her," Wald said, adding that he also thought the social conservatism of GOP vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin "brought Democrats back," including both Jews and gentiles.

"Political campaigns often bring people back to their initial party loyalty," Wald said, "and the Democratic campaign brought Jews back and that was certainly augmented by the financial crisis."

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