

Tradition! Tradition? Jewish Voting in the 2012 Election

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ABSTRACT

The voting of Jews in the 2012 US presidential election is discussed in this article within the context of a recent reexamination of historical data on Jewish voting. Two Election-Night polls of Jews and the largest scientific survey of Jews to date make this detailed exploration of Jewish voting possible. Voting differences among Jews are analyzed, especially among major denominational movements. The role of American policy on the Middle East merits specific attention, particularly given concern about the potential Iranian nuclear threat to Israel. Explanations of Jewish liberalness and Democratic identification are considered, with a special focus on the role of social identity. A reluctance of Jewish conservatives to identify as Republicans is discussed as well as how Jewish conservatives react to economic and social issues. The possibility of a party realignment of Jews along generational and denominational lines is considered, as well as the impact of the Republican alliance with Evangelical Christians and the Tea Party.

The Jewish vote has long been one of the most reliable components of the Democratic Party's coalition. As a result, Jewish voting received little notice in recent years until 2012, when Republicans vigorously attacked President Obama on his policy toward Israel. The national exit poll found that most Jews again voted Democratic for president; however, reports of two Election-Night surveys of Jews took opposite positions on how much change had occurred. These two polls, along with other recent surveys of Jews, provide an opportunity to examine their voting in more detail than is typical. This article reviews Jewish voting in an historical context, examines the polls of Jews in 2012, and discusses explanations of their continued Democratic voting. Sources of Republican voting among certain subgroups are also examined.

JEWISH VOTING HISTORICALLY

The standard account is that Jews voted Republican for president until 1924, a claim that focuses attention on the basis and quality of these historical estimates. Weisberg (2012) traced the sources of the standard figures (Forman 2004, 153) and found that they are based on only a single city (before 1940), a single survey, or a single exit

poll (since 1972). Table 1 provides the revised estimates that Weisberg developed by averaging multiple data sources in each election. Most of the revisions are close to the standard figures but with notable exceptions. For example, Republican Coolidge outpolled Democrat Davis among Jews in Boston, Chicago, and Philadelphia in 1924; combining data from multiple cities therefore suggests that the Republicans still won a plurality of the Jewish vote that year.

Nevertheless, figures on Jewish voting are necessarily estimates. Not only is the number of Jews included in most surveys too small for high confidence, the accuracy also depends on whether the surveys happen to sample the correct proportions of both Orthodox Jews and Jews living in areas that are not predominantly Jewish.

The chart of the revised data, shown in figure 1, highlights historical shift points. Jews apparently voted predominantly Republican in the early twentieth century but became Democratic starting in 1928 (Gamm 1989). The very high Democratic vote during the Franklin Roosevelt elections decreased after his death (Lubell 1951). Jews voted more Democratic during the 1960s but less so in the 1970s and the 1980s. The Democratic vote increased again beginning in 1992, when Pat Buchanan gave his "culture war" speech at the Republican Convention.

THE ISRAELI ISSUE IN THE 2012 CAMPAIGN

Jewish support for a black presidential candidate was initially uncertain in 2008, but the Jewish vote went strongly for Barack

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Obama: 78% according to the national exit poll and 74% according to the Solomon Project (2012), which combined state exit polls with the national exits. However, Obama appeared to be vulnerable by mid-2011 because the economy was still weak from the Great Recession and his Middle East policy was perceived as less pro-Israel than that of most recent presidents. Obama was criticized, for

sentence, however, followed conventional US policy when he added “with mutually agreed swaps, so that secure and recognized borders are established for both states.” Many Jews found the possibility of Iran acquiring a nuclear bomb to be an existential threat to Israel, and some considered the American reaction to be insufficient, even though Obama imposed strong sanctions on Iran.

Most preelection polls showed Obama ahead among Jews, as in a 70%–25% lead in Gallup’s combined July–early September daily tracking poll. However, an Investors Business Daily/TIPP poll after the first presidential debate gave Obama only a 47% to 25% advantage, and an update found Romney ahead by 44% to 40%—although with the following disclaimer on the Jewish vote: “Small sample size; interpret with caution.”

example, when in May 2011 he asserted that “the borders of Israel and Palestine should be based on the 1967 lines.” The rest of that

Obama was seen as a stronger candidate by the fall of 2012 as the economy was showing signs of improvement, but the Jewish vote potentially was in play because of issues related to Israel. In contrast to the coolness between Barack Obama and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Mitt Romney had a personal relationship with Netanyahu developed when they both worked at Boston Consulting Group. Obama rejected Netanyahu’s open pressure to “draw a red line” on Iranian movement toward a nuclear bomb. Netanyahu’s support for Romney became so apparent that some Israelis were concerned that it would damage Israel’s future standing with the United States if Obama were reelected.

The Republican Jewish Coalition (RJC), largely financed by billionaire Sheldon Adelson, aggressively targeted Jewish voters on Romney’s behalf. It ran “buyer’s remorse” television ads featuring Jewish voters who said they had voted for Obama in 2008 but would not do so again. Billboards appeared in Jewish areas, with the lament: “Obama ... Oy Vey!” The Democratic image suffered when the Party’s draft platform did not include its promise in recent platforms to recognize Jerusalem as Israel’s capital. The image was further damaged when the Democratic convention took an awkward three voice votes before the convention chair ruled that an amendment reinserting that language had received the two-thirds vote required for passage.

Democrats argued that the Obama administration had given Israel more military help than any previous administration. The issue came to a head in the October 22, 2012, campaign debate when Romney repeated a Republican refrain that Obama had not visited Israel as president. Obama defended himself by pointing out that he had visited Israel in 2008, that he had gone to the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial rather than attending fundraisers (as Romney did during his July 2012 visit), and that his stop at Sderot led to his support for American funding of Israel’s Iron Dome for protection against Palestinian missile attacks.

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Table 1

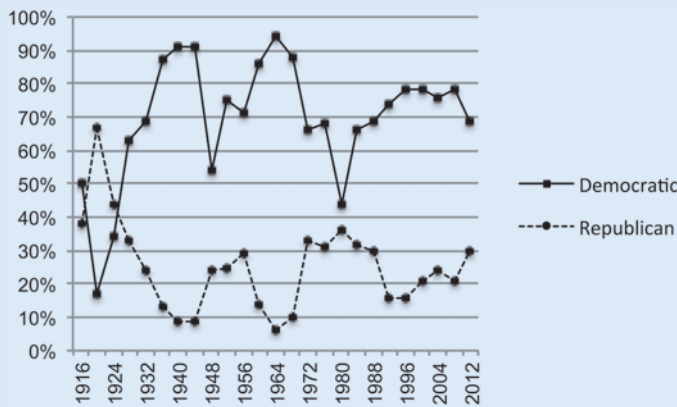
Estimates of the Jewish Presidential Vote, 1916–2012

	DEMOCRATIC	REPUBLICAN	OTHER
1916	50%	38%	11% Socialist
1920	17%	67%	16% Socialist
1924	34%	44%	22% Progressive
1928	63%	33%	4% Socialist
1932	69%	24%	7% Socialist
1936	87%	13%	
1940	91%	9%	
1944	91%	9%	
1948	54%	24%	22% Progressive
1952	75%	25%	
1956	71%	29%	
1960	86%	14%	
1964	94%	6%	
1968	88%	10%	2% Wallace
1972	66%	33%	
1976	68%	31%	
1980	44%	36%	19% Anderson
1984	66%	32%	1% Other
1988	69%	30%	1% Other
1992	74%	16%	10% Perot
1996	78%	16%	4% Perot; 2% Nader
2000	78%	21%	1% Nader
2004	76%	24%	
2008	78%	21%	
2012	69%	30%	

Source: Weisberg (2012) with National Election Pool exit polls for 2012.

Figure 1

Jewish Vote for President in 1916–2012 (based on Weisberg (2012), plus 2012 exit polls)



HOW DID JEWS VOTE IN 2012?

The 2012 exit polls reported that 69% of Jews voted for Obama and 30% voted for Romney. Although only 2% of total respondents were Jewish, Jews constitute an important vote in the key battleground states of Florida and Ohio.

Two organizations conducted separate national telephone surveys of Jews after the polls closed on Election Night. J Street, a liberal advocacy group on Israel that favors a two-state solution to the Israeli–Palestinian dispute, used Gerstein, Bocian, Agne Strategies to implement a lengthy survey of 800 Jews in its ongoing Internet panel. The RJC hired Arthur J. Finkelstein and Associates to conduct a short survey of 1,000 Jews, but it did not indicate how its sample was generated. An important caution is that such single-night polls typically have low response rates.

Dueling J Street and RJC press releases reported results that were similar to the national exit poll, although they were interpreted differently.¹ J Street compared the 70% Obama vote it obtained with his 74% vote in 2008 found by the Solomon Project to emphasize his continued strong support among Jews. The RJC instead compared the 32% Romney vote it found with McCain’s 21% in the 2008 national exit poll to trumpet considerable improvement. However,

the RJC press release understated the Romney showing by not removing respondents who did not state how they voted; adjusting their response tally results in a 34% Romney vote among responders (table 2).²

Table 3 compares the composition of the voter samples, showing substantial regional, denominational, and especially age differences.³ The table also compares these samples with a probability-based telephone survey of 3,475 Jews conducted by the Pew Research Center in early 2013 (Pew Research Center 2013). The proportion of young people younger than age 40 was less than half as large in RJC’s sample as in J Street’s sample, and it was smaller than the proportion Pew found to be younger than age 30. This suggests that the RJC did not call cell phones, which is one of the problems that caused GOP pre-election polls to overestimate the Romney vote. However, the real source of the few percentage points of difference between the two surveys is the different defection rates they found: the RJC showed Democratic Jews defecting to Romney at a slightly higher rate than Republican Jews defecting to Obama, whereas J Street found the opposite.

Nevertheless, what should be stressed is how similar are the results from the exit poll, RJC, and J Street: Romney received a higher Jewish vote than McCain, although this only returned the GOP to its 1970s and 1980s levels.⁴

SUBGROUP DIFFERENCES IN THE JEWISH VOTE

Although the Jewish vote has become solidly Democratic, it is not monolithic. The two Election-Night surveys afford a rare opportunity to examine differences in an election setting (table 4). Some differences mirror gaps in the electorate as a whole, such as a gender gap. An income effect was also indicated, with Romney receiving an additional 13 points of the vote of Jews with an income of at least \$100,000 compared to those with an income of less than \$50,000. However, the lack of consistent differences across age groups suggests that a generational-based party realignment of Jews is not in the offing.

The most important subgroup voting difference is among the major Jewish “movements”—that is, the Orthodox (more observant and more traditional), Reform (the least observant, such as in following kosher dietary rules), and Conservative (between Orthodox and Reform). Orthodox Jews (which is the smallest of the three

Table 2

Jewish Voting in the 2008 and 2012 Presidential Elections

	2012			2008		
	OBAMA	ROMNEY	OTHER	OBAMA	MCCAIN	OTHER
Exit Polls						
National Election Pool	69%	30%	1%	78%	21%	1%
Solomon Project				74%	23%	3%
Election Night Polls						
J Street	70%	30%	–			
RJC	61%	32%	1%			
RJC-corrected*	65%	34%	1%			

*The “corrected” values give the vote among respondents who answered the question.

branches) have been voting more Republican than other Jews, which is confirmed for 2012 in table 5. Moreover, Conservative Jews voted for Romney at a higher rate than Reform Jews (which is the largest branch).

growth potential, whereas the high intermarriage rate among non-Orthodox Jews could lead to an outflow among the rest of Judaism. These differences lead some demographers to expect that Orthodox Jews will eventually outnumber non-Orthodox Jews,

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The 2013 Pew Research Center results suggest that Orthodox Jews were even more negative toward Obama (and presumably to his reelection) than the Election-Night polls show (Pew Research Center 2013). Pew found that only 38% of Orthodox Jews approved of Obama's performance (see the bottom part of table 5), well below the level for non-Orthodox Jews and also well below the Election-Night polls. The approval figures for other Jewish denominations are generally very close to those of the Election-Night polls as well as to their Obama vote percentages.⁵

Table 5 partly reflects differences in party identification among the different branches of Judaism, as shown in table 6. Orthodox and Conservative Jews are more likely than other Jews to consider themselves Republican. The Pew interviews with more than 500 Orthodox Jews found that a majority are either Republicans or lean Republican.

Birth-rate and intermarriage differences among Jewish denominations have potentially important political implications. Many Orthodox couples have large families, giving the Orthodox community a large

which could shift the Jewish vote to predominantly Republican.

THE IMPACT OF THE ISRAEL ISSUE

The Election-Night polls also enable an analysis of the role of attitudes on Middle East policies. Past surveys have not found Israel to be among the primary reasons that Jews give for their votes. Some commentators expected a greater effect in 2012 because of the potential threat to Israel from Iran's nuclear ambitions. However, that effect could be limited because Jews who are more concerned about Israel had already been voting more Republican in recent elections (Uslaner and Lichbach 2009).

Table 3

Comparison Composition of Voters in RJC, J Street, and Pew Samples

	RJC	J STREET	PEW*
Northeast	30%	49%	46%–43%
Midwest	23%	11%	10%–11%
South	30%	17%	24%–23%
West	17%	24%	20%–23%
Younger than 30		16%	18%–20%
Younger than 40	14%	32%	
40–64	47%	47%	
65 and Older	39%	21%	26%–24%
Orthodox	12%	10%	12%–10%
Conservative	31%	27%	22%–18%
Reform	49%	32%	40%–35%
Unaffiliated/Other	8%	29%	25%–37%
Republican	19%	18%	15%–13%
Independent	23%	27%	31%–31%
Democrat	58%	55%	54%–55%
(N)	(938)	(1,000)	(2,786–3,475)

*The first value includes only Jews by religion; the second value also includes "Jews of No Religion."

Table 4

Romney Vote among Jews by Demographic Characteristics*

Gender	Men	Women			
RJC	39%	29%			
(N)	(442)	(496)			
J Street	34%	26%			
(N)	(384)	(416)			
Education	Not College Grad	College Grad	Post-Grad		
J Street	29%	29%	31%		
(N)	(278)	(334)	(188)		
Income	Less than \$50K	\$50K–\$100K	More than \$100K		
J Street	25%	29%	38%		
(N)	(276)	(325)	(199)		
Region	Northeast	Midwest	South	West	
RJC	33%	29%	37%	35%	
(N)	(282)	(217)	(279)	(160)	
J Street	26%	28%	33%	36%	
(N)	(388)	(89)	(134)	(188)	
Age	Younger than 41	41–64	Older than 64		
RJC	31%	33%	36%		
(N)	(134)	(449)	(332)		
	Younger than 40	40–64	Older than 64		
J Street	31%	29%	30%		
(N)	(256)	(379)	(164)		

*RJC results are reconstructed to base percentages on only the people who answered the vote question.

When the RJC survey asked how important issues concerning Israel were in an individual's vote decision, 30% answered that it was very important, 46% said somewhat important, and 22% stated that it was not important. Those who considered it very important voted for Romney by a 53%-to-45% margin, whereas those who said it was either somewhat or not important voted overwhelmingly for Obama (i.e., 72% to 27% and 78% to 21%, respectively).

However, question wording matters, and the issue of Israel appears less important when a different form of the question was

policies; 30% agreed with his policies but did not like the execution; and 27% disagreed with his policies. Most J Street respondents thought Obama would do a better job than Romney on dealing with the issues of Israel (i.e., 53% to 31%) and Iran (i.e., 58% to 26%).

WHY ARE JEWS STILL VOTING DEMOCRATIC?

Many explanations have been offered about why Jews vote Democratic. Jewish values have often been cited to explain why

How much did the Jewish vote change in 2012? A larger percentage of Jews voted Republican than in 2008, although it was hardly a sea change.

used. J Street asked respondents to choose the two issues from a list of 13 that they considered most important in deciding how to vote for president. Although respondents could give two answers, only 10% chose Israel, tying it for sixth place; at 2%, the issue of Iran was the least chosen issue. Those who chose Israel as one of the issues that most affected their decision split their vote 50%–50% between Obama and Romney.

The polls show considerable acceptance of Obama's Middle East policy. Of the RJC respondents, 44% believed Obama was more pro-Israeli versus 23% pro-Palestinian. Of the J Street sample, 43% agreed with the president's policies on the Arab–Israeli conflict and approved of the way he executes those

Jews are liberals and therefore support the Democratic Party (Fuchs 1956). However, as Wald (2011) pointed out, that explanation fails because Jews do not necessarily support Leftist parties in other countries. Wald instead offers an important argument that the Democratic Party is favored because it is more liberal on church–state separation, which created an environment in which American Jews can prosper.

Alternatively, Jews being Democratic could be understood as an instance of minorities feeling excluded from the Republican Party because it is perceived as not representing their interests. That possibility would fit with a 2007 survey finding of all religious minority groups (except Mormons) being overwhelmingly Democratic (Pew

Table 5

Vote Distribution and Presidential Approval by Jewish Movement

	ORTHODOX	CONSERVATIVE	REFORM	UNAFFILIATED/OTHER*	
RJC Vote					
Obama	51%	57%	71%	75%	
Romney	46%	41%	27%	24%	
Other	3%	1%	1%	1%	
Total	100%	99%	99%	100%	
(N)	(112)	(291)	(463)	(72)	
J Street Vote					
Obama	59%	63%	78%	70%	
Romney	41%	37%	21%	29%	
Other				1%	
Total	100%	100%	99%	100%	
(N)	(80)	(216)	(256)	(232)	
Presidential Approval					Total
RJC**	55%	61%	73%	76%	68%
J Street	63%	62%	74%	63%	67%
2013 Pew***	38%	65%	72%	75%	69%

*Values for Unaffiliated/Other for the RJC poll were obtained by subtracting values for other movements from overall totals in its report.

**Percentage with an opinion who have a favorable opinion of Obama as a person.

***Percentage based on people with an opinion.

Table 6
Party Identification by Denominational Movement

	ORTHODOX	CONSERVATIVE	REFORM	OTHER	TOTAL
RJC					
Democratic	56%	51%	61%	62%	57%
Independent	15%	25%	25%	23%	24%
Republican	29%	23%	15%	15%	19%
Total	100%	99%	101%	100%	100%
J Street					
Democratic	50%	52%	66%	48%	55%
Independent	28%	25%	23%	33%	27%
Republican	21%	24%	12%	19%	18%
Total	99%	101%	101%	100%	100%
Pew*					
Democratic	36%	64%	77%	75%	70%
Pure Independent	7%	9%	6%	10%	8%
Republican	57%	27%	17%	15%	22%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

*The Pew figures include "Jews of No Religion," with leaners treated as partisans.

Forum on Religion and Public Life 2008, 206); however, it does not account for some minorities (e.g., Muslims) only recently becoming Democratic.

An explanation of Jewish voting should consider an important pattern in the cumulative American National Election Studies and the cumulative General Social Surveys, as well as in large-scale surveys of Jews: that is, the proportion of politically conservative Jews who identify as Republicans is much smaller than the proportion of politically liberal Jews who consider themselves Democrats (Weisberg 2011). This pattern holds in the RJC survey: only 53% of politically conservative Jews identify as Republicans compared to 81% of politically liberal Jews who identify as Democrats. It is not that Jews cannot be political conservatives; it is more that the Republican Party is not capturing their vote to the extent that a conservative party should expect support from political conservatives.

This lower level of Republican identification by Jewish political conservatives is likely due to social issues. Jewish conservatives are significantly more liberal than non-Jewish conservatives on social issues such as abortion, although Jewish and non-Jewish conservatives are similar on economic issues (Greenberg and Wald 2004). In addition, surveys show that Jews are uneasy about the Republican alliance with Evangelical Christian groups (Uslaner and Lichbach 2009). Similarly, Jews have unfavorable attitudes toward the Tea Party by a 74%-to-12% margin (Gerstein 2012), and they give it only a 26 average rating on a zero-to-100 scale (Public Religion Research Institute 2012). Associations with Evangelical Christians and the Tea Party complicate the Republican Party's ability to nominate moderate candidates who would be more attractive to Jews.

The "tradition" of Jews voting Democratic also has sociopsychological underpinnings. When Jews began voting overwhelmingly Democratic during the New Deal and World War II, many

came to feel that "we Jews are Democrats," thereby incorporating partisanship into their group identity. Being Democratic became part of the dominant politicized social identity of American Jews. Information that counters such partisan identity is generally discounted, whereas voting Democratic is reinforced when family and friends are primarily other Democratic Jews.

Although most Jews are Democratic and vote Democratic for president, it is also important to recognize that many are Republican, consider being Republican as part of their Jewish identity, have their Republican identity reinforced by their Republican Jewish family and friends, and regularly vote Republican. They may accept Republican economic policies and/or prefer Republican positions on Israel. Some are Orthodox Jews who agree with Republican stands on school vouchers and social issues, whereas others are Jews from the former Soviet Union who oppose welfare programs. Whatever the reasons, the 30% of Jews who voted for Romney in 2012 amount to well more than a million people; therefore, they constitute an important voting group even when most Jews vote Democratic.

CONCLUSION

How much did the Jewish vote change in 2012? A larger percentage of Jews voted Republican than in 2008, although it was hardly a sea change. It was the best Republican showing among Jews since the 1980s, but Jews continue to be one of the most Democratic groups in the electorate. Many politically conservative Jews still did not consider themselves to be Republican.

The RJC was unable to convince most Jews to vote against Obama because of Israel. Few Jews regarded Israel as their most important voting issue, and many who considered it very important still voted for Obama's reelection. The RJC claimed that its efforts led to a change in Jewish voting; more crucially, however, Republican emphasis on Israel's vulnerability appealed to

Evangelical Christians who consider Israel's continued existence essential to their interpretation of the Bible.

Regarding the Jewish vote, the key question is whether 2012 was the beginning of a long-term increase in Republican voting. The last election that gave the Republicans such hope was in 1980, when a majority of Jews did not vote Democratic. That low Democratic vote has been interpreted as repudiation of Jimmy Carter's weak support for Israel; however, many groups voted less Democratic in 1980 due to hyperinflation and the Iranian hostage crisis. It is too early to gauge whether the increased Republican voting in 2012 was an anomaly like in 1980, associated with the weak economy, or whether it will have greater significance.

Of course, social groups sometimes change their partisanship. Jews comprise the only component of the original New Deal Coalition that has not diminished its Democratic voting in recent history. The possibility of a nuclear-armed Iran threatening Israel's existence was not sufficient to produce massive change in 2012. However, that does not discount the chance of future realignment if Republicans become more moderate on social issues. Democratic voting by Jews may be a tradition, but traditions can change. ■

NOTES

1. RJC results are available at <http://www.rjchq.org/2012/11/an-inside-look-at-the-rjc-exit-polls>. J Street results are available at http://jstreet.org/blog/post/2012-election-night-poll-results_1.
2. RJC percentages presented in this article are based only on respondents who answered the vote question.
3. Denominational differences are partly due to wording of the question. J Street and Pew interviewed people who consider themselves Jewish regardless of their religion (thereby including people who do not practice any religion but had Jewish parents and/or consider themselves culturally Jewish) and then included "Unaffiliated" as an alternative when asking people how they would describe their Jewish denomination. The RJC only interviewed people who said their religion was Jewish and then asked whether the respondents most associate themselves with Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform, without the option of Unaffiliated.
4. Separate telephone surveys of 600 voters each in Florida and Ohio commissioned by RJC and J Street obtained results similar to national figures, with a Romney

vote in the low 30% range. The Jewish vote could be credited for Obama carrying Florida—given how close the election was in that state—but was not essential to his carrying Ohio.

5. The Orthodox consist of Modern Orthodox who work in the general community and the more numerous Ultra-Orthodox who keep mainly to themselves and are less likely to agree to be interviewed. Only 34% of the Ultra-Orthodox approved of Obama's job performance versus 41% of Modern Orthodox.

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