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American Jews, Politics and Israel

BY **FRANK NEWPORT**

The political orientation of American Jews has come back into the spotlight in recent weeks with President Donald Trump's comments regarding Jews and their stances toward his presidency and the Democratic Party.

Trump has, throughout his presidency, shown public support for Israel through both his rhetoric and policy actions, including his recent high-profile assailing of Democratic members of Congress whom he characterized as anti-Semitic and anti-Israel.

Part of Trump's motivation is no doubt maintaining support among Christian evangelicals, who are very positive toward Israel and who form a key component of his political coalition. But Trump recently drew a connection between his support of Israel and the Jewish vote, saying to Jewish Americans: "In my opinion, if you vote for a Democrat, you're being very disloyal to Jewish people and you're being

very disloyal to Israel. And only weak people would say anything other than that." And, a day earlier: "I think any Jewish people that vote for a Democrat, I think it shows either a total lack of knowledge or great disloyalty."

It has traditionally been difficult to analyze the attitudes and political orientation of American Jews in surveys because they are such a small segment of the population (more on that below). But, by aggregating large numbers of interviews, Gallup and other organizations have been able to learn a good deal about American Jews that relates to the issues Trump is raising. The data show that despite Trump's commentary, Jews in the U.S. are *both* highly likely to identify as Democrats and vote for Democratic candidates *and* to express views that are highly loyal to Israel. There is little evidence of a change in these trends, or that this situation creates the kind of Jewish cognitive dissonance that Trump asserts should be the case.

It's important to recognize that Jews represent a quite small proportion of the U.S. population and voters, nationally and in most states.

From a strictly "practical politics" point of view, the Jewish vote is not likely to make a huge difference in the presidential election, even if Trump were to succeed in bringing more Jews over to the Republican side of the political ledger.

Gallup's ongoing estimates show that about 2% of American adults (those aged 18 and older) identify their religion as Jewish. To be specific, an aggregate of Gallup surveys conducted in 2018 shows 1.9% Jewish identification, and over 18,000 Gallup interviews conducted so far this year show that 2.0% of the population identifies as Jewish.

A 2013 Pew Research Center [analysis](#) of Jewish identification showed that in addition to the 1.8% of U.S. adults who identified their religion as Jewish (very similar to Gallup's estimate), another small percentage of Americans who did not initially say their religion was Jewish identified their *secular* heritage as Jewish. According to this research, at maximum 2.2% of the U.S. adult population has some basis for Jewish self-identification.

The population of Jews in America, as is the case for Protestants, Catholics and those with no religion, is disproportionately distributed across states.

Looking at the religious makeup of adults aged 18 and older in the 50 states, the highest Jewish representation is in New York, at 8%, followed by four other states -- New Jersey, Massachusetts, Connecticut and Maryland -- where it is between 6% and 4%. (These estimates are based on Gallup's

interviews with over 130,000 adults in 2017.) At the other end of the spectrum, Jews are less than one-half of 1% of the adult population in 11 states: Iowa, Nebraska, Mississippi, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Wyoming, Utah, Idaho, Arkansas, West Virginia and North Dakota.

Based on past presidential elections, the group of states with the highest probability of close popular votes next year -- classic swing states -- includes Arizona, Florida, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. Gallup's state-by-state analysis of religious preference in 2017 shows that Jews as a percentage of the adult population are above the national average in only two of these: Florida (3%) and Pennsylvania (2.3%).

Jews are below the national average in the other swing states, and are less than 1% in Wisconsin, Minnesota and North Carolina.

Jews in the U.S. do have a slightly higher profile in the voting electorate than the population at large, by virtue of their above-average educational attainment. This reflects the strong relationship between education and voter turnout in American elections. But even taking this higher turnout into account, and while recognizing that the Jewish vote may be important in some specific areas of some states in more localized elections, it's apparent that the Jewish vote is not going to make a huge difference in the coming presidential election unless there is an extremely close popular vote in specific swing states.

The Democratic orientation of the Jewish population is a very well-established fact of American political life.

The clear majority of Jewish Americans identify with or lean toward the Democratic Party, and we find no evidence that this has changed significantly during the Trump administration so far.

Trump took office in January 2017, and Gallup's aggregated surveys conducted from February through December of that year show that 68% of Jews identified as Democratic or as independents who leaned toward the Democratic Party, while 28% identified as or leaned Republican.

In 2018, those numbers were 59% Democratic and 36% Republican. So far this year, using an aggregated sample of Gallup polls conducted from January through August, 65% of Jews identify with or lean toward the Democratic Party, with 30% identifying with or leaning toward the Republican Party.

In terms of ideology, 44% of American Jews are liberal, much higher than the overall 25% among the total population, making Jews the most liberal of any major religious group we identify. Another 36% of Jews are moderates, with 20% describing themselves as conservative -- compared with 37% of the total population.

As we would expect given their majority-Democratic political identity, Jewish voters overwhelmingly (but not monolithically) voted for Hillary Clinton over Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election.

Exit polls from the 2016 election show that of the 3% of voters who identified their religion as Jewish, 71% voted for Clinton and 23% for Trump. Similarly high percentages of Jews have voted for the Democratic presidential candidate in all presidential elections going back to 1992 and have favored Democratic candidates by at least a plurality in elections going back much further than that.

Trump's assertion that "any Jewish people that vote for a Democrat, I think it shows either a total lack of knowledge or great disloyalty" thus covers a very large percentage of the U.S. Jewish population.

(In terms of "total lack of knowledge," Jews in America have *by far* the highest average education level of any religious group we measure, as noted earlier. Some 67% of Jewish adults are college graduates, far above the 32% of the overall population, and the 37% who have a postgraduate education is also much higher than among any other religious group.)

Also not surprisingly given their Democratic orientation, Jewish Americans are well below average in their approval of the job Trump is doing as president.

Our aggregate from January through August of this year shows a 29% Trump job approval rating among Jews, with 69% disapproval. Over this same period, Trump's overall job approval rating was 42%. In 2017, the first year of his presidency, Trump's Gallup job approval rating among Jews was 30%. In 2018, based on an aggregate of Gallup surveys, it was 35%. These estimates are based on relatively small samples of Jews, meaning there will be some fluctuation from year to year based on sampling error -- but overall, I see no sign that Trump approval this year is higher than it was when Trump first took office.

Most of Trump's discussion of what he assumes should be Jewish support for his party and for his presidency revolves around his administration's policies toward Israel. Trump has been very publicly supportive of Israel and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. He has followed through on a campaign promise to move the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, has attacked members of Congress whom he criticizes as anti-Israel (and anti-Semitic), and has supported Israel's decision to deny two members of Congress who have been critical of Israel -- Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib -- the right to enter that country as part of a congressional delegation.

Presumably, American Jews are aware of Trump's actions, and the data clearly show that Jews have strongly positive views of Israel. Nevertheless, Trump's actions in support of Israel to date have done little to shift Jews' political allegiance.

My recent review of the available data shows that about nine in 10 American Jews are more sympathetic to Israel than to the Palestinians. (That compares to about six in 10 of all Americans.) Additionally, 95% of Jews have favorable views of Israel, while 10% have favorable views of the Palestinian Authority -- significantly more pro-Israel than the overall national averages of 71% favorable views of Israel and 21% favorable views of the Palestinian Authority.

Research conducted in 2013 by Pew showed that 76% of Jews (identified by religion) said they were at least somewhat emotionally attached to Israel. In addition, almost half said that caring about Israel is an essential part of being Jewish (with most of the rest saying it is important although not essential) and nearly half reported that they had personally traveled to Israel.

Trump's assertion that Jews should in essence be single-issue voters whose presidential vote is directly swayed by his statements about and policies toward Israel is apparently much too simplistic. The majority of American Jews have voted for Democratic presidential candidates for decades and are politically liberal in their views of many domestic issues. Those facts of political life are not going to change overnight.

The consequences of Jews' majority-level disapproval of President Trump and Jews' underlying Democratic political orientation is evident in an interesting recent finding reported by Pew Research. Their data showed that 42% of Jews say Trump favors Israel *too much* -- far more than is the case for Catholics or Protestants, with most of the rest of Jews interviewed saying Trump is striking the right balance rather than favoring the Palestinians too much. This is most likely explained by the heavy Democratic partisanship of Jews (as Pew notes) as well as the possibility that Jews do not think Trump's policies are the right way to help Israel. This finding underscores the challenges facing Trump or any Republican presidential candidate if they attempt to court the Jewish vote.

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