

Jewish voters back Obama, say Israel not top issue

by [Lauren Markoe](#) in the [May 2, 2012](#) issue

Though many Democrats worry that President Obama could lose Jewish support because of his approach to the Middle East, a poll indicates that Israel is not the top political issue of American Jews, with only 4 percent calling it the most important factor in their vote.

Like most Americans, Jews are primarily concerned about the economy, the poll found, but they differ from the general public on a number of political and social issues, including their relative willingness to accept Muslims and same-sex marriage.

The findings emerged April 3 from a survey released by the Public Religion Research Institute, which aimed to identify the religious issues and ideas that Jewish Americans consider most important. The results, said PRRI CEO Robert P. Jones, show a strong Jewish concern for social and economic justice.

“These values resonate with religious Jews as well as Jews who identify as culturally or ethnically Jewish,” he said. Thirty percent identified themselves as “just Jewish.” Eight in ten respondents said pursuing justice and caring for the widow and the orphan are important in shaping their politics—ranking higher than any of the four other values listed on the survey. Ranking lowest: “seeing every person as made in the image of God,” with 55 percent calling it a very or somewhat important motivator of their political beliefs.

A “commitment to social equality” was named by 46 percent as the factor most important to their Jewish identity, followed by 20 percent who said it was “support for Israel” and 17 percent who said it was “religious observance.”

As for Jewish views on Muslims, 66 percent agree that American Muslims are an important part of the U.S. religious fabric—markedly higher than the 54 percent of all Americans who hold this view.

On the issue of same-sex marriage, 81 percent of Jews (compared to 51 percent of all Americans) believe it should be legal in all or most cases. The Reform movement, the largest and—aside from the relatively small Reconstructionist wing—the most liberal strain of American Judaism, allows same-sex marriage, along with parts of the Conservative movement.

The poll also showed Jewish voters' strong support for Obama. Twice as many said they would vote for Obama over a GOP candidate. That level of support is nearly unchanged from the same point during Obama's first presidential run.

Kenneth Wald, a political science professor who studies Jewish voting patterns at the University of Florida, said he has heard the political chatter that U.S. Jews are so upset with Obama's treatment of Israel that they will move away from their traditionally Democratic leanings and vote for a GOP challenger—but the survey doesn't find evidence for that.

"About three out of four American Jews voted Democratic in 2008," Wald said. "Something relatively similar is likely to occur in 2012."

Jews also expressed a strong preference for diplomacy over military approaches in U.S. foreign policy, preferring diplomatic means by a more than two-to-one margin. But there are significant partisan differences on this issue, with 81 percent of Jewish Democrats choosing diplomatic tactics, compared to 35 percent of Jewish Republicans.

The survey of 1,004 American Jews, which was one of the few studies of Jews conducted by a non-Jewish organization, has a margin of error of plus or minus 5 percentage points. It was funded by a grant from the Nathan Cummings Foundation. —RNS