

People of the Button



By Peter H. Schweitzer

IN 1845, David Levy Yulee, a Florida Democrat, became the first Jew to be elected a United States senator. This was well before his state had enough Jewish retirees to fill early-bird restaurants for dinner and constitute a significant voting bloc.

It didn't take long, however, before politicians started pandering to the Jewish vote. And it didn't take long for the Jewish vote to become crucial. This year, Florida's electoral votes could hinge on how those Jewish retirees vote. Witness the "Great Schlep," a campaign — spurred by a Sarah Silverman video on the Web — urging Jewish grandchildren to persuade their bubbes and zaides to vote for Barack Obama.

In my experience, the most obvious way politicians try to woo Jews today is to demonstrate their support of Israel and to appeal to long-held social values. The less obvious way is through, well, political buttons.

Back in 1940, Wendell Willkie, the Republican candidate, was beaten by Franklin D. Roosevelt in a landslide. Normally this might make for just a footnote in history. But of great interest to Jews is the button, the first on the left in the series displayed above, that was handed out in an effort to gain their vote.

This seems to be the first instance of using Hebrew-style calligraphy to communicate — in coded fashion — one's political allegiance. As rabbinic commentators have said, "The one who knows, knows" — the one who "gets it" doesn't need an explanation. Non-Jews might perceive this as just some kind of fancy artwork, but Jews would get the secret message that Willkie was "one of us."

Willkie, a Democrat until the year before his nomination, had been outspoken

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From Willkie to Obama, campaigning in code to Jewish voters.



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in fighting racism and opposing the Ku Klux Klan. He was also considered a pro-conscription internationalist when so many Republicans were isolationists. Both these views would undoubtedly have appealed to many Jews, but he ended up as a footnote, garnering only 10 percent of the Jewish vote, the same amount captured by Barry Goldwater — a candidate with Jewish roots — in 1964.

In the past few decades, the covert approach has been replaced by a clear and bold one: the outright spelling out of candidates' names in Hebrew. Jewish voters are proud of being Jewish and the candi-

dates want to identify with them.

In 2000, or the year 5761 according to the Jewish calendar, as we are reminded by another button, Al Gore faced off against George W. Bush. This gave rise to a clever joke based on a multilingual pun. Reading Hebrew-style from right to left, under Mr. Gore's photo is the Hebrew spelling of his name, "Gore." Under Mr. Bush's photo is the word "Gore-nisht," literally "Gore not" or, in proper Yiddish, "Gornisht," which means "nothing." One doesn't need to be a maven to know that this button was put out by the Democrats.

George W. Bush's campaign, on the other hand, recalled an earlier era with a return to that old-time Hebrew-style lettering. In its assertion that there were "Jews for Bush" it seems to be making a statement that not all Jews are automatically Democrats and that you wouldn't be alone if you went Republican. In the end, however, this remained a rallying cry of a minority within a minority. Mr. Bush received only 19 percent of the Jewish vote in 2000, and just a little more, 24 percent, in 2004.

And this year's candidates? John McCain has a dignified button with an upper-crust-style typeface. In contrast, Barack Obama has adopted a hip new style — call it "chutzpadik" or audacious — that dispenses with English altogether.

With his name written solely in Hebrew, Mr. Obama's button, on the left, represents the ultimate insider-speak. It's a clever wink at the Jewish audience that says, "You know that I know that we are one." And the one who knows not only knows, but may also get the votes. □

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