

DAILY UPDATE

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Values Divide Among Orthodox Jews

Supporters of Trump and Biden are as polarized on the issues as the rest of the country.

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Joe Biden and Donald Trump commented on the vote results in the early hours of Nov. 4, 2020 in Delaware and the White House respectively. (Getty Images)

A post-election [survey of Orthodox Jewish voters](#) found a “vast” gap in priorities between Trump and Biden voters, reflecting the kind of polarization found among all Americans.

The survey of Orthodox voters found less than a handful of issues that both Trump voters and Biden voters agreed were top priorities, with sharp differences on some major issues. Trump voters ranked Israel as their number one concern, the survey found, while Biden voters ranked the coronavirus pandemic as their top issue.

Mark Trencher, president of Nishma Research and the study’s lead researcher, said that the results indicated that “Modern Orthodox world is even more split than people thought.”

“Not only was there a lot of disagreement between the two groups, in many cases their views were diametrically opposed,” said Trencher in a phone interview.

The Orthodox community is sometimes viewed from the outside as a monolith, and indeed Orthodox Jews — ranging from centrist Modern Orthodox to the more insular charedim — [appeared to vote by a large majority for Trump in the 2020 election](#). The campaign saw an [unusual degree of partisan communal activity in support of the Republican incumbent](#). Analysts attributed the Orthodox vote to support for Trump’s hawkish Israel policies and his conservative views on religious freedom and social issues.

But previous research conducted by Nishma found [fault lines in the Orthodox Jewish community that fell along social and theological issues including the role of women, the place of LGBTQ members in the community and centrality of certain core beliefs](#). These “ideological and halachic differences” — referring to Jewish law — did not prepare Trencher for the “level of political differences that seem to have taken root.”

“It’s both surprising in its scope and worrisome,” Trencher said of the values divide within Orthodoxy. “This goes beyond the differences between Orthodox and non-Orthodox; it really affects the Orthodox community internally.”

The survey was conducted among 449 self-identified Orthodox respondents and released last week.

While Orthodox Trump voters ranked Israel as their number one issue, with 80 percent saying it was a critical factor, it ranked only 15th among Biden voters, with 29 percent of respondents calling it a critical concern. In contrast, Biden voters ranked the coronavirus pandemic as their number one issue (78 percent saying it was a critical factor), while it ranked only 26th among Trump voters (12 percent).

Steven Bayme, an analyst of American Jewry and Israeli society, warned that the survey results may represent “a referendum on Trump” rather than a “significant paradigm shift among Orthodox.”

“I don’t believe for a second that you can interpret these results to mean that Orthodox Jews who voted for Biden are not concerned about Israel,” Bayme told The Jewish Week in a phone interview. “However, at this moment, the primary concern of Orthodox Biden voters is not what Trump did for Israel — which was noteworthy and very praiseworthy — but what Trump has done to aggravate the polarization within America.”

Within Orthodoxy, the “sharp divides between the Modern Orthodox and charedi Jews predated Trump, but were cast into starker relief in this election,” said Bayme.

Other lightning rod issues showing sharp divides were climate change — for which 41% of Biden voters cited the issue as a critical concern, compared to a bare 1% of Trump voters — and racial inequality. The latter was a critical concern for 42% of Biden voters, compared to only 13 percent of Trump voters.

Bayme saw the “Orthodox drift rightward” with regard to racial relations to be “a key focus point.”

“Historically, Orthodox Jews have been concerned about racial inequality and racial tensions in America,” he said, noting that central hubs of Orthodox life — in New York City and beyond — generally directly border communities of color. He found it “surprising” that “pro-Trump voters have significantly downgraded the issue of race relations, when they live in areas where race relations are particularly critical.”

While certain issues have caused internal divides over the last quarter century — mainly around LGBTQ membership and the role of women — “science, climate change, race relations, immigration were never really an argument” in Orthodox circles, said Trencher.

The survey suggests that voters are more likely to subscribe to a “package of beliefs,” rather than individual policy concerns.

“The results speak more to our hyper-polarized political environment than anything else,” he said. “Core, underlying priorities might not be as far apart as the data — taken as a uniquely contentious time — seem to suggest.”