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South Carolina Jewish voters torn on primary candidates

Alina Dain Sharon/JointMedia News Service, Tuesday, January 17, 2012

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The flag of South Carolina

Henry Goldberg loves his country. The businessman's Polish-Jewish parents escaped Nazi Germany and made their home in South Carolina. His father began work as a janitor and eventually became a business owner. These were the opportunities that America offered, and not a moment went by when the elder Goldberg wasn't thankful for his survival.

This is the background that shaped Goldberg's Republican views. As the years went by, he and his brother expanded their father's company, Palmetto Tile Distributors, in Columbia. In the 1950s and '60s, this was a truly wonderful country, Goldberg told JointMedia News Service. Doors were left open at

night, keys were left in the car, the country was strong militarily, and it wasn't in debt. Since then, he's seen the country decline into what he views as a welfare state that gives too much of its dollars to agencies like Medicare and Medicaid.

"I want my country back ... My children do not live currently as good as I did, nor will they, and I strongly believe my grandchildren will not," he said.

As South Carolina prepares to hold its Republican primary on Jan. 21, Goldberg's views represent just some of the political opinions held by the members of the Jewish community in the state. These opinions vary between fiscally and socially conservative views and generally liberal beliefs, yet all of them tend to coincide on the support of uniquely Jewish issues (such as Israel).

These views also reflect how Jews in the state may ultimately vote, although that vote may not mean much. The Jewish population of the state is small, just under 13,000 in 2011 according to the Jewish Virtual Library. While their own political views vary, South Carolina Jews are also encapsulated within a traditionally conservative-voting general population. The state even made the list of the top Republican states in a 2009 Gallup poll.

"To a large degree South Carolina is a very critical state for the Republican nomination because it is voting along Republican lines almost every single time. I am sure pollsters are watching South Carolina very closely," said Rabbi Jonathan Case of the Beth Shalom Synagogue in Columbia.

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Nonetheless, South Carolina Jews still have impact and have managed to send several Jewish officials to public office, including Democratic Sen. Joel Lourie and Inez Tenenbaum, currently head of the Consumer Product Safety Commission in Washington, D.C.

Despite his conservative views, as the son of Holocaust survivors Goldberg was naturally irked when Fox News host Sean Hannity asked Republican Primary candidate Ron Paul on his show in December 2011 if Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is a Holocaust denier, and Paul responded, "They're just defending themselves."

"You're a crazy person if you believe that," Goldberg said, adding that how the candidates feel about Israel is very important, and noting what he views as Obama's poor treatment of Netanyahu and Israel. Other than Paul, "generally the Republicans stand up so much stronger for Israel." Romney, who narrowly leads over the other candidates since the New Hampshire primary, is the most electable candidate, but ultimately it would be hard for any of the contenders to beat Obama, Goldberg said.

South Carolina residents may vote in the upcoming primary even if they are not Republican. For instance, a Democrat might vote for the more progressive GOP candidate in order to skew the election towards the center, said Stanley Dubinsky, the Director of Jewish Studies at the University of South Carolina, who classifies himself as an independent. "I'm neither an Occupy-Wall-Streeter nor a Tea-Partier," he said.

Rabbi Case tells a similar story. While he typically views himself as Democrat, he could also vote Republican depending on the stance of the individuals running for the office and how closely they align with his views. Within Case's congregation and community, some favor Rick Perry and Newt Gingrich for their ardent support of Israel, while others consider Gingrich a bit volatile and fear Perry's religiously conservative views. While people tend to like Rick Santorum, few express support for Ron Paul.

Mitt Romney on the other hand is more palatable for many because he's more moderate and very pro-Israel, Case said. On the other hand, Dubinsky said he finds most of the Republican candidates to be a little too extreme—with the exception of Jon Huntsman, who recently dropped out of the race. He opined that some of the candidates go too far by dictating morality to the public "as if God spoke to them personally." It's not a Jewish thing to "tell people they're going to hell," he said.

However, Dubinsky believes President Obama has shown himself to be an incompetent leader who has also backpedaled on Israel. "As a Jew who is committed to Israel and doesn't want to see the U.S. let Israel be harmed," he said he would be satisfied with any of the GOP contenders except Ron Paul.

Some concern could arise regarding the ability of South Carolina Jews to vote in the primary since this year the election will be held on the Sabbath, as it also was for the 2008 Republican primary. However, not all Jews are observant enough to be hindered by this, and the state does allow absentee voting. Results also depend on where Jews and non-Jews actually go to vote, as districts in the state tend to be monochromatic, either Democrat or Republican.

While Jewish opinion in South Carolina varies, it seems that a candidate's views on Jewish issues trumps all else. Due to their small numbers, this may not have much of an impact on the South Carolina primary, but Florida's primary may prove another matter.

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