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# CAMPAIGN

## Parties target Fla. Jews who switched to Bush

By Jonathan Singer

While President Bush made significant gains with Florida's Jewish voters in 2004, Republicans hoping to knock off Sen. Bill Nelson (D-Fla.) in 2006 might not be able to count on the same level of support because of the GOP's handling of Social Security reform, stem-cell research and the Terri Schiavo case.

Republicans argue that they are stronger than the Democratic Party on the issue of Israel's security and that their party shares many spiritual values with Jews. Nelson counters that, as a state insurance commissioner, he fought for payments for Holocaust victims.

What's more, GOP contender Rep. Katherine Harris — a hero to conservatives and a villain to Democrats across the country — does not enjoy the same popularity that Bush does in the Jewish community, Democrats insist.

Religion plays a large role in Florida politics, explained the Rev. Jim Henry of the First Baptist Church of Orlando, a former president of the Southern Baptist Convention. In recent years, Henry said, he has seen "a rising interest in the religious community" among politicians.

That interest is not limited to the evangelical communities so heavily courted by the GOP. During the presidential campaign, Florida Republicans made unprecedented entreaties to Jewish voters. A specific budget was drawn up for the effort, and surrogates such as former New York Mayor Ed Koch trolled the state for Jewish votes.

Florida's Jewish community, which numbers close to 700,000 when "snowbirds" — Northeasterners who fly to the state for the winter — are included, traditionally makes up 5 percent of the electorate. In areas of South Florida, that number can reach as high as 40 percent.

In November, Bush received 139 percent more Jewish votes in Florida than he did in 2000, according to GOP pollster Dr. Michael Cohen, president of Cohen Research Group, who conducted a post-election survey for Artemis Strategies. Bush's share of the



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statewide Jewish vote increased seven percentage points.

Cohen sees a long-term shift of American Jews towards the Republican Party but cautions that the 2006 Florida Senate race might not evidence that trend. While elderly Jews in retirement homes go to the polls for the Democrats “by the busload,” the groups of Jews among whom Bush performed the best in 2004 — young men and the Orthodox — are less likely to turn out for midterm elections.

Democratic pollster Anna Greenberg, who has surveyed Jewish voters nationally, was also skeptical that there would be a major shift next year. “I don’t see the set of circumstances that led to marginal gains by Bush in 2004 being present in 2006,” Greenberg said.

She explained that while Republicans improved among the Jewish community on account of the president’s war on terrorism, current issues cut against the GOP. Greenberg pointed to Republicans’ opposition to increased government funding for stem-cell research and actions during the Schiavo affair, both of which concerned many Jews who strongly support the separation of church and state.

Florida Democrats also stress that Republican handling of the Medicare prescription-drug benefit and support for private Social Security accounts are anathema to Jewish voters in the state.

Democrat Joe Schreiber, the mayor of Tamarac in Broward County and resident of the Kings Point retirement community — which gave 86 percent of its vote to Democratic presidential nominee John Kerry in 2004 — admitted that the Republicans made inroads among the Jewish community on the basis of the Israel-Palestine situation. But, he said, “In the several months since the election, the trend has been in the other direction because of Social Security.”

Republicans strongly disagree, saying that Jewish voters will support the assertive stance that the president has taken to fix the entitlement programs. Boca Raton’s Republican mayor, Steve Abrams, commented, “Jews are very responsive to the administration’s message on the economy.”

Candidate selection could hamper Republican efforts in 2006. “If Katherine Harris is nominated,” Cohen predicted, “I can’t imagine that the strong gains Bush made would hold unless Bush comes down to campaign for her.”

Sid Dinerstein, chairman of the Palm Beach County Republican Party, admitted as much: “Katherine Harris is her own lightning rod.”

Republicans are quick to point out that that the nomination of Harris is not a done deal. A recent Mason-Dixon poll showed Harris trailing Nelson by a 17-point margin, 53 to 36 percent, among registered voters. And two weeks ago, the St. Petersburg Times reported that the White House has been encouraging Florida House Speaker Allan Bense, a Republican, to enter the race.

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