

## A Jewish Voice At YearlyKos

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The ruckus they raised ousted then-Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.) from his leadership position. The money and activists they mobilized helped put several long-shot Democratic candidates from red states into Congress. And their sustained attention to the departure of seven U.S. prosecutors from the Justice Department created a bonfire that has destroyed Attorney General Alberto Gonzales' credibility.

Yet, when liberal bloggers — denizens of that noisy, cranky, high-intensity region of the Internet where individuals air their personal views, analyses, musings and, at times, reporting — held their major conference earlier this month, Jewish groups were nowhere to be seen.

In contrast, all but one of the Democratic presidential candidates came to Chicago for YearlyKos, the second annual gathering of progressive bloggers, organizers, and Democratic operatives. The event, which is named for the popular blog DailyKos, attracted 1,500 people.

To be sure, there were plenty of individual Jews among the attendees at YearlyKos. But out of 350 speakers, I was the only representative from a Jewish organization or blog. Jewish organizations were also conspicuously absent from the numerous tables and stalls at Chicago's McCormick Place Convention Center.

In this community of increasing influence in public affairs, the absence of both the organized Jewish community and the unorganized Jewish blogosphere was anomalous. After all, Jews are leaders in the Democratic Party. Most Jewish organizations have close ties to progressive lawmakers. And Jewish organizations are usually smart enough to have a seat at almost every powerful table.

At an event with sufficient clout to attract almost the entire field of Democratic presidential candidates, sponsored by a blog that attracts more than half a million readers every day, it was unusual to witness Jewish groups ceding the field.

I think two overlapping phenomena explain our community's absence.

One of the guiding philosophies of DailyKos, as articulated by its founder and namesake, Markos Moulitsas Zúniga, is the belief that interest groups have hurt the Democratic Party and progressive politics in America. Kos has repeatedly attacked organizations like

NARAL, a pro-choice group, for endorsing vulnerable Republican members of Congress because of their voting record on singular issues of importance to them.

These interest groups, according to Kos, represent the “old” way of doing business. They focus on their own, often narrow issues instead of helping to build a progressive movement. This parochialism accurately describes the current state of much of the Jewish civic square.

However, Jewish organizations were not the only interest groups missing from YearlyKos. Although Kos’ recently told “Meet The Press” that “everybody else in the party coalition [except for the Democratic Leadership Council] has come together,” few of the major ethnic, racial or religious organizations had a presence. The established organizations that were there, including People for the American Way, the AFL-CIO, assorted international unions and the American Civil Liberties Union, were liberal stalwarts who have embraced the Internet and who understand that occasional alignment on some issues, with some conservatives, does not a bipartisan movement make.

The overwhelming majority of speakers at YearlyKos were independent bloggers, elected officials and their staff, or people affiliated with new, Internet-based organizations. It is a constituency that attracts and develops many of the most valuable activists, raises large sums of money online, and masters new technology. Freed from some of the constraints of more established interest groups, the “netroots” is generally less ideologically rigid, valuing authenticity in its candidates. Newly elected Sens. Jon Tester (D-Mont.) and Jim Webb (D-Va.) are two favorites.

A second reason for their absence is the fact that the Jewish community has not figured out what to do about the new forms of communications, networking and organizing represented by blogs and various Web 2.0 tools. Although there were some people at YearlyKos who came only for the politics, I think the overwhelming majority were bloggers or otherwise engaged in online communication or community building. Note that this absence extended to the Jewish blogosphere. The blog I edit, [jspot.org](http://jspot.org), is one of a small handful of Jewish blogs with credibility and relationships outside of the Jewish blogging community.

One of the inherent challenges that blogging presents to more established organizations is the premium the forum places on candor, independence and individuality. Traditional Jewish organizations typically have one spokesperson and the message is tightly controlled, as vividly demonstrated by the recent dismissal of the New England regional director of the Anti-Defamation League for acknowledging the Armenian genocide. If these groups are interested in entering this world as members of the online community, this will have to change.

The openness and unpredictability of blogs has already tested the Jewish community’s understanding of the medium. Because blogs and other online forums are open to all users, on rare occasions visitors to the sites write anonymous comments that are racist, sexist, anti-Semitic or otherwise inappropriate. Partisans have sought to use these

comments to negatively characterize Web-based groups like MoveOn.org or blogs like DailyKos, and by implication any candidates who accept their support. Thus far, nonpartisan Jewish groups have not taken the bait, but they will be tested repeatedly as the election season gets closer.

In the months and years to come, Jewish organizations will need to reevaluate our relationship with technology and the communities whose growth has been a product of that technology. We must begin to change our culture to allow for — even encourage — debate and dissent in the public square. Otherwise some of the younger, more nimble Jewish organizations will fill the vacuum. n

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