

# The Jewish Week

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## Edgy Effort To Redirect Jewish Political Debate

*Web-based project to try to get campaigns focused on domestic agenda, not just Israel.*



**James D. Besser/Washington - Washington Correspondent**

Listen to the 2008 presidential candidates and it's easy to get the impression that the only thing Jewish voters care about is Israel.

The Jewish Funds for Justice, a New York-based incubator for social action projects, says that relentless focus ignores the agenda of a community with much broader concerns. And this week the group announced an innovative, Web-based project designed to educate politicians that Jewish politics doesn't begin and end with the issue of Israel.

"We wanted to give the average Jew a role in shaping the domestic Jewish agenda for the 2008 elections," said Mik Moore, the public policy director of the group, which uses the acronym JFSJ. "While there are a lot of Jewish organizations that get to sit down with the presidential candidates and tell them what they want, or what they think the Jewish community wants, for a lot of Jews those meetings aren't representative of their interests."

Domestic issues, he said, have gotten "short shrift" as more and more candidates focus on the big-ticket issue of Israel and as more Jewish organizations shift to an agenda heavily skewed toward international concerns.

And the project, tapping some of the hippest Jewish Web sites with strong appeal to younger Jews, represents an effort to start creating networks of young activists who believe the traditional Jewish organizations do not represent their interests.

JFSJ leaders are convinced the politicians will pay attention. But some political analysts point to an obvious problem: political candidates focus overwhelmingly on Israel because that's the issue that opens the wallets of big campaign donors.

"If politicians stereotype Jews as single-minded on Israel, it's not because they are unaware of the general liberal political orientations of the community," said Ken Wald, a University of Florida political scientist who studies the Jewish community. "The organized Jewish community, which is the best way to find and tap donors, is cohesive behind Israel, and therefore it's sensible for candidates to aim their fundraising and rhetoric to that audience."

The idea behind the JFJS project, Moore said, is simple.

This week the group is asking visitors to its popular JSPOT Web blog to consider a list of 10 domestic issues, ranging from child care to fair wages.

"Folks coming to the site are asked to pick the five [domestic] issues they think should represent the Jewish agenda," he said. "We describe what we see as the major challenges in each of these issues. We'll leave it open for about two weeks. Our expectation is that thousands of Jews will participate and express their preferences."

Then, JFSJ will contact each presidential campaign and provide not only the results of the

survey but the names of all those who participated.

“And we will ask them: if you are elected, what are you going to do to address these areas of concern to the Jewish community?” Moore said. “As their answers come in, we will post them on our Web site, and encourage people to use the site to evaluate and discuss the responses.”

The group will not promote particular positions, he said. “We won’t be saying ‘we want to you to commit to raising the minimum wage by \$2’; it’s just to give the campaigns an opportunity to understand what the real priorities of this community are, and then to provide a forum for a genuine exchange.”

The goal, he said, is to foster a genuine dialogue between the candidates and a politically diverse Jewish community instead of the pro-Israel talking points most candidates stick to when addressing Jewish groups.

The project will only work, he said, if there are “thousands” of participants. The key to making that happen is JFSJ’s partnership with several organizations that focus heavily on domestic issues and Jewish Web sites that have a strong following among younger Jews — including the Web magazine “Jewcy” and the popular Velveteen Rabbi blog.

Also on board: JDub Records, a nonprofit company that produces innovative Jewish music and uses it “as a means of bridging religious, ethnic, and cultural boundaries,” according to the group’s Web site, and The Tribe, a Web site centering on an offbeat film by producer Tiffany Shlain that offers “an electric ride through the complex history of both the Barbie doll and the Jewish people — from biblical times to present day.”

Those partners — 14 so far — will actively promote the JFSJ experiment.

“While we are a record company dealing in the cultural realm, one thing we are really interested in is getting our peers involved in the real world,” said Aaron Bisman, president and CEO of JDub records. “This is an opportunity to engage people by simply asking them: what do you care about? And having them respond in a format that really has the potential to be important in the world.”

Bisman said he believes the involvement of JDub and other icons in the new Jewish media “will help engage younger Jews. It’s operating within the realms younger people exist in, reaching out to them where they are — sitting in front of their computer screens, surfing the Net.”

Other partners include some of the small, progressive social action groups that have sprung up in cities across the country, in many cases in response to the perception that big national Jewish agencies have been edging away from their traditional domestic liberalism.

Among those participants: the Progressive Jewish Alliance in California and Jews for Racial and Economic Justice (JFREJ) in New York.

“This is particularly important to us because as a Jewish social justice group, we really want politicians to focus more on the domestic issues,” said Dara Silverman, the JFREJ director. “We see this as a way to project our local goals — including things like immigrant rights and housing — on a national level.”

And she said the project is a way to draw in Jews who have not been involved in public policy from a Jewish perspective.

“The real question for us is how you engage people who have not been engaged by the existing Jewish organizations because the emphasis hasn’t been on the domestic issues that so many Jews see as a core part of their Judaism,” she said. “So many haven’t found ways to plug in.”

Silverman said the JFSJ project won't revolutionize Jewish politics or instantly change the way most politicians relate to Jewish voters.

"But my hope is that candidates will start talking about issues," she said. "Mechanisms like this can have an impact on the way politicians talk about issues and frame them."

Some major Jewish leaders commended the effort but said it won't be so easy to offset the impact of big, narrowly focused Jewish groups — and of Jewish campaign giving, which is focused heavily on the Israel issue.

"It's a good idea; it's important for politicians to know that Jews care about more than Israel," said Rabbi Steve Gutow, executive director of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA), an umbrella Jewish group that has traditionally focused heavily on domestic affairs — but which in recent years has also turned up its Israel involvement.

But he said that most "politicians do know that Jewish groups support other issues; the disconnect comes because of the intensity, the amount of lobbying and the money that goes into political campaigns."

To succeed in shifting the political balance back to the domestic side, JFSJ "has to go the next step and mobilize real resources," Gutow said. "Their constituency has to be ready to put their energy and their money on the line. That's what really turns politicians on. Until that happens, you'll still see politicians come before Jewish groups and talk mostly about Israel."

But participants say the edgy, Internet-focused project has the potential, at least, to draw a whole new generation into Jewish activism — and to start the process of giving politicians a broader view of Jewish interests.

"It is our expectation that when a presidential campaign receives a letter from more than a dozen organizations and signed by thousands of individual voters, they will take it seriously," said JFSJ's Mik Moore. "At this point in the primary process, most Jewish voters are undecided. We are giving candidates an equal chance to put their best foot forward, to have their positions examined by a community that takes public policy seriously."

As an "added incentive," he said, the group will take out full-page ads "to make it known to the readers of tens of thousands of Jewish newspapers which candidates have been responsive and which have not."