

The day after the election, I was in a meeting filled with Jewish leaders. I asked the group how many of them knew a family member or spouse who hadn't voted in the 2016 election. To my astonishment, all hands went up. How could there be such apathy from a group known for being active in their community?

In the week following the election I continued to speak with synagogue and Jewish day school leadership who admitted to not voting. When asked, most told me they either believed their vote didn't matter or they didn't care for either of the main presidential candidates. Still, others admitted to not understanding understand the issues well enough and skipped the entire process.

Confusion, indifference, general distaste for politics, or the misguided notion that one person's vote doesn't matter may explain the startling number of people who didn't vote in the presidential election - both in our own community and across the country.

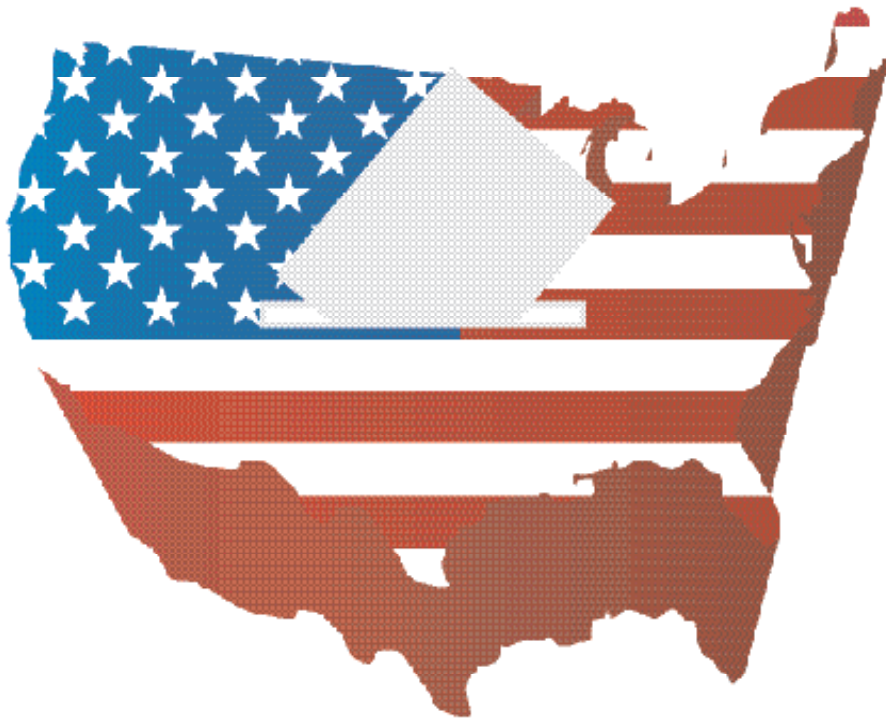
According to the United States Election Project, nearly half the country - more than 100 million people - didn't vote in the Nov. 8 election. That's 100 million plus people who decided, for whatever reason, that this election wasn't worth their time.

Unfortunately, the Jewish community isn't unique in this respect. The Orthodox Union Advocacy Center's Teach NJS initiative launched a voter engagement effort in New Jersey in 2013. Although we successfully increased the number of people who vote in Bergen County, the results were less than stellar. In Teaneck, for example, the total number of people who voted increased from 50 percent in 2013 to 64 percent in 2016. In neighboring Englewood, the number grew from 34 percent in 2013 to 59 percent in 2016.

While presidential elections garner the most attention and coverage, all elections on the ballot are critically important - from Senate races to House races, to state legislative seats, all the way down to city council races. It is difficult to underestimate the impact state and local elections have on the issues we care most about, namely, policing and race relations.

Many voters don't realize how much local

VOTING AND THE JEWISH COMMUNITY:



Can We Finally Take This Seriously?

By Maury Litwack

racers affect the issues they care most about. While CNN and Fox News may not cover local legislative minutia, their impact far exceeds the media's interest.

Care about Israel? Yes, the president is the most powerful voice on this issue, but many local and state political bodies voted on critical issues affecting the Jewish state, including the boycott, divestment and sanctions against Israel movement.

Care about Jewish education? Government funding for education is almost entirely decided at the local level.

What happens at the local level matters in the short term, but also in the long term. Imagine local and state politics as the minor league. Many county chairs and state senators move up the ladder to national politics. Remember, President Obama was once a little-known state senator in Illinois. New Jersey Senator Cory Booker was previously the mayor of Newark. The list goes on and on.

It's time for the nation to take voting more seriously. This is especially true for the Jewish community, which is personally invested in major foreign policy issues like Israel and major domestic policies like education reform.

Thankfully, we have a year to change our lackluster voting habits. New Jersey and New York, states with sizeable Jewish populations, will hold two major elections in less than a year - governor of New Jersey and mayor of New York City. One out of 13 children in New York City is a yeshiva student. Imagine the possibilities if we vote for candidates who support school choice for non-public education.

Why stay home when every vote counts and makes a difference in our children's lives as well as our own? Why be indifferent or lazy when there are critical races up and down the ballot? Devote just a little bit of time over the next year to educate yourself and your community about future elections. Your participation will make a big difference for our communities - and the nation.

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The Ellison Challenge

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is difficult to see how Sanders would have sold his radical positions to an uninterested public.

The other problem with the "Sanders would have won" argument is that it misses the distinction between Trump's populism and Democrat populism.

Trump's populism stemmed from his willingness to say things that other politicians and authority figures more generally wouldn't dare say. Trump's allegation that the political system is rigged, for instance, empowered Americans who feel threatened by the authoritarianism of the politically correct Left.

Trump's opponents insist that his populism empowered white power bigots. But that was a bug in his ointment. It wasn't the ointment itself. Trump's willingness to seemingly say anything, and certainly to say things that were beyond the narrow confines of the politically correct discourse, empowered tens of millions of voters. It also empowered white bigots at the fringes of the Right.

Whereas empowering white bigots was a side effect of Trump's populism, empowering bigots is a central feature of leftist popu-

lism. And this is where it gets dicey for Jews.

As Obama - and Ellison - have shown, when Democrats channel populism, they use it to demonize their opponents as evil. They are "fat cats on Wall Street."

They are "racists," and other deplorables.

There are scattered voices on the Left that are calling for their fellow leftists to revisit their authoritarian practice of labeling everyone who doesn't walk lockstep behind them as racists and otherwise unacceptable. But for the most part, the populists are winning the argument by essentially demanding more ideological radicalism and more rigidity.

This policy is completely irrational from a political perspective. It's hard to see the constituencies that will be swayed to support an angry, hateful party.

But this brings us to the Jews, who voted 3:1 for the Democrats, and to the American Jewish leadership, whose support for Clinton was near unanimous.

When anti-Semitic, populist voices like Ellison's began taking over Britain's Labour Party, British Jews began heading for the exits. When push came to shove, they preferred their individual rights and their communal rights as Jews above their partisan loyalties.

So far, this doesn't appear to be the case

among Jewish Democrats.

Consider the Anti-Defamation League's unhinged onslaught against Trump's chief strategist, former Breitbart CEO Steve Bannon.

While ignoring Ellison's record of anti-Semitism and support for Israel's enemies, as well as his ties to unindicted co-conspirators in funding Hamas, the ADL launched a scathing assault on Bannon, accusing him of being an anti-Semite.

The ADL's assault on Bannon follows its absurd claim in the final days of the campaign that Trump's ad criticizing George Soros was anti-Semitic. It also follows the group's bizarre condemnation of Prime Minister Binyomin Netanyahu's recent video clip in which he stated the plain fact that the Palestinian demand that Jews be ethnically cleansed from the territory they wish to take control over is an anti-Semitic demand.

As many prominent US Jews on both sides of the partisan divide have made clear, the accusation that Bannon, whose Breitbart website is one of the most pro-Israel websites in the US, is anti-Semitic is appalling on its face. The allegation is simply unsubstantiated.

So why do it? Why allege that a friend of the Jews is a Jew-hater while ignoring the actual anti-Semitism of another man? The an-

swer is depressingly easy to discern.

The ADL appears to be trying to give cover to the rising forces of anti-Semitism in the Democrat Party.

By falsely accusing Bannon and, through him, Trump of anti-Semitism, the ADL defuses the real problem of Democrat anti-Semitism. And if the ADL doesn't think there is a problem with Ellison taking over the DNC, but alleges that Republicans hate them, then rank-and-file Jews will stay put.

The ADL, of course, isn't alone in sending this message.

Following the election, Conservative and Reform congregations in major cities throughout the US organized communal "shivvas" to mourn Clinton's defeat as if it was a death in the family. Such actions, along with characterizations of Trump and his advisers as Nazis or Hitler or white supremacists work to bind Jews to a party that is inhospitable to their communal interests while blinding them to the fact that Republicans do not hate Jews or the Jewish state.

For decades, American Jews have been at the forefront of every major social movement on in the US. But the Democrat Party's move toward anti-Semitism, a move made apparent through Ellison's rise, is one movement the Jews mustn't lead.