

# NEW YORK The Jewish Week

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## The Politics of Schumer's Victory

Chuck Schumer is the first Jewish Democrat that New Yorkers have sent to the U.S. Senate since former Gov. Herbert Lehman was elected senator in 1949.

Schumer's election marks the start of a new era for Jews in New York. The ultra-Orthodox haredim have demonstrated that they are a vocal, visible and well-organized but relatively insignificant part of the vote in New York, Schumer, supported by secular and moderate Jews along with the Modern Orthodox, was opposed by the haredim, whose mutual defense pact with Al D'Amato and Gov. Pataki has now unraveled.

Unlike 1992, when Crown Heights was fresh in voters' minds, there was no compelling issue this year attracting Jewish voters to D'Amato.

Although D'Amato played a pivotal role in the battle with Swiss banks, his press conference with Holocaust survivors to endorse his candidacy backfired with most Jewish voters.

Even the efforts of Australian attorney Norman Rosenbaum, who invoked his slain brother's memory as a basis for endorsing D'Amato, did not work.

And the Clinton administration's success in the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations in Maryland superseded Ed Koch's blessing of D'Amato. Koch, who criticized Schumer for his vote on the Gulf War Resolution, was simply not credible as a political mashgiach, acting as if he had the authority to certify a politician's compliance with Jewish values and traditions.

Few observers have noted that Schumer won by a slightly larger percentage of the vote than incumbent Gov. George Pataki, who was running for re-election along with D'Amato. Clearly, Schumer's Jewish persona was not a liability in this election.

In fact, Schumer inadvertently may have demonstrated that being Jewish is no longer a defining characteristic in New York State politics. Although D'Amato's ads emphasized Schumer's Brooklyn roots, he was unable to make Schumer's religious or geographic pedigree into a political liability. That's because Schumer succeeded in positioning himself as a moderate Democrat opposed to the national Republican Party that resists immigration, abortion rights and gun control. Running as an ideological bedfellow of the president, Schumer nationalized this contest for the U.S. Senate, further removing his religion from the minds of the voters.

When a politician wins 54 percent of the state vote and defeats an incumbent three-term senator by almost a half-million votes, no one group can take credit for that victory. Schumer won with a coalition consisting of upper- as well as low-income voters, gaining more than 80 percent of the Latino and black vote, almost 60 percent of the female voters, plus three-quarters of the Jewish vote. But women were especially significant in the Schumer victory. The vicious murder of Buffalo Dr. Barnett Slepian in his home on a Friday night in front of his wife and four sons certainly mobilized women to oppose D'Amato, the right-to-life candidate who had tried to mask his anti-abortion record with support for breast cancer research.

Schumer took New York City by more than 600,000 votes; but he also won suburban Westchester County and major upstate population centers such as Erie, Monroe and Albany counties. In D'Amato's home territory, Schumer did surprisingly well; he came within 20,000 votes of winning Suffolk County and lost Nassau by less than 30,000 votes. Clearly, the people who knew D'Amato best did not turn out for him in 1998.

Schumer's victory is also a harbinger of the emerging power of the Hispanic vote, both nationally and in the state. Hispanics comprise just 6 percent of the state electorate, but they are a rapidly growing group. Hispanics already outnumber blacks in New York City, and their political voice is only starting to be heard. Six years ago, 29 percent of Latinos supported D'Amato, but this year D'Amato received just 17 percent of the Latino vote while 83 percent went for Schumer.

Vice President Al Gore, recognizing the importance of the Hispanic vote, spent the Sunday before the election at a rally for Schumer in the Bronx. Spanish-language radio stations carried ads in which Latino politicians endorsed Schumer and told D'Amato: "No te vistas que no vas," an expression that loosely translated means "don't get dressed because you're not going."

New York is a heavily Catholic state, and Schumer made it easy for Jews and Catholics to find common ground against the fundamentalist Christian ideology that underlies so much of the Republican Party. The secret of Schumer's victory is that he won not because he is Jewish but rather because his values are more congruent with those of most New Yorkers, who are more comfortable with the Clinton-Gore administration than with the congressional Republican Party. Schumer, a young politician at the age of 47, with almost 25 years of experience in public office, will now be in a position to shape New York politics for the next 30 years.