**Latino Jews weigh in on immigration, Israel leading up to election**

*Roughly 100,000 Latino Jews reside in the U.S., including 40,000 in the swing state of Florida—which could very well decide the election. With that in mind, JNS.org spoke to Latino-Jewish immigrants from Peru, Cuba, Mexico and Argentina who are now eligible to vote in America, getting their thoughts on critical political issues.*

By Alina Dain Sharon/JNS.org

Meet Alex Halberstein. A swing voter in a swing state, the registered Independent’s family moved in 1938 from Vienna to Peru, and then immigrated to Miami following the Peruvian revolution of 1968.

Though Israel is the most important political issue for Halberstein, “the economy is important because we have to make a living,” he says. On immigration reform, Halberstein believes “if you don’t follow the rules, you shouldn’t be rewarded for it.”

According to estimates by the American Jewish Committee (AJC)’s Latino and Latin American Institute, Halberstein is one of roughly 100,000 Latino Jews residing in the U.S. Leading up to November’s presidential election, *JNS.org* spoke to a group of Latino-Jewish immigrants now eligible to vote in America on how they see issues often associated with typically disparate voting groups**—**while many Latino voters are concerned with immigration reform and many Jewish voters are concerned with Israel, Latino Jews have both on their minds.

“The awareness about the presence of Latino Jews in the U.S. is relatively new,” says Dina Siegel Vann, director of the AJC Latino and Latin American Institute. Primarily European Jews and Sephardic Jews from the Ottoman Empire formed contemporary Jewish communities in South America during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and after World War II. Eventually, some of those Jews came to the U.S.

Juan Dircie, associate director of the AJC Latino and Latin American Institute’s Miami branch, says roughly 40,000 Latino Jews reside in Florida. Since the gap between the Republican and Democratic parties in Florida is so small, a group of 10,000 eligible voters could potentially sway the state—or even the entire national election, as was the case in 2000.

Halberstein became involved in the American Jewish community through organizations like the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life. He also entered political activism by founding the non-partisan Florida Congressional Committee (FCC), which financially supports pro-Israel U.S. senators and Congress members. The South Florida Jewish community is “slowly but surely” increasing its political influence through donations to Jewish organizations like the FCC, NACPAC (Pro Israel National Action Committee) and SunPAC (Florida Hispanic Outreach), Halberstein says.

Siegel Vann, who is from Mexico, says that in the U.S., “Mexican Jews act as an interesting bridge between Mexico and the U.S,” she says. Mexican Jews denounced California Proposition 187, a 1994 bill intended to screen for citizenship and limit public services to illegal immigrants that was later deemed unconstitutional.

Like Siegel Vann, Fanny Herman is from Mexico, where she attended a Jewish day school and Ibero-American University. Her family came to Mexico around 1910 from Turkey and Greece, but she later married an American and moved to the U.S. She is now chair of the AJC Latin American Task Force, as well as the liaison to the Latino community for both the AJC in Chicago and the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center.

“Israel is extremely important to me,” Herman says. “But I don’t consider myself Zionist.” Herman sees herself as part of the Diaspora and wants to work with it to help Israel. “As Jews all over the world, we can live in peace because we have a place to go,” she says.

As both Jewish and Latino, Herman always thinks back to what Jewish immigrants “have gone through,” and believes “it’s a moral thing to do” to help immigrant families stay together. She believes the Democrats are “concerned about [immigration reform and Israel],” but that some policies could be improved. Herman particularly wants the U.S. to enact stronger sanctions against Iran and to take the nuclear threat more seriously. Iran “is not just an Israel issue, but a world issue,” she says.

Daniel Ajzen came from Mexico to the U.S. 30 years ago. He currently resides in San Diego, where he is the president of the Latin American Democracy Defense Organization, [*LADDO.org*](http://www.laddo.org/)—which monitors anti-democratic activities by potentially hostile entities, including Arab terrorist organizations, in Spanish speaking countries. The organization has detected and reported activities by Iran and Hezbollah in Mexico, Nicaragua and other Central American countries. “I care about the survival of Israel,” he says. Ajzen even volunteered in Kibbutz Or-Hanner in the Sha’ar Hanegev region by the Gaza border during the Six Day War.

Ajzen’s articles are published on Hispanic and Jewish websites such as [*Jewishwebsite.com*](http://Jewishwebsite.com) and [*Diariojudio.com*](http://diariojudio.com/)*.* By assisting non-profit, citizen advocacy organizations worldwide to develop professional websites at subsidized prices—sites such as the foreign language Web pages of the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) and [*Porisrael.org*](http://www.porisrael.org)*—*Ajzen works to help Israel build a better and more realistic image around the world.

Ajzen also advocates for immigration reform, as he started several online campaigns to help Hispanic immigrants integrate into U.S. society. [*Tuspuentes.com*](http://www.tuspuentes.com/)links immigrants with their place of origin and [*Dondeestajose.com*](http://www.dondeestajose.com) helps families locate lost relatives.

Though Ajzen initially preferred Mitt Romney in the upcoming election, he now dislikes the social extremes the Republican candidate has chosen to defend. However, Ajzen says he is considering voting for Romney anyway, “if only to punish Obama for unfulfilled promises and broken dreams.”

According to Dr. Jaime Suchlicki, an expert on Cuba and Latin American affairs from the University of Miami, more than 60 percent of Cuban Jews in the U.S. “will vote for Romney because of his position on Israel.”

Among Jews in Cuba of his generation, there was a strong “pro-Zionist feeling…before Castro,” Suchlicki says. “All of us were young people when Israel was created and grew up supporting Israel.” Many Cuban Jews have made aliyah, while many of them in the U.S. today want the government to be tougher on the Castro regime and believe a Romney government would do this.

Patricia Levin came to the U.S. in 2004 from Argentina and currently teaches at a college preparation academy in Boston. In Argentina, it took a long time for Jews to integrate due to strong anti-Semitism during the country’s dictatorship period, Siegel Vann says. Levin believes “that every Jew should actively support [Israel’s] existence. “

Levin considers no one issue more important than all the others in this election. “I do profoundly care about civil liberties, human rights, Israeli-American relations, cultural issues, immigration issues, education, health care and the economy… and I believe that Mr. Obama will do a better job [than Romney] managing all of them,” she says.

Monica Cooper, currently the analyst for the Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America’s (CAMERA) Revista de Medio Oriente, says Argentinian Jews “may criticize the politics, but they have strong feelings towards Israel.” Personally connected to the Boston Argentinean Jewish community, Cooper believes that “they consider Obama’s track record on Israel a relatively positive one.”

The great grandfather of Bernardo Ferdman was from Bessarabia, and had settled with his family in Entre Rios, an Argentinean province where Moses Montefiore had sponsored the establishment of Jewish settlements. Ferdman is now a professor at the California School of Professional Psychology of Alliant International University and the co-chair of the San Diego Latino Jewish Coalition.

When it comes to immigration reform, there should be a “plan to regularize people that are here,” and there should be a system for people to legally come and go, Ferdman says. “Obama is being mischaracterized,” he adds, emphasizing that the president is “very strong on Israel.” He also likes that Obama has pushed the Israeli government and Netanyahu to focus more on peace negotiations with Palestinians.

But Sergio Rubinstein, originally from Mexico, intends to vote for Romney and says if Obama “was a supporter of Israel, which is the only democracy in the Middle East, he would take a stronger stand against Iran,” a country that has “openly admitted its intention to destroy Israel.”

“Obama’s speeches are like steam, you see it in front of you and then it disappears!” says Rubinstein, a cosmetic dentist from Skokie, Ill.

Rubinstein also believes immigrationmust be regulated with a special permit or visa. “Giving a free pass for the illegal immigrants is not the solution,” he says.

A recent AJC poll shows Obama leading Romney 69-25 percent among Florida Jewish voters. Five percent of respondents were undecided, and some Independents like Halberstein could go either way in November.

But while Halberstein may not have determined his candidate yet, he isn’t short on opinions and passion, as is the case with many of his fellow Latino Jewish voters.

“If we had Israel in 1933, we’d have 20 million Jews living today,” Halberstein says. “I do not want [the Holocaust] to happen again.”