Florida Jewish vote for Obama shows slight drop

By David A. Schwartz

Florida Jewish Journal

10:41 AM EDT, September 27, 2012

Gallup and American Jewish Committee polls released last week showed a slight drop for Barack Obama among Jewish voters in Florida when compared to the Jewish vote nationwide in the 2008 election. But the president maintained a sizable lead — 45 points — over Republican challenger Mitt Romney with less than 50 days remaining before the election.

The Gallup tracking poll of Florida Jewish voters between July 1 and Sept. 10 had Obama at 70 percent and Romney at 25 percent.

The AJC poll, conducted Sept. 7-9, had 69 percent of Jewish voters in Florida for Obama and 25 percent for Romney.

Jewish support for Obama in 2008 ranged from 74 percent to 78 percent.

A drop of even a few percentage points in the Florida Jewish vote could make a difference in a tight election in which the candidate who wins Florida, and the state's 29 electoral votes, is likely to be president.

The results are neither unusual nor unexpected, said Frederick Greenspahn, a member of Florida Rabbis for Obama and eminent scholar for Jewish studies at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton. Previous national polls had Obama receiving 65 percent to 80 percent support among Jewish voters, Greenspahn said.

"Most people have already made up their minds," he said. "A small number are unsure and will stay that way until the election."

Republicans have tried to chip away at the Jewish vote for Obama by making a candidate's support for Israel the issue, Greenspahn said. "Jews vote on a host of issues. Jews are not one issue voters."

AJC poll figures bear out Greenspahn's assertion about Jewish voters. Only five percent of Florida Jews polled considered U.S.-Israel relations to be the most important issue in the election for president of the United States.

The economy was the most important issue for 54 percent of those who participated in the poll while 16 percent of respondents said health care was the most important issue.
"Israel is a factor. It's not the sole factor. It's not the most important factor," said Mitchell Ceasar, chair of the Broward County Democratic Party.

The slight drop in the president's poll results relative to 2008 is not of great concern, Ceasar said. It shows "how successful the Republican distortion machine has been," he said.

Republicans are using Israel as a wedge issue, said Obama surrogate and former Florida Democratic state senator Dan Gelber of Miami Beach. "I think the Jewish community is not going to be fooled in the least bit."

Sid Dinerstein, chair of the Republican Party of Palm Beach County, said he does not believe the 70 percent figure for Obama in the Gallup poll. "From the stuff I see on the ground, I don't think Obama comes anywhere near the 70 percent," Dinerstein said.

Richard DeNapoli, chair of the Broward County Republican Party, said Jewish support for the Democratic presidential nominee has shown a steady decline since the 2000 election.

"It's a very important voting group in Florida, especially where we have narrow elections," DeNapoli said. "Losing even a point or two could be detrimental to the president's campaign. I think [Republicans] are seeing an increasing level of support in the Jewish community."

The Republican Jewish Coalition has made a big push among Jewish voters, DeNapoli said. "Maybe it's paying off."

Matt Brooks, RJC executive director, responded to the American Jewish Committee poll in a statement. "This poll hints at trouble for President Obama in the Jewish community," Brooks said. "We have seen evidence in many recent polls that President Obama will have difficulty reaching the same level of Jewish support that he received in 2008."

He said "disillusionment with the president's policies on the economy and on foreign policy, including Israel" are factors in the loss of support for the president among Jewish voters.

The National Jewish Democratic Council said in a blog post that the Gallup poll's 45-point gap between Obama and Romney and the increasing support for Obama revealed in the Gallup and AJC polls over the past six months show that "The more American Jews get to know Romney, the less they like him."