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Jewish Pols Backing Clinton, But Also Obama, McCain

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As the nation trains its spotlight on New Hampshire, two Jewish politicians have become central players in the Granite State's political drama that may well determine who secures the Democratic and Republican nominations.

U.S. Sen. Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut, a self-described "Independent Democrat," recently crossed party lines to endorse Republican John McCain and will be working to boost support from independents for the Arizona senator. Meanwhile, a less well-known member of Congress, U.S. Rep. Paul Hodes (D-N.H.), his state's first Jewish congressman and the co-chair of the New Hampshire campaign of Democrat Barack Obama, will be stumping on primary day for the Illinois senator.

"I know that the various policies of the candidates tell us something about how they think and what their priorities are, but aren't necessarily, in this primary contest, the ultimate determiner," Hodes told JTA. "For me, there were other singular qualities that I saw that moved me: authenticity, consistency and congruity, judgment, the ability to inspire and bring people together. And simply, who Obama is and what his life experience is means a profound change for the way we are perceived in the world."

Though congressional endorsements are not generally seen as having a particularly strong impact on the presidential contest, with the primary races as close as they are, endorsements have become an issue in the campaign. Obama and U.S. Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-N.Y.) in particular have sparred over the number of endorsements each has racked up — though Clinton, the Democratic frontrunner, still enjoys a comfortable lead, with more than twice as many on the books as of the end of last week.

Lieberman's support for McCain is also deemed significant, given the substantial number of independent voters in New Hampshire and a system that allows them to take part in either of the major party primaries. The endorsement from Lieberman sparked a slew of positive stories about McCain, bolstering his image as a maverick willing to work in a bipartisan fashion.

"I think it's helped McCain a lot," said Ben Chouake, president of the pro-Israel Norpac and a member of McCain's finance committee. "I think his polls have gone up tremendously since the Lieberman endorsement and I think he's going to win New Hampshire."

As of Dec. 28, Clinton had rounded up 76 congressional endorsements, including the bulk of the Jewish congressional delegation that has declared its support. Among Clinton's supporters are some of the most familiar Jewish political names in the country: U.S. Sens. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) and Charles Schumer, as well as U.S. Rep. Barney Frank (D-Mass.), whose sister, Ann Lewis advises the former First Lady. All told, 14 Jewish members of Congress are backing Clinton. Besides Hodes, Obama has been endorsed by only three Jewish members: Rep. Steve Rothman (D-N.J.), Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.) and Rep. Robert Wexler (D-Fla.).

On the Republican side, U.S. Sen. Norm Coleman (R-Minn.) is the only Jewish member to issue an endorsement; he's backing former New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani.

That still leaves roughly half of the Jewish congressional delegation up for grabs, including several well-known figures, including U.S. Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.).

Four of 10 Jewish Democratic lawmakers from California — Feinstein, and Reps. Jane Harman, Tom Lantos, and Brad Sherman — are backing Clinton. But the other six have not declared.

Though most Jewish congressmen and senators from New York and New Jersey have rallied around Clinton — Rothman being the one exception — in Florida, a state that may be crucial if the race remains tight coming out of Iowa and New Hampshire, the delegation has split.

U.S. Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-Fla.) has endorsed Clinton, while Wexler is backing Obama. Florida's third Jewish representative, Democrat Ron Klein, hasn't declared.

Florida is the sixth state to vote, on Jan. 29, and observers say the large and politically well-organized Jewish community there could end up having a substantial impact on the outcome if the race remains tight through the end of January. Even so, the impact of Jewish endorsements is likely to be minimal, some observers say.

"It's all just a scorecard to say who they've got. No one's going to vote for Hillary because Debbie Wasserman Schultz is with her," said one Democratic consultant unaffiliated with any campaign who asked not to be identified. "They might come out to listen to her, but they're not

going to vote for her because of that."

What might sway voters are endorsements from marquee names like former President Bill Clinton, who has been active in his wife's campaign, and talk show host Oprah Winfrey, who has thrown her support to Obama.

"Bill Clinton is still so revered among the vast, vast, vast majority of Jewish voters," the Democratic operative said. "Bill Clinton could actually sway voters and he will matter."

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