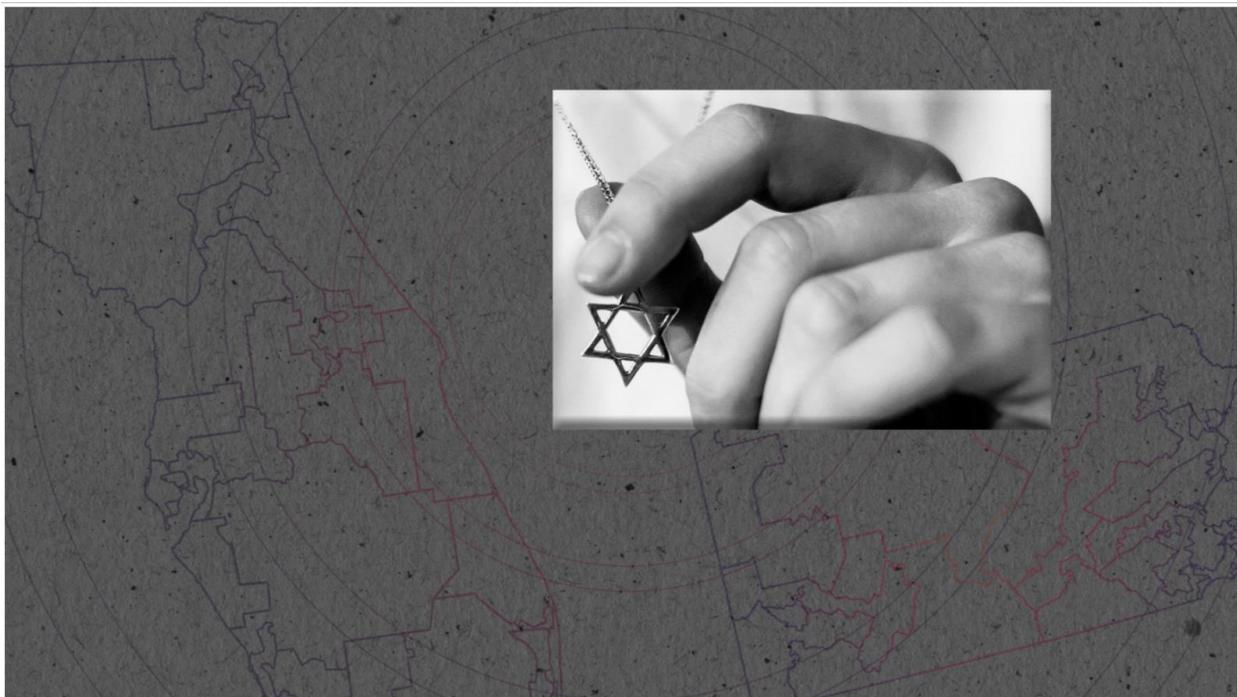


It's 2020 and anti-Semitism is an electoral tactic again

Jewish communities are facing a wave of anti-Semitic online ads, internet-fueled conspiracy theories like QAnon, and widespread racist disinformation.

by **Tate Ryan-Mosley** [archive page](#)

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MS TECH | PEXELS

There were 2,107 anti-Semitic incidents reported in the US in 2019—a record-breaking year as tracked by the Anti-Defamation League, and almost double the rate reported in 2016. The resurgence of anti-Semitism is partly attributed to the mainstreaming of QAnon, a rise in hate speech more broadly, and the radicalization of many political spaces online. A recent study showed that as much as 9% of public Facebook posts related to Jewish Americans contained derogatory language. Most Jewish voters report feeling less secure than they did four years ago, and over 80% of Jewish voters believe that the rise of anti-Semitism and white nationalism is one of

the most important issues in the 2020 election.

Jewish Americans make up just over 2% of the US population, but they represent up to 4% of the electorate, with pivotal populations in swing states such as Florida and Pennsylvania. Jewish voters as a whole tend to vote Democrat, but Orthodox Jews lean right, and Jews as a whole contribute a disproportionate amount of funding to both political parties.

More often than not in this election, however, Jewish voters are being talked *about* more than they are being talked *to*. Political conversations leading up to the election have been rich in disinformation and divisiveness, with online campaigns often pitting Jewish Americans against other groups of voters—especially other racial and ethnic minorities. Anti-Semitic narratives have become a core strategy for some groups.

Creating division

On June 12, as the country was in the middle of the largest protest movement in history, a new channel called “Black Lives Matter Global” cropped up on Telegram, the encrypted messaging platform. The channel started filling with Black power and BLM imagery rife with anti-Semitic rhetoric, intended to paint BLM and Jewish Americans as being opposed to each other. The channel was shared in many white supremacist groups on Telegram, and some of the imagery found its way onto Facebook. The posts were just one example of divisive and misleading content intended to ignite a chasm between Black and Jewish communities this summer.

Jewishness is being used as a wedge in other underrepresented communities too, often in more formal communication channels. Florida, a key swing state, has been inundated with disinformation this election, particularly targeted toward Hispanic voters. Much of the disinformation is seeded with anti-Black and anti-Semitic narratives, often positing false relationships between the two groups. The Miami Herald’s Spanish newspaper, El Nuevo Herald, ran an advertising insert in September that challenged Jewish support for the Black Lives Matter movement and “Antifa,” equating the two groups to Nazis. And the Miami-based Spanish station Radio Caracol ran a 16-minute segment suggesting that a Joe Biden victory would lead to a dictatorship run by “Jews and Blacks.” The onslaught prompted Florida congresswoman Debbie Mucarsel-Powell to ask the FBI to investigate anti-Semitic

and racist political disinformation in the state.

Meanwhile, as the QAnon conspiracy theory has gained traction, it has accelerated the spread of anti-Semitic tropes online. A 2017 ADL review of anti-Semitism on Twitter warned that “the amount of anti-Semitism in QAnon-related content is currently very low,” but that “it has the potential to proliferate especially quickly given the viral nature of the subculture.” It proved to be an accurate warning: QAnon has swallowed up many other conspiratorial narratives, including thinly veiled versions of preexisting anti-Jewish tropes such as the “blood libel,” and latched onto audiences of white supremacists and evangelicals.

“QAnon is so disturbing because it shows that many people are susceptible to bizarre conspiracy theories,” says David Bernstein, president of the Jewish Council of Public Affairs, a coalition of Jewish groups. “If people can believe that nonsense, then they can believe crazy conspiracy theories about Jews, and some do. It underscores that one form of conspiracy mongering or bigotry can easily morph into another.”

Twenty-four congressional candidates in the 2020 election have made comments associated with QAnon, and at least one of those candidates is expected to win. And President Trump has repeatedly refused to condemn it, allowing the virtual cult to nestle itself under the ideological umbrella of the Republican Party.

Vilification

On October 15, Michael Bloomberg announced a \$250,000 donation to the Jewish Democratic Council of America to boost support for Joe Biden among Jewish voters in Florida. The following week, the Highlands County Republican Party started running ads on Facebook accusing Bloomberg and George Soros of trying to buy Florida votes and destroy electoral primaries. (The party’s Facebook page is rife with all kinds of misinformation.)

Online advertisements that invoke Jewish figures such as Bloomberg, Soros, and Bernie Sanders often tread close to anti-Semitism. On October 26, the last day to submit new political advertisements to Facebook before the site instituted a ban, American Action News, a conservative nonprofit with over 1 million followers on Facebook, ran an ad with a picture of George Soros and the subtitle “Burn It Down: Soros planning nationwide chaos if Trump wins.” It was targeted to a group of 10,000

to 50,000 Facebook users in Virginia. It ran from October 26 through November 1, despite Facebook's policies against incendiary content.

The vilification of Jewish political figures contributes to the mainstreaming of anti-Semitism in politics. Bernstein says he's actually been "pleasantly surprised" that it hasn't played a bigger role in the presidential campaigns, though there have been alarming incidents of anti-Semitism in smaller campaigns.

Forged dogmas

Jewish voters have been targeted by online campaigns too, reflecting the fact that they are not a politically uniform group. Jewish support for Donald Trump has risen 5 percentage points since 2016, although Jewish support of Joe Biden is high across national polls. But division within the Jewish community has been exacerbated by online disinformation.

In one such example, JewsChoose4MoreYears, a political action committee, has funded a number of advertisements in Jewish newspapers in swing states. One of them, entitled "This does not end well for Jews," included a fake statement about support for the Holocaust attributed to Democratic congresswoman Rashida Tlaib, a Muslim. Many Jewish newspapers have refused to run the advertisements.

Such material is confusing and alarming, in part because its source is not clear. When asked about these type of ads, Bernstein said, "I've seen all sorts of disinformation aimed specifically at Jewish voters. It might come from fringe Jewish groups, and it might come from private people or ancillaries to the campaigns"

The JCPA released a joint statement last week signed by 90 Jewish organizations that advocate for free, fair, and accessible elections. They've set up a crisis team to monitor the elections and respond, if appropriate. "We know it's going to be challenging," Bernstein says.