



Matt Gurney: Harper's principled support of Israel continues paying off

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On Tuesday night, I attended the annual [Spirit of Hope](#) fundraiser for the [Friends of Simon Weisenthal Center for Holocaust Studies](#). The event, at a posh downtown Toronto conference hall, raised over \$2.5-million for the Centre, which promotes Holocaust remembrance and educates young students about anti-semitism, racism and human rights. The more than 2,000 guests were a cross-section of Toronto's intellectual, business and cultural elite, and by no means were limited to those of the Jewish faith. But it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that the GTA's Jewish community was well represented.

The evening's main event was a debate, moderated by CNN's Gloria Borger, between U.S. political commentators. The Republicans were one-time GOP presidential nominee candidate and now Fox News commentator Mike Huckabee, as well as Karl Rove, former deputy chief of staff and campaign guru to president George W. Bush. The Democratic contingent consisted of two campaign warriors — James Carville and Donna Brazile, both who contribute commentary to CNN.

Canadians are fascinated by the scale and grandeur of political life in our neighbour to the south. The organizers of the Spirit of Hope event do well to bring in U.S. heavyweights — in the last six months, two different senior U.S. officials have told me how amazed they always are by the average Canadian's knowledge of U.S. affairs. But I was interested to note that the biggest applause line of the evening, the only one that got the crowd on its feet, was praise reserved for a Canadian — Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

The question being debated by the panel was "Is the world safer under President Obama?" Audience members were invited to vote via text message. The results were updated and displayed often, and remained remarkably steady through the evening. Near the end, yes and no were repeatedly trading a one-point lead. The audience's split loyalties were also apparent in which lines drew applause. It seemed the Democrats may

have gotten a little less cheering and applause when defending Obama than the Republicans got for their sharpest attacks. But it was close. At least when American politics is concerned, Toronto's affluent seem split largely down the middle.

But that divergence vanished when Huckabee spoke of a recent trip to Israel. Throughout the evening, Obama's support for Israel had been a frequent point of contention. Then Huckabee said (I am quoting from memory, so this is approximate), "In 40 years of visiting Israel, I have never seen the people there in such a state of anxiety [over Iran's nuclear program]. And as an American politician, what astonished me was that for the first time, the Israelis I spoke to considered the Canadian prime minister, Stephen Harper, a much better friend and ally to them than the American president."

The applause was loud and sustained. Many rose to their feet. Huckabee was forced to pause before continuing until the crowd quieted. An audience that was split down the middle on president Obama was throatily enthusiastic about Stephen Harper. In years of closely following Canadian politics, I have never seen a Conservative politician receive such a tremendous outpouring of support in downtown Toronto ... and from people who actually live there, to boot.

It's not surprising. Under the Conservatives, Canada has rightly aligned itself with the Israelis. That doesn't mean turning against the Palestinians, as some will try to spin it. It means recognizing the reality that Israel is a legitimate democracy struggling with multiple asymmetrical and conventional threats to its security, if not existence. Israel isn't perfect — and some of its policies and actions are counterproductive. But it doesn't have to be perfect to be right.

And Harper's Conservatives have been refreshing in their willingness to acknowledge that, despite the frankly [limited electoral reward](#). James Carville cracked up the crowd when he joked that if he'd learned one thing about Israeli politics, it's that you need to win the Jewish vote, but that's far from the case in Canada. Jews make up a majority of voters in precisely zero ridings, and are only a sizeable minority in five out of 308 — four in the Toronto area, one in Montreal. Three of them went to the Conservatives in the last election, as did the support of 52% of Jewish voters. That's a huge swing into the Conservative camp. Not all that long ago, the Tories would have carried none of those three ridings. But it's still only three.

It's a happy thing in politics when doing the right thing brings electoral reward. It's all the more impressive when a political leader does the right thing even when the math argues against it — Muslim voters far outnumber Jews in Canada, and are much more likely to vote for the Liberals or NDP than they are Conservatives, no doubt for many of the reasons that Jewish Canadians are likely to support the Tories.

Tuesday night's event wasn't about Canadian voting trends. It was about U.S. politics, and more importantly, about raising money for a cause worth supporting. The money raised will help bring Holocaust and human rights education to communities throughout

rural Ontario, where trips to museums and access to special resources are limited. That's something worth writing about all by itself.

But it was hard to ignore the Canadian political reality on display in that room. If the people there were any indication, Stephen Harper shouldn't have much trouble besting his record of 52% of Jewish support next time he heads to the polls.