

RJC Amplifies Voice Of American Jews In Conservative Politics

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For almost 40 years, The Republican Jewish Coalition (RJC) has been building relationships between the most influential players in Republican and conservative politics in the United States. Headquartered in Washington, DC, it currently has 47 chapters across America, and has played key roles in shaping American policy on critical issues such as Israeli-US relations—and the Middle East peace process. Its board of directors includes former Minnesota Senator Norm Coleman, former White House Press Secretary for George W. Bush, Ari Fleischer, and New York Congressman Lee Zeldin. Sam Markstein, RJC's national political director spoke with *The Jewish Press* about what's next now that the Republican Party has regained control of the House of Representatives.

Sam, please give a brief history of the Republican Jewish Coalition; what was its goal at its founding and how have those goals evolved since its founding.

Sam Markstein: The organization was founded in 1985 and the mission was the same then as it is today: to represent the Jewish voice in the Republican Party and to foster and enhance ties between the American Jewish community and Republican decision makers in Washington, DC, and in state capitals across the country. We've invested in cutting edge data-driven grassroots operations to turn out Jewish voters in key battleground states, we've continued building out the RJC PAC so our members can support candidates financially directly, and every cycle our independent expenditure arm plays a significant role in the most competitive races in the country. We have tens of thousands of members and volunteers across the country, so we really are the home for Republican Jews who want to have their voices heard in the Republican Party.

This year's annual convention took place in November in the desert paradise of Las Vegas, Nevada, and had an impressive lineup of guest speakers that included Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, former ambassador Nikki Haley, former Governor Chris Christie, former Vice President Mike Pence, South Carolina Senator Tim Scott, and former President Donald Trump. That's star power! Would you say this was your biggest event so far?

The RJC annual summit has been our flagship event going back a long ways, and we affectionately call it the 'kosher cattle call', where you have the biggest names in Republican politics descend on Las Vegas, and I would say this was the biggest and best to date with over 850 attendees, and wall-to-wall media coverage in the US and overseas. For me it was fantastic to welcome so many Senators, Governors and Members of Congress, including Kevin McCarthy, the next Speaker of the House, and newly reelected Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Their presence there really demonstrates how this event is a must-stop for the top echelons of the Republican Party.

I think the event was a smashing success with the key speakers assessing the victories and, quite frankly, the shortfalls of 2022. Some of the speakers laid out their visions and platforms and teased whether they were going to run in 2024. So far Trump is the only declared candidate, and he addressed the audience as well.

Was this the first time Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has spoken at the RJC convention? How special is it that he would take the time, just days after having returned to

the top position in Israeli politics, to attend the conference and speak to your members? Should conservatives be relieved Bibi is back?

Yes, this was the first time Netanyahu had addressed the organization (via satellite). He spoke candidly with our members, our national chairman



Sam Markstein at work

and our CEO Matt Brooks. It was certainly special; I think it speaks to just how close the relationship our organization has with the Prime Minister, Likud and the other conservative parties in Israel. Do I think that Netanyahu will be better on issues conservative Jews care about than Lapid and Bennett? A resounding yes. I think Bibi will be the strong decisive leader he has always been.

While on stage, Tennessee Senator David Kustoff of Tennessee said, "I'm proud to be a Jewish Congressman, and we just grew our (Jewish) delegation from two to three. I think that's exciting. One thing we ought to think about (is) electing more Jewish Republicans to the House and the Senate- that should be our goal." What is the RJC's strategy on making this goal a reality?

I think it all starts with candidate recruitment. This 118th Congress will be the most diverse Republican conference in history and that includes our expanded Jewish delegation. So, we must find those [Jewish] candidates who are willing to put their name on the ballot. And we are very lucky to have Senator Norm Coleman as our national chairman. If anyone knows how to do it- it's him.

Are you excited about new Representatives George Santos of New York and Max Miller of Ohio? What impact will these young Jewish Republicans have in the new congress? How will the RJC work with these two new congressmen to make sure they are a success?

We are absolutely thrilled, they are both talented and smart and they are both focused on getting stuff done, be it tackling the rising costs of living due to inflation, rising crime, school choice, fighting anti-Semitism. these are the issues that resonated with voters in their districts, and the reason why they won their races. I think they are going to be around for a long time and we are gratified in having played a role in their victories.

Sadly, for now, we are losing New York Representative Lee Zeldin. What was his impact and his legacy for Jewish Republicans? How significant was his strong showing in the race for New York governor, and what do you think he'll do next?

Your New York readers know better than anyone

that Lee Zeldin was a phenomenal member of Congress and an absolute pro-Israel stalwart. He has also been a great friend of the RJC, and we just elected him to our national board of directors. The New York Governors' race was very close, closer than many thought it would be. He campaigned hard on the issues that mattered to New Yorkers: during his campaign he was in Boro Park talking about school choice and in Manhattan talking about getting rid of the of horrible bail laws and firing prosecutors who refuse to enforce the law and making our subways safe again. Compare that to incumbent governor Kathy Hochul who said to Zeldin during the debates, "I don't know why crime is such a big deal to you." She's so out of touch. Zeldin certainly helped pull several key candidates across the finish line, in deep blue districts that Joe Biden won by double-digits in 2020. You have to admire his long service in both the military and in public life, and we look forward to everything he does next and will be with him every step of the way.

As part of its mission, do you feel the RJC has a responsibility to call out their Jewish counterparts in the Democratic Party who have repeatedly been silent on anti-Semitic rhetoric, anti-Zionism and the tolerance of BDS in their party?

So, as an illustrative example: on one side you had Republican Iowa Congressman Steve King who was stripped of his committee assignments and was defeated in his reelection bid by Randy Feenstra - with RJC's support - after making some truly horrific comments. You compare that to remarks made by Ilhan Omar and the reaction of the Democrats; they don't change anything; they just keep quiet. It speaks volumes that Kevin McCarthy, the next Speaker of the House, has said he will kick Omar off the House Foreign Affairs Committee- and he's going to keep that promise. Then there's Marjorie Taylor Greene: she also has made outlandish comments over the years, and we've called her out on that and we've supported primary challengers to her because we call out all anti-Semitism, be it on the left or the right. So, we talk the talk and walk the walk. The Democrats do not, but Kevin McCarthy and GOP leaders are proving we can and should continue to do that.

Former Governor Chris Christie and Former Ambassador Nikki Haley disagreed on the impact of Trump's influence over the Republican Party and the 2022 elections. Christie assessed the elections had been hurt by Trump and we needed to move forward, whereas Haley suggested that party disunity was the factor to blame. How do we determine which viewpoint is right?

I think there's a process that's going to play out, and it's always entertaining, must-see tv. We watched this in 2016, and we're going to have that process again. I appreciate Ambassador Haley and Governor Christie coming to Las Vegas and sharing their visions for the future of the party; they should share, especially if they want to continue to be in leadership roles, but ultimately it will be the voters who end up deciding which path we should take. So, I expect you'll hear a lot of different perspectives on what is the best path forward for the party and that's a debate we should be having. We like to say we're a big family and sometimes family argues, but when it comes to 2024, we all need to be united behind whomever the nominee is. That's the only way we can win.