Wednesday, Nov. 29, 2023 / The American politics of Israel

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SCORING IN <Bees - Marble Beat NO SYNTH>

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hqX3Z9dzXa0)*> House Speaker Mike Johnson: The calls for a ceasefire are outrageous.*

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): It was just a few weeks ago that Speaker Mike Johnson denounced a ceasefire while flanked by top Democrats in Congress.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hqX3Z9dzXa0)*> House Speaker Mike Johnson: There are few issues in Washington that could so easily bring together leaders of both parties in both chambers …*

SEAN: This particular bipartisan gathering felt ill-advised to many on the left. But Semafor reporter David Weigel says it should not have come as a surprise:

DAVID WEIGEL (national political reporter, Semafor): No, that was the most normal in terms of the last 50 years of American politics I could imagine. It was actually a throwback to when there wasn't really daylight between the parties on Israel. It had the appearance of unity at a moment when there is less unanimity around support for Israel politically than any time I can remember covering.

SEAN: The war is fifty days old this week, and *Today, Explained* is taking stock of how the politics around Israel and Palestine have shifted in the United States.

[THEME]

SEAN: For a minute now at *Today, Explained* we’ve been wanting to talk about how this war between Israel and Hamas is dividing the American left. David Weigel has been reporting on just that for *Semafor*, where he’s a national political reporter. We started at the top, with Joe Biden. I asked him if the president’s response differs from presidents past.

DAVID: I mean, it really doesn't.

SCORING IN <Creative Mind - APM>

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7v40bJGqfEo)*> President Biden: Let there be no doubt: The United States has Israel’s back.*

DAVID: And this is where a lot of the president's problems with younger Democrats and critics of Israel come in. Israel is under attack and he responds not that much differently than Richard Nixon did during the Yom Kippur War, which is, ‘We support Israel. They are our ally.’

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S5evz3VAZaQ)*> Richard Nixon on Nightline with Ted Koppel, 1992: As I told Congressional leaders during the 1973 Yom Kippur War, no American president will let Israel go down the tube. Democrat or Republican, it's not an issue.*

DAVID: So October 7th, there is a burst of outrage at Hamas for the massacres they carry out. That weekend, there's a rally in New York, in Times Square:

*<*[*CLIP*](https://pix11.com/news/local-news/pro-palestine-rally-planned-in-times-square/)*> PIX11: Hundreds of demonstrators standing in solidarity with Palestine, taking over the crossroads of the world. To organizers of this rally, the attack on Israel was justified resistance.*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://abc7ny.com/nyc-israel-palestine-israeli-rallies/13879158/)*> Munir Atalla: “We’re here to say that occupied people have a right to resist their occupation.”*

DAVID: Democratic Socialists of America’s New York chapter endorses the rally but doesn't organize it. Inside the Democratic Party, there's a sort of antibody response where any Democrat who associates themselves with those protests is pilloried, is accused of supporting antisemitism, is associated with the craziest view out there of Israel. You saw the governor in New York, you saw leading Democrats, people who are going to be probably at the head of the party for quite a while, condemning this and saying that this is antisemitism.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://abc7ny.com/nyc-israel-palestine-israeli-rallies/13879158/)*> ABC7: Governor Hochul yesterday called the planned pro-Palestinian rally “morally repugnant.”*

DAVID: Younger Democrats see Israel as an apartheid state because they've seen an attempt at a peace process from Barack Obama be undermined by a pro-Trump Israeli government. What you see as the war continues is some of those prewar dynamics reasserting themselves. And by middle of November, most Democrats say, ‘Yeah, I don't want my country to be giving unlimited support to Israel no matter what they do.’

SCORING OUT

SEAN: Tell me about where exactly the divisions are. So who specifically is sort of breaking away from Joe Biden and maybe even other moderate Democrats?

DAVID: The most obvious people doing this in Congress are members of the Squad. And this is the four female Democrats who get elected in 2018. A few more Democrats are elected in 2020 and 2022, but a very small beachhead of left wing Democratic politicians inside the House. Not really inside the Senate. You actually see a division in the first few days of the war between what those Democrats are demanding, and they're calling pretty early for a full ceasefire. Not continuing conflict until Israel wipes out Hamas, which they say is their goal, but a ceasefire, contradictory to the Netanyahu policy.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=buukWsD_His)*> Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez: Ceasefire means release the hostages. [applause] All the hostages. [applause] Ceasefire means stop the bombardment now. [applause]*

DAVID: You see other Democrats like Bernie Sanders, who's really influential, the John the Baptist of the Squad, really…

SEAN: <chortles>

DAVID: …coming before them and helping them get elected. He doesn't even do that. But you see, within days after that, Sanders and a few other Democrats, some of whom surprised people like Dick Durbin, saying, all right, no, I don't think we should, as Democrats, as a country, be supporting whatever this government does.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GFYRmADgT1Q)*> Sen. Bernie Sanders: Israel has a right to defend itself. But what Israel does not, in my view, have a right to do, is to kill thousands and thousands of innocent men, women, and children who had nothing to do with that attack.*

DAVID: As they see footage coming in from Gaza, as they see reports of children in hospitals being starved, civilian casualties. There are incidents, for example, like reporting that a hospital was blown up by Israeli missiles that is then contested. Rashida Tlaib, a Detroit Democrat – Detroit and Dearborn, really – Democrat, advances that and is censured by the House for it.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=flMMDZ_6ixo)*> House Speaker Mike Johnson: The resolution is adopted. [applause, cheers]*

DAVID: She sticks to her guns, she gets censured, and she, she gains, not to everything she said, but on the quest for a cease fire, they're adding people day by day. I mean, you have a few dozen House Democrats who've called for a cease fire. That is a minority. But I think the significance here is, one, that's a lot of Democrats criticizing Israel in war time. That is rare. The second part is, according to polling, they’re with the base. I mean, and I covered some protests where people were pretty explicit about this. They would cite polling. There was one protest at the DNC where there are people shining lights on the building that just show the poll numbers.

SEAN: Hm!

DAVID: When you ask people if they want a cease fire without Israel's conditions, like 80% of Democrats say yes. I mean, Ipsos/Reuters poll’s the most recent that backs that up.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://twitter.com/ryangrim/status/1725525631444631602)*> DNC protest: [chanting in background] Representative! Do you support a ceasefire? I’m an American Jew and I’m asking you, do you support a ceasefire? [door clicks shut]*

DAVID: For a lot of these Democrats, it's clear that their constituents in the Democratic base are not as interested in reflexive Israel support as they are. But it is important to discredit their opponents and say these people are crazy, these people are anti-Semitic, these people are dangerous. This is where the division I think gets a lot nastier. While this is happening, with fewer protests, they're getting a lot of blowback from Arab Americans who think that what Biden is doing and they knew he was pro-Israel when he won the Arab-American vote in 2020, what he's doing is offensive to them, is murderous.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://x.com/MeetThePress/status/1716918166310564117?s=20)*> Amer Zahr: They said that we had to save America from Donald Trump. And now we feel that we have to save Palestine from Joe Biden.*

DAVID: You see the term Genocide Joe being thrown around to attack Biden.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://x.com/anthonyzenkus/status/1729184706930057312?s=20)*> Protesters chanting “Genocide Joe has got to go!”*

DAVID: That's what you're seeing eating away at Democratic support is both some stuff from far-left activists. Many of them are Jewish themselves. And then some from Arab American Democrats who say, I can't possibly support a president, not that they’ll support Trump, I can't possibly go out and support a president who's, if he's reelected, is just going to do whatever Netanyahu says.

SEAN: And these few dozen Democrats who are supportive of a cease fire, who do want to see a real shift in this war and are pushing for it in Congress, are they facing repercussions from the moderates or the staunchly pro-Israel factions?

DAVID: The large groups I’ve been talking about – AIPAC, which is the Israel lobby in America, Democratic Majority for Israel, which is founded more recently and works in primaries to defeat left-wing Democrats, especially if they’re Israel critics – both those groups are very clear early on that they are going to continue working to beat Democrats who are critics of Israel. And within a few, really within days, but it becomes a little more clear at the end of October, there is an effort to find a candidate who can beat Tlaib. There's an effort to support one candidate who could beat Ilhan Omar. There's an effort to beat Jamaal Bowman in New York, add Cori Bush in Missouri. So 3 or 4 of the most prominent Israel critics in the Congress. How do we beat them? And they're not hiding this. It's not like a trap they're going to spring later. They're saying pretty clearly, we want candidates to run against these people. In a couple of cases, they have them.

SEAN: How much of this is a generational divide within the party? Is it just young versus old, or is there something more going on here?

DAVID: Well, young and old explains much of it for basic reasons. If you are born after 1973 and that's most Americans, you don't know Israel as a tiny democracy in the Middle East that needs American protection. You know it as a powerful country with wealth comparable to a Western European country, with a strong military that never loses. Maybe you can get ambushed and surprised, but it doesn't lose wars. So you ask, okay, why is my government supporting this? And there's been a search for reasons among a lot of pro-Israel Democrats: What could have done this to our younger voters? How did our young voters grow up and become Israel critics? There's a lot of blame put on college. Okay. College is very liberal and college is progressive. A few people are taught to be anti-colonial. That’s some of it. I think, in the intelligentsia of the left, everything that they say about this is true, that yes, there are people who have transposed their anti-colonial, anti-settler thinking and said I'm against the Zionist state for this reason. But this is across the education gap. Post-Iraq, there is a lot of skepticism. Why is America spending all this money, not just on foreign aid, but foreign aid in the Middle East in particular? Where is this going? What is the point of doing all this? And what is the point in doing it when we're not as vulnerable as we were in the 1970s to OPEC and to oil shocks? For a lot of Americans the answer is, yeah, I don't know. I don't care. Why, why is either party so reflexively supportive of this? That's kind of the question asked by, I'd say, Democrats across educational lines under 40. Also just younger voters generally who are very, very skeptical of this.

SEAN: And in the Democratic Party, we have young, we have old, and then we have really old, namely Joe Biden, who himself is older than Israel. Where exactly is he now considering the state of affairs in his party?

DAVID: He doesn't comment from day to day on critics inside the party. He's not been baited into criticizing the left the way that AIPAC is. What Biden wants and what he says when he's interrupted by a Jewish Voice for Peace activist at a fundraiser, is he wants a humanitarian pause, which is, we pause the conflict. We release hostages. When the hostages are released and tensions decline maybe we can de-escalate the conflict. At no point does he say “whatever Netanyahu wants.” There is American pressure on ending hostilities as soon as possible, but it's in the context of support for Israel, and sympathy for Israel, and sympathy for the people killed on October 7th by Hamas. It sounds like a very subtle difference. I think in some ways it is. But to activists and younger Democrats, it's so clear to them morally that anything but demanding an immediate cease fire and liberation for Palestinians is effectively genocide, that this is unacceptable.

SCORING IN <Density - APM>

DAVID: This is what he’s struggling to navigate. He just doesn't have a party base that agrees, we should take pains to protect Israel as we try to end the war. Their position is why? Why do they get this treatment? Why are we treating them any differently than another country that has some sort of internal population that doesn't have full democratic rights? Or in the case of Gaza, the ability to leave the Gaza Strip freely? Why are we doing that? And that's not something Biden can answer. That's something that explains why he starts angering so much of the base.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: We’ll talk with David about the American *right* when we’re back on *Today, Explained*.

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

SEAN: *Today, Explained*. Back with David Weigel from Semafor.   
  
We've talked about this divide, this sort of schism on the left and all the factions involved and how complicated that mess is. I imagine this looks a lot less messy on the right?

DAVID: Yes, that's a good way to put it. On the right, so, it's always easier to be out of power in some ways. You can say, as Senator Tom Cotton from Arkansas said, this wouldn't happen if Trump was president.

<CLIP> *Sen. Tom Cotton on Fox News: It wasn’t on President Trump’s watch that Iran unleashed its proxy, Hamas, to slaughter Jews in Israel.*

DAVID: The easiest, clearest position they can take is that Joe Biden's weak. If a war breaks out, that is because he's weak. That is because the decisions he made that invited this weakness. I think it is very hard to trace Biden's decisions on Israel to to that. But, you know, you've got a script. You're going to stick to it. The differences between the candidates for president I think are significant in showing how Republicans promise to be more reflexively pro-Israel if elected, as Trump was. I mean, Trump recognizes the Golan Heights.

<CLIP> *President Donald Trump: In a moment I will sign a presidential proclamation recognizing Israel’s sovereign right over the Golan Heights.*

DAVID: Trump moves the US Embassy in Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

*<CLIP> President Trump: For I have determined that it is time to officially recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. I am also directing the state department to begin preparation to move the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.*

DAVID: Like, Trump basically does everything Israel wants and Trump says out loud, as he likes to do:

<CLIP> *President Trump: I can’t imagine how anybody who’s Jewish and who loves Israel, and frankly the evangelicals love, just love Israel, I can’t imagine anybody voting Democrat.*

DAVID: So that's Trump's position. That has not changed. The people who are running against him – Ron DeSantis, Nikki Haley being the most relevant at this point – they want to go further. They will fully support Israel, but they want to be clear that Palestinians should never get foreign aid.

<CLIP> *Gov. Nikki Haley on Hannity: We need to make sure that no taxpayer dollars go to any Palestinian entities, or any UN entities that support Hamas.*

DAVID: You also have them criticize Trump from the right by saying he's too critical of Benjamin Netanyahu.

*<CLIP> President Trump on Brian Kilmeade: He was not prepared and Israel was not prepared, and under Trump they wouldn’t have had to be prepared, look at what we did for them.*

*<CLIP> NBC News, Dasha Burns: One of Trump’s 2024 rivals Florida Governor Ron DeSantis firing back with his toughest criticism yet of the frontrunner.*

*Gov. Ron DeSantis: Now is not the time to be attacking our ally.*

DAVID: Trump has a habit of kind of bloodlessly assessing another player in the world and saying whether they're smart or not. Trump says that Hezbollah is smart.

<CLIP> *President Trump: And then two nights ago I read all of Biden’s security people, can you imagine, national defense people, and they said “gee I hope Hezbollah doesn’t attack from the north, because that’s the most vulnerable spot.” I said wait a minute, you know Hezbollah’s very smart, they’re all very smart.*

<CLIP> Gov. Haley on CNN: *You don’t go and compliment any of them, because that makes America look weak.*

DAVID: I don't think the Republican base cares. Not just my my view. I mean, I've seen polls that then Republican voters don't see Trump's comments as insulting to Israel. It is a very pro-Israel party. It is a very anti-Palestinian party in the conservative commentary infrastructure. You know, one of the most influential figures is Ben Shapiro, who kind of performs itself. But it used to, you know, like talked about the Palestinians, the animals, the phrase “Pale-swinians” has traffic on the right for a long time, on the right, if just there's no danger in saying that. You know, there's but there's no danger in saying, I support Israel. I don't care what happens to Palestinians. I mean, and you see that not to get too far from the presidential field. You see that in Florida. Florida is a state with a Jewish population that votes overwhelmingly Democratic. A Christian evangelical population that's very pro-Israel. And you see, you know, on the floor of the Florida legislature, a Democrat rhetorically asking:

<CLIP> *FL State Rep Angie Thomas: We are at 10,000 dead Palestinians, how many will be enough?*

DAVID: And a Republican rhetorically, I guess rhetorically, answering:

<CLIP> *FL State Rep Angie Thomas: <pauses> Wow. One of my colleagues just said all of them.*

SEAN: Mm!  
  
DAVID: That's the space that Republicans are operating in. And like I said, there's a little bit of skepticism to this in the new right, in the nationalist right. There's a little bit of the “why are we supporting them” attitude. There is a little bit of, you know, frankly, anti-Semitic opposition to Israel's existence. Not in the world of primary voters. That's not very relevant among the people who will be nominating the party's nominee.

SEAN: Okay. So we're talking about, you know, the presidential candidates. We're talking about the base. What about, you know, somewhere in between those two is Republicans in Congress. How is this played out on the Hill?

DAVID: Let's, let's establish as much as we’ve been talking about America, let's establish that the most important thing as far as Israel is concerned right now is probably not whether members of Congress say nice things about it, But most of the legislation, I should say, resolutions that have passed over the last month or have been introduced on this, have been just condemning the attacks and then attacking Democrats who won’t condemn the attacks, passing funding with a poison pill Democrats support, and then attacking Democrats for not supporting it. And the National Republican Congressional Committee after the House passes Israel funding that would cut the IRS to pay for it immediately is out attacking Democrats, as you know, anti-Israel anti-Semites if they don't support it. There is more interest, just if I can speak cynically, in using this as an issue to divide Democrats than in unifying the country around one response. So not a lot has happened in Congress apart from political kayfabe.

SEAN: Although we know that Republicans in Congress are very skeptical of Ukraine aid, how is that played out with Israel? Is it a totally different story?

DAVID: Yeah. So again, the Biden position here is America America needs to support Israel in its war against Hamas. It needs to support Ukraine in its war against, against Russia. For a lot of Republicans, it's very clear. If, if there is a zero sum amount of aid we should be giving out, including a zero sum amount of military ordnance, bullets, etc., it should be going to defend Israel, not to, not to defend Ukraine. That's not, again, unanimous in the party. But that's the evolving Republican position, is that America's first priority is its own self-defense, defending its own border. Its second priority is defending Israel. That's the end of the list. There's not really a priority in defending Ukraine right now.

SEAN: Why are Republicans so unified on this issue? What's behind that?

DAVID: A lot, so a lot of it is a sense that Israelis are the good guys. If I can be direct about it, it is, now there, there are Jews in the Republican party, not that many. Most support for Israel is driven by believing Christians, pro-Zionist Christians, who believe that Israel is it. It won its territory. It is a good steward of the Middle East. It is a democracy no matter how Palestinians within the country are treated. And it's just not a hard call for them.

<[CLIP](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sf95tcGj8bg)> *Pastor John Hagee: Please join me in praying for the safety and security of the people of Israel. We will lift up their warriors and leaders in prayer, wrap our hearts around the bereaved, and ensure that our leaders in Washington know that there is no room for equivocation or daylight between America and Israel.*

SEAN: You mentioned that the sort of the schism on the left has cast some shadow over Joe Biden's presidential reelection bid. Do you think that what we've seen in the past 50 days and what might be coming in the next 50 could have lasting implications for our election, for our politics at home, which the presidential election, I guess, is now finally less than a year away. Will people still remember all of the protests in the streets and the various fights in Congress and the various fights over funding, whatever it might be?

DAVID: Well, there's been a conversation on the left that I find a little tedious about, ‘Hey, if you're saying that you're going to boycott voting for Genocide Joe, you're effectively voting for Trump.’ The other side of this will point out the election is 11 months away, a year away. This is the time to say this policy needs to change or we won't vote for you. And so it's unclear how much of that's going to stick.

SCORING IN <A Spiral Staircase>

DAVID: I think overall, though, and if you talk to peace activists, Jewish Voice for Peace, If Not Now, etc., their theory of what might happen here, I think has been borne out in the first month of the conflict. I talked to them early in October around this period where they're being condemned for having the audacity to have rallies where people said crazy things. Their thought was, ‘We're going to get a lot of blowback right now,’ and they were. ‘But as this war continues, people are going to look at the images from Israel and recalculate.’ I think they were correct that that happened. Each time there is a conflict, that, they're all different. There are different different levels of military strength, different leaders, etc.. Each time this happens, I feel like there is a, you see a decline in reflexive support for Israel. You can see less patience for the Israeli position. Every time a conflict breaks out and especially as this conflict lasted over, over October-November, you saw that fade. And in ways that I think are, it will take a couple of years to play out.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: That’s David Weigel. Read him at semafor dot com.

Our show today was produced by Avishay Artsy and Isabel Angell.   
  
They had help from Matthew Collette, Laura Bullard, Siona Peterous, and Patrick Boyd. I’m Sean Rameswaram. This is *Today, Explained*.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]