**March 5, 2024 / CA Senate race**

**[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]**

**[BILLBOARD]**

ALANA CASANOVA-BURGESS (fill-in host, *Today, Explained*): It’s *Today, Explained*. I’m Alana Casanova-Burgess, filling in as host on this Super Tuesday!

SCORING IN <The Bride-Elect March>

ALANA: Elections everywhere in the U.S. all at once. This could be Nikki Haley’s last stand. And folks are mad at Biden about his support of Israel’s war in Gaza.

But we’ll start with the Senate race in California.

MELANIE MASON (Politico): This was a seat that was occupied since 1992 by Senator Dianne Feinstein, who is, you know, was this legend of California politics, a real institution.

ALANA: This is Melanie Mason. She writes about California politics for Politico.

MELANIE: Whoever gets this seat, it automatically catapults them to a new level of notoriety and new level of prominence in the Democratic Party.

ALANA: Israel is a major talking point for candidates in that race. And it’s shaking up primary contests across the country. More ahead on *Today, Explained*.

**[THEME]**

*<BUMPER> Super Tuesday, Super Tuesday.*

ALANA: So, there’s a Senate primary today in California. There are a whopping 27 candidates on the ballot, but there are four big ones: three Democrats and one Republican. Melanie Mason, Politico: you give us a little bit about each of them and the case they're making as to why they should be the next senator from California? Do you want to start with Congressman Adam Schiff from Burbank, or I guess as we've heard Trump call him:

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FE7_S7Ymjjw)*> Donald J. Trump: You little pencil neck.*

MELANIE: Pencil neck, Shifty Schiff. There's like so many nicknames, and there's been nothing better for Adam Schiff than the fact that he has this antagonist in Trump.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FE7_S7Ymjjw)*> Donald J. Trump: He buys the smallest shirt collar you can get. And it’s loose.*

MELANIE: Adam Schiff has been a congressman representing the Los Angeles area since 2000, and he was seen as kind of a pretty establishment, fairly centrist Democrat who had been on the House Intelligence Committee, had been involved mostly on sort of foreign affairs, national security side. And then the Trump impeachment comes, and he became the main House manager for the first Trump impeachment and has become sort of a face of the resistance, as it were, to former President Trump.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OFTsuUCoVew)*> Rep. Adam Schiff: You can't trust this president to do the right thing. Not for one minute, not for one election, not for the sake of our country. You just can't. He will not change and you know it.*

MELANIE: Between that and the January 6th committee really has sort of positioned himself nationally as somebody who would take on Donald Trump.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UG32ejSiOvA)*> Adam Schiff ad: “When our democracy was in danger he stood up. Adam Schiff took on a corrupt president. He fought to protect our values and the rule of law.”*

MELANIE: He's not exactly like the flashiest candidate…

ALANA: Mm hm.

MELANIE: … but he has somehow become the celebrity candidate because he has such a national following, which in practical effect means that he has raised just gobs of money. And so he has been sort of the consistent frontrunner from the beginning, in part because of this national profile and in part because he has more money than God.

ALANA: All right. So, Adam “gobs of money” Schiff. Then we've got Katie Porter, right? She's a congresswoman from Orange County, and I'm picturing her with a whiteboard. Right. That's how we know her.

MELANIE: That's how she would love for you to picture her, because that's definitely been the branding that she has done. Congresswoman Porter got elected in 2018. She was part of that 2018 wave that was in reaction to the Trump presidency. And she is very infamous for having this whiteboard that she's used in congressional hearings to sort of take down CEOs or take down members of the Trump administration back then.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nbYylU5XK7k)*> Rep. Katie Porter: CEOs will use tactics like, “could you repeat the question,” “I'm sorry, I didn't catch all that,” “I couldn't follow all of the numbers you were throwing out there.” I think the whiteboard helps prevent that.*

MELANIE: She's a former law professor. So she's incredibly good at distilling these bullet points of key information and making it very digestible. She was also seen as a pretty formidable candidate coming into this race because of that celebrity that she had, and the fact that there were a lot of people who were quite loyal to her more assertive brand of politics.

ALANA: And then you have Barbara Lee, long serving congresswoman from Oakland, sort of activist of the bunch.

MELANIE: Yes. And she really has kind of captured the longstanding admiration, particularly of progressives, because of this really fateful vote that she took back in 2001, in the aftermath of September 11th, she voted against the Authorized Use of Military Force Act, which is sort of what laid the groundwork for the war in Afghanistan, the war in Iraq. And she has really run on that.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-TX25hZ42FY)*> Rep. Barbara Lee: I didn't quit when I refused to give the president completely unlimited war powers after September 11th. And in the face of countless death threats, I was the only no vote. I didn't quit then and I won't quit now!*

MELANIE: Her problem is she just has not been able to raise money like the other two Democrats that she's running against. So all of those compelling storylines, she doesn't really have the ability to communicate that to the voters.

ALANA: Okay. So three Democrats, one Republican in the race, Steve Garvey, former baseball player?

MELANIE: That's right. Former Dodger, former Padre.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PMIJ3QRMQIw)*> Baseball announcer, 1984 NLCS, Game 4: Deep right field, way back, Carter going back to the wall. It's gone! Homerun Garvey, and there will be tomorrow!*

MELANIE: I used to have a Steve Garvey autographed glove as a kid, even though…

ALANA: <laughs>

MELANIE: I actually was too young to ever see him play. But, I mean, that just goes to show, like Steve Garvey, people know him in California. If you're a baseball fan, you know Steve Garvey. He is certainly kind of iconic in that sense. But this is his first time as a candidate. And it shows. I mean, he is running as this pretty squishy Republican who won't really take positions on really any issues at all. He, for example, voted for Trump twice, but won't say if he will vote for Trump again in this election.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q4XL1T7uXdo)*> Steve Garvey: I will look at the two opponents, I will determine what they did, and at that time I will make my choice.*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q4XL1T7uXdo)*> Rep. Katie Porter: Well California, I think what they say is true. Once a Dodger, always a Dodger.*

MELANIE: He also just really isn't running very much of a campaign. But for reasons that I'm sure we will get to, that doesn't matter because Adam Schiff, the Democrat, is sort of doing it for him, and that has accrued to his benefit a lot.

ALANA: Okay. But this is a different kind of primary, right? This is not Democrats and Republicans are in different buckets. This is a free for all, kind of?

MELANIE: That's right.

SCORING IN <Pigeons Learning About Escalators>

MELANIE: So California, in the last couple election cycles has adopted this top-two primary, which means that it doesn't matter what party you're in. Just the top-two vote getters of the primary election will advance to the November general. So there is a possibility that you could have two Democrats advance or a Democrat or a Republican.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AShKoSKtwnM)*> Fox 11 LA: The latest Berkeley IGS poll has Republican Steve Garvey on top with 27 percent support among likely voters, followed by Schiff with 25 percent, Porter 19 percent, and Lee 8 percent.*

MELANIE: Adam Schiff has consistently polled among the top Democrats. But Steve Garvey, as the Republican, has been moving up and up and up. It seems that he's really coalescing the Republican vote behind him. Katie Porter seems to be battling a little bit more to try and get into that, that second spot and that's looking harder and harder for her to do. And then Congresswoman Lee has just consistently not really been able to poll above double digits.

SCORING OUT

ALANA: You mentioned earlier that Schiff has been sort of promoting Garvey?

MELANIE: Yeah. So because Schiff has so much money that he can spend, he basically has money to run two campaigns. So he's running his own campaign where he has advertisement that's his own bio, his own sort of positive vision, talking about what he would do with Senate.

ALANA: Mm hm.

MELANIE: And then he's running this other set of ads that technically are anti-Garvey ads.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vb-fzBykBYA)*> Garvey ad: Two leading candidates for Senate, two very different visions for California. Steve Garvey, the leading Republican, is too conservative for California. He voted for Trump twice and supported Republicans for years, including far right conservatives.*

MELANIE: There are millions of Republicans in this state. But the reality is, is looking ahead, in a state as blue as California, a Schiff-Garvey matchup almost virtually ensures that Schiff would be the next senator from California. We don't obviously make 100 percent predictions, but the math would be extremely difficult for Steve Garvey going forward.

ALANA: So we've got essentially Schiff the Trump antagonist, Katie Porter the explainer, Barbara Lee the activist. And among them, are we seeing any actual policy differences, or just vibes?

MELANIE: I'd say mostly vibes. I think there's two areas that have emerged as a point of difference. And one of them, I will say, I did not have on my bingo card going into this race. And this was this question of earmarks. Katie Porter has really put her foot down.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F1pIgyjBZyw)*> Rep. Katie Porter: Earmarks are about inviting corruption, conflicts of interest, and rewarding peoples’ donors.*

MELANIE: The other two Democrats say, of course we need earmarks. Earmarks are ways that we can pay for housing programs or homelessness programs in our communities. The other issue where there is some genuine policy differentials and I think does reflect a larger conversation is about the Israel-Hamas war. As soon as Hamas's attack on Israel happened on October 7th, Congresswoman Lee – who, remember, is this anti-war activist, has sort of been a hero in the party because of that – immediately came out, literally the next day, came out and called for an immediate cease fire.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gh7o0L1eI0U)*> Rep. Barbara Lee: The only way Israel is going to be secure is through a permanent ceasefire. The only way that is going to happen is with a political and diplomatic solution.*

MELANIE: And she had really put a marker down early, I would say, much earlier than most of the progressives in her party, who very quickly, I think, coalesced around this ceasefire idea or this cease fire concept as something to rally around. Congressman Adam Schiff on the other side has been sort of steadfast in not calling for a cease fire.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gh7o0L1eI0U)*> Rep. Adam Schiff: I don't know how you can ask any nation to cease fire when their people are being held by a terrorist organization.*

MELANIE: Katie Porter has sort of found herself a little bit in the mushy middle.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gh7o0L1eI0U)*> Rep. Katie Porter: So I have called for a release for all the hostages, resources to rebuild Gaza, making sure Israel is secure, and a free state for Palestinians where they can thrive.*

MELANIE: But just the fact that she sort of put herself in this, in this middle ground position so that she could say that she supported some form of cease fire, I think in a way symbolizes Democrats’, or at least some Democrats’, growing concerns about how Israel is conducting this military operation…

ALANA: Mm hm.

MELANIE: …and a sense that there is a real uneasiness out there. And increasing that pressure, calling for some form of cease fire is a way to do that.

SCORING IN <(dorian) And The Moustache Was His Name>

MELANIE: I think that there are people who feel very, very strongly about this issue, just as we've seen across the country. There are people who come out and protest. There are people who say that this will be a determinative issue. But I think that if we're talking more broadly about the electorate as a whole, I don't think that this is necessarily an issue that is determining what people's vote is going to be. And so I think for the people who, who care very deeply, it might be that single determining factor. But I do not think that's the case for the majority of voters.

SCORING BUMP

ALANA: Melanie Mason. Politico dot com.

A lot of voters might not be deciding based on Israel. But that’s not stopping interest groups from pouring money into competitive primaries.

How that’s reshaping this year’s election, ahead on *Today, Explained*.

**[BREAK]**

**[BUMPER]**

ALANA: *Today, Explained* is back. I’m Alana Casanova Burgess.

Ross Barkan writes about politics for the New York Times Magazine and other places. Lately he’s been looking at the fracture in the Democratic Party over Israel and Palestine.

ROSS: For the last few decades, it was almost impossible to find a Democrat who was willing to criticize the actions of the Israeli government in any way. That consensus has only started to erode in the last few years.

SCORING IN <Stacking Ladders>

ROSS: You've seen the rise of a new, younger left. You've seen Democrats enter Congress like Ilhan Omar, like Rashida Tlaib, like Summer Lee, like Jamaal Bowman, who are willing to criticize the Israeli government. Most of those politicians are in the Squad. The Squad is now around eight Democrats. The Squad didn't exist at all until 2019, so that's important to keep in mind. You have a very different political dynamic today than you did a decade ago or 20 years ago, and that is definitely playing into what you see today. And you've also seen a strengthening of the pro-Israel lobby. AIPAC, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, has always been very powerful, but in recent years, it started to play a much more significant role in primaries. And another organization that's related, Democratic Majority for Israel, has been in particular focusing on Democratic primaries.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G-X_9cLDaDY)*> Sen. Bernie Sanders: This election, AIPAC is expected to spend approximately $100 million just to try to unseat progressive members of Congress who dare to speak out about what's going on in Gaza.*

ROSS: AIPAC and DMFI, who are separate, there is a difference. Democratic Majority for Israel only endorses Democrats. AIPAC, on the other hand, has long funded Republicans and pro-Israel Democrats, and they've no problem giving money to Trump Republicans. Democratic Majority for Israel draws the line at that. But when it comes to Democratic primaries, the two are completely aligned in that they each want to defeat, crush, eliminate the progressive Israel-skeptical left.

SCORING OUT

ALANA: So you mentioned AIPAC. You mentioned the Democratic Majority for Israel. How are they participating in these primaries in ways that maybe we haven't seen them do that before?

ROSS: They are spending and will spend enormous sums of money in Democratic congressional primaries. That is new. Democratic Majority for Israel really came on the scene around 2022, when they spent a lot of money to defeat Nina Turner, who was a high level member of Bernie Sanders’ campaign, a former state senator who's running for a congressional seat in Ohio.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rLSteseCNEs)*> Nina Turner: The American Israel Public Affairs Committee has inserted its way into many Democratic primaries over the past couple of years specifically targeting progressive candidates such as myself. I still got the battle scars, y'all.*

ROSS: They spent heavily against her in favor of her opponent, who won the race, Shontel Brown. Typically, what AIPAC would do was donate money in general elections to both parties to keep a kind of consensus. They're still doing bipartisan donations, but their focus has changed from keeping Republicans and certain Democrats in the pro-Israel fold, in the Israel hawk fold, to really coming hard against this Israel-skeptical, or even politicians who are willing to lightly criticize Israel. There's a few policy positions that AIPAC and DMFI particularly revile. One is conditioning military aid to Israel. This is something that has become increasingly accepted on the progressive left, that if the US is going to continue to fund Israel, it can't be a blank check. In 2022, Andy Levin, who is a Jewish Zionist, in favor of a two-state solution, also a progressive. He was the president of his synagogue, someone who traveled to Israel many times, who believed fully in the project of Zionism, he was pushing legislation to condition military aid to Israel.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pCGOiZ8o8ys)*> Andy Levin: AIPAC can't stand the idea that I am the clearest, strongest Jewish voice in Congress, standing for a simple proposition, that there's no way to have a secure democratic homeland for the Jewish people unless we achieve the political and human rights of the Palestinian people.*

ROSS: AIPAC opposed him furiously. And he lost his reelection to Haley Stevens, who is still in Congress, and who is an unflinching supporter of Israel.

ALANA: Can you talk about what the AIPAC spending and the DMFI spending result in, like attack ads – are those ads actually mentioning Israel?

ROSS: They will run ads that have nothing to do with Israel. And they'll attack politicians based on whatever their polling says makes them most vulnerable. For example, in California, they're targeting a state senator, Dave Min, who's running for Katie Porter's open House seat. And they're attacking him over a drunk driving incident, not over any alleged insufficient support of Israel.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://twitter.com/AdImpact_Pol/status/1754879325977927824)*> Dave Min attack ad: Dave Min wants your trust, but Min was arrested for drunk driving, putting us all at risk…*

ROSS: More voters in California will care about Dave Min driving drunk than Dave Min supposedly not supporting Israel enough. And that is often the approach they take. And there's a reason they do it. It's an approach that usually works.

ALANA: What about the other side? Like, are there groups more critical of Israel also getting involved in primary campaign spending?

ROSS: To an extent, but they just have a lot less money.

SCORING IN <Beaming>

ROSS: So the traditional player has been J Street. But they are somewhat marginalized in this moment. J Street is something of the liberal counter to AIPAC. They are Zionist. They are supportive of Israel, but they are willing to criticize the Israeli government, criticize Benjamin Netanyahu, and they endorse candidates who take those positions. But J Street unendorsed Jamaal Bowman and they are not helping the Squad members in the AIPAC/DMFI onslaught. So J Street is not really in play here. Jewish Voice for Peace is trying to be more involved. They are a growing and very professionalized anti-Zionist organization that is behind a lot of the big attention grabbing protests you see, like the occupation of the Statue of Liberty or Grand Central Station.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aU5uaDUOJ88)*> CBS New York: Here at home an almost surreal scene inside Grand Central Terminal tonight as hundreds of demonstrators took over the place calling for a cease fire in the war…*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rOxjcRp2Xsg)*> Jewish Voice for Peace demonstration: If we don’t get it, shut it down! If we don’t get it, shut it down!*

ROSS: They have a political action arm that they use to endorse candidates. They will be volunteering. They'll probably be sending some money there, but on a much, much smaller scale. There's DSA, Democratic Socialists of America. You know, in some of these congressional races, DSA could be in play. Again, DSA is a volunteer-run organization, so it's about people showing up. But it's not about spending millions of dollars on television ads.

SCORING OUT

ALANA: What does this mean for the Democratic Party? And not just in, like, the political sense, but in the kinds of policies that we see that party support? We've had this progressive movement of more Congresspeople on the left. Could this end that?

ROSS: On one hand, the Squad could shrink. The spending against them could be successful, and other Democrats could be even more terrified of crossing AIPAC in the future. And you could see this Israel skeptical left start to shrink. On the other hand, if you look at the actual number of young people, especially, who are starting to vote, who are engaging on this, the Israel skeptical faction is only growing. And this is something I think even the most staunch Israel supporters recognize, and what they fear, is that the old consensus is starting to crumble. I would say my most bold prediction, which could turn out to be wrong, but I'll make it here, is that Joe Biden will be the last Democratic president for some time who offers mostly unconditional support for the Israeli government. I think that is going to be increasingly untenable unless the politics in Israel start to change.

SCORING IN <Basic Barbara>

ROSS: Israel is governed by a conservative, right-wing majority. And it's no secret that Benjamin Netanyahu is holding on in the hopes that Donald Trump is elected president again, because Trump and Netanyahu align on politics, they've the same vision for the future of Israel. And Netanyahu would like to see someone like Joe Biden lose. So while I think today and tomorrow AIPAC can keep winning and blow Squad members out of the water and spend money, on the left at least, none of this is going to hold in the same way, because the politics of these two countries are going to diverge.

SCORING BUMP

ALANA: That’s Ross Barkan. Check out his substack, Political Currents.

Today’s show was produced by Avishay Artsy, edited by Matt Collette, fact checked by Laura Bullard, and mixed by Patrick Boyd. I’m Alana Casanova-Burgess, and this is *Today, Explained*.

**[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]**