

# [***A Pittsburgh congressional race could test Democrats who have criticized Israel's handling of war***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BT1-M9B1-DYMD-628Y-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

HARRISBURG, Pa. — An election this month in Pittsburgh and some of its suburbs is emerging as an early test of whether [*Israel’s war with Hamas*](https://apnews.com/hub/israel-hamas-war) poses political threats to [*progressive Democrats in Congress*](https://apnews.com/article/israel-hamas-congress-squad-progressives-aipac-b110bee792a51ca838f88b2b632d8953) who have criticized how the conflict has been handled.

U.S. Rep. Summer Lee, a first-term lawmaker who has aligned herself with the “ [*squad*](https://apnews.com/article/f80a96ce79934860936ebdc2127c28fc),” is facing a primary challenge from Bhavini Patel and the war has become a flashpoint in the race.

Patel frames Lee’s criticism of Israel as part of a broader pattern of left-wing ***politics*** that are extreme for the district and potentially damaging to Democratic President [*Joe Biden*](https://apnews.com/hub/joe-biden) in a state crucial to his reelection bid against Republican [*Donald Trump*](https://apnews.com/hub/donald-trump). Lee counters that she has helped move calls for a cease-fire in Gaza more into the mainstream of the Democratic Party.

The war has scrambled Democratic ***politics*** across the United States. It's dividing traditionally progressive groups, including Pittsburgh's sizable Jewish community, in ways that don't always fall neatly along ethnic or cultural lines. But it’s an especially potent issue in Lee’s district, which is home to the synagogue where a gunman in 2018 [*killed 11 congregants*](https://apnews.com/article/pittsburgh-synagogue-shooting-ba843b83bf674d2603a07add574f13ea) in the deadliest attack on Jews in U.S. history.

The April 23 primary could shed light on whether the war alone is enough to turn a critical mass of Democrats against Lee.

“It clearly is big enough with a certain group in this district,” said Sam Hens-Greco, the party chair in Allegheny County, which includes Pittsburgh. “Whether it is big enough for the entire populace, we’re going to find out.”

If Lee is defeated, she would be the first Democratic incumbent in Congress to lose a primary this year. Other progressive Democrats, including Reps. [*Cori Bush*](https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-conflict-democrats-2024-primaries-1b8616887e31f86a930ebc2e767c9a12) of Missouri, [*Jamaal Bowman*](https://apnews.com/hub/jamaal-bowman) of New York and [*Ilhan Omar*](https://apnews.com/hub/ilhan-omar) of Minnesota, face primary challengers this summer.

Lee has raised far more money than Patel and has backing from Pennsylvania’s Democratic establishment, including Sen. Bob Casey, and a constellation of progressive groups that include both Jewish and Muslim organizations.

The first Black woman elected to Congress from Pennsylvania, the 36-year-old Lee is a Howard University law school graduate and community activist who began her political career in 2018 with a successful challenge from the left to an entrenched Pittsburgh-area state lawmaker.

In this year’s campaign, Lee has promoted herself as a hardworking representative who delivers for constituents and speaks in Congress for marginalized communities on issues from fighting inequality to climate change and bigotry, including antisemitism and Islamophobia.

On the Israel-Hamas war, Lee has condemned [*Hamas’ attack*](https://apnews.com/article/israel-palestinians-gaza-hamas-rockets-airstrikes-tel-aviv-11fb98655c256d54ecb5329284fc37d2), but has also accused Israel of committing “war crimes” in Gaza, demanded an end to U.S. military aid to Israel and called for a cease-fire within days of the war starting as the best way to end the cycle of violence and work toward peace.

That set her apart from Biden’s stance and that of most House Democrats, although now dozens more have joined her in calling for a cease-fire. At Biden’s [*State of the Union*](https://apnews.com/article/state-of-union-biden-gaza-ukraine-israel-1a42ff9d4ef3e0f2753e43ac8d39fc18) speech, Lee [*donned*](https://apnews.com/article/state-of-union-2024-fashion-biden-232d70549c5e65cbb5656eefbcbf9c8b) a kaffiyeh, a checkered scarf that has come to symbolize solidarity with Palestinians.

Patel, 30, a small-town municipal councilwoman who worked in former Allegheny County Executive Rich Fitzgerald’s administration, declared her candidacy a few days before Hamas' Oct. 7 attack. Patel, who is Hindu and of Indian heritage, has cultivated the Jewish community, opening a campaign office in the Jewish enclave in Squirrel Hill, attended post-Oct. 7 vigils and bussed with community members to a pro-Israel rally in Washington in November.

Most recently, Patel has hammered Lee for being aligned with backers of the “ [*uncommitted*](https://apnews.com/article/uncommitted-biden-trump-war-15f96be36b4d5ac167c7ceda72fe65d1) ” campaign that is encouraging Democrats to protest Biden’s handling of the war voting “uncommitted” in primaries.

That, Patel suggested, is dangerous.

“I would say that every Democrat in Pennsylvania’s 12th Congressional District should take notice that my opponent is equivocating on her support for President Biden and failed to denounce the ‘uncommitted’ movement,” Patel said in an interview. “I think that is the issue that is a big concern for Democrats in this district."

Lee defended the “uncommitted" movement, saying it’s wrong to discourage people from voting and potentially lose a crucial part of the electorate that Democrats want to persuade to support Biden in November’s presidential contest. Biden recognizes that, as well, Lee said.

Lee said she has met with people on all sides of the war, including families of hostages and families of Palestinian civilians killed in Gaza, and that her calls for a cease-fire reflect the district’s majority.

Lee also accused Patel of aligning herself more with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu than with Biden.

“Joe Biden is now coming more into alignment with us, which means that, no, we were not wrong to come out early and to come out strong, because as we’re seeing now this was always where we needed to get,” Lee said in an interview. “This was always the only pathway to peace.”

For now, the sharpest questions about the war have largely been limited to debate exchanges between Lee and Patel.

The issue has barely registered on the airwaves, and pro-Israel groups that spent heavily to try to defeat Lee in the 2022 primary — Democratic Majority for Israel and the American Israel Public Affairs committee, better known as [*AIPAC*](https://apnews.com/hub/american-israel-public-affairs-committee) — haven’t waded into the race.

In Pennsylvania, one potential boost for Lee could come from college students who, unlike in 2022’s primary, will be on campus this time. At the University of Pittsburgh, the war has had a “commanding presence” on campus, with most students for a cease-fire, said Will Allison, president of Pitt’s College Democrats.

The group endorsed Lee unanimously, despite the war causing some division among members, and the College Democrats are campaigning for Lee.

In one possible sign of shifting ***politics*** around the war, the 14th Ward Independent Democratic Club, a nonparty organization based around Squirrel Hill, voted to endorse Patel after backing Lee in 2022.

Sue Berman Kress, a Patel supporter who is Jewish, said she knows some Jewish Democrats who won’t vote for Lee again. They feel she’s abandoned the Jewish community and that her ***politics*** could open the door to a Trump victory and a surge in antisemitism.

“Those things feel very divisive in a way that’s very scary,” Kress said.

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