

# [***Senate races are roiled by campus protests over the war in Gaza as campaign rhetoric sharpens***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BY9-DHD1-DYMD-6439-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

HARRISBURG, Pa. — The student [*protest movement*](https://apnews.com/live/college-protests-palestine-updates) disrupting university campuses, classes and graduation ceremonies over the [*war in Gaza*](https://apnews.com/hub/israel-hamas-war) is also roiling Senate contests across the nation as Democrats tread cautiously over an internal divide and Republicans play up their rivals' disagreements.

The political impact of the protests on the White House campaign has drawn considerable attention, with opposition to President Joe Biden's handling of the Israel-Hamas war reverberating from Columbia to UCLA. The fast-evolving landscape of the demonstrations is shaping pivotal Senate races, too.

Tent encampments have popped up at universities in many states where Democrats this election year are defending seats essential to maintaining the party's razor-thin Senate majority. At some schools, police crackdowns and arrests have followed.

The protests have sharpened the campaign rhetoric in Pennsylvania, Nevada, Ohio and Michigan, among other places. Republican candidates in California and Florida have stepped up their criticism of the Democratic president for the U.S. response to the war or for chaotic scenes on American campuses.

Some Republicans have shown up at encampments, including one at George Washington University, not far from the White House. Sen. [*Rick Scott*](https://apnews.com/hub/rick-scott), R-Fla., who is facing reelection, said on social media that he went there to show solidarity with Jewish students. "We need to do all we can to protect them,” he said.

Republican candidate [*David McCormick*](https://apnews.com/hub/david-mccormick), during a visit to the University of Pennsylvania, said protesters at the Ivy League school did not know the “difference between right and wrong, good and evil," and were creating a hostile atmosphere for Jewish students.

McCormick has decried what he frames as a lack of leadership and moral clarity on the part of his Democratic opponent, Sen. [*Bob Casey*](https://apnews.com/article/bob-casey-senate-pennsylvania-reelection-115aee358de6f15dddfe54442d6232e5), as well as by Biden and administrators at the school buffeted by [*accusations of harboring antisemitism*](https://apnews.com/article/new-york-governor-antisemitism-colleges-israel-gaza-ae1294d644b3305cc51e8d9bb7252766).

“What’s happening on campuses is clearly a test of leadership and moral courage, both for the college presidents and for our leaders and for Sen. Casey and President Biden,” McCormick said in an interview.

Israel and its supporters say the protests are [*antisemitic*](https://apnews.com/article/israel-palestinian-campus-protests-columbia-congress-df4ba95dae844b3a8559b4b3ad7e058a), a charge that Israel’s critics say is sometimes used to silence legitimate opposition. Although some protesters have been caught on camera making antisemitic remarks or violent threats, protest organizers, some of whom are Jewish, say it is a peaceful movement aimed at trying to save the lives of Palestinians civilians.

Many Democrats, [*from Biden*](https://apnews.com/article/biden-silence-college-protests-police-gaza-israel-d5f3092671951c3bc2968b8751c93ba6) on down, avoided saying much about the situation until recently as universities began to crack down and comparisons were made to anti-war protests of the 1960s.

Even then, Democrats balanced their criticism of antisemitism and rule-breakers with the need to protect the right to free expression and peaceful protest. Some have tried to avoid taking sides in protests that have pitted pro-Israeli versus pro-Palestinian Democrats and divided important parts of the party's base, including Jewish, Arab American and younger voters.

Republicans, meanwhile, have railed at what they characterized as equivocating or silence by Democrats. Republicans professed solidarity with Jews against antisemitism while condemning the protests as lawless.

Mike Rogers, a Republican seeking [*an open Senate seat in Michigan*](https://apnews.com/article/michigan-senate-slotkin-rogers-election-stabenow-d724624cf34ee7ff64845e34cd4a2d79), said student protesters at Columbia were “Hamas sympathizers.” In California, GOP Senate candidate [*Steve Garvey*](https://apnews.com/article/california-senate-schiff-garvey-porter-feinstein-democrats-1fc10223e5f54f247516d039ec9f062b) called them “terrorists” practicing “terrorism disguised as free speech.”

In five states, the National Republican Senatorial Committee, the Senate Republicans' campaign arm, is using the protests in digital ads about student loan forgiveness, saying Democrats want to pay off the loans of students “radicalized by the far left” who are “threatening Jews,” “attacking police” and “acting like terrorists.”

McCormick and others say universities that, in their view, tolerate antisemitism should lose federal subsidies and that visas should be revoked for any foreign student inciting violence or expressing pro-Hamas sentiments at the encampments.

Casey, long a staunch supporter of Israel, has criticized acts of antisemitism on campuses and pointed to legislation he sponsored as a way to make sure the Education Department takes action.

“Students of course have the right to peacefully protest, but when it crosses the line either into violence or discrimination, then we have an obligation to step in and stop that conduct,” Casey said Thursday as he urged colleagues to pass his bill.

Democratic Sen. [*Jacky Rosen*](https://apnews.com/hub/jacky-rosen) of Nevada, who is Jewish and facing reelection, said she was “horrified” by displays of antisemitism on campuses and, like Casey, called for the department to hold schools accountable.

In California, U.S. Rep [*Adam Schiff*](https://apnews.com/hub/adam-schiff), the Democratic nominee for an open Senate seat, took aim at the Columbia demonstration and said “antisemitic and hateful rhetoric is being loudly and proudly displayed.” Accused by Garvey of being “incredibly silent” on the protests, Schiff, who is Jewish, voted for a House bill similar to Casey's and released a statement that condemned violence and the “explicit, repeated targeting and intimidation of Jewish students.”

Republicans elsewhere contended statements by Democrats were equivocating and inadequate.

Republicans called out Sen. [*Sherrod Brown*](https://apnews.com/hub/sherrod-brown), D-Ohio, after he told an Axios reporter last week that he was “not going to talk about the ***politics*** of that. People always have the right to speak out and should.”

His Republican opponent, [*Bernie Moreno*](https://apnews.com/article/republicans-ohio-moreno-trump-sherrod-senate-da843cbb08b9233a180081cde6676a5f), charged that Brown had “wholeheartedly endorsed these vile and violent antisemitic demonstrations.”

Later, at a news conference, Brown gave more expansive comments. “Students want to make their voices heard, they need to do it in a way that's nonviolent, they need to do it in a way that doesn't spew hatred, and laws need to be enforced," he said.

In Michigan, which has a relatively significant [*Muslim population*](https://apnews.com/article/michigan-primary-uncommitted-dearborn-arab-muslim-05f6a1099c00fe75823f77aaadbacf25), Biden’s handling of the war is expected to factor heavily into the presidential and Senate races.

Rogers, a favorite for the GOP nomination, thanked New York City police for confronting protesters and “standing up to protect Jewish students at Columbia from the visceral hatred we’ve witnessed from Hamas sympathizers on their campus.”

Republicans argued that U.S. Rep. [*Elissa Slotkin*](https://apnews.com/hub/elissa-slotkin), the front-runner for the Democratic nominationfor Senate, had not spoken out strongly against protests at Columbia, her alma mater, and that she took five days after they began to say anything at all.

Slotkin, who is Jewish, said in an April 22 statement — the most recent wave of demonstrations began at Columbia on April 17 — that “the use of intimidation, antisemitic signs or slogans, or harassment, is unacceptable.”

It was, she suggested, a complicated topic.

“I would rather be thoughtful and take more time than have a knee-jerk answer for any issue," Slotkin said in an interview. "But especially this one."

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Associated Press reporters Adam Beam in Sacramento, California; Joey Cappalletti in Lansing, Michigan; Mike Catalini in Trenton, New Jersey; Tassanee Vejpongsa in Philadelphia; and Stephany Matat in West Palm Beach, Florida, contributed to this report.

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