

# [***Biden faces widening partisan split over Israel***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BYW-FW41-DY7V-G06N-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; [*President Joe Biden*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/joe-biden) is facing more critical moments this week that will test his fraught relationship with his base over [*Israel's war in Gaza*](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-05-06-24-intl-hnk/index.html) and potentially widen the partisan split about the Jewish state that has been building for years.

Long before the current conflict, polls showed that sympathies among rank-and-file Democrats have been shifting from Israel toward the Palestinians over roughly the past two decades - a period that coincides with almost unbroken right-leaning governments in Israel, mostly led by current Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Simultaneously, support for Israel over that same long period has markedly increased among rank-and-file Republican voters.

As a result, over twice as many Republican as Democratic voters now say they sympathize more with Israel than with the Palestinians, a much bigger gap between the parties than earlier in this century, according to Gallup Organization polling. This widening partisan chasm in the United States suggests that whenever Netanyahu leaves the political stage in Israel, an inescapable part of his legacy will be a leading role in shattering the bipartisan consensus that for decades provided Israel an almost unassailable position in US ***politics***.

"There's no doubt that the drivers of the US-Israeli relationship that have accounted for its resilience, its special quality and character over the years, are more under stress than at any point in my government experience or even out of government," said Aaron David Miller, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace who has advised six secretaries of state on the Mideast.

That rising pressure could make Biden the last of his kind: Though the vast majority of Democratic office-holders show no penchant to fundamentally break with Israel, Biden could be the last Democratic president for the foreseeable future who aligns so unreservedly with the nation. He's expected to make a speech on antisemitism on Tuesday at an event sponsored by the Holocaust Memorial Museum. Meanwhile, Democratic critics of his handling of the war will be watching on Wednesday when his administration is due to report to Congress on whether Israel is using US weapons in accordance with international law and is cooperating with the delivery of humanitarian aid.

Biden's deep personal bond with Israel already makes him a throwback in US ***politics***. In the first half century after Israel's formation in 1948, it was Democratic presidents such as Harry Truman, Lyndon B. Johnson, Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton who displayed the greatest emotional connection to the Jewish state. Republican presidents including Dwight Eisenhower, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush also supported Israel but more overtly qualified that support when it conflicted with their other regional goals of preserving access to oil and repelling Soviet influence; Reagan and Bush each at points protested Israeli actions they opposed by temporarily withholding aid.

Over roughly the past quarter century this partisan pattern has inverted. Republican Presidents George W. Bush and Donald Trump have identified most thoroughly with Israel, while Clinton (in his second term) and Barack Obama experienced the most disagreements with the Israeli government. Many factors have contributed to this reversal of roles. Bush's campaign against Islamic extremism after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks encouraged him to place more value on Israel as a regional ally. Growing identification with Israel among US White evangelical Christians, a key GOP constituency, also nudged the party toward greater support for the Jewish state. Conversely, more voters in the Democratic coalition (both racial minorities and liberal Whites) came to see Israel's treatment of the occupied Palestinian territories as colonial, or even apartheid-type, oppression.

While holding the prime minister position in the late 1990s and then again with only brief interruption since 2009, Netanyahu has also played a huge personal role in prompting this American partisan reversal. Netanyahu has pursued staunchly conservative policies within Israel (such as his attempt to weaken the judiciary that triggered massive nationwide protest) and rebuffed pressure from successive Democratic presidents to negotiate an independent Palestinian state. As important, he has aligned with the Republican Party [*as overtly as any foreign leader has with either political party in modern times*](https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/01/americas-meddling-ally/438939/). Netanyahu in 2015, for instance, delivered a speech to Congress opposing the Iran nuclear deal at the invitation of House Republicans - over express objections from Obama. And Netanyahu recently echoed Republican talking points [*at a news conference*](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/24/us/netanyahu-israel-us-college-protests.html) when he dismissed the protests about the war on US campuses as simply widespread antisemitism.

Against this backdrop, partisan polarization about Israel among American voters was already widening years before the brutal Hamas attack last October and the devastating Israeli response it triggered.

One measure [*is the annual Gallup polls*](https://news.gallup.com/poll/472070/democrats-sympathies-middle-east-shift-palestinians.aspx) that ask Americans whether they sympathize mostly with Israel or mostly with the Palestinians. In 2001, the share of Republican voters who said they sympathized mostly with Israel exceeded the share of Democrats by only eight percentage points (59% vs. 51%.) By Obama's second term, Republican partisans were over 20 points more likely than Democrats to say they sympathized mostly with Israel. The gap between the parties in sympathy for Israel expanded under Trump to nearly 40 points, and it has soared to 45 points under Biden - nearly six times the difference in 2001. In the 2023 and 2024 surveys, [*Gallup recorded for the first time*](https://news.gallup.com/poll/472070/democrats-sympathies-middle-east-shift-palestinians.aspx) that the share of Democrats who sympathized mostly with the Palestinians exceeded the share who mostly favored Israel.

Another [*long-running survey series*](https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/americans-continue-say-us-should-stay-impartial-israeli-palestinian) from the Chicago Council on Global Affairs found similar, though not quite as extensive, movement. In 2002, the share of Republicans who said the US should take Israel's side in the conflict was roughly double the percentage of Democrats; in the latest survey, conducted this February, the gap had grown to about 3-to-1. The survey found that the share of Democrats who said the US should align with Israel in the conflict, after falling through the Trump years, rebounded to nearly 1-in-5 in the latest poll, almost exactly its level in the early 2000s. But as many Democrats now say the US should side with the Palestinians - a view held by just 1-in-50 Democrats in 2002. (That's also the same share of Republicans today who say the US should side with the Palestinians.) Most Democrats said the US should not take either side in the conflict - a view shared by only about two-fifths of Republicans.

An array of polls this spring show how the war in Gaza has hardened this partisan split. Earlier this year, both [*Quinnipiac University*](https://poll.qu.edu/poll-release?releaseid=3894) and [*CBS/YouGov*](https://www.scribd.com/document/722765138/cbsnews-20240414-SUN#1fullscreen=1) polls found that while about 55% of Republicans wanted the US to send more military aid to Israel, about two-thirds of Democrats did not. Nearly half of Democrats, but only a little over one-fifth of Republicans in the CBS poll, said the US should pressure Israel to stop the fighting. While a slim majority of Republicans expressed confidence in Netanyahu [*in an April Pew survey*](https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/04/25/a-growing-share-of-americans-have-little-or-no-confidence-in-netanyahu/#:~:text=Three-in-ten%20say%20they,11%20percentage%20points%20since%202023.), over 7-in-10 Democrats said they had little or no faith in the Israeli leader "to do the right thing." In the Quinnipiac survey just 5% of Democrats said they had a favorable view of Netanyahu; the number was 11 times as high among Republicans.

All of the dividing lines separating the parties are also cleaving the generations. Just 1-in-12 young adults in the Quinnipiac poll said they had a favorable view of Netanyahu and over two-thirds opposed sending more arms to Israel; likewise, in the Pew survey about two-thirds of young adults said they viewed the Israeli government unfavorably. [*Gallup's latest poll*](https://news.gallup.com/poll/611375/americans-views-israel-palestinian-authority-down.aspx) found that while older adults still mostly favor Israel, a plurality of younger adults now express sympathy for the Palestinians.

These shifts in attitudes within the Democratic coalition have only modestly changed behavior among the party's leading elected officials. [*Only 37 House Democrats ultimately voted*](https://clerk.house.gov/Votes/2024152) against the recently approved foreign aid package that included over $26 billion in new military assistance to Israel. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, despite an earlier speech criticizing Netanyahu, is reportedly joining with House Speaker Mike Johnson to invite the Israeli leader to address a joint congressional session - an extraordinary opportunity given how many of Biden's requests Netanyahu has resisted since the war began.

Liberal critics of Israel's approach to the Palestinians, both before and after the October 7 attacks, largely attribute the widening disconnect between Democratic voters and elected officials to the influence of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, and other pro-Israeli lobbying groups in Washington. Since the Obama presidency, AIPAC has become more aggressive in supporting primary campaigns against Democratic officials critical of Israel; [*it has pledged to spend $100 million this year*](https://news.gallup.com/poll/611375/americans-views-israel-palestinian-authority-down.aspx) to defeat members of Congress who have criticized Israel's conduct of the war most strongly such as Democratic Reps. Jamaal Bowman of New York and Cori Bush of Missouri.

"AIPAC's enormous financial and political pressure in Washington is the most important factor in slowing down larger numbers of Democratic officials from opposing Israel's war in Gaza," said Waleed Shahid, who has held senior positions in multiple liberal organizations and has been active in organizing opposition to the war. "By targeting Democrats who oppose a blank check of weapons funding to Israel, AIPAC aims to stall an inevitable generational shift within the party."

Yet AIPAC's influence alone doesn't explain the distance opening between Democratic voters and officials. Part of the answer, as Shahid suggests, is generational. Biden personifies an older cohort of US political leaders whose image of Israel was formed when it was a lonely outpost of democracy and haven for Holocaust survivors. Ordinary Americans and US political leaders alike in the years of the 1967 and Yom Kippur (1973) wars tended to view Israel, in Miller's words, as a David barely fending off threatening Goliaths; now, many younger Democrats in particular believe "Israel is no longer David, it's Goliath," and it "is pounding David" in Gaza, Miller said. Older Democratic officials have been less influenced than younger ones by the emergence of that new perspective among their voters.

Many observers also note that Biden tends to view foreign policy much as he does domestic ***politics*** - placing enormous confidence in his ability to leverage personal relationships with other leaders. "Biden always says 'all foreign policy is an extension of personal relationships,'" said Ben Rhodes, who served as a senior National Security Council adviser while Biden served as Obama's vice president. "I don't know how many times I heard him say that."

Biden over the course of the war has more explicitly criticized Netanyahu and the far-right coalition that he is governing with, but he has still rebuffed rising demands within Democratic ranks to penalize Israel for its conduct of the war and resistance to the delivery of humanitarian aid.

"We're almost at the seventh month of this war, and this administration has been reluctant to impose a single cost or consequence on this Israeli government that normal humans would regard as serious or significant pressure," said Miller. Instead, Miller added, Biden is still operating primarily from the belief that to achieve his goals in the region - more humanitarian aid into Gaza, a ceasefire that leads to further hostage releases and eventually a regional accord between Israel and Saudi Arabia - "he cannot do that by creating a sustained public breach with the Israeli prime minister. He needs Israel's acquiescence if not its active assistance."

Biden allies also believe Israel's critics within the party are overstating the political risks of his continued support. Though polls show widespread opposition to the war among both young people and Democrats more broadly, they also usually show that those voters prioritize other issues more.

"While some elements of the party's activist core are focused on what's happening in Gaza, most Democrats and most Americans are not," said long-time Democratic pollster Mark Mellman, president of the Democratic Majority for Israel, a pro-Israeli group. "Rather they are seized with other issues - whether it's holding down prices or protecting abortion rights or protecting democracy itself. "

But as the war persists - with the wave of campus protests compounding the fractures over the issue in the Democratic coalition - there are clear signs the party's center of gravity is moving away from the instinctive support for Israel expressed by older Democrats such as Biden and Schumer.

The telltale sign is not the escalating outrage over the war from liberals long critical of Netanyahu and far-right Israeli governments, such as Sen. Bernie Sanders and members of "the squad" in the House. Rather the key measure is the willingness of ambitious mid-career Democrats closer to the party center to criticize Israel's conduct of the war more openly and to indicate support for limiting the future transfer of offensive weapons; the list of Democrats in that camp include Sens. Chris Murphy of Connecticut, Chris Van Hollen of Maryland, Chris Coons of Delaware and Tim Kaine of Virginia. [*Biden only agreed to deliver the report due Wednesday*](https://www.vanhollen.senate.gov/news/press-releases/alongside-biden-administration-van-hollen-announces-national-security-memorandum-to-ensure-us-security-assistance-is-used-in-line-with-international-law) on Israel's use of US weapons and cooperation with international aid after pressure from a group of about 20 Democratic senators led by Van Hollen.

Though almost all Democratic senators voted for the recent military aid package for Israel, Biden risks alienating many who supported the assistance if Wednesday's report to Congress does not seriously address whether Israel should be penalized for its actions in the war, said Amanda Klasing, the national director of government relations and advocacy for Amnesty International. Amnesty [*recently issued a report*](https://www.amnestyusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/4.29.2024-NSM-20-AIUSA-submission-re-Israel.pdf) charging that Israel has targeted civilians with US weapons in violation of international law. "Biden has a Democratic caucus that is putting a lot of faith in this process," she said. "They have taken these votes under the assumption that these conditions will be applied by the administration."

The Israeli prime minister's [*personal relationship with Trump is prickly,*](https://www.politico.com/news/2024/04/30/trump-netanyahu-israel-gaza-war-00155119) but Netanyahu's hardline approach toward both the Palestinians and Iran has encouraged the GOP's transformation into what Miller calls "the Israel can do no wrong party."

If Israel elects a more centrist government in the future, Miller believes, the widening US partisan divide over Israel could narrow. But given the alienation about Israeli actions among Democratic partisans in general - and younger voters in particular - it seems virtually guaranteed that Democratic elected officials in the years ahead will face greater pressure than Republicans to maintain a critical distance from Israel.

So far, Biden has been much more inclined to resist than respond to that pressure. A ceasefire could diffuse that pressure for a time. But even Biden may not be able to ignore the inevitable backlash among Democrats if [*Netanyahu, with or without a cease fire, eventually fulfills his pledge to launch a ground invasion of Rafah*](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-05-06-24-intl-hnk/index.html).

The fierce Israeli response to the terrorist attacks of October 7 may leave in rubble not just much of Gaza, but the US tradition of bipartisan support for Israel.

Analysis by Ronald Brownstein, CNN

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