

# [***Young Democrats face Gaza blowback as they try to mobilize students for Biden***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BY9-1R41-JBSS-S1W1-00000-00&context=1516831)

CNN Wire

May 4, 2024 Saturday 1:04 PM GMT

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**Length:** 1859 words

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**Dateline:** (CNN)

**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; [*President Joe Biden*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/joe-biden)'s support for the Israeli military offensive in Gaza mixed with student anger over police crackdowns on [*anti-war campus protests*](https://www.cnn.com/business/live-news/university-protests-pro-palestinian-israel-05-03-24/index.html) is complicating the work of Democratic youth groups trying to engage classmates and other Generation Z voters ahead of this year's election.

"If I'm talking about electric vehicles and climate change, and then (a student) asks me, 'What about all the emissions caused by the bombing of Gaza?' I'm like, 'Well, you know, can't help you there,'" said Hasan Pyarali, the president of the College Democrats chapter at Wake Forest University in North Carolina and the national group's Muslim caucus chair.

"Same thing with abortion access. And as an organizer, going in with those set of facts is so difficult that a lot of the times I'm like, 'Yeah, you're right,'" he said.

In his [*most pointed remarks to date*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/05/02/politics/biden-says-his-support-for-israel-remains-unwavering-amid-college-protests/index.html), Biden on Thursday condemned what he referred to as "disorder" in the demonstrations, emphasizing reports of antisemitic intimidation on campuses. He said he supported "the right to protest, but not the right to cause chaos." Asked if the protests had led him to change his thinking on the conflict, the president answered, "No."

Israel's [*monthslong bombardment*](https://www.cnn.com/world/middleeast/israel) of Gaza, launched in response to Hamas' deadly cross-border attacks on October 7, has killed more than 34,600 people, according to the enclave's health ministry, and the threat of starvation looms.

The dire situation on the ground in Gaza, which many young Americans are routinely exposed to in real-time through social media apps like TikTok, Instagram and Facebook, has [*emerged as a significant concern*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/30/politics/democrats-biden-college-protests/index.html) for many Democratic organizations, liberal outside groups and other Biden allies worried about youth voter turnout in the 2024 election.

Those anxieties came into view again last week when the traditionally modest College Democrats of America sounded the alarm, saying in a statement, "The White House has taken the mistaken route of a bear hug strategy for (Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin) Netanyahu and a cold shoulder strategy for its own base and all Americans who want to see an end to this war."

"It should be made abundantly clear that calling for the freedom of Palestinians is not Antisemitic," the group wrote, "and neither is opposing the genocidal acts of the far-right radical extremist Israeli government."

The decision by leaders of the CDA - which for many years operated under the wing of the Democratic National Committee - to take such a bold stand and potentially endanger its standing with senior party leaders drew immediate attention across ideological lines. But the College Democrats insist their worries are also rooted in what they see as the Biden campaign's unwillingness to grasp the scope of how difficult it is becoming [*to engage young voters*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/29/politics/biden-young-voters-what-matters/index.html).

A mixed picture

Polling of young voters on the Israel-Hamas War, specifically about its effect on Biden's campaign, presents a mixed picture.

A [*Harvard/Institute of* ***Politics*** *poll*](https://iop.harvard.edu/youth-poll/47th-edition-spring-2024) conducted in March showed that young Americans supported a permanent ceasefire in Gaza (51% versus 10% who were opposed). An [*Economist/YouGov poll*](https://d3nkl3psvxxpe9.cloudfront.net/documents/econTabReport_0NJUiMQ.pdf) from April found that 32% of adults younger than 30 sympathized with Palestinians (compared with 13% who sympathized with Israelis). Only 18% of young voters approved of Biden's handling of the Israel-Hamas war, according to the Harvard/IOP poll.

However, the Harvard survey also found that only 38% of young Americans were closely following news about the war. Asked which national issue concerned them the most, only 8% said foreign policy.

Nicho Fernandez, a 21-year-old at Georgetown University in Washington, DC, admitted he hasn't been paying close attention to the conflict in Gaza.

"It's a very complex situation, and personally, because of everything that I have, with internships, schoolwork, I haven't been able to give a very close look to it," Fernandez said.

A majority of young adults (63%) in the Economist/YouGov poll said they haven't attended any sort of political protest, rally or demonstration.

"This is a different youth electorate than we saw in 2020 and 2022, and young voters are motivated by different things," John Della Volpe, the Harvard Institute of ***Politics*** polling director, said when the results were released. "Economic issues are top of mind, housing is a major concern - and the gap between young men's and young women's political preferences is pronounced."

Biden allies frequently point to these constantly evolving dynamics as evidence that the domestic political stakes of the war in Gaza are being overblown by critics. Santiago Mayer, the founder and executive director of the Gen Z group Voters of Tomorrow, said that anger over the recent campus crackdowns has been directed more at college administrators and local officials than at Biden, and that observers shouldn't draw a straight line between student unrest and how young people will vote.

"I really don't think that the protests themselves are an electoral conversation. I think there's obviously an electoral component of it, but it is not something that we're talking about right now," Mayer told CNN. "It's very important to remember that these young people, no matter how angry they might be at Joe Biden, will never vote for Trump."

But College Democrats national president Carolyn Salvador Avila, a 19-year-old student at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas, warned that while policy issues like the cost of living, climate change and abortion rights are, indeed, the most important to young voters, Biden's Israel policy threatened to undermine his personal standing.

"Even if it's not the top at the list, it's still something that's keeping people who would otherwise fully support this party from being 100% sure that they're going to cast their vote for Biden," Salvador Avila said. "There are so many people on our campuses that are not as receptive anymore to our conversations about all the fantastic things that the president has accomplished because of this issue."

Internal divisions

Those divisions exist now at almost every level of institutional Democratic ***politics***, from local party chapters to Congress, and even within the College Democrats themselves.

Allyson Bell, a graduate student at Meredith College in North Carolina and chair of the national College Democrats' Jewish caucus, said she was taken aback by the group's statement - in part because she, along with Pyarali, the Muslim caucus chair, had worked together on earlier drafts that, Bell said, contained more prominent denunciations of antisemitism on American campuses.

Those versions were eventually voted down by the group's executive council, she said, which ended up voting, 8-2, in favor of a statement that was more fiercely critical of Israel, Biden and police raids of protest encampments.

Bell said she was not consulted on the final draft, an "alienating" occurrence that led her to believe that the College Democrats' leadership did not want to highlight "the experience that Jewish students are having right now across college campuses."

"I support peaceful protests, even if those protests don't necessarily align with my own beliefs," Bell said. "But I think it was important to also include the instances of harassment that we have seen."

The Biden campaign and the Democratic National Committee declined to address the specific policy points voiced by these groups, pointing to the president's most recent comments and his work to facilitate a ceasefire in the region. Seth Schuster, a spokesman for the Biden campaign, touted its investment in engaging young voters.

"We have launched a more robust youth outreach campaign led by a dedicated youth vote team earlier than ever before that will feature campus organizers across every battleground state and has already included seven figure advertising across social media," Schuster said in a statement. "Our operation is bolstered by 15 endorsing youth vote groups who are leveraging their networks and resources to mobilize young voters to reelect the president and vice president."

Among those groups is the College Democrats of America, which says it remains committed to backing Biden's reelection and helping drive young voters to the polls. Still, top CDA officials expressed frustration over what they described as a cold shoulder from the Biden team.

"It's been really hard for our organization to get in contact with the White House and with the Biden administration," said Aidan DiMarco, the group's director of membership. "This isn't new. This didn't happen when we released this statement. It's been an issue for a long time now."

That frustration, DiMarco insisted, is not personal, but a simple matter of campaign strategy.

"If the Biden campaign wants to win in November, they're going to have to start building a stronger connection with our organization," he said, "because we're doing the groundwork."

Battleground realities

In Wisconsin, a critical swing state that could be decided, again, by the finest of margins, 20-year-old Evelyn Schmidt, chair of the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater College Democrats, said her group has sought to "hold two truths in our head" when it comes to Gaza and the election.

"We care about this and want to be on the right side of history," Schmidt said. "But then, also, making (clear) people know that the best situation in terms of the presidency and setting up that conversation is having Joe Biden reelected."

Democratic operatives working outside the White House with youth and local party organizations also said that their work has been complicated by the Israel-Hamas conflict, though they were less inclined to criticize Biden's policies. That is in part, as one longtime Democratic strategist said, because the intractability of the issue makes it difficult to discuss in a campaign setting.

"The problem is there's not much conversation that can be had. It is even hard for young people to talk to other young people about how to do this," the Democratic strategist said. "When I work with state parties and talk to people with the College Democrats, people with youth councils of the party, they ask, 'How do I answer these questions for other young people?' And that is a really hard challenge. There is so much emotion behind the issue."

Schmidt said her group's message to young voters angry over Biden's handling of the war is simple, delivered as straightforwardly as she and her colleagues can.

"We say, 'It's not the ideal situation if that is your top issue,'" Schmidt told CNN. "But in Wisconsin, I think a lot of voters, their top issue is reproductive freedom, gun reform, and climate change."

Still, she added, delivering that message, day in and out, has put an added onus on young organizers.

"It is frustrating because it does kind of put the weight on the individual organizers who are talking to people, to process with voters about how they should feel," Schmidt said. "That weight of this issue is felt by organizers having to have those conversations."

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**Load-Date:** May 4, 2024

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