

# [***Bad News for Biden as Gaza Puts Foreign Policy at Center of 2024 Election***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6C1V-1WP1-JBR6-9005-00000-00&context=1516831)

Newsweek.com

May 16, 2024 Thursday 5:00 AM EST

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**Length:** 2456 words

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**Highlight:** Opponents of Israel's war in Gaza make up a relatively small part of the electorate, but they could play an outsized role in battlegrounds states.

**Body**

Americans aren't fighting abroad in Ukraine or Gaza as they once did in Vietnam and Iraq. But growing protests over [*U.S. military*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/u.s.-military?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) support for Israel have increased the likelihood that 2024 may join 2004 and 1968 as a rare foreign policy-influenced election — and the fallout could cost President [*Joe Biden*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/joe-biden?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) in the critical battleground states he needs for re-election.

The young people, progressives, Arab and Muslim Americans and others — including some Jews — voicing outrage over the killing of tens of thousands of Palestinians in Gaza in Israel's war on [*Hamas*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/hamas?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) make up a relatively small part of the electorate, though they've commanded outsized attention by clashing with police on college campuses in an echo of past protests over foreign wars.

But the 2024 election will come down to close races in swing states such as Michigan, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania and Georgia, and if enough Biden supporters stay home or vote for a third-party candidate, it could land former President [*Donald Trump*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/donald-trump?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) back in the White House.

"President Biden is playing with fire here," Ahmad Abuznaid, the executive director of US Campaign for Palestinian Rights, told *Newsweek.* "The more death and destruction we see coming out of Gaza, the more people are fed up with it and the more they're questioning our support for the state of Israel," said Abuznaid, speaking on behalf of the group's political advocacy arm.

Foreign policy has traditionally taken a back seat in U.S. elections to economic and other domestic concerns, and polls show foreign policy isn't top of mind for most voters in 2024. But it played a major part in the 1968 election in which [*Republican*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/republican?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) Richard Nixon defeated a Democratic rival as America was roiled by campus protests over the Democratic administration's deepening involvement in Vietnam. In 2004, Republican [*George W. Bush*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/george-w.-bush?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships)'s handling of the post-9/11 war on terror helped him win re-election, despite a growing anti-war protest movement over Iraq and Afghanistan.

Biden is well aware of the political dimensions of Israel's war in Gaza, according to people familiar with his thinking.

"I know he's concerned about it," [*Chuck Hagel*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/chuck-hagel?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships), a former U.S. Defense secretary, told *Newsweek,* referring to progressive opposition to the war. But Hagel, who said he has spoken to the president several times in recent months, added that with Israel and other foreign policy issues Biden puts political considerations aside to focus on what he "thinks is the right thing to do."

"Overall he's done a very good job of handling a very difficult situation," Hagel said.

A lot can change before Election Day. Biden has increased his criticism of Israel as the war has dragged on. Moves like his early May decision to stop some weapons shipments to Israel if it proceeded with a major offensive in Rafah may win back some voters he's alienated in recent months.

Israel and the militant group Hamas could reach a ceasefire agreement that ends the fighting in Gaza. In Europe, Ukraine could regain momentum now that [*Congress*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/congress?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) has passed a long-stalled military aid package to help Kyiv in its war with Russia — though support for Ukraine in that war has been less contentious among Biden's supporters. A majority of Democratic voters support aiding Ukraine, and congressional [*Democrats*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/democrats?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) voted overwhelmingly in favor of the latest aid package.

But with no immediate end in sight to the war in Gaza, the Middle East could continue dominating headlines, forcing Biden to potentially grapple with protests through the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in August in an echo of the chaotic scenes from 1968 when police clashed with anti-war protesters at the Democratic convention in the same city.

"Right now it's all about the margins and Biden can't afford to be losing voters on the margins," Thomas Patterson, a political scientist at the Harvard Kennedy School, told *Newsweek.*

"In the post-World War Two period, foreign policy has only played a big role in U.S. elections when things aren't going well," Patterson added, and with Gaza, "Biden's gotten himself into a no-win situation."

**Political fallout in key battlegrounds**

The [*Democratic Party*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/democratic-party?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) built up support with Arab and Muslim Americans in the post-9/11 years, when then-President Bush launched two wars in the Middle East and the Republican Party was tied to a neoliberal foreign policy agenda that fell from favor as the wars dragged on.

But Biden's military support for Israel has eroded some of the goodwill Democrats established with those groups over the past two decades, political strategists, historians and Middle East analysts said.

"There is no question at this point that is going to seriously affect Arab American voters," James Zogby, the president of the Arab American Institute, told *Newsweek*.

The Trump campaign did not respond to a request for comment from *Newsweek*.

The Biden campaign defended Biden's handling of the conflict in Gaza.

"The President shares the goal for an end to the violence and a just, lasting peace in the Middle East. He's working tirelessly to that end," Charles Lutvak, a Biden campaign spokesperson, said in a statement to *Newsweek*.

"Joe Biden's decades of experience in foreign policy and deep relationships with our allies make him exactly the leader America needs on the global stage in this moment. Trump, on the other hand, nearly tweeted our way into a nuclear war with North Korea and weakened our leadership around the world by praising Vladmir Putin and other dictators," Lutvak said. "A second Trump term threatens to be even worse."

The domestic political fallout from the war in Gaza has cast a spotlight in particular on Arab and Muslim Americans, overlapping groups that make up a small portion of the U.S. population but that could have a big impact in a few critical battleground states.

Just 1 percent of U.S. residents — 3.5 million people — identified as being of Middle Eastern or North African descent [*according to the 2020 Census*](https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2023/09/2020-census-dhc-a-mena-population.html#:%7E:text=Who%20Identified%20as%20a%20Detailed%20MENA%20Group%3F,population), a total that includes Arabic and non-Arabic speakers and other ethnic and racial groups. The census doesn't collect information on religious affiliation, but a widely-cited Pew Research Center [*study*](https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2018/01/03/new-estimates-show-u-s-muslim-population-continues-to-grow/) found there were 3.4 million Muslims in America in 2017 — and estimated the number would double by 2050. According to a separate Pew study published last month, 66 percent of Muslim Americans say they are Democrats or left-leaning independents.

Those voting blocs are small, but they're clustered in big enough numbers in places like Michigan to impact key statewide elections.

Michigan's Arab American population is the largest as a percentage of a state's population of any state in the country, according to the Arab American Institute. There were also 206,050 registered Muslim voters in Michigan in the 2020 presidential election — more than Biden's 154,000-vote margin of victory over Trump in the state. More than 100,000 voters in Michigan's Democratic primary in February voted "uncommitted" to register opposition to Biden's support for Israel in its war with Hamas.

And Michigan isn't alone. The battleground states of Wisconsin and Pennsylvania are also home to Arab and Muslim American communities that are larger than Biden's narrow victory margin in those states in the last election. More than 48,000 voters in Wisconsin's Democratic primary last month cast "uninstructed" ballots as an anti-war vote, in a state Biden won by just 20,000 votes.

Nationally, 1.5 million Muslim Americans voted in the 2020 presidential election, a turnout rate of 71 percent according to a [*report*](https://emgageusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Emgage-ImpactReport-2020-v2.4-lr-1.pdf) on the election by Million Muslim Votes, a grassroots group. That turnout doesn't have to dip too much in Michigan and other battlegrounds to help swing the election to Trump, Democratic strategists and others said.

"I don't think that Arab Americans are coming back to him" after Gaza, Celinda Lake, the 2020 Biden campaign's chief pollster, told *Newsweek.*

**The youth revolt**

The protests over Gaza on campuses across the country, from Columbia University in New York to USC in Los Angeles, have made clear Biden faces a growing backlash from young people on the left — regardless of their race, ethnicity or religious beliefs.

The moment represents a turning point for a diverse generation of younger progressives who oppose Israel's policies toward Palestinians and who view the current war as a genocide, said Abuznaid, the head of US Campaign for Palestinian Rights.

"Support for Israel's genocide is incredibly unpopular right now with young people and people of color," Abuznaid said, noting that this was "President Biden's base."

Public polls show a broad divide in attitudes between younger and older Americans on the worst outbreak of violence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in decades. Hamas killed some 1,200 people in the Oct. 7 attack inside Israel and abducted 250 more. Israel responded with a military campaign in Gaza that has killed more than 34,000 Palestinians according to Gaza's Hamas-run health authority, which doesn't distinguish between combatants and civilians.

One poll by the Arab American Institute taken in January found that 37 percent of people aged 18 to 29 felt increased sympathy toward Palestinians as a result of the current war, compared to just 19 percent of all American adults who said they felt the same way. A separate March [*poll by Gallup*](https://news.gallup.com/poll/611375/americans-views-israel-palestinian-authority-down.aspx#:~:text=Young%20adults%20show%20the%20biggest,adults%20aged%2055%20and%20older.) found that just 38 percent of 18-34 year-olds held a favorable view of Israel, compared to 71 percent of Americans 55 and older who view Israel favorably.

Younger voters are critical to Biden's success in November. He relied on young and nonwhite voters to beat Trump in 2020, carrying the [*18-29 year-old*](https://www.cnn.com/election/2020/exit-polls/president/national-results)vote by 24 points according to national exit polls. Biden's support among young Black and Latino voters was even higher.

Experts said the Gaza protests also reflect a broader frustration among young people of all backgrounds who want the Biden administration to address issues such as student loan debt and housing affordability at home instead of spending billions on things like military aid to Israel.

Young peoples' frustration over U.S. foreign policy isn't new, of course. But while the protests today have drawn comparisons to the anti-war protests over Iraq and Vietnam that marked the 2004 and 1968 elections, experts said 2024 is unique for reasons beyond the fact that America doesn't have troops on the ground fighting in the Middle East or Europe.

The country is far more polarized now along party lines than it was during the Iraq and Vietnam eras. Biden's embrace of international alliances and Trump's isolationism offers voters an even starker foreign policy choice than in previous elections, historians and others said. Social media has also transformed the way the public absorbs information on foreign events, helping drive the age gap in public opinions on Gaza.

"Twenty years ago there was much more overlap in the news sources for young and old," said Lake, the Democratic pollster. Today, "[*TikTok*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/tiktok?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) is the number one source of information on the war in Gaza for young people," said Lake, giving them greater access to graphic images of the violence in Gaza than older Americans typically see in mainstream news outlets.

"They are watching two very different wars," Lake said.

The 2024 White House race also defies easy comparison to past presidential elections due to other factors that have nothing to do with Gaza. It's the first U.S. presidential election between two major-party candidates who are both more than 70 years old, and Trump's run for a second term comes as he faces criminal charges in four separate cases that he says are politically motivated.

Most voters will be focused on the economy, immigration, abortion and other issues and not on foreign policy, Robert Blizzard, a Republican pollster, told *Newsweek.* "This election is going to be a referendum on the Biden economy versus a referendum on Trump's personality," Blizzard said.

Still, reminders of past inflection points in American ***politics*** remain, said Zogby, the head of the Arab American Institute.

"I go back to '68," Zogby said. The Vietnam War wasn't the only factor that tipped the election to Richard Nixon, "but you can't deny that it played a critical role," he said, and Israel's war in Gaza has raised similar questions today. For young progressive voters and others angry with Biden's support for Israel, "the choice is not Trump or Biden," Zogby said. "It's, 'Do I vote [for Biden] or not vote at all?"

**Biden's 'political calculation is off'**

The Biden campaign is betting his supporters will ultimately back him over Trump, despite any lingering anger some may have over Gaza. Democrats believe that by the fall, left-leaning voters will start focusing more on Trump's 2024 campaign promises.

As a 2024 candidate, [*Trump has said*](https://apnews.com/article/trump-policies-agenda-election-2024-second-term-d656d8f08629a8da14a65c4075545e0f) he would reinstate his administration's travel ban targeting Muslim-majority countries; enact the biggest deportation program in American history as part of a crackdown on illegal immigration; and reevaluate "[*NATO*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/nato?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships)'s purpose and NATO's mission." He has also said that in a second term he would urge Russia [*"to do whatever the hell they want"*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/10/politics/trump-russia-nato/index.html) to NATO members that don't meet defense spending requirements.

Trump has also been a steadfast supporter of Israel and although he has appeared more critical of its handling of the war in recent weeks he has given no indication he would adopt policies over Gaza that would please progressives more.

"I have a very high level of concern" about Trump's leadership if he returns to the White House, Hagel, the former Republican U.S. senator from Nebraska who served as defense secretary in the Obama administration, said in the *Newsweek* interview. "I think he would be disastrous for this country and the world."

Voters have historically rejected presidential candidates with extreme foreign policy views, said Elaine Kamarck, a senior fellow at Brookings and former Clinton White House official. "Biden is much more of a traditional American president in many ways, but particularly on America's role in the world," Kamarck told *Newsweek.* Trump has shown he's "really not in the mainstream of American foreign policy."

The president's approach to Israel may also wind up being more in line with most Americans, even if it alienates some progressives on the far left. It's possible that "the kind of middle ground messaging of American international leadership and having a sense of order on campuses [appeals to] a larger group of people than the people who aren't going to vote for him" over Gaza, Jeremey Ben-Ami, the president of J Street, a liberal advocacy group, told *Newsweek.*

Others said appealing to the middle was a mistake that may cost Biden the election.

"His political calculation is off," Abuznaid said. "President Biden is not reading the room."

[*Link to Image*](https://d.newsweek.com/en/full/2392338/foreign-policy-center-bidens-election.jpg)

**Graphic**

Foreign Policy At Center Of Biden's Election

Photo-illustration by Newsweek/Getty, Justin Sullivan, Kent Nishimura, Menahem KAHANA / AFP

Foreign Policy At Center Of Biden's Election

**Load-Date:** May 16, 2024

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