

# Known Unknowns in US Public Opinion Towards Israel

*Youssef Chouhoud*



*Youssef Chouhoud is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Christopher Newport University, where he is affiliated with the Reiff Center for Human Rights and Conflict Resolution. He is also a Public Fellow with the Public Religion Research Institute for the 2023-24 academic year. Email: [youssef.chouhoud@cnu.edu](mailto:youssef.chouhoud@cnu.edu)*

Six months into the assault on Gaza, America's policies towards Israel have barely budged from their default positions of unconditional aid, overwhelming deference, and diplomatic cover. Of course, this stagnation is not for lack of pushback. Even in the face of protests that drew tens of thousands and high-profile resignations, the Biden administration has remained steadfast in its intransigence.

In fairness, the president will, occasionally, sharpen his rhetoric toward a foreign government prosecuting a plausible genocide, but appears to draw the line at using his considerable leverage to limit, let alone halt, what is potentially the most indiscriminate bombing campaign in history (Borger 2023). All this as a clear majority of likely voters want the U.S. to call for a permanent ceasefire (Data for Progress 2023). Against this backdrop of domestic 'political' and foreign 'violent' conflict, Americans' attitudes toward President Biden and his policies have decidedly soured with opinions towards Israel following suit.

Despite these clear trends, one misconception about the broader Israel-Palestine conflict is that we actually know Americans' opinions on the matter in any meaningful sense. To be sure, we certainly have a clear snapshot of public sentiment in the months following

the October 7 Hamas attack. For instance, only one-third of respondents in a December 2023 New York Times/Siena College Poll said they approved of Biden's handling of the Israel-Palestine conflict (Weisman, Igielnik, and McFadden 2023), similar to the result in a Pew poll taken a few weeks earlier (Pew Research Center 2023). Additionally, in a more recent USA Today/Suffolk University survey, nearly half of respondents said Biden should do more to pressure Israel to ease the humanitarian crisis in Gaza (Irwin 2024).

Similarly, Americans' opinion of Israel's military campaign in Gaza, and regard for Israelis in their conflict with the Palestinians generally, has taken a demonstrably negative turn. In a mid-February poll, half of US adults said that Israel had "gone too far" in its prosecution of the current war (Knickmeyer and Sanders 2024). In terms of which side Americans sympathize with in general, Gallup's latest World Affairs poll finds that, for the first time, Democrats say that they are more sympathetic towards the Palestinians than Israel (Gallup 2023).

Yet, how much can we really learn from such findings when it comes to Israel-Palestine policy generally? More often than not, surveys on the broader conflict merely report

some measure of affect—and not a particularly informative one, at that. The question most frequently asked pits Palestinians against Israel/Israelis for Americans’ sympathies. Sometimes the query will take a more typical favorable/unfavorable format, even adding nuance by differentiating the people from their government (Alper 2022), but there is a near total dearth of polling on Americans’ policy preferences toward Israel.

This is where political science can intervene to ask questions that not only probe key attitudes of interest that go beyond surface-level support for one side over the other, but also do so in a manner that accounts for different messaging contexts. For example, we would certainly want to know where the public stands on conditioning aid to Israel. Yet, simply asking “Would you support conditioning American aid to Israel?” would have limited utility. Instead, public opinion scholars could field survey experiments that most polling firms are reticent to incorporate into their questionnaires to get a more valid gauge of attitudes toward this issue. We would then be able to compare baseline levels of support for conditioning aid, in general, to support for various, specific criteria upon which such decisions could be made. Moreover, this methodology would allow us to deduce whether it makes a difference if you inform respondents that aid to foreign countries is typically conditioned and that the no-strings-attached package that Israel receives is outside the norm. A similar assessment of framing effects could be fielded concerning sanctions: Would the American public be more willing to sanction settlers in the West Bank if you inform them that this group’s actions are illegal under international law and that they regularly use violence to reinforce their presence?

Even more fundamentally, a better gauge of

Americans’ knowledge and prioritization of policies toward Israel would be invaluable to both lawmakers and activists. For instance, does knowing how much annual aid Israel receives make one more or less likely to support conditioning it? Scholars could also deploy various means to assess the extent to which support for Israel wins out when it is pitted against another policy priority (say, immigration or taxes or healthcare) or how it fits within a seemingly misaligned ideology like “America First.”

Myriad gaps exist in our understanding of how Americans regard the US-Israel relationship and what messages and considerations influence that assessment. In the absence of informative survey findings, interest-group narratives and partisan heuristics will continue to drive public discourse on the topic. Political scientists can intervene by providing deeper, more holistic public opinion data. Hopefully, this moment underscores the urgency in building this cache of knowledge. ♦

## References

Alper, Becka A. 2022. “Modest Warming in U.S. Views on Israel and Palestinians.” *Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/05/26/modest-warming-in-u-s-views-on-israel-and-palestinians/>.

Borger, Julian. 2023. “Civilians Make up 61% of Gaza Deaths from Airstrikes, Israeli Study Finds.” *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/dec/09/civilian-toll-israeli-airstrikes-gaza-unprecedented-killing-study>.

Data For Progress. 2023. "Voters Want the U.S. to Call for a Permanent Ceasefire in Gaza and to Prioritize Diplomacy." *Data For Progress*. <https://www.dataforprogress.org/blog/2023/12/5/voters-want-the-us-to-call-for-a-permanent-ceasefire-in-gaza-and-to-prioritize-diplomacy>.

Irwin, Lauren. 2024. "Almost Half Want Biden to Pressure Israel on Gaza Humanitarian Conditions: Survey." *The Hill*. <https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/4534917-almost-half-want-biden-pressure-israel-gaza-humanitarian-conditions-survey/>.

Gallup. 2023. "Democrats' Sympathies in Middle East Shift to Palestinians." <https://news.gallup.com/poll/472070/democrats-sympathies-middle-east-shift-palestinians.aspx>.

Knickmeyer, Ellen and Linley Sanders. 2024. "Half of US Adults Say Israel Has Gone Too Far in War in Gaza, AP-NORC Poll Shows." *AP News*. <https://apnews.com/article/israel-palestinians-poll-biden-war-gaza-4159b28d313c6c37abdb7f14162bcdd1>.

Pew Research Center. 2023. "The Biden Administration's Response to the War between Israel and Hamas." *Pew Research Center - U.S. Politics & Policy*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2023/12/08/the-biden-administrations-response-to-the-war-between-israel-and-hamas/>.

Weisman, Jonathan, Ruth Igielnik, and Alyce McFadden. 2023. "Poll Finds Wide Disapproval of Biden on Gaza, and Little Room to Shift Gears." *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/19/us/politics/biden-israel-gaza-poll.html>.