

Poll Finds Wide Disapproval of Biden on Gaza, and Little Room to Shift Gears

Opinion is split between those wanting the war to end and those pressing for a definitive Israeli victory, and the divide is starkest among older and younger generations.

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Voters broadly disapprove of the way President Biden is handling the bloody strife between Israelis and Palestinians, a [New York Times/Siena College poll](#) has found, with younger Americans far more critical than older voters of both Israel's conduct and of the administration's response to the war in Gaza.

Voters are also sending decidedly mixed signals about the direction U.S. policy-making should take as the war in Gaza grinds into its third month, with Israelis still reeling from the Oct. 7 terrorist attack, thousands of Palestinian deaths in Gaza and the Biden administration trying to pressure Israel to scale back its military campaign. Nearly as many Americans want Israel to continue its military campaign as want it to stop now to avoid further civilian casualties.

That split appears to leave the president with few politically palatable options.

The findings of the Times/Siena poll hold portents not only for Mr. Biden as he enters the 2024 re-election year but also for long-term relations between the Jewish state and its most powerful benefactor, the United States.

The fractured views on the conflict among traditionally Democratic voter groups show the continued difficulty Mr. Biden faces of holding together the coalition he built in 2020 — a challenge that is likely to persist even as economic indicators grow more positive and legal troubles swirl around his expected opponent, former President Donald J. Trump.

Overall, registered voters say they favor Mr. Trump over Mr. Biden in next year's presidential election by two percentage points, 46 percent to 44 percent. The president's job approval rating has slid to 37 percent, [down two points from July](#).

But there is considerable uncertainty over whether disaffected voters will even vote. While it is still early, the race is flipped among the likely electorate, with Mr. Biden leading by two percentage points.

Economic concerns remain paramount, with 34 percent of registered voters listing economic- or inflation-related concerns as the top issue facing the country. That's down from [45 percent in October 2022](#), but still high.

Voters between 18 and 29 years old, traditionally a heavily Democratic demographic, jump out. Nearly three quarters of them disapprove of the way Mr. Biden is handling the conflict in Gaza. And among registered voters, they say they would vote for Mr. Trump by 49 percent to 43 percent — [in July](#), those young voters backed Mr. Biden by 10 percentage points.

“I don't want to vote for someone who is not aligned with my own personal values, as Biden has shown he is not when it comes to Gaza,” said Colin Lohner, a 27-year-old software engineer in San Francisco. But, he asked, “Do I vote for Biden or do I not vote at all? That's really difficult, because if I don't vote for Biden, I open up the possibility that Trump will win, and I really do not want that.”

The electorate appears to be of two minds on what should come next, a cease-fire or a continuing campaign against Hamas, whose terrorist attack on Oct. 7 killed around 1,200 Israelis and set off the conflagration.

Given a choice between two courses of action, a narrow plurality of voters, 44 percent, said Israel should stop its military campaign to protect against civilian casualties, already totaling nearly 20,000 people killed, according to Gaza health authorities. A similar number, 39 percent, advised the opposite course: Israel should continue its military campaign even if it means civilian casualties in Gaza mount.

The results were nearly identical no matter whether respondents were given Israel's objective as securing the release of all hostages (with stopping the war meaning hostages may stay in captivity) or as wiping out Hamas (with stopping meaning that Hamas may not be eradicated).

“He's pushing Israel to pursue peace with Hamas, where I personally don't believe Israel should seek peace with Hamas,” William Hunting, a 24-year-old libertarian who works in sales in Asheville, N.C., who favors Mr. Trump, said of Mr. Biden.

Most young voters, however, responded to question after question with answers showing that they see the worst in Israel. Few of them believe Israelis are serious about peace with the Palestinians. Nearly half say Israel is intentionally killing civilians. Nearly three-fourths say Israel is not taking enough precautions to avoid civilian casualties. And a majority oppose additional economic and military aid to Israel.

The broader electorate, by contrast, takes a much more pro-Israel view, suggesting that Israel's image problems with American voters are more acute on the political horizon than at present.

Still, fully 48 percent of all voters surveyed said they believed Israel was not taking enough precautions to avoid civilian casualties in Gaza.

Those who identify as regular users of TikTok were the most adamant in their criticism. The social media platform, which is owned by a Chinese company, has come under heated criticism from both parties, but especially Republicans, for an inflammatory stream of videos aimed at users who skew very young. Even when controlling for their age, TikTok users were more critical of the Biden administration's policies toward Israel.

"It's a lot of really violent imagery of civilian casualties and hospital bombings," Mr. Lohner said, citing TikTok and another platform, Instagram. "I'm trying to take it at face value and acknowledge that this is social media and it could be anything, but it feels like these are on-the-ground perspectives into what is really happening."

The war also appears to be advancing the process of turning Israel into a partisan issue. For years, Republicans, led by Mr. Trump, have accused Democrats of undermining Israel's government and have implored Jewish voters to leave the party that nearly [three-quarters of them](#) traditionally have called their political home.

Now, a partisan divide is emerging that could affect some Jewish voters' comfort within the Democratic Party: 76 percent of Republicans said they sympathized with Israel over the Palestinians. Among white, evangelical Christians, whose theological emphasis on Israel is at the core of the G.O.P.'s unquestioning support, sympathy with Israel is even higher, at 80 percent. Democrats show no such consensus: 31 percent said they sympathized more with Israel, 34 percent with the Palestinians and 16 percent said their sympathies lay with both.

"Israel is a beacon of freedom in the Middle East that is surrounded by very different governments," said Summer Jennings, 29, a Republican graphic designer near Raleigh, N.C., "and if Israel backs down, it'll just be these oppressive governments."

Though Mr. Biden's policies may favor Israel, she said she believed that Mr. Trump would take the same approach, but with more muscle: "As much of a jerk as Trump was, I feel like Biden is very weak," Ms. Jennings said.

The split among Democrats could alienate Jewish voters who overwhelmingly chose Mr. Biden in 2020 and are anxiously watching a rise of antisemitism that has accompanied anger at Israel's war effort. Cory Lebson, a 50-year-old Jewish Democrat in Silver Spring, Md., said antisemitism "feels like the worst that I can remember in my 50 years. It's more salient, it's more visible."

But he had high praise for the president. "I think he has been very good at balancing both from the left and the right and coming up with a nuanced response," Mr. Lebson

said, adding, “Biden historically, for his entire political career, has always been supportive of the Jewish community and very against antisemitism.”

The generation gap reflects not only the experiences that people from different age groups have had with the 75-year conflict between Israelis and Palestinians but also their exposure to social media, especially TikTok, where brutal images of slain Palestinians bombard youthful eyes.

To George A. Sanders Sr., 78, a retiree in Littleton, Mass., there is no question: “Where the United States stands is with Israel.” Mr. Sanders, an independent who plans to vote for Mr. Biden, added: “We may not like everything that Israel is doing or has done, but as far as them being a free democracy, we’re going to stand with them, and rightfully so.”

Lyndsey Griswold, a 20-year-old student at Temple University in Philadelphia, marks the other side of the divide. She implored Mr. Biden to change course from military to humanitarian support.

“I’d like him to show some compassion for the Palestinian families and the Israeli families that are receiving the main blow of it all in Gaza,” she said. “This country has plenty of money to send to the civilians who are being actively harmed by this conflict.”

Older voters were far more sympathetic to Mr. Biden’s efforts. Fifty-two percent of registered voters 65 years and older approve of Mr. Biden’s actions on Israel, 12 percentage points more than those who disapprove. And older Americans reliably vote.

“The armchair quarterbacking in this situation, what do they expect?” asked Christine Johnson, 69, a retired computer consultant in Oak Park, Ill., who plans to vote for Mr. Biden. “What would they do? My feelings are I approve. I think he’s doing the best that can be done.”

It is unclear how much the criticism of Mr. Biden will translate into votes for Mr. Trump, or anyone else, given the admitted disaffection of young voters sympathetic with the Palestinians. Voters under 45 who say they disapprove of the president’s policies on Gaza are also more likely than young voters who approve of his policies to concede that they did not vote in 2020. Such youthful critics are picking Mr. Trump over Mr. Biden, by 16 percentage points, but they may not vote.

The young voters who disapprove of Mr. Biden’s Israel-Gaza policies but still say they will vote for him are also a little more likely to say they are certain to vote than young critics who side with the ex-president.

And many are torn. Evan Crochet, a 30-year-old video producer in Cary, N.C., who supported Senator Bernie Sanders, the left-wing independent, in the 2016 Democratic primary, said he saw Mr. Biden and Mr. Trump as “two sides of the same coin.”

“I don’t trust Biden on Israel, I don’t trust Trump on Israel,” he said.

If pushed to choose, he'd reluctantly opt for Mr. Trump, he said, though he's leaning toward Robert F. Kennedy Jr., the anti-vaccine conspiracy theorist running as an independent. He said he wanted Mr. Biden to be punished.

"We're at a point where I think all of this needs to stop," Mr. Crochet said of the Gaza war. "I think Biden needs to be accountable for this. I think he should be held liable for crimes."

Israel still retains healthy allegiances in the United States. But the future of such sentiments is unclear. Among young voters, 46 percent sympathize more with the Palestinians, against 27 percent who favor Israel.

Only 28 percent of those between the ages of 18 and 29 said Israel was seriously interested in a peaceful solution to the broader conflict; half of them said the Palestinians were. Older voters had far more faith in Israel's intentions and less in the Palestinians'.

The New York Times/Siena College poll of 1,016 registered voters nationwide was conducted by telephone using live operators from Dec. 10 to 14, 2023. The margin of sampling error is plus or minus 3.5 percentage points for registered voters. Cross-tabs and methodology are available [here](#).