

U.S.–Israel Alliance as a Litmus Test: The Democratic Primaries and the Struggle over the Party's Future

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The Democratic Party's 2026 congressional primaries have become a major contest between its mainstream and progressive wings, with U.S. policy toward Israel and the role of AIPAC emerging as defining fault lines. Progressives — buoyed by high-profile upsets in New York, New Jersey, California, and Colorado — have made opposition to the U.S.-Israel alliance a de- facto litmus test. Their victories are concentrated in deep-blue districts and the higher-stakes question is whether their anti-Israel positioning proves to be an asset or a liability in competitive races. For Israel and the American Jewish community, the outcome will shape not only the next Congress but the ideological trajectory of the Democratic Party heading into the 2028 presidential election.

At the end of June, Democratic primaries were held in a number of districts across the United States to select the party's candidates for the general congressional elections, which will take place on November 3. In New York, three progressive Democrats supported by Mayor Zohran Mamdani won against more mainstream figures in the party. All three are harsh critics of Israel who made opposition to the U.S.-Israel alliance centerpieces of their campaigns, describing Israel as a genocidal, apartheid state, and attacking their opponents for accepting campaign funding from AIPAC. Two of the three, Darializa Avila Chevalier and Claire Valdez, are early career politicians and supported by Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), a small left wing organization that endorses and promotes candidates in Democratic party races. Avila Chevalier launched her political career as an activist in the Gaza encampment protest at Columbia University.

Following the New York primaries, DSA notched an additional upset victory in a congressional race in Denver, Colorado. The winner in that race, Melat Kiros, a 29 year-old Ethiopian-American lawyer and doctoral student, unseated a 30 year Congressional veteran in a campaign that also focused to a large extent on Israel and the Gaza war. Kiros launched her political career after having been fired from her law firm over her refusal to take down a blog post defending Gaza war protesters against charges of antisemitism. She ignited controversy late in the campaign for [refusing to use the term antisemitism](#) to describe the 2025 firebombing of a rally in Boulder, Colorado for Israeli hostages held in Gaza. In her acceptance speech, she phrased the major issues that animated her campaign thusly:

We will not wait to take the fight to Donald Trump and the oligarchy. We will not wait to abolish ICE and pass Medicare for all. We will not wait to get big money out of our politics and to reject corporate PACs and AIPAC. And no, we will not wait to end the genocide in Palestine.

Progressive activists in the Democratic party have been challenging mainstream Democrats over their support for Israel for many years, and the issue has been a major dividing line in the party since the Biden administration came to Israel's defense after the Hamas invasion of October 7, 2023. During the 2024 presidential elections, progressive activists sought to make the Gaza war into a central issue but were largely unsuccessful. The Democratic National Convention that nominated Vice President Kamala Harris included speeches by Israeli hostage families but did not include a single Palestinian speaker.

Since then, progressive activists have gained strength within the party. They have been buoyed by widespread dissatisfaction with the Democratic establishment's feckless opposition to President Trump. Even so, their campaigning has focused in large part on charging Israel with genocide and apartheid, pledging to support a ban on future weapons sales to Israel, and describing AIPAC as a malign and corrupting force in American politics. They have effectively made acceptance of these slogans and stances into a litmus test for candidates seeking to earn their support (or avoid their wrath). Other issues, such as immigration, cost of living, housing, anti-racism and labor rights, are also elements of their political agenda, but have not proven as effective in distinguishing the progressive left from the party's mainstream.

The pressure to toe the progressive line has been on display, for example, in San Francisco, where Scott Wiener, a state senator and candidate for an open House seat, initially declined to describe Israel's conduct in Gaza as genocidal. Then, following intense criticism of his reticence, Wiener, who is Jewish, [announced](#) that he would henceforth use the term, which he described as no longer a "technical, legal" term but rather a "descriptor that people use to describe extreme levels of massacre, death, of destruction."

Deep Blue Districts

Midway through the primaries, the major victories won by progressives — including races in Maine, New Jersey, California and Illinois — have tended to be in "deep blue" congressional districts with strong Democratic majorities. In such districts, the political battle is not over whether the winner in the November contest will be a Democrat or a Republican but rather over the kind of Democrat that will go to Congress, that is, over the future of the party.

In many of those deep blue districts, the progressives are doing well partly because the voting base — especially young, urban, college educated voters — tends to agree with it on Israel. According to a recent [Pew Research Center survey](#), 84% of Democratic voters under the age of 50 have an unfavorable view of Israel and 76% have little or no confidence that Prime Minister Netanyahu will do the right thing in the Middle East. For these voters, mainstream elected Democrats really have fallen out of step, and the progressives have stepped into the political void.

Purple Districts and Swing States

The real balance of power between Democrats and Republicans in the next U.S. Congress will not turn on the contests in deep blue districts. Instead, the outcome will depend on which party captures more of the relatively few swing districts (Purple Districts) and states, places where Democrats and Republicans are more equally divided and where the parties compete intensely for seats. To win back control of the House of Representatives, Democrats must "flip" three seats while holding on to their existing seats; to win back the Senate, they must flip four.

In swing districts and states where progressives either won or are on track to win nominations, [Democratic strategists](#) worry that the party may lose in the general election to Republican challengers. One case in point is Michigan, a swing state that Democrats must capture if they hope to take back the Senate. The state's contest for the Democratic nomination pits Dr. Abdel El Sayed, a political newcomer and harsh Israel critic, running against Haley Stevens, a veteran U.S. Representative backed by AIPAC. A victory by El Sayed may make winning the Senate seat for Democrats in the general election that much more difficult as the race will turn on the votes of independents who tend to be political moderates (although [some believe](#) that precisely more heterodox positions could mobilize voters). At the same time, the nationalization of American politics means that even in districts where Democrats field more moderate candidates, those candidates will be asked to answer for the party's move to the left in other districts.

AIPAC's Role

Across the United States, progressive candidates have focused much of their ire on AIPAC, the central organization of the pro-Israel lobby. They have denounced AIPAC's role in the elections, and demanded that fellow Democrats pledge to reject AIPAC funding. Their rhetoric about AIPAC has sometimes employed antisemitic tropes, dog whistles, and insinuation. For example, speaking at a campaign rally a few days before the New York primaries, Mamdani [described AIPAC as "monsters"](#) who support "genocide in Netanyahu's wars" and who "move millions in dark money to accomplish a single goal: to preserve their power, so that they can turn us against one another."

However, the attacks on AIPAC follow on the heels of a major change in its strategy and conduct. Since 2022, AIPAC has operated a Super PAC, called the United Democracy Project, that raises funds nationally and wages advertising campaigns against strategically selected targets. During the 2024 congressional cycle, the organization's campaign advertising helped unseat two progressive members of Congress that the organization targeted because of their hostility toward Israel.

The advertising campaigns of United Democracy Project [do not necessarily mention Israel](#) or the Middle East or the Super PAC's relationship to AIPAC. For example, earlier this year, the group funded more than [\\$2 million on ads](#) attacking Representative Tom Malinowski (D. NJ). Many of the attack ads faulted Malinowski for voting for immigration enforcement. (In a twist, Malinowski lost the race to progressive democrat far to his left in her criticism of Israel.)

Given AIPAC's huge campaign war chest (reportedly \$100 million in the current cycle), and its practice of targeting progressives with attack ads focused on their vulnerabilities rather than their positions on Israel, it is perhaps unsurprising that progressives have sought to "call out" and discredit the organization. AIPAC has come to symbolize not just Israel but also [big money in politics](#) and the distortion of the democratic process by major donors and disingenuous advertising. In this, as in other attacks on the organization, rivals have relied on antisemitic tropes about Jews and money. Still, AIPAC is not the lone target of attacks on the pernicious influence of money in politics. Among the [largest Super PACs](#), the AIPAC affiliated United Democracy Project ranks in the top ten, below the Super PAC funded by the cryptocurrency industry and above the one funded by the artificial intelligence industry.

Jewish Voters

Many Jewish voters and communal leaders, a majority of whom identify as liberal, are deeply alarmed by the anti-Israel rhetoric coming from the left. They believe that the progressive left has become hostile to Jews and they feel a measure of [political homelessness](#). But polls suggest [no discernable movement](#) among Jewish voters, 65-70%, of whom vote Democrat, to the Republican camp. Most Jewish Democrats are disdainful of Donald Trump and worry about rising antisemitism and anti-Israelism on the right as well as the left. Many are also quite dismayed by Israel's right wing government and the manner in which Israel prosecuted the wars in Gaza and Lebanon.

Moreover, the Trump administration's decision to pursue rapprochement with Iran, and the President and Vice President's [harsh rebukes](#) of Israel, make Jewish migration to the Republican camp unlikely even among staunchly pro-Israel Democrats. Rather than switching political camps, most Democratic voters will double-down in their support of mainstream figures in the party, although with mounting concern.

To be sure, some Jewish voters — particularly younger voters and voters in liberal bastions such as New York, San Francisco and Boston — continue to support the progressive left. In New York, exit polls from the 2024 mayoral race suggest that between one-quarter and one-third of the city's Jewish community cast ballots for Zohran Mamdani. In the current cycle, many of those same voters supported Brad Lander, a former city official, in his successful bid to unseat US Representative Dan Goldman. Of these liberal Jewish voters, it is important to know that, based on [recent survey research](#), most are concerned about antisemitism, support a two-state solution, and do not embrace the most radical elements of the progressive left critique — although they do not see it as disqualifying either.

The Stakes for Israel and American Jewry

The struggle that is unfolding in the Democratic party will be of great importance to the future of the U.S.-Israel alliance. The primaries and fall elections will determine the strength of the progressive left in the Democratic party, and also establish lessons about the political and electoral strategies that work best for the party — lessons that will be carried over into the presidential elections in 2028. As things stand, many Democratic hopefuls are likely to conclude that vocal support for Israel will prove a political liability.

The contest will also affect the future of American Jewry's relationship to the party. Under current circumstances, few American Jews view the party of Donald Trump as a viable alternative, so no major "[Jexodus](#)" is expected. However, if the progressive wing of the party continues its ascent, the party's stances on Israel may prompt more American Jews to abandon their political home of nearly a century. And by doing so, they may contribute to a vicious cycle, with the party becoming more openly hostile to Israel as its Jewish funder and donor base shrinks.

To be sure, the party's orientation toward Israel has to a remarkable extent already changed. The party has fully shifted on direct military aid to Israel, and the mainstream is much more skeptical even of U.S. weapons sales to Israel and of the overall value of the U.S.-Israel alliance. It will be impossible within the Democratic party to return to the Golden Age of robust and largely unquestioned support.

Still, a Democratic Party that is critical of Israel and conditions military aid on adherence to U.S. law — but continues to support the U.S.-Israel alliance and a U.S. role in the Middle East, while pressuring Israel toward negotiations with the Palestinians — is very different from a party dominated by a faction that

would impose a total arms embargo on Israel, remove its diplomatic protection in the UN, and act against its interests in international forums. This latter image of the party has not materialized yet, despite the hopes of some on the left flank of the party, and may not materialize at all. The current election cycle, and the one that follows in 2028, will determine which kind of Democratic party emerges.

Recommendations

The state of Israel plays no direct role in U.S. elections but its diplomatic, national security and foreign policy orientations matter a great deal. The decisions made by Israel's leadership can strengthen mainstream figures within the Democratic party who remain committed to the U.S.-Israel alliance, or provide arguments for figures in the progressive camp who seek to dismantle it. Under such circumstances, Israeli leadership should embrace the following principles.

1. **Distinguish between harsh-critics and hostile political figures.** Israel's national and diplomatic leadership must engage in continuous and respectful dialogue with a wide range of Republicans and Democrats while seeking to isolate only the political figures who are ardently opposed to the alliance in any form. The guiding principle of Israel diplomatic policy toward the United States must be to build-back bipartisan support.
2. **Advance new diplomatic initiatives that address core American concerns.** Most Senators and U.S. Representatives recognize that Israel faces profound security challenges and that Palestinian leaders have on several occasions rejected opportunities to reach a two-state solution. However, such politicians are under increasing pressure from challengers on the left and right who view Israel as the rejectionist party and accuse the Jewish state of seeking permanent hegemony over the Palestinians or their expulsion to other countries. To enable Israel's supporters to continue defending the alliance, Israel must go on the diplomatic offensive with new ideas about Israel's future relationship to the Palestinian people. Such ideas must be grounded in post-October 7 security realities as well as Israel's firm commitment to remaining a Jewish and democratic state.
3. **Demonstrate accountability to international law.** The accusations that Israel committed war crimes in Gaza and tolerates or abets settler violence against Palestinians in the West Bank severely damages support in the U.S. Congress and beyond. Israel can mitigate that damage by taking measures to investigate its own conduct in the war, demonstrate the continuing vitality and independence of its courts, and crack-down on settlers who attack Palestinian villages in the West Bank.
4. **Dialogue and coordinate with American Jews.** The wave of progressive politicians publicly assailing Israel has unnerved many American Jews, contributing to their sense of political dislocation and diminished power. At the same time, much of the Jewish public [feels alienated](#) by many of the policies and declarations of the Israeli government and its ministers. Israel must seek to repair its relationship with the American Jewish community as a condition for coordinating a broad and sustained effort to restore Israel's standing with the American public and its two major political parties.

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