

Israel-Hamas war

How public opinion on the Israel-Hamas war has shifted

Surveys have picked up significant changes in the US and Europe that are rippling through national politics

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The bloodshed between Israelis and Palestinians has long divided the world, bringing people on to the streets in protest and splitting the international community.

The Hamas-led attack of October 7, and Israel's six-week campaign of [retaliation in Gaza](#), has further polarised views, with harrowing scenes from Israel and Gaza dominating news and social media around the world.

Yet the evolution of public opinion since the war has been far from predictable, or straightforward. From the US to Europe, there have been important shifts that are rippling through national politics.

Before October 7

While the [Israeli-Palestinian conflict](#) has been a divisive issue for decades, in the months before October 7 the widespread response in most of western Europe was apathy.

More than three-quarters of Germans said the conflict mattered little to them. Even in the US, 55 per cent of those surveyed in May said they did not feel strongly about the issue.

Traditionally the US public has shown the strongest support for Israel, while among European countries Spain has been one of the most sympathetic to Palestinians.

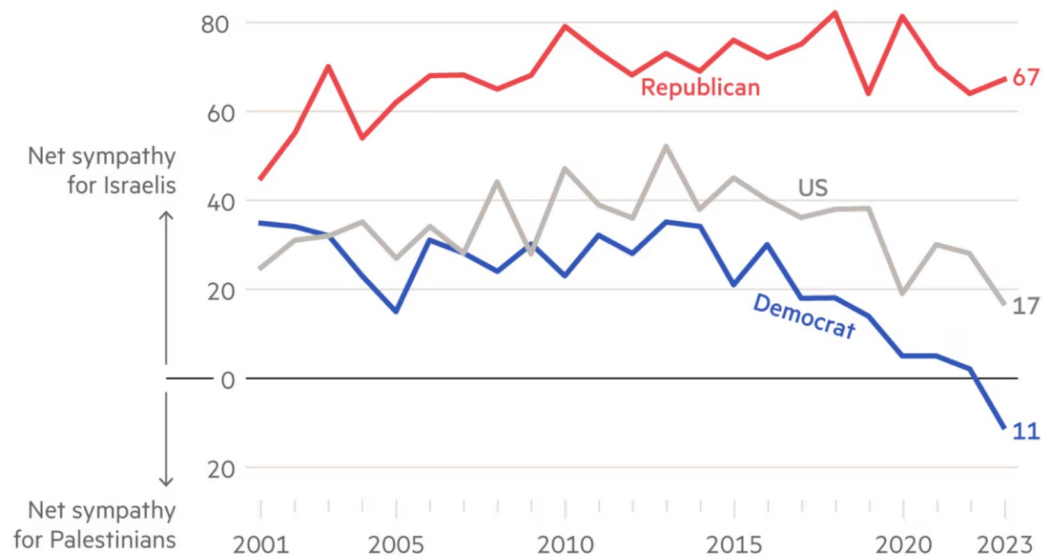
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However, even before October 7, there was a marked trend in the US, with potentially significant political consequences: Democrats had begun to move towards the Palestinian cause.

Although US citizens remain on balance more sympathetic towards Israel, in March pollsters at Gallup recorded a net score for Democrats that favoured the Palestinians for the first time.

Democrats' sympathies have shifted towards the Palestinians in recent years

Net sympathy* (percentage points)



*% more sympathetic toward Israel vs % more sympathetic toward the Palestinians

Source: Gallup, March 16 2023

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Since October 7

Since the Israel-Hamas war began, US polls have laid bare substantial generational and political differences over the conflict.

The recent rise in pro-Palestinian sympathy among Democrats still holds: about 25 per cent of those who voted for President Joe Biden identify as pro-Israel, not much more than the 20 per cent backing Palestinians. By contrast, 76 per cent of Donald Trump voters are pro-Israel.

That shift has meant Biden is now contending with a sudden rift within his party over the Middle East as he heads into a tough re-election campaign, likely to be against former president Trump.

The other big factor is age. Among younger Americans there is more outright support for Palestinians than Israel. Meanwhile, among those over 65, support is overwhelmingly with one side — the 65 per cent support for Israel is more than 10 times the percentage of pro-Palestinians.

One potentially significant development for US politics has been the evolution of views since the start of Israel’s military campaign against Hamas in Gaza, which has besieged the enclave, forced hundreds of thousands from their homes and left a [deepening humanitarian crisis](#).

An Ipsos poll in mid-November found most Americans now believe the US should act as a neutral mediator. While a majority agreed that Israel is “doing what any country would do in response to a terror attack”, two in three US citizens surveyed said the Jewish state should call a ceasefire and try to negotiate the return of hostages.

The poll also found Americans are divided evenly on whether “Israel’s response to the recent attacks has been excessive” — 50 per cent agreed and 50 per cent did not. However, among Democrats 62 per cent were more likely to agree versus 30 per cent of Republicans.

Younger and more leftwing progressive Democrats have been particularly critical of Biden’s handling of the war, saying his support of Israel’s response was not conditional enough and he should have done more to prevent civilian casualties among Palestinians.

The UK has similar patterns to the US across political views and age groups, but the division between generations is less pronounced.

Although people aged 18-24 were three times more likely to sympathise more with Palestinians than the over 65s, both groups had around the same percentage that supported both countries equally or were undecided.

Politically, Labour voters tend to support Palestine (31 per cent) and Conservative voters sympathise more with Israel (34 per cent). But significant proportions of people across the political spectrum sympathise with both sides equally or are still unsure. This is most striking among Liberal Democrat voters, where 50 per cent sympathise with both.

Much could change as the war unfolds. But already, particularly within the US, public opinion on Israel has begun to move in ways that could shape politics, in the Middle East and beyond, for years to come.

