

Failing Support for Israel among U.S. Democrats

by Michael Curtis



Imagine all the people living life in peace, a brotherhood of man. A world without barriers, religious, and national divisions was the dream of John Lennon in his highly successful solo song, *Imagine*. Yet, just as it is difficult to imagine this millionaire rock star living without possessions it is even more difficult to imagine American politics at present as an example of the world living as one.

The reality is that partisan antipathy between Democrats and Republicans in US politics is stronger than ever, and becoming more ideologically polarized. The proportion in each party with a highly negative view of the opposing party has more than doubled over the last twenty years. As a generalization, Democrats have been moving to the left, while Republicans are moving to the right.

Personalities affect political attitudes and the present split between the parties on Israel, was influenced by the attitude

of President Barack Obama toward Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and by Democratic antipathy towards Donald Trump and his role in the White House. Among Republicans, 52% have a favorable impression of Netanyahu, while only 18% of Democrats do so. Nevertheless, the differing party views on Israel go beyond these personalities.

In general, American public opinion is favorably inclined toward Israel, with 46% of Americans saying they sympathize more with Israel than with Palestinians who got 16% approval. To some extent there has been a decline in sympathy for both sides, but a recent survey by the Pew Research Center portrays a significant shift in the views of the two political parties.

The surprise in this results from the fact that an axiom of American politics is that Jews vote Democratic in larger proportion than any other religious group. It is still broadly true, as Milton Himmelfarb joked in 1973 that Jews earn like Episcopalians but vote like Puerto Ricans. In 2012, Barack Obama received 69% of the Jewish vote while George Romney got 30%. In 2016, Hillary Clinton got 71% of the Jewish vote while Donald Trump received 24%. A generation ago in 1992, Bill Clinton won with 80% of the Jewish vote to the 11% of George H. W. Bush.

The Pew report issued in January 2018 indicates the growing gap between the two parties towards Israel. Its main finding is the reduced support for Israel by Democrats while Republican support has risen dramatically and is at all-time high. The divide is getting stronger. In 2001, 50% of Republicans expressed sympathy for Israel; in January 2018 it was 79%. In contrast, in 2001 38% of Democrats expressed sympathy; 2018 it declined to 27%.

The crucial finding of the Pew report is this very strong support of Republicans and the reduced support of Democrats for Israel. This was a change from the last Pew report in its April 2016 survey. That found that 43% of Democrats were more

sympathetic to Israel. Earlier surveys, one by Gallup, found in 2011 that 57% of Democrats sympathized with Israel.

How to explain the reduction in Democratic support of Israel? First, there are differences in the Democratic party. Moderate and Conservative Democrats favor Israel, 35-17 (in 2016 it was 57% Israel), but twice as many liberal Democrats 35-19, support the Palestinians more than they do Israel.

As one goes up the educational ladder, support for Israel declines. It is lowest among college educated, 42-27, and postgraduates, 39-22. This is likely the result of more active pro-Palestinian groups on campus but also exposure of younger people to teaching on campuses and information from the media, mainly leftist in inclination, and critical of Israel.

There are differences according to age. Millennials a generation ago, tended to sympathize more with Israel; now only 43% do so. They are the only generational cohort in which less than half sympathize more with Israel than with Palestinians, (27%). The highest approval of Israel, 56% to 13% for Palestinians, comes from those 65 and over. The lowest comes from the youth group, 18-29 who register 32 for Israel and 23% for Palestinians.

Among religious Americans, one thing is clear. The highest support for Israel comes from white Evangelical Christians, 76% to 5% for Palestinians. Evangelical and born-again voters represent the plurality of those who vote or lean Republican. It is they who pushed for the Trump administration to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital. Among mainstream Protestants Israel is favored 48-16; Catholics favor Israel 43 to 12. though Latino Catholics only do so by 36-25. Those who are unaffiliated to any religious organization are about even, 26% to 29%.

There is some, though little, gender difference. Men are more likely, 50-17, to support Israel than are women, 42-14.

Similarly, all ethnic groups do support Israel, but by different majorities.

One relevant fact in all this is that Israel was not an important issue for many Jews in voting. Only 8% mentioned it as one of their top two priorities in voting.

Another factor relative to views on Israel has to be put in context of a changing America. Current estimates are that there are about 3.45 million Muslims living in the U.S.; they make up 1.1% of the total U.S. population. This is over a million more than in 2007: the increase is due to two factors; high fertility rates; and continued immigration into the U.S.

The Muslim population will grow fast, it is younger than the general population, and within 20 years Muslims will replace Jews as the second largest religious group after Christians. The Muslim population has always been and remains strongly Democratic. In 2016, some two-thirds, 78%, voted for Clinton. More than two-thirds disapprove of Trump's handling of the presidency. Only 13% declare they are Republican or lean towards it.

Interestingly, Muslim women are even more Democratic than men, 73%-59%. Muslims of all ages are Democratic, but the younger group, 18-29 are a little more Democratic than their elders. In summary, Muslims are more Democratic than the US public as a whole.

Israel has its faults but it is a democratic country, incorporating civil rights, free speech and assembly, religious freedom for all sects, a health care system, model of sexual toleration and feminism, welcoming immigrants, and moderate capitalism. How then can one explain the increasing shift of Democrats away from Israel, even accepting that animosity to Trump may be a significant factor?

First is the issue of identity politics. Liberal Democrats, accepting the Palestinian Narrative of Victimhood, see

Palestinians as oppressed victims. They may be accepting the Palestinian argument that Israel is colonist, white, oppressors. Worse, they may be accepting the age-old myth of Jewish conspiracy. In this case, it is bewildering that 76% of Democrats compared with 25% of Republicans concur with the conspiracy that Israel has too much influence on US foreign policy. There are wide party differences on settlements in the West Bank and whether they are an impediment to peace.

Democrats minimize the contribution Israel has made to social justice and human rights, to the equality of rights for women, to free religious expression. Rather, Israel is seen as by the extreme democrats as white supremacists, deniers of minority rights and civil liberties, while Republicans appreciate that Israel is a strong ally, a democratic country that is a strategic partner of the U.S.

Political differences will stem from perceptions of policy decisions. In the light of decreasing Democratic support for Israel it is pertinent to assess the differences on the Trump decision on Jerusalem. A major challenge came from Democratic Senator Dianne Feinstein in a letter to Trump on December 1, 2017. She stated that recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital would spark violence and embolden extremists on both sides. This in fact only happened to a small extent, and by one side. But more important was her thought that the decision might lead to another Intifada. Recall, she argued, that the second Intifada in 2000 was sparked by Ariel Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount.

But this Palestinian propaganda story, accepted by Feinstein, has been denied by Palestinians themselves. The Hamas leader Mahmoud al-Zahar stated that "President Arafat instructed Hamas to carry out a number of military operations in the heart of the Jewish state." Even more convincing, Arafat's widow, Suha, stated in an interview on Dubai TV that Arafat had made a decision to launch the Intifada.

Democrats, particularly major figures in the party, should be more accurate in their assessment of Israel. That might change their perception of Israel.