

To: J Street

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Democratic Primary and Caucus Voters Survey Summary Findings

The issue of Israel has tripped up Presidential candidates for years, as they navigate the conventional wisdom that criticism of Israeli policy or an American approach that falls short of unconditional support of Israeli policy imperils candidates' chances at victory. Surveys of American Jewish voters in each of the last several election cycles have consistently shown this conventional wisdom to be fundamentally out of touch with Jewish public opinion. And now, Republicans and Israeli supporters on the political right are pushing a narrative that Democrats don't support Israel, and Donald Trump says the Democratic party "doesn't care about Israel or the Jewish people."

A new national survey of likely Democratic primary and caucus voters in the 2020 election finds that neither conventional wisdom nor Donald Trump have much understanding of Democratic voters' views of Israel, American policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or America's role in the Middle East. In fact, similar to American Jews, Democratic primary and caucus voters hold very nuanced views on these issues – they support Israel despite their distaste for Prime Minister Netanyahu, they want the U.S. to be an honest broker that will push both Israelis and Palestinians to end their conflict, and they don't support BDS (the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement) but they don't want to penalize people who boycott Israel.

The following memo highlights key findings and strategic considerations based on a survey of 800 likely voters in the 2020 Democratic primary, conducted May 1-5, 2019. The survey was conducted with live dialers to landline and cell phones, and is subject to a margin of error of +/- 3.5 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level.

Key Findings

- **Democratic voters pay attention to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but they do not follow it very closely.** Most voters (61 percent) follow the news about the conflict, but only 19 percent follow it very closely. When asked detailed questions about the conflict and U.S. policy, respondents often express uncertainty or a low intensity response (instead of taking a concrete or strong position), which suggests the issue does not arouse much passion for most Democratic voters.
- **Voters support Israel and hold nuanced views toward Israeli policy and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.** It is very striking how much Democrats distinguish their positive feelings toward Israel (+25 favorable/unfavorable) from their negative feelings toward Prime Minister Netanyahu (-27 favorable/unfavorable). And while they clearly express



warm feelings toward Israel, they also have a favorable view of the Palestinians (+13 favorable/unfavorable). It is also notable that the people who most closely follow the issue are both the most positive toward Israel (+33 favorable/unfavorable) and the most negative toward Netanyahu (-40 favorable/unfavorable).

- **It is completely compatible to be pro-Israel and critical of Israeli government policies.** An overwhelming majority of Democratic primary voters (81 percent) believe that “someone can be critical of Israeli government policies and still be pro-Israel.” This finding is particularly remarkable because it reflects a similar result (84 percent) when we asked this same question among American Jewish voters in November 2018. And the pro-Israel-yet-critical-of-Israeli-policy sentiment is actually strongest (92 percent) among those who view Israel positively.
- **Choosing between the Israelis and Palestinians is a false dichotomy, and Democratic voters want the U.S. to be a fair and impartial broker to help achieve a peace agreement.** When asked whether they are looking for a candidate to support the Israelis, the Palestinians, or both, slightly more voters (12 percent) choose someone who supports the Israelis compared to the Palestinians (7 percent), while the vast majority (75 percent) want a candidate who supports both. A similar percentage (74 percent) say they want the U.S. to act as a fair and impartial broker instead of siding with Israel (20 percent).
- **A series of detailed policy questions indicates areas where primary and caucus voters are less engaged and areas where they have stronger opinions.** Overall, Democratic voters want the U.S. to be a fair and impartial broker between Israelis and Palestinians, and they are not seeking a candidate who takes steps that undermine this ability. This includes not taking positions that give Israel unconditional support, as well as not taking positions that can be seen as unilateral actions or bypassing negotiations.
 - **There is a clear sentiment that voters do not want candidates to express unconditional support for Israeli policies or financial and military aid.** The strongest opinions on policy center on opposition to the idea that the U.S. should continue unrestricted aid or policy support for Israel when its government does things that violate U.S. positions.
 - 69 percent are less likely to support a candidate who says, “the United States should continue financial and military aid to Israel without any restrictions, regardless of whether Israel expands settlements or annexes Palestinian territory.”
 - 61 percent are less likely to support a candidate who says, “he or she strongly supports Israel, and the United States must stand behind all of Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's policies.”
 - **There is strong support for candidates who advocate the U.S. playing a role in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and exerting pressure on both sides to achieve an agreement.** Voters are not looking for a President who steps back and lets the Israelis and Palestinians figure out their problems without us (55 percent less likely to support such a candidate). Moreover, 61 percent are more likely to support someone who says, “the U.S. has an important role to play in resolving the Israeli Palestinian conflict, and the next President should exert pressure on both Israelis and Palestinians to make the compromises necessary for a peace agreement.” This support is stronger among men (69 percent),

college educated voters (68 percent), and voters over 50 years (66 percent), but it also has majority support among women (55 percent), non-college educated voters (53 percent), and voters under 50 years (53 percent).

- **There is less engagement when getting deeper into the issues and bypassing negotiations to drive policy.** It does not appear to matter much to voters if a candidate tries to shake up the current situation by calling on the U.S. to recognize Palestinian statehood now and let details on final borders get determined later in negotiations: 40 percent would be more likely to support this candidate, 33 percent less likely, and 21 percent say it makes no difference to them. Similarly, there is no support for recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, independent of the negotiations (24 percent more likely to support a candidate with this position, 50 percent less likely, 21 percent no difference).
- **The BDS movement is unknown among Democratic primary voters and arouses little interest.** Only 9 percent have heard a great deal (4 percent) or good amount (5 percent) about “the BDS, or Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement against Israel.” Another 27 percent have heard a little and 63 percent have heard nothing about BDS. Even among people who follow news about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, only 13 percent have heard a great deal or good amount about BDS. Democratic voters are not interested in BDS, and there is neither real opposition (13 percent) nor support (12 percent) for BDS.
- **Despite the lack of interest in BDS, there is clear opposition to legislation about BDS that would penalize people who boycott Israel.** When given an argument to penalize Israel boycotters because we need laws to protect “our democratic ally in the Middle East from hostile actors” versus an argument not to penalize because these laws “infringe on the Constitutional right to free speech and peaceful protest,” 54 percent oppose legislation that penalizes people who boycott Israel, 22 percent support, and 24 percent don't know. These attitudes reveal the strength of the free speech argument, as most people who oppose BDS also oppose laws that penalize the BDS movement (61 percent).
- **There is broad consensus on Iran policy, and calls to re-enter the nuclear agreement with Iran effectively plays into the energy in the Democratic primary electorate.** Democratic voters obviously oppose Trump policy across a range of domestic and national security issues, and Trump's withdrawal from the Iran nuclear agreement serves as a prime opportunity for candidates to define themselves on Middle East issues: 72 percent support the U.S. re-entering the Iran agreement, including 45 percent who strongly support it.

Strategic Considerations for Candidates

- 1) **The political playbook on Israel has changed.** Democratic voters support Israel, but have nuanced perspectives about the U.S.-Israel relationship. Presidential candidates should feel comfortable expressing their support for Israel without feeling the need to voice automatic backing of all Israeli policies. In fact, voters want the U.S. to be a fair and impartial broker, and there are downsides to throwing around unconditional support or tax dollars, even to our allies.

- 2) **BDS is not an issue for Democratic primary voters.** With most voters unfamiliar with BDS and lacking strong support or opposition to the movement, candidates do not need to enter the incendiary debate over BDS.
- 3) **Calling on the U.S. to re-enter the Iran agreement is an excellent opportunity to tap into Democratic voters' concerns over Trump in the Middle East.** Support for re-entering the agreement spans the full Democratic primary electorate, and effectively positions candidates directly opposite Trump's approach to national security.
- 4) **Democratic voters support candidates who want to hold leadership on both sides of the conflict accountable.** Previous J Street research with Jewish voters clearly reveals that Jews believe people can be critical of Israeli government policy and still be pro-Israel, but support for U.S. leadership in resolving the conflict drops significantly when Israel gets singled out for criticism instead of holding both sides accountable. Our new findings in this Democratic Presidential primary survey indicate the same belief that someone can be both critical of Israeli policy and pro-Israel, and it is important to be mindful of the finding in the Jewish survey in order to avoid inviting distractions that distort candidates' positions."