Main Points

• Political polarization in the United States creates several potential challenges for U.S.-Israel relations.

• However, polarization evident in public opinion is dampened at the elite level because the constituencies most interested in this issue are strongly pro-Israel.

• Polarization is more pronounced within the Democratic party, making it hard for President Obama to undertake major initiatives.
Polarization

Democrats  Republicans

Negotiating Partner (Palestinians, Iran)

Israeli Right
In the Middle East situation, are your sympathies more with the Israelis or more with the Palestinians?
Polarization
Sympathy for Israel by Party ID

Note: The Pro-Israel Score is derived from principal components analysis of four questions from the 2012 survey described by Judy: (1) support for aid to Israel, (2) US position in a Middle East conflict, (3) Israeli intransigence, (4) Palestinian intransigence. The score is based on the first component, which explains 47 percent of the variance. By construction, it has a mean of zero and standard deviation of one.
Pro-Israel Attitudes by Party ID

Distribution of Attitudes towards Israel
Democrats

Distribution of Attitudes towards Israel
Republicans

Distribution of Attitudes towards Israel
Independents
Polarization and Iran

If Israel were to attack Iran to stop its nuclear weapons program, what position should the U.S. take? Should it support Israel’s military action, oppose Israel’s military action, or should the U.S. stay neutral?

Which is more important: to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons, even if it means taking military action, or to avoid a military conflict with Iran, even if it means they may develop nuclear weapons?

Perils of Polarization: Domestic

- Alternation in party control of the executive has the potential to create large swings in policy

- Legislation harder to pass due to divided government, minority veto points

- Disappearance of deference to president on foreign policy matters
Perils of Polarization: International

- Distance between current US and Israeli governments creates tension, distrust, and incentives to influence domestic politics in other country

- Challenge of credible commitments: will the promises/threats of one US administration persist into the next?

- General dysfunction can diminish US power (e.g., defense spending cuts, lack of long-term investments) or create crises that divert attention (e.g., debt default)
A Benefit of Polarization?

• “Schelling conjecture”: A more hawkish opposition party may improve the president’s ability to extract concessions from Iran (Schelling 1960; Putnam 1998).
  – need to get elements of the deal approved by Congress
  – threat that a successor will offer worse terms

• However, this bargaining advantage only accrues up to a point: once the opposition becomes too hawkish, feasible peaceful deals can be foreclosed (Mo 1995; Milner and Rosendorff 1997; Tarar 2005)
Polarization?

House Roll Call Votes on Israel (1991-2012)

Note: This figure includes all roll calls in which the word “Israel” appeared in the title or summary. Each bar represents the percentage of representatives voting for the pro-Israel position. Votes marked in red indicate (potentially) binding legislation (as opposed to declaratory resolutions). Sources: Voteview, THOMAS.
Votes by Democrats on Israel

- Pro-Israel
- Anti-Israel
- Present
Votes by Republicans on Israel

- Pro-Israel
- Anti-Israel
- Present
Why the Gap between Mass Opinion and Elite Behavior?

Pro
Israel
Constituencies with
High
Salience and
Information
Pro-Israel Attitudes by Political Interest

Distribution of Attitudes towards Israel
High Political Interest Respondents

Distribution of Attitudes towards Israel
Low Political Interest Respondents

kernel = epanechnikov, bandwidth = 0.2099

kernel = epanechnikov, bandwidth = 0.2450
Why PICHSIs Matter

• Politicians are responsive to those constituencies for whom the issue has high salience and who have information and resources to influence policy.

• On matters pertaining to Israel, these constituencies are almost entirely on the pro-Israel side.

• PICHSIs serve an anchor that limits the distance the two parties can drift apart at the elite level.

• To the extent that legislatures help make commitments credible across administrations (Martin 2000), pro-Israel commitments have credibility.
Pro-Israel Attitudes by Party ID and Political Interest

Distribution of Attitudes towards Israel
Democrats - High Political Interest

Distribution of Attitudes towards Israel
Democrats - Low Political Interest

Distribution of Attitudes towards Israel
Republicans - High Political Interest

Distribution of Attitudes towards Israel
Republicans - Low Political Interest
Intraparty Polarization

• Jerusalem and the Democratic platform

• “Leading from behind” in responding to settlement expansion (Beinart 2012)
Looking Ahead

• Overall, security cooperation is likely to remain strong regardless of president, particularly on issues that Congress can influence

• Unless forced by events, President Obama will find it hard to make major initiatives on the Israeli-Palestinian issue, owing to
  – lack of support from Netanyahu
  – intra-party divisions

• Obama needs a deal with Iran since both a nuclear Iran and a war with Iran are very bad outcomes, but a deal that requires congressional implementation is tricky

• Continued rightward drift in Israel has the potential to increase inter- and intra-party polarization in the US
Anchored to What?

A secure, prosperous, democratic Jewish state
Anchored to What?

“Not an inch of difference”


