

Religious Beliefs, Elite Polarization, and Public Opinion on Foreign Policy: The Partisan Gap in American Public Opinion Toward Israel

Amnon Cavari

Lauder School of Government, Diplomacy and Strategy, Interdisciplinary Center (IDC)
Herzliya, Israel

Abstract

Examining American attitudes toward Israel, this article demonstrates that religious beliefs and elite polarization both play a significant role in predicting public opinion about foreign policy. It is argued that the growing gap in partisan support for Israel is explained by two related transformations in the American political parties: the emergence of new religious cleavages and the polarization of the political parties. Using a time series of public attitudes toward Israel since 1967, it is revealed that the partisan support is strongly explained by religious preferences, that these religious preferences have aligned with partisan identification in the 1990s, and that the polarization between Democratic and Republican elites in recent years has further distanced the attitudes of Republican and Democratic identifiers.

American political parties have undergone two important transformations in recent years, the political alignment of religious cleavages and the polarization of party elites on every significant domestic and foreign policy. A large body of work demonstrates the increasing role of these two factors in shaping public opinion about economic and social issues (see, for example, Layman, 2001; Nivola & Brady, 2006, 2008), but their effect on attitudes about foreign policy has so far defied empirical investigation.

A major theme in American politics alleges a dominant influence of religious views, especially those of Evangelical Christians, on American foreign policy. In this account, American foreign policies have been shaped by key characteristics of an evangelical mindset: militarism, dogmatic unilateralism, dualistic moralism, and nationalistic assertiveness (Guth, 2009). Despite this

All correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Amnon Cavari, Lauder School of Government, Diplomacy and Strategy, Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) Herzliya, Kanfei Nesharim St., PO Box 167, Herzliya, 46150, Israel. E-mail: cavari@idc.ac.il

influence, Guth observed that “few political scientists have considered the way that religion influences the foreign policy attitudes of the American public.” Similarly, the analysis of public opinion and foreign policy has not fully appreciated the important effect of elite polarization on partisan attitudes (Shapiro & Bloch-Elkon, 2007). Unlike domestic policies, which Americans are directly influenced by and are often aware of, most Americans rely on elites for information about foreign events and policies (Holsti, 2004). Polarized views at the elite level may therefore acuminate the attitudes of Americans and divide them along party lines.

To fill in this void in the literature, I examine American attitudes toward Israel and the Arab–Israeli conflict. In recent years, attitudes toward Israel—once viewed as a special case of bipartisan support—have sharply divided along partisan lines. This change in partisan attitudes is observed at a time where attitudes toward Israel have increasingly aligned with religious affiliations and practices (Mayer, 2004), and partisan elites have split along party lines in their attitudes and actions regarding Israel (Oldmixon, Rosenson, & Wald, 2005). How these changes independently and simultaneously affected the growing gap in partisan attitudes toward Israel can shed light on the more broad interest in the effects of religious beliefs and elite polarization on attitudes about foreign policy.

The data include a unique longitudinal series of attitudes of Americans toward Israel from 1967 to 2009. Employing multivariate regression analyses to individual responses and to aggregate time-series of support for Israel, I assess the independent effect of religious cleavages and party polarization. I find that the religious cleavages have generated a partisan gap in support for Israel, a gap which has further increased as a result of the growing polarization among party elites.

American Attitudes Toward Israel, Religious Realignment and Party Polarization

American public opinion about Israel has long been a puzzling exception to Americans’ knowledge, interest, and opinion about foreign policy. While most Americans possess little knowledge about foreign countries, they are highly informed about Israel and are generally supportive of it (Gilboa, 1987; Holsti, 2004; Page & Bouton, 2006). Americans view Israel in favorable terms, sympathize more with Israel than with Arab countries or with the Palestinians, see Israel as an ally of the United States and are willing to follow up on their support for Israel with economic and military aid. This support has long remained strikingly homogenous across most major groups in American society (Gilboa, 1987). The strong support for Israel and its broad base led pundits, journalists, and scholars to conclude that views toward Israel

are relatively isolated from American partisan politics, that there is a broad support which cuts across party cleavages, putting Israel in a special category.

Recent evidence challenges this conventional wisdom. Table I summarizes the percent of people in major demographic groups who sympathize more with Israel than with Arab Nations or Palestinians in 1967 and in 2009. Overall support has remained the same, yet the structure of mass support has significantly changed. In 1967, there were no differences between the two dominant religious camps in America—Protestants and Catholics (nearly 90% of Americans at the time). There were also no differences between gender or partisan groups. Breaking the data by education levels, reveals that support for Israel was strongest among the more educated (college education or more) and weakest among the least educated (without a high school diploma).

Table I

Support for Israel of Major Demographic Groups—1967 and 2009

Demographic Group	June 1967 (%) ^a	January 2009 (%)
All ^b	60	61
Protestants	59	69
Mainline Protestants	— ^c	55
Evangelical Protestants	— ^c	78
Catholics	58	58
Jewish	100	75
No high school education	52	67
High school diploma	60	65
Some higher education	63	60
College education or more	75	57
Republican	60	80
Independents	57	60
Democrat	62	51
White	60	64
Black	53	54
Male	60	63
Female	60	60
Age (years)		
18–29	72	53
30–49	56	60
50–64	59	67
65 years or more	57	66
<i>n</i> (responding to the sympathies question)	2,253	1,218

Note. ^aJune 2–June 7. The 1967 War broke on June 5, during the last 2 days of the survey.

^bThe total includes all respondents, some of which are missing information on several demographic questions. Therefore, a weighted sum of each breakdown does not necessarily reach the same average as the total.

^cData not available.

Data: Gallup, June 2–7, 1967. Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, January 7–11, 2009.

Age differences were minimal except for overwhelming support of the youngest cohort (age 18–29 years). Racial differences were small.

By 2009, the structure of mass opinion has changed considerably. While support among Roman Catholics remained unchanged, Protestant groups have increased their support for Israel generating a religious gap of 10 points. This change has been mobilized by the growing share of Evangelical Christians in America, whose support reaches 78%. Differences between education levels decreased but the associations reversed: now people with fewer years of formal education (no high school diploma) became Israel's staunchest supporters, whereas those with the highest education levels (college degree or more) significantly reduced their support. This reverse of associations characterizes also age groups. In 2009, the most supportive age groups are the older cohorts—the cohort that was the youngest in the 1967 survey. The increase in the gender and racial gaps is within the margin of error.

The most significant change, however, is that of partisan groups. In contrast to 1967, Democratic identifiers became the least supportive group among all other major demographic divisions (51%), whereas Republicans became the most supportive group (80%), exceeding even the Jewish population and Evangelical Christians, the two most pro-Israeli groups in contemporary America (Mayer, 2004). Given this 30 points gap, it is difficult to argue that American attitudes toward Israel today are beyond party politics.

The problem with existing references to American attitudes toward Israel is that they fail to account for party coalitions in the United States, how they evolve, and how their evolution affects elite and mass attitudes. The bi-partisan support for Israel that characterized American public opinion during most of the postwar era is explained by the structure of the party coalitions during this period rather than the special case Israel exhibits. Until the 1990s, the party coalitions were based on ideological and social dimensions that did not correlate with views about foreign policy exhibiting very few inter-partisan disagreements. This, I argue, has recently changed as a consequence of two significant transformations in American party politics: the alignment of religious cleavages with the political parties, and the “polarization” of the two main parties on domestic and foreign policies.

The American two-party system is characterized by relative stability punctuated by occasional shocks, or realignments that alter the structure of mass attachments to the two parties. Perhaps the most dominant transformation in recent years is the alignment of Evangelical Christians with the Republican Party. Starting in the late 1980s and throughout the following decade, Evangelical Christians responded to their leaders calling for increased political participation and followed them to identify with the Republican Party (Layman, 2001).

This alignment has had vast consequences for electoral politics as well as policy choices (Green, 2007). With regards to foreign policy, some research indicates that evangelicals share relatively hawkish views, especially with regards to Islam, fighting terrorism and the Middle East conflict (Baumgartner, Francia, & Morris, 2008; Boyer, 2005; Smidt, 2005). Evangelical support for hard-line policies in the Middle East is tightly connected to Israel through the evangelical belief of dispensationalism, predicting an Armageddon that would end with the second coming of Christ. According to the modern interpreters of dispensationalism, God gave the land of Israel to the Jews and the modern reappearance of the nation of Israel is a confirmation of the accuracy of biblical prophecies and the nearness of Christ's own reign. The 1967 War, in which Israel defeated the armies of Egypt, Jordan and Syria, tripled its territory and took control over the old city of Jerusalem and holy places in the West Bank, was viewed as another dispensation, or stage, in God's unfolding plan (Lienesch, 1993).

Evangelical leaders found contemporary political meaning in God's gift, exhorting Israel's leadership never to give up any territory to the Palestinians or Arab Nations, and ensuring that the United States would continue its support to Israel (Boyer, 2005). The fact that this interpretation is rooted in a strict reading of the bible (Ariel, 2002), and the relative tendency of evangelicals to accept the policies suggested by their religious leaders (Putnam & Campbell, 2010), both contributed to a wave of mass pro-Israeli views among a majority of evangelicals. This constituency, has become the most supportive of Israel today (Mayer, 2004).

By aligning with the Republican Party, evangelicals restructured the partisan support for Israel. Today, a larger share of Republican and a smaller share of Democratic identifiers are Evangelical Christians. Given their hawkish views of foreign policy and their strong support for Israel, this alignment is expected to have the effect of an increased support for Israel among Republicans.

H1: Evangelical Alignment Hypothesis

The increased support for Israel among Republicans is explained by the alignment of evangelicals with the Republican Party.

The alignment of religious cleavages was greatly promoted by a strategic choice of party leaders who saw an advantage in championing noncentrist stands on cultural issues such as abortion and gay marriage (Layman, 2001). Its effect on the growing gap between the two major parties, however, extends beyond issues rooted in religious beliefs or cultural values. Since the final decades of the 20th century, leaders and activists of the two parties have increasingly "polarized," with Republicans moving in a conservative direction on nearly all major issues of public policy while Democrats staking out a consistently liberal ground. This theme is supported by a large body of

empirical research showing that the parties in government are each growing more homogenous in their policy positions, and that the differences between the two parties' stands on major policy issues are expanding in both scale and scope (Beinart, 2008; Hetherington, 2009; Layman, Carsey, & Horowitz, 2006; Nivola & Brady, 2006, 2008; Shapiro & Bloch-Elkon, 2007).

How elite polarization affected mass attitudes is still a matter empirical debate. Yet, it is widely agreed that while the overall distribution of ideology in American has not—or only little—changed, Republican and Democratic identifiers have responded to elite polarization by sharply dividing on policy choices (Fiorina, 2005; Fiorina & Abrams, 2008; Hetherington, 2001, 2009; Layman & Carsey, 2002).¹

The majority of work on elite and mass polarization has focused on domestic policies. In contrast, policy positions about foreign affairs have long been characterized more by intra-party disagreements than by inter-party divisions. This has recently changed with several studies suggesting that both elite and mass attitudes now diverge in how they approach foreign affairs, their support for international intervention and the goals they seek to achieve with foreign policy (Holsti, 2004; Jacobson, 2008; Shapiro & Bloch-Elkon, 2007). Beinart (2008) attributes this change to the war on terror and especially as it was redefined by the war in Iraq. He shows that on questions relating to the war on terror, Republicans present a strong interventionist view. Democrats, in contrast, are strikingly more dovish and isolationist—far more than they were in the second half of the twentieth century—yet did not retreat to an isolationist view completely. They object to the war on terror overseas, they object to democracy promotion, but they support promoting human rights around the world, to limiting global warming and the fighting global poverty. Hence, Beinart argues, when Republicans think of foreign policy they think of military threats, especially from terrorists or terror-associated regimes (2008). Democrats, see a different world, marked by economic and humanitarian dangers.

Shapiro and Bloch-Elkon (2007) examine overall trends in elite and mass opinion on foreign policy. They find that in the last decade party elites and attitudes of Republican and Democratic identifiers have significantly polarized. While they do not use rigorous empirical testing to examine the causal relationship between elite and mass polarization, they suggest that an elite effect is the most theoretically persuasive. This is especially true with regards to foreign policy, where Americans often lack sufficient knowledge and thus heavily

¹Fiorina and Levendusky (2006) suggest that this process is better termed party sorting. By sorting they mean that mass partisans are following what are now clearer elite cues to sort themselves into the correct party, which decreases intra-party heterogeneity and increases the differences between party adherents. Evidence of party sorting is found for several issue policies such as macroeconomics, social/cultural, racial, environment, and, most recently, defense/foreign policy issues (Hetherington, 2009; Levendusky, 2009; McCright & Dunlap, 2011).

rely on leaders' cues to determine their position (Holsti, 2004; Page & Bouton, 2006). I test this proposition using American attitudes toward Israel.

Recent evidence suggests that parallel to party polarization on broad views of foreign policy, party elites have also increasingly diverged in their attitudes toward Israel. Analyzing Congressional behavior relating to Israel, Oldmixon and colleagues (2005) find new partisan, ideological and religious cleavages in the U.S. Congress. They demonstrate that starting in the 107th Congress (2001–2002) Democrats and liberals began to identify with the Palestinians emphasizing human rights concerns, while Republicans, religious and ideological conservatives began to identify Israel as a just state under attack. These findings fit with the change suggested above by Beinart (2008) and stand in striking contrast to earlier periods, characterized by little or no variation in members' support for Israel along partisan or religious lines. In fact, if anything, in earlier periods Democrats—not Republicans—were more supportive of Israel (Feuerweger, 1979; Trice, 1977).

A 2004 survey of leaders conducted by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations reveals that elite differences are not limited to Congress. While most respondents thought that the United States should take neither side in the Arab–Israeli conflict, 31% of Republicans thought that the United States should take the Israel side compared to only 12% of Democrats thinking the same. In the event of an Arab attack upon Israel, 71% of Republicans compared to 62% of Democrats supported using U.S. military force to protect Israel. A similar question asked in a 1998 leaders' survey showed no difference between Democrats and Republicans.² The differences are subtle, but they indicate an important shift in elite views.

Republican and Democratic elites have therefore in the last decade diverged in how they view American foreign policy and in their attitudes toward Israel. I expect that Republican and Democratic identifiers responded to these changes by aligning their opinion with their elites—mainly Republicans increasing their support for Israel and Democrats decreasing their support.

H2: Elite Polarization Hypothesis

Elite polarization on foreign policy in the last decade expanded the partisan gap in public opinion toward Israel.

²Chicago Council of Foreign Relations Leaders Survey, July 2004. The survey includes 450 leaders with foreign policy power, specialization, and expertise. These included 100 Congressional members or their senior staff, 31 from the Senate and 69 from the House; 75 university administrators and academics who teach in the area of international relations; 59 journalists and editorial staff who handle international news; 41 administration officials such as assistant secretaries and other senior staff in various agencies and offices dealing with foreign policy; 50 religious leaders; 38 senior business executives from Fortune 1000 corporations; 32 labor presidents of the largest labor unions; 29 presidents of major private foreign policy organizations; and 25 presidents of major special interest groups relevant to foreign policy.

In the following analysis, I test the two hypotheses concerning the relationship between partisan transformations and attitudes toward Israel—alignment of evangelicals and elite polarization hypotheses. For this purpose, I collect a unique dataset on the attitudes toward Israel from 1967 to 2009. This data set allows both individual- and aggregate-level analyses of public opinion toward Israel.

Data and Method

Given the strong interest in Israel and the Middle East, American–Israeli relations and U.S. policy in the Middle East have been some of the most popular topics in surveys taken in the United States on foreign policy. Several of these surveys offer great leverage to assess change in public attitudes toward Israel over a long period of time by routinely asking respondents about their broad views of the Middle East such as how they view the parties to the conflict (favorable or unfavorable terms), whether they approve the U.S. policy in the region, or who they sympathize with more (Israel, Arab Nations, or Palestinians). The sympathies question is especially appealing because it asks respondents to weigh their views of Israel against other parties to the Israeli–Arab conflict. By asking respondents to make a substantive decision this item increases variation needed for empirical testing.

There are two common versions of the sympathies item. One version asks respondents whether they sympathize more with Israel or with Arab nations. The second version, used in more recent surveys, asks respondents whether they sympathize more with Israel or with the Palestinians. The first version was routinely asked since 1967, but gradually dropped during the 1990s. The second version was asked a few times in the 1980s, but routinely only starting in the 1990s. I collect individual responses from all surveys that ask any one of these questions since 1967 totaling in 44 surveys. Nearly 70,000 respondents participated in these surveys with a substantive response rate of 78%.³

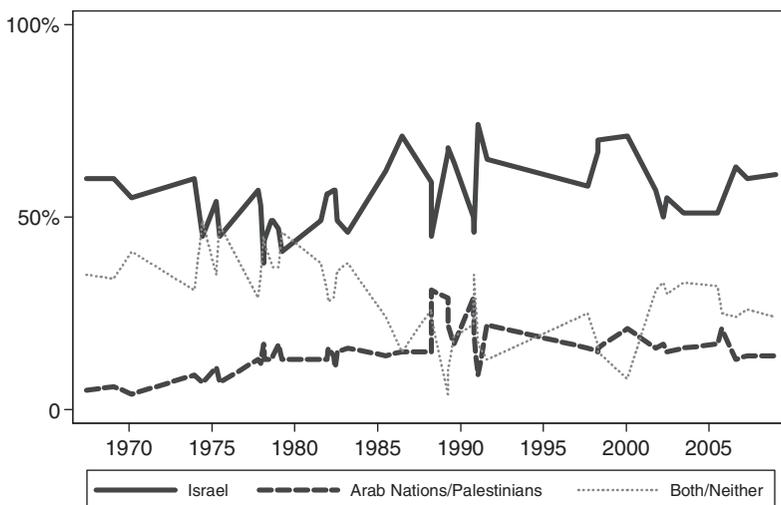
Figure 1 plots the distribution of Americans' sympathies toward the parties in the Middle East conflict as recorded from both questions.⁴ Throughout the entire period, Americans have sympathized more with Israel than with Arab nations or the Palestinians. Although there are considerable shifts in the level of support, average sympathies have remained relatively steady and above 50%.⁵ Sympathies with Arab nations or Palestinians have increased during

³These responses do not include an average of 18% of respondents who refused to answer or said they do not know. In addition, there is no information on 4% of respondents.

⁴The data are available online at <http://cavari.wordpress.com/data/>. Any Google search of the author's name would lead to the most current data set.

⁵Despite wording differences of the two questions (Palestinians and Arab nations), they yield the same level of support—56% using the Israel–Arab question and 57% using the Israel–Palestinians question. See Appendix A for a comparison of the two questions.

Figure 1

American sympathies in the Middle East conflict, 1967–2009

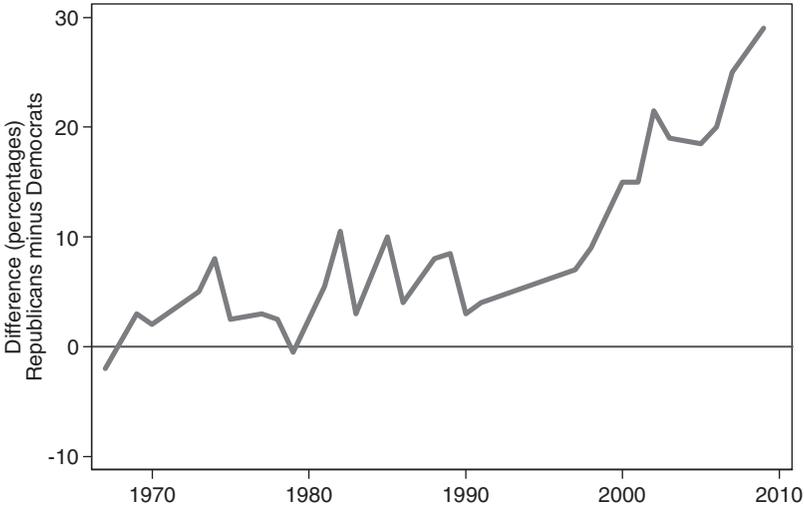
this time-series—from lows of less than 10% sympathies to highs in the twenties. The declining share of people who reported that they see no difference between Israel and the Arab nations or Palestinians indicates an increasingly informed and opinionated electorate.⁶

Figure 2 illustrates the change in partisan attitudes by plotting the partisan gap—i.e., the difference between the sympathies of Republicans and Democrats (calculated for each survey by subtracting the average sympathies of Democrats from that of Republicans). Until the end of the 1990s, the partisan gap has remained relatively constant showing some “advantage” among Republicans (a positive line). Starting from 2000, the gap has more than doubled reaching by the end of the decade approximately 30 percentage points.

To assess the causes of change in public attitudes, I analyze individual responses and aggregate change. I first estimate several logistic regressions of individual response to the sympathies’ question, including variables that account for religious affiliation, party identification and interaction terms that identify the effect of specific religious cleavages. Second, I examine the relative effect of religious affiliation and elite polarization by estimating their independent effect on the partisan gap of support for Israel. For this latter model, I collect two additional time series: a measure of the increasing alignment between Evangelical Christians and the Republican Party, and a measure of the party polarization in Congress.

⁶The options of both or neither are not offered to respondents. They are recorded only if said voluntarily.

Figure 2
Emerging gap in partisan sympathies with Israel, 1967–2009



Religious Preferences and Public Support for Israel

To assess changes in partisan attitudes toward Israel, and especially the role of religious cleavages in this change, I estimate a logistic regression of support for Israel as a function of political and demographic variables. Support for Israel is measured using the sympathies question, coded 1 if a respondent sympathized with Israel and 0 otherwise (sympathizing with Arab nations, Palestinians, or voluntarily said both or neither). Respondents who did not know or refused to answer are dropped from the data.

Party identification is coded into three categories: Republicans and Republican leaners (29%), Democrats and Democratic leaners (42%), and independents (29%). Due to the interest in the two major parties, I include an indicator for Republicans and Democratic identification, leaving independents as reference.

Religion is measured using the self-described religious denomination. Despite some variation in the options available for respondents to choose from, the major categories have remained unchanged—Protestant, Roman Catholic, and to a much lesser extent, Jewish, and Eastern Orthodox. Protestants and Catholics make the majority of the American population reaching on average about three-quarters of the population. While the Jewish population is small, approximately 2%, for obvious reasons it is of relevance to this project. I therefore include three binary indicators—Protestant, Jewish, and uncategorized. This latter group consists of a variety

of groups, most of which prefer to not affiliate with any religion. (See discussion of this group in Putnam & Campbell, 2010.) Catholics are the reference group.

The broad denomination categories do not directly account for the important transformations within the Protestant Church since the 1980s, mainly the rise of evangelical groups at the expense of mainline Protestants. A direct measure of Christian fundamentalism could better account for religious views toward Israel, but such a measure is not available in most surveys. Despite this limitation, I expect that the broad classification to major denominations would suffice for the interest of this project. Since the 1980s, the Protestant Church in America became a more conservative one—membership in mainline protestant churches has significantly declined, whereas evangelical and fundamentalist Christian groups have grown in size (Putnam & Campbell, 2010; Spector, 2009). Therefore, the broad denomination categories capture the effect of religious affiliation: over time, the Protestant group has become more conservative and thus more likely to support Israel.

In addition, I control for: (a) education, using four conventional subgroups, leaving people with high school diploma as reference; (b) age, using four conventional subgroups, leaving the age group 30–49 years as a reference group; and (c) gender, categorized for males. Due to time variance, I also include indicators for each survey in the dataset.

I estimate five models. The first model includes all variables listed above and is applied to the entire data set. The second model adds an interaction term to account for religious cleavages—Republicans who affiliate with the Protestant Church. The third and fourth models divide the data into two subsets—surveys from 1967 to 1988 and from 1989 to 2009. As Oldfield (1996) notes, until 1988 the partisan allegiances of evangelicals were uncertain. Yet, the 1988 presidential campaign left no ambiguity about the role of evangelicals in the establishment of the Republican Party. During the campaign, Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, the most dominant leaders of the Christian Right movement, rose to be part of the Republican establishment. Falwell was ardently courted and publicly endorsed by the eventual victor George Bush. Robertson was himself a candidate for the Republican nomination, coming in third in a crowded field of contenders. From that election forward, evangelicals occupied an increasing share in the Republican electoral coalition.

The final model replaces the interaction of Protestants and Republicans with an interaction of Evangelical Christians with Republicans. This model is limited to surveys that asked the “born-again” question—one in 1981 and then from 1997 forward.

The results are summarized in Table II. Column 1 reveals that party identification and religion both have an independent positive effect on sympathies with Israel. Republicans and Democrats sympathize more with Israel

Table II
Coefficient Estimates of Sympathies with Israel

Sympathize more with Israel	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	1967–2009	1967–2009	1967–1988	1989–2009	Born
Republican	0.436*** (0.0257)	0.412*** (0.0363)	0.249*** (0.0510)	0.592*** (0.0523)	0.542*** (0.0684)
Democrat	0.127*** (0.0237)	0.127*** (0.0237)	0.172*** (0.0302)	0.0469 (0.0387)	-0.0815 (0.0557)
Protestant	0.300*** (0.0235)	0.289*** (0.0264)	0.284*** (0.0319)	0.281*** (0.0474)	0.0747 (0.0542)
Jewish	2.581*** (0.103)	2.578*** (0.103)	2.981*** (0.148)	1.998*** (0.147)	3.536*** (1.020)
Uncategorized	-0.169*** (0.0339)	-0.170*** (0.0339)	-0.0424 (0.0459)	-0.280*** (0.0516)	-0.0614 (0.0920)
Republican × Protestant		0.0402 (0.0438)	0.0449 (0.0584)	0.181** (0.0700)	
Evangelical Christian					0.674*** (0.0609)
Republican × Evangelical					0.318** (0.103)
No High School	-0.143*** (0.0294)	-0.142*** (0.0294)	-0.174*** (0.0343)	0.0879 (0.0612)	-0.132 (0.0860)
Some Higher Education	0.113*** (0.0257)	0.113*** (0.0257)	0.176*** (0.0323)	-0.00108 (0.0430)	-0.00554 (0.0619)
College Education or More	-0.0217 (0.0270)	-0.0219 (0.0270)	0.164*** (0.0371)	-0.231*** (0.0408)	-0.196*** (0.0592)
18–29 years	0.0806** (0.0263)	0.0807** (0.0263)	0.0601* (0.0323)	0.0581 (0.0461)	0.0912 (0.0701)
50–64 years	-0.156*** (0.0258)	-0.157*** (0.0258)	-0.259*** (0.0332)	0.0488 (0.0420)	0.0251 (0.0586)
65 years or more	-0.186*** (0.0291)	-0.187*** (0.0291)	-0.176*** (0.0380)	-0.173*** (0.0457)	-0.0931 (0.0637)
Male	-0.0451* (0.0195)	-0.0448* (0.0195)	-0.127*** (0.0246)	0.0788* (0.0323)	0.108* (0.0462)
Survey Indicators					
Constant	0.0900 (0.0538)	0.0943 (0.0540)	0.162** (0.0586)	0.102 (0.105)	-0.127 (0.114)
<i>n</i>	46,383	46,383	28,789	17,594	8,667

Note. Standard errors in parentheses. * $p < .1$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

compared to Independents (the reference group), yet the size of the coefficients reveal that Republicans are more supportive of Israel than Democrats. Protestants and Jews sympathize more with Israel compared to Catholics (the reference group). Individuals who do not affiliate with any of these three groups are less likely to side with Israel.

Column 2 demonstrates that the added interaction between Republicans and Protestants does not affect the model. This is consistent with the discussion above. The change in the Protestant Church from Mainline to evangelical groups, and the alignment of evangelicals with the Republican Party, were noticeable only towards the end of the century. This is illustrated in Models 3 and 4. In Model 3, referring to the period from 1967 to 1987, Protestants are more supportive of Israel than Catholics, but this support is still not aligned with partisan politics—i.e., the interaction between Protestants and Republican is not significant. In the second period, starting in 1989, Model 4 indicates that partisanship takes up a dominant role in explaining attitudes toward Israel—becoming the single most significant predictor of sympathizing with Israel (excluding the coefficient for Jews).

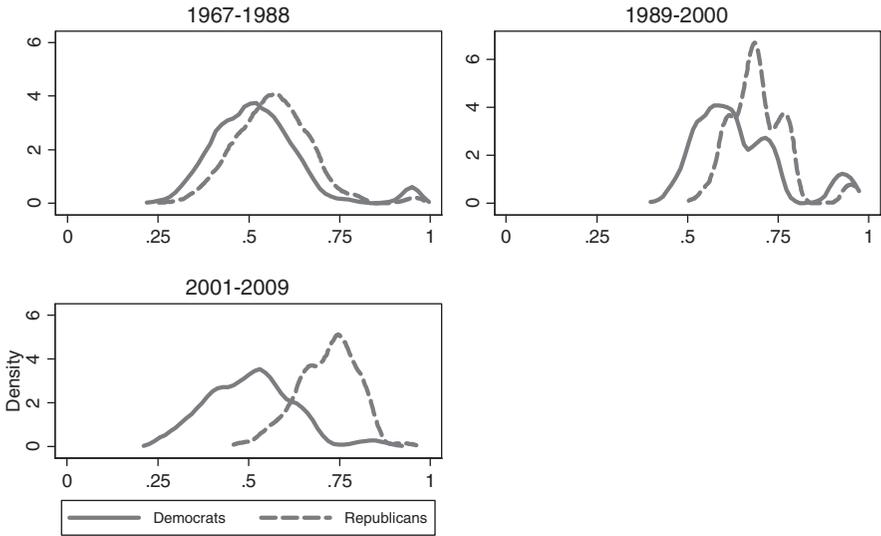
The positive and significant coefficient for the interaction in Model 4 between Republican and Protestant supports the first hypothesis. It indicates that Protestants who affiliate with the Republican Party are significantly more supportive of Israel than Republicans who are not Protestants and from Protestants who are not Republicans. To illustrate this, I take advantage of the tractable form of the logistic regression and calculate the odds ratio of each group holding all else at their mean (Long, 1997). From 1988 forward, the odds that a Republican–Protestant will support Israel have significantly increased to a rate that is higher than any other group. The odds that a Republican who is Protestant will sympathize with Israel are 3 to 1. In comparison, the odds that a Republican who is not Protestant will sympathize with Israel are only 1.9, a Protestant who is not Republican are 1.5, and neither a Republican nor Protestant are 1.2. The outstanding support among Republican–Protestants is a substantial change from the earlier period. Until 1988 (Model 3), the odds that a Republican–Protestant will sympathize with Israel were 1.6 to 1, a rate only slightly higher than non-Protestant Republicans (1.4) and non-Republican Protestants (1.2).

The coefficient for Evangelical Christians in the final model (Model 5) supports existing work indicating that evangelicals are highly supportive of Israel (Baumgartner, Francia, & Morris, 2008; Mayer, 2004). The large, positive and significant coefficient for the interaction between Republicans and evangelicals directly supports the first hypothesis that the favorable views among Republicans are at least partially explained by the growing dominance of evangelicals within the Republican Party.

Party Polarization and Attitudes Toward Israel

The high support among Republicans (Table I) and the independent effect of Republican identification found in the regression analyses (Table II) suggest that party identification has increasingly played an important and independent

Figure 3
Three periods of partisan attitudes toward Israel



role in shaping the attitudes of Americans toward Israel. The timing of this change in partisan opinion—especially how it fits with other transformations in the political parties—can illuminate the causes of this change.

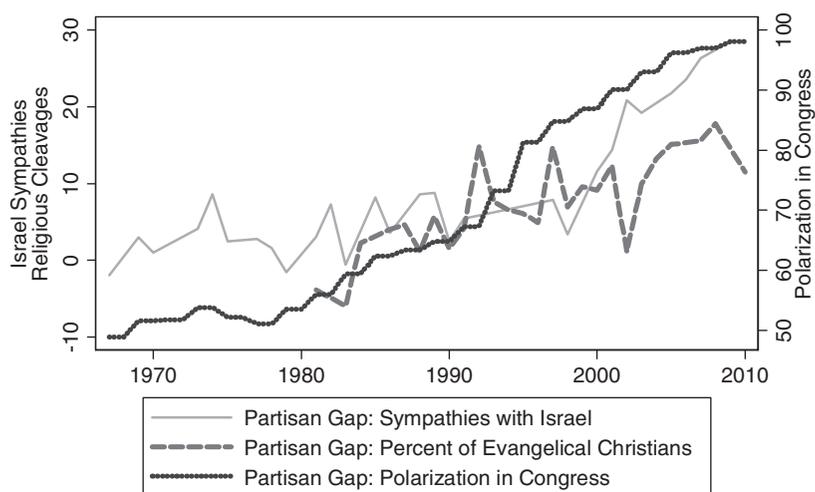
Figure 3 plots the probability distributions for Republicans and Democrats in three time periods—until 1988, from 1989 to 2000, and from 2001 to 2009.⁷ The first cut—1988—corresponds with the rise of the religious right within the Republican Party. The second cut—2001—is chosen because of the effect of 9/11 and the eventual polarization of American opinion on foreign policy (Beinart, 2008; Shapiro & Bloch-Elkon, 2007) and about Israel and the Middle East (Oldmixon, Rosenson, & Wald, 2005; Rosenson, Oldmixon, & Wald, 2009).

The three periods are distinctively different. During the first period, from 1967 to 1988, support for Israel has been largely bipartisan—i.e., the probability that a Republican would sympathize with Israel is not different than that of a Democrat. During the 1990s, both partisan groups increased their support for Israel, yet the parties began to diverge with Republicans more homogenous and more supportive than Democrats. As discussed above, during this time, religious conservatives have aligned with the Republican Party

⁷The distribution functions assign each person (Republican or Democratic) a probability of sympathizing with Israel based on his or her demographic and political characteristics. In figure 3, I aggregate these probabilities for each partisan group and plot them together. The total probability for each group is 1 yet the density can shift along the entire probability distribution—from 0 (not likely to sympathize with Israel) to 1 (likely to sympathize).

Figure 4

Three partisan gaps: religious, elite polarization, and Israel



All gaps are measured by subtracting annual means of Democrats from Republicans

making it the home of a highly supportive constituency. The increase in Democratic support for Israel can be explained not only by events in the region—the Oslo accords and the peace process with the Palestinians, the peace agreement with Jordan and the open talks with Syria—but also by the highly supportive Democratic administration at the time (Freedman, 2009). During the 2000s, the attitudes of identifiers with the two parties have continued to diverge—Republicans moving further to the right and Democrats retreating back to their pre-1990s level of support. This final shift cannot be attributed only to the realignment of the religious cleavages because by the turn of the century this process has already slowed down. At that time, a more substantial change began to show its effect on public opinion—the polarization of political elites on domestic and especially on foreign policies.

To examine the independent effect of the alignment of the evangelicals with the Republican Party and the polarization of the political elites, I collect additional data on these two dimensions of party change. First, I collect all available (60) Gallup surveys that directly ask respondents if they identify themselves as born-again Christians. For each year, I calculate the percent of Republicans and of Democrats identifying themselves as born-again Christians, and subtract the latter from the former. This creates a measure of the strength of the cleavage between Christian Evangelicals and the Republican Party. Data are consistently available only from 1979.

Table III

The Effect of Party Polarization and Religious Cleavages on the Israel Gap, 1980–2009

	(1) Israel gap
Party Polarization in Congress ($t-1$)	0.144* (0.0789)
Religious Cleavages between the Republican Party and Evangelicals ($t-1$)	0.211* (0.122)
Democratic Administration (dummy)	-0.0202 (0.0177)
Post 2001 (dummy)	0.107** (0.0331)
Constant	-0.0382 (0.0494)
n	29
R^2	0.894

Note: Series are aggregated annually. Missing data are linearly extrapolated on time. Standard errors in parentheses. * $p < .1$, ** $p < .01$.

Second, I collect DW-NOMINATE scores developed and compiled by McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2006) from all roll call votes in Congress.⁸ These scores are a measure of each Congress member's position on the liberal-conservative spectrum. Calculating the average difference between Democratic and Republican legislators in each Congress offers a time-series of the distance, or gap between the two parties in Congress. Although this measure is neither specific to foreign policy issues nor to Israel, it is considered a reliable measure of the polarization of the American elite, a polarization which since 2001 has expanded to foreign policies (Beinart, 2008; Shapiro & Bloch-Elkon, 2007) and specifically to attitudes toward Israel (Oldmixon, Rosenson, & Wald, 2005; Rosenson, Oldmixon, & Wald, 2009).

Figure 4 plots the two time-series together with the annual partisan gap in support for Israel (calculated by subtracting the mean sympathies of Democrats from the mean sympathies of Republicans in all surveys available each year). Until 2000, religious cleavages, party polarization in Congress, and the partisan gap in support for Israel have gone up at a similar rate. From that time, the religious partisan polarization in Congress and the partisan gap of support for Israel have further increased while the gap in religious cleavages has little changed. Consistent with a large body of work on party polarization, Figure 4 suggests that as Democrats and Republicans representatives polarized

⁸Data available online at <http://www.voteview.com/dwnomin.htm>.

on domestic and foreign policies, attitudes of Democratic and Republican identifiers have increasingly diverged in their attitudes toward Israel.

To test the simultaneous effect of these series on the partisan gap, I estimate the effect of lagged values (previous year) of polarization in Congress and religious cleavages on contemporary support for Israel. I include two additional controls. First, given the traditionally strong support for Israel—and rhetoric of support—displayed by the administrations, I include an indicator of Democratic administrations (1977–1980, 1993–2000, 2009–). During these administrations, the voice of the Democratic Party is that of the administration and therefore the administration's traditional support of Israel is likely to affect Democratic identifiers and hence reduce the gap between Republicans and Democrats. Second, because attitudes toward Israel are highly affected by the war on terror and the involvement of U.S. troops in the Middle East, I include an indicator for the post 9/11 years. Since the series of religious cleavages (born-again) is available only from 1979, I estimate the model on data from 1980 forward (to allow the one year lag). The coefficients of the linear regression are summarized in Table III.

The results support the second hypothesis. Both party polarization in Congress and religious cleavages have a positive and significant independent effect on the gap between Republicans and Democrats in their attitudes toward Israel. An increase of one percentage point in Congressional polarization increases the Israel gap between Republican and Democratic identifiers by .14 points. A point increase in the attachment of Evangelical Christians with the Republican Party increases the Israel Gap by .21 points.⁹ Estimating the model on a subset of the data since 2000, reveals that the effect of religious cleavages drops and the effect of polarization is larger. This suggests that the effect of party polarization has increased over time. Yet, given the small number of observations available in such model the results should be interpreted with caution. The aggregate analysis reveals that while the realignment of Evangelical Christians with the Republican Party has altered the structure of mass support for Israel, the polarization in American politics on domestic and foreign policies has further expanded this gap.

Conclusion

For a long time, support for Israel transcended existing divisions in American society. This has recently changed with the emergence of a significant conservative movement in the United States, which affected American society and its political balance. The association of this change with views of Israel has, for the first time, aligned partisan politics with attitudes toward Israel.

⁹Calculating the variance inflation factor rejects severe multicollinearity in the model.

This change was further fueled by the polarization of American political parties. Long resistant to party polarization, since 2001 American political parties—elite and mass—have diverged in their preferences, goals, and attitudes about foreign policy. Consistent with existing work showing that elite polarization affects mass opinion, the evidence here demonstrates that the American electorate responds to elite change about foreign policy and about views of Israel by following the respective views of their party elites.

Although this study examines attitudes toward the Arab–Israeli conflict, it is indicative of the effect religion and elite polarization have on public opinion on foreign policy. While Israel and the Arab–Israeli conflict represent only a limited scope of American foreign policy and international affairs, for a long time the Middle East region has been pivotal to American foreign policy. It played a dominant role during the Cold War, leading the United States to invest in Israel both economically and militarily. With the increasing involvement of the United States in conflicts in the Middle East and the rise of Islamic terrorism targeting American interests, American Middle East policy has become a central component of American foreign policy.

The simultaneous analysis of the effects of religion and elite polarization on American attitudes toward Israel fills in a current void in the study of American public opinion on foreign policy. Adding to the limited work on the effect of religion on foreign policy, I demonstrate that the emergence of religious cleavages is a determinant factor in shaping public opinion about foreign policy. Building on an initial interest in the effect of elite polarization on public opinion about foreign policy, I reveal that the partisan gap has significantly broadened as elites diverged on foreign policy.

The most important contribution, however, is the evidence that partisan attitudes about foreign policy are explained by both religious beliefs and elite views. It is widely agreed that American politics is now marked by sharper divisions and more intense conflicts than has typically been the case in earlier times. Yet, students of American politics disagree on the cause of this change—some see it as an outcome of the polarization of party elites, while others argue that the party elites respond to change at the mass level. This study shows that, at least with regards to foreign policy, the change in partisan attitudes is explained by both the realignment of religious cleavages with a clear policy agenda, and the polarization of American elites which affects attitudes of partisan identifiers beyond their ideological-religious commitments.

The partisan gap in public opinion toward Israel may have important consequences to the relationship between Israel and United States. For a long time, and in the face of the significant commercial and strategic interests in the Arab world, the United States has maintained a special relationship with Israel supporting Israel politically, economically, and militarily.

This support would have been untenable were it not for highly favorable American public opinion (Gilboa, 1987). The possible consequence of an emerging partisan gap may affect policy preferences of leaders of the two parties and turn the special relations into one conditioned on partisan control of government. The current Republican critique of Obama's tension with the Israeli government, the reference to Israel in Republican congressional and presidential campaigns across the nation, and recent visits of prospective 2012 Republican presidential candidates in Israel are examples of how the issue takes a front stage in American partisan politics.

Acknowledgments

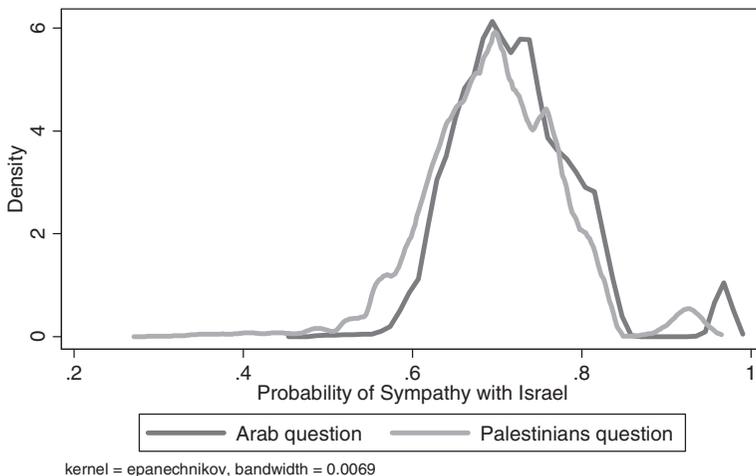
The author thanks John J. Coleman, Robert O. Freedman, Itay Gabay, the anonymous reviewers, and the editors of the *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* for their helpful comments and suggestions.

Appendix A

The two questions are significantly different because they alter the identity of the group of reference: Arab Nations or Palestinians. Despite this difference, concerns about appending the data into one time-series with a unified outcome arise only if we find variance in the structure of mass support for Israel (sympathies with Israel) as captured by these two questions.

Figure A1

Similarity of the two questions comparing the probability distribution of the predicted outcomes



I test this by estimating the base model on three surveys which asked both questions—March 1988 (ABC), April 1989 (NY Times), and April 1998 (LA Times). Figure A1 illustrates the similarity in the structure of public opinion in response to the two questions by plotting the probability distribution function of each predicted outcome. The correlation of the predicted outcomes from the two models is .88.

References

- Ariel, Y. (2002). *Philosemites or antisemites? Evangelical Christian attitudes towards the Jews*. Jerusalem: Vidal Sasson Center, Hebrew University of Jerusalem.
- Baumgartner, J. C., Francia, P. L., & Morris, J. S. (2008). A Clash of Civilization? The influence of religion on public opinion of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. *Political Research Quarterly*, 61(2), 171–179.
- Benart, P. (2008). When politics no longer stops at the water's edge: Partisan polarization and foreign policy. In P. S. Nivola & D. W. Brady (Eds.), *Red and blue nation?* (Vol 2, pp. 151–167). Washington, DC: Brookings.
- Boyer, P. S. (2005). Biblical policy and foreign policy. In C. H. Badaracco (Ed.), *Quoting God*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press.
- Feuerweger, M. C. (1979). *Congress and Israel: Foreign aid decision-making in the house of representatives, 1969-1976*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Freedman, R. O. (2009). Israel and the United States. In R. O. Freedman (Ed.), *Contemporary Israel* (pp. 253–295). Cambridge: Westview Press.
- Fiorina, M. P. (2005). *Culture war? The myth of a polarized America*. New York: Pearson.
- Fiorina, M. P., & Abrams, S. J. (2008). Political polarization in the American Public. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 11, 563–588.
- Fiorina, M. P., & Levendusky, M. S. (2006). Disconnected: The political class versus the people. In P. S. Nivola & D. W. Brady (Eds.), *Red and blue nation?* (Vol 1, pp. 49–71). Washington, DC: Brookings.
- Gilboa, E. (1987). *American public opinion toward Israel and the Arab-Israeli conflict*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Green, J. C. (2007). *The faith factor*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Guth, J. L. (2009). Religion and American public opinion: Foreign policy issues. In C. L. Smidt, L. A. Kellstedt & L. Guth James (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of religion and American politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hetherington, M. J. (2001). Resurgent mass partisanship: The role of elite polarization. *American Political Science Review*, 95, 619–631.
- Hetherington, M. J. (2009). Review article: Putting polarization in perspective. *British Journal of Political Science*, 39, 413–448.
- Holsti, O. R. (2004). *Public opinion and American foreign policy*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- Jacobson, G. C. (2008). *A divider, not a uniter: George W. Bush and the American people*. New York: Pearson Longman.

- Layman, G. (2001). *The great divide*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Layman, G. C., & Carsey, T. M. (2002). Party polarization and conflict extension in the American electorate. *American Journal of Political Science*, 46, 285–309.
- Layman, G. C., Carsey, T. M., & Horowitz, J. M. (2006). Party polarization in American politics: Characteristics, causes, and consequences. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 9, 83–110.
- Levendusky, M. (2009). *The partisan sort*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Lienesch, M. (1993). *Redeeming America: Piety and politics in the news Christian right*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Long, S. J. (1997). *Regression models for categorical and limited dependent variables*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Mayer, J. D. (2004). Christian fundamentalists and public opinion toward the Middle East: Israel's new best friends? *Social Science Quarterly*, 85, 695–712.
- McCarty, N., Poole, K. T., & Rosenthal, H. (2006). *Polarized America: The dance of ideology and unequal riches*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- McCright, A. M., & Dunlap, R. E. (2011). The politicization of climate change and polarization in the American public's views of global warming, 2001–2010. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 52, 155–194.
- Nivola, P. S., & Brady, D. W. (2006). *Red and blue nation? Characteristics and causes of America's polarized politics*. Washington, DC: Brookings.
- Nivola, P. S., & Brady, D. W. (2008). *Red and blue nation? Consequences and correction of America's polarized politics*. Washington, DC: Brookings.
- Oldfield, D. M. (1996). *The right and the righteous: The Christian right confronts the Republican party*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Oldmixon, E. A., Rosenson, B., & Wald, K. D. (2005). Conflict over Israel: The role of religion, race, party and ideology in the U.S. House of Representatives, 1997–2002. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 17, 407–426.
- Page, B. I., & Bouton, M. M. (2006). *The foreign policy disconnect: What Americans want from our leaders but don't get*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Putnam, R. D., & Campbell, D. E. (2010). *American grace*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Rosenson, B. A., Oldmixon, E. A., & Wald, K. D. (2009). U.S. Senators' support for Israel examined through sponsorship/cosponsorship decisions, 1993–2002. *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 5, 73–91.
- Shapiro, R. Y., & Bloch-Elkon, Y. (2007). Ideological partisanship and American public opinion toward foreign policy. In M. H. Haleprin, J. Laurenti, P. Rundlet & S. P. Boyer (Eds.), *Power and superpower* (pp. 49–68). New York: The Century Foundation Press.
- Smidt, C. (2005). Religion and American attitudes towards Islam and an invasion of Iraq. *Sociology of Religion*, 66, 243–261.
- Spector, S. (2009). *Evangelicals and Israel*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Trice, R. H. (1977). Congress and the Arab-Israeli conflict: Support for Israel in the U.S. Senate, 1970–1973. *Political Science Quarterly*, 92, 443–463.

Biographical Note

Amnon Cavari (PhD, 2011, University of Wisconsin-Madison) is a visiting faculty at the Lauder School of Government, Diplomacy and Strategy, the Interdisciplinary Center (IDC), Herzliya, Israel. He specializes in American public opinion, the presidency, and political parties.