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To Bern or Not to Bern: The New Jewish Question

Andy Neumann

In the 2016 United States Presidential Election, Bernie Sanders shocked political insiders with a fiercely populist presidential campaign, the success of which surpassed all expectations. While initially hampered by low name recognition, Sanders, a self-proclaimed Democratic Socialist, managed to grow his brand and gain an enormous following. His supporters appreciated his honesty, anti-establishment message, and progressive positions on income redistribution, the environment, and foreign policy. Sanders, however, who is of Jewish heritage, often faced animosity from pro-Israel political groups. After speaking about Israeli aggression and the plight of the Palestinians early on the campaign trail, Sanders found himself forced to justify his statements in lieu of his presumed Jewishness. Within the State of Israel, the general population watched as the first Jewish presidential candidate to win multiple primaries would also be one of the first major American politicians to openly criticize the occupation, settlement expansion, and violence in Israel. This paper will show that the candidacy of Bernie Sanders clashed aggressively with the interests of the Israel lobby in the United States and discuss how conventionally Zionist institutions struggled between supporting a Jewish candidate's pursuit of the White House and condemning many of Sanders' incongruent positions on Israel. Furthermore, his candidacy revealed a deeper trend in terms of age and demographics which could

threaten support for Israel.

This research draws on a variety of sources. Background on Sanders, the American-Israeli relationship, and the influence of the Israel lobby on American politics comes from American scholarly journals such as *The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* and *Jewish Quarterly* as well as books. Due to the contemporary nature of the research, this paper utilizes news articles and other media sources from the United States and Israel to analyze the coverage of the Sanders campaign. Israeli media outlets provided insight on how the general Israeli public perceived Sanders' campaign, and, therefore, the implications of his relative success.

The paper will begin by examining the context for Sanders' candidacy while assessing the demographic profile of his supporters. The research will describe the efficacy of the pro-Israel lobby in American politics as well as the nearly-ubiquitous support for Israel in the U.S. agenda. The paper will then discuss why Sanders' positions on Israel represented fringe ideas and how he failed to excite American Jews. Analyzing coverage of Sanders in Israeli media as well as American publications that focus on Israel, this paper argues that Sanders' popularity conveys troubling undertones for many Israeli or Israel-oriented groups.

Hailing from Brooklyn, N.Y., Bernie Sanders was born to Jewish immigrants from Poland in 1941. Although his parents emigrated just after World War I, the Nazis murdered much of his extended family who remained in Europe.¹ Sanders found activism as a teenager and began to devote himself to social justice. By the time he graduated from the University of Chicago in 1964, Sanders was already a force in the anti-segregation movement and had been arrested a year prior while demonstrating for racial equality in Chicago.² Hoping to apply this spirit in the realm of policy, Sanders moved to Vermont where he ran for governor and senator four times under the banner of the anti-capitalist, anti-war Liberty Union Party of Vermont, losing all four elections.³ Sanders earned his first elected position in 1981 when he became

mayor of Burlington. Sanders pushed a progressive agenda and his popularity within the state surged, which paved the path to his electoral success in 1990 when he became Vermont's sole member of the House of Representatives. His platform resonated with the most left-leaning segments of the country, citizens concerned with workers' rights, social justice, and the environment.⁴ Boasting authenticity and consistency, Sanders ran for Senate in 2007 and won. Despite his national success, Sanders' party identification left him in political purgatory; while his views fell soundly on the far left of American politics, he refused to call himself a Democrat, identifying instead as a socialist, Democratic socialist, or simply a progressive independent. Rather than diminishing his base, however, these identifiers enamored Sanders to his supporters who appreciated his bold stances and unwillingness to compromise ideologically for a party.

Structural, societal, and demographic factors formed an exceptionally favorable climate for anti-establishment political outsiders in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Candidates with no political experience found surprising traction early in the primaries as populist, "drain-the-swamp" rhetoric flourished. While support for many of them, like Ben Carson and Carly Fiorina, soon dwindled, Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump harnessed those sentiments and led successful campaigns, with the latter eventually winning the presidency. The populist spirit enveloped many different sectors of the country, but Senator Sanders became the "champion" for younger demographic in the electorate.⁵ The primary season displayed Sanders' dominance with this bloc as he claimed over 70 percent of the under-30 vote in multiple significant primaries including Iowa. These young voters, a sizable portion of whom were registered independents, harbored negative views of both parties and unfavorable opinions of Hillary Clinton who represented a status-quo, establishment-backed candidate.⁶ Surpassing all expectations, Sanders mobilized and impassioned youths across the country. Despite losing the nomination to Clinton, the Sanders campaign branded itself as a political

revolution, a term the media picked up to describe the momentous impact of his candidacy. The movement, according to many political scientists, tapped into the fastest growing segment of the electorate and holds the power “to fundamentally change the system.”⁷

While Sanders’ image as an anti-establishment champion earned him a great deal of momentum, his views fell outside of traditional American political discourse which put him at odds with many mainstream positions. The first of these differences lay in his identification with socialism, a word with which many Americans hold extremely negative associations.⁸ Sanders’ positions on income redistribution and Wall Street regulation fell far to the left on the political spectrum, but his foreign policy views differed from mainstream discourse even more. Sanders spoke about restraint and railed against unilateral military action, a staple of American foreign policy.⁹ Although he emphasized measured responses, his critics derided the “dovish” views as isolationist, regressive, and reactionary.¹⁰ The discourse surrounding Israel displayed Sanders’ uniqueness perhaps more than any other issue. To understand the context, it is important to understand the framing of Israel in American politics.

Throughout the past century, beginning long before the state’s official creation in 1948, Israel has enjoyed significant support from the United States. One academic described the extent of this support by noting that “no citizens of one country have ever been so committed to the success of another as American Jews have been to Israel.”¹¹ Early on, financial contributions from American Jews, through investments, donations, and bonds, constituted most of this support. These efforts came primarily as a result of the Holocaust; the decimation of European Jewry invigorated Jews around the world to fight for sovereignty despite having no intention of emigrating. After the establishment of the state, however, American Jewish interest in Israel waned as the general public focused on the Cold War and Jews feared accusations of harboring “dual loyalties.”¹² The Six-Day War in 1967 dramatically changed

the discourse around Israel and affected the political landscape. Israel proved its might to the world with a “swift and stunning” victory against its attacking neighbors.¹³ This success shifted perceptions of Israel from a young, vulnerable state of refugees to a legitimate and modern force in the Middle East, as the Jewish establishment began to frame Israel as an invaluable strategic asset. The resulting Jewish pride, as well as secular admiration, lay the foundation for the new form of Zionist support which would come to define the relationship: political advocacy and lobbying.

Although difficult to define precisely, the Israel lobby consists of multiple large organizations comprising a great deal of the Jewish establishment in the U.S. and wields awesome political power. The most significant of these organizations is the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, which coordinates massive grassroots lobbying efforts aiming to “protect and promote the U.S.-Israel relationship.”¹⁴ Multiple Israeli prime ministers and presidents have spoken at AIPAC’s annual conference, and the Israeli government actively supports the group. Linking the two nations, AIPAC hopes to convince American lawmakers that the goals of Israel and the U.S. are philosophically and pragmatically intertwined, as they express in their mission statement:

AIPAC’s staff and citizen activists educate decision makers about the bonds that unite the United States and Israel and how it is in America’s best interest to help ensure that the Jewish state is safe, strong and secure. Cooperation between the two countries is advantageous for both nations. As America’s bipartisan pro-Israel lobby, AIPAC urges all members of Congress to support Israel through foreign aid, government partnerships, joint anti-terrorism efforts and the promotion of a negotiated two-state solution – a Jewish state of Israel and a demilitarized Palestinian state.¹⁵

The lobby shares not “a consensus about Israeli policies but [rather] a consensus about U.S. policies toward Israel.”¹⁶ Many of these policies refer to foreign aid, one of AIPAC’s top priorities. Since 1976, Israel has been

the largest annual recipient of direct economic and military aid from the U.S.; furthermore, since World War II, Israel is the largest total recipient of such aid. Approximately 20 percent of U.S. foreign aid goes to Israel each year, and Israel consistently receives exemptions requiring them to spend only 75 percent of this aid back on U.S. materials rather than the standard 100 percent.¹⁷ The second consensus about policy towards Israel is virtually “unconditional diplomatic protection.”¹⁸ This includes diligent effort in the United Nations to veto criticism of Israel, allowing Israeli interests to influence U.S. relations with other countries, and demanding a level of support from every American politician. Like with all issues with one highly mobilized side, lobbying plays a critical role in policy. Because of this, one should not be surprised by the intensity of the lobbying; far more striking is the unparalleled efficacy of the Israel lobby in shaping policy and discourse.

In both tangible and intangible ways, the Israel lobby is extremely successful and effective. Despite relying almost entirely on grassroots lobbying rather than paid lobbyists, AIPAC consistently ranks as one of the most powerful lobbies on Capitol Hill.¹⁹ Campaign contributions play a large role as well. The pro-Israel lobby donates over \$4 million every year in addition to commanding this force of volunteer lobbyists.²⁰ In an era of elite political polarization, Israel faces negligible opposition in Congress; most AIPAC-backed bills enjoy over 95 percent support, like the 2014 “strategic partner” bill which passed 410-1 in the House of Representatives.²¹ The impact on American political discourse, however, remains the largest effect of the Israel lobby. The lobby’s branding of Israel helped lead to “unequivocal popular support for Israel” and “near unanimity of opinion” on the national political stage.²² This effectively stigmatized anti-Israel sentiment to the extent that these opinions became fringe ideas. Criticism of Israel, even benign criticism, could warrant the wrath of the lobby and political suicide. President George H. W. Bush summarized this sentiment when he felt enormous pushback while opposing immediate loan guarantees for Israel, calling himself the

“one lonely little guy down here” urging nuance and patience.²³ While non-governmental organizations and parts of academia have always criticized the country, a vast majority of American politicians recognized that ardent support of the State of Israel is the most politically viable approach.

Building a career on challenging the establishment, Bernie Sanders clashed with the pro-Israel lobby on many occasions. Sanders first publicly criticized the Jewish State in 1988, condemning the “brutal” and “reprehensible” treatment of Palestinian protesters in the West Bank. In 1991, he voted to withhold aid unless settlement expansion ceased and a decade later he voted against a resolution condemning a specific terror attack against Israeli civilians. Quite frequently, like in the aforementioned examples, Sanders found himself in a tiny minority voting against the Israel lobby’s efforts.²⁴ In his 25 years of Congressional service, Bernie Sanders received only \$4,000 from pro-Israel Political Action Committees. For comparison, Hillary Clinton received over \$68,000 from these groups in only 8 years in Congress.²⁵ A maverick among American politicians, Sanders consistently displayed his disregard for the political elite and the pressure it exerted in attempting to force conformity.

This boldness gained national recognition during Sanders’ 2016 presidential campaign during which he faced off against Secretary Clinton. Early in the primary season, Democratic billionaire mogul Haim Saban, a “one-issue guy” focusing only on Israel, decided to back Clinton.²⁶ A few months later, Clinton published an article in the Jewish publication *The Forward* affirming her commitment to the “unbreakable bond with Israel — and with Benjamin Netanyahu.”²⁷ While Clinton appealed to the Jewish establishment, Bernie Sanders continued to chastise the state as he always had, criticizing Israeli disproportionate force and demanding “respect and dignity” for the Palestinians.²⁸ CNN political commentator Van Jones emphasized the boldness of the critiques after Sanders, while on the campaign trail, implored the U.S. to drop its one-sided approach to the conflict: “I haven’t seen anyone

at this level of the game ... say, ‘Look, let’s have a more balanced approach,’” Jones said, in addition to commending Sanders’ courage for expressing his beliefs.²⁹ The dichotomy between Sanders’ and Clinton’s positions on Israel falls relatively in line with each of their relationships with the establishment in general. While Clinton was generally seen as a stable candidate promoting the status quo, Sanders presented with voters with bolder positions and the possibility of change. The media and the public judged Sanders’ stances on Israel not just from the perspective of a progressive challenger but also as the most successful Jewish candidate for president the United States has ever seen.

The backdrop of Sanders’ heritage complicated his image. While Jewish institutions strongly opposed Sanders’ statements on Israel, they valued the fact that a Jewish candidate could earn such a high degree of political success. Mentions of Senator Sanders’ religious background often appear with disclaimers. The first of those disclaimers refers to Israel directly, like when *The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* commented that “Representative Sanders is Jewish but has been a major disappointment to pro-Israel activists.”³⁰ The media adopted similar terminology when mentioning that Sanders was the sole candidate for president who did not attend the 2016 AIPAC Policy Conference in Washington D.C. The media depicted Sanders as disloyal to his community and implied that he had gone somewhat rogue, calling him “a Jew who has uttered the fatal words ‘an even-handed approach.’”³¹ While these labels express sympathy with Sanders and recognize the difficulty of facing the pro-Israel establishment, his positions still faced scrutiny not only through the lens of policy but also through identity. The alternative disclaimer frequently attached to descriptions of Sanders’ Jewish heritage is one that questions the extent of his Jewishness. Throughout his political career and 2016 campaign, Sanders most frequently referenced Judaism in relation to his relatives’ experiences in the Holocaust and how the tragedies of the 20th century shaped his outlook on life. While Clinton claimed she prays daily and Trump called the Bible his favorite book ever,

Sanders noticeably distanced himself from traditional religious rhetoric and instead invoked a humanistic perception of spirituality. J.J. Goldberg noticed this absence of religious references, noting that the Hebrew phrase *tikkun olam*, “repairing the world,” has become mainstream in American liberal vocabulary to refer to social justice yet “never crossed [Sanders’] lips.”³² Such framing of Sanders’ Jewish heritage reflected the struggle of the American Jewish community in having a successful Jewish candidate yet not one with whom many Jews could relate. Israeli media, with its uniquely specific interests in American politics, also reflected this framing.

Israeli society follows American politics closely and provides interesting perspectives. Israeli articles about American issues tend to be less nuanced, as their target audience is less knowledgeable about U.S. politics than American audiences. Media priming and framing of Senator Sanders, therefore, provides insight into the interests and biases of the publications and of the target audiences. Some Israeli outlets, like the popular Walla, dwelled simply on the success of a Jewish candidate with headlines that exclaim “A Jew in the White House? Here’s How Sanders is Captivating Youths in America.”³³ Articles like this, however, comprised the minority of references to Sanders and were more frequent earlier in the campaign. Over time, the novelty of Jewish political success in the Diaspora faded and Israeli media realized that this “Jew in the White House” might not be as friendly as anticipated. Some articles bluntly displayed the questions about Sanders in their headlines: “Bernie Sanders: A Jew Who Loves Israel or a Pro-Palestinian?”³⁴ The publication cautions that although raised by immigrants with Holocaust survivors in the family, Sanders has a “problematic” history with Israel. Many of the articles seem to imitate the reactions they hope to instill in their readers; headlines dwell on his Jewish identity, like “Bernie Sanders Says He’s Proud to be Jewish and Gets Applauded,” while the body of the articles outline his positions towards Israel in a foreboding tone.³⁵

For all of the aforementioned reasons and many more, Hillary Clinton

dominated the Jewish vote in the United States. With so many members of the Jewish establishment backing Clinton over their “co-religionist,” Sanders underperformed amongst Jewish voters and earned a lower percentage of them than of Democrats as a whole.³⁶ Pundits continue to debate whether Bernie Sanders could have performed better with Jews had he called upon his Judaism more on the campaign trail or if his positions on Israel immediately disqualified him for winning the Jewish vote. Demographic analysis, however, shows that these questions do not relate to Jews as a whole; rather, the divisions that distinguish the electorate as a whole apply as well to the Jewish community. Younger American Jews joined their similarly-aged peers in voting for Bernie en masse. Just as Bernie Sanders overperformed among younger voters relative to the general public, he overperformed among younger Jews relative to Jews in general.³⁷ This fact reveals certain overarching trends among the American public but more specifically among the American Jewish community.

Despite losing the election and losing the American Jewish vote, Sanders undoubtedly succeeded in terms of younger voters. His success among younger Jewish voters stands out as striking; these people, many of whom were voting for the first or second time, disregarded the religious and cultural establishment. Furthermore, they validated Bernie Sanders’ humanistic attitude towards Judaism and his criticisms of the Jewish State. While the older generation demanded unconditional support, the new generation of Jewish Americans see Israel as “an actual country with its problems and flaws.”³⁸ Support for Bernie Sanders showed that younger Jews were either not bothered by or downright supportive of Sanders’ positions towards Israel. Because of the intimate connection between the American Jewish community and U.S. policy towards Israel, this shift in attitude reveals a threatening trend for Israel. Israel relies heavily on U.S. support that Israel lobby and American Jewish establishment guarantee through political advocacy. By casting votes for Sanders, however, younger American

Jews showed themselves willing to defy the establishment and to tread on previously untouched ground: a conditional and critical relationship with the State of Israel.

Andy Neumann is a sophomore from Baltimore, Md. studying Philosophy, Politics, and Economics. He has a wide range of interests and enjoys heated debates about everything from ethics to food trucks. In his spare time, Andy can be found drinking coffee and panicking about existential risk.

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