

War in Israel divides California Democrats

The ongoing conflict in the Middle East has exposed fissures within the Democratic Senate field.



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While protesters were [shutting down](#) the congested 110 Freeway in Los Angeles last week, 21-year-old Jonah Gottlieb was working to organize student protesters calling for a cease-fire in Gaza on his campus and elsewhere.

Gottlieb, a Jewish student at the University of California at Berkeley who spoke to *National Journal* between organizing efforts, said that the war in Gaza is going to be top of mind for voters ahead of California's March 5 Senate primaries and that the issue is not going away anytime soon.

"I think that if we as organizers do our work correctly, this will be the defining issue of the election," Gottlieb said.

Before the war in Gaza, it may have been difficult to parse between the three leading Democrats in the California race—Reps. Adam Schiff, Katie Porter, and Barbara Lee—all vying to replace the late Sen. Dianne Feinstein.

But since Hamas' deadly attack on Israel on Oct. 7, the conflict has exposed the fault lines in the marquee race. All three candidates have different views on how the U.S. should respond.

Lee distinguished herself early as a vocal supporter of a cease-fire, while Schiff and Porter have taken different lanes—with Porter only recently supporting a "[bilateral cease-fire](#)." The divide over the war is playing out nationally within the Democratic Party and within the halls of Congress. California's early primaries could serve as a referendum on the war and send a message to national Democrats about how the base wants them to respond.



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The congressman's fundraising lead may make the difference in an expensive statewide race.

HANNAH THACKER

Planting her flag against a war is nothing new for Lee. Three days after the 9/11 terrorist acts, she was the only member of Congress to vote against the authorization for use of force that spawned the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. She faced death threats and [was called a traitor](#) at the time.

Gottlieb sees Lee as having passed a "progressive litmus test" by backing a cease-fire early, and he says it could make the difference in the primary, especially among young progressives like himself.

Gottlieb and other progressives say they plan to step up their ground operation for Lee to get her into the top two spots in the upcoming open primary, in which the [top two finishers](#) move on to compete in the general election regardless of party affiliation.

"We are going to have a really robust field program," said Fatima Iqbal-Zubair, who leads California's Progressive Caucus. "That's our strength as progressives is that we are going to really attack the doors."

Schiff and Porter, both prolific fundraisers, have led in available polling as Lee struggled to make inroads from the very start of her campaign.

But Lee's campaign started to show signs of life in mid-November when she won a plurality of the vote at the state Democratic Convention—which was cut short after [mostly young](#), pro-cess-fire demonstrators forced the event center into lockdown and organizers had to cancel its Saturday evening programming.

"We know that the public is with us on cease-fire," Lee told *National Journal* in a telephone interview. "People know that I condemn Hamas and condemn any terrorist attack against Israel, and that Israel deserves to be secure and free from the horrific tragedy and horrific attacks. So that's very clear. But also people know that I believe we have to have a permanent cease-fire."

Recent [polling](#) has shown that a majority of Americans [support](#) a cease-fire in the conflict. Calls from progressive Democrats for a cease-fire have put pressure on politicians from Congress to the White House. President Biden has seen a [sharp drop](#) in his approval ratings within his own party, especially with young Democrats, as he continues to refuse to call for a cease-fire.

"If this discussion was taking place on October 6, it would be very difficult to see a path forward that would get Lee into the runoff, let alone into the Senate," said Dan Schnur, a former political strategist and political-communications professor at prominent California universities. "But the world has changed since the Hamas attacks.



Rep. Adam Schiff carries a sign on a picket line outside Netflix studios in Los Angeles in July. (AP Photo/Chris Pizzello) CHRIS PIZZELLO/INVISION/AP

"If Lee does make the runoff, it will be a direct result of the Gaza war and its impact on the Democratic Party," Schnur said.

Lee's cease-fire messaging also recently earned her the endorsement of Burbank Mayor Konstantine Anthony, who pulled his previous endorsement from Schiff over his refusal to support a cease-fire.

Porter's campaign declined to comment for this story. Schiff's campaign touted his endorsements from current and former elected officials in California and labor unions across the state.

Lee significantly trailed Schiff and Porter in polls in October and November, but a UC Berkeley Institute of Governmental Studies poll found [30 percent](#) of voters were undecided. Another poll from Emerson College/*Inside California Politics* found 39 percent of voters were still undecided.

In December, Lee moved up in the polls, with a SurveyUSA poll showing her at 12 percent, now tied with Porter, though 20 percent of voters were undecided.

California political strategists and pollsters who spoke with *National Journal* say it is still too early to say anyone has the race in the bag given the amount of undecided voters in recent polls.

"This new momentum behind Barbara Lee is really going to start targeting that 39 percent of people who may not know her, who only know Adam Schiff by name, who've only heard of Katie Porter through her viral videos and her [whiteboard](#)," Anthony said.

But even if Lee can capture those undecided voters, California political observers say that making it through the March primaries will still be difficult given her lack of fundraising and name recognition outside of Northern California.

Some California political observers also argue that her strong showing at the state party convention, which attracts the most ideological voters, was not reflective of how more-moderate Democrats will vote statewide come March. Lee disagrees.

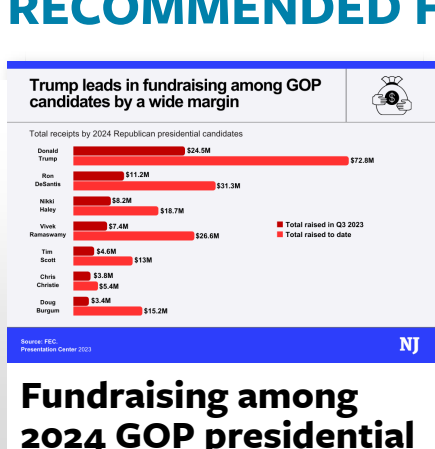
"I think the Democratic Party is a progressive party in California, but it's a party that wants to see their progressive champion get the job done on behalf of California," Lee said. "We had a coalition—a multiracial, multigenerational coalition—who showed up and who voted for me, and this does reflect California in terms of the positions that we take."

Lee has managed to excite her progressive base, but the question remains whether she can turn that momentum into small-dollar donations, and most importantly, into votes, noted Danielle Cendejas, a California-based Democratic strategist.

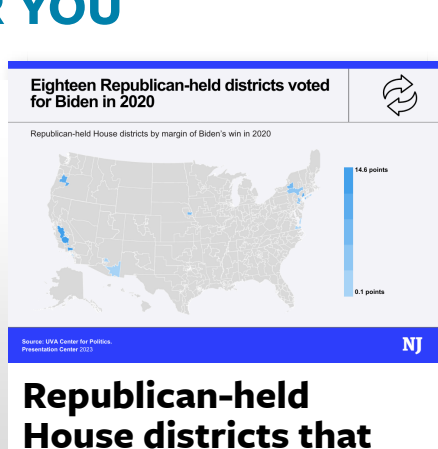
"That's going to be the challenge of her campaign: Does she have the resources to capitalize on that momentum and also not turn off voters who maybe have a different viewpoint on what she's advocating for?" Cendejas said. [NJ](#)

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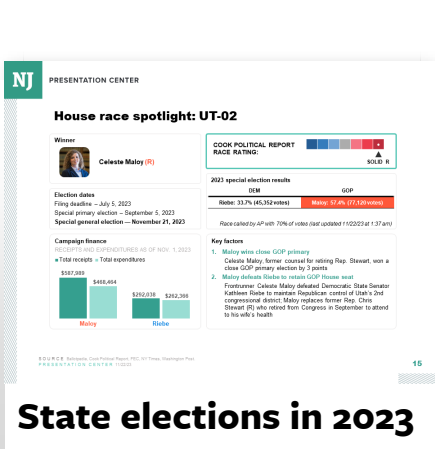
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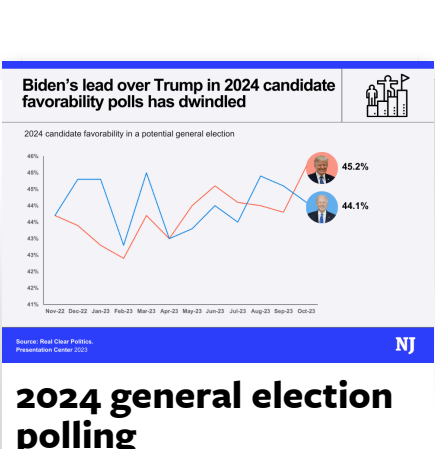
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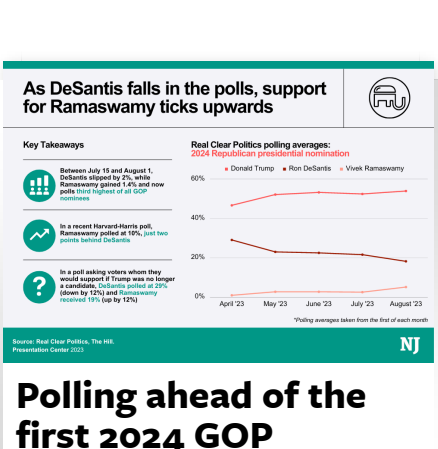
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