

# Trends in International Politics 2024

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## The Gaza War - Affective Polarization and the Future of Democracy

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2024 will be a global election year. Voters in more than 77 countries, including the US, India, the UK, and the European Union, representing almost

half of the world population, will go to the polls (Time, 28.12.2023). Not all elections - such as the presidential elections in Russia or the local elections in Turkey - will be taking place in a democratic environment.

However, most of them will be characterized by high political polarization. For many democracies, such as the US or Austria, 2024 will be another important stress test. Political debates are polarized around rising costs of living or identity issues such as immigration. A rather new trend is that the perceptions of international conflicts have increasingly overlapped and intertwined with political fault lines on the domestic level. The wars in Ukraine and Gaza have fueled heated political debates in many societies. This 2024 trend report aims to explore the impact of the War in Gaza on political polarization and elections.

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October 7, 2023, was the bloodiest terrorist attack in Israeli history. Hamas fighters took 1139 lives and more than 200 hostages (France 24, 15.12.2023;

The Wallstreet Journal 24.01.2024). Many of the victims were young people, 36 of them were children (ibid.). Many women were sexually abused and raped before they were killed or taken hostage. The images of the attacks, their dimension and the brutality of the terrorists not only impacted Israelis but also frightened and disturbed many people around the world. However, Israel's uncompromising war on Hamas leading a death toll of 26.000 civilians (AP 27.01.2024), the level of destruction in Gaza and the food and health emergency have soon led to cracks in the broad international solidarity with Israel.

While across the Middle East, there has been - despite reservations in some countries against Hamas- an overwhelming solidarity with Palestinians and Gaza, most, Western democracies, have been divided over support for Israel's right to self-defense and solidarity with Palestinians. In November 2023, 50 percent of US

citizens approved of Israel's military action in Gaza and 45 percent disapproved. An overwhelming majority of 71 percent of Republicans have been in support of Israel, compared to 36 percent of Democrats who approved of Israel's military actions in Gaza (Gallup, 30.11.2023). In Germany, a survey held in November 2023 highlighted that 31 percent of Germans backed the government's pro-Israeli stance while 38 percent desired a more critical policy towards Israel to prevent Palestinian casualties (Middle East Monitor, 24.11.2023).

Arguments in support of Israel have often either foregrounded Israel's special historical role as a refuge for Jews in the world and/or they have seen Israel as an outpost of Western civilization in a hostile Middle East and as a bastion against Islamist extremism. These different lines of argument have largely ignored the injustice and discrimination against Palestinians and have rather perceived Palestinians and Muslims as a homogeneous group characterized by radicalism, extremism, and anti-Semitism. This perception has chimed in with Israeli right-wing rhetoric which has presented Israel's military occupation of the West Bank, settlements, and the war on Gaza as inevitable measures to keep Islamist

extremists at bay and safeguard security not only in Israel but the entire Western world.

Hence, rather often pro-Israel rhetoric and approval for the war has overlapped with anti-Muslim and anti-migration opinions. These are overwhelmingly - but not exclusively - represented in right-wing, nationalist, and conservative echo-chambers. Anti-Israeli and pro-Palestinian voices in turn have tended to see Israel through the lens of Western colonialism. They have often ignored the historical context from which Israel emerged and the trauma of the Holocaust. They have rather only judged Israel by the discriminatory practices against Palestinians and have seen Israel as an oppressive, military apartheid state. While Israel is depicted as the face of Western imperialism, Palestinians are often collectively seen as the subaltern in an unjust international order. These perceptions have strongly overlapped with the criticism of the racist nature of Western capitalist imperialism of leftist and liberal urban circles.

The two different perceptions of the conflict reflect deep-seated antithetical and irreconcilable conceptions of the social world and the world order. One group tends to perceive the world as a chaotic jungle where Israel is in a good fight against the evil (Islamist

extremists). This perspective is also inclined to support power politics and military strength while civilian casualties are often justified as an unavoidable necessity. The second group mostly shares the idea of a word of the powerful. However, in contrast to the first group they rather criticize it and solidarize with the weak and poor. They tend to have a stronger believe in international organizations and international law as instruments to rein in the powerful.

These splits over notions of justice and injustice on the international level prevent any empathy for the sufferings of both sides and they have increasingly coincided a growing trend towards affective polarization in most democratic and semi-democratic societies. Affective polarization refers to the political polarization of the masses. It goes beyond divisions within the political elites and is characterized by a growing distrust and dislike of supporters of one political group for those of another (Iyengar et al. 2019). Different from ideological cleavages, affective polarization is rarely based on

ideological differences - many voters cannot even or do not want to place themselves on a Left–Right scale (Lauka et al. 2018, 110). Instead, societies are mainly split along identity conceptions. The divide is not over political programs but over the very conceptions of democracy, coexistence, identity and justice. Lauka et al. (2018, 110) assert that in most of the cases, it is not only one but rather a particular combination of cleavages that drives societies apart. The Hamas-Israeli conflict has coincided with divisions on identity and justice that do partially match with the traditional Left–Right rifts, but also run across various party lines.

October 7 and the subsequent war in Gaza won't be the central themes neither of elections in the US nor in the EU, the UK, India, or Austria. However, the conflict has highlighted the growing overlap between the perception of international conflicts and domestic polarization over identity issues and values. This growing trend towards affective polarization limits dialogue, empathy and compromise.

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