

United States: The Democrats' stubborn refusal to learn from the campus protests for Palestine

Wednesday 18 December 2024, by [MOOR Ahmed](#) (Date first published: 17 December 2024).

In Philadelphia and across the U.S., progressive young voters rejected the idea that domestic priorities must be tied to a destructive policy abroad.

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In mid-November, I attended a public meeting organized by Reclaim Philadelphia, a progressive group founded in the aftermath of the first Trump presidency. The event served as an election post-mortem, but also as a place to begin to chart a way forward — to consider what the next four years may bring. Speakers, including members of the local Philadelphia community and Reclaim's leadership, described the ways in which the Democratic party leadership had failed them: plenty of “brat” and Beyonce, but nothing about a living wage for working families — all while [supporting a genocide](#) in Gaza and [repression on college campuses](#).



The fifth day of the Gaza encampment at UPenn in Philadelphia, April 29, 2024. (Joe Piette/CC BY-NC 2.0 DEED)

Donald Trump's commanding victory is attributable to [more factors than can be easily listed](#) here. But among the lessons of the presidential election, the youth vote tells an important story.

Overall, the Democrats experienced their [worst performance](#) among young people in 20 years. Compared to President Joe Biden's election victory in 2020, Vice President Kamala Harris [lost 3 million votes](#) from Americans under 30. Americans across the country moved to the right, and under-30 voters were no exception. But the Democrats lost youth not only to Trump but to broad demobilization: put simply, fewer young voters turned out at the polls.

According to research compiled by Tufts University, nationwide youth participation was eight points

lower in 2024 than in 2020 — 42 percent as compared to 50 percent. Kamala Harris won among under-30s by only four points; in 2020, Biden beat Trump among this demographic by 25 points. That’s a 21-point swing in only four years.

So what explains this? “I didn’t feel like my views were represented by either party,” Sophia Rosser, a third-year student at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, told me.

For Rosser, the fact that Harris seemed to back all of Biden’s policies, especially his [support for Israel’s genocidal war](#) in Gaza, highlighted contradictions in her campaign. “I can’t think of her attempt to solve the housing crisis without thinking about the fact that 90 percent of people in Gaza have been displaced,” she said. “I can’t think of her [vowed] protection of women’s rights and not think of mothers in Gaza, who are giving birth without access to care, or the thousands of children who have been murdered.”



Thousands march in the streets of Philadelphia to protest Republican and Democrat complicity in the Gaza genocide, September 10, 2024. (Joe Piette/CC BY-NC 2.0 DEED)

This was a common sentiment among young voters I spoke to in Pennsylvania: a refusal to accept that achieving progressive political priorities at home must come at the cost of continuing a destructive, illiberal policy abroad. Democrats, they argue, can no longer afford to be [“progressive except Palestine.”](#) And thousands of them, like Rosser, are university students who participated in protests and joined encampments over the past year.

Rather than take their concerns seriously, Democratic politicians and party leaders spent much of the past year berating and belittling students for their vocal opposition to Israel’s genocide, and smearing them as being motivated by hatred of Jews. Biden described the encampment at Columbia as [“antisemitic protests.”](#) Ohio Senator Sherrod Brown, who is often described as a progressive, [told reporters](#) in relation to the protest movement that “the antisemitism and hate and violence [on college campuses] are not acceptable.”

By November, it was clear that this policy of prolonged vilification did substantial damage to the Democrats. “A lot of left-leaning kids stayed home,” Jeet Heer, a columnist at The Nation, [noted](#) on X. “Don’t let anyone tell you Gaza wasn’t a factor.”

Chalking out a crackdown

Much has been written about the pro-Palestinian demonstrations and encampments on college campuses that erupted in spring of this year, in which tens of thousands of students across the country called on their university leaderships to [divest](#) from arms manufacturers that are abetting the genocide. But with the hindsight of the election results, it’s worth reviewing how the crackdown on student organizing contributed to the Democrats’ defeat.

The campus protest movement gained force after students affiliated with the national umbrella group Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) erected tents on Columbia University’s campus in April. At the University of Pennsylvania, students pressured the administration to disclose its investments

from the school's \$22.3 billion endowment. According to Rosser, the movement at Penn also called to "divest from the Israeli apartheid state and defend Palestinian scholars, students, and activists" from disciplinary action.



Over 300 workers, students and community members rallied for Palestine in a march ended at the UPenn encampment for Gaza in Philadelphia, May 8, 2024. (Joe Piette/CC BY-NC 2.0 DEED)

What followed was an onslaught of physical and rhetorical repression. The media and political leaders cynically interpreted the protests as being antisemitic and dismissed them as the latest manifestation of "woke" behavior.

A Republican-led, [Democrat-supported](#) series of congressional hearings followed. They targeted three female university presidents, two of whom were later forced from their roles at Harvard and Penn. Columbia's president, who survived the hearing on Capitol Hill, later [succumbed](#) to her own psychic wounds after being pilloried by students for demonizing them in a national forum, and resigned. Elise Stefanik, the Republican who led the hearings, has been tapped by Donald Trump for the role of US ambassador to the UN.

The high-profile firings at Harvard and Penn helped shape universities' reactions to the protests, which have been both ham-fisted and heavy-handed. Administrators routinely summoned police onto campus, who proceeded to beat and arrest protesters — [3,100](#) during the course of the spring semester.

Over the summer, administrators at Harvard, George Washington, and Indiana, among many other universities, implemented new rules prohibiting students from protesting. At Harvard, the administration went as far as to try to prohibit students from writing in chalk on sidewalks. In response, several tenured faculty chalked their protest. "Why do preschoolers have more academic freedom than Harvard students?" one message [read](#).

Meanwhile students at Columbia, NYU, Yale, USC, Emory, and a host of other institutions are contending with the fallout of having been arrested and, in some cases, prosecuted. Rishi Arun, a student at Temple University in Philadelphia, was arrested in May at an encampment at Penn. "This is like 2020," Arun overheard one police officer say to another during the incident — a statement he believes referenced the Black Lives Matter protests that erupted after George Floyd's murder.

Arun was held for roughly 12 hours on a \$25,000 bail, which he ultimately paid to secure his release. "My charges are still pending," he explained, with his next hearing scheduled for this month.



At the beginning of the fall semester, Students for Justice in Palestine hold a “dis-orientation rally” at Temple University in Philadelphia, August 29, 2024. (Joe Piette/CC BY-NC 2.0 DEED)

‘There’s energy on campus – but a lot more fear’

The repression has continued in full force into the current academic year. In October, 12 Penn police officers [raided a student apartment](#) in Philadelphia with guns drawn. The police claimed that they were there to investigate “suspicion of vandalism” and that the show of force was authorized by a warrant. The District Attorney’s Office quickly distanced itself from the action, claiming it had “no role” in how the search warrant was executed.

“It is completely unacceptable and disturbing that a dozen officers armed with tactical gear and assault rifles threatened the safety of unarmed young people,” Pennsylvania State Representative Rick Krajewski, himself a Penn graduate, [wrote](#) on X — a sentiment that echoed the broader community’s outrage. But Penn administrators have aggressively [defended](#) their decision to raid the apartment, and the incident followed an overall increase in policing on campus. For a time, visitors could not access the college green, which had been fenced off to prevent spontaneous protest and encampments.

The reactionary and zealous moves appear to have achieved little in the way of dissuading those who are opposed to the genocide, even while causing them to adjust their tactics. Eliana Atienza, another Penn student, explained that “the energy is there but there’s a lot more fear; the police raid definitely scared a lot of people,” she added.

“They’re not holding back on disciplinary action so we’re trying to get more creative about how we organize in light of the new guidelines,” Atienza continued. For students at Penn, that means organizing to end the institutional relationship between the university and Ghost Robotics, a company which was founded at Penn, is headquartered at [Pennovation](#), an on-campus accelerator, and whose customers [include the Israeli military](#).

By targeting a small company whose success carries limited financial upside for the university’s massive endowment, the students hope they will be able to force the university to cut ties with the company — rather than risk the public relations scandal of being associated with active support for an ongoing genocide. They also believe this approach will have more success than continuing to organize general demonstrations, particularly as those protests have been mischaracterized as creating an unsafe environment for Jewish students.



A sign protesting Ghost Robotics on the UPenn campus, April 27, 2024. (Joe Piette/CC BY-NC 2.0 DEED)

Nearby, at Swarthmore College, a third-year student who requested anonymity explained that “the energy on campus is higher than it was last year,” but the repression is apparent too. “We’ve been able to mobilize both students and faculty [to protest] after the administration issued more than 25 disciplinary warnings — mainly to first-generation, lower income students of color,” the student explained.

Indeed, despite new university restrictions, this semester has seen students across the country continue to organize and protest. Students at UCLA [erected new encampments](#) on their campus in October. In Minnesota, 11 students were arrested after protesters occupied a university building. And at Brown, Jewish students [erected](#) a Gaza Solidarity Sukkah in solidarity with Palestinians; they, too, were censured by their administration.

But not all agreed that organizers maintained the same level of zeal for demonstrating. The enthusiasm “last year was more palpable,” a student at Drexel University, who wished to remain anonymous, told me. “We had more hope that we could change something.” Indeed, those feelings of disempowerment and disaffection may have contributed to the number of young voters who opted to stay home in November.

Bipartisan blackmail

The assault on academic freedom and speech, much of it organized by wealthy trustees, has come at a time of structural vulnerability for many institutions of higher learning. Adjusting for inflation, it now costs [twice as much](#) to attend a four-year university as compared to 1963. And as tuition has increased, so has [students’ reliance](#) on [federal funding](#), both at public and private institutions.

This reliance is a key source of vulnerability for universities, which pro-Israel politicians are ready to exploit. Republican House leaders have promised AIPAC that they will pull funding from universities that do not “[squash criticism of Israel](#).” And in late November, Virginia Foxx, a Republican in North Carolina, and Josh Gottheimer, a Democrat in New Jersey, introduced a bipartisan bill [that aims](#) “to prohibit colleges and universities from receiving federal student aid if they engage in commercial boycotts” of Israel.

Representative Steve Scalise — who serves as House Majority Leader, the second most senior position in the House — has openly threatened universities with even more severe sanctions. “Your accreditation is on the line,” he said at an AIPAC event in October, a threat echoed by Donald Trump. Just days after winning the election, Trump [promised](#) that on his “first week back in the Oval Office, my administration will inform every college president that, if you do not end antisemitic propaganda, they will lose their accreditation and federal taxpayer support.”



Democratic Congressman Josh Gottheimer, January 21, 2019. (New Jersey National Guard/CC BY-ND 2.0 DEED)

The disruption to academic and intellectual freedom has led faculty around the country to begin [accelerating efforts](#) to protect the vitality of their institutions, a drive led by those at public universities whose right to unionization is mostly protected by law. While many faculty members participated in protests last spring, the repression of speech has caused some to begin to link the protest movement to the diminishment of institutions of higher learning, and the increasingly tenuous role of academics within them.

These academics face an enormous challenge. [Title VI](#), the federal law enacted through the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits the use of public funding by institutions that discriminate “on

grounds of race, color, or national origin,” has been weaponized to target critics of Israel. Students who claim to feel “unsafe” at university because of protests or because they don’t like a professor’s point of view can now file a complaint online with little effort, triggering dramatic consequences for the targeted faculty.

“We’ve conflated the experience of being uncomfortable with being unsafe,” a tenured professor at a liberal arts college in Pennsylvania, who is currently being investigated by his college for his teaching on Palestine, and who requested to remain anonymous, told me. In his view, the liberal discourse of “safe spaces” and “trigger warnings,” which were developed with good intentions and to protect historically marginalized students, have helped produce an infrastructure for filing “bias complaints” with little substantive support.

In his case, all it took was one student who took offense at his approach toward teaching Palestine to launch the investigation, supported by an external law firm that the college hired. “The process has been incredibly invasive,” he said. The months-long investigation will culminate when a faculty panel evaluates the law firm’s findings to determine whether he violated university policy.

“Investigations take a tremendous financial toll — you have to hire your own lawyer,” the professor explained. And beyond the stress of being targeted, he said, the investigation is “incredibly time-consuming and takes you away from teaching or research.”



Teachers rally for Palestine at National Education Association (NEA) Convention in Philadelphia, July 3, 2024. (Joe Piette/CC BY-NC 2.0 DEED)

There are troubling indications that the front lines of the fight to prohibit anti-Zionist or anti-Israel speech are being broadened, with NYU now claiming, [against an](#) authoritative and comprehensive body of scholarship, that the word Zionist is a “[codeword for Jew](#).” This growing prohibition on Palestine advocacy in academia threatens to undermine the very purpose of open inquiry and dialogue, which Harvard — even as it restricts free speech on campus — recently [described](#) as being essential to “the pursuit of truth, the creation and transfer of knowledge across generations, and the use of knowledge to improve society, spur innovation, and fortify democracy.”

“[The repression] gets at the heart of academic freedom and what academia is supposed to stand for,” the tenured professor said. “We don’t really know where academia is heading. Are we witnessing the beginning of the end of academic freedom in America?”

Fighting on local turf

At the post-election event in Philadelphia, one man spoke thoughtfully about the different Democratic parties — the city party, the state organization, and the Democratic National Committee. People in the room seemed to feel most energized and activated by the prospect of organizing locally for housing and access to healthcare, and against the encroachment of massive real estate development in the city. There was no sense that the DNC was relevant.

There was a feeling, too, that the coming administration would capitalize on the openings provided

by Biden-Harris. Trump will go to war against universities and speech he doesn't like, and efforts to combat the assault will almost certainly take place in the cities and counties where local officials are closest to their constituents, where they walk the same streets and send their kids to neighborhood schools.

And yet, the general landscape suggests that the accelerating fight against pro-Palestine speech will find allies in the Democratic party leadership. Chuck Schumer's Antisemitism Awareness Act and Foxx and Gottheimer's Protect Economic Freedom Act illustrate that the faultlines do not divide the parties from one another. The United States' establishment — its politicians, its media moguls, and its donor class — remain largely aligned.

And that may be the lesson in all this: there is no national cavalry that will step in to save the day. The battles against genocide in Palestine, the domestic repression of speech, and the erosion of liberties in service of Israel and a bipartisan corporatist agenda are local fights — ones that will require broad popular solidarity to win.

To paraphrase Benjamin Franklin, Philadelphia's own founding father, coalitions of activists who fight for academic freedom, a living wage, just foreign policy, environmental protections, an independent media, and restrictions on corporate intrusions into civic life will have to hang together. Or else, they will hang separately.

Ahmed Moor

P.S.

• +972. December 17, 2024 :

<https://www.972mag.com/gazans-criticize-hamas-war-october-7/>

- Ahmed Moor is a writer and advisory board member of the US Campaign for Palestinian Rights.
- Our team [+972] has been devastated by the horrific events of this latest war - the atrocities committed by Hamas in Israel and the massive retaliatory Israeli attacks on Gaza. Our hearts are with all the people and communities facing violence.

We are in an extraordinarily dangerous era in Israel-Palestine. The bloodshed unleashed by these events has reached extreme levels of brutality and threatens to engulf the entire region. Hamas' murderous assault in southern Israel has devastated and shocked the country to its core. Israel's retaliatory bombing of Gaza is wreaking destruction on the already besieged strip and killing a ballooning number of civilians. Emboldened settlers in the West Bank, backed by the army, are seizing the opportunity to escalate their attacks on Palestinians.

This escalation has a very clear context, one that +972 has spent the past 13 years covering: Israeli society's growing racism and militarism, the entrenched occupation, and an increasingly normalized siege on Gaza.

We are well positioned to cover this perilous moment - but we need your help to do it. This terrible period will challenge the humanity of all of those working for a better future in this land. Palestinians and Israelis are already organizing and strategizing to put up the fight of their lives.

Can we count on your [support](#)? +972 Magazine is the leading media voice of this movement, a desperately needed platform where Palestinian and Israeli journalists and activists can report on and analyze what is happening, guided by humanism, equality, and justice. Join us.

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