نشریه علمی-پژوهشی
مطالعات کشورها
شاپای الکترونیکی: ۹۱۹۳-۲۹۸۰

دموکراسی در گفتار، استثناگرایی در عمل: سیاست ایالات متحده در قبال جنگ غزه، ۲۰۲۳–۲۰۲۵م

دینا یولیانتی[۱*]، دوی آردیانتی[۲]، ویرچوئس ستیاکا[۳]، ماندلا آ. موبکوا[۴]، اتونگ سولایمن[۵]

۱. گروه روابط بین‌الملل، دانشکدهٔ علوم اجتماعی و سیاسی، دانشگاه پاجاجاران، سومدانگ، اندونزی.
۲. گروه روابط بین‌الملل، دانشکدهٔ علوم انسانی, دانشگاه دارالسلام, پونوروگو، اندونزی.
۳. گروه روابط بین‌الملل، دانشگاه آندالاس، پادانگ، اندونزی.
۴. مدرسهٔ کسب‌وکار، دانشکدهٔ علوم مدیریت، دانشگاه فناوری دوربان، دوربان، آفریقای جنوبی.
۵. مدرسهٔ عالی دین اسلام صدرا، جاکارتا، اندونزی.

مشخصات مقاله

مقالهٔ پژوهشی
موضوع: روابط بین‌الملل، سیاست خارجه، گفتمان‌کاوی
حوزهٔ موضوعی: ایالات متحده، غزه

تاریخ دریافت: ۱۴۰۵/۰۵/۳۱
تاریخ بازنگری: ۱۴۰۵/۰۶/۳۰
تاریخ پذیرش: ۱۴۰۵/۰۷/۱۱
تاریخ انتشار: ۱۴۰۵/۰۷/۲۶

واژگان کلیدی:
استثناگرایی دموکراسی‌گونه،
ایالات متحدهٔ آمریکا،
جنگ غزه،
روایت‌های راهبردی،
سیاست خارجی،
گفتمان دموکراسی‌گونه،
مشروعیت.

چکیده

در این مقاله، مفهوم «استثناگرایی دموکراسی‌گونه» در توضیح این مسئله بسط داده شده است که چگونه زبان دموکراسی در جایگاه ارزشی جهان‌شمول مطرح می‌شود، درحالی‌که تعهدهای ناشی از آن، بسته به روابط سیاسی و جایگاه ائتلافی کشورها، به‌طور نابرابر اعمال می‌گردد. در این مفهوم، نحوهٔ استفادهٔ دولت‌ها از زبان دموکراسی در توجیه سیاست ایالات متحده در جنگ غزه، از ۷ اکتبر ۲۰۲۳م تا ۲۰ ژانویه ۲۰۲۵م شکل می‌گیرد. در این پژوهش، دموکراسی ویژگی نظام داخلی محسوب نمی‌شود، بلکه به‌مثابهٔ واژگان سیاست خارجی در پنج مؤلفه بررسی می‌شود: دموکراسی، حاکمیت قانون، حمایت از غیرنظامیان، نظم بین‌المللی مبتنی بر قواعد، و حق تعیین سرنوشت فلسطینیان از طریق راه‌حل دوکشوری. در پژوهش، با تحلیل تفسیری ساختاریافته، ۱۶ سخنرانی و بیانیهٔ بایدن بررسی و با شواهد دیپلماتیکی و مادی آمریکا، از جمله اسناد شورای امنیت، یادداشت امنیت ملی، آرای دیوان بین‌المللی دادگستری، داده‌های کمک امنیتی و نظرسنجی‌ها مقایسه شده است. یافته‌ها نشان می‌دهد زبان دموکراسی، به‌جای محدودکردن انتخاب‌های سیاستی، تعهدات هنجاری را نابرابر توزیع می‌کند. امنیت اسرائیل تعهدی الزام‌آور تلقی می‌شود، درحالی‌که حمایت از غیرنظامیان و حاکمیت فلسطین بیشتر اهداف بشردوستانه یا بلندمدت مطرح است. در مقاله استدلال شده است استثناگرایی دموکراسی‌گونه سازوکاری گفتمانی برای حفظ ادعای جهان‌شمولی دموکراسی همراه با اعمال گزینشی تعهدات است.

ارجاع به این مقاله: ولیانتی د، آردیانتی د، ستیاکا و، موبکوا م آ، سولایمن ا. (۱۴۰۶). «دموکراسی در گفتار، استثناگرایی در عمل: سیاست ایالات متحده در قبال جنگ غزه، ۲۰۲۳–۲۰۲۵م». *مطالعات کشورها*. ۵(۳): ۶۲۱- ۶۴۸. doi: https://doi.org/10.22059/jcountst.2026.420717.1625

وبگاه: https://jcountst.ut.ac.ir/ | رایانامه: jcountst@ut.ac.ir
شاپای الکترونیکی: ۹۱۹۳- ۲۹۸۰ | ناشر: دانشگاه تهران

CC BY NC

* نویسندهٔ مسئول: dina14@unpad.ac.id، https://orcid.org/0009-0006-2487-2745

Journal of
Countries Studies
EISSN: 2980-9193

Democracy in words, exceptionalism in practice: United States policy toward the Gaza War, 2023–2025

Dina Yulianti[1*], Dwi Ardiyanti[2], Virtuous Setyaka[3], Mandla A. Mubecua[4], Otong Sulaeman[5]

1. Department of International Relations, Universitas Padjadjaran, Sumedang, Indonesia.
2. Department of International Relations, Universitas Darussalam, Ponorogo, Indonesia.
3. Department of International Relations, Andalas University, Padang, Indonesia.
4. Business School, Faculty of Management Sciences, Durban University of Technology, Durban, South Africa.
5. Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Sadra, Jakarta, Indonesia.

Article Info

Original Article

Main Object: International Relations, Foreign Policy, Discourse Analysis
Scope: Gaza, United States

Received: 22 August 2026
Revised: 21 September 2026
Accepted: 03 October 2026
Published online: 18 October 2026

Keywords:
democratic discourse,
democratic exceptionalism,
foreign policy,
Gaza war,
legitimacy,
strategic narratives,
United States.

Abstract

This article develops the concept of democratic exceptionalism to explain how democratic language is claimed as a universal value while the obligations it carries are applied unevenly, depending on a country's political relationship and alliance status. The concept is developed through an analysis of how the Biden administration used democratic language to justify United States policy during the Gaza war, 7 October 2023 to 20 January 2025. Democracy is treated not as a domestic regime characteristic, but as a foreign-policy vocabulary built around five elements: democracy, the rule of law, civilian protection, the rules-based international order, and Palestinian self-determination through a two-state solution. The study applies structured content coding to sixteen of Biden's speeches and statements on Gaza, then interprets it against records of U.S. diplomatic and material practice, including Security Council documents, the National Security Memorandum, International Court of Justice decisions, security-assistance data, and public opinion surveys. Democratic language is discovered to spread out normative obligations rather than to limit policy choices. Civilian protection and Palestinian sovereignty were discussed more as a humanitarian issue or long-term aim, whereas Israel's security was seen as more of a binding obligation. Adjustments, though occasional, to legal and humanitarian language did not hinder military assistance to Israel; and the repeated U.S. vetoes weakened the multilateral mechanisms official rhetoric referred to as the basis for American leadership. The article argues democratic exceptionalism is a discursive mechanism sustaining democracy's claim to universality while applying its obligations selectively, offering an analytical lens for how democratic states preserve legitimacy while applying obligations unevenly in international relations.

Cite this article: Yulianti D, Ardiyanti D, Setyaka V, Mubecua MA, Sulaeman O. (2027). "Democracy in words, exceptionalism in practice: United States policy toward the Gaza War, 2023–2025". *Countries Studies*. 5(3): 621-648. doi: https://doi.org/10.22059/jcountst.2026.420717.1625.

Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License
Website: https://jcountst.ut.ac.ir/ | Email: jcountst@ut.ac.ir |
EISSN: 2980-9193
Publisher: University of Tehran

* Corresponding author: dina14@unpad.ac.id, https://orcid.org/0009-0006-2487-2745

1. Introduction

The war in Gaza has become a major test for the longstanding claim of the United States as a defender of democracy. Until now, Washington has presented itself not only as a powerful state, but also as a protector of democracy, human rights, international law, the protection of civilians, and the rules-based international order. After the attack by Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups against Israel on 7 October 2023, President Joseph Biden described American support for Israel as a form of solidarity among democracies in confronting terrorism (Biden, 2023a). This narrative continued to be maintained even though Palestinian civilian casualties, displacement, starvation, and the destruction of infrastructure continued to increase. At the same time, the United States continued to send weapons, approve additional military assistance, protect Israel at the United Nations Security Council, and reject a number of international accountability efforts. Several recent studies have also assessed the Gaza war as a serious test for United States global leadership as well as for the claim of Western countries that they apply international norms consistently (Krieg, 2024; Crowley-Vigneau et al., 2025). The issue, therefore, is not merely that political interests often override principles. More important is the fact that those principles continue to play a strong political role, even when their application in policy is limited.

The word hypocrisy is the term that has been most commonly used to explain this situation, and there are good reasons for this. Krasner's (1999) concept of organized hypocrisy helps explain how internationally recognized norms persist despite recurrent violations, particularly where power asymmetries and conflicting rules allow political leaders' calculations of interests to override normative commitments. Although Krasner developed this argument primarily in relation to sovereignty, the concept can be applied to the gap between the democratic ideals invoked in American exceptionalism and US foreign policy practices.

The language of democracy, in the context of Gaza, puts Israel in the category of a political community to be saved, and the U.S. in the category of the defender of law and civilization. In contrast, in numerous official declarations, Palestine is framed as an object of humanitarian concern rather than a rights-holding political entity. As a result, the language of democracy makes an unbalanced policy appear consistent with universal commitments, even though the underlying treatment is not equal.

Lawson and Zarakol (2023) show that accusations of hypocrisy become politically meaningful when an order promises equal recognition, but in practice instead maintains hierarchy. In line with this, Maass (2024) shows how United States foreign-policy discourse can place actors in different moral positions, while at the same time making that hierarchy appear natural. Thus, the problem is not that the

language of democracy has no meaning, but that the moral authority contained within it can be used selectively.

This article proposes two main questions. First, how did the Biden administration use the language of democracy to justify the diplomatic policy and material support of the United States for Israel during the Gaza war? Second, what happens to the meaning and credibility of that language when the same principles are applied unevenly? This article argues that the Biden administration practised democratic exceptionalism. The administration did not abandon its commitment to democracy, the rule of law, the protection of civilians, multilateralism, or the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination.

However, in practice, these commitments did not have the same weight. Israel's security was treated as an obligation that had to be fulfilled immediately, while Palestinian security was more often placed as a humanitarian issue. Palestinian sovereignty continued to be supported normatively, but its realization was always linked to a future political process. Likewise, international law continued to be used as a reference, but its application remained dependent on political considerations.

The United States also continued to declare its support for a rules-based multilateral order, while using its veto power to prevent those rules from limiting the actions of its close ally. This study is a country study focusing on United States foreign policy. Its purpose is not to assess the quality of democracy in general or the entire political system of the United States, but to analyse the public discourse and policy practices of the Biden administration during the Gaza war, from 7 October 2023 until the end of Biden's term of office on 20 January 2025. By viewing rhetoric as part of policy practice, this study examines how an administration that claims itself to be a leader of democracy confronts the tension between language that is universal and practice that is exceptional. This time limit was also chosen so that the analysis would not be mixed with changes in policy direction and rhetoric under the second Donald Trump administration.

This article begins with a discussion of the role of the language of democracy in the identity of the United States and in the literature on strategic narratives, norms, hierarchy, and legitimacy. It then presents the idea of democratic exceptionalism, the analytical framework, and the data employed. The empirical section analyses five main elements in the vocabulary of the Biden administration—democratic fellowship, the rule of law, the protection of civilians, rules-based multilateralism, and the two-state solution. The concluding section then discusses the impact of this pattern on the moral authority of the United States, considers several alternative explanations, and outlines its implications for the study of foreign policy. This article also emphasizes that the decline in normative credibility is not always followed by the weakening of the material and institutional power of the United States.

2. Literature review: Democracy as a foreign-policy vocabulary

Democracy promotion is not only a policy program, but also an identity claim and a source of legitimacy for the United States. From one administration to another, the language of democracy has been used to distinguish friends and enemies, justify intervention as well as the provision of assistance, and describe the use of American power as a contribution to the international order. Burnell (2005) has long shown that support for democratization abroad is almost always connected with security and economic interests. Meanwhile, Ikenberry (2011) describes the liberal order as a system that combines institutional restraint with hierarchy and United States domination. More recent studies also show similar tensions. From the perspective of recognition, liberal institutions promise equality, but in practice they continue to produce differences in status among actors (Adler-Nissen & Zarakol, 2021; Mukherjee, 2024). Therefore, it is not appropriate to view democracy as an idealism standing separately from geopolitical interests. The two are instead shaped and explained through narratives that make government policy choices appear natural, reasonable, and legitimate.

Double standards are nothing new in the Gaza war. In the past, United States foreign policy has proven itself to be a reliable supporter of governments that have been implicated in serious human rights abuse, such as right-wing dictatorships in Latin America and elsewhere during the Cold War (Schmitz, 2006) and Egypt's authoritarian governments in the decades after 1973 (Brownlee, 2012). Gaza is salient for this research is because of the scale, real-time documentation, and the concurrent International Court of Justice (2024b) case on the plausibility of genocide in Gaza, and because of the war occurring at a time when the administration's primary foreign-policy narrative was rooted in a "democracy versus autocracy" dichotomy involving Ukraine (Wissén, 2026). Democratic language to support Israel and other allies is not new to the Biden administration or to the Democratic Party; other administrations of both parties have used similar language, with the difference in emphasis and register, but not in the pattern (Monten, 2005; Mearsheimer & Walt, 2007). The single case, single administration design used here (Section 4.1) is not a deliberate scope choice, in order to maintain analytical consistency. The constructivist approach helps explain why consistency is important.

States can indeed claim a certain identity, but they cannot determine it unilaterally. Identity can only be maintained through practices carried out consistently and recognized by relevant audiences (Wendt, 1999; Hopf, 2002). Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) show that international norms depend on processes of persuasion and legitimation, while Hurd (1999) explains that legitimacy arises from the perception that an action is indeed worthy of being obeyed, not merely because of coercion. More recent research also shows that international actors not only pay

attention to the content of norms, but also assess whether recognition and status are given fairly (Adler-Nissen & Zarakol, 2021; Lawson & Zarakol, 2023). Therefore, when a state claims to defend universal values but applies them selectively, the risk is not only that it will be accused of inconsistency. More fundamentally, that state may lose the social recognition that serves as the source of legitimacy for its claim to leadership.

Discourse is part of the process of policy formation, not merely a complement added after decisions have been made. Frames determine which issues are considered important, explain their causes, determine who is responsible, and offer solutions that are considered appropriate (Entman, 1993). Meanwhile, strategic narratives connect the identity of a state with a way of understanding an event as well as with a vision of the future that it seeks to realize (Miskimmon, et al., 2013).

The study by Wissén (2026), for example, shows that the Biden administration used the narrative of "democracy versus autocracy" to strengthen the claim of the United States as the leader of the democratic world. Wissén also shows that this narrative was framed around hope and an open acknowledgement of democratic fragility rather than confident exceptionalism; the present study asks a different question, namely how the obligations attached to that vocabulary were distributed once the Gaza war began. Indeed, leaders cannot fully control how audiences interpret their messages. However, the continuous repetition of certain terms and phrases shapes the framework used to explain and justify policy. In the case of Gaza, expressions such as "Israel's right to defend itself", "consistent with obligations under international humanitarian law", "protecting civilians", and "a path toward a two-state solution" were added to this framework, despite the ground realities making the narrative ever more difficult to uphold.

That vocabulary turns into jargon when repetition becomes more dominant than concrete explanation. For example, the rule of law continues to be mentioned without a clear explanation of its consequences; the protection of civilians continues to be affirmed without being followed by consistent conditions on military support; and the two-state solution continues to be put forward even though various policies instead further reduce the possibility of realizing it. Dugard (2023) puts forward a similar criticism of the concept of the rules-based order, which becomes vague when its rules are not applied consistently on the basis of international law. Thus, the issue is not merely the use of language that sounds idealistic. More important is the widening distance between terms loaded with moral value and their ability to truly limit policy.

The term democratic exceptionalism is not an entirely new concept, but has been used in several different senses. Geis and Wagner (2008) use the term in their critique of the democratic peace literature and its shift toward the idea of democratic distinctiveness. For them, the

literature on the democratic peace has tended to focus on the fact that democratic states are, by their nature, more peaceful, more cooperative, and more moral than non-democratic states. Therefore, in democratic states, the use of violence has often been regarded as an exception to the rule, instead of as a part of political life that must be accounted for.

Ivie and Giner (2009) demonstrate in their research of United States political rhetoric that exceptionalism does not always manifest itself through explicit assertions of national superiority. It is also built in the language of democracy, one that includes change, hope, participation, and national renewal, and keeps America in the image of a nation with a special capacity to improve itself and to realize universal values. Soare (2021) expands the concept in the context of the foreign policy of the Biden administration, but she does not frame it solely as an analytical category but as a threat to be avoided. She distinguishes "democratic security", namely leadership through resilience, self-correction, and international cooperation, while democratic exceptionalism places the United States as a leader of democracy that is seen to have special legitimacy and ability to shape the international order. Soare's piece was written early in Biden's term, warning that decisive action to pursue the former course while steering clear of the latter would be "key to President Biden's success". This warning was issued prior to—and not as a result of—the Gaza war.

3. Analytical framework: Democratic exceptionalism and its vocabulary

In general, the previous literature defines democratic exceptionalism as the idea that there are unique features of democratic states, as rhetoric that maintains the myth of American distinctiveness, or as the argument that the United States has a unique obligation to the democratic world. This article presents another interpretation. Democratic exceptionalism is viewed as a discursive process through which democratic norms are presented as universal principles, while the responsibilities and consequences arising from those norms are applied selectively according to the identity, political status, and alliances of the actors involved.

In this sense, the problem is not that democratic norms are abandoned. On the contrary, those norms continue to be cited as sources of legitimacy, but their practical consequences do not apply equally to all parties. The main contribution of this article is to shift attention from claims of distinctiveness toward the distribution of normative obligations. The focus of this article is on moving the debate away from claims of distinctiveness and onto the distribution of normative obligations. While Geis and Wagner (2008), Ivie and Giner (2009), and Soare (2021) are interested in the question of whether or how democracies and the United States are special, this article is interested in the question of how the language of democracy asymmetrically distributes protection, accountability, legal constraints, and a sense of urgency. Democratic exceptionalism is not simply an alternative term

for "American exceptionalism" but a concept for understanding the universal nature of norms in discourse and their selective nature in practice.

In this analysis, we examine five signifiers that have been consistently featured in the official statements of the Biden administration: democracy, the rule of law, civilian protection, the rules-based international order and the two-state solution. The five terms are bundled into one policy narrative that seems coherent, namely: support for Israel, international law, humanitarian care, multilateral leadership, and conflict resolution.

This analysis is guided by an explicit hypothesis: when a state's international identity depends on a claim to democratic and rules-based leadership, the obligations attached to that vocabulary will diverge systematically between allies and adversaries, even where the vocabulary itself remains formally identical. Table 1 operationalizes this hypothesis for each of the five signifiers, specifying the policy indicator that would confirm congruent, equal application and the indicator that would instead confirm exceptional application; the empirical test follows in Section 5.

Table 1. The vocabulary of democratic exceptionalism: Signifiers, declared meanings, and indicators of uneven application

Signifier	Declared meaning	Congruent policy indicator	Indicator of exceptional application
Democracy	Shared identity, rights, accountable government	Equal concern for political agency and accountability	Democratic identity grants presumptive legitimacy to the ally
Rule of law	Force constrained by international humanitarian law	Transparent assessment, conditions, investigation and remedy	Law framed as advice without enforceable consequence
Civilian protection	Prevention and mitigation of civilian harm	Assistance conditioned on measurable protection	Humanitarian aid compensates for continued military enablement
Rules-based order	Multilateral rules and international accountability	Acceptance of collective constraint and consistent legal standards	Veto or rejection when institutions constrain the ally
Two-state solution	Palestinian self-determination and viable statehood	Policy that protects territory, governance and political agency	Self-determination deferred while contrary facts consolidate

Source: Authors' construction, based on the coding procedure described in Section 4

Three questions were asked of each marker: (1) what obligations were assumed by the officials during the term; (2) what diplomatic or material policies were pursued during the term; and (3) does the term lead to comparable protection and liability for all parties involved? The last question does not depart from the assumption that justice always means equal treatment. sraelis and Palestinians have different legal and political positions, and the October 7 attacks pose a real security threat. Therefore, what is tested is not just whether or not there is different treatment, but whether the difference can be explained by existing norms and circumstances, or rather reflects the status of the alliance.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research design and case selection

This study uses a single case study design using a qualitative approach that combines structured content coding of the discourse corpus with interpretive comparison against the policy-practice record. The focus is on the Biden administration's policy on the Gaza war from October 7, 2023 until the end of Biden's term on January 20, 2025. Discourse and practice are treated as two independent evidentiary layers throughout: what the administration said is coded separately from what it did, so that neither layer is used to validate the other. Although Israel, Hamas, and Palestinian civilians are the main actors in this conflict, the study only evaluates the claims and policy behavior of the United States government. The restrictions on one administration also maintain consistency of analysis and avoid mixing the Biden administration's rhetoric with different policy styles in the second term of Donald Trump's administration.

The research evidence is arranged in two layers. First, the discourse corpus, which is a collection of President Biden's official speeches and statements that are the basis for the analysis. Second, the policy practice record, which includes UN voting results, government memoranda, international court rulings, and data on U.S. security assistance to Israel. These two types of data are separated so that the analysis is not circular, i.e. using the same document as both a source of claims and as evidence of policy practice.

4.2. Discourse corpus

This research corpus includes speeches, remarks, and written statements issued by President Biden regarding Gaza during the period from October 7, 2023 to January 20, 2025. A document is included in the corpus if (1) it is submitted or published on behalf of President Biden, (2) discusses Gaza or U.S. aid to Israel as a principal subject, and (3) contains at least one of the five main markers or its equivalent.

This research only uses the President's public statements as the official voice of the government. Because of this, press secretary statements, fact sheets, summaries of telephone conversations,

interviews, campaign events, and statements by other officials were not included; exchanges with reporters that form part of a presidential address or remarks were retained. An initial search of the White House Briefing Room archive, using the keywords Gaza, Hamas, hostage, Palestinian, and Israel, identified 13 qualifying documents. A cross-check against the *Compilation of Presidential Documents* (American Presidency Project) then identified three further qualifying documents that the archive search had not returned: the address to the nation of October 19, 2023, the remarks of November 26, 2023, and the remarks of January 15, 2025. These were added, bringing the corpus to 16 documents, all of which are presented in the appendix along with the results of coding. The corpus should therefore be read as a comprehensive record of the President's principal statements on Gaza, rather than as a strict census. Each document is analyzed to identify five key markers, then each statement is classified as declarative, justificatory, or commissive. A declarative statement describes an actor or event, a justifying statement provides a reason for a policy, while a committal statement contains a promise or commitment to future action. This distinction allows research to distinguish statements that are only normative in nature from statements that can be tested through policy practice.

In addition to this corpus, this study also cites President Biden's opinion article in *The Washington Post* (Biden, 2023d) as a reference on government policy principles. However, because it is not among the President's speeches and statements drawn from archives, the article was not included in the coding process.

4.3. Policy practice records

Some of the elements in this study can be clearly identified through official documents. Key data include four United States vetoes of draft ceasefire resolutions (October 18 and December 8, 2023; February 20 and November 20, 2024), abstentions that allow the passage of Resolution 2728, support for Resolution 2735, vetoes of the recommendation for Palestinian membership in the United Nations (April 18, 2024), *National Security Memorandum* 20 and reports to Congress, three interim measures rulings of the International Court of Justice (2024a; 2024b; 2024c), Congressional *Research Service documentation* regarding aid to Israel, as well as various officially announced security assistance packages. The three Pew Research Center surveys (Pew Research Center, 2024a; 2024b; 2024c) are used in a limited way to describe the public response, while media reports are only used as a complement when documenting administrative decisions that are not yet available in official sources.

The analysis is based on three policy domains. First, the practice of diplomacy, such as the use of vetoes, abstentions, support for resolutions, and reaction to decisions of the International Court of

Justice. Second, material practices (military support, extra budget, transfer of arms, postponing, and security measures). Third, political practices, which relate to the conditions for Palestinian government, territorial integrity, and the establishment of a Palestinian state. Evidence of public opinion is used only to assess the possible cost to policy credibility, not to conclude a direct cause-and-effect relationship.

This research has several limitations. The corpus analyzed only includes documents at the presidential level, so it does not include the White House and State Department press conferences that help shape the official narrative. In addition, public documents cannot record all internal government debates or details of the use of military aid. Therefore, this analysis focuses on institutional discourse and practice, not on the personal motives of officials. This study also does not aim to establish criminal responsibility or provide a final legal assessment of genocide. The focus is more limited, namely assessing whether the democratic vocabulary used by the Biden administration really serves as a consistent barrier to its policies.

5. Research results

5.1. Democracy as an alliance identity

In the early stages of the war, democracy serves as the defining boundary of membership in a political community. On October 10, 2023, Biden pledged to ensure that the "Jewish and democratic State of Israel" is capable of self-defense, while explicitly drawing those limits: democracies like Israel and the United States are stronger and more secure when they act according to the rule of law and, unlike terrorists who target civilians, uphold the laws of war; as he said, "There's a difference" (Biden, 2023a). Eight days later in Tel Aviv, he reiterated the pair of concepts, "You are a Jewish state, but you're also a democracy"—and added that, like the United States, Israel does not live by the rules of terrorists but by "the rule of law" (Biden, 2023b). This association affirms Israel's right to security, as well as places its military response within a morally democratic community. This framework is also in line with the Biden administration's broader strategic narrative, where interdemocratic solidarity serves to legitimize the leadership of the United States (Wissén, 2026). This self-image predates the war. Early in his presidency, Biden made the same claim to singular capacity: "It falls to the United States to lead the way", he wrote, because "no other nation is built on that [democratic] idea" (Biden, 2020).

However, the corpus analysis shows that the marker "democracy" only appeared in two speeches in October 2023. In the next eleven documents—until the January 2025 ceasefire—the term is no longer used. This shows that democracy served primarily as a tool of legitimacy at the beginning of the war; Once the framework of the alliance is formed, the legitimacy is treated as if it is established and no longer requires explicit justification.

This asymmetry is increasingly evident in the political role given to each side of the conflict. Israelis are present in the narrative as democratic citizens who are attacked by terrorists. Instead, the Palestinians initially appeared primarily as civilians who should not be held accountable for Hamas' actions. This distinction is indeed important and necessary, but *humanitarian innocence* is a form of recognition that is thinner than recognition as a political subject. The political rights, representation, and protection of the Palestinian people from occupation receive much less emphasis than Israeli sovereignty. On the one hand, there has been a democratic state whose security demands immediate action; an other hand, there are civilians who need humanitarian assistance and a nation whose sovereignty is placed as a future settlement agenda. This framing also obscures a complicating truth: Hamas came to power in the 2006 Palestinian Legislative Council elections (Gunning, 2007), whatever criticisms there may be regarding this organization's leadership style, it still possessed a legitimate electoral mandate that is not recognized in the discourse examined here. The US administration's language treats Hamas as a terrorist actor and ignoring the fact that Hamas is an elected governing body. Maass's (2024) analysis of the formation of *racialised subject-positioning* is relevant here because it shows how the discourse of the United States can construct a hierarchy between actors without ever stating it openly.

The same hierarchy is also evident in the pattern of the president's empathy throughout the corpus. Israeli and American victims are depicted individually. In a speech in Tel Aviv, Biden spoke of the smell of a wardrobe, a cup of coffee in the morning drunk together to "the giggle of your little boy" (Biden, 2023b). The remarks of 24 November follow the same pattern: Biden named four-year-old Abigail, who remained among those missing, and spoke of the teddy bears waiting for the youngest hostages (Biden, 2023e). Instead, the emergence of the Palestinian people follows a different grammar: they are referred to as "innocent Palestinians who are suffering greatly" (ibid) or "the innocent people in Gaza" (Biden, 2025c), and are more often counted by the number of aid trucks than by individual names. This pattern reappeared in at least six of the sixteen documents analyzed.

Biden has never denied the humanity of the Palestinian people. He has repeatedly asserted that Palestinian lives are just as precious and refuses to blame them collectively. However, there is a difference in the structure of recognition: support for Israel is conveyed as a strong affirmative commitment, while concern for Palestine is generally present as a humanitarian counterweight to that commitment. Although the humanitarian dimension became increasingly prominent throughout the war, this recognition structure did not change. The mention of Israel as a *fellow democracy* also strengthens the level of political trust given by the United States. Democratic identity is not only treated as a standard of behavior, but also as a political trust capital that makes

deviations more often dealt with through closed consultation than through public terms or pressure.

5.2. Rule of law as conditional advice

The Biden administration has repeatedly stated that Israel must comply with international humanitarian law. In Tel Aviv, Biden warned Israel not to be overwhelmed by anger and reminded of the mistakes the United States had made after the September 11, 2001 attacks (Biden, 2023b). A few days later, in a statement regarding the first humanitarian aid convoy, he asserted that the protection of civilians must be carried out "in accordance with obligations under international humanitarian law" (Biden, 2023c). These formulations are important because they openly acknowledge that the right to self-defense has legal limits, and that democracies should be judged on the way they use force.

The grammatical form of these statements is also important. The language of the law exists primarily as advice and self-description—lessons from American history as well as assurances of U.S. behavior—not as a binding condition for military aid announced at the same time. As allegations of lawlessness intensify, a more fundamental question arises: in addition to advising and conducting reviews, what actions does the language of the law actually require? The question of prevention, responsibility, and consistent application of the law is at the heart of academic debate about Gaza (Sultany, 2024; Crowley-Vigneau et al., 2025).

National Security Memorandum 20 (February 8, 2024) appears to provide a procedural form for the legal commitments of the United States by requiring recipients of military assistance to ensure compliance with international humanitarian law and access to humanitarian assistance (White House, 2024). However, a government report in May 2024 acknowledged that there were reasonable grounds to assess that American-made weapons had been used inappropriately in accordance with humanitarian law, but concluded that the available evidence was insufficient to halt aid (U.S. Department of State, 2024a). As a result, the procedure records the concerns formally without resulting in a policy change.

A similar pattern was seen after seven World Central Kitchen workers were killed in April 2024. Biden stated that Israel "has not done enough" to protect civilians and aid workers and demanded a prompt and accountable investigation (Biden, 2024a). However, the investigation remains left to Israel itself, while the United States' response is limited to "urgent" and "pushing" efforts, without changing the terms of military assistance. Hence, the legal language is more of a tool of critique and persuasion than one that automatically generates material consequences.

The main problem lies in the distribution of risk. Normatively, the United States government states that international humanitarian law is

applicable to all. However, in reality, the ongoing provision of military aid is linked to the responsibility and the level of proof. If uncertainty is a reason to persist in arms transfers, the risk falls on the civilians, yet military ties with allies go on. In that regard, the responsibility to prevent should not be based on the legal certainty that occurs after a loss, but rather on the presence of serious risks, as emphasized by Sultany (2024).

The temporary halt to shipments of high-explosive bombs, carried out due to concerns about their possible use in Rafah, shows that Washington does in fact have leverage against Israel. However, this step is limited and does not evolve into a general principle that the risk of breaking the law automatically triggers restrictions on military aid. Therefore, the Biden administration can still affirm that compliance with the law is important, while at the same time reassuring Israel that the U.S.-Israel security relationship remains "*ironclad*".

This pattern is also evident in attitudes towards international legal institutions. In a May 31, 2024 speech, Biden emphasized that "no one is above the law" when discussing the verdict against Donald Trump. However, when turning to Gaza, he did not mention the International Court of Justice ruling on May 24, 2024 ordering a halt to the offensive in Rafah (Biden, 2024b; International Court of Justice, 2024c). Thus, the rule of law is asserted in the domestic realm, but is ignored when it comes to allies at the international level.

Criticism of international legal institutions can certainly be debated juridically. However, the problem arises when the institution is seen as legitimate when judging opponents, but is ignored when judging allies, without consistent principles. Dugard (2023) warns that the use of the concept of an elastic rule-based order actually facilitates the emergence of selective treatment like this, while Sultany (2024) shows the magnitude of the legal consequences of such selectivity in the case of Gaza.

5.3. Protection of civilians as compensatory language

The protection of civilians is the only theme that appears throughout the sixteen corpus documents, but the intensity is not always the same. The most detailed discussions—including the number of aid trucks, fuel distribution, and supplies for hospitals and water installations—emerged especially during the November 2023 humanitarian pause and ahead of the January 2025 ceasefire. During this period, the United States presented itself as the leader of the international humanitarian response. On the other hand, when the war is at its most intense, humanitarian issues often appear only as brief passages in statements about hostages. Consequently, attention to civilian protection follows diplomatic momentum rather than on-the-ground needs.

On the other hand, the Biden administration's humanitarian concern continues to produce concrete steps, such as expanding aid access,

humanitarian funding, support for a ceasefire in the fighting, and insisting that Israel reduce civilian casualties. However, these efforts are in parallel with continued military support. The United States is also helping to maintain Israel's military capabilities and financing aid for civilians affected by the operation. Olmsted (2025) calls this pattern *Sisyphean aid*: continuing to reduce the humanitarian impact of the damage that remains produced by highly militarized political relations.

The research corpus shows that *the conditionality* mechanism is applied in an unbalanced manner. In an October 2023 speech, when announcing the aid corridor from Egypt, Biden asserted that humanitarian aid would be stopped if Hamas diverted it (Biden, 2023b). However, in the same speech he also announced an unprecedented package of military aid to Israel without including any conditions. Thus, language regarding the terms is available, but it applies only to aid to the Palestinians, not to arms aid to Israel. This pattern did not change in subsequent documents.

The same two-track approach is seen in the April 2024 supplemental legislation, which simultaneously authorizes major security assistance for Israel and a humanitarian budget with broader regional coverage. In September 2024, Israel announced an US$8.7 billion U.S. aid package, consisting of US$3.5 billion for the procurement of war equipment and US$5.2 billion for air defense and missile systems (*Reuters*, 2024). This package followed a trend of continued U.S. security support to Israel that was observed throughout the administrations of President Trump, Biden, and Obama (Sharp, 2023). While the defense system is not the same as the offensive weapons, the size of the package still highlights the United States' commitment to security during the peak of the humanitarian crisis According to Krieg (2024), providing humanitarian aid while continuing military support weakens the United States' claim to regional leadership.

In this context, language as a means of humanity is used as a compensation mechanism. The language does not require the government to alter its key decision on maintaining an alliance with Israel, but it does recognize the suffering of the Palestinian people. Civilian deaths continue to mount, and the focus becomes the distribution of aid, humanitarian coordination (deconfliction), access to humanitarian assistance, and "diplomacy in disguise". These measures did help to mitigate the war's effects, but they did not alter the military relations that supported the operation. Consequently, the protection of civilians is not a condition precedent to military assistance but rather a part of policy, as it is not always a constraint on military aid (Olmsted, 2025). According to Crowley-Vigneau et al. (2025), the experts they interviewed interpreted this pattern as a double standard where Washington showed no sign of applying the responsibility to protect to its ally's actions.

The strongest acknowledgment of the suffering of the Palestinian

people came on May 31, 2024, when Biden said that they had “endured sheerhell in this war", and again on January 15, 2025, when he said that they "have gone through hell" (Biden, 2024b; 2025c). Thus, recognition of suffering reaches its peak when it simultaneously supports Washington's diplomatic goals.

The humanitarian framework also tends to obscure the political dimension of Palestine. In the corpus of research, the Palestinian people are more often portrayed as recipients of aid than as holders of political rights. Humanitarian aid is important, but excessive focus on emergency needs can distract attention from more fundamental issues, such as blockade, occupation, territorial control, expulsion, and Palestinian sovereignty. These findings are in line with Akgül-Açıkmeşe and Özel (2024), who suggest that humanitarian mitigation strategies can reduce the impact of conflict without changing the political conditions that give rise to it.

5.4. Rule-based order and exception through veto

The UN Security Council is the clearest arena to test the United States' commitment to *rules-based multilateralism*. Washington vetoed draft resolutions regarding a truce or ceasefire on October 18 and December 8, 2023, February 20, 2024, and again on November 20, 2024. Among them, the United States abstained on March 25, 2024 so that Resolution 2728 could be passed, and supported Resolution 2735 on June 10, 2024 endorsing a three-stage ceasefire plan (United Nations, 2023a; 2023b; 2024a; 2024b; United Nations Security Council, 2024a; 2024b). Interestingly, in the corpus of presidential speeches, multilateral institutions are almost never mentioned during the veto period. There is no speech explaining or defending the use of the veto. The reference to the Security Council only emerged in January 2025, when Biden highlighted the Security Council's unanimous support for the United States' ceasefire proposal, described as “unanimous” in two documents and “overwhelming” in a third, as evidence of the legitimacy of his policies (Biden, 2025a; 2025b; 2025c).

This pattern suggests that international institutions are primarily positioned as a source of legitimacy when supporting Washington's initiatives, not as a barrier when their decisions have the potential to limit the policies of the United States or its allies. In other words, multilateral procedures are highlighted when it gives legitimacy, but tends to be ignored when it gives rise to obligations.

The number of vetoes alone does not explain the whole problem. The United States argued that certain draft resolutions were inadequate, did not provide for the release of hostages, or could potentially interfere with negotiations, and even submitted its own draft resolutions. However, the end result remains the same: collective action can only be taken if it complies with the conditions set by Washington. Thus, multilateral procedures depend on the United States' judgment of when

a rule is appropriate to enforce. Crowley-Vigneau et al. (2025) link the Security Council's impasse on Gaza to the growing perception that the norms of protection of civilians are applied through geopolitical double standards.

This contrast is increasingly visible at the UN General Assembly. Without a veto mechanism, the vast majority of member states repeatedly supported resolutions on the ceasefire and Palestinian rights. While the results of the vote do not automatically resolve legal or moral issues, these differences indicate limited international support for Washington's approach. As a result, the international order appears participatory in the General Assembly, but hierarchical in the Security Council, a tension that is seen as one of the main sources of contestation against the liberal order (Adler-Nissen & Zarakol, 2021; Mukherjee, 2024).

The use of the United States' veto power does not violate the UN Charter because it is indeed the right of permanent members of the Security Council. However, formal legality does not always result in legitimacy. A state can use its legitimate authority legally, but at the same time weaken its claim to be the leader of a rules-based order. When veto power repeatedly gets in the way of collective action to protect allies, legality and legitimacy begin to move in different directions (Dugard, 2023; Lawson & Zarakol, 2023).

5.5. The two-state solution as a deferred democracy

Markers of the two-state solution emerged from the beginning of the corpus and were delivered personally. In Tel Aviv, after calling for the need to pursue a path that allows both nations to live in safety, Biden added, "To me, that means a two-state solution" (Biden, 2023b). A month later, when announcing the hostage release deal on Thanksgiving Day, the formula reappeared as "two states for two people", which was described as something that could one day be achieved by Israel and Palestine (Biden, 2023e). In his opinion article, he also opposes forced evictions, the reoccupation of Gaza, permanent blockades, and the reduction of Gaza territory, as well as supports the reunification of Gaza and the West Bank under a revitalized Palestinian Authority (Biden, 2023d).

However, as the war progressed, the language of Palestinian statehood weakened. In his May 31, 2024 speech, Biden only spoke of a "political settlement" and the future of Palestine that guarantees self-determination, dignity, security, and freedom, without mentioning the state (Biden, 2024b). In his remarks of 15 and 19 January 2025, all that was promised was "a credible pathway" or "a credible path" "to a state of their own" (Biden, 2025b; 2025c)—a named state, but no longer framed as a "two-state solution" and without a timeline or mechanism, while Israeli-Saudi Arabian normalization was described as an ongoing agenda. Thus, Israel's security is treated as a priority today, while Palestinian statehood is placed as a future goal.

A similar pattern was seen in April 2024 when the United States vetoed a recommendation for Palestinian full membership at the UN on the grounds that statehood must be achieved through direct negotiations (U.S. Department of State, 2024b). Moreover, the demand for a "revitalized Palestinian Authority" shows that political conditions are imposed more on the Palestinians than on Israel. As a result, the two-state solution remains maintained as a normative commitment, but Palestinian political agency continues to be postponed. Similar to EU policy, Akgül-Açıkmeşe and Özel (2024) discover that in both the two-state solution was the main one and the mitigation strategies did not change the underlying constraints, such as Israel's occupation under U.S. protection. Ayyash (2026), on the other hand, interprets Gaza as an ideological divide between the Western order established by the United States and most of the Global South.

5.6. Reading the corpus as a whole

Three new patterns become visible when the sixteen documents are read as a single sequence rather than as stand-alone texts. The first pattern concerns the distribution of speech acts. Declarative statements appear in all documents, while commissive statements are found in twelve documents. By contrast, justificatory statements—that is, explanations of why a policy is considered legitimate or justifiable—appear in only seven documents, and their appearance follows a particular pattern.

Justificatory argumentation is concentrated at five moments. First, the October 2023 speeches that established the basis for support for Israel. Second, the remarks of 24 November 2023 on the first hostage releases, which restated the two-state solution and answered the question of conditioning aid. Third, the statement on the World Central Kitchen incident in April 2024, when the deaths of seven aid workers, one of them an American citizen required a public explanation from the administration. Fourth, the May 31st Speech in which he explained why the war had to end. Fifth, the two January 2025 documents that were in support of the Biden administration's overall policy record.

In the other six documents, presidential statements tend to be descriptive, stating what happened or what was promised, rather than making normative claims, such as describing the situation of the hostages and announcing the extension of the humanitarian pause. Put differently, the Biden administration provided explanations primarily when its policy was called into question. Following this, the structure of legitimacy that had been created was left to function independently. This pattern indicates a reactionary approach to language of justification (used when there is doubt over legitimacy, then it ceases to be used when pressure is reduced).

The second pattern relates to the common way of indicating who is acting and who is responsible. In the entire corpus, the suffering of Palestinians is indeed more clearly expressed, but the reason for that

suffering is almost always missing. The war is repeatedly attributed to Hamas: "this war that Hamas has unleashed" (Biden, 2023e); "the war that Hamas started" (Biden, 2025b). In the remarks of 19 January 2025, the dead are remembered only as "all the victims of this war" (Biden, 2025b), a passive formulation which suggests that the war was the cause of their death, rather than any specific group. The only attribution that explicitly links mass casualties to a specific cause is the explanation concerning a misfired rocket launched by a militant group (Biden, 2023b). Not a single presidential speech directly links civilian deaths to Israeli military operations that were, at the same time, supported by the United States.

As a result, the language of responsibility and the language of empathy move in different directions. The greater the recognition of Palestinian suffering, the more consistently official language places the cause of that suffering on Hamas. The third pattern can be seen at both the beginning and the end of the war, and most clearly illustrates how the Biden administration practised what this article calls democratic exceptionalism.

In November 2023, when asked about proposals from some members of the Democratic Party that aid to Israel should be made conditional, Biden acknowledged that the idea was "a worthwhile thought." However, he rejected it on the grounds that such an approach would impede the progress that had been achieved (Biden, 2023e).

Fourteen months later, in his remarks of 19 January 2025, Biden once again recognized critics and put them aside, four months later. Answering those who said his policy of firm support for Israel risked drawing America into a wider war in the region, he said he had "listened to those voices" but concluded that "abandoning the course I was on would not have led us to the cease-fire we're seeing today" (Biden, 2025b). The critics are different– the danger of a wider war or the conditioning of aid– but the usual sequence is the same: accept the norm or the criticism, then move onto practical considerations. The same argumentative structure is used to open and close the entire sequence of policy. Biden also characterized his policy during the war as "principled and effective", and attributed the success of the ceasefire to the military pressure created by Israel with the support of the United States (Biden, 2025a; 2025b).

So democratic ideas were never set aside in the rhetoric. What happened is that their use was continually deferred and finally applied to justify the policy that had already been pursued. This pattern of identity claim, followed by the suspension of application and then self-justification is what this article characterizes as "democratic exceptionalism" in the discourse of the Biden administration.

6. Discussion

6.1. Audience responses and the credibility gap

If the audience sees a disconnect between the claim and the action, the authority of the person making the claim is undermined. It can be seen at the United Nations: the United States consistently voted against ceasefire resolutions, and on several occasions it was the only vote against. Delegates from all over the Global South, including several European countries, directly and explicitly condemned the voting pattern as a demonstration of the West's double standards and its application of international law on a selective basis. Not just U.S. policy towards Gaza was challenged, but also the U.S. position as a leader of a rules-based order (Lawson & Zarakol, 2023; Krieg, 2024). This credibility gap is accentuated by another contradiction: the U.S. had a declared "special relationship" with Israel and claimed to be an honest broker in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is an example of democratic exceptionalism because it is the use of the supposedly neutral role in an asymmetric way that the concept is supposed to capture.

Domestically, there was also a split in public opinion. In early 2024 Pew polls found that 34% of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents felt that Biden was "too pro-Israel" while 29% believed his stance was "just about right". 60% of American Muslims said they felt Biden was too sympathetic to Israel and 6% said he had a balanced policy (Pew Research Center, 2024a; 2024b). The results do not reflect a breakdown in the administration's legitimacy, but they are a sign that Biden's message of a principled policy was not convincing to some of his key audiences.

There were also divisions among the younger generations, progressive organizations and even within the administration itself. The Gaza conflict found its way into American public discourse, as campus encampments sparked discussions on antisemitism, academic freedom, and the right to protest. The point of this article is that the language of democracy was not rejected by the critics, but they used the same language to criticize the government, i.e., rights, law, equality, accountability, and representation. Official university statements and media coverage emerged as important battlegrounds in the fight for the legitimacy of the pro-Palestinian movement; Castro (2025) traces how power operates through the "protest paradigm" in coverage of the 2024 protests.

However, there was not a uniform erosion of legitimacy. There was still considerable support for Israel's security in the United States, and the allied nations still saw the United States as a vital diplomatic player even as some of them openly criticized specific policy choices. That is, confidence in the importance of the U.S. strategic role remained, but with some criticism of policy consistency.

As such, this study's results should be viewed as a credibility gap and not as a complete loss of legitimacy. The United States still has military,

financial, diplomatic and veto power, and the ability to facilitate negotiations. However, what is increasingly questioned is the claim that this power is used to apply democratic principles and international rules consistently. As Adler-Nissen and Zarakol (2021) and Mukherjee (2024) argue, a hegemonic order may continue to endure because of its material power, but the gap between that power and normative recognition will remain a source of contestation. The pattern described here indicates that Soare's (2021) first warning was ignored.

6.2. How democratic jargon works

The findings of this study show that democratic jargon works not primarily through outright falsehoods, but through the construction of hierarchy. The term democracy places Israel within a trusted moral community. The rule of law acknowledges the existence of constraints, but in practice is more often realized through consultation and case-by-case review. Civilian protection acknowledges Palestinian suffering, while military support continues alongside humanitarian assistance. The rules-based order affirms the importance of international institutions, but their constraints tend to be ignored when they concern a United States ally. Meanwhile, the two-state solution is retained as an official objective, but its realization is continuously postponed. Thus, the five terms are not merely rhetorical, but carry different policy weights.

The five concepts also reinforce one another. Democratic identity builds political trust; trust reduces demands for accountability; humanitarian assistance manages the effects of military support; veto power prevents multilateral alternatives from becoming binding; and the two-state solution preserves hope for justice in the future. Taken together, this vocabulary enables the Biden administration to manage various contradictions without having to alter its self-image. What appears to be a collection of talking points actually forms a single interconnected policy narrative.

This narrative is not merely a matter of public relations. Continuous repetition can change the meaning of a norm. If democracy, the rule of law, or international rules are rarely used to restrict military assistance, initiate investigations, support multilateral constraints, or protect Palestinian political rights, those norms gradually become ceremonial symbols. Democracy is not removed from United States foreign policy, but is narrowed into a language for identifying trusted allies and promised objectives. Lawson and Zarakol (2023) describe this condition as the loss of recognitional authority, when claims to justice no longer align with the practices that are undertaken.

Democratic exceptionalism is not just about the illegitimacy of security concerns, nor is it about treating allies as adversaries. The difficulty lies in the fact that exceptions to norms increase rapidly and happen at the same time in the diplomatic, legal, material and political

spheres. So, the case in this article is not that of a single veto or a single weapons package, but of a regular pattern throughout the entire process of policy.

This finding is also relevant to debates in the Global South. The Gaza case shows that criticism of Western double standards is not merely anti-Western rhetoric, but a demand that democracy and international law be applied consistently. Ayyash (2026) sees Palestine as an ideological fault line in the world order, while Aboueldahab (2026) shows how Global South states use international legal institutions to demand accountability when Western states are reluctant to do so.

7. Conclusion

From 7 October 2023 to 20 January 2025, the Biden administration consistently employed a democratic language—alliance, law, civilian protection, multilateralism and self-determination—to state that United States policy toward Gaza was a policy with a moral foundation. These pledges were not only real words, but real references to policy debate, as Sections 5 and 6 demonstrate. In practice, however, none of them had the same impact on policy-making as the alliance commitment towards Israel's security. The analysis of the corpus shows this inequality clearly. Democracy was used to establish the alliance framework at the beginning of the war, but after that it played almost no further role. Legal language more often produced review processes than restrictions on or the termination of support. Civilian protection appeared in all presidential speeches, but its discussion was strongest precisely when the fighting had begun to subside. At the same time, the only condition for terminating assistance announced in the presidential corpus was directed at humanitarian aid for Palestinians, not at military assistance for Israel. Multilateralism also appeared only when it supported United States initiatives, not when explaining the United States' own use of its veto power.

In the meantime, the language of Palestinian self-determination evolved from the "two-state solution" to a more distant "credible path to a state of their own", while Israel's security continued to secure immediate and concrete commitments. Notably, the sequence closed off with the same pattern it opened with: the proposal that aid to Israel should be made conditional was admitted to be an idea worth considering but was then rejected. Rather, the notion of "democratic exceptionalism" better captures this uneven norm application than the notion that the Biden administration "forgot about democratic values".

The policy had significant material impacts and a cost in terms of a loss of credibility. America's claim to defend universal rules is increasingly under question, as reflected in the votes at the United Nations, and in domestic disagreements and criticism from various groups in international society. It is not the power of the United States that has gone. Rather, it is still quite powerful, both militarily and

institutionally. The one thing that has been damaged is the moral credibility of the Biden administration to justify and explain the use of that power. In the context of country studies, the results above indicate that the official language of the government is part of the policy infrastructure, and not just a means of political communication.

Official language serves to define actors, to set the urgency of an issue, to narrow down policy options deemed reasonable and to preserve policy continuity under political pressures. The expansion of the corpus is possible in the future with the addition of the daily statements of government spokespeople who, in response to the media, regularly defended this vocabulary. More in-depth research is also possible to make comparisons between the discourse on Gaza and the discourse on Ukraine in the United States, as well as between different administrations. Such comparisons would help answer whether there are changes in language that are accompanied by changes in practice, or simply a change in language to maintain the same policy pattern.

These findings also have normative implications. To narrow the gap between democratic principles and policy practice, three steps can be taken. First, the review in *National Security Memorandum 20* can be used as a mechanism for public disclosure with periodic reports to Congress (White House, 2024). Second, security assistance needs to be conditioned on evidence of compliance with the laws of war. Third, the US government needs to openly explain any veto to resolutions based on international humanitarian law. The impact of such openness on state behavior still needs to be further researched.

Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

Ethical considerations

The authors have completely considered ethical issues, including informed consent, plagiarism, data fabrication, misconduct, and/or falsification, double publication and/or redundancy, submission, etc. This article was not authored by artificial intelligence.

Data availability

The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Appendix. The presidential discourse corpus

All documents were retrieved from the archived White House Briefing Room (bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov), except documents 4, 8, and 15, which were retrieved from the U.S. Government Publishing Office's *Daily Compilation of Presidential Documents*. D= declarative; J= justificatory; C= commissive.

Table A1. Presidential speeches and statements on Gaza, 7 October 2023–20 January 2025

No	Date	Document	URL	Signifier	Coding
1	10 October 2023	Remarks by President Biden on the Terrorist Attacks in Israel	White House Archive	democracy; rule of law; civilian protection (marginal)	D, J, C
2	17 October 2023	Statement from President Joe Biden on the Hospital Explosion in Gaza	White House Archive	civilian protection	D
3	18 October 2023	Remarks by President Biden on the October 7th Terrorist Attacks and the Resilience of the State of Israel and its People, Tel Aviv, Israel	White House Archive	democracy; rule of law; civilian protection; two-state solution	D, J, C
4	19 October 2023	Remarks by President Biden on the United States' Response to Hamas's Terrorist Attacks Against Israel and Russia's Ongoing Brutal War Against Ukraine (Address to the Nation, Oval Office)	GPO (DCPD-202300917)	democracy; rule of law; civilian protection; two-state solution	D, J, C
5	21 October 2023	Statement from President Joe Biden on the Delivery of Humanitarian Aid to Gaza	White House Archive	civilian protection; rule of law	D, C
6	21 November 2023	Statement from President Joe Biden on the Hostage Release in Gaza	White House Archive	civilian protection (marginal)	D, C
7	24 November 2023	Remarks by President Biden on the Release of Hostages from Gaza	White House Archive	civilian protection; two-state solution	D, J, C
8	26 November 2023	Remarks on the Release of Hostages Held by Hamas in Gaza and an Exchange With Reporters, Nantucket, MA	GPO (DCPD-202301055)	civilian protection; two-state solution	D, J, C
9	27 November 2023	Statement from President Joe Biden on Extension of Humanitarian Pause in Gaza	White House Archive	civilian protection	D, C

No	Date	Document	URL	Signifier	Coding
10	29 November 2023	Statement from President Joe Biden on the Release of American Hostage from Gaza	White House Archive	civilian protection	D, C
11	14 January 2024	Statement from President Joe Biden Marking 100 Days of Captivity for Hostages in Gaza	White House Archive	civilian protection (marginal)	D, C
12	2 April 2024	Statement from President Joe Biden on the Death of World Central Kitchen Workers in Gaza	White House Archive	civilian protection; rule of law (marginal: accountability, no explicit legal reference)	D, J, C
13	31 May 2024	Remarks by President Biden on the Middle East	White House Archive	civilian protection; two-state solution (synonym); rule of law (domestic segment)	D, J, C
14	15 January 2025	Statement from President Joe Biden	White House Archive	civilian protection; rules-based order	D, J, C
15	15 January 2025	Remarks on Reaching a Cease-Fire and Hostage-Release Deal Between Israel and Hamas and an Exchange With Reporters	GPO (DCPD-202500067)	civilian protection; two-state solution; rules-based order (marginal)	D, J, C
16	19 January 2025	Remarks by President Biden on the Ceasefire and Hostage Deal, North Charleston, SC	White House Archive	civilian protection; two-state solution; rules-based order (marginal)	D, J, C

References

Abouelddahab N. (2026). "Humanisation through international law? The Global South's role in accountability". *Third World Quarterly*. 47(10): 2089-2104. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2025.2514568.

Adler-Nissen R, Zarakol A. (2021). "Struggles for recognition: The liberal international order and the merger of its discontents". *International Organization*. 75(2): 611-634. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818320000454.

Akgül-Açıkmeşe S, Özel S. (2024). "EU policy towards the Israel-Palestine conflict: The limitations of mitigation strategies". *The International Spectator*. 59(1): 59-78. https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2024.2309664.

Ayyash MM. (2026). "The Western imperial order on display in Gaza: Palestine as an ideological fault line in the international arena". *Third World Quarterly*. 47(10): 1918-1935. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2025.2465522.

Biden JR. (2025a). "Statement from President Joe Biden" [Statement]. The White House. January 15. https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2025/01/15/statement-from-president-joe-biden-14/.

----------. (2025b). "Remarks by President Biden on the ceasefire and hostage deal | North Charleston, SC" [Speech transcript]. The White House. January 19. https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2025/01/19/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-ceasefire-and-hostage-deal-north-charleston-sc/.

----------. (2025c). "Remarks on reaching a cease-fire and hostage-release deal between Israel and Hamas and an exchange with reporters" [Speech transcript]. U.S. Government Publishing Office. January 15. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/DCPD-202500067/html/DCPD-202500067.htm.

----------. (2024a). "Statement from President Joe Biden on the death of World Central Kitchen workers in Gaza" [Statement]. The White House. April 2. https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/04/02/statement-from-president-joe-biden-on-the-death-of-world-central-kitchen-workers-in-gaza/.

----------. (2024b). "Remarks by President Biden on the Middle East" [Speech transcript]. The White House. May 31. https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2024/05/31/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-middle-east-2/.

----------. (2023a). "Remarks by President Biden on the terrorist attacks in Israel" [Speech transcript]. The White House. October 10. https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/10/10/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-terrorist-attacks-in-israel-2/.

----------. (2023b). "Remarks by President Biden on the October 7th terrorist attacks and the resilience of the State of Israel and its people | Tel Aviv, Israel" [Speech transcript]. The White House. October 18. https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/10/18/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-october-7th-terrorist-attacks-and-the-resilience-of-the-state-of-israel-and-its-people-tel-aviv-israel/.

----------. (2023c). "Statement from President Joe Biden on the delivery of humanitarian aid to Gaza" [Statement]. The White House. October 21. https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/10/21/statement-from-president-joe-biden-on-the-delivery-of-humanitarian-aid-to-gaza/.

----------. (2023d). "The U.S. won't back down from the challenge of Putin and Hamas". *The Washington Post*. November 18. https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/op-ed-the-president-the-us-wont-back-down-from-the-challenge-putin-and-hamas.

----------. (2023e). "Remarks by President Biden on the release of hostages from Gaza" [Speech transcript]. The White House. November 24. https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/11/24/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-release-of-hostages-from-gaza/.

Brownlee J. (2012). *Democracy Prevention: The Politics of the U.S.-Egyptian Alliance*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139198721.

Burnell P. (2005). "Political strategies of external support for democratization". *Foreign Policy Analysis*. 1(3): 361-384. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24907267.

----------. (2020). "Why America must lead again: Rescuing U.S. foreign policy after Trump". *Foreign Affairs.* 99(2): 64-76. March/April. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again.

Castro R. (2025). "The protest paradigm and power: A relationship study using the 2024 pro-Palestine student protests". *Discourse & Society*. https://doi.org/10.1177/09579265251387154.

Crowley-Vigneau A, Baykov A, Zhang T, Morozov V. (2025). "The responsibility to protect the civilians of Gaza: Building on international perceptions". *International Peacekeeping*. 32(1): 98-124. https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2024.2427208.

Dugard J. (2023). "The choice before us: International law or a 'rules-based international order'?". *Leiden Journal of International Law*. 36(2): 223-232. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0922156523000043.

Entman RM. (1993). "Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm". *Journal of Communication*. 43(4): 51-58. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x.

Finnemore M, Sikkink K. (1998). "International norm dynamics and political change". *International Organization*. 52(4): 887-917. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2601361.

Geis A, Wagner WM. (2008). "From democratic peace to democratic distinctiveness: A critique of democratic exceptionalism in peace and conflict studies". CLPE Research Paper No. 39/2008. SSRN. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1313700.

Gunning J. (2007). *Hamas in Politics: Democracy, Religion, Violence*. Columbia University Press.

Hopf T. (2002). *Social Construction of International Politics: Identities and Foreign Policies, Moscow, 1955 and 1999*. Cornell University Press.

Hurd I. (1999). "Legitimacy and authority in international politics". *International Organization.* 53(2): 379-408. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2601393.

Ikenberry GJ. (2011). *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order*. Princeton University Press.

International Court of Justice. (2024a). "Application of the convention on the prevention and punishment of the crime of genocide in the Gaza Strip (South Africa v. Israel), provisional measures. January 26. https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/192/192-20240126-ord-01-00-en.pdf.

----------. (2024b). "Application of the convention on the prevention and punishment of the crime of genocide in the Gaza Strip (South Africa v. Israel), request for the modification of provisional measures". March 28. https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/192/192-20240328-ord-01-00-en.pdf.

----------. (2024c). "Application of the convention on the prevention and punishment of the crime of genocide in the Gaza Strip (South Africa v. Israel), request for the modification of provisional measures". May 24. https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/192/192-20240524-ord-01-00-en.pdf.

Ivie RL, Giner O. (2009). "American exceptionalism in a democratic idiom: Transacting the mythos of change in the 2008 presidential campaign". *Communication Studies*. 60(4): 359-375. https://doi.org/10.1080/10510970903109961.

Krasner SD. (1999). *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy*. Princeton University Press.

Krieg A. (2024). "The war in Gaza, the decline of US leadership and the emergence of a networked regional order". *Mediterranean Politics*. 30(4): 892-901. https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2024.2358618.

Lawson G, Zarakol A. (2023). "Recognizing injustice: The 'hypocrisy charge' and the future of the liberal international order". *International Affairs*. 99(1): 201-217. https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiac258.

Maass RW. (2024). "Whitewashing American exceptionalism: Racialized subject-positioning and US foreign policy". *International Studies Quarterly*. 68(3): sqae085. https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqae085.

Mearsheimer JJ, Walt SM. (2007). *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Miskimmon A, O'Loughlin B, Roselle L. (2013). *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order*. Routledge.

Monten J. (2005). "The roots of the Bush Doctrine: Power, nationalism, and democracy promotion in U.S. strategy". *International Security*. 29(4): 112-156. https://www.jstor.org/stable/4137499.

Mukherjee R. (2024). "Hierarchy and endogenous contestation in the liberal international order". *Global Studies Quarterly*. 4(2): ksae028. https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksae028.

Olmsted JC. (2025). "US militarism and Sisyphean aid to Israel/Palestine". *Review of Radical Political Economics*. 57(2): 266-281. https://doi.org/10.1177/04866134251334443.

Pew Research Center. (2024a). "Views of the U.S. role in the Israel-Hamas war". In *Majority in U.S. Say Israel Has Valid Reasons for Fighting; Fewer Say the Same about Hamas*. March 21. https://www.pewresearch.org/2024/03/21/views-of-the-u-s-role-in-the-israel-hamas-war/.

----------. (2024b). "How U.S. Muslims are experiencing the Israel-Hamas war". April 2. https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/04/02/how-us-muslims-are-experiencing-the-israel-hamas-war/.

----------. (2024c). "Israeli views of Biden, the U.S. and diplomacy in resolving the conflict". May 30. https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2024/05/30/israeli-views-of-biden-the-u-s-and-diplomacy-in-resolving-the-conflict/.

Reuters. (2024). "Israel says it has secured $8.7 billion U.S. aid package". September 26. https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-says-it-has-secured-87-billion-us-aid-package-2024-09-26/.

Schmitz DF. (2006). *The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1965–1989*. Cambridge University Press.

Sharp JM. (2023). *U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel* (CRS Report No. RL33222). Congressional Research Service.

Soare SR. (2021). "Biden's security policy: Democratic security or democratic exceptionalism?". *Intereconomics*. 56(1): 14-20. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10272-021-0945-1.

Sultany N. (2024). "A threshold crossed: On genocidal intent and the duty to prevent genocide in Palestine". *Journal of Genocide Research*. 1-26. https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2024.2351261.

United Nations. (2024a). "Security Council again fails to adopt resolution demanding immediate humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza on account of veto by United States" (Press Release SC/15595). February 20. https://press.un.org/en/2024/sc15595.doc.htm.

----------. (2024b). "Security Council fails to adopt resolution demanding immediate ceasefire in Gaza, as United States casts negative vote" (Press Release SC/15907). November 20. https://press.un.org/en/2024/sc15907.doc.htm.

----------. (2023a). "Security Council fails to adopt resolution calling for humanitarian pauses in Gaza crisis on account of veto by United States" (Press Release SC/15450). October 18. https://www.un.org/unispal/document/security-council-fails-to-adopt-resolution-calling-for-humanitarian-pauses-in-israel-gaza-crisis-on-account-of-veto-by-united-states/.

----------. (2023b). "Security Council fails to adopt resolution demanding immediate humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza on account of veto by United States" (Press Release SC/15519). December 8. https://www.un.org/unispal/document/security-council-fails-to-adopt-resolution-demanding-immediate-humanitarian-ceasefire-in-gaza-on-account-of-veto-by-united-states-un-press-release/.

United Nations Security Council. (2024a). "Resolution 2728" (S/RES/2728). March 25. https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4042189?v=pdf.

----------. (2024b). "Resolution 2735" (S/RES/2735). June 10. https://www.un.org/unispal/document/sres2735-2024-10jun24/.

U.S. Department of State. (2024a). "Report to Congress pursuant to National Security

Memorandum 20". May 10. https://www.justsecurity.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Report-to-Congress-under-Section-2-of-the-National-Security-Memorandum-on-Safeguards-and-Accountability-with-Respect-to-Transferred-Defense.pdf.

----------. (2024b). "Explanation of vote on Palestinian membership in the United Nations". April 18. https://usun.usmission.gov/explanation-of-vote-at-a-un-security-council-meeting-on-palestinian-membership/.

Wendt A. (1999). *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge University Press.

White House. (2024). "National security memorandum on safeguards and accountability with respect to transferred defense articles and defense services" (NSM-20). February 8. https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2024/02/08/national-security-memorandum-on-safeguards-and-accountability-with-respect-to-transferred-defense-articles-and-defense-services.

Wissén S. (2026). "A grand strategy narrative of democratic hope: Legitimizing the Biden administration's democracy versus autocracy framework". *International Politics*. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-026-00769-2.