

# The “Israel Lobby” and American Politics

Robert C. Lieberman

In their recent book, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt argue that American support for Israel does not serve American interests. Nevertheless, they observe that American foreign policy regarding the Middle East, especially in recent years, has tilted strongly toward support for Israel, and they attribute this support to the influence of the “Israel lobby” in American domestic politics. Their book is principally an attempt to make a causal argument about American politics and policymaking. I examine three aspects of this argument—its causal logic, the use of evidence to support hypotheses, and the argument’s connection with the state of knowledge about American politics—and conclude that the case for the Israel lobby as the primary cause of American support for Israel is at best a weak one, although it points to a number of interesting questions about the mechanisms of power in American politics. Mearsheimer and Walt’s propositions about the direct influence of the Israel lobby on Congress and the executive branch are generally not supported by theory or evidence. Less conclusive and more suggestive, however, are their arguments about the lobby’s apparent influence on the terms and boundaries of legitimate debate and discussion of Israel and the Middle East in American policymaking. These directions point to an alternative approach to investigating the apparent influence of the Israel lobby in American politics, focusing less on direct, overt power over policy outcomes and more on more subtle pathways of influence over policy agendas and the terms of policy discourse.

Why does the United States support Israel so strongly when that support appears to violate American national interests? In their recent book, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt argue that Israel is of little strategic value to American interests and that the moral case for supporting Israel is weak at best. They then argue that this apparent distortion in American foreign policy is due to the extraordinary influence of pro-Israel groups and individuals—a collection of actors they dub the “Israel lobby”—in American domestic politics.<sup>1</sup> Not surprisingly, this book and the article that preceded it have provoked a great deal of criticism, as well as a fair amount of praise, focused largely on the merits of the book’s foreign-policy argument.<sup>2</sup> Much less attention has been paid, however, to their core argument, which consists of a set of causal claims about American politics and policymaking. In this article I examine this argument and conclude that the case for an “Israel lobby” as the primary cause of American support for Israel, although it points to a number of interesting questions about the mechanisms of power in American politics, is weak at best.

I treat Mearsheimer and Walt’s work as an exercise in the study of American politics, in which they attempt to mount an argument about the reasons for a particular set of American policy choices and the possible influence of

an interest group in guiding those choices in the context of American policymaking institutions. My focus is exclusively on this part of their argument, and *not* on their assessment of American foreign policy toward Israel and the Middle East. I ask three sets of questions about their argument. First, what, exactly, are their causal claims? By what mechanisms do they suggest that pro-Israel individuals and organizations influence policy outcomes? What are their hypotheses about the forces that shape American policy toward the Middle East? Second, what does political science have to say about these mechanisms? Many of the political processes that Mearsheimer and Walt discuss have, of course, been the subject of extensive research by scholars of American politics. What guidance can the discipline’s state-of-the-art knowledge about policymaking in the American political system give us in evaluating their argument? And finally, what kind of evidence would be necessary to substantiate their hypotheses? Do Mearsheimer and Walt provide such evidence? What might systematic empirical tests of their claims look like?

How does their argument hold up when subjected to this kind of critical scrutiny? Not well. Their causal claims about American politics are often illogical or impossibly vague, are almost never supported by dispositive evidence, and frequently contradict well-established research findings in American politics. I begin by describing their argument in some detail in order to expose the argument’s theoretical underpinnings and discern the causal hypotheses that they explore. I then zero in on these causal claims and examine Mearsheimer and Walt’s treatment of them—the logic by which they submit these hypotheses to critical

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Robert C. Lieberman is Professor of Political Science and Public Affairs and Chair, Department of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University (rcl15@columbia.edu).

tests, the evidence they use to test them, and alternative approaches that might illuminate the problems they address. My primary purpose is to unpack and evaluate Mearsheimer and Walt’s claims about influence on American policymaking and not to propose and test a fully-fledged alternative argument about the links between the activities of pro-Israel individuals and organizations and American foreign policy. To the extent that there are conventional standards for making causal inferences from empirical observations about influence in American politics, Mearsheimer and Walt generally fail to meet them. I note, however, that their argument involves claims not only about the lobby’s direct influence on policy outcomes but also about its ability to shape the policy agenda through the stifling of open debate and discourse in the United States about Israel and American policy toward Israel. These more subtle mechanisms of power are considerably harder to observe and there is no consensus among scholars of American politics about how to demonstrate their effects. Nevertheless, they offer a provocative and suggestive account of political influence that merits careful attention.

### Mearsheimer and Walt’s Argument

Mearsheimer and Walt’s central argument is that the activities of the Israel lobby are the primary cause of American foreign policy in the Middle East. They make this argument by tracing the lobby’s multiple pathways of influence on the American policymaking process: Congress, the president and the executive branch, the media, think tanks and the issue networks of professional policy analysis, universities, and broader public discourse. Following this theoretical exposition, they present several brief case studies of recent American policymaking that supposedly display the lobby’s influence.

The success of the causal argument about the reasons for American Middle East policymaking and the power of the Israel lobby will depend primarily on the principle of variation. In order to show a causal relationship between a cause and an effect, we must be able to observe that when the cause is present the effect is present but that when the cause is absent the effect is absent or, alternatively, that when there is more of the cause there is more of the effect. Empirically, then, substantiating a causal relationship between the activity of the lobby and policy outcomes would seem, as a general matter, to require showing that relatively higher levels of pro-Israel lobbying activity are associated with more pro-Israel outcomes, and showing this would require that the observed level of both lobbying activity and policy outcomes vary.<sup>3</sup>

This general principle of causal explanation suggests that a fruitful way of evaluating Mearsheimer and Walt’s argument would be to probe their argument for propositions that can be expressed as causal hypotheses and then

to examine whether it presents evidence to substantiate these hypotheses. In this section, I derive several distinct causal hypotheses from the book, and in the following section I evaluate whether or not Mearsheimer and Walt’s evidence provides sufficient reason to accept these hypotheses, and consequently their overall argument, as true. The short answer is that it does not. In some cases, it is fairly easy to demonstrate decisively that their causal claims—particularly those concerning the lobby’s direct influence over policy decisions—are simply wrong. In other cases the evidence is either absent or ambiguous, making it impossible either to accept or reject their claims without further examination, particularly where their claims concern the lobby’s more subtle and indirect agenda-setting influence over the boundaries of legitimate debate and discussion of Israel and the Middle East in American policymaking.

### *The Existence and Influence of the “Israel Lobby”*

The Israel lobby, Mearsheimer and Walt contend, is a “loose coalition of individuals and organizations that actively works to move U.S. foreign policy in a pro-Israel direction” (5). The lobby is composed primarily of American Jews for whom this is an important political issue, but it also includes others, particularly evangelical Christians, for whom Israel holds an important place in a set of eschatological beliefs (115, 132–34).<sup>4</sup> Finally, the lobby also encompasses Israeli government officials, with whom many Americans active in public affairs have close ties and routinely consult. The lobby is bound together not only by a common interest in supporting Israel but also by strong shared norms against public criticism of Israeli policy (121–22). Mearsheimer and Walt do not claim in direct terms that the lobby is an organized entity, although they emphasize a single organization, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), whose reputation for lobbying influence and effectiveness they note (117–18).

The individuals and groups that make up the “lobby,” Mearsheimer and Walt suggest, engage in a number of activities intended to influence American foreign policy in the direction of support for Israel (112–13). First, they vote for pro-Israel candidates. Second, they engage in other activities intended to convey their policy preferences to their elected representatives and other policymakers, including writing letters, contributing money to candidates for public office, and “supporting pro-Israel organizations,” which presumably includes donating money, joining membership organizations, volunteering, attending meetings, and so forth (115). In other words, they engage in political participation in a democratic system; this list of activities corresponds almost precisely with the classic definition of political participation that has long formed the backbone of the study of mass political behavior in the United States and other democratic countries.<sup>5</sup>

In principle, therefore, Mearsheimer and Walt's major contention, that the activity of the Israel lobby is the primary cause of American policy toward Israel, is amenable to the construction of empirically testable hypotheses that connect pro-Israeli political participation in the United States to pro-Israel policy outcomes. If, as they contend, the strength of the lobby and its activities translate into policy outcomes, then we ought to be able to observe its effects in a variety of ways.

The political participation of pro-Israel actors, they suggest quite reasonably, is not undifferentiated. Rather, they argue that it exploits the particular fragmented institutional structure of the American political system, which provides "a multiplicity of points of access" and veto points for actors who wish to influence policymaking.<sup>6</sup> Mearsheimer and Walt's assertion that the lobby's members "exert significant influence on the policy-making process in Washington" (151), then, rests on a set of more precise causal claims about the lobby's influence in specific institutional venues, particularly Congress and the executive branch, and their dominance of public and policy discourse through think tanks, the media, and the academy.

### *The "Lobby" and Congress*

The brief section of the book on the lobby's apparent influence in Congress contains a number of causal claims and testable propositions about the means by which pro-Israel forces in American society might plausibly affect policy. Mearsheimer and Walt make several explicit testable claims. One is that the presence of members of Congress who are either "Christian Zionists" or Jews can be expected to increase the likelihood of pro-Israel policy outcomes. "One reason for the lobby's success with Congress," they write, "is that some key members have been Christian Zionists, such as former House Speaker [sic] Richard Arme. . . . There are also Jewish senators and representatives who work to make U.S. foreign policy support Israel's interests" (152–53).<sup>7</sup> The implication of this statement is that the power of either "Christian Zionist" or Jewish members of Congress translates into pro-Israel policy outcomes, and that the more powerful these members are, the greater the likelihood of pro-Israel outcomes. This is so presumably because these members of Congress have pro-Israel policy preferences that derive from either their religious convictions or ethnic attachments independently of any lobbying activity (although it might also be the case that these members represent districts or states whose voters have pro-Israel preferences that are reflected in their choice of representative). If the presence and power of "Christian Zionist" and Jewish members of Congress increase the chance of pro-Israel policy outcomes, this ought to be discernible in one of two ways. One is that variations in the power of these

members will be associated with variations in pro-Israel outcomes; when these members are either more numerous or wield more influence in congressional policymaking, the results should tilt more toward the preferences of pro-Israel actors. Alternatively, we should be able to observe and describe the processes by which these particular members wield such influence. Elsewhere, Mearsheimer and Walt rightly caution against equating American Jews with pro-Israel policy preferences or political behavior. They cite a survey finding that "36 percent of Jewish-Americans were either 'not very' or 'not at all' emotionally attached to Israel" (115), so that the presumption of pro-Israel preferences should not attach automatically to all Jewish members of Congress. This caution should temper our willingness to attribute pro-Israel influence to Jewish members. For the moment, I leave deliberately vague the question of how congressional "power" is constituted or measured (as Mearsheimer and Walt leave it vague). I return to it later.

Members of Congress themselves are not the only source of influence over congressional policy. Congressional staff members play an important role in the formulation of policy on behalf of the members and committees whom they serve. Staff members with pro-Israel policy preferences, then, constitute another potential causal factor in policymaking, again independent of lobbying by nongovernmental actors. Mearsheimer and Walt slide quickly from this broader claim about the policy preferences of Congressional staff members to a quotation (from a former executive director of AIPAC) about the presence of Jewish staffers "who are willing . . . to look at certain issues in terms of their Jewishness" (153). Again, it is not clear how closely the "Jewishness" of staff members maps onto pro-Israel policy preferences, nor is it clear exactly by what mechanism these staff members are supposed to wield power—sheer numbers, occupancy of particular positions on the staffs of pivotal members or influential committees—but the suggested hypothesis, connecting the presence and power of Jewish congressional staff members with pro-Israel policy outcomes, is clear enough. Evidently "Christian Zionist" congressional staffers are of less consequence; they receive no mention.

At the center of Mearsheimer and Walt's congressional influence story, however, are AIPAC and its capacity to funnel campaign contributions to congressional candidates who are perceived as friendly to the group's preferences and to withhold contributions from candidates whose policy positions or commitments are different:

AIPAC's success is due in large part to its ability to reward legislators and congressional candidates who support its agenda, and to punish those who do not, based mainly on its capacity to influence campaign contributions. Money is critical to U.S. elections . . . and AIPAC makes sure that its friends get financial support so long as they do not stray from AIPAC's line (154).

This proposition gives rise quite straightforwardly to a hypothesis connecting this electoral activity to policy outcomes: greater levels of campaign activity, whether measured in contributions or other kinds of electoral support, should be associated with higher levels of support for pro-Israel policies. This hypothesis has two empirical variants, depending on the level of analysis—collective or individual—at which campaign activity and outcomes are being measured. At the collective level, an association should appear between aggregate levels of campaign activity by groups such as AIPAC and overall policy outcomes. At the individual level, the association might work in one of two ways. On the one hand, contributions and campaign support might be retrospective, a means of rewarding or punishing past behavior; if this is the case, candidates whose records or policy statements indicate support for Israel should receive higher levels of pro-Israel campaign support than those whose records indicate lower levels of support. On the other hand, they might also be prospective, a means of inducing future behavior; in this case, candidates who receive higher levels of pro-Israel electoral support should subsequently be more supportive of pro-Israel policy than those who receive less support. While these two mechanisms are conceptually distinct, empirical research on campaign contributions and other electoral activity has found them fiendishly hard to distinguish empirically, as I will elaborate below. In principle, these relationships between campaign activity and policymaking behavior ought to be empirically observable in terms of both correlations (between campaign contributions and legislative behavior, for example) and of process (evidence, perhaps, of the interactions between candidates and groups).

A suggested final mechanism for the lobby’s influence on Congress is AIPAC’s role as a source of information, background work, and tactical advice for members of Congress and their staffs. They quote a former legislative director of AIPAC who says that members of Congress often “turn to” AIPAC before other sources for information, and that AIPAC “is often called upon” for other assistance (161). This quotation appears to suggest that members of Congress voluntarily seek out AIPAC for these interactions. This is, moreover, a common mode of interaction between legislators and interest groups that does not clearly distinguish AIPAC from other organizations.<sup>8</sup>

Thus it is not clear what the causal mechanism at work here or why we evidence of this form of contact leads to an inference of influence. Is the information that AIPAC provides biased or inaccurate in a way that might influence policy decision-making? Does AIPAC’s information crowd out information from other sources? Does AIPAC derive some advantage from being, on occasion, the first source of information, such as the ability to frame policy issues for members of Congress in an advantageous way? Mearsheimer and Walt say no more about the causal argument here.

### *The “Lobby” and the Executive Branch*

The second key point of influence for the Israel lobby that Mearsheimer and Walt explore is the executive branch, particularly the president and his close foreign- and defense-policy advisors, especially (but not exclusively) those with Middle East portfolios. The principal causal mechanism they propose here is, quite reasonably, electoral. The lobby’s “leverage over the Executive branch,” they write, “derives in part from the impact Jewish voters have on presidential elections” (163). First, they suggest that Jewish-Americans are particularly important as donors to presidential campaigns: “Despite their small numbers in the population (less than 3 percent), American Jews make large campaign donations to candidates from both parties. . . . Indeed, the *Washington Post* once estimated that Democratic presidential candidates ‘depend on Jewish supporters to supply as much as 60 percent of the money raised from private sources’” (163). This claim suggests that presidential candidates who receive more financing from Jewish donors (or, one might add, from other pro-Israel sources) ought to be more likely to espouse pro-Israel policies (and to pursue them if they are elected) than candidates who receive less, and that candidates with more pro-Israel financing ought to be more likely to win presidential elections. Of course, as with congressional candidates, the causality might work the other way: pro-Israel candidates raise more money from pro-Israel donors.

The second part of the electoral argument concerns the apparently pivotal position of Jewish voters in presidential elections: “Furthermore, Jewish voters have high turnout rates and are concentrated in key states like California, Florida, Illinois, New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania, which increases their weight in determining who becomes president.” (163). Here the contention is that Jewish voters are decisive in presidential election—that the outcome of the election hangs, at least in part, on their vote choices and, presumably, that these vote choices depend on the stances or records of the candidates toward Israel. If, in fact, Jewish (or pro-Israel) voters ever cast the decisive votes in presidential elections, then it might be reasonable to expect more pro-Israel policies from the ensuing administrations than from administrations in which Jewish voters were not decisive—assuming, that is, that it is reasonable to equate “Jewish” and “pro-Israel” votes. Once again, the argument slides from a broader claim about the Israel lobby to more particular claims about Jewish voters; they do not discuss the potential electoral influence of evangelical “Christian Zionists” as a factor in pro-Israel electoral pressure, although such voters have received a great deal of attention in recent years as a powerful and decisive force in American politics.<sup>9</sup> They also seem, once again, to ignore their own precaution against assuming that pro-Israel policies are of high importance to all American Jews.

A second suggested avenue of influence on the executive branch is appointments. The lobby, Mearsheimer and

Walt suggest, acts as a gatekeeper for senior executive appointments in foreign and defense policy as high as the cabinet level. Pro-Israel organizations, they argue, exercise veto power over prospective appointees who they view as insufficiently supportive of pro-Israel policy and can snuff out policy avenues of which they disapprove (166–67). Moreover, they suggest, the lobby often enjoys close ties to executive-branch officials, to the point that people affiliated with the lobby have often themselves occupied key Middle East policymaking positions (165–66). Although the assertion of influence is clear enough, it is not clear what empirically testable proposition is being offered about the lobby's influence on executive personnel. It is hard to discern a hypothesis here that is neither a truism nor a tautology, on the order of "pro-Israel officials make pro-Israel policy." How are we to know empirically when the presence of pro-Israel officials in an administration is the consequence of interest-group pressure that runs contrary to the president's own foreign-policy preferences rather than merely reflecting those preferences? Is, for example, Jimmy Carter's failure to appoint George Ball secretary of state—one of the very small number of anecdotal instances of apparent influence over a presidential appointment that Mearsheimer and Walt discuss—part of a larger pattern of such influence (167)? Is it an instance of a recurring norm (as in labor policy, where labor unions and business organizations routinely propose and vet presidential nominees to the National Labor Relations Board), or is this influence of a more extraordinary sort?<sup>10</sup> Were the pro-Israel officials who, they note, populated the national security establishment in the first term of the Bush *filis* administration there because they were foisted upon the president against his wishes or because they shared his (and the vice president's) policy beliefs, whether about Israel or other foreign- and defense-policy matters? Mearsheimer and Walt offer little guidance on these questions.

### ***The Lobby and Policy Discourse***

Alongside their argument about the Israel lobby's direct influence on the processes and outcomes of American foreign policymaking, they make a separate but related argument about the lobby's influence on the discourse surrounding Middle East policy in the United States. Here their central claim is that pro-Israel actors manage on the whole to stifle open debate about American policy toward Israel in order to maintain favorable public opinion toward Israel and American support for Israel. This influence, they suggest, operates through a number of mechanisms. One is the media, which, they argue, is susceptible to pressure such as "letter-writing campaigns, demonstrations, and boycotts against news outlets whose content [the lobby] considers anti-Israel" (172). A second is the arena of professional policy analysis, particularly the dense world of think tanks and other policy

research institutions concerned with Middle East policy, which they portray as dominated by pro-Israel analysts (175–78). A third domain, in which Mearsheimer and Walt acknowledge that the lobby has been rather less successful in its attempts to regulate discussion of Middle East policy on college and university campuses. Nevertheless, they describe some attempts by pro-Israel actors to monitor teaching and research by university faculty and note the recent increase in the number of Israel studies programs in American universities (178–85). Finally, they describe what they see as one of the lobby's key tactics in shaping discourse on the Middle East in the United States: the accusation that criticism of Israel or of pro-Israel policy is tantamount to anti-Semitism (188–96). These claims, while hard to substantiate and exquisitely difficult to theorize, nevertheless seem, as I will show, to describe something closer to reality than the arguments about the lobby's direct impact on American policymaking. I return to this point in the conclusion.

### **Assessing the Argument**

How well do Mearsheimer and Walt's arguments about the causes of American policy toward Israel stand up to careful examination? Are they logically consistent? Do they allow for clear and systematic empirical tests that would allow us to observe whether or not American policy does, in fact, respond to the sources of pressure that Mearsheimer and Walt deem so important? If so, do they provide the evidence to conduct such tests? Are these arguments consistent with what we already know about how American politics and policymaking work? Now that I have unpacked the logic of their argument and identified the particular causal claims that seem to be embedded in it, I return to those claims and examine whether the book makes a reasonable empirical case for them.

### ***The General Argument***

In its most encompassing form, Mearsheimer and Walt's argument describes an overall relationship between pro-Israel political activity and American foreign policy. As a general matter, testing such a hypothesis requires establishing an observable connection between the two parts of this general proposition: the level and kind of political activity aimed at affecting American Middle East policy on the one hand and the results—policy outcomes—on the other. An examination of the methods and evidence by which Mearsheimer and Walt test these propositions reveals several serious problems with the book's empirical argument and the general logic behind it.

The first of these issues is the matter of variation. There are a number of conceivable ways that Mearsheimer and Walt might find and explain variation in both their independent and dependent variables. They might, for example, examine variation over time. The state of Israel and,

hence, the question of American policy toward Israel have existed for more than sixty years, and was a matter of public debate for some decades before that. Surely the lobby’s power, as Mearsheimer and Walt would measure it, has not been constant over that period. So they might have found a systematic way of observing both the level of pro-Israel lobbying activity of various kinds and the level of “pro-Israelness” of American foreign policy. If their main argument is right, then, we should expect to find that at times of greater pro-Israel lobbying activity, American policy is more pro-Israel. They might also have considered variation across policy areas. If the lobby has paid more attention to some aspects of policy than to others, we might expect to find that policy in those policy areas that receive the lobby’s direct attention is more pro-Israel than policy in other areas. It might, in fact, be the case that there has been little variation in American policy toward Israel, in which case an explanatory strategy based on exploring the covariation of cause and effect would not work. If this were the case—if American Middle East policy *were* constant—it would be necessary to show that Mearsheimer and Walt’s favored explanatory factor, the activities of the Israel lobby, was also constant *while other possible explanatory factors varied*.

But the book, in general, presents very little variation on any of these dimensions. The level of lobbying always seems to be high, and the outcomes always seem to be pro-Israel, regardless of the circumstances. Nor do they systematically canvass alternative explanations of American Middle East policy that might help bolster their case for the lobby’s causal importance. The examples of the lobby’s apparent influence in the book are taken from a relatively broad time period, although most of them—and all of the cases in the book’s empirical section—are drawn from the George W. Bush administration (which seems to be the most one-sidedly pro-Israel administration in recent memory).<sup>11</sup> This time period seems to align with the era in which AIPAC in particular has been recognized as a highly skilled actor in national politics. But what about major events in U.S.-Israel policy before this period, and before AIPAC wielded such influence? What about President Harry Truman’s rather controversial decision to recognize Israel after its declaration of independence in 1948, in which pro-Israel lobbying certainly played a role but without the densely institutionalized lobby that Mearsheimer and Walt describe in a later period?<sup>12</sup> What about President Dwight Eisenhower’s response to the Suez Crisis of 1956, presumably also before the emergence of a powerful Israel lobby (AIPAC had been founded only three years earlier)? The Suez example might, in fact, help Mearsheimer and Walt’s case, as an example of American diplomacy deployed against Israeli military gains (although the real targets of American pressure were Britain and France) in the absence of a powerful lobby. What about the sale of Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) aircraft to Saudi Arabia in 1981, which was

concluded by President Ronald Reagan with the approval of the Senate over the strenuous objections of both Israel and its American supporters?

Each of these episodes receives brief mention in the book, to be sure, but they are not deployed as comparative cases that might provide a test of the book’s overall hypothesis. In the AWACS case, Mearsheimer and Walt acknowledge that the outcome “was mostly due to a set of unusually unfavorable conditions,” a combination of international and domestic factors (p. 144). This is a pregnant claim, which implies—correctly—that policymaking is the result of a complex and ever-changing set of variables and that the efficacy of lobbying might vary depending on these contextual conditions. Sadly, this insight does not inform the rest of the analysis. There is, in general, no systematic attempt to find or exploit the variation, either in pressure or in outcomes, that would help to establish a causal connection between the two. Rather, the evidence that they offer—both the illustrative examples in the presentation of their argument and the cases that make up their empirical demonstration of the lobby’s supposed effects—seems to be selected precisely because it follows the pattern they expect: high pressure and pro-Israel outcomes. But this appearance of selection bias, which I will discuss in more detail, severely undermines the validity of their argument.

A second general source of confusion about Mearsheimer and Walt’s argument concerns the relationship among the various causal arguments that they present. These hypotheses run the gamut of American politics, encompassing campaigns and elections, voting behavior, interest group behavior, Congressional and executive politics, and the media. It is not clear how these different mechanisms interact with each other in Mearsheimer and Walt’s causal scheme. Are they complementary? Do they compete with one another? Do they all exert influence on policy outcomes independently, or are they connected in a more complex causal chain, in which one effect is itself a cause of yet another effect, and so on, with policymaking at the end of the chain? For example, some of the causal arguments they offer are not about policymaking *per se*, but rather about media coverage of Israel and the Middle East, the content and volume of which are presumably somehow related to the policymaking process, although this relationship is not clearly specified. This distinction—between direct influence on policy decisions and more indirect influence through the shaping of discourse surrounding policymaking—will turn out to be an important one in evaluating the success of Mearsheimer and Walt’s argument, but it is one that they do not make. In general, their failure to specify a model of the American policymaking process with any clarity produces an argument with some rather loose ends.

Finally, a question arises frequently in the book about the boundaries of the lobby and its distinctness from the government over which it seems to wield such influence.

Mearsheimer and Walt seem to veer between two different portraits of the lobby. On the one hand, they suggest the lobby (as this name implies) is a non-governmental entity (or set of actors), whose purpose is to exert influence or power over actions of the government. On the other hand, some of their claims suggest that the lobby is a ruling elite that includes both government officials and people outside of the government who are connected to one another by shared social background, economic status, or network ties.<sup>13</sup> If the lobby is defined in the first of these ways, such that it consists of actors outside of the government, then its influence is, in principle, empirically testable; many of the hypotheses elaborated above take just such a form, connecting a discrete and observable set of actions on the part of one set of people with a set of policy outcomes that they prefer. If, on the other hand, the lobby consists not only of pro-Israel voters, campaign contributors, organizations, and the like but also elected and appointed government officials and their staffs, then the proposition that the lobby exerts disproportionate influence on policymaking begins to verge on the unfalsifiable, for at every turn of the policymaking process there seems to be another “member” of the lobby closer to the center of power to whom some decision can be attributed.<sup>14</sup>

One might respond to this general critique of their argument that they are engaged in a different kind of explanatory enterprise than the one I have contemplated thus far, based on tracing processes of influence to find causal mechanisms rather than simply measuring the extent of covariation between lobbying activity and policy outcomes. As its name implies, process-tracing is intended not simply to discover the extent to which hypothesized causes and effects covary—that is, whether effects tend to appear when causes are present across a large number of independent cases—but to examine closely the processes by which causes generate effects within each case.<sup>15</sup> This is certainly a plausible way of framing their argument and might allow them to relax somewhat the need for a large sample of cases of policymaking in order to substantiate their claims about the lobby’s influence. If, instead, they can document recurrent sequences of cause and effect connecting pro-Israel political activity and pro-Israel policy outcomes, they will be able to stake a strong claim to having established a more general causal relationship. But following a process-tracing approach does not exempt them from the need to specify and test theories of policymaking and hypotheses about the particular causal connections they suspect to be behind American policy. Even in this kind of analysis, as Peter Hall has argued, “the causal theories to be tested are interrogated for the predictions they contain about how events will unfold.”<sup>16</sup> Whether these hypotheses are expressed in terms of covariation or process, the fundamental nature of the empirical tests to which they are to be subjected remains the same: have they assembled evidence that would reveal if they were wrong, and

does that evidence, in the end, fit their expectations about both processes and outcomes? As I proceed to examine whether Mearsheimer and Walt’s data support their hypotheses, I will try to examine their evidence in terms of process as well as outcome.

In order to assess more precisely the general claim about the lobby’s influence, we need to explore the evidence for the more specific propositions that I have outlined that highlight particular mechanisms by which the Mearsheimer and Walt hypothesize that pro-Israel political activity is the primary cause of policy outcomes. I emphasize again that my purpose is not to test these hypotheses fully or to develop a comprehensive explanation of American foreign policy toward Israel. My intent, rather, is to explore Mearsheimer and Walt’s arguments and to suggest (and, in some cases, briefly demonstrate) how one might systematically deploy theory and evidence to test them. In examining their treatment of each claim, I assess the evidence about three things: the relevant pro-Israel activity, the outcomes in question, and the processes that connect the two. Where possible, I also evaluate their claims against the relevant theory and research findings about these topics that might inform their discussion. I am not suggesting that any finding that contradicts what other political scientists have said is necessarily invalid, but if they are going to do so they ought to be prepared to show where current theory goes wrong and how their evidence supports their model of influence over a currently prevalent alternative. There is no such analysis in the book, however—no discussion of the relationship of the argument with other theories and no systematic testing of Mearsheimer and Walt’s models of American politics and policymaking against alternatives. There are also frequent misstatements about basic elements of American politics. More generally, the specific empirical tests in the book display the basic general flaws of the argument over and over—lack of variation, selection bias, conceptual confusion, and lack of clarity about the boundaries distinguishing cause, effect, and process.

### *Congress*

Mearsheimer and Walt’s discussion of the lobby’s influence in Congress begins with a statement that displays something of a misunderstanding of Congress and how it operates. Israel, they contend, is “virtually immune from criticism” in Congress. “This situation is remarkable,” they write, “because Congress frequently deals with contentious issues” (152). Maybe so, but Congress habitually shies away from contentious issues; avoiding unnecessary controversy is inherent in Congress’s very nature and structure, beginning with the reelection imperative that forms the basis of modern congressional studies. The things that individual members of Congress do revolve around the fundamental electoral incentive, which dictates that they should avoid doing anything that might alienate too many

voters. The activities in which they do tend to engage—famously characterized by David Mayhew as advertising, credit claiming, and position taking—are fundamentally conflict-avoidant.<sup>17</sup> Individual members’ electoral interests in conflict-avoidance among other things, moreover, dictate the way Congress as a whole is organized to act collectively and the way congressional policymaking occurs. Consequently, Congress collectively is very good at doing things that are relatively unlikely to cause substantial controversy, such as distributing discrete, identifiable benefits to particular places or groups that do not impose visible or traceable costs on others. Congress generally finds it difficult, however, to address highly controversial issues or to adopt policies that will impose substantial visible costs on voters.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, Mearsheimer and Walt’s basic premise here—that the lack of Congressional debate and division on Middle East policy reflects the stifling of Congress’s natural urge to address controversial issues—is fundamentally flawed. If anything, the burden is on Mearsheimer and Walt to show that congressional action on the Middle East is out of synch with the central tendency of national opinion; this presumption lies behind their argument (both here and in general), but they do not establish that it is so. In fact, data on long-term trends in American public opinion show that Americans have long consistently expressed substantial support for Israel. Levels of sympathy for Israel have been sensitive to short-term events, though fluctuating around a baseline of support approaching or exceeding a majority, a picture consistent with their observation of Congress’s general pro-Israel stance but not consistent with their premise.<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, Mearsheimer and Walt hint at some specific causal claims about the lobby and its influence on Congress, particularly relating to the presence of Jewish and evangelical members of Congress and Jewish staff members and to the impact of campaign contributions and other campaign activity on the part of AIPAC and other pro-Israel organizations. Their first argument suggests that it is the presence of Jewish and evangelical Christian members of Congress (and Jewish staff members) that drives congressional policy toward Israel. But they offer little evidence connecting either of these groups within Congress to actual policy outcomes, beyond a single pro-Israel quotation from former House Majority Leader Dick Armey (who left the Congress in 2003 and thus was not a member during most of the events Mearsheimer and Walt discuss) and the bland assertion that some Jewish members of Congress “work to make U.S. foreign policy support Israel’s interests” (152–53). How many such members of Congress are there? How do they influence American foreign policy? What actions do they take to shape policy? What positions within Congress do they hold that give them privileged access to the levers of foreign policymaking? Mearsheimer and Walt do not say.

There are a number of ways that a discrete and like-minded group of members of Congress might influence congressional policymaking. One is through sheer numerical power. To explore this proposition, a useful starting point is the size of the group. There were several dozen Jewish members of the 109<sup>th</sup> Congress (which was the sitting Congress when Mearsheimer and Walt’s original article appeared): eleven senators (out of 100) and twenty-six House members (out of 435, less than six percent) according to one count.<sup>20</sup> These numbers have been relatively stable over the recent past. It is somewhat harder to count precisely the number of “Christian Zionist” members of Congress because they are not generally so identified in compilations of member data (in the *Congressional Directory*, for example, members are generally identified either by generic denomination—“Baptist,” or “Catholic,” for example—when they are identified by religion at all). So we have little idea how much weight “Christian Zionist” members carry in Congress, although given the recent growth of the Christian right as an important force in American politics, it is a reasonable suspicion that the “Christian Zionist” presence has grown in recent decades.

Given these relatively small numbers, it is also far from clear how Mearsheimer and Walt suppose that these members wield such influence over congressional policymaking. Certainly the Jewish members of Congress do not carry enough voting weight to make a substantial difference by themselves in policy decisions, which must be made by majorities (and often by supermajorities in the Senate, due to the filibuster rule), without substantial support from others. In the House, for example, a bloc of twenty-odd members could not succeed in passing legislation without the support of nearly 200 other members. By the same token, eleven senators could not generally legislate without the support of forty-nine others, due to the three-fifths requirement under Senate rules (amounting to sixty votes) to close debate and end a filibuster (which would likely either occur or be threatened on such a closely divided and potentially controversial subject).<sup>21</sup>

But numbers alone do not tell the whole story in Congress, and there are other mechanisms by which members of Congress with distinctive policy views might sway congressional deliberations. There are a number of theoretical approaches to congressional policymaking in which strategic considerations, rather than sheer numbers, are decisive in determining policy outcomes. Three such approaches deserve special consideration. One is the theory of pivotal politics developed by Keith Krehbiel.<sup>22</sup> In this approach, members of Congress are assumed to have policy preferences that can be represented as points on a single dimension—say, from pro- to anti-Israel. In typical majoritarian institutions, we would expect the median voter—the individual right at the center of the preference distribution—to control policy outcomes, because

his or her preferred policy would defeat any other proposed policy.<sup>23</sup> But the American policymaking system includes several key nonmajoritarian elements—particularly the filibuster in the Senate, the presidential veto, and the two-thirds requirement for a congressional veto override—which require a modification of the median-voter approach. Krehbiel’s pivotal politics approach thus identifies the preferences of several key actors, or pivots, as crucial to explaining policymaking outcomes: the median member of the House, the sixtieth senator, the president, and the representative and senator representing a two-thirds division of each House in case of a presidential veto.<sup>24</sup> In this picture, policymaking influence might derive from occupying these key pivotal positions in one or more of these institutions. Establishing that this is what is driving the lobby’s influence in congressional policymaking would, therefore, require a more textured examination of the role of Jewish or “Christian Zionist” members.

A second model of congressional policymaking focuses on parties as key agents of congressional policymaking. In this approach, parties represent aggregations of members with common policy preferences who unite to exercise majority control over the procedures and, especially, the agenda of the House and Senate. By exercising agenda control, parties can shape policy outcomes, at least by preventing their least preferred policy options from being considered.<sup>25</sup> In one especially influential version of this approach, known as “conditional party government,” the power of the majority party in each house to set the agenda and direct policymaking comes about particularly when the parties in Congress are highly unified and ideologically homogeneous, as has increasingly been the case in recent decades. In this scenario, unified parties consent to delegate agenda control and other powers to their leaders in order to maximize the achievement of their own policy and electoral goals. Under this approach, the key observations to chronicle policy influence in Congress would be the extent to which the parties, and especially the majority party in each chamber, are unified in their policy views, and hence we might want to know something about the weight of pro-Israel members not in the chambers as a whole but in the majority party. Based on this approach, the possibility that Jewish members, at least, exercise decisive influence on congressional policymaking through their centrality to partisan majorities seems exceedingly remote. In the 109th Congress, the last Congress before the Democratic takeover in the 2006 elections, there were only three Jewish Republicans in Congress, two in the Senate and one in the House, hardly a recipe for tremendous influence in establishing the majority party’s policy direction. Again, it seems much more likely that it would be “Christian Zionists” playing this role under the Republican congressional majorities of the last twelve years, although this proposition is subject to the same measurement problem mentioned earlier.

A final perspective on congressional policymaking concerns the internal organization of the Congress, particularly the role of committees, which are Congress’s primary internal shapers and gatekeepers of substantive legislation. There are two schools of thought about the role committees play in the legislative process. One holds that committees tend to be composed of members who have particularly strong and distinctive preferences regarding the policy areas under their committee’s jurisdiction.<sup>26</sup> For example, we might expect the agriculture committees to be composed of members from farm states who have a strong interest in protecting policies such as agricultural subsidies that confer highly concentrated benefits on their constituents while imposing highly dispersed costs on everybody else. In this picture, such “preference outlier” committees manage to engineer the passage of legislation highly favorable to their own members through log-rolling with other committees, so that distinctive interests in Congress are each able to protect their most cherished policies.

This “distributive” approach to committee power is actually potentially consistent with Mearsheimer and Walt’s account of the lobby’s influence in that it provides an institutional logic for policy outcomes in specific policy areas that follow the preferences of a narrow group whose interests diverge from the central tendency of Congress’s overall preferences. But they offer little evidence to show that it is disproportionate representation on the relevant committees that constitutes the critical ingredient of the “lobby’s” influence. In the 109th Congress Jewish members occupied eight of twenty-three Democratic seats on what was then called the House International Relations Committee, including the top three ranked minority members and the top six of nine. One of these members was also the ranking minority member of the Subcommittee on the Middle East and Central Asia, which presumably plays an important role in developing congressional Middle East policy. (As Mearsheimer and Walt note, this committee and subcommittee—renamed the Committee on Foreign Affairs and the Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia after the 2006 elections—are now chaired by Jewish members under the new Democratic majority. But they misrepresent the process by which committee and subcommittee chairs are selected, implying that there was some kind of Israel litmus test rather than a system based largely, although not exclusively, on seniority (153).)<sup>27</sup> But on the Senate’s counterpart committee (Foreign Relations), Jewish members accounted, in the 109th Congress, for only two of eight Democratic seats and one of ten on the Republican side. (The Armed Services committees were equally bereft of Jewish members—two of eleven Senate Democrats, including the ranking minority member (now the chair), and two of twenty-eight House Democrats.) Again, disproportionate representation on the minority side of a single committee hardly seems a formula for outsized influence.

An alternative approach to committee power in Congress holds that committees exist principally to provide information about specialized policy areas to members through the division of labor.<sup>28</sup> This approach begins with the recognition that although members of Congress have preferences about policy outcomes, they are typically generalists and do not have enough knowledge of specific policy areas to know which policies are most likely to achieve their preferred outcomes. Committees, then, divide up the range of policies into substantive areas and allow committee members to gain specialized knowledge and convey that information to the entire chamber so that the house as a whole can make more informed policy decisions. In this picture, committees serve the interests of the median (or pivotal) tendency of overall congressional preferences rather than the more specialized interests of their own members. The implications of this “informational view,” then, are similar to the pivotal view of policymaking under separated powers—it is hard for specialized groups to induce policy outcomes that deviate from these pivotal tendencies.

Clearly these approaches to the congressional policymaking suggest different pathways of potential influence and each implies a different empirical test. Some, moreover, are incompatible with one another. Examining Mearsheimer and Walt’s propositions about congressional influence in a convincing way would seem to require a careful, systematic examination of pivots, committees, and parties in Congress, which their analysis does not provide. On its face, moreover, the validity of the proposition that a small band of ideologically pro-Israel members of Congress has hijacked American foreign policy seems dubious, and this cursory examination of some evidence about these members does not bear out this causal connection.

A second set of hypotheses about congressional influence centers not on the composition and structure of Congress but on the bases of electoral support for members of Congress, particularly financial and other campaign support from AIPAC and other pro-Israel organizations.<sup>29</sup> What pro-Israel campaign donors are Mearsheimer and Walt describing? How much money have they contributed, to how many candidates, over what period of time? How does AIPAC orchestrate these contributions? Do these contributions systematically and significantly affect the likelihood that AIPAC’s favored candidates will win their elections (or that those on AIPAC’s hit list will lose)?

Mearsheimer and Walt do substantiate, in its broadest outlines, their claim that pro-Israel donors, both individuals and political action committees (PACs) donate a lot of money to candidates for federal office. They cite data from the Center for Responsive Politics (CRP), a nonpartisan nonprofit organization that tracks money in politics, that show that pro-Israel PACs contributed more than \$3 million to congressional candidates in the 2006 elections (117, 156). In fact, pro-Israel individuals and organiza-

tions contributed an average of approximately \$7.3 million to candidates for Congress and the presidency in each two-year election cycle between 1990 and 2006.<sup>30</sup> But is this overall level of contributions sufficient to indicate influence? These aggregate figures conceal some important factors that ought to give one pause before drawing that conclusion. First, between two-thirds and three-fourths of the total is donated to Democratic candidates, and although the Democratic share did decline after the Republican takeover of Congress in 1994 (73.6 percent during the 1990–94 cycles; 63.7 percent during 1996–2006), Democrats still received most pro-Israel contributions, even when they were in the minority. Second, the total amount of pro-Israel donations has remained relatively flat while the overall level of campaign contributions has increased dramatically, meaning that pro-Israel contributions constitute an ever-smaller share of total campaign spending. According to the CRP’s rankings, pro-Israel contributions amounted to the twelfth-highest total of any industry or issue-oriented group in 1990, but that ranking steadily declined over the 1990s and early 2000s; in 2004, pro-Israel contributions ranked only fifty-second, recovering to thirty-fourth in 2006.

Finally, it is far from clear that even these large-sounding amounts of money are enough to be decisive in increasingly expensive congressional elections, especially for Senate seats. For one thing, the candidates who received the largest shares of pro-Israel contributions were hardly guaranteed victory. In 2004, for example, the congressional candidate receiving the most money from pro-Israel donors, Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle, lost his reelection bid despite receiving nearly \$250,000 from pro-Israel sources.<sup>31</sup> In 2002, three of the top ten pro-Israel recipients lost; in 2000, two of the top ten (including the largest single recipient, Senator Charles Robb); and in 1998, two of ten again. Moreover, even these extravagant-seeming amounts of money constitute a relatively small portion of the total cost of running an expensive election campaign; even Senator Joseph Lieberman’s record \$1.2 million in pro-Israel contributions for his highly publicized 2006 reelection campaign (in which he was elected as an independent after losing the Democratic primary) constituted only 6 percent of his total fundraising for the campaign. (Lieberman also spent approximately \$1.2 million less than he raised in that campaign and still won decisively, suggesting that his pro-Israel contributions were essentially superfluous). Mearsheimer and Walt provide a handful of examples of campaigns in which pro-Israel contributions lined up against a candidate who turned out to be unsuccessful, but these anecdotes hardly demonstrate that pro-Israel campaign contributions are causally decisive in hard-fought, high-stakes electoral contests (157–59).

More problematic, however, than this lack of empirical investigation is Mearsheimer and Walt’s apparent but erroneous presumption that campaign contributions

effectively “buy” influence—that is, that contributions will induce members of Congress to behave in ways they would not otherwise do, or that large campaign contributions can cause congressional policymaking to deviate from directions it might otherwise take were it governed by more “sound” considerations. There is, to be sure, some evidence that organized campaign contributors behave as if they are, in essence, making “investments” in candidates that they expect to pay off in policy terms, and there is also evidence that overall levels of candidate spending are an important factor in determining the outcomes of congressional elections.<sup>32</sup> But these findings do not necessarily imply that groups, even highly coordinated and well-financed ones, can influence either election outcomes or legislative behavior on a large scale. Most candidates rely much more heavily on a broad array of individual contributions than on PAC contributions or on particular bundles of substantively focused contributions. Moreover, the extensive literature on the connection between campaign contributions and policymaking has found very little support for the link in either direction—that is, contributions neither have a strong effect on legislative behavior nor are they affected strongly by it, suggesting that no hypothesis connecting pro-Israel campaign contributions to congressional policymaking behavior would be likely to receive empirical support. As some of the leading analysts of this question recently put it,

the evidence that campaign contributions lead to a substantial influence on votes is rather thin. Legislators’ votes depend almost entirely on their own beliefs and the preferences of their voters and their party. Contributions explain a minuscule fraction of the variation in voting behavior in the U.S. Congress. Members of Congress care foremost about winning re-election. They must attend to the constituency that elects them, voters in a district or state, and the constituency that nominates them, the party.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, Mearsheimer and Walt’s confident assertion that “there is little doubt about the potency of these tactics” (156) in fact contradicts the main thrust of recent research findings on this question, suggesting that it might be imprudent to accept their conclusions in the absence of any theoretical or empirical basis for their claim of influence through campaign finance or other campaign activity.

### ***The Executive Branch***

The second pillar of Mearsheimer and Walt’s argument is the executive branch. Here the key causal mechanism they posit is again electoral, centering principally on the pivotal position of Jewish voters in presidential elections. They base this argument, first, on the apparent predominance of campaign funds for major presidential candidates that come from Jewish donors. This claim stems primarily from a 1977 White House memo from advisor Hamilton Jordan to President Jimmy Carter stating that “wherever there is major political fundraising in this country, you will find American Jews playing a significant role” (163). Neither Jordan nor Mearsheimer and Walt

offer any hard evidence to back this claim, and Mearsheimer and Walt, like Jordan, fail to heed their own injunction against equating “Jewish” with “Israel-centric.” In fact, identifiably pro-Israel contributions have, in the last four presidential elections, amounted to an infinitesimal share of total contributions to presidential campaigns. Again relying on the Center for Responsive Politics’s data, the total of all pro-Israel contributions to all presidential candidates in 2004 was slightly more than \$300,000 out of more than \$528 million received by all candidates during the campaign, amounting to a little bit more than five one-hundredths of one percent.<sup>34</sup> These contributions, moreover, have not always gone to the winning candidates. While George W. Bush has received the largest share of pro-Israel contributions by far in his two runs for the presidency (totaling nearly \$400,000), Bill Clinton received only \$7,000 from pro-Israel sources in his 1996 reelection campaign, considerably less than Senator Bob Dole’s \$80,500 or former Tennessee Governor Lamar Alexander’s \$21,425. Regardless of these rankings, however, these are minuscule amounts given the scale of modern presidential campaigns.<sup>35</sup> Once again, the available evidence contradicts the claim of influence.

The second element of Mearsheimer and Walt’s claim about the lobby’s influence on the executive branch stems from the assertion that Jews are pivotal voters in presidential elections, due to their high turnout and their concentration in “key states like California, Florida, Illinois, New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania” (163). This claim is subject to a number of empirical tests. First, we might examine demographic and voting data to examine whether, given the margin of victory and their weight in the voting population, it is plausible that Jewish voters were decisive. Second, we might look at the campaign process itself to see if American policy toward Israel played an important role in candidate strategies and messages, especially in states where Jewish voters might have held the balance of electoral power. This claim, too, softens when confronted with actual data. American Jewish voting behavior has, in recent years, been extraordinarily predictable: Jews have supported the Democratic nominee at rates of approximately seventy-five percent or more in every presidential election since 1992, and more than sixty percent in every election but one dating back to 1928.<sup>36</sup> This behavioral consistency rather limits the potential for Jewish votes to be decisive. Of the states Mearsheimer and Walt mention, moreover, three—California, Illinois, and New York—can hardly be said to be “key” to recent presidential elections; these states have not, in recent years, been competitive, and the Democratic candidate has won each of these states by a very large margin in each of the last five presidential elections. In fact, most states were decided in 2004 by a margin substantially larger than the entire Jewish population of the state regardless of voting eligibility, suggesting that Jewish votes were essentially extraneous to these states’

**Table 1**  
**Estimate/simulation of Jewish pivotal voting, 2004 presidential election**

(1) State (Electoral Votes)	(2) Winner	(3) Margin	(4) Jewish Pop.	(5) Est. Jewish VAP	(6) Turnout (VEP)	(7) Est. Jewish Votes	(8) Jewish Dem. Share	(9) Potential Vote Shift	(10) Change Outcome?
New York (31)	Kerry	1,351,713	1,657,000	1,248,000	57.0%	711,400	80%	569,000	No
New Jersey (15)	Kerry	241,427	485,000	365,000	64.1%	234,000	75%	176,000	Yes
Florida (27)	Bush	380,978	620,000	479,000	65.9%	316,000	80%	63,200	No
Nevada (5)	Bush	21,500	77,000	57,000	55.5%	32,000	62%	12,000	Yes
Pennsylvania (21)	Kerry	144,248	282,000	215,000	62.2%	134,000	—	101,000	Yes
Ohio (20)	Bush	118,599	149,000	111,000	66.4%	73,700	—	18,400	No
New Hampshire (4)	Kerry	9,274	10,000	7,500	70.3%	5,300	—	4,000	No
New Mexico (5)	Bush	5,988	11,000	7,900	57.7%	4,600	—	1,200	No
Wisconsin (10)	Kerry	11,384	28,000	21,000	76.2%	16,000	—	11,000	Yes

electoral competition.<sup>37</sup> In some states, however, the Jewish population may have been large enough to tip the election one way or another. Some of these states—New York, New Jersey, Florida, Nevada, and Pennsylvania—are states with relatively high Jewish population percentages. Others—Ohio, New Hampshire, New Mexico, and Wisconsin—are states with very small Jewish populations that also had very thin election margins in 2004. Either way, these states bear closer examination.

These nine states are the ones in which it is numerically possible that the votes of Jewish citizens were decisive, in the sense that if those who voted for the eventual winner of the state’s plurality had voted for the other major-party candidate, the results might have changed, placing the state’s electoral votes in the other column.<sup>38</sup> Simulating this possibility requires several assumptions and calculations, which are presented in table 1. (Table 1 lists states in descending order of Jewish population percentage.) First, it is necessary to estimate the voting-age share of the Jewish population (those 18 and over). Each state’s voting-age Jewish population was estimated by assuming that the percentage of population 18 year of age or over was the same for the state’s Jewish population as for the state’s total population as reported in the 2000 Census. These estimates are shown in column 5 of table 1.

Not all of a state’s voting-age residents actually vote, however, so we must estimate the proportion of each state’s Jewish residents who actually voted. To estimate this figure, I assume that Jewish voting-age residents of a state turned out at the same rate as the state’s overall voting-eligible population, which filters out those voting-age residents who are ineligible to vote because of citizenship, felon status, or another reason.<sup>39</sup> I use voting-eligible turnout rather than voting-age turnout for several reasons. Jewish voting-age residents are very likely to be eligible to vote because they are very likely to be citizens. Jewish-Americans are probably more likely than average to turn out to vote on the basis of generally above-average education and income, so using the higher turnout rates calcu-

lated using voting-eligible rather than voting-age population probably more accurately reflects Jewish voting behavior. This approach, then, runs less risk than the alternative of systematically underestimating Jewish voting strength and thus falsely finding that Jewish voters were not decisive in any given state. This produces an estimate of the total number of Jewish voters in the state, reported in column 7 of table 1.

The next step in the simulation is an estimate of how those Jewish voters voted, and how many additional votes they would have produced for the losing candidate in the state if all of them had voted for that candidate. For this estimate, I use the estimated Democratic vote of Jewish voters in the state as reported from election-day exit polls, reported in column 8 of table 1. (For some states, there were too few Jewish voters in the survey to produce a statistically reliable estimate of Jewish vote choice at the state level, indicated by a dash in column 8; in these cases, I assume that the state’s Jewish voters voted the same way as those in the national exit-poll sample, 75 percent for Senator John Kerry, the Democratic nominee.) Column 9 reports the estimate of the votes that would have been transferred to the loser if every Jewish voter in the state had voted for him. In states won by Kerry, this is calculated by multiplying the total Jewish vote by the Jewish Democratic vote share. In states won by Bush, the calculation is the reverse: total Jewish vote multiplied by the Jewish Republican vote share (assumed to be 1—[Democratic vote share]). Finally, column 10 indicates whether or not, if this had happened, the outcome in the state would have been reversed. If the additional votes for the loser equal more than half of the state’s total margin, reported in column 3, the conclusion is that the outcome would have been reversed (because these votes represent votes taken away from the winner as well as added to the loser). These results reveal that in four of the nine states the result would have been reversed if every single Jewish voter in the state had voted for the losing candidate: New Jersey, Nevada, Pennsylvania, and

Wisconsin. In the other states—importantly including New York, Florida, and Ohio—Jewish voters could not have affected the state's outcome.

The first critical conclusion to draw from this exercise is that it is simply mathematically impossible for Jewish voters to have been decisive in the 2004 presidential election. If every Jewish American who voted had voted for Kerry (as almost all of them did), Bush would still have won. Of the states that President Bush won in 2004, only Nevada was in play based on the disposition of Jewish voters. Nevada's five electoral votes, however, were well within the cushion of Bush's Electoral College majority. Had he lost those electoral votes because Jewish voters in Nevada deserted him, he would still have won the presidency. Senator Kerry, by contrast, had much more to lose from alienating Jewish voters, although perhaps less than Mearsheimer and Walt imply; he stood to lose 46 electoral votes (15 from New Jersey, 21 from Pennsylvania, and 10 from Wisconsin) if Jewish voters had defected en masse from their traditional partisan loyalty. Although this outcome would have deprived Kerry of any hope of winning the election, it would still not have changed the election's overall outcome.

At the same time, however, these results do seem to confirm, arithmetically at least, Mearsheimer and Walt's supposition that Jewish voters might, under the right circumstances, be decisive in presidential elections, and that this pivotal position might have policy consequences.<sup>40</sup> We can imagine a presidential election that was even closer than the 2004 election, in which the national outcome hung on the vote count in a state where the margin was small enough and the Jewish population large enough that a plausible swing of Jewish votes could have changed the outcome. (In fact, we have lately experienced just such an election; a careful analysis of the results in Florida in 2000 have shown that in the heavily Jewish counties of South Florida enough votes meant for Al Gore were miscast for Pat Buchanan because of the "butterfly ballot" to have altered the result. In such freakishly close elections, however, all bets are off; any random perturbation might change the results, as it evidently did).<sup>41</sup> But it also suggests that Democratic presidential candidates have a great deal more than Republicans to lose by alienating Jewish voters, although history suggests that it is hard for them to do so. Accordingly, the simulation suggests that the incentive to protect Jewish votes was severely imbalanced between the candidates in 2004. Moreover, even the possibility of such a reversal is predicated on the expectation that Jewish voters would deviate substantially from long-held, stable electoral loyalty to the Democratic Party. Democratic presidential candidates, then, do have a nontrivial incentive to avoid crossing Jewish voters, although it is not clear how precisely pro-Israel rhetoric and policy map onto this goal.<sup>42</sup> For Republican candidates, however, this electoral incen-

tive appears rather weaker. Given these results, it might be interesting to look more closely at the candidates' campaign strategies in the few battleground states that this analysis suggests were legitimately in play to see if Bush or, more pertinently, Kerry sought to target an Israel-based appeal at Jewish voters and if commitments made in this context affected subsequent policymaking. But in the end, George W. Bush's victory (in 2004, at least) did not depend on Jewish votes, making it hard to explain his pro-Israel policy stance as a function of electoral pandering to Jewish voters. At the very least, these observations are not promising for the hypothesized causal connection between pivotal Jewish votes and policy influence (although a fuller test would, of course, examine this question over many elections).

### ***Public Discourse: The Media, Think Tanks, and the Academy***

One of the central preoccupations of pro-Israel actors, in Mearsheimer and Walt's rendering, seems to be the shaping of public discourse about Israel and the Middle East in a number of venues, particularly the media, the world of professional public policy research, and college and university campuses. The general themes of these sections of the book are similar: the lobby tries to stifle free and open debate about Israel and the Middle East in each of these venues, and it generally succeeds either because its members dominate the relevant institutions or because it uses pressure tactics to discipline, blackmail, or otherwise lean on others who have the temerity to criticize Israeli policy or behavior or American support for Israel. These sections of the argument display the same general lack of systematic data and lapses of logic as those on Congress and the executive branch, as well as highlighting some other important limitations. At the same time, however, they also point to a more subtle—and more promising—approach to understanding the potential policy influence of pro-Israel actors that depends more on the capacity to shape the terms of policy discourse rather than direct power over policy decisions.

First, these sections are full of apparent selection bias in the presentation of evidence. The discussion of the media, for example, mentions a number of nationally prominent publications that display a pro-Israel editorial bias: the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Chicago Sun-Times*, the *Washington Times*, *Commentary* (which is published by the American Jewish Committee), the *New Republic*, and the *Weekly Standard* (170–72). A similar accounting of pro-Israel think tanks appears several pages later (175–77). These lists may indeed indicate that there are some serious journalists and foreign-policy scholars and analysts with pro-Israel preferences, but this fact by itself indicates neither "bias" nor influence. Without some account of

how these lists were arrived at and whether they are somehow representative of a larger phenomenon that cuts across the entire population of media outlets, think tanks, or other relevant venues, we should hesitate before taking these data as anything more than suggestive. Moreover, it is not clear whether these organizations and the individuals who inhabit them are themselves *part* of the lobby or merely subject to its influence, rendering the causal significance of this evidence somewhat murky. In the case of news coverage, there is some evidence of the kind of activity in which pro-Israel actors engage to try to influence Middle East coverage, such as letter-writing and e-mail campaigns and boycotts directed against news outlets whose reporting is deemed anti-Israel (172–73), and there is similar evidence that some university professors have, in some instances, been identified for similar treatment (179–80). But the evidence presented does not demonstrate at all systematically that these activities had an observable effect on the content or valence of the Middle East reporting or on teaching and research in universities. Did the individual news outlets, reporters, or faculty members who were targeted by these activities change their behavior in response? Was the aggregate balance of reporting or teaching affected? These questions remain unanswered.

A second limitation of these sections is a lack of clarity about the ultimate impact of these activities. Even assuming, for the sake of argument, that public discourse is different than it might otherwise be due to the behavior of pro-Israel actors, it is not clear what effect this fact is likely to have on the policymaking process. Underlying this section of Mearsheimer and Walt’s argument is a presumption that if news coverage, policy research, and academic discourse on the Middle East were “unbiased,” policy would somehow come out differently. But this is far from self-evident. In his landmark study of American policymaking, John Kingdon found that academics, researchers, and the media, while important, are clearly of rather limited independent importance in shaping the national agenda and determining the direction of policy.<sup>43</sup> More focused studies of the media’s impact on policymaking have found that media coverage does not affect what people think about public issues as much as it frames public discussion of issues; by presenting the news in a certain way, media coverage can activate beliefs or understandings that people already hold and affect the importance they attach to a particular issue, but it will generally not induce them to change their minds altogether about an issue on which they already have relatively settled views.<sup>44</sup> Finally, recent research on think tanks and their effect on policymaking has found that think tanks with clearly ideological or one-sided missions tend to have a smaller impact precisely because the policy research they produce comes with a known ideological predisposition, which allows policymakers to dismiss it more readily if the predisposition does not fit their own.<sup>45</sup> Think tanks, consequently, often

preach to the converted. In sum, the claims about the lobby’s influence on American policy discourse do not seem to be supported systematically by Mearsheimer and Walt’s evidence, but neither can they be clearly refuted. In fact, these factors point to the most plausible and suggestive account of the lobby’s influence on American politics and policymaking, through the shaping of public discourse that frames policy debates regarding Israel and the Middle East, a point to which I return in the conclusion.

### *Anti-Semitism*

The final causal mechanism that Mearsheimer and Walt posit, and the lobby’s ultimate weapon in the battle for the hearts and minds of American policymakers, is the tendency to equate anti-Israel sentiments with anti-Semitism, which, if true, would understandably create a chilling effect for many potential entrants into this debate. “Anyone who criticizes Israeli actions or says that pro-Israel groups have significant influence over U.S. Middle East policy stands a good chance of being labeled an anti-Semite,” they write (188), although their discussion of this subject contains only a handful of specific examples of this phenomenon involving such public figures as former President Jimmy Carter and Francis Fukuyama (193–94). (To be fair, as they point out (193–94), Mearsheimer and Walt themselves were the victims of this unfortunate tactic after the publication of their *London Review of Books* article in 2006.<sup>46</sup>) In most of these high-profile cases, as they also point out, the tactic was singularly unsuccessful as a means of silencing its intended targets (195–96). More to the point, however, they offer very little in the way of systematic empirical analysis that shows a causal connection between this threat and the behavior of would-be critics of Israel or American policy toward Israel.

Much of this section is devoted to a discussion not of this phenomenon in the United States but rather of anti-Semitism in Europe (188–90). The purpose of this discussion seems to be to establish that European societies are more tolerant of anti-Israel discourse not because they are, as some suppose, more tolerant of anti-Semitism but because European political elites are not in thrall to an Israel lobby equivalent to the American one. They point, for example, to the decline in anti-Semitic violence in France between 2004 and 2005 (188), although they neglect to mention that 2004 saw the largest number of anti-Semitic incidents recorded in recent memory and that the 48 percent reduction in incidents between 2004 (974 incidents) and 2005 (504 incidents) still meant that anti-Semitic “actions and threats” were at a historically high level in 2005.<sup>47</sup> Between 1995 and 1999, France averaged 98 recorded incidents of anti-Semitism per year, with no more than 118 in any single year (1996); between 2000 and 2005, the annual average was 663 incidents. Since 2000, more French Jews than French immigrants have

been injured as a result of such violent incidents.<sup>48</sup> This is hardly a picture of a society in which anti-Semitism is an insignificant matter; the French government, after all, feels compelled to report regularly on anti-Semitism in France and to take punitive action against its effects.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, recent research has found a strong and robust association between anti-Semitism and anti-Israel sentiment in ten western European countries (including France).<sup>50</sup>

In any event, this discussion has little bearing on either the tendency of pro-Israel actors in the United States to play the anti-Semitism card or the question of whether this tactic has the effect that they suggest, to stifle criticism of Israel or of American policy that would otherwise find a hearing and, as a consequence, to affect policy. This ambiguity once again raises the possibility that the lobby's influence takes a "softer," more indirect form, through the shaping of the boundaries of policy discourse rather than the control of policy actors and the direction of policy decisions.

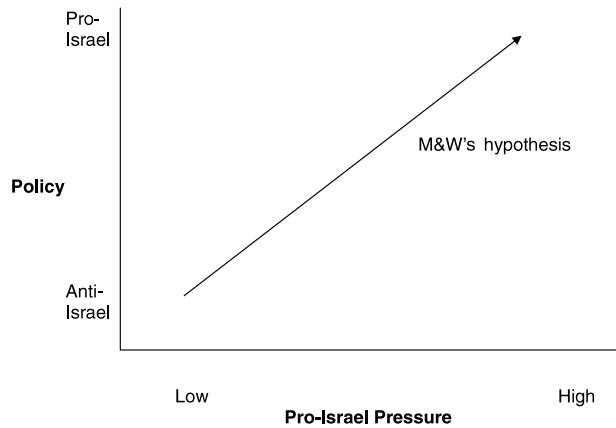
## The Empirical Argument

The final major section of the book is devoted to an empirical demonstration of these effects at work in a series of American policy decisions. Mearsheimer and Walt examine six cases of policymaking: 1) the Bush administration's decision to back off from its stance of pressure against Israeli policy in the occupied territories between 2001 and 2003; 2) the decision to invade Iraq in 2003; 3) the abandonment of the policy of "dual containment" of Iran and Iraq and the move toward a more aggressive assault on nondemocratic regimes in the Middle East, particularly 4) Syria, 5) Iran, and 6) Lebanon. Each of the elements of the theoretical argument outlined in the book's previous section is on display in these case studies, in which Mearsheimer and Walt attempt to show how they cumulate to direct overall American Middle East policy in a decisively pro-Israel direction. In this section, Mearsheimer and Walt purport to offer concrete evidence of the Israel lobby in action and, in particular, evidence that on these issues "the lobby successfully pressured Bush to change course and to adopt its policy preferences instead" of alternative policies preferred by much of the foreign-policy, defense, and intelligence establishment (202). In each case they examine briefly the course of events leading to a policy decision, and in each case they conclude that pressure applied by the lobby was the decisive factor in shaping policy. On the issue of President Bush's shifting rhetoric toward Israeli policy in the occupied territories, they write that "the lobby's influence was one of the central reasons for this shift" (204), and suggest that "[Israeli Prime Minister Ariel] Sharon and the lobby [took] on the president of the United States and triumphed. . . . But it was the pro-Israel forces in the United States, not Sharon or Israel, that played the key role in thwarting Bush's efforts to promote a more

evenhanded policy" toward the Palestinians (211). On Iraq, they write that "the war was motivated at least in good part by a desire to make Israel more secure" (231). The broader transformation of Middle East policy following the invasion of Iraq, they suggest, came about because "Israeli leaders, neoconservatives, and the Bush Administration all saw war with Iraq as the first step in an ambitious campaign to remake the Middle East" (259). They attribute the passage of the 2003 Syria Accountability Act, which imposes sanctions against Syria to counter its sponsorship of terrorism and its effective occupation of Lebanon, to the lobby. "The story here," they write, "is a simple one: without the lobby's influence, there would have been no Syria Accountability Act and U.S. policy toward Damascus would have been more in line with the American national interest" (279). They argue, also, that the lobby is responsible for escalating American saber-rattling against Iran: "Israel and the lobby . . . are the central forces today behind all the talk in the Bush administration and on Capitol Hill about using military force to destroy Iran's nuclear facilities. . . . Were it not for the lobby, the United States would almost certainly have a different and more effective Iran policy" (282). And finally, they argue that "the lobby played the critical role in keeping the United States firmly aligned with Israel" during the latter's military conflict with Lebanon during the summer of 2006 (334). These case studies do, indeed, seem to show a consistent pro-Israel stance in American foreign and defense policy over the last four years or so. But for many of the reasons I have already catalogued, they do not amount to a convincing causal argument about the effects of the Israel lobby.

The principal flaw in Mearsheimer and Walt's empirical argument stems from the lack of variation in the evidence with which they attempt to show the lobby's influence. In order to substantiate their causal claims about the sources of American Middle East policy, Mearsheimer and Walt would need to present evidence that clearly represents the full range of actually existing combinations of pro-Israel pressure activity and pro-Israel outcomes at various levels. Schematically, one could imagine that it might be possible to measure any instance of policymaking according to the level of pro-Israel pressure it entailed and classify it as either low or high. One could classify any policy according to its level of favorability toward Israel. Thus each policymaking instance could be classified on each of two dimensions, as represented graphically as in figure 1; each episode can be assigned a single location on the diagram corresponding to its level of pressure (on the horizontal axis) and the "pro-Israelness" of its outcome (on the vertical axis). Mearsheimer and Walt's basic hypothesis—that greater pressure leads to more pro-Israel outcomes—is represented by the diagonal line in figure 1; if they are right, then were we to plot the location of all instances of Middle East policymaking (or a representative sample of

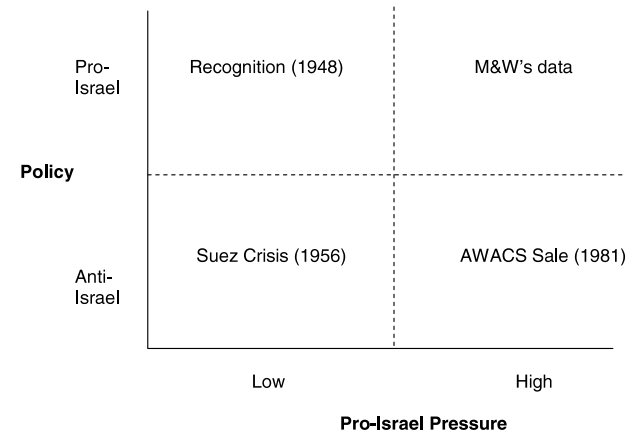
**Figure 1**  
The “Israel Lobby” argument



them) on the figure according to these two measurements, the preponderance of the cases should fall more or less along this diagonal. That is, there should be a lot of high-pressure/pro-Israel cases *and* low-pressure/anti-Israel cases, and relatively fewer high-pressure/anti-Israel or low-pressure/pro-Israel cases.

But in order to show convincingly that this is, in fact, the case, Mearsheimer and Walt would have to present a sample of evidence that is reasonably certain to include cases from every one of these combinations, if they exist. In order to have faith in their conclusions, we need to be confident that in collecting and presenting their data, they have allowed for the possibility that episodes in the “wrong” quadrants—high/anti and low/pro—would show up. If they allow for this possibility and these cases *don't* show up in large numbers compared with cases on the diagonal, *then* we might confidently conclude that pressure and outcomes are related as they hypothesize. In order to instill this confidence, they would have to explain how and why they selected the evidence that they choose to present—both the anecdotes they use to illustrate their theoretical points and the slightly more extensive case (though hardly very detailed) case studies of policymaking that constitute their empirical argument. This they do not do. Moreover, when we plot the evidence they do offer on the diagram represented in figure 1, nearly all of it falls in the upper right, high-pressure/pro-Israel. No causal inferences are possible from these data because we simply have no way of knowing what happens when levels of pressure vary or whether all instances of high pressure result in pro-Israel outcomes. To the extent, moreover, that there is any contrary evidence in the book, it tends to suggest that there are times when pro-Israel pressure does not, in fact, always produce ostensibly pro-Israel outcomes—the failure (thus far) to induce Congress to place speech-based restrictions on Middle East research funding to universities (181), for

**Figure 2**  
Variation in pressure and policy



example, or the suggestion that the lobby has not had much effect on American policy toward Iran (281–82). There is nothing in the book that allows us to assess what happens when pro-Israel pressure occurs at lower levels. Finally, it is not hard to find major policymaking episodes that seem to occupy the other three quadrants of the diagram. Take, for example, the cases I mentioned in passing earlier: the recognition of Israel in 1948, the Suez crisis of 1956, and the AWACS sale to Saudi Arabia in 1981. The first, recognition, would seem to be a low-pressure/pro-Israel case; the second, Suez, a low-pressure/anti-Israel case; and the third, AWACS, a high-pressure/anti-Israel case, as represented in figure 2. Given the apparent existence of ample historical variation on both key dimensions of their argument, the appearance of selection bias in their evidence rather severely hampers their ability to make causal inferences connecting the lobby with policy outcomes and casts severe doubt on central claims of Mearsheimer and Walt’s argument for the lobby’s direct power.<sup>51</sup>

## Conclusions

It is quite clear that the book’s argument does not support Mearsheimer and Walt’s central contention, that the existence and activities of an Israel lobby are the primary causes of American policy in the Middle East. The claim is supported neither by logic nor evidence nor even a rudimentary understanding of how the American policymaking system works. Several questions remain, however. If the unified Israel lobby of Mearsheimer and Walt’s analysis is not the prime mover in shaping American foreign policy toward the Middle East, what alternative explanations might account for these policy outcomes?

Mearsheimer and Walt have already implicitly considered and rejected the standard realist account of foreign policymaking, which posits that states (or at least powerful

states) will generally act in the international arena on the basis of their material security interests as shaped by the international system. It is the apparent deviation from this theoretical expectation, in fact, that motivates the book's core analysis. But given the discovery that domestic politics has intruded on policymaking, several alternative approaches that might be profitably considered alongside Mearsheimer and Walt's blunt interest-group approach suggest themselves.

There is a somewhat simpler version of the interest-group-centered explanation of Middle East policy outcomes, to which Mearsheimer and Walt allude, that might, at first blush, work better. "In a democracy," they write, "even relatively small groups can exercise considerable influence if they are strongly committed to a particular issue and the rest of the population is largely indifferent" (140). All public policies, of course, confer benefits on some actors and impose costs on others, and the nature of policymaking in different policy domains often depends on how widely or narrowly distributed those costs and benefits are.<sup>52</sup> In this case, Mearsheimer and Walt are undoubtedly right that the benefits of pro-Israel policy are particularly concentrated among those American voters whose intense policy preferences for pro-Israel policy are thereby satisfied, while the costs of that policy are widely dispersed across the population, most of whom are consequently indifferent to policy outcomes. This scenario does typically produce strong and intense interest organization on the part of the policy's proponents and little organized opposition. But note that in this schematic understanding of the policymaking world, the organization of interests is understood to be a *consequence* rather than a *cause* of the characteristics of the policy realm in which it operates.<sup>53</sup> This theoretical perspective might predict outcomes similar to those Mearsheimer and Walt highlight—consistently pro-Israel policy, subdued public discussion, and displacement of conflicts over policy from the material dimension to the moral or ethical (that is, attempts to debate policy might easily devolve into name-calling precisely because the material stakes for most people are so low that they cannot be mobilized into active opposition on the basis of the policy's active harm to them).<sup>54</sup>

But policymaking in such situations is often dominated not by the highly public and often acrimonious debates that seem to characterize Middle East policymaking (at least in Mearsheimer and Walt's telling) but by quiet and generally harmonious networks of relationships among interest groups and policymakers who share goals that few others care about, as well as repeated logrolls among a number of such groups, who agree to support each others' favored policies at little net cost to themselves. In such policy subsystems, moreover, the goals of interest groups and policymakers are generally closely aligned and it is often not clear who is serving whom—whether policymakers are doing the bidding of interest groups or vice versa. As a result, this perspective by

itself does not generate clear theoretical predictions about the causal mechanisms that might connect group activity to policy outcomes.

To what other factors might we attribute the pattern of American policymaking toward Israel? One plausible alternative approach might be based on public opinion and its role in shaping policymaking. Correspondence between the policy preferences of the mass public and the policymaking behavior of elected representatives is notoriously weak in the United States, a finding that is generally attributed to low levels of information and sophistication on the part of American voters.<sup>55</sup> But more recent research has shown that in the aggregate, American public opinion about major policy issues is reasonably stable and that policy generally corresponds to the broad outlines of national opinion and that when opinion changes significantly, policy changes usually follow.<sup>56</sup> This perspective would at least provide a set of competing hypotheses about the relationship between public opinion and policy that would challenge the Israel lobby account.

A second alternative might focus more comprehensively than Mearsheimer and Walt do on the institutional structure of the American political system and the particular discipline that this structure imposes on policymaking, including foreign policymaking. Such an account might consider some of the institutional patterns discussed above, considering for example the organizational structure of Congress or the relations between Congress and the presidency. Institutional accounts might emphasize the veto points inherent in American policymaking, the many opportunities that advocates of alternative policies have to shape the policymaking process and its outcomes. This complexity inherent in the separation of powers tends to bias American policymaking away from dramatic change and toward incrementalism and the status quo. Major policy change is relatively rare (precisely because it is hard), but it generally endures and enjoys wide legitimacy because, as David Mayhew has put it, the enactment process is "so strenuous, dramatic, and crystallizing."<sup>57</sup> Moreover, recent research has shown that policy is often path-dependent, that once a policy direction is established it becomes harder to dislodge and that early incremental choices can become increasingly significant over time.<sup>58</sup> In this view, we might expect that early patterns of policy toward Israel and the Middle East would set the template for later policy directions and that dramatic changes in policy would occur only under unusual conditions (or at least we would have to specify a causal mechanism for policy change).<sup>59</sup> In this picture, for example, foreign-policy decisions taken during the Cold War—when Mearsheimer and Walt acknowledge that there was a sound strategic logic behind support for Israel as a check against Soviet expansionist designs in the Middle East (51–58)—might have established a pattern of policy that became increasingly difficult to adjust

over time, even when the Cold War ended.<sup>60</sup> At any rate, assessing this approach would require a careful examination of policy over time.

Mearsheimer and Walt’s own evidence suggests yet another alternative approach, focusing on a more careful delineation of the meaning of power, that deserves particular attention. Most of Mearsheimer and Walt’s argument presumes that power means the ability of one set of actors, in this case the Israel lobby, to impose its preferences on other actors, policymakers, who do not share those preferences.<sup>61</sup> But the parts of the argument that draw on this understanding of power are, for the most part, demonstrably false. The Israel lobby does not appear to wield extraordinary influence on the visible mechanics of American policymaking through any of the pathways that Mearsheimer and Walt examine, particularly Congress and the executive branch. Critics have argued, however, that power has multiple faces. In addition to this first, overt, face, power can be exerted in more hidden ways, by controlling the agenda of matters that are available for debate and decision (the “second face of power”) and by so shaping the ideological environment that certain ideas or proposals are considered outside the legitimate or taken-for-granted bounds of discussion (the “third face”).<sup>62</sup>

These understandings of power suggest an alternative approach to conceptualizing the lobby’s influence on American policy toward Israel and the Middle East. Despite the lobby’s limited direct power over American policy choices, it seems more plausible to observe that American Middle East policy is made in a context that discourages robust debate about the costs and benefits of support for Israel compared against other policy options. Given Mearsheimer and Walt’s provocative but ultimately inconclusive arguments about the lobby’s potential influence over public discourse about American Middle East policy, it would be reasonable to hypothesize that pro-Israel actors, both inside and outside of government, make it very hard—or at least very costly—for public officials to be openly critical of Israel or of pro-Israel policy choices, with the consequence that policy debate in the United States is limited and stilted, as Mearsheimer and Walt justly lament. There might, of course, be numerous reasons for this state of affairs: public opinion; the cumulative, historical effect of past policy; or the continuing and active vigilance of pro-Israel actors in much the way Mearsheimer and Walt chronicle. These subtle and interesting possibilities deserve considerably more attention than they have received. Investigating such pathways of power is a notoriously difficult enterprise because it requires careful and nuanced attention not only to decisions but also to non-decisions, actions either contemplated but not taken or not contemplated at all, as well as to the ways in which those boundaries of legitimate discourse are constructed over time.<sup>63</sup>

I offer these alternatives not to propose a comprehensive account of American policy toward Israel but merely

to suggest the range of possible explanations that might plausibly enjoy theoretical grounding and empirical support and to suggest several directions that seem, on their face, to be more promising explanatory avenues than the crude interest-group theory that Mearsheimer and Walt offer. Recent research on American foreign policymaking, in fact, suggests that side-by-side assessment of multiple potential explanations—encompassing interest groups, public opinion, and expertise, among other factors—can provide more subtle and convincing accounts of foreign policy outcomes than single-cause explanations, which are susceptible to bias and distortion.<sup>64</sup> Mearsheimer and Walt do not seem, at any rate, to have considered alternative explanations and they do not deploy their evidence in ways that show convincingly that their explanation provides a better account for some range of outcomes than one of these alternatives (or any other alternative).

Mearsheimer and Walt pose a set of deep and provocative questions about who wields power in American politics and policymaking. Although their own answer is unconvincing, they challenge the discipline to take up (and take seriously) these questions—both about the particulars of American foreign policy toward Israel and the Middle East and more generally about the pathways of power in American politics, a venerable topic that is happily now receiving renewed interest in political science.<sup>65</sup> If their enterprise—and the reaction it has occasioned—start a more robust and substantive conversation about either or both of these things, and thereby open up new directions of scholarly inquiry and public debate on these terribly important issues, it will have been a worthwhile enterprise.

## Notes

- 1 Their argument was originally published as an essay in the *London Review of Books* (Mearsheimer and Walt 2006a). A longer version (Mearsheimer and Walt 2006b), with scholarly apparatus, was posted on the website of Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government. In this essay I refer to the book (Mearsheimer and Walt 2007), cited in the text by page numbers.
- 2 Mearsheimer and Walt have responded to some of these criticisms in a variety of public fora and, most extensively, in Mearsheimer and Walt 2006c and 2007.
- 3 This formulation exposes an extremely important and knotty question for Mearsheimer and Walt’s enterprise: what constitutes “pro-Israel” policy? Mearsheimer and Walt do not provide a very clear definition. They write that “pro-Israel forces surely believe that they are promoting policies that serve the American as well as the Israeli national interest. We disagree. Most of the policies they advocate are

- not in America's or Israel's interest" (112). Their definition, as Gideon Rose (2007) notes, seems to be highly situational and ad-hoc, heavily dependent both on the policy preferences of certain key individuals and groups that form the core of the Israel lobby and on the perceived gap between their preferred (but underspecified) account of American (and Israeli) national interests and actual policy outcomes. As Rose (2007, 4) sums up their position, "pro-Israel' can be synonymous with 'pro-American' at the same time that it is objectively 'anti-Israel' and 'anti-American.'"
- 4 Gorenberg 2000; Anderson 2005; Kirkpatrick 2006; Mead 2006.
  - 5 Verba and Nie 1972; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Putnam 2000; Dalton 2006.
  - 6 Truman 1971, 507. See also Immergut 1992; Tsebelis 2002.
  - 7 Armev served as House Majority Leader from 1995–2003; he was never speaker of the House. They also misidentify Armev's successor as majority leader, Tom DeLay, as speaker (152).
  - 8 Hansen 1991; Kingdon 1995, 37–38.
  - 9 Wilcox 1992; Green, Rozell, and Wilcox 2003.
  - 10 Moe 1987, 247–56.
  - 11 Stolberg 2006.
  - 12 Hansen 1991, 225–26.
  - 13 Hunter 1953; Mills 1956.
  - 14 Dahl 1958.
  - 15 George and Bennett 2005.
  - 16 Hall 2003, 393–94.
  - 17 Mayhew 1974, 49–73.
  - 18 Arnold 1990.
  - 19 Page and Shapiro 1992, 251–61; Jones 2005.
  - 20 <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/US-Israel/jewcong109.html>. These numbers increased slightly following the 2006 elections to 13 senators and 30 representatives, and again in 2008 (13 senators and 32 representatives). (<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/US-Israel/jewcong110.html>; <http://pewforum.org/docs/?DocID=379>)
  - 21 On the supermajority requirement in the Senate, see Wawro and Schickler 2006.
  - 22 Krehbiel 1998.
  - 23 Black 1958; Downs 1957.
  - 24 Krehbiel 1998, 23–24.
  - 25 Romer and Rosenthal 1978; Shepsle and Weingast 1981; Rohde 1991; Aldrich 1995; Aldrich and Rohde 2000, 2001; Cox and McCubbins 1993, 2005.
  - 26 Weingast and Marshall 1988; Ferejohn 1986; Buchanan and Tullock 1962.
  - 27 Rohde 2005, 203.
  - 28 Gilligan and Krehbiel 1987, 1989; Krehbiel 1991.
  - 29 AIPAC itself is a registered lobbying organization and, as such, is barred from making its own campaign contributions under federal campaign finance law.
  - 30 All campaign finance data are taken from the Center for Responsive Politics's website, <http://opensecrets.org/>. The CRP is generally regarded as the best neutral compiler of campaign finance information, based on public disclosures issued by the Federal Election Commission, and its data are widely used by scholars of campaign finance. The CRP describes "pro-Israel" donors as follows: "A nationwide network of local political action committees—generally named for the region their donors come from—supplies much of the pro-Israel money in American politics. Additional funds come from individuals who bundle contributions to candidates favored by the PACs. The donors' unified goal is to build stronger U.S.-Israel relations and to support Israel in its ongoing negotiations (and armed conflicts) with its Arab neighbors." <http://opensecrets.org/industries/background.asp?Ind=Q05&cycle=2006>.
  - 31 Among all candidates for federal office in 2004, only President George W. Bush received more than Daschle.
  - 32 Snyder 1990, 1992, 1993; Gerber 1998.
  - 33 Ansolabehere, de Figueiredo, and Snyder 2003, 116. See also McCarty and Rothenberg 1996; Milyo, Primo, and Groseclose 2000; Wawro 2001.
  - 34 This total spending figure includes not only contributions received from PACs and private individuals for all candidates but also public financing provided to the party nominees for the national party conventions and the general election campaigns. Even excluding public financing from the total, the pro-Israel share of total receipts comes to only approximately eight one-hundredths of one percent.
  - 35 These amounts may seem rather low, especially when compared to the extravagant, if undocumented, claims about the influence of campaign contributions from Jewish donors that Mearsheimer and Walt cite. These data, of course, identify only donations that are made with clear and explicit pro-Israel policy intent (see the CRP's definition, quoted above in note 30), and not those from Jewish donors per se. It is not clear how one would systematically track contributors by religious affiliation, because federal reporting requirements do not require donors to disclose their religion. Nor should we presume that a donation carries a pro-Israel message simply because it comes from a Jewish donor. The CRP acknowledges that its estimates of the ideological or industry affiliations of contributions are conservative because there are many contributions, especially from individuals, that it is unable to attribute to particular industries or causes. But even if the "correct" pro-Israel

- figures were an order of magnitude higher than those reported their likely influence on presidential campaigns would still be negligible. <http://opensecrets.org/industries/methodology.asp>.
- 36 Forman 2001, 152. See also Gamm 1989. The exception is 1980, when only 45% of Jewish voters supported President Jimmy Carter. Ronald Reagan, the Republican nominee, received 39%, and third-party candidate John Anderson received 15%.
- 37 Jewish population estimates by state—and only estimates are available because the Census does not ask respondents to report their religious affiliation—are from the American Jewish Committee’s American Jewish Year Book, 2002, as reported in the Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2002, 56. The states with the highest estimated Jewish population percentage are: New York (8.7%), New Jersey (5.7%), the District of Columbia (4.5%), Massachusetts (4.3%), Maryland (4.0%), Florida (3.9%), Nevada (3.8%), Connecticut (3.2%), California (3.2%), and Pennsylvania (2.3%). Population percentages are more relevant than population totals for this analysis because it is electoral margins, not vote totals, that are at issue.
- 38 The logic and spirit of this analysis follow Uggen and Manza 2002.
- 39 I use state turnout data compiled by Michael McDonald of George Mason University, which are available at <http://elections.gmu.edu/>.
- 40 By this logic, of course, it would be possible to replicate this procedure for any group that is unevenly geographically distributed and thereby show that its votes were “pivotal” in presidential elections.
- 41 Wand et al. 2001.
- 42 See Frymer 1999, 185.
- 43 Kingdon 1995, 53–61.
- 44 Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000.
- 45 Rich 2004, 25–26.
- 46 Cohen 2006.
- 47 Commission Nationale Consultative des Droits de l’Homme 2006, 28.
- 48 These data were compiled before the February 2006 murder of Ilan Halimi, a French Jew who was killed apparently by a gang of Muslim immigrant youths, but after the race riots that engulfed France in the fall of 2005.
- 49 This tendency on the part of the French government is also a function of France’s historically rooted political culture, which generally views with suspicion the very existence and identity of sub-national groupings based on categories such as race, religion, or national origin. Consequently, French national policies toward group inequality and conflict tend to focus heavily on proscribing the expression of racist or anti-Semitic beliefs rather than enacting compensatory, group-based protections. See Weber 1976; Birnbaum 2001; Bleich 2003; Lieberman 2005.
- 50 Kaplan and Small 2006.
- 51 King, Keohane, and Verba 1994; Collier, Mahoney, and Seawright 2004. One might certainly quarrel with my interpretations of these cases and their location on the diagram, but this interpretive difficulty merely underscores the importance of establishing in advance the principles by which cases are to be selected and interpreted in order to avoid selection bias.
- 52 Lowi 1964, 1972; Wilson 1974, chap. 16; Arnold 1990.
- 53 Wilson 1974, 333–34.
- 54 Ibid., 336.
- 55 Converse 1964; Miller and Stokes 1963; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996.
- 56 Page and Shapiro 1992; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Stimson 2004.
- 57 Mayhew 2000, 167. See also Steinmo 1993.
- 58 Pierson 2004; Hacker 2002.
- 59 Lieberman 2002; Thelen 2004; Hacker 2004.
- 60 See Bass 2003.
- 61 Dahl 1957, 1961.
- 62 Bachrach and Baratz 1962; Lukes 1974; Gaventa 1980.
- 63 See Polsby 1963; Wolfinger 1971; Crenson 1971; Gaventa 1980; Dobbin 1994; Pierson 2004.
- 64 Jacobs and Page 2005.
- 65 Katznelson 2007; Valelly 2006.

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# The Blind Man and the Elephant in the Room: Robert Lieberman and the Israel Lobby

John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt

Robert Lieberman's critique of our work on the Israel lobby is at odds with an abundance of evidence and prior scholarship describing the powerful influence that pro-Israel groups exert on U.S. Middle East policy. In addition to mischaracterizing our arguments, Lieberman claims that our methodology and research design are flawed and that our work contradicts the scholarly literature on American politics. Neither claim is true. Contrary to what he says, we did consider alternative hypotheses, and our analysis contains significant variation on both the independent and dependent variables. Given the methodological challenges involved in assessing the causal influence of any interest group, we also relied heavily on "process-tracing." Lieberman recognizes this is an appropriate method for assessing causal impact and he concedes that this evidence supports our central argument. Moreover, we went to some lengths to avoid selection bias. Similarly, our arguments are consistent with the existing literature on interest groups, and with much of the scholarly literature on congressional decision-making, campaign financing, electoral politics, and the role of think tanks and the media. Surprisingly, after leveling a variety of false charges, Lieberman offers an "alternative" explanation for the Israel lobby's influence that is virtually identical to our own.

It is hard to know what to make of Robert Lieberman's essay. Not only does it contain numerous unsupported charges and internal contradictions, it is at odds with a wealth of evidence and prior scholarship describing the powerful influence that various pro-Israel groups exert in Washington. If the Israel lobby is largely irrelevant, as he seems to think, why was the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) ranked the second most powerful lobby in Washington in a 2005 *National Journal* survey of Congress, and why did veteran Congressman Lee Hamilton say "There's no lobby group that matches it . . . They're in a class by themselves?"<sup>1</sup> If the lobby is so inconsequential, why is Israel still the largest recipient of U.S. foreign aid (over \$3 billion each year, or more than \$500 per Israeli citizen) even though its per capita income is now 29th in the world?<sup>2</sup> Why do the highest-level policymakers and dozens of prominent politicians from both parties attend the AIPAC Policy Conference each year? Furthermore, why did Hillary Clinton, John McCain, and Barack

Obama each feel compelled to make pandering pro-Israel speeches there in June 2008? In Lieberman's world, a politician's position on Israel has little effect on his or her electoral prospects, and U.S. presidents would not hesitate to make aid conditional on Israel ending its efforts to colonize the West Bank, a policy that every president since Lyndon Johnson has opposed.

Of course, this is not a world that experienced observers of the American political scene would recognize. Indeed, even our harshest critics acknowledge that the lobby is a remarkably powerful force. For example, Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz wrote in a memoir that "my generation of Jews . . . became part of what is perhaps the most effective lobbying and fund-raising effort in the history of democracy." Jeffrey Goldberg, another staunch defender of Israel, describes AIPAC as a "leviathan among lobbies," and AIPAC is only one of many pro-Israel organizations.<sup>3</sup> One wonders how Lieberman could think that the lobby has so little impact on U.S. Middle East policy.

In fact, Lieberman's critique is more of a dust-kicking operation than a serious assessment of our work. His strategy is to raise countless objections, in the hope that the sheer volume of accusations will convince readers that our arguments should not be taken seriously.<sup>4</sup> This approach leads him to misrepresent what we wrote, and to ignore or denigrate the extensive evidence we compiled about the lobby's influence. Accordingly, almost every page of his article contains some new condemnation: not only are we supposedly

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*John J. Mearsheimer is the R. Wendell Harrison Distinguished Service Professor of Political Science and the co-director of the Program on International Security Policy at the University of Chicago (j-mearsheimer@uchicago.edu). Stephen M. Walt is the Robert and Renée Belfer Professor of International Affairs at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University (Stephen\_Walt@harvard.edu).*

guilty of “selection bias,” “lapses of logic,” “conceptual confusion,” “lack of variation,” and “impossibly vague” arguments, but our case studies are dismissed as only “slightly more extensive” than “anecdotes” and our causal claims are said to be “often illogical” and “almost never supported by dispositive evidence.”<sup>5</sup> On top of that, we are said to lack “even a rudimentary understanding of how the American policymaking system works.”<sup>6</sup> If we really committed all these scholarly sins, and others that we have not mentioned, we might be tempted to look for another line of work. Fortunately, his complaints are groundless.

Lieberman’s numerous accusations fall into two categories. First, he argues that our methodology and research design are flawed, and that these shortcomings invalidate the abundant evidence we presented about the lobby’s influence on U.S. Middle East policy. Second, he claims that our arguments are inconsistent with the scholarly literature on American politics, a body of work that allegedly proves that interest groups like the Israel lobby cannot wield influence in the manner we described. As we show below, both sets of charges are wrong.

It is worth noting that although Lieberman disputes our claim that the lobby has a profound influence on U.S. Middle East policy, he does not challenge our account of past or present Israeli policies or the history of America’s special relationship with Israel. Nor does he dispute our description of the lobby’s activities in the United States. In particular, he does not deny that a diverse array of pro-Israel organizations and individuals are active in Washington and in American political life more broadly. Indeed, after going to considerable effort to debunk our claims about the lobby’s influence, he offers his own “alternative” account of its power. But this move does not make sense: if the lobby exerts little influence on U.S. policy, why is it necessary to present alternative explanations for its power? Even more remarkably, his explanations turn out to be almost identical to our own.

We begin by summarizing our argument and explaining our research design. We then consider Lieberman’s main criticisms in detail.

## Our Argument and Research Design

Our book addresses two main questions. First, what explains America’s “special relationship” with Israel, a relationship that the late Yitzhak Rabin once described as “beyond compare in modern history”?<sup>7</sup> Second, is it good for the United States and Israel? Our aim was not to explain why the United States supports Israel’s existence—a policy that is not controversial and that we endorse—rather, we sought to explain why the United States gives Israel so much economic, military, and diplomatic support—for the most part unconditionally—and why key aspects of American foreign policy are conducted with the aim of making Israel more secure.<sup>8</sup>

We argued that this special relationship is due primarily to the political activities of a powerful interest group—which we termed the “Israel lobby”—whose members work assiduously to promote unconditional U.S. support and whose influence has grown significantly over time. We did not argue that the lobby “controlled” U.S. Middle East policy, and we emphasized that it did not win every policy dispute. Nonetheless, we showed that the individuals and organizations in this interest group have successfully employed a variety of strategies to advance the special relationship and to influence American foreign policy in ways intended to benefit Israel.

Although talking about the lobby and its influence has been something of a taboo subject in the United States—in part because some of its members are quick to smear anyone who questions the special relationship—we were not making a radical or counterintuitive argument. Other prominent interest groups—like the farm lobby, the National Rifle Association, the AARP, as well as some other ethnic lobbies—wield considerable influence over their respective policy domains, and they use similar strategies to achieve their goals. The key organizations that make up the Israel lobby possess the basic characteristics that make interest groups powerful in the United States, such as ample financial resources, a committed core of well-educated, politically active supporters, and lack of strong opposition.<sup>9</sup> Thus, our account was consistent with the extensive literature on interest groups in American politics, as well as the literature on ethnic groups and foreign policy. It was also in line with a number of earlier studies of the lobby itself.<sup>10</sup>

Making our case required careful attention to research design, because determining the relative importance of the different factors that shape policy outcomes is a challenging task. This is especially true when dealing with interest groups, which sometimes conceal particular activities. Furthermore, policymakers rarely admit that their decisions were influenced by a lobbying group’s pressure, which can make it even more difficult to trace an interest group’s impact on policy.

Measuring influence requires an appreciation of political context as well. One cannot measure the influence of an interest group simply by looking at whether it “won” or “lost” a particular policy dispute. The real question is what the outcome would have been had interest group pressure been absent. After all, an interest group may lose a specific policy battle but still force policymakers to water down their goals or expend lots of political capital in order to overcome its opposition. In short, there is no simple linear relationship between “lobbying activities” and “policy outcomes” in the real world; thus gauging a lobby’s clout requires paying careful attention to the process by which decisions and outcomes were reached.

Mindful of these considerations, we thought carefully about the evidence needed to assess the lobby’s influence.

Because we were writing for a broad audience, we did not employ the usual social science terminology about hypothesis testing to describe our research design. Nonetheless, in a section of our book that Lieberman does not mention, we explained how we make our case.<sup>11</sup> First, we tested our argument about the lobby's influence against the main alternative explanations. Second, we relied heavily on "process-tracing," a methodology well-suited for drawing causal inferences when complex questions of causation and political context are involved.<sup>12</sup> As discussed below, this method was especially valuable in this case, because the historical record was not especially conducive to analyzing covariation, which is at the heart of large-N research. Third, we examined U.S. relations with Israel since its founding in 1948, paying careful attention to broader patterns of variation over time. We also zeroed in on specific episodes where U.S. policy shifted, because these incidents provided opportunities to gauge the lobby's independent influence.

### **Lieberman's Methodological Critique**

Lieberman's makes three main charges regarding our methodology and research design: 1) we failed to test alternative hypotheses, 2) our definition of the lobby and its activities is marred by "conceptual confusion," and 3) our evidence does not contain sufficient variation—both over time and across issues—to permit reliable inferences about the lobby's overall influence. In each case, Lieberman has either overlooked or misread key sections of our work, or failed to grasp the methodological issues involved.

#### ***Alternative Hypotheses***

Lieberman is wrong to say that we failed to "systematically canvass alternative explanations that might help bolster . . . [our] case for the lobby's causal importance."<sup>13</sup> In fact, two of the book's twelve chapters are devoted to evaluating alternative explanations for America's special relationship with Israel. Chapter 2 ("Israel: Strategic Asset or Liability?") assesses the claim that the special relationship exists because Israel is a unique strategic asset, while Chapter 3 ("A Dwindling Moral Case") evaluates whether it is due to "shared values" or other moral considerations. We reject both alternatives, and conclude that some other factor must be at work. Other sections of the book assess whether the oil lobby or public opinion are the real driving forces behind U.S. Middle East policy.<sup>14</sup> Lieberman is free to disagree with our assessment of these rival explanations, although he does not do so in his critique, but his charge that we did not consider alternative explanations is false.

#### ***Conceptual Confusion (and Other Alleged Sins)***

Lieberman repeatedly accuses us of "conceptual confusion," "lapses in logic," and assorted other analytic and

methodological errors. Given the frequency with which he hurls these various brickbats, it is sometimes hard to tell exactly what mistakes we supposedly committed. Nonetheless, Lieberman seems particularly bothered by our definition of the lobby. He says we "veer between two different portraits," one in which the lobby is "a non-governmental entity (or set of actors)" and another where it is a "ruling elite that includes both government officials and people outside of the government who are connected to one another by shared social background, economic status, or network ties."<sup>15</sup> He also claims that the term "pro-Israel" is inherently ambiguous, and suggests that these difficulties confound our attempts to demonstrate the lobby's influence and render our argument unfalsifiable.<sup>16</sup> He is mistaken.

First, Lieberman misrepresents our definition by saying that we think the lobby "encompasses Israeli government officials."<sup>17</sup> We never made such a claim. On the contrary, we made it clear that the lobby is comprised of American citizens and American organizations, and that its behavior is as American as apple pie. Individuals in the lobby do meet with Israeli officials on occasion, but we neither said nor implied that the latter were part of the lobby. Furthermore, Lieberman does not identify a single example where we mistakenly placed an individual or group in the lobby or a single episode where we mistakenly described the lobby's actions.

Second, we do not "veer between two different portraits" of the lobby, and neither of his two alternatives accurately reflects our definition. Specifically, we made it clear that individuals in the lobby sometimes hold important positions in the government, so it cannot be said that we described the lobby simply as a "non-governmental . . . set of actors."<sup>18</sup> Nor did we describe the lobby as a "ruling elite," which is an inappropriate term for describing most American interest groups, and especially one that includes people with such diverse backgrounds as Christian Zionists and secular Jews. Instead, we employed a straightforward, commonsensical definition that is consistent with the literature on interest groups. We defined the lobby as a "loose coalition of individuals and organizations that actively work to shape U.S. foreign policy in a pro-Israel direction."<sup>19</sup> We pointed out that the term "lobby" was somewhat misleading, insofar as some members do not engage in formal lobbying activities. But we employed it as a "shorthand term" because it was consistent with common parlance, as in farm lobby, gun lobby, or environmental lobby. We also noted that the boundaries of all interest groups are somewhat imprecise, although most have a core membership whose identity is not disputed.

Third, we recognized that the term "pro-Israel" is ambiguous; indeed, we made this very point in our book.<sup>20</sup> To clarify the issue, we emphasized that "the various groups that make up the lobby . . . share the desire to promote a

special relationship between the United States and Israel” and believe “the United States should give Israel substantial diplomatic, economic, and military support even when Israel takes actions the United States opposes.”<sup>21</sup> Of course, one of our central conclusions was that the special relationship was in fact harmful to both countries.

Nor did we argue that policymakers who support a “pro-Israel” policy initiative are necessarily members of the lobby. On the contrary, we explicitly wrote that our definition does not “imply that every American official who supports Israel is part of the lobby.”<sup>22</sup> We judged officeholders to be part of the lobby if their attachment to Israel preceded their entry into public service or if they devoted a substantial portion of their personal or professional lives both in and out of office to influencing U.S. Middle East policy in ways intended to benefit Israel. Thus, when Congressman Howard Berman (D-CA) declares that his concern for Israel is the reason he wanted to serve on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, it seems reasonable to count him as part of the broad “pro-Israel” interest group.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, when Martin Indyk—formerly deputy director of research at AIPAC and co-founder of the pro-Israel Washington Institute of Near East Policy—is appointed one of Bill Clinton’s key Middle East advisors, it strains credulity to exclude him from the “loose coalition” that “actively works” to promote the “special relationship.”<sup>24</sup>

There is really no mystery or “conceptual confusion” here. Like other interest groups, organizations in the Israel lobby try to get individuals who are sympathetic to their views elected to office or appointed to key positions in the executive branch. They also try to convince presidents not to appoint individuals about whom they have doubts. As we documented in our book, these efforts sometimes succeed. When they do, these groups will be trying to influence officials who share their broad perspective—and may even have belonged to the same pro-Israel organization(s)—and they will not have to deal with officials who might have reservations or even be opposed to the special relationship. Does Lieberman deny that the lobby engages in these kinds of activities? And does he deny that they sometimes affect the policy process?

### *Process-Tracing versus Covariation*

Lieberman recognizes that there are two distinct ways to assess the causal influence of the lobby on policy—covariation and process-tracing—and that we relied mainly on the latter.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, he acknowledges that process-tracing is potentially a powerful tool for showing cause and effect. In his words: “if . . . [Mearsheimer and Walt] can document recurrent sequences of cause and effect connecting pro-Israel political activity and pro-Israel policy outcomes, *they will be able to stake a strong claim to having established a more general causal relationship.*”<sup>26</sup> He then

concedes that our case studies—which fill five substantial chapters—“do, indeed, seem to show a consistent pro-Israel stance in American foreign and defense policy.”<sup>27</sup>

Yet instead of simply admitting that we make a strong case for our argument, which would seem to follow from his comments on process-tracing and our case studies, Lieberman declares that “the success of the causal argument about the reasons for American Middle East policymaking and the power of the Israel lobby will depend primarily on the principle of variation.” He goes on to say that “the principle flaw in Mearsheimer and Walt’s empirical argument stems from the lack of variation.”<sup>28</sup> In other words, after stating that process-tracing is an acceptable way to demonstrate causal influence and that the process-tracing we performed supports our basic argument, he reverses field and insists that covariation is the only reliable way to analyze cause and effect and that there is hardly any variation in the evidence we presented. He is wrong on both counts.

Lieberman’s claim that there is no variation in our empirical evidence takes three forms. First, he maintains that our case studies are drawn entirely from the Bush administration, and indeed, from the “last four years or so.”<sup>29</sup> But this is not true. For example, our case studies of U.S.–Syrian and U.S.–Iranian relations begin in the early 1990s and cover more than fifteen years. Moreover, we show that American policy toward both regimes—especially Syria—varied considerably over time, and we trace how these changes corresponded to shifts in Israeli policy and the lobby’s activities. Similarly, our chapter on the 2003 Iraq war traced the origins of that conflict back to the late 1990s, when the neoconservatives began putting pressure on the Clinton administration to use military force to topple Saddam Hussein. We also compared the role played by oil interests and the lobby in the period preceding the 1991 and 2003 wars against Iraq.<sup>30</sup>

There is also a great deal of empirical evidence in our book that is not contained in the case studies, and this evidence exhibits considerable variation. In particular, we analyzed how America’s relationship with Israel has evolved since 1948 and drew special attention to how relations between the two countries had changed over that sixty-year period. Specifically, we emphasized that “the ‘special relationship’ that now exists did not emerge until several decades after Israel’s founding” and we documented the various disputes that characterized U.S.–Israeli relations during the 1950s and 1960s as well as U.S. efforts to keep its distance during Israel’s first fifteen years of existence.<sup>31</sup> Although Israel certainly had strong American supporters from the beginning, we also showed that the lobby has grown more powerful and more active over time and that its leading organizations have become more hard-line in recent decades. Thus our book’s overarching narrative highlights variation over time in both the independent variable (the lobby’s clout and agenda) and the dependent variable (the extent of the U.S.–Israeli special relationship).

Lieberman's second argument regarding covariation is his claim that we focus almost exclusively on cases where high levels of lobby activity led to pro-Israel policy outcomes, and that we failed to consider three other kinds of cases: 1) high levels of lobby activity failed to stop anti-Israel policy outcomes; 2) low levels of lobby activity produced pro-Israel policy outcomes; and 3) low levels of lobby activity were associated with anti-Israel policy outcomes. According to Lieberman, this is another example of selection bias on our part.<sup>32</sup> The implication, of course, is that if we had looked at all four kinds of cases—represented by the cells in his table 2—we might have found evidence that contradicts our argument.

This is yet another false charge. In fact, we discussed each of the cases contained in the various cells of his table 2: recognition of Israel in 1948, the Suez Crisis in 1956, and the AWACS sale in 1981. We also considered several episodes that he does not mention, such as the 1992 dispute over loan guarantees. Lieberman concedes that we discussed these cases in our book, but he complains that they received only "brief mention" and "they are not deployed as comparative cases that might provide a test of the book's overall hypothesis."<sup>33</sup> We dealt with these cases briefly because there was no need to discuss them at length. The story would have remained the same, because there is nothing about these incidents that undermines our basic account of the lobby's growing influence over time.

One might think there are cases in the various cells that we simply overlooked, because we focused most of our attention on those cases where high levels of lobby activity led to pro-Israel policy outcomes. But that would be wrong. We scrutinized the historical record with great care, looking for cases that might disconfirm our theory. And when we found them, we addressed them in the book. We also took advantage of the fact that critics of our original article pointed to cases that they thought undermined our claims about the lobby. Thus, it is hardly surprising that Lieberman does not identify a single important incident omitted from our analysis that might undermine our core claims.

Lieberman directs a third criticism at us regarding variation. "If American Middle East policy *were* constant," he writes, "it would be necessary to show that Mearsheimer and Walt's favored explanatory factor, the activities of the Israel lobby, was also constant, *while other possible explanatory factors varied.*"<sup>34</sup> Yet this is just what we showed. Foreign policy is never completely "constant," of course, but one of the principal aims of our book was to explain why the "special relationship" has remained intact in recent decades, even though other potential "explanatory factors" were varying in ways that should have led U.S. support for Israel to decline.

The special relationship developed during the Cold War, when one could plausibly argue that Israel was a useful asset for containing Soviet influence in the Middle East. But the

Cold War ended in 1989 and the strategic landscape changed drastically. As we document at length in our book, Israel has since become a strategic burden for the United States, which should have attenuated if not ended the special relationship, at least if strategic calculations were driving American policy. Similarly, although we believe there is still a strong moral case for Israel's existence, the moral case for giving Israel unconditional support has been weakened by its prolonged occupation of the West Bank and its brutal treatment of the Palestinians there and in Gaza. Thus, the evidence in our book fits the exact pattern that Lieberman claims is "necessary" to prove our case: 1) the activities of the lobby are constant or growing; 2) other "explanatory factors" are weaker or reversed; yet 3) the special relationship remains unchanged. *QED.*

The bottom line is that we are not guilty of selection bias or lack of variation. There is variation in our evidence and it supports our core argument.

What about Lieberman's claim that the only dependable way to analyze the lobby's influence is with covariation, not process-tracing? Both approaches obviously have strengths and weaknesses, and in an ideal world one would want to employ both methods more or less equally. The main reason we put greater weight on process-tracing is that there are certain limits to covariation in this case. As Lieberman acknowledges, if the lobby has significant influence on U.S. Middle East policy, as we claim it does, then the historical record will tend to show an association between lobbying activity and pro-Israel policy outcomes.<sup>35</sup> And if the lobby has become more powerful over time, as we claim it has, this association will be more pronounced now than it was in the past. As a result, most cases will fall in the cells where high levels of lobby activity lead to pro-Israel policy outcomes or low levels of activity are associated with less pro-Israel outcomes, but relatively few cases will appear in the "off-diagonal" cells. In other words, there will not be much variation in the historical record for scholars to observe and exploit. That certainly has proven to be the case in recent decades, and neither Lieberman nor any of our other critics has provided evidence to challenge that story. But in a situation like that, as Lieberman admits, "an explanatory strategy based on exploring the covariation of cause and effect would not work."<sup>36</sup> Instead, one would want to rely more heavily on process-tracing, which is what we did.<sup>37</sup>

There is another dimension to this problem. When an interest group is especially powerful, policymakers may refrain from taking initiatives that might trigger its opposition. As a result, the interest group's influence leads to "non-events," potential disputes that do not occur and thus cannot be directly observed. As long-time U.S. Middle East negotiator Aaron David Miller has acknowledged, "those of us advising the secretary of state and the president were very sensitive to what the pro-Israel community was thinking, and *when it came to considering ideas*

*Israel didn't like, we too often engaged in a kind of preemptive self-censorship.*"<sup>38</sup> Or as we noted in our book, "like other powerful interest groups . . . the Israel lobby achieves its aims [in part] by constraining the policies key officials are willing to consider."<sup>39</sup> Given this tendency for "preemptive self-censorship," the contrasting cases that Lieberman demands will be even less common and therefore it is not surprising that he cannot find any. Indeed, when self-censorship by key officials occurs, the historical record will actually understate the true extent of the lobby's power.

Given the problems with relying solely on covariation, Lieberman's insistence on privileging this research method is misplaced. That is why we relied primarily on process-tracing, while remaining alert for examples of covariation as well. But regardless of the relative merits of these two approaches for analyzing the lobby, the critical point is that each approach yielded similar results. To challenge our argument, Lieberman would have to show that an analysis based on covariation produced different results than one based on process-tracing, which he has not done.

### The Lobby and American Politics

Lieberman's second line of attack alleges that we make "frequent misstatements about basic elements of American politics" and that many of our key claims about the lobby "frequently contradict well-established research findings in American politics."<sup>40</sup> He focuses his criticism on our discussion of 1) how the lobby influences Congress; 2) the effects of campaign spending by pro-Israel individuals and groups; 3) the importance of Jewish voters in presidential elections; and 4) the lobby's efforts to shape public discourse. He maintains that our discussion of these key causal paths of influence is not compelling, because it is at odds with "the state of knowledge about American politics."<sup>41</sup>

These criticisms are wrong. There are important disagreements among students of American politics—as there are in any field of study—so we do disagree with some findings but not with others. None of our claims, however, fall outside the boundaries of serious discussion among mainstream scholars in that subfield. More importantly, our discussion of how the Israel lobby operates is consistent with the extensive literature on interest groups. It is this literature that is most directly relevant for assessing Lieberman's charge that our findings contradict the conventional wisdom in the field of American politics, and he does not claim that our book is at odds with this extensive body of work. Indeed, he barely mentions it at all. There are also a number of earlier works on the Israel lobby itself—including discussions by well-known scholars of American politics—and this literature does not contradict our claims in any meaningful way.<sup>42</sup>

Lieberman instead argues that the problem lies with our discussion of subjects like Congress and campaign

financing. We disagree, but even if our story were at odds with "well-established research findings" on those subjects, the Israel lobby might be an anomalous case and our core argument would still be correct. Lieberman actually concedes this point, saying "I am not suggesting that any finding that contradicts what other political scientists have said is necessarily invalid." Of course, he is suggesting just that; and he has little choice but to do so since he challenges hardly any of our facts. He goes on to say that if the lobby is a special case, we have "to show where current theory goes wrong" and why our "model of influence" is superior.<sup>43</sup> Fortunately, we did not have to perform that Herculean task, because the lobby's influence is easy to understand in light of the existing literature on American politics. It operates much as other powerful interest groups do, although it has several advantages that make it unusually effective.

Before examining what Lieberman has to say about each causal path, it is important to note that he misrepresents what we said about the relationship between the various causal paths we describe. In particular, he maintains that "it is not clear how these different mechanisms interact with each other in Mearsheimer and Walt's causal scheme. Are they complementary? Do they compete with one another?"<sup>44</sup> This charge is false, however, as we explicitly stated that "the various strategies that groups in the lobby employ . . . are mutually reinforcing."<sup>45</sup> We also provided several examples to support that point, which is again consistent with the literature on interest group politics.

Having misrepresented our views on how the different causal paths interact, Lieberman then implies that we believe that each causal mechanism should independently be able to explain the special relationship. For example, when discussing our point that support for Israel in Congress is due in part to the fact that some legislators are strongly pro-Israel, he writes that "the proposition that a small band of ideologically pro-Israel members of Congress has hijacked American foreign policy seems dubious."<sup>46</sup> We agree, which is why we never advanced that proposition. Furthermore, he claims that we believe "it is disproportionate representation on the relevant committees that constitutes the critical ingredient of the 'lobby's' influence."<sup>47</sup> But we did not say it was "the critical ingredient"; we merely noted that well-placed supporters on key committees are one reason for the lobby's success in Congress, a proposition consistent with the existing literature on Congressional behavior.<sup>48</sup> In short, our argument is that the lobby seeks to influence the policy process in several complementary ways, no one of which alone accounts for the special relationship.

### Congress and the Lobby

Lieberman does not dispute our claim that "Israel is virtually immune from criticism" in Congress, but he suggests

that there is a simple explanation: legislators reflect the public's preferences. "Long-term trends in American public opinion," he writes, "show that Americans have long consistently expressed substantial support for Israel."<sup>49</sup> Thus, "the burden is on Mearsheimer and Walt to show that congressional action on the Middle East is out of synch with the central tendency of national opinion." Lieberman fails to mention that this is precisely what we showed. As detailed in our book, the behavior of Congress is not in synch with public opinion. The American people are generally sympathetic to Israel, but they are much more critical of Israeli policy than their representatives are and they are far more willing to support a hard-nosed approach to dealing with Israel. Indeed, a 2005 survey by the Anti-Defamation League found that 78 percent of Americans believe that Washington should favor neither Israel nor the Palestinians, which effectively means that they do not support the special relationship.<sup>50</sup> The Lebanon war in 2006 revealed a similar gap between public opinion and Congressional behavior.<sup>51</sup> If Congress reflected the views of the American people, criticism of Israeli policy would be commonplace on Capitol Hill and U.S. policy itself might be substantially different.

Lieberman next takes us to task for not explaining how Israel's staunch supporters exercise power in Congress, especially given their "relatively small numbers."<sup>52</sup> He lays out three possible theories from the American politics literature, and notes that the third model of congressional policymaking, which emphasizes the role of committees, "is actually potentially consistent with Mearsheimer and Walt's account of the lobby's influence." So, on this important issue, it turns out we are not at odds with the American politics literature after all! Nonetheless, Lieberman criticizes us for not providing enough evidence to show that there is "disproportionate representation on the relevant committees." Furthermore, he says that we "misrepresent the process by which committee and subcommittee chairs are selected, implying that there was some kind of Israel litmus test."<sup>53</sup>

We did limit ourselves to talking about the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, mainly because of space constraints, but we easily could have shown that the other relevant committees in Congress are stocked with pro-Israel members, and that hardly anyone on those committees is likely to say things or push policies that would anger AIPAC or other groups in the lobby.<sup>54</sup> On the matter of a litmus test, Representative Henry Waxman (D-CA), a veteran Congressman who is also a devoted supporter of Israel, said in the wake of the 2006 election, "There will be some Democratic chairmen who may not share all my views . . . on Israel [but] . . . they will not be chairing committees dealing with Israel and the Middle East."<sup>55</sup> He was telling it like it is.

Finally, Lieberman is guilty of his own form of selection bias: while claiming to offer a careful scholarly assessment, he fails to mention when our arguments drew

explicitly on the American politics literature. For example, we pointed out that AIPAC is often directly involved in drafting legislation intended to benefit Israel, thereby providing the sort of "legislative subsidy" that scholars have identified as a key source of lobby influence.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, he says hardly anything about the many cases we described where individuals or groups in the lobby intervened on Capitol Hill to shape policy outcomes. To note one example, consider the recollections of former Secretary of State George Shultz:

In early December [1982] . . . I got word that a supplement was moving through the lame-duck session of Congress to provide a \$250 million increase in . . . U.S. military assistance granted to Israel: this in the face of Israel's invasion of Lebanon, its use of cluster bombs, and its complicity in the Sabra and Shatila massacres! We fought the supplement and fought it hard. President Reagan and I weighed in personally, making numerous calls to Senators and congressmen . . . *The supplement sailed right by us and was approved by Congress as though President Reagan and I had not even been there.* . . . This brought home to me vividly Israel's leverage in our Congress. I saw that I must work carefully with the Israelis . . . if I was to maintain congressional support for my efforts to make progress in the Middle East.<sup>57</sup>

Lieberman's omission of this body of evidence is important, because AIPAC, by virtually all accounts, plays a critically important role in pushing Congress to support the special relationship. Nor does he mention the abundant evidence and direct testimony we provided about the lobby's influence—such as the 2005 *National Journal* survey that ranked AIPAC as the second most powerful lobby on Capitol Hill—or the testimony of experienced political figures such as former Congressman Lee Hamilton or former Senators John Culver, Fritz Hollings, and Barry Goldwater.<sup>58</sup>

### ***Campaign Contributions and the Special Relationship***

Lieberman makes three arguments about why campaign contributions from pro-Israel sources have hardly any effect on either Congress or the president. First, he says that we "substantiate" our claim that Israel's supporters "donate a lot of money to candidates for federal office."<sup>59</sup> But then he reverses course, arguing that these contributions are too small a percentage of total contributions to have much impact on politicians' behavior. He writes, for example, that "Bill Clinton received only \$7,000 from pro-Israel sources in his 1996 reelection campaign."<sup>60</sup> Second, he maintains that we mistakenly believe that "campaign contributions effectively 'buy' influence."<sup>61</sup> He counters by invoking scholarly studies arguing that legislators' votes are driven in large part by the preferences of their constituents and their party, because these factors are critical to getting elected or re-elected. In this story, money from interest groups generally has little influence on how politicians vote. Third, he notes that candidates backed by the

lobby do not always win, and candidates the lobby opposes do not necessarily lose. Taken as a whole, Lieberman's critique suggests that a candidate's position on Israel will have little effect on his or her chances of winning.

Lieberman's arguments on this point are at best misleading and at worst simply wrong. To begin with, he greatly understates the role that pro-Israel fundraising plays in American politics, which includes campaign contributions, financial support for party organizations, and various forms of "soft money." To be sure, there is no comprehensive and wholly reliable source on the precise amount of money that Jewish-Americans, Christian Zionists or other pro-Israel individuals give to political campaigns. The main reason is that individuals are not required to report their ethnicity or religious beliefs when they contribute to a campaign or party, and therefore organizations that monitor campaign financing—like the Center for Responsive Politics (CRP)—have no good way of assessing the total amount of money that different ethnic or religious groups give to politicians.

Nevertheless, almost everyone agrees that the amount that American Jews provide is substantial and that candidates who are seen as insufficiently supportive (let alone critical) of Israel will have great difficulty raising money from these sources. The *Washington Post* once estimated that Democratic presidential candidates "depend on Jewish supporters to supply as much as 60 percent of the money raised from private sources." This figure may be too high, but we noted that other estimates range between 20 and 50 percent.<sup>62</sup> We emphasized that "Israel is not the only issue that inspires these contributions. . . but candidates who are perceived as hostile (or even indifferent) to Israel run the risk of seeing some of these funds go to their opponents."<sup>63</sup> Thus, it is hardly surprising that Benjamin Ginsberg, a prominent American politics scholar, remarked in July 2008 that "the Obama campaign has pretty much tapped out individual contributors and the number of people giving small amounts online is diminishing. So it's back to the Democratic Party's traditional finance sources, which for the most part means big Jewish donors."<sup>64</sup> Needless to say, Obama's behavior throughout the campaign was entirely consistent with Ginsberg's remark.

The claim that the 1996 Clinton campaign received only \$7,000 from "pro-Israel sources" is absurd, and it is frankly surprising that a specialist in American politics would make it. The \$7,000 figure, like all of Lieberman's campaign finance data, comes from the CRP database, which reports PAC money given to political campaigns but not individual contributions.<sup>65</sup> This data understates actual contributions by a wide margin, because individuals give far more money to candidates than PACs do. As one of Lieberman's key sources notes, "In congressional elections, where PACs are most active, candidates raised over 3 times more from individuals directly than they did from PACs."<sup>66</sup> Lieberman acknowledges that individual

contributions are more important than PAC contributions, but he says nothing about the fact that individual contributions can be affected by a donor's commitment to Israel, thus ignoring this critically important source of pro-Israel money.<sup>67</sup> Israel's supporters can also influence elections by giving so-called "soft money" to the party of their choice, and they can establish purportedly "independent" political organizations like "Freedom's Watch," a hardline pro-Israel organization bankrolled by hawkish pro-Israel billionaire Sheldon Adelson.<sup>68</sup> In short, simply relying on CRP data, as Lieberman does, greatly understates the amount of money that politicians have received from pro-Israel sources, including President Clinton in 1996.

The claim that campaign contributions are largely useless for influencing politicians fails the common sense test. Why would the Israel lobby—and other interest groups—contribute to campaigns if they were effectively throwing money away? Why would incumbents and challengers alike fear AIPAC so much if they did not think it could affect their electoral prospects?

Contrary to what Lieberman writes, we do not believe that all campaign contributions automatically translate into political influence, and we never said so. We recognize that there will be cases where this does not happen, for several obvious reasons. For example, interest groups often give substantial amounts of money to politicians who already share their views. These contributions are not "buying influence" directly, though they can help these politicians remain in office. Also, politicians sometimes receive money from rival lobbies, which means that the contributions effectively cancel each other out. And if the issue at stake is highly salient for a politician's constituents, he or she will almost certainly do what the voters want and ignore an interest group pushing in the other direction. Finally, incumbents usually enjoy a significant electoral advantage and usually have less difficulty raising campaign money, and thus they are likely to be harder for interest groups to influence than challengers.

Yet scholars in American politics also recognize that there will be some cases where campaign contributions do translate into political influence, and the Israel lobby is probably one of them.<sup>69</sup> Israel is not a salient issue for most Americans, so most politicians will not incur significant political costs if they back Israel down the line.<sup>70</sup> But there are real costs to questioning the special relationship, as virtually every politician in Washington knows. The main fear is that AIPAC and other like-minded groups will target politicians they consider insufficiently pro-Israel, thereby raising the odds that an incumbent will face a well-funded challenger. We discussed a number of these cases in our book, and the scholarly literature makes clear that the ability to raise money is critical to successful Congressional challenges. As Gary Jacobson notes, "Congressional challengers rarely win if they do not spend a substantial amount of money, and the more they spend,

the more likely they are to win.”<sup>71</sup> Not surprisingly, incumbents strive to reassure AIPAC that they fully support the special relationship. They would prefer that pro-Israel PACs and individuals not give their challengers any money, and instead give it to them. An incumbent might well survive the challenge, but why take the chance? The Israel lobby also has the great advantage that there is no opposing lobby with deep pockets that politicians can turn to for help. Moreover, as Lieberman notes, voting behavior is also shaped by the preferences of a legislator’s party, and if the party itself relies heavily on contributions from individuals and groups who strongly support the special relationship, then individual politicians will have even less incentive to question it.<sup>72</sup>

Finally, we made it clear that the lobby does not win every time. Rather, it wins often enough to make it clear to most politicians that they are putting their careers at risk if they are perceived as anti-Israel. Or as Aaron David Miller recently observed, “Today you cannot be successful in American politics and not be good on Israel. And AIPAC plays a key role in making that happen.”<sup>73</sup> We discussed a handful of cases where pro-Israel forces targeted candidates successfully and showed that other politicians noticed. For example, after AIPAC successfully targeted Senator Roger Jepsen (R-IA) following his decision to support the sale of AWACS aircraft to Saudi Arabia in 1981, Senator Alan Cranston (D-CA) remarked that Jepsen’s defeat “has sort of struck terror into the hearts of senators about switching” on Middle East votes. It is for good reason that J.J. Goldberg, the editor of the Jewish weekly newspaper the *Forward*, said in 2002, “There is this image in Congress that you don’t cross these people or they take you down.” All of these considerations explain why former Senator Ernest Hollings said upon his retirement in 2004, “You can’t have an Israeli policy other than what AIPAC gives you around here.”<sup>74</sup>

### ***Jews as Pivotal Voters***

Lieberman attempts to challenge our argument that Jews can be pivotal voters in presidential elections—a situation that encourages candidates for the White House to enthusiastically endorse the special relationship—but he ends up agreeing with us. He performs a mathematical simulation to assess our claims, and concludes that the “results do seem to confirm, arithmetically at least, Mearsheimer and Walt’s supposition that Jewish voters might, under the right circumstances, be decisive in presidential elections, and that this pivotal position might have policy consequences.” He then observes “in fact, we have lately experienced just such an election . . . Florida in 2000.”<sup>75</sup> He points out that the Jewish vote was not decisive in 2004, which is true, but the key point is that the presidential candidates rarely know *ex ante* whether the vote will be close (as it was in 2000) and they must therefore act from the start as if it might be. Even if most Jewish Americans favor the Democratic side, the

actual percentage voting for the Democratic candidate has varied significantly in the past and could determine the outcome of a close contest. For this reason, both Obama and McCain went to great lengths to court the Jewish vote in Florida and other possible swing states in 2008, mostly by repeatedly affirming their strong support for the special relationship.

In addition, Lieberman ignores the importance of courting Israel’s supporters during presidential primaries. He points out that states like California or New York have substantial Jewish populations but have not been competitive in recent presidential elections, thereby suggesting that candidates need not court the Jewish vote in order to carry those states. This may be true for the general election but not the primaries, which is yet another reason why any serious candidate will work hard to convey his or her support for the special relationship.

### ***Shaping Public Discourse***

Lieberman also takes aim at our discussion of the many newspapers and magazines that “display a pro-Israel editorial bias,” and the think tanks that adopt the same perspective.<sup>76</sup> Significantly, he does not challenge our description of the position those publications and think tanks take on Israel. Instead, he accuses us once more of “selection bias,” arguing that it is not clear whether our examples “are somehow representative of a larger phenomenon that cuts across the entire population of media outlets, think tanks, or other relevant venues.”<sup>77</sup> The implication is that we overlooked important mainstream media publications and think tanks that are critical of Israel and the special relationship.

Lieberman offers no evidence to support this line of argument. The discussion in our book did focus on the country’s major newspapers, mainly because they exert greater influence on public attitudes, but also because of space limitations. In doing the research for the book, however, we surveyed numerous newspapers across the country and found no evidence that publications in smaller markets were systematically less pro-Israel than their bigger and more well-known cousins. And nobody we know of suggests that is the case.

Not surprisingly, Lieberman offers no examples of newspapers or mainstream commentators that contradict our basic point. His failure to do so is itself revealing: if there were lots of media outlets and pundits who were consistently critical of Israel, one would think that some of them would be well-known and he would have no trouble identifying them. But as we noted in our book, there are at best a handful of mainstream media figures or outlets that offer more than the mildest criticism of Israel’s behavior or take a skeptical view of the special relationship, and a multitude of prominent voices on the other side. This situation, we also noted, is substantially different from the discourse in many other democracies, including Israel itself.

We also surveyed all of the relevant think tanks inside the Beltway—which is where most of the foreign policy think tanks are located—and we noted that “there are a few smaller think tanks that are not reflexively pro-Israel.” Our point was that “the largest and most visible” ones “usually take Israel’s side,” and thus “the balance of power . . . strongly favors Israel.” We also discussed the prestigious Council on Foreign Relations, which is located in New York City and which has become increasingly supportive of the special relationship over time.<sup>78</sup> Once again, Lieberman provides no evidence that contradicts our description of the think-tank world.

Lieberman also suggests that pro-Israel research organizations are not likely to have much impact on policymaking because “recent research . . . has found that think tanks with clearly ideological or one-sided missions tend to have a smaller impact precisely because the policy research they produce comes with a known ideological predisposition.”<sup>79</sup> The lobby, of course, is well-aware of this problem, and thus pro-Israel think tanks do not openly advertise their pro-Israel orientation. As we noted in our book, this is why the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, which was founded in 1985 by individuals closely identified with AIPAC, “plays down its links to Israel and claims that it provides a ‘balanced and realistic’ perspective on Middle East issues,” which is not the case.<sup>80</sup>

### Lieberman’s “Alternative” Explanations

Lieberman concludes his critique by offering several “alternative explanations” that might account for the lobby’s influence. As we noted earlier, this step makes no sense, as the main purpose of his essay is to argue that the lobby “is not the prime mover in shaping American foreign policy toward the Middle East.”<sup>81</sup> His aim should therefore be to identify the real driving forces behind the special relationship, and U.S. Middle East policy more generally, instead of trying to explain why the lobby wields so much influence, a claim he challenges throughout his article. Yet here he focuses on the lobby and claims to offer a more sophisticated analysis than our supposedly “blunt interest-group approach.” However, his alternative explanations are in fact our own.

First, he suggests that the lobby might be influential because of the way that the costs and benefits of the special relationship are distributed. He acknowledges that we made this point and quotes our statement that “in a democracy, even relatively small groups can exercise considerable influence if they are strongly committed to a particular issue and the rest of the population is largely indifferent.” Lieberman goes on to say “Mearsheimer and Walt are undoubtedly right that the benefits of pro-Israel policy are particularly concentrated among those American voters whose intense policy preferences . . . are thereby satisfied,

while the costs of that policy are widely dispersed across the population, most of whom are consequently indifferent to policy outcomes.”<sup>82</sup> Under such circumstances, he notes, one would expect little debate about the special relationship, which was of course another one of our key points. Thus, Lieberman’s first “alternative” merely restates our basic account.

Second, he suggests that “a second alternative might focus more comprehensively than Mearsheimer and Walt do on the institutional structure of the American political system and the particular discipline that this structure imposes on policymaking.”<sup>83</sup> Lieberman’s language indicates that he is simply calling for doing further research on matters that are at the core of our book. We would welcome additional research along these lines, but there is no reason to think that it would undermine our analysis of the ways that groups in the lobby work on the different branches of government or our historical account of how they have sought to institutionalize the special relationship. Lieberman adds that “assessing this approach would require a careful examination of policy over time,” which is exactly what we sought to provide within the space at our disposal.<sup>84</sup>

Third, Lieberman suggests that another “alternative approach to conceptualizing the ‘lobby’s’ influence” might be to focus on how it shapes policy debates about Israel and the Middle East.<sup>85</sup> This argument is yet another central part of our own explanation; in fact, we devoted an entire chapter to explaining how this process works. Lieberman says it is “plausible to observe that American Middle East policy is made in a context that discourages robust debate about the costs and benefits of support for Israel,” admitting further that it is “reasonable to hypothesize that pro-Israel actors, both inside and outside of government, make it very hard—or at least very costly—for public officials to be openly critical of Israel.”<sup>86</sup> This supposed “alternative” is our argument, of course, as even a cursory reading of Chapter 6 (“Dominating Public Discourse”) makes manifestly clear. In our words, “key elements in the lobby strive to influence discourse about Israel. . . They promote efforts to portray Israel in a positive light and they go to considerable lengths to marginalize anyone who questions Israel’s past or present conduct or seeks to cast doubt on the merits of unconditional U.S. backing.”<sup>87</sup>

In short, after directing a lot of ill-aimed firepower at us, Lieberman concludes his essay by recapitulating some of our main arguments and offering no new ones. We are gratified by his turn-around, but left wondering why he was so exercised by our book in the first place.

### Conclusion

We do not regard our book as the last word on the Israel lobby or America’s special relationship with Israel. Indeed, we wrote it to encourage a more open discussion of these

important but frequently taboo subjects. We did so because we believe the United States will not be able to address the various challenges it faces in the Middle East if Americans cannot have a candid and wide-ranging discussion of the different forces that shape U.S. foreign policy in this vital region, and whether the resulting policy makes good strategic sense. A careful and fair-minded critique of our work would have advanced our understanding of these weighty issues and been a welcome addition; unfortunately, Lieberman's effort falls well short of that standard.

## Notes

- 1 Mearsheimer and Walt 2007, 117.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 26, 30.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 14, 153–54.
- 4 Space does not permit us to deal with every one of Lieberman's accusations, so we focus on his most important charges.
- 5 Lieberman 2009, 235, 240, 241, 244, 247, 250.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 250.
- 7 Mearsheimer and Walt 2007, 23.
- 8 Lieberman claims that we believe "the moral case for supporting Israel is weak at best" Lieberman 2009, ms. pg.1. This is wrong. In fact, we repeatedly endorse Israel's right to exist and state explicitly that the United States should come to its aid if its survival were in jeopardy. Mearsheimer and Walt 2007, 5, 12, 15, 18, 79, 114, 338, 341. What we question is the special relationship, which we argue is harmful to both countries.
- 9 A recent comparison of ethnic interest groups identified six characteristics that determine a group's political influence; the Israel lobby is the only group possessing all of them. See Rubenzer 2008, table 3.
- 10 On interest groups in general, see Baumgartner and Leech 1998; Hall and Wayman 1990; Hall and Dear-dorff 2006; Hansen 1991, Cigler and Loomis 2006; and Kollman 1998. On ethnic groups and foreign policy, see King and Pomper 2004; Smith 2000; Ahr-ari 1987; Said, 1981; Haney and Vanderbush 1999; Trice 1976; Shain 1994–95; Mathias, 1981; Watanabe 1984; Sheffer 2003, Dekmejian and Themelis 1997. On the Israel lobby itself, see Tivnan 1987, Ball and Ball, 1992; Bard 1991; Findley 1985; Goldberg 1996; Lind 2002; and Massing, 2002a, 2002b.
- 11 Mearsheimer and Walt 2007, 14–18.
- 12 Van Evera 1997; George and Bennett 2005.
- 13 Lieberman 2009, 240.
- 14 Mearsheimer and Walt 2007, 108–110, 142–46, 226–27, 330–32.
- 15 Lieberman 2009, 241.
- 16 *Ibid.*, n. 4.
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 Mearsheimer and Walt 2007, 165–67.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 5, 112.
- 20 In our words, "This definition does not mean that every American with favorable attitudes toward Israel is a member of the lobby. . . .the authors of this book are 'pro-Israel,' in the sense that we support its right to exist, admire its many achievements, want its citizens to enjoy secure and prosperous lives, and believe that the United States should come to Israel's aid if its survival is in danger. But we are obviously not part of the Israel lobby." Mearsheimer and Walt 2007, 113–14.
- 21 Mearsheimer and Walt 2007, 5, 114. Thus, we placed dovish groups like Americans for Peace Now within the lobby because they oppose any reduction in U.S. aid to Israel, but we excluded Jewish Voice for Peace because it supports making U.S. aid conditional on an end to Israel's occupation of the West Bank. See Mearsheimer and Walt 2007, 120–21.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 114.
- 23 On Berman's views, see Guttman 2008.
- 24 Mearsheimer and Walt 2007, 114, 152, 165–66, 175–77, 249, 258, 284, 286, 290.
- 25 Lieberman 2009, 239–240.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 241, emphasis added.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 249.
- 28 *Ibid.*
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 Mearsheimer and Walt 2007, 253–55.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 24.
- 32 Lieberman 2009, 250.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 240.
- 34 *Ibid.*, emphasis original.
- 35 *Ibid.*
- 36 *Ibid.*
- 37 There are two other reasons why process-tracing is well-suited for analyzing the lobby. First, carefully examining particular events allows a scholar to look for direct evidence of the links between causes and effects. In practice this means that one can show how groups or individuals in the lobby weighed in on a particular issue to influence the outcome. Second, process-tracing allows us to examine the broader context in which particular decisions are made, which is important because there is not always a simple linear relationship between "pro-Israel lobbying activity" and "American policy," as Lieberman (14) seems to think. As noted, whether an interest group wins or loses a particular policy dispute may not tell us much about its overall influence. For example, the lobby "lost" the 1981 AWACS fight in the narrow sense that the Senate approved the sale—after a protracted struggle—by a vote of 52–48. But this case does not prove the lobby was weak, because the Reagan administration had to pull out all the stops to overcome its opposition. Moreover, the AWACS battle may have been

- a strategic victory for AIPAC, because it discouraged the Reagan administration from picking another major fight with the lobby again.
- 38 Miller 2008, 123, emphasis added.
- 39 Mearsheimer and Walt 2007, 151.
- 40 Lieberman 2009, 235.
- 41 Ibid., abstract.
- 42 Lieberman may not be aware that respected scholars in American politics have used the Israel lobby as a textbook case of the power that small interest groups can exert, and their portrayal of its influence is for the most part consistent with ours. According to one well-known scholar, “only one other ethnic group, Cuban-Americans, has achieved anything near the prowess of the pro-Israel lobby,” which he describes as the “best organized, best-funded, and most successful of the ethnic lobbies.” See Uslaner 2006, 303–304. Another widely-used American politics textbook contains a special section on “The U.S. Politics of the Arab-Israeli Conflict” and notes that “whatever the merits of the issue, it can be perilous for U.S. elected officials to appear to be anti-Israel. Although Jewish Americans make up only 2 percent of the population, several key interest groups are extremely well-organized advocates for Israel.” See Fiorina et al. 2006, 602–605.
- 43 Lieberman 2009, 241.
- 44 Ibid., 240.
- 45 Mearsheimer and Walt 2007, 196, emphasis added.
- 46 Lieberman 2009, 244.
- 47 Ibid., 241.
- 48 On the importance that interest groups place on influencing committee leaders, and especially how they will use their time, see Hall and Wayman 1990.
- 49 Lieberman 2009, 242.
- 50 Mearsheimer and Walt 2007, 109–110.
- 51 U.S. opinion was sharply divided about Israel’s actions during that war: two separate polls found that 46 percent of Americans held Hezbollah and Israel equally responsible for starting the conflict and a *USA Today*/Gallup poll found that 65 percent thought the United States should take neither side in the conflict. Yet the House passed a resolution of support for Israel by a vote of 410–8. The House also dropped a clause in the draft resolution calling for both sides “to protect civilian life and infrastructure” after AIPAC objected. See Mearsheimer and Walt 2007, 326, 330–31.
- 52 Lieberman 2009, 242.
- 53 Ibid., 243. The claim that we did not provide sufficient or “systematic” evidence recurs throughout Lieberman’s essay. See 239, 240, 241, 244, 246, 247, 248. As noted, he also says that our case studies are only “slightly more extensive” than anecdotes, adding that they are “hardly very detailed” (250). Given that the five case study chapters contains on average over one hundred and twenty footnotes and several hundred separate sources, one wonders what he considers a “detailed” study to be.
- 54 Prior to his election as Vice President, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee was chaired by Joseph Biden (D-DE), whom the *New Republic*’s Martin Peretz recently described as “more than just a ‘friend of Israel’” (Peretz 2008). His successor as chairman, John Kerry (D-MA), has been a strong supporter of the special relationship as well, and the committee’s ranks presently include other reliable defenders of Israel such as Barbara Boxer (D-CA), Benjamin Cardin (D-MD), Robert Menendez (D-NJ), and Christopher Dodd (D-CT). Only former member Chuck Hagel (R-NE), who retired in 2008, might have been regarded as somewhat critical of the special relationship.
- 55 Mearsheimer and Walt 2007, 153.
- 56 Ibid., 161; Hall and Deardorff 2006.
- 57 Ibid., 46, emphasis added.
- 58 Ibid., 162. As Barry Goldwater recalled after nearly three decades in the Senate, “I was never put under greater pressure than by the Israeli lobby, nor has the Senate as a whole. It’s the most influential crowd in Congress and America by far.” Goldwater and Casserly 1988, 16–17. For similar statements by prominent political figures such as Bill Clinton, former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, former Congressman Mervyn Dymally and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, see Mearsheimer and Walt 2007, 117, 153–54.
- 59 Lieberman 2009, 244.
- 60 Ibid., 245.
- 61 Ibid.
- 62 Mearsheimer and Walt 2007, 163. One scholarly study of campaign financing estimates that 33 percent of the contributors to Michael Dukakis’ 1988 presidential campaign were Jewish. See Brown, Powell and Wilcox 1995, 45, 77.
- 63 Mearsheimer and Walt 2007, 163.
- 64 Besser 2008.
- 65 Lieberman 2009, n. 31. It is revealing that the CRP database includes a separate heading for the more than two dozen “pro-Israel PACs” currently active in American politics, under the broader category of “Ideological/Single-Issue PACs.” No other ethnic lobby has its own heading. Similarly, the 2006–2007 edition of the *Almanac of Federal PACs* lists twenty-four “pro-Israel” PACs (by far the largest number in the entire “foreign policy” category) and identifies only one opposing organization (the Arab-American Leadership Council PAC). See *Almanac of Federal PACs 2006*.
- 66 Ansolabehere, de Figueiredo, and Snyder 2003, 109.
- 67 Lieberman 2009, 245.
- 68 On Adelson and “Freedom’s Watch,” see Bruck 2008, Kronholz and Audi 2008, and Van Natta 2007.

Similarly, the largest single donor to the Democratic Party in recent years is Haim Saban, an Israeli-American media mogul who describes himself as a “one-issue guy, and my issue is Israel.” Not only did Saban give some \$13 million himself to the Democratic Party, he also played a key role in persuading others to give as well. Sorkin 2004, Ben David 2008, Wallace 2008. These additional ways of using money to affect elections are also discussed by Ansolabehere, Figueiredo, and Snyder 2003.

- 69 Scholars in American politics have reached a variety of conclusions about the impact of campaign contributions on legislative behavior, which is not surprising given the considerable methodological difficulties involved in this issue. One recent survey performs a meta-analysis of prior studies and concludes that “the hypothesis that campaign contributions have no effect on voting behavior is rejected at the 1% level,” although the author cautions against overstating this result. See Stratmann 2005, 146; also Stratmann 2002, 1992. For arguments that the impact of campaign contributions on elections may be understated and that they constitute a “long-term investment” in sympathetic politicians, see Levitt 1998 and Snyder 1992. A recent formal analysis determines that interest group giving can bias incumbent behavior when “there is some asymmetry in the resources of the interest groups representing opposing sides of a given issue,” in part because lawmakers must “consider the effect of their policy choices on the incentives interest groups have to bankroll an opponent to run against them.” The author notes that there are “several policy areas where only one side is effectively represented financially,” one of these areas being “U.S. foreign policy towards Israel, where money for the pro-Israeli side swamps the pro-Palestinian side.” See Fox 2006, 2–3 and especially note 4.
- 70 One U.S. senator explained why he and his colleagues signed a piece of controversial legislation pushed by the lobby by saying: “There is no political advantage in not signing. If you do sign you don’t offend anyone. If you don’t you might offend some Jews in your state.” Mearsheimer and Walt 2007, 140.
- 71 Jacobson 2004, 42. Another survey of the subject concludes that “early money from PACs does help candidates raise additional monies both from other committees and from individuals. Although there may be some dispute about the marginal impact of campaign spending by incumbents, all researchers agree that non-incumbents benefit more from additional money than incumbents.” Herrnson and Wilcox 1994.
- 72 This is especially true of the Democratic Party, which decided not to give former President Jimmy Carter a speaking role at the 2008 presidential convention

because of his views on Middle East politics. As Ira Forman, head of the National Jewish Democratic Council, explained: “The party is very sensitive to the American Jewish community, and it’s very sensitive to ever conveying that this is anything but a pro-Israel party.” Quoted in Lieberman and Guttman 2008. For a discussion of how campaign contributions influence political parties, see Currinder 2009.

- 73 Miller 2008, 96.  
 74 Mearsheimer and Walt 2007, 158, 159, 162.  
 75 Lieberman 2009, 247.  
 76 Ibid.  
 77 Ibid., 248  
 78 Mearsheimer and Walt 2007, 177–78.  
 79 Lieberman 2009, 248.  
 80 Mearsheimer and Walt 2007, 175.  
 81 Lieberman 2009, 250.  
 82 Ibid., 251.  
 83 Ibid.  
 84 Ibid., 252.  
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# Rejoinder to Mearsheimer and Walt

Robert C. Lieberman

In their reply, Professors Mearsheimer and Walt focus quite reasonably on my two main claims: that their research methods are flawed and that their evidence is weak. But they begin, tellingly, by citing a range of indirect evidence that appears to depict a powerful “Israel lobby.” Lots of knowledgeable Washington insiders, they say—policymakers, journalists, candidates for office, and the like—say and do things that seem to acknowledge the “lobby’s” power. I draw attention to this opening for several reasons. First, it is not clear how much weight some of this evidence will bear. Take, for example, the *National Journal* survey of members of Congress that Mearsheimer and Walt cite twice in their reply (and once in their book). In this survey, conducted once, in 2005, seventy-three members of Congress (out of 535—less than 15 percent) responded to the question, “Which two interest groups do you believe are most effective on Capitol Hill?” Of these respondents, thirteen (less than 20 percent of the sample) mentioned American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) as one of their two choices. It seems something of a leap from the observation that a dozen or so members of Congress said once that AIPAC is “effective” (which might mean any number of things) to the inference that AIPAC—or the lobby more generally—is powerful. Or take the observation that important politicians regularly address AIPAC’s annual conference and make friendly speeches when they do. Surely these same politicians visit other such organizations regularly. And when they appear before, say, the AFL-CIO or the NAACP, surely they say nice things about the issues that these organizations and their conference attendees care about. Successful politicians rarely voice open disagreement with the people they are talking to. But are we to conclude from this behavior that the AFL-CIO and the NAACP, or any other groups that regularly receive such visits, are powerful? Again, this inference requires something of a logical leap.

Second, this opening suggests a starting presumption that the power of the Israel lobby over American policymaking is so obvious that everyone recognizes it without having to be told. The implication of this presumption (underscored, in case you missed it, by the title they gave their piece) is that anyone who cannot see what is so

obvious to everybody else is simply blind, or deluded, or misguided. If this is so—if, as they suggest, this is the “world that experienced observers of the American political scene . . . recognize”—one wonders why they felt compelled to write their book at all, since they seem to feel that it states the obvious. They repeat this rhetorical gambit later in their response, as in the discussion of the extent and consequences of campaign contributions by American Jews, about which I will say more later. But if the basic proposition that the Israel lobby is powerful is so obviously true, one ought to be able to observe this power in action by describing and documenting a set of precise causal mechanisms by which this influence over policymaking operates. This is where I still believe their argument falls short.

## Methods, Processes, and Causal Mechanisms

Mearsheimer and Walt’s response to my methodological critique makes several points. I respond here to the most salient. First, they claim that they assess alternative explanations for American policy toward Israel, pointing to chapters 2 and 3 of their book, in which they dismiss geopolitics and ethics as sufficient explanations. Having dispensed with international system-level explanations, they turn to American domestic politics as their primary causal arena. Among domestic political explanations, the influence of organized interests is certainly a plausible one, and any serious investigation of policy ought to consider the organization and activities of relevant interests as one component of a comprehensive study. But interests comprise only one element among many plausible components of a domestic politics-based account of policy outcomes; the structure and operation of policymaking institutions, the dynamics of public opinion, the nature of electoral processes, political ideologies and national political culture, and historical policy legacies all might also be components of a causal account of policy outcomes independent of interests, and often constitute rival explanations. Focusing an account of the domestic political causes of a set of policy outcomes so doggedly and exclusively on a single explanatory factor would seem

to require at least a defense of this methodological move—why interests instead of any or all of the other competing domestic factors?—and, preferably, a research design that systematically assesses an interest-based explanation against other rival domestic political hypotheses. This kind of analysis can fruitfully challenge even a widely-held conventional wisdom about the outsized influence of powerful organized interests in American politics that seemed “obvious” to many observers. For a long time, for example, the standard story behind the repeated failure of the United States to enact national health insurance in the twentieth century was that it was repeatedly blocked by the influence of physicians and the effective lobbying of their main professional organization, the American Medical Association. But more recent accounts have carefully assessed this explanation alongside other hypotheses and successfully shown that organized interests were, in fact, substantially less consequential than institutions or policy legacies.<sup>1</sup>

Mearsheimer and Walt provide neither a defense of their approach nor a clear assessment of alternative domestic explanations for policy outcomes. The transitional section between the “international” and “domestic” sections of their book moves quite abruptly from the conclusion that “the strategic and moral case is increasingly weak” (110) to a discussion of interest groups and their influence on policymaking, without a theoretically grounded defense of the exclusive attention to interests as against other factors. They do briefly discuss (and dismiss) public opinion (108–110) and, as they point out, return to public opinion two or three other times in the book, but this is not the same thing as testing rival hypotheses side by side to challenge one and advance the other. Nor do they offer anywhere a guide to how they will assess the lobby explanation against others. What rival theories and hypotheses might account for the outcomes in which they are interested? How does their selection of cases allow them to make inferences about policymaking processes? How do they canvass evidence that allows them to adjudicate among competing explanations? They suggest that they address these issues in the book, but the passage to which they refer in support of this assertion (14–18) is merely an introductory précis of the book’s remaining chapters that seems to function more as a preview of coming attractions than as a detailed description of research method and inferential logic.

Second, Mearsheimer and Walt also describe and defend their process-tracing method. As I indicated, I have no quarrel with process-tracing as a methodological tool to show causality especially in cases where outcomes result from complex chains of events and where narrative methods can fruitfully expose those causal processes. In particular, process-tracing is especially useful as a way of identifying the causal mechanisms underlying a political process and of testing hypotheses about those mechanisms. In order for process-tracing to be useful as a method

for making causal inferences, however, it should be built on a clear theoretical foundation and must be deployed to test hypotheses about precisely specified causal mechanisms. As Alexander George and Andrew Bennett, perhaps the most important elucidators of process-tracing as a method, write, “theories or models of causal mechanisms must undergird each step of a hypothesized causal process for that process to constitute a historical explanation of that case.”<sup>2</sup> Moreover, they write, “process-tracing provides a strong basis for causal inference only if it can establish an uninterrupted causal path linking the putative causes to the observed effects, at the appropriate level(s) of analysis as specified by the theory being tested.”<sup>3</sup> A convincing causal argument based on process-tracing will connect cause and effect in an unbroken chain of intervening micro-level causal links. Finally, process-tracing, like methods of analysis based on covariation, should investigate alternative causal hypotheses alongside the hypothesis of particular interest. George and Bennett again: “There may be more than one hypothesized causal mechanism consistent with any given set of process-tracing evidence.”<sup>4</sup> The use of process-tracing, as I wrote in my original critique, does not absolve analysts of the need to state and test theoretically-grounded hypotheses about the specific causal mechanisms that produce the effect. Mearsheimer and Walt mistakenly suggest that I all but concede their argument when I acknowledge that the policy outcomes in the cases they examine are consistently pro-Israel. But the burden of a process-tracing argument, which they themselves have taken on, is not simply to show that some presumed cause is associated with the expected effect but that the hypothesized causal mechanisms are operating, and on this point I remain unconvinced.

As I elaborate in my critique, Mearsheimer and Walt invoke a great many such causal hypotheses in their account that seek to connect the activities of the lobby to policy outcomes through a set of intervening policymaking mechanisms involving many aspects of the American policymaking process, from elections and public opinion to Congress and the executive branch. Confirming these hypotheses would seem to require an empirical account not just of the lobby’s activities but of the workings of the specific policymaking processes that they suspect are at work in any given episode. But the case studies that form the core of their empirical argument do not provide much evidence about processes that bear on these hypotheses. The case chapters focus, rather, on the activities of people and groups associated more or less with the lobby, on the one hand, and policy outcomes on the other, without clearly discernible statements about the intervening processes that connect the former causally to the latter. Take, for example, their account of the “lobby’s” role in the decision to invade Iraq in 2003 (ch. 8). The evidence in this account catalogues a great deal of

activity by Israeli government officials (233–38), neoconservative American government officials and journalists (238–40), and AIPAC and other organizations (241–43). These activities amounted, they suggest, to a sustained public relations campaign in favor of war, beginning even before Bush took office, that involved not only garden-variety punditry (243–50) but also manipulation of intelligence, which they also attribute largely to the lobby's influence (250–53).

There is, of course, no doubt that these people and organizations played a role in the drumbeat for war after September 11, 2001. But Mearsheimer and Walt's account does not focus sufficiently on the processes of policymaking that connect these activities to the policy outcome at issue. How, exactly, do they conceptualize the causal processes by which the lobby's activities influenced the presidential decision to go to war, which was taken with the explicit approbation of Congress (and which is, analytically speaking, probably overdetermined even apart from the lobby's putative influence)?<sup>5</sup> Beyond the occupancy of influential executive-branch positions by pro-Israel neoconservatives such as Paul Wolfowitz and Douglas Feith, they give little indication. Nor, indeed, do they provide any direct evidence about presidential (or congressional) decision-making, which would seem to be useful, if not essential, in establishing a continuous chain linking cause and effect. What role did the other causal mechanisms they invoke—involving electoral considerations, campaign financing, the composition of Congress, and the like—play in the chain of events that led to the decision? It is not clear that Mearsheimer and Walt have met the explanatory standard of process-tracing because it too often remains unclear exactly what processes they are tracing.

## Evidence and Inference

Which brings me to the second major part of their response, their reply to my critique of their specific arguments about the lobby and its role in American politics and policymaking—specifically regarding Congress, campaign finance, electoral behavior, and public discourse. In each case, I argued, Mearsheimer and Walt fail in their book to specify sufficiently clear causal mechanisms and hypotheses about the causal processes that connect the Israel lobby's activities with pro-Israel policy outcomes. Consequently, I suggested, their evidence does not support their contention that the lobby's power is the principal cause of American foreign policy toward Israel. In their response, they still do not explain the causal mechanisms behind their argument. Along the way they misstate several of my claims.

They also suggest that I mistakenly ignore the literature on interest groups in American politics and that my focus on these arenas of politics and policymaking—Congress,

campaign finance, and elections—is misplaced. They defend their argument as being “consistent with the extensive literature on interest groups.” If by this they mean their description of what individuals and organizations with pro-Israel policy preferences *do*, they are correct; much of the literature on American interest groups over the last forty years or so (since Mancur Olson's withering deconstruction of pluralism) has focused on explaining the existence, proliferation, and activities of interest groups, and the activities of AIPAC and other pro-Israel actors are consistent with the cumulative picture that this literature has drawn.<sup>6</sup> No one disputes this. But if they mean that their *causal* argument is consistent with our developing understanding of how and under what conditions interest groups exert influence over policy, they are on shakier ground. First, making this kind of argument immediately and necessarily involves precisely the policymaking institutions and political processes that are at issue here—again, Congress, the presidency and the executive branch, and the electoral forces that shape the behavior of actors in those settings—and should be built on clear foundations of theory about those institutions and processes. And second, the literature on the role of interest groups in policymaking in those settings, some of which they cite, is less than conclusive about the mechanisms by which groups can influence policy outcomes.

The uncertainty of the causal mechanisms that underlie Mearsheimer and Walt's argument is, perhaps, clearest in their discussion of Congress, which contains a number of puzzling statements. I offer several possible causal mechanisms, derived from a variety of theoretical perspectives on congressional policymaking, that might explain policy outcomes toward Israel. Naturally they seize on one—the distributive approach to committee power—that might form the basis for a sound causal explanation of policy outcomes that deviate from the median preferences of Congress as a whole, a mechanism plausibly consistent with part of their argument about the lobby. Several points are worth noting here. First, they do not dispute my rejection of (or at least skepticism about) the other mechanisms that might account for the disproportionate policymaking power of a small group of members of Congress—pivotal politics, conditional party government, or the informational perspective on committees. Second, it is not clear that policy outcomes regarding Israel *do* deviate from the median preferences of Congress as a whole; establishing through process-tracing that this causal mechanism is indeed operating would seem to require demonstrating this. Third, as I point out in my critique, they do not establish that the relevant committees are, as they put it, sufficiently “stocked” with members whose pro-Israel preferences are deviant in this way to make a substantive difference; this is, in any event, a dubious proposition, as I point out, even for the House Committee on Foreign Affairs.

Moreover, their characterization of members of Congress as “parts” of the Israel lobby proves to be something of a moving target.<sup>7</sup> Early on in their response, they state that they “judged officeholders to be parts of the lobby if their attachment to Israel preceded their entry into public service or if they devoted a substantial portion of their personal or professional lives both in-and-out of office to influencing U.S. Middle East policy in ways intended to benefit Israel” (260). (As a guide to empirical inquiry this seems like a reasonably tractable definition, but as a measurement issue it implies the need for fairly extensive biographical research on members of Congress and other officeholders to ascertain their level of personal and professional commitment to pro-Israel policy before their careers in public service, which as far as I can tell they did not conduct.) But in their discussion of congressional committees in their response, they refer not to this fairly exacting empirical definition but to committees that are “stocked” with “pro-Israel” members more simply, presumably a broader category. In their book, as I point out, they suggest that it is Jewish (and Christian Zionist) members who are the critical actors, substituting religious identity for policy preferences as an indicator. These three definitions certainly overlap, but they are not interchangeable. More important, they further obscure the critical question of causal mechanisms. Are they talking about “members” of the lobby who get themselves elected to Congress? Members of Congress who are not “part” of the lobby but who share pro-Israel policy preferences? Members of Congress who are susceptible to the lobby’s influence and thus vote against their preferences? It is far from clear where the lobby’s influence lies in this scenario or what causal mechanism they are invoking.

We also differ on the question of whether they can document that there is a pro-Israel litmus test for occupying relevant committee chairs in Congress. On this point they repeat from their book a quotation from Representative Henry Waxman asserting that members who do not share his views on Israel “will not be chairing committees dealing with Israel and the Middle East,” which they punctuate with the tag line, “He was telling it like it is.” They seem to interpret this statement as a threat; it seems at least as likely that it was a simple statement of fact. In any event, the accession of the relevant committee and subcommittee chairs between the 109th and 110th Congresses followed straightforward seniority norms, without Waxman’s (or anyone else’s) intervention. If either the House or Senate Democrats had violated seniority and leapfrogged a pro-Israel member ahead of a more senior member with different views on policy toward Israel to assume a chair, this might be evidence for Mearsheimer and Walt’s interpretation. But it did not happen, at least not in 2006.

Next, they claim that I ignore their discussion of the role of interest groups such as AIPAC in providing infor-

mation and expertise to members of Congress and their staffs, and particularly their role in providing a “legislative subsidy,” thereby lowering the cost of policymaking for legislators.<sup>8</sup> This is not, strictly speaking, true, although admittedly I do not use the phrase “legislative subsidy.” In a paragraph on the subject I both suggest that this is not exceptional behavior and question its causal importance. I add here only that the “legislative subsidy” theory of lobbying assumes shared preferences between lobbyist and legislator; it is not a model in which lobbying changes the direction in which policy will go. “The proximate political objective of this strategy,” write Richard Hall and Alan Deardorff, “is not to change legislators’ minds but to assist natural allies in achieving their own, coincident objectives.”<sup>9</sup>

Finally, they repeat from the book a quotation from former Secretary of State George Shultz about the Reagan administration’s failure to dissuade Congress from appropriating additional military assistance to Israel in the wake of the invasion of Lebanon in 1982. Shultz expresses his frustration at not being able to control Congress’s actions (a frustration common among executive-branch officials) and notes “Israel’s leverage in our Congress” (quoted on 46). In their response, they suggest that this quotation is evidence of an instance “where individuals or groups in the lobby intervened on Capitol Hill to shape policy outcomes.” But in this passage Shultz says nothing about AIPAC, or lobbyists, or committees, or anything else that might shed light on the causal mechanisms by which he supposes that the lobby may have exerted its influence over Congress’s deliberation and decision-making in this case.

On the question of campaign finance, Mearsheimer and Walt make several equally puzzling statements. First, they misinterpret my remark that campaign contributions attributable to pro-Israel donors constitute “a lot of money.” In absolute terms, \$7.3 million—the average amount of pro-Israel campaign contributions to federal candidates in each election cycle between 1990 and 2006—is a lot of money. But it is not “reversing course” to say that in relative terms even this amount of money is a small drop in a very large bucket. To update the data, pro-Israel contributions to candidates for Congress and president in 2008 totaled \$11.5 million (bringing the average up to \$7.7 million per cycle since 1990). This impressive sum amounted to a shade more than one-third of one percent of the \$3.2 billion that these candidates raised during that election cycle.<sup>10</sup> Pro-Israel contributions ranked forty-second among “industry” groups in total donations in 2008. On the basis of these data, it is hard to conclude that pro-Israel donors are responsible for a large share of campaign financing.

Mearsheimer and Walt, however, insist that these data—which come from the Center for Responsive Politics (CRP), generally acknowledged to be the most reliable and unbiased source of campaign finance data—understate the real

amount of pro-Israel money in American politics by several orders of magnitude. They offer several reasons for this claim. First, they resort again to the rhetorical strategy of asserting that what they say is something that everybody knows, implying that any skepticism of this conventional wisdom is somehow suspect; “almost everyone agrees,” they write, that American Jews are substantial funders of campaigns. Second, they repeat their estimate that Jewish donors are responsible for anywhere between 20 and 60 percent of funding for Democratic presidential candidates, which seems to be based on several (vaguely sourced) newspaper articles and a thirty-year-old memorandum from White House chief of staff Hamilton Jordan to President Jimmy Carter. I acknowledge that the CRP’s data probably understate somewhat the amount of pro-Israel money because of the difficulty of assigning a substantive motive to many individual contributors, and I say so in my critique. (The CRP, which is admirably transparent about its sources and methods, acknowledges this also; the same presumably holds true for any of its sector and industry designations.) But it also seems imprudent to attribute sources and motives to individual donors that we cannot identify and use that speculative attribution as the basis for a causal inference. I preferred in my account to stick to documentable facts, not about contributions from Jewish donors, which might have any number of motivations, but about money that could be definitively linked to pro-Israel policy preferences.

Finally, Mearsheimer and Walt make an important mistake when they say that the CRP database “reports PAC money given to political campaigns but not individual contributions.” This is simply and demonstrably false; they report both, and in fact they are able to attribute millions of dollars in individual contributions to specific interests. The CRP reports, for example, that of the \$11.5 million in verifiably pro-Israel contributions made in the 2008 election cycle, \$2.9 million came from PACs and \$8.6 million came from individuals.<sup>11</sup>

When they turn to the question of the position of Jews as potentially pivotal voters in presidential elections, they again misread what I wrote. I do not “end up agreeing with” their suggestion that Jewish voters are commonly decisive voters in national elections. It is true, as they point out, that I noted the *arithmetical* possibility that Jewish voters—or, indeed, any bloc of like-minded voters—might be pivotal *under the right circumstances*. But the right circumstances, as the rest of the paragraph in which that statement appears makes clear, are exceedingly rare. Either one would need a freakishly close election such as 2000—the closest national election in more than a century—or one would have to suppose that Jewish voters would start voting Republican in substantial numbers. The 2000 election was an extraordinarily unusual event, in which political happenstance put heavily Jewish South Florida at the center of a bizarre electoral foo-

faraw, and hardly seems a solid basis for sound inference (on the “good-cases-make-bad-law” principle). And the Democratic share of the Jewish vote has not, as Mearsheimer and Walt state, “varied significantly” in the last several decades. The estimated Democratic share of the Jewish vote in the last five presidential elections (stretching back to 1992) is 80 percent, 78 percent, 79 percent, 75 percent, and 78 percent, respectively, hardly a picture of dramatic fluctuation.<sup>12</sup> (Moreover, if, as Mearsheimer and Walt imply, Jewish votes reward hawkishly pro-Israel policy, one might have expected George W. Bush to do considerably better among Jewish voters, particularly in his 2004 reelection bid; but evidently Jewish voters do not uniformly choose candidates that way.)

Thus “arithmetically possible” does not mean “politically realistic.” In fact, the main conclusion to be drawn from my 2004 simulation is that, as I wrote, “it is simply mathematically impossible for Jewish voters to have been decisive in the 2004 presidential election.” A repeat of the simulation for the 2008 presidential election produces the same result; if every Jewish voter in the country had voted for John McCain, Barack Obama would still have won the election, and quite comfortably.<sup>13</sup>

Mearsheimer and Walt also mention the nomination process as a potential pathway by which Jewish voters might exercise a pivotal influence on presidential selection. In a party’s nomination contest, they correctly point out, there might be closely fought primary or caucus contests in states that are otherwise typically one-sided in general elections and where Jewish voters might play a decisive role. This is certainly a possibility worth serious systematic empirical investigation (beyond the two paragraphs on the fate of Howard Dean in 2004 that they offer in their book) (164). Here I point out only that Hillary Clinton won large majorities (between 58 percent and 67 percent) of the Jewish vote in the primaries or caucuses of six of the nine states with the largest Jewish population percentage in 2008.<sup>14</sup> Thus it is not clear that courting and winning Jewish votes in Democratic primaries is either necessary or sufficient to win the party’s presidential nomination.

On the question of the Israel lobby’s role in shaping public discourse, Mearsheimer and Walt once again fail to confront the problematic question of causal mechanisms and, consequently, misunderstand my point. In the case both of newspapers and magazines and think tanks, they simply presume a causal relationship between what appears in the press or in think-tank output and public opinion (and, presumably as a consequence, policy). They focus attention on the country’s major newspapers, they say, “because they exert greater influence on public attitudes.” It is, as I point out in my critique, a contestable proposition whether the content of the media’s reporting and analysis has a significant impact on public opinion. Nevertheless, they seem to take this relationship for granted

and treat the media's impact as a settled question. Accordingly, when they find evidence of pro-Israel bias in publications or policy research, they conclude that it must, therefore, be influencing public opinion or policy attitudes in a pro-Israel direction—but they do not demonstrate empirically that this relationship holds. They do not present their evidence in a way that constitutes a test of the underlying causal proposition that pro-Israel bias in newspapers and magazines actually affect public attitudes or policy outcomes. Thus when they suggest that their conclusions about the lobby's effects on the media and public discourse stand because I do not challenge any of the specific facts in their book or offer counterexamples, they miss the point. The issue is not whether there are media outlets or think tanks that are less pro-Israel than the ones they cite; it is what the precise impact of the pro-Israel voices they chronicle are on attitudes and policy and, again, by what causal mechanisms this influence occurs. The lobby's impact on public discourse is a hypothesis that deserves investigation—one of the more plausible ones that they offer, in fact—but one on which their data shed little light.

### Alternatives

In the final section of their response, Mearsheimer and Walt commit a final, and quite revealing, misinterpretation of my critique. They suggest that I offer several alternative explanations “that might account for the lobby's influence.” This is not what I do. What I, in fact, do at the end of my commentary is to sketch a set of plausible alternative explanations for the policy outcomes in which they are interested—pro-Israel American foreign policy—that rely on causal mechanisms other than the supposed power of the lobby. As I suggest above, the power of organized interests is only one of several approaches to understanding American public policy outcomes, but it seems that it is the only one Mearsheimer and Walt are interested in entertaining. When commenting on these alternative hypotheses, in fact, they insist on interpreting them not as potentially independent accounts of American foreign policymaking but as restatements of the lobby hypothesis. As I said at the outset of my critique, my purpose was to assess their causal argument—their research strategy, the hypotheses they offer, and the evidence they deploy to test those hypotheses. Part of that assessment involved suggesting parallel directions their inquiry might have taken in order to weigh the lobby explanation against others as a step toward both showing some of their argument's limitations and suggesting directions for further research that might, as they put it, “identify the real driving forces behind the special relationship, and U.S. Middle East policy more generally.” I agree that this should be our goal, and I look forward with anticipation to the research that will realize it.

### Notes

- 1 Steinmo and Watts 1995; Hacker 2002
- 2 George and Bennett 2005, 147.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 222.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 222.
- 5 Jervis 2008–9, 658–59.
- 6 Olson 1965. For prominent and illustrative examples, see Schlozman and Tierney 1986; Walker 1991.
- 7 This formulation, of course, presumes that the “lobby” is an entity that can be said to have “parts” — or “members,” as they occasionally suggest. Mearsheimer and Walt say they use it as “shorthand,” even as they concede that it is “somewhat misleading.” Nevertheless, the ontology of the “lobby” that this repeated usage denotes is rather dubious. It is worth recalling that the “lobby,” to paraphrase Kenneth Shepsle's (1992) aphorism about Congress, is a “they” and not an “it.”
- 8 Hall and Deardorff 2006.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 69.
- 10 The data again come from the Center for Responsive Politics, <http://opensecrets.org>, as of February 10, 2009.
- 11 <http://www.opensecrets.org/industries/indus.php?ind=Q05>
- 12 Forman 2001, 152. Estimates for 2004 and 2008 are from election-night exit polls.
- 13 Results of the 2008 simulation are available from the author.
- 14 Data are from exit (or, in the case of the Nevada caucuses, entrance) polls. The states referred to here are those listed in note 37 of my critique except for the District of Columbia, where no exit polls were conducted during the 2008 primary. Obama won pluralities among Jewish primary voters in California, Connecticut, and Massachusetts (two of which Clinton won).

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