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Israeli flag attack ad prompts antisemitism charge in PA state race — yet boosts the Jewish candidate

Mailers to voters from a cryptic PAC endorse a progressive in Tuesday’s primary who says Israel committed genocide

By [Hannah Feuer](#) May 18, 2026



The Pennsylvania State Capitol in downtown Harrisburg. Photo by Photo by Daniel SLIM / AFP via Getty Images

Bradley Merkl-Gump, a former middle school social studies teacher and school board member running for Pennsylvania state senate in Tuesday’s primary, is seeking a state job that has little to do with global politics.

Yet voters received campaign mail plastered with an Israeli flag, portraying him as the candidate of an “Israel first” political machine.

The mail, paid for by the Protecting Our Democracy PAC, casts Merkl-Gump as the “hand-picked candidate of the corporate, Israel-first Democratic party boss and insiders” and a “party boss and special interest puppet.” It pictures him in the company of Pennsylvania Sen. John Fetterman, who is a stalwart Israel ally, and — embellished with the Israeli flag —

Steve Santarsiero, a Jewish Democratic state senator from a neighboring district who endorsed Merkl-Gump.



The campaign mail sent to voters. Screenshot of [Bucks County Democratic Committee](#)

Santarsiero, who converted and has a Jewish family, has twice introduced legislation to withhold funding from any Pennsylvania colleges that divest from Israel, but he is a relative moderate on Israel: He has also said he does “not support either Benjamin Netanyahu or his right-wing government,” and does “support the creation of a Palestinian state.”

Merkl-Gump took to [Instagram](#) earlier this month to condemn the flyers, accusing the PAC of “targeting his Jewish faith” and declaring “This has gone too far.” He has also has hinted at concerns about the anti-divestment resolution, saying in a recent [debate](#): “We should never be preventing any institution in this state from using its free speech.”

He did not respond to the *Forward*’s request for comment.

Complicating the picture: the candidate Protecting Our Democracy PAC is promoting in the mailer, Lehigh County Controller Mark Pinsley, is Jewish.

He is also a vocal voice criticizing Israel. The flyer notes that Pinsley “spoke out against Netanyahu’s war crimes.” Like many in his Democratic Party, Pinsley has called Israel’s military campaign in Gaza [a genocide](#).

Pinsley says he sees the mail as pushback on Israel-related policy rather than animus toward Jews.

“To me, it looks like a sharp criticism of a specific vote on a specific bill,” Pinsley said in an interview with the *Forward*, referring to Santarsiero’s anti-BDS legislation.

Pinsley noted that Pennsylvania Sen. John Fetterman, who is not Jewish but is one of the most outspoken Democrats in support of Israel, also appears in the flyer.

Still, Pinsley conceded that it was disingenuous to tie Fetterman, Merkl-Gump and Santarsiero together through Israel-related framing.

He also condemned the mail as an example of “dark money and outside groups poisoning our politics.”

But other Jews in the district expressed alarm.

Rabbi Moshe Re’em of Temple Beth El in Allentown, which has many congregants located in the district, said the PAC’s focus on Israel seemed intended to “demonize” and “create a kind of a panic.”

“The country that receives the second largest sum of foreign aid in terms of the military is Egypt, and one can have dual citizenship also with Egypt, but you don’t see anyone targeting Egyptian Americans as prioritizing funds for Egypt over local funding,” Re’Em told the *Forward*. “You have to really question and wonder if something’s being singled out, the extent to which it’s problematic.”

Stealth game?

Accusations that political candidates are “Israel first” have mushroomed with U.S. involvement in the Iran war and funding for Israel’s defense, invoking claims that Jews and their allies have un-American, pro-Israel dual loyalties. Those charges typically revolve around funding AIPAC, the mega pro-Israel campaign group, and the candidates who have received its support.

But state candidates don’t receive money from AIPAC and have no power over foreign policy. Candidates in the Pennsylvania race have largely focused on local issues like bringing down the cost of housing.

The winner of Tuesday’s primary will face off against Republican state Sen. Jarrett Coleman, who assumed office in 2023, and some in the district suspect that the mailer boosting Pinsley is intended to help Coleman get re-elected by prompting Democrats to elect someone too far to the left to win the general election.

The “Israel first” line of attack against Merkl-Gump may also serve an entirely unrelated interest.

The Protecting Our Democracy PAC has links to the “skill game” industry — games that are similar to slot machines but involve a higher level of player input, [avoiding gambling regulation and taxes](#).

Public records list Joseph Calla, the owner of game supplier Capital Vending in Mechanicsburg, Pa., who wrote [an op-ed](#) in January against a proposed tax on the skill games industry, as the chairperson of the Protecting Our Democracy PAC. Calla declined to comment to the *Forward*.

Coleman’s campaign has [received nearly \\$400,000](#) from skill-game executives and has argued that taxing the industry would [hurt organizations](#) that rely on revenue from skill games, such as fraternal clubs that serve veterans. Coleman did not respond to the *Forward*’s request for comment.

“These guys are just trying to create chaos,” Pinsley said. “It’s unfortunate that politics has turned into such a nasty game.”