

Social Penalties For Participating In Jewish Life

Given that about two-thirds of Jewish students do not regularly attend Jewish activities on campus (and close to half seldom or never attend), I next explore the question of whether the politics on campus affects the students' willingness to participate in Jewish life. Are campus political climates (particularly as they relate to the Israel-Palestine conflict) so toxic that students feel they pay a social cost for participating in Jewish life?

“Sometimes it does get overwhelming, because Israel is so attached to Judaism and the religion itself that when there’s a bunch of people protesting on the main street of your school, it does feel like it’s attacking a part of yourself if you connect to Israel, like I do.”

OHIO STATE
MALE

Consider the following questions on the survey. Students were asked if they agree with this statement: **I worry that people make unfair judgements about me because I’m Jewish.** Fifteen percent said they didn’t know. Of those who agreed or disagreed, half (49%) of students agreed to this statement, with higher agreement among those who attend Jewish programs at least monthly (56% agree) than those who attend programs less frequently than monthly or never (46% agree).

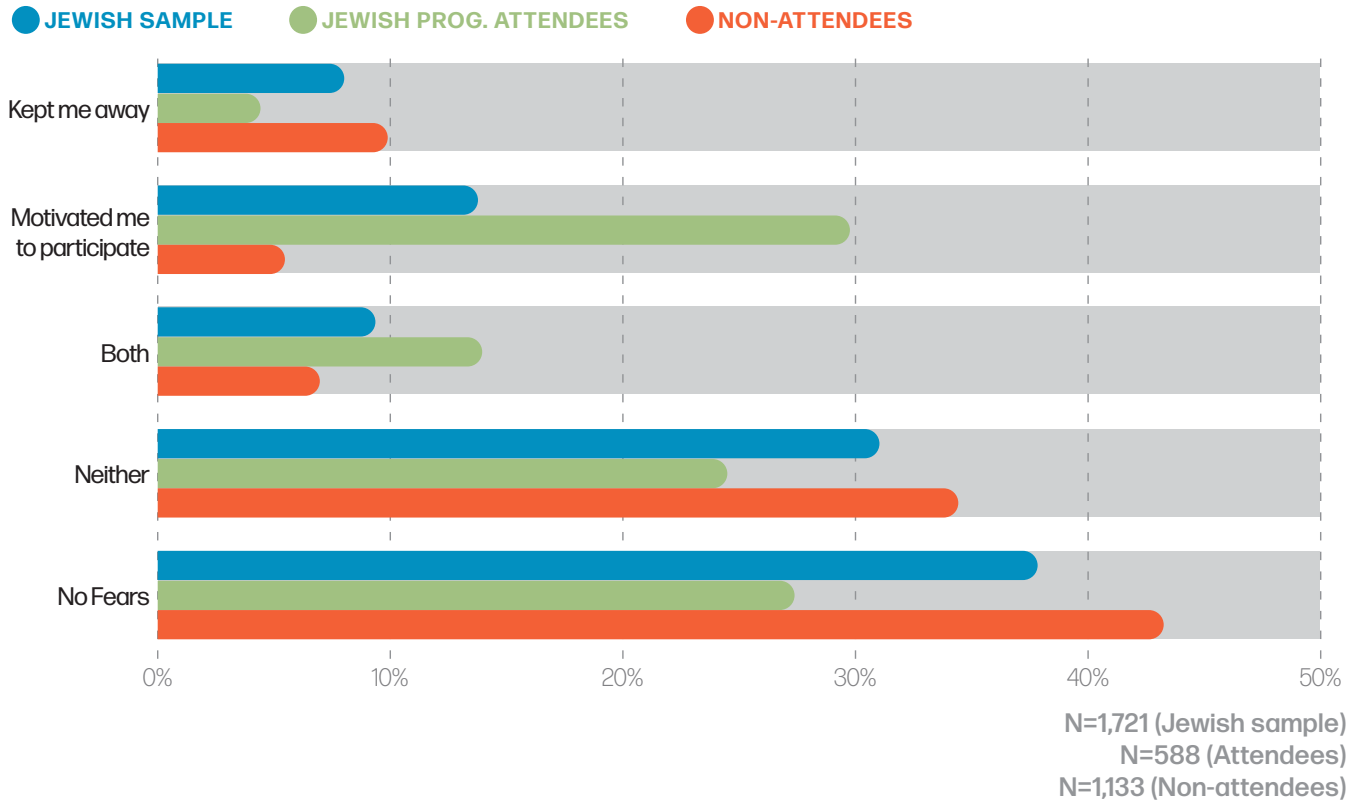
Next agree/disagree question: **People will judge me negatively if I participate in Jewish activities on campus.** Seventeen percent said they didn’t know. Of those who agreed or disagreed, just under a quarter (23%) of Jewish students agreed to this statement. Agreement is slightly higher among those who attend Jewish programs regularly (26%) versus those who do not (22%).

Another agree/disagree question: **In order to fit in on my campus, I feel the need to hide that I am Jewish.** Fifteen percent said they didn’t know. Of those that agreed or disagreed, 17% of students agree, and again, agreement is slightly higher among those who regularly attend programs (21%) as those who do not (15%).

Agreement with all three of the above questions is higher on public school campuses than in private schools. For example, 13% of students at private colleges or universities feel like they need to hide that they are Jewish to fit in, compared to 21% of Jewish students at public schools.

I asked if fear of antisemitism has kept the students away from Jewish activities, motivated them to participate in Jewish activities, both, neither, or if they have no fears of antisemitism on campus. About 2 in 5 students (38%) said they have no fears, and a third (31%) said that antisemitism did not affect their participation either way. The students were split between saying antisemitism motivated them (14%), kept them away (8%) and both (9%). Compared to students who attend Jewish programming regularly, the students who do not participate regularly were both more likely to say they

Fear of antisemitism on my campus has...



don't fear antisemitism and to say that antisemitism kept them away. Indeed, 10% said it kept them away, which is twice the rate of students who attend regularly.

Students with low scores on the *Background* and *Affect* scales are substantially more likely to report they have no fears of antisemitism, and that antisemitism does not affect their behavior. About 80% of those with low *Background* or *Affect* scores fall into these categories, versus about 65% of those with high *Background* or *Affect* scores.

None of the above questions mentioned politics or Israel. Rather they asked in general about campus climate. I also asked several questions about Israel. I asked the students if they agreed with this statement: **“On my campus, Jewish students pay a social penalty for supporting the existence of Israel as a Jewish state.”** Note that this question-wording is not asking about student support for any political party or policy position within Israeli politics. It merely asks if the students pay a penalty for supporting the existence of the Jewish state.

“Issues on my campus and other campuses have made me hesitant to participate in explicitly Jewish spaces, as opposed to just spending time with my Jewish friends and doing something together.”

UC SANTA CRUZ
FEMALE

“I think a lot of people look at the situation and think, ‘Oh, you’re Jewish. So you’re Israeli, so you believe in what they’re doing.’ Whenever someone says that to me, I usually kick back at them. And I’m like, ‘Look at American politics. Do you agree with everything that our president is doing? Or the previous president did? Because we’ve had very polar politics here in the last year.’ A lot of people don’t agree on anything.”

OHIO STATE
MALE

“One of the things that I also experienced a lot is everybody expects you as a Jew to have an opinion, and people that I’m not very close to will come up to me and ask, ‘So what are your thoughts? Can you explain it to me?’”

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
FEMALE

“I’m often expected to have an opinion on [Israel] and readily share that opinion. And people think I do because I am Jewish, even though I personally have pretty much no connection to Israel.”

UC SANTA CRUZ
FEMALE

“I don’t feel any need to conceal my identity where I study, and I don’t feel like there’s a suppression of any kind of opinion on either side.”

TULANE UNIVERSITY
MALE

“I tend to not project my Judaism. Obviously, if someone asked me what my religion is, then I answer honestly, but I find that people tend to then assume things about my experiences, my background, my political beliefs, which is just a little off-putting. I like to be able to craft my own identity and not have it tied to something that I can’t control... I’ve struggled in the past with feeling like I can’t escape my Jewish identity in times that I might want to, just because I don’t feel like I fit in so well.”

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
FEMALE

Thirty-nine percent of Jewish students said they didn’t know. Of those who agreed or disagreed, the majority of Jewish students agreed with this statement (54%), with higher agreement among those who regularly attend Jewish programs (59%). Unlike the question about hiding one’s Judaism, where agreement was higher on public campuses, the social penalty for supporting the existence of Israel is similar on private campuses (55%) and public campuses (53%). However, the rate of agreement varies dramatically by campus. For instance, among the 22 students at Tulane who answered this question, only 5% agreed. But among the 24 students at Tufts who answered the question, 79% agreed. Other schools with large Jewish populations were in the middle (e.g., 38% at Ithaca College (N=32), 57% at Ohio State (N=46), 62% at University of Chicago (N=21) and 64% at University of Vermont (N=64)).

The non-Jewish students corroborated what the majority of Jewish students reported. I asked the non-Jewish students if they agreed with this statement: **I wouldn’t want to be friends with someone who supports the existence of Israel as a Jewish state.** Most of the non-Jewish students said they didn’t know (56%). Of those who shared an opinion, 13% said yes. This number was higher (18%) among non-Jewish students who study at the ten college campuses that had the most Jewish respondents.

“I think my political ideology is a little too far left for a lot of Jewish organizations”

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
FEMALE

A more strongly worded agree/disagree question asked the non-Jewish students: **“I avoid socializing with Jewish students because of their views about Israel.”** To this question, 34% reported they didn’t know. Of those who said they did know, only 2% said yes. So, while almost one in five non-Jewish students (at campuses with large numbers of Jews) say they wouldn’t want to be friends with someone who supports the Jewish state, many fewer say that they avoid socializing with Jews. At the same time, the high rate of “I don’t know” responses on these simple questions suggests that the rate of agreement might be higher than the survey takers are letting on.

I asked the students, Jewish as well as non-Jewish, about their basic view on Israel. Agree or disagree: **Personally, I don’t think there should continue to be a Jewish state in Israel/Palestine.** Most of the Jewish students have an opinion about this; 36% said they didn’t know.

Among the Jewish students who have an opinion, 26% answer that Israel should not continue to be a Jewish state and 74% said Israel should continue to be a Jewish state. These percentages are the same on the campuses with the most Jewish students as on campuses with few students in the sample.

Responses vary dramatically by *Background* and *Affect*. Among those with low *Affect* scores, 41% do not think that there should continue to be a Jewish state in Israel/Palestine (including 18% who strongly hold this position). Among those with high scores on *Affect*, 16% do not think there should continue to be a Jewish state in Israel/Palestine (including 8% who strongly hold this position). Among those who say their Jewish identity is very important to them, 21% agree that there shouldn’t continue to be a Jewish state. Among those who say their Jewish identity is not at all important to them, 57% of agree that there should not continue to be a Jewish state.

Of the students who think Israel should continue to exist as a Jewish country, 60% agree with the statement that students on campus pay a social penalty for

supporting the existence of a Jewish state. Interestingly, almost half (46%) of the Jewish students who do not support the continuing existence of a Jewish state also agree that students pay a social penalty for supporting Israel. The social penalty is not something that is just in the heads of Jewish students who support the existence of Israel.

The non-Jewish students were asked the question of whether Israel should exist as a Jewish country. In the non-Jewish sample, 68% said they didn’t know. Of those who did have an opinion, more of them (31%) – but not many more – agreed with the position that is opposed to the existence of a Jewish state compared to the Jewish students.

After asking the students about their position on the existence of a Jewish state, I asked whether their friend group has similar views. Specifically, I asked them whether they agreed/disagreed with this statement: **My views about Israel are generally in line with the views of most of my college friends.**

“I like to know that there are two sides to the issue and I personally don’t mind when somebody says that they have a different political opinion to like me. I just really wish that the same courtesy could be extended to me.”

UC SANTA CRUZ
MALE

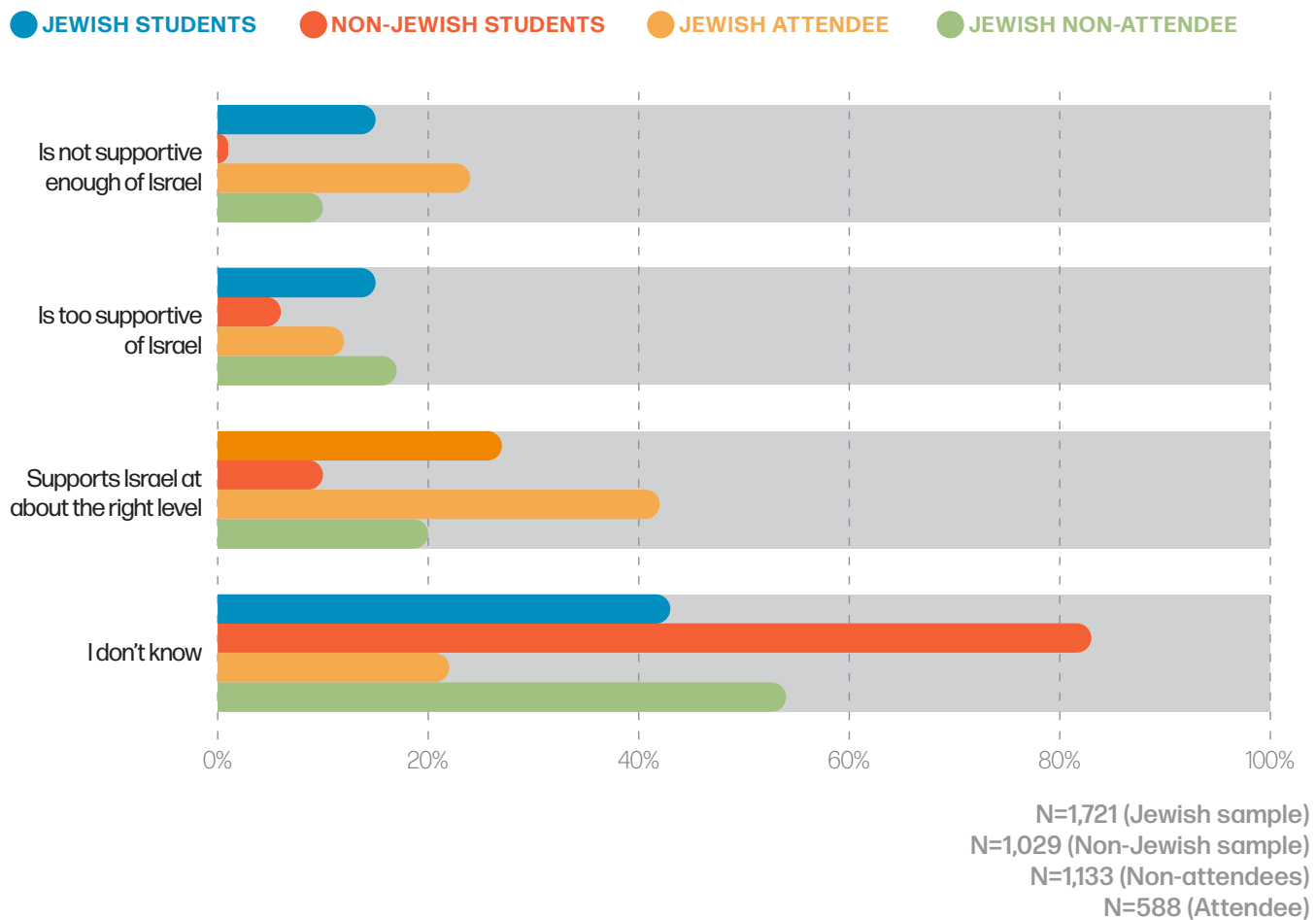
The results suggest that the students opposed to the existence of Israel as a Jewish state are in more homogenous social bubbles than the students who support the existence of Israel. Of the Jewish students who said they do not support a Jewish state, 80% said their views are in line with their friends. Of the Jewish students who said they support a Jewish state, 58% said their views were in line with their friends. The same pattern is true among the non-Jewish respondents. If they are opposed to a Jewish state in Israel, 86% said their views are aligned with their friends. If they support a Jewish state in Israel, 75% said their views are aligned with their friends.

Finally, I asked the students if the Jewish community on campus was supportive enough of Israel, too supportive, about right, or they didn't know. About

6 in 10 Jewish students had an opinion about this. The plurality thought that the Jewish community on campus was about right on Israel, with numbers evenly split between feeling like the Jewish community was too supportive and not supportive enough. Responses varied by level of engagement: of those who attend Jewish programs at least monthly, 42% think the Jewish community is getting it right, but they are twice as likely (24%) to say the community isn't supportive enough of Israel as they are to say the community is too supportive (12%). The opposite pattern emerges for those who do not attend events, though the majority of these students say they don't know.

The non-Jewish students overwhelmingly do not know the campus Jewish community's relationship to Israel; over 80% couldn't say. However, more of them believe

The Jewish community on campus....



the Jewish community is too supportive of Israel than not supportive enough. On the ten campuses with the most Jewish respondents, 12% of non-Jewish students said the Jewish community is too supportive of Israel, compared to 2% who said it's not supportive enough.

Conclusions

This report showcases that for all the challenges in understanding today's Jewish college students and connecting to them, there are real opportunities. Today's Jewish college students – from many different kinds of backgrounds – are saying that they care about their Jewish identity, they want to explore their Jewish religion and culture while in college, and to the extent that they've been to Jewish programs, they've found joy and comfort there. Community-building is never easy, but despite the challenges, Jewish organizations that are seeking to make an impact on college campuses are pushing at an open door.

Students who encounter Jewish organizational life on campus tend to give it high marks. They go to a Hillel program or other Jewish event, and most of them encounter an atmosphere they find positive and welcoming.

At the same time, the students from more engaged Jewish backgrounds want something *more*, and the students from less engaged Jewish backgrounds want something *different*.

The students who come from engaged backgrounds care a lot about their Jewish identity. They want to explore that identity more in college. They want a range of programs. Many of them who already know a Jewish mentor on campus want an even stronger relationship with a Jewish mentor on campus. The students are happy with Jewish life on campus, *and* they want more.

Many of the students, particularly those with stronger Jewish backgrounds, have free time that they could be dedicating to developing their personal and communal relationship with Judaism. Right now, they are mostly spending their free time informally socializing. For students who are seeking deeper relationships and intellectual growth, there is a vacuum to be filled. Jewish programs and leaders may be able to fill that vacuum.

“I feel like my school overwhelmingly supports Palestine, and so I’m hesitant to say my beliefs. My school has developed a culture and doesn’t like it or take kindly when someone expresses an opinion that is not part of the norm. It’s not a symptom of anything uniquely Jewish, it’s just that my school has a culture and likes it when people stay in line, and it just so happens that the school culture supports Palestine.”

UC SANTA CRUZ
MALE