

Focus Groups

Between April 3 and April 5, 2024, we conducted twelve hour-long focus group sessions via Zoom. Each session had four to five students currently enrolled at a four-year college or university. All focus groups were facilitated by College Pulse's consultant, Dr. Deborah Mashek, a social psychologist who is an expert in qualitative research. The focus group scripts and formats were designed collaboratively by us, Dr. Mashek, College Pulse, and the Jim Joseph Foundation.

A. FOCUS GROUP METHODOLOGY

Students were recruited with an outreach message that alerted them to the topic of the focus group. The message read:

You participated in a College Pulse survey about Israel and Palestine about a month ago.

Based on your responses, you've been selected to participate in an exclusive focus group with other college students on the same topic. It'll only take about 60 minutes, and you get \$100 for your time.

Ready to join the discussion? Just click the link below to pick a time that works for you:

In the focus groups, the students were informed of the basic guidelines. They would not be identified by name or by school, although they could choose to identify the school they attend if they wished. They could end participation at any time. Dr. Mashek also stayed on the Zoom session afterwards in case a student had a follow-up question or concern. Upon completion of the focus groups, she also sent students links to further mental health resources in case the conversation brought up difficult emotions.

Six of the twelve focus groups exclusively assessed views of Jewish students. Two of these groups drew students from highly selective schools, two groups drew students from moderately selective schools, and two drew students from less selective schools.

For each of these tiers of selectivity, we had one focus group that recruited Jewish students who had said on the fall 2023 survey that they attended Jewish events on campus weekly or

more. The other focus group was for students who attended Jewish events less frequently. In this latter group, about 40% said they had seldom or never attended Jewish events, 30% said they attended a few times a year, and the remaining 30% said they attended once or twice a month.

Three focus groups exclusively assessed views of non-Jewish students. These students were also grouped by school selectivity: high, medium, and low. The three remaining focus groups consisted of both Jewish and non-Jewish students together. These, too, were grouped by selectivity.

The rationale for these divisions is straightforward. We sought a wide range of perspectives from students. Our quantitative research suggested that the Jewish students who are not involved in Jewish activities on campus come from different backgrounds and have different experiences than those who are more involved in Jewish activities. We thought that the students might express themselves more openly if they were in company with students with similar Jewish campus experiences.

Twelve Focus Groups:

Jewish Focus Groups

REGULAR JEWISH PROGRAM ATTENDEES

1. Highly selective school
2. Moderately selective school
3. Less selective school

NOT REGULAR JEWISH PROGRAM ATTENDEES

4. Highly selective school
5. Moderately selective school
6. Less selective school

Non-Jewish Focus Groups

7. Highly selective school
8. Moderately selective school
9. Less selective school

Mix of Jewish and Non-Jewish Student Focus Groups

10. Highly selective school
11. Moderately selective school
12. Less selective school

Likewise, the social environments on elite campuses have been somewhat different than those on less elite campuses, in part because of the public scrutiny and news attention focused on elite campuses, so we separated the student groups by level of school selectively.

We also wanted to learn how Jewish and non-Jewish students might express themselves differently in separated focus groups compared to focus groups in which both groups of students were present, hence the inclusion of three mixed groups.

The focus group setting was on Zoom, but it was intimate. Most students were sitting in dorm rooms. Many were in hoodies, t-shirts, or sweaters. They were surrounded by typical dorm room decorations: photographs taped to walls, hanging tapestries, institutional lighting, Christmas lights. There were stuffed animals and unmade beds.

All the focus groups were asked the same set of questions, except for one additional question that was asked to the students in the six Jewish-only focus groups.

The common questions were as follows:

1. *How do you obtain information about Israel and the conflict in Israel and Gaza? To what extent do you actively seek out information vs. passively receive information? Are there particular sources you turn to? What sources do you find most trustworthy?*
2. *How has the conflict in Israel and Gaza affected your experience on campus, if at all?*
3. *Data from our research suggests that nearly one-third of non-Jewish students say they would not want to be friends with someone who supports the existence of Israel as a Jewish state. Why do you think they might believe this? To what extent do you think the opinion is a function of this specific issue vs. a general challenge with being friends with people who see the world differently?*
4. *How do your views about Israel or the conflict in Israel and Gaza compare to those of your friends? How closely aligned are your and your friends' views about Israel or the conflict? How has the conflict affected your relationships with your friends, if at all?*
5. *Best case scenario, how should the conflict in Israel and Gaza be resolved?*

Between questions 2 and 3, the Jewish focus groups were asked the following additional question:

6. *Think for a moment about your relationship with Jewish communities, broadly construed. How has your relationship with Jewish communities changed, if at all, since October 7? Why do you think that change has occurred? What do you think caused that change?*

In places, Dr. Mashek asked students follow up questions, and sometimes students asked each other questions.

Note that question #3 above mentions a statistic from our 2023 survey that a third of non-Jewish students would not want to be friends with someone who supports the existence of Israel as a Jewish state. That statistic is the percent who agree with the statement of those who either agree or disagree, excluding respondents who answer they “don’t know”. As noted below in the section on survey methodology, throughout this report, unlike prior reports in this study, we evaluate agree/disagree statements by measuring the percent who agree without excluding “don’t know” respondents, yielding a lower estimate of the percent who agree. In the case of this particular question, we would calculate that 20% rather than one third would not want to be friends with someone who supports a Jewish state.

All the focus group transcripts are available in full. Here, we provide highlights of the conversations. We hope this summary conveys the variety and complexity of student opinions as revealed in their own words.

B. NEWS HABITS

Our focus group conversation started off with the most straightforward and non-controversial question: how do the students get their news? In both Jewish and non-Jewish focus groups, the most popular traditional source mentioned was the New York Times. Among both groups, other mainstream news sources were also mentioned, such as CNN, Associated Press, Wall Street Journal, and Washington Post.

In non-Jewish focus groups, foreign news sources were commonly mentioned, such as Al Jazeera, BBC, Reuters, and Sky News Australia. One non-Jewish student at a highly selective school said he prefers foreign media over domestic sources like the New York Times.

“I feel like they [NYT] are hiding the fact that what’s happening in Israel/Palestine. They are not showing the true picture. I try to avoid the West[ern] media most of the time. I also try to follow some Instagram reporters like Motaz Aziza, where he reports what’s happening on the ground and I feel like that’s more realistic.”

Jewish students also sometimes look to foreign media for a different perspective. One such student, not a regular participant in Jewish activities, said she follows the news on social media and via the New York Times. But she also said, **“I like the BBC because it is not American so they might have a different viewpoint on the conflict.”**

Jewish students, particularly those more engaged in Jewish life on campus, utilize mainstream news as well as Jewish-specific sources. **“I go to the New York Times for general news,”** one student reflects. **“When I am thinking about news relating to the war in Israel and Gaza, I use a combination of general news outlets and more Jewish outlets.”** A number of students identified sources such as JewishBreakingNews, StandWithUs, and Times of Israel.

Of course, many students only passively receive news about the conflict. They might regularly check a news website where they will happen upon news about Israel, but they will not read about it beyond the headlines. Said one Jewish student:

“The majority of my news is from newspapers like the Economist, the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal. I would say that I don’t go out of my way to read things on the conflict, but it comes up as part of the news.”

Many students get their passive news from social media. Students mentioned several social media platforms, including TikTok, Twitter, and others, but the most common one mentioned in the focus groups was Instagram. On Instagram, students see information from traditional news sites, as well as posts from their friends, posts from accounts run by student organizations on campus, viral posts, and posts from influencers. They reflected on how they digest this news, often trusting information coming from official media

over information coming from independent influencers or unverified accounts. A Jewish student not involved in Jewish activities at a selective school put it like this:

“The majority of information I consume is from social media. A lot of people and creators I follow post a lot about [the conflict], including infographics to repost. I, for one, don’t actively seek it out but I remember when the conflict did start to ramp up and was gaining national attention, I did notice more...I think that news feeds that post about it are more trustworthy. Creators sharing personal accounts have more bias.”

While students get news from Instagram, they often expressed frustration with social media due to its potential for spreading misinformation and its toll on mental health. One student said:

“I went to a Jewish day school and it felt like I was seeing two extremes where Jewish people were posting things that were extremely to the right and people who I know now were posting things that were more extremely to the left. So, I actively moved away from that, and I have since deleted social media.”

This student now follows news via the New York Times and listens to podcasts such as the *Ezra Klein Show*.

Another student who is involved in Jewish activity on campus expressed similar frustration:

“On social media, I have blocked the keyword ‘Palestine’ because I kept getting content that was upsetting me. I think it was getting too distracting. For a lot of people I follow, I muted them, so I stopped seeing their posts. People were posting a lot of misinformation, and it made me upset that people who are such smart people and go to an esteemed institution kind of mindlessly post misinformation.”

A number of Jewish students mentioned that their engagement with news changed over the course of the year. In the fall, they either sought out more news specifically about the conflict or they saw more social media posts from Jewish entities such as StandWithUs, or both. Over time, they might have seen less Jewish-specific content or sought it out less than at the beginning of the war. One Jewish student reflected:

“Those accounts like StandWithUS and Jewish-BreakingNews were very active at the beginning... and it’s been like six months since then, so it is more passive...just like what is coming through social media and the news.”

Several students mentioned they learn news from their parents and other family members. Parents send their children articles. Said one student (a Jewish student, not involved in Jewish life at a less selective school):

“Most of my information comes from word of mouth and talking to other people – I am not seeking it out myself. I also see it when I am scrolling through other apps like Instagram and Twitter...I think hearing things from my parents, I trust them more than random people on the street.”

Of course, not all students agree with their parents. One Jewish student who gets articles from her parents thinks they are too pro-Israel. A non-Jewish student said her Christian parents are too pro-Israel, too. **“It’s kind of a stance made on a lack of information,”** she said. But in general, students do seem to hear news from parents and are influenced by their parents’ perspectives.

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C. EFFECT OF WAR ON CAMPUS EXPERIENCE

The war and subsequent protests affected students differently. For some, especially non-Jewish students, the war and protests were something they were aware of but did not affect them much. In one focus group composed of non-Jewish students at moderately selective universities, a student said the issue was “more in the periphery.” The moderator, Dr. Mashek, asked if other students felt that way. The entire group of students agreed.

But other students, Jewish and non-Jewish, were quite affected. One theme in responses was that the noise and commotion of the protests on some campuses were distracting. Focus group participants mentioned the times that classes near loud protests had to be canceled or university events like career fairs were disrupted.

One woman, a non-Jewish student at selective school in a rural area, described her experience:

“I think just looking out my window every day and seeing a group of people with flags and all that noise and the police cars surrounding them is just, it’s such a weird experience. And if it was, like, once and it went away, it would be fine. But the fact that it’s every day and it’s recurring. And I do sympathize with what’s happening, and I do understand. But at the same time, it’s hard to go about your normal day when you have to find a different way to get to class where you have to go through everything that’s happening. And there have been some, a few, like, violent incidents on campus. There have been arrests. And having to just go through that and deal with that as part of your daily routine is sort of unnerving for me.”

Students also saw the protests as places of tension on campus, often taking over central portions of campus and showcasing conflict. They noticed the increased police presence. Students overwhelmingly reported that the campus protests they saw this year were peaceful. Most Jewish students, but not all, said they did not feel physically unsafe. In general, Jewish students articulated a view that even though most protesters probably did not harbor antisemitic attitudes, there are some who clearly did. And while most protests did not escalate to violence, there were some that clearly did. The uncertainty around those possibilities unnerved Jewish students.

ONE JEWISH STUDENT:

“It felt uncomfortable not knowing what this particular crowd might be feeling or what might come of this protest. I just felt I like I didn’t belong as much as I would normally feel.”

Another Jewish student reflected on the initial reaction on campus to October 7. She thought about the fact that the protests started **“long before the ground invasion in Gaza began, so the campus demonstrations in support of Palestine seem to be more a response to the initial attack than the response.”** Another Jewish student was stunned by some of the chants, such as one cheering on the Houthis.

Many focus group participants cited the cases where protests got physical or led to damage of property on their campuses. One student mentioned sculptures that were destroyed during a pro-Palestine protest. Another discussed swastikas drawn on the Chabad and Hillel buildings.

A Jewish student at the Ohio State University said that he now tucks in his Star of David necklace at certain times. He said he started doing this after a friend of his was punched for being Jewish and the OSU Hillel was vandalized.

Another student (Jewish student, mixed focus group) reflected on the high tensions on her campus:

“My school has had a lot of protests, almost solely from one side, and most people at school support said side. It has been almost fully pro-Palestinian support... There have been attacks on our Hillel, which was pretty bad. We had, earlier in November, a student was shot – not on the campus, but by some kind of right-wing Christian Nationalist person – which sparked a lot of protesting and discourse. In general, I feel like the Jewish population has shrunk away and there is a very large Jews for Ceasefire Now movement which has resulted in a lot of destruction of the Jewish community here, which has been really sad to watch.”

And yet, even though some students point to physical violence or antisemitic actions, Jewish students noted that their campus environment was tamer than media portrayals of campus unrest. Some students had to reassure their family members that they were not feeling physically threatened on campus and that they were safe, in contradiction to alarming media portrayals.

WHICH SIDE IS THE SCHOOL ON?

A clear contrast between Jewish and non-Jewish students is how they perceived the school, as an institution, as taking a side in the conflict. Jewish students discussed their perception that the student bodies and faculty were overwhelmingly against Israel. They felt socially isolated and that there was no room for nuance: **“I don’t necessarily feel unsafe being Jewish on campus but there is definitely not room to be moderate about this issue: you are either pro or against, which has been very frustrating.”**

Several students also brought up how classrooms were affected. One Jewish student dropped a class that she felt was clearly biased. Another Jewish student confronted a professor whose rhetoric she felt was over the line. The faculty member, she said, doubled down on her commitments to the Palestinian cause and later told the class that they need to **“stand together against apartheid, genocide, and oppression.”** Another student, not Jewish, said that professors made announcements alerting students to when protest activities were happening. Dr. Mashek asked, **“And would you say you’re hearing that kind of information-sharing from different perspectives?”** The student replied, **“Honestly, no. It’s very much on one perspective.”** She clarified it was only pro-Palestine protests that were being advertised in classrooms by faculty.

On the other hand, several of the non-Jewish students focused on the perceived bias from administrators against the pro-Palestine protesters. They saw university leadership as having clamped down on peaceful protesters in an unfair way. As one student put it:

“I feel more stress[ed] and powerless because the only thing we could do right now is just spreading awareness. And when we are not able to spread awareness because of the management of the university.... We would just want to, like, spread awareness and to show what’s actually happening there instead of the West[ern] media where it’s silencing the people’s voices.”

Another student demonstrated the unfair treatment of pro-Palestine protesters by explaining how the university dealt with Black Lives Matter protests differently.

“Well, I was here during the whole 2020 George Floyd situation, and I was also protesting and there was a completely different feel from my administration as there is right now. And you can absolutely tell it’s because my administration is directly responsible and benefiting from Israel’s part in genocide. How it makes me feel personally, like ... why did I even come here?”

The university’s response to the current protest movement made this student feel like she does not belong at her school. The same student continued:

“There are many people who I feel are willing to learn and listen and educate themselves about the actual issue that’s going on. It’s really hard to walk by a large portion of the campus who are not willing to do that. And those are the people that are given a voice. And those are the people who are published in the New York Times. And those are the people that are shown world-wide, and those voices are amplified because those are the people that have all this money. And that’s really disheartening because that’s what makes me feel like I won’t belong.”

DR. MASKEK ASKED,

“And just so I’m not making assumptions about what you mean about what the actual issue is or who those people are or those voices, would you feel comfortable given some specificity there?”

“Sure. I go to Columbia University, which donates so so much money to every kind of terrible industry you can think of because we rely on the backs of so many wealthy Zionist donors and those people have children that go to our school. And those people have opinions that they welcome and rightfully can have. However, that becomes a problem when you hold on to that opinion so intensely that you aren’t willing to educate yourself further to maybe see the incorrectness or futility of your stance.”

When asked how the campus environment has affected them, a number of Jewish students, particularly those who were less participatory in Jewish life on campus, explained how they increasingly decided to keep quiet and hunker down. For example, one student at a less selective school that does not have enough Jewish students to compose a Hillel board, said:

“One benefit of having no Jewish student group is that you can blend in. I know that is what I am doing, and what my other Jewish friend is doing, is just laying low. Just lay low and don’t say anything because we don’t have the numbers – it is ten versus a thousand people. Sometimes it comes up in the classroom, but I don’t say anything.”

Students understand that they have friends with very different views about the conflict and that those views can be a social litmus test. So, some keep quiet because they do not want to be in disagreement with their peers. One said:

“Just a couple of days ago, I was sitting at lunch with a group of students, and they asked me about my opinion on the conflict. It was tense because they asked questions in an open way, but you can tell by the way they asked it, that they are expecting a specific answer.”

Some of the Jewish students want to be able to express their mixed feelings about the conflict – a sense of identity connected to Israel but despair about civilian deaths or disagreement with the Israeli government. But they find it difficult to hold a nuanced view in such a polarized environment. An Israeli student expressed it like this, **“Regardless of my opinion on the conflict, even if it is not 100% pro-Israel, just being connected to it by my place of birth is a little bit intimidating and daunting on campus where people are so extremely pro-Palestine.”**

D. CHANGING RELATIONSHIP INSIDE THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

Students in the Jewish-only focus groups were asked about their changing relationship with the Jewish community since October 7. The students who were more engaged typically felt that the school year had been one of increased participation in Jewish life and an increased sense of Jewish identity. One modern Orthodox student put it like this:

“Everyone is living in the sense that there is war going on in Israel and we want to be more connected...I feel like it has brought people closer, and people have a common ground that ‘we love Israel, we support Israel, and we will continue to share that belief.’”

This attitude is common among active participants beyond those who identify as Orthodox. There is a common sense of belonging, pride, of being on a ‘team’ among those students who were regular attendees at Jewish events. They described an increased attendance at Hillel and Chabad. A few students mentioned they began to wear Star of David necklaces. Some of these comments were not necessarily positive, but just descriptive: a student felt himself becoming “more insular” as a reaction to social isolation from non-Jewish students on campus, but the move toward insularity may be both positive and negative.

A student who was president of her school’s Hillel chapter felt she learned a lot about life through her engagement in the Jewish community during this difficult year. **“Dealing with helping to navigate the Hillel’s response to October 7th taught me more than any college class ever has.”**

These students -- who, again, were involved in campus Jewish life -- were also attuned to increased tension within the Jewish community. One student said:

“It can be difficult to all pray in one room together on Friday night and the next Tuesday be on different sides of a protest, and to be in a community together and also be on two different sides of an ideological issue.”

Another described how he managed friendships with Jewish friends on the other side of the Israel–Palestine conflict. **“I’m not going to let this issue come in between a friendship unless they are just spreading information [that I think is] dangerous.”**

Another student in the focus groups said he is connected to Jewish life and wants to continue to be connected to Jewish life, but Israel advocacy does not resonate with him. This student is in AEPi and on the Chabad student board, but he does not feel personally connected to Israel at all. In his social circle, he is expected to care about Israel. For instance, the AEPi brothers marched around campus with Israeli flags after October 7, but he felt uncomfortable. He thinks that some of his peers are not getting involved in Jewish life because doing so is seen as too political or as too pro-Israel.

In spite of these differing perspectives, the three focus groups targeting Jewish students who are regularly involved in campus Jewish life showcased a clear predominant worldview: increased connection to and increased participation with Jewish life on campus.

In the three Jewish-only focused groups that drew students who were not involved in Jewish life on campus, the experiences were far more variable. Some students said they started attending shabbat dinners and other Jewish programs more **“to show my support for people on campus.”** Others, particularly those who are not supportive of Israel, did not participate before and continued to abstain. As one student said,

“After October 7th, I have felt more alienated from my Judaism because my understanding of Judaism is not reflected in supporting Israel. And I felt unsure about where that put me....I have heard from friends that there are other Jews who have similar opinions to me but I don’t know of any spaces for us to come together... Tying Judaism to a support of Israel is really hard for me because, at the moment, I don’t think I can say I support Israel because it is creating a humanitarian crisis and killing 30,000 people. I feel like that goes against all my beliefs, even just valuing human life.”

Another student just did not know where she fit in and was trying to find her place in the Jewish community. **“I don’t engage with Hillel because I don’t agree with its stance on Israel, but I still want to engage with the Jewish community, so I am trying to navigate that,”** she said.

Several students, regardless of their participation in programs, did feel an increased personal connection to their Jewish identity and to Israel. Said one, **“Prior to this, I haven’t really considered my connection to Israel, but now I feel kind of like a bond that is pulling me more culturally Jewish.”** Some students also noted that they were communicating with family and with Jewish friends more on account of the war.

The students less engaged in Jewish life were attuned to divisions in the campus Jewish community. Here is one voice:

“I honestly think it may have divided the Jewish community more than brought them together. At least on my campus, there is a section of pro-Palestinian Jewish people and if you are neutral or pro-Israel, you are on the other side. It has created two different groups of people, and it is really hard to connect to people who are Jewish and also super pro-Palestinian.”

A Jewish student who is very involved in pro-Palestine activism saw the protest movement as drawing her more closely to the part of the Jewish community that is openly critical of Israel.

“I have been very involved in protests for divestment. I have definitely felt isolated by the Jewish organizations because of my support for Palestine, like I don’t feel comfortable going into Hillel. Not that I’ve ever been involved, because I’ve always had these views and I’ve never felt comfortable in that space. I have noticed that there is more division but also more of a sense of community within the Jewish students who are working together to protest for divestment and Palestinian liberation. I’ve felt more of a sense of community in a Jewish community than any other time in my life, honestly.”

ANOTHER STUDENT:

“Again, within the Jewish community, there is now a growing divide. On my campus they have started a Jewish Voices for Peace organization, which is a pro-Palestine organization. I think that pro-Israel Jews look down on pro-Palestine views and I think that the pro-Palestine Jews are much louder about their opinions.”

In spite of the tensions, some students mentioned that their campus Jewish leadership was succeeding in keeping the diverse community together.

“My school and student body do a really good job of separating Judaism from being Zionist or being pro or anti-Israel. Religion and politics are pretty separate in that regard which I appreciate...I feel like the head rabbi was doing a good job of opening the conversation and recognizing that people have different viewpoints. The rabbi was hosting discussions where people could come together and say their opinions.”

Another student focused on the fact that people come together at the Hillel to eat meals, and she, too, credited the rabbi for making people of different views feel welcome.

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E. BEING FRIENDS WITH PEOPLE WHO SUPPORT THE EXISTENCE OF ISRAEL

All the focus groups were asked to reflect on findings generated from our fall 2023 survey that a large minority of non-Jewish students say they would not want to be friends with someone who supports the existence of Israel as a Jewish state. We asked participants why students might hold this view and whether the dynamic is typical of others issues as well.

In the Jewish-only focus groups, students were split between thinking it is unique to this issue or whether the dynamic would be similar for other controversial issues.

Most of the Jewish students gravitated toward the idea that social media was to blame for creating a litmus test for friendships. On social media, the Israel-Palestine conflict has been a constant presence. One Jewish student shared the following anecdote:

Even on Instagram, there are so many accounts that I have blocked because I don't want to see it anymore. I literally clicked on a cooking video and the comments were all 'Free Palestine.'...It feels like a trend where everyone is like 'let's go hate on Israel, let's go hate on Jewish people.'"

Students described a media environment portraying that Israel is committing genocide and killing 30,000 civilians. One student reasoned that if he was not Jewish and was just seeing what was posted on Snapchat and Instagram, he would probably be against Israel too. If you are bombarded with information about civilian deaths and genocide, he explained, it makes sense to break off ties with people deemed as supporting such evil. Another student walked through the same logic:

"The next step would be 'well it is completely immoral to support that and, if you support that, I don't think that you have good values and I don't think that you have the same morals that I do, so I don't want to be associated with you.'"

The Jewish students brought up other explanations as well. Chief among them was a lack of nuance in political debates.

ONE STUDENT SAID:

"I think there is a conflation with supporting the existence of Israel and supporting every single thing that Israel has ever done. And that is a loss of nuance for highly educated people to be making and yet it is being made... [Zionism] has just become a slur. I have seen people use the word Zionist as a slur."

ANOTHER:

"I think people assume that if you are Jewish, that means you are a Zionist. I think that people think that Zionism is equated to conservatism. And people equate all of that to badness. And they can't be friends with a person like that because everything is just so polarized."

ANOTHER:

"Unfortunately, Zionism, to some people, has become a label for 'I want to commit genocide against Palestinians.'"

In the non-Jewish focus groups, the students reacted to the prompt differently. Mainly, they sympathized with students who said they would not want to be friends with someone who supports the existence of Israel as a Jewish state. These students, too, disagreed about whether the dynamic was particular to the Israel-Palestine issue or whether it would similarly apply to other issues, such as support of Donald Trump, support for abortion, or support for Black Lives Matter.

Several students simply articulated the view that not wanting to be friends with someone who holds opposing beliefs is normal. Said one student, **"For some people, some topics are so personal that if someone doesn't share that belief, it's almost like a character judgment about that individual about what side they would support or how they would identify."**

Other students offered more detail about the case of potential friends who might support Israel. **"Some people... don't want to be friends with people who have ideas that are antithetical to promoting peace,"** said one.

ANOTHER:

"I totally understand not wanting to be friends with somebody who supports the existence of Israel as a Jewish state because in my head that's kind of like, 'well you should be educated more and if you still decide to take that stance, then I can't really swallow that.'"

ANOTHER:

"I think I probably do fall into that statistic because it's like, I don't understand how you can defend what's happening, and I don't want to be constantly arguing with somebody who's doing that... I think with this case, it's like the death tolls are just insanely unequal. And it's just heartbreaking what's happening. I don't know that much about the history. I tried to educate myself.... I do a lot of Native American studies too, so I think it's very it's hard for me to think about like just like power and like power dynamics and how it's really hard to see that. There's always one type of people, people with money always win, I guess."

A couple of non-Jewish students reflected on the role of the media, but they took very different views from one another. One student said that believing Israel should not be a state is **“a bit extreme”** but it is a view reinforced by social media and by students **“hopping on a bandwagon”** to support the popular position.

Another student, who is particularly antagonistic to Israel, had a more complex media narrative. She, the same Columbia student mentioned previously, believes that western media has obscured the Israel-Palestine issue by not sufficiently drawing attention to Palestinians’ plight. She went on:

“A way that advocates for Palestine have tried to counter that obscurity of Western media has been to paint every single Jewish person that is currently on the planet as the villain. And I think that has had an even bigger effect on making this topic uncomfortable....because yes, there are very clear villains in this genocide. However, there are also people who are villains by ignorance and forced ignorance....I think the way that they are being cast as such intense horrible people is not going to have any kind of positive benefit on them maybe possibly changing their opinions.”

In other words, this student believes that there is a villainous portrayal of Jews in leftist media that is unhelpful because it leads them to not be open to change. She specified who she thought is being villainized:

“I’m talking specifically the pro-Israel rich Zionist population and the very intense scrutiny they are getting right now and their reaction from their already frail perspectives from certain historical events that have happened to Jewish people.”

In the mixed focus groups, containing both Jewish and non-Jewish students, students pointed to different explanations for litmus tests in friendship. Some pointed to an ethos of moral righteousness and a herd mentality among college students. As one student said, **“There is going to be a certain ‘follow the crowd’ mentality, so if everyone is yelling that they hate Israel and wish death, then you’re just gonna follow along with that because you don’t want to step out of line.”**

A couple of Jewish students in the mixed cohorts pointed to a lack of nuance or willingness to dialogue as the reason why people do not want to be friends with those who think Israel should exist. As one said,

“There are some people who are not willing to believe that I can hold both opinions. That I can both be upset about what’s happening in Gaza and still believe in Israel. Some people just assume that all Zionists believe that it is good to be killing people.”

But other students said the issue is not about the current conflict but about Zionism and Israel more generally. A self-described non-Zionist Jewish student said this:

“I do sympathize with people who feel like they can’t be friends with someone who supports Israel. Even if you are a Zionist and you don’t agree with everything that is happening, I think there is an inherent part to Zionism that is, because Israel settled on Palestinian land, there is an inherent violence to Israel. Of course, now you can kind of say you don’t support what is going on now, but I think the term itself has a lot of history that we weren’t alive for that can be hurtful and traumatic to some people. So, I do understand it if someone doesn’t want to be friends with supporters of Israel.”

A non-Jewish student described the situation as follows:

“...From my knowledge, Palestine has existed for longer than Israel has. Palestine is not the one that has a captive over Israel, it is the other way around and this war has amplified the feelings of people who don’t want to support that because you obviously haven’t educated yourself on the history if you align yourself with that...That notion of not wanting to be friends with those people comes from a place of ‘you’re just siding with that side because of your religious affiliation, not because you are trying to be knowledgeable about what is going on and how many people are suffering in Palestine and Gaza.”

One Jewish student in the mixed group reacted to the statistic about not being friends with visible sadness. She was close to tears.

“There is a constant frustration for me that there is a whole history that people that are really refusing to recognize and that the history did not start 70 years ago like people want to think and there is a much longer history... I feel like people think that they can’t be friends with someone if they don’t hold every single perfect idea that I hold and it makes me sad that that is the only thing you could possibly see in a person.”

F. DIVERSITY IN FRIEND GROUPS

The next question asked the students about the viewpoints about Israel/Palestine in their friend groups and how the current war has affected their own relationships. Many of the Jewish students have both Jewish and non-Jewish friends. Some of these students have respectful, even enjoyable, conversations with people with whom they disagree. One Jewish student said he has gotten closer specifically to Muslim friends because they have good conversations about the conflict.

Other students said they just try to stay quiet and not talk about the conflict, for fear of disrupting their relationships. **“I think if I weren’t Jewish,”** said one student, **“there would be more of an expectation for me to take a position and I think my friends largely skew pro-Palestine and they understand that because I am Jewish I don’t want to take a side.”**

A non-Jewish student who is against Israel’s actions and who has lots of Jewish friends explained the tightrope she walks:

“I have a couple people in my life who very much identify with their Jewish identity and are very much on the Israel side. For me, I think I still have a good relationship with them, but you do kind of feel that tension or space where we completely tiptoe around the topic. If we see a protest on campus while we are together, we just pretend we don’t see it so we don’t have to talk about it.”

Some students, Jewish or not, try to be empathetic and understand where their friends are coming from. Here is one non-Jewish student:

“I have a friend who is Jewish and his sister lives in Tel Aviv, so when he talks to me about the conflict, it’s more so about safety and wellbeing than being about the overall conflict. With my Muslim friends, it might be less about that and more about the politics and what is going on in the news... It is important to be open and empathetic to the people you are engaging with and to consider their perspectives and experiences.”

Certainly, one common theme is students tiptoeing around the conflict either because friends are on different sides or because friends have extreme views. A Jewish student reflected:

“Most of my Jewish friends are pro-Israel in a ‘they should annex the West Bank and Gaza and take over all of the land’ view. But all of my non-Jewish friends believe in Palestinian liberation and think that the land should be returned to them and for the Israeli government to be dissolved. There is almost no one who believes in a two-state solution or a one state solution....There is so much aggression in the Zionist people but the pro-Palestine people don’t believe in the state of Israel period. So, I don’t talk to my friends about Israel at all.”

Another common theme is frayed relationships on account of the conflict. One Jewish student lost old friendships right after October 7, when she posted an infographic signaling her support for Israel. Another student said he is fine with his friends participating in pro-Palestine protests, **“but ‘from the river to the sea’ crosses a line for me so I haven’t been hanging out with those people as much. And that is definitely unfortunate, but I don’t feel so comfortable hanging out with those people when they hold such a different opinion about the value of Jewish life and Jewish statehood.”**

Another Jewish student who is interested in rabbinical school told his romantic partner that he wanted to work in Israel as a rabbi **“and make some kind of political change and improve the state of Israel. And that, to him [the romantic partner], just appeared like, ‘I’m just trying to support a genocide state.’ And it really upset me.”**

A third theme that emerged from the focus groups with Jewish students was the role they play in giving a “Jewish perspective” on the conflict to their non-Jewish peers.

HERE IS ONE STUDENT:

“A lot of my friends at school aren’t Jewish and so they don’t have much of a connection to the conflict, so they turn to me to ask me about the conflict and for my opinion. I’m happy to talk to them but I always tell them that I feel bad because I am definitely telling them something biased and I want them to do their own research and come to their own conclusions.”

ANOTHER:

“People come to you because you are Jewish, thinking you are an aficionado on the subject, when I probably know less than most because I don’t take the time to understand this super deep and complicated topic. I don’t see the value of understanding something that doesn’t personally affect my life on a daily basis.”

ANOTHER:

“When it first happened, I noticed that a bunch of people were asking me for context which I thought was interesting because it is not really something that you receive as a request every day... if it comes up, it is a civil conversation but for most people there are a lot of things going on in the world right now and this is just one of them.”

A final theme from the Jewish students, particularly those more active in Jewish programming, is that they talked about Israel/Palestine more among other Jewish students with whom they share a basic orientation toward the conflict. Some feel they have grown closer to their Jewish friends. **“I do feel closer to my Jewish friends,”** one student said. **“I have noticed people are able to come out of their shells and talk about what is happening.”**

Among non-Jewish students who are actively engaged in pro-Palestine activities, the conflict has similarly brought students together. One talked about how she and her friends discuss which companies to boycott. **“We’re very active trying to support even the smallest of matters.”**

Another student active in Palestine support: **“My friend group also shares the same views as me. So, nothing has really negatively changed. But it’s definitely brought us closer because we have room to have that conversation and try to inform each other and stay educated and see how we can help in different ways and share materials on social media to try to get that info out there. But no negative consequences I would say.”**

Beyond the students who are active in protests, it was very common in the non-Jewish focus groups for students to say that their social circles are uniformly pro-Palestine. One student said small disagreements about the conflict emerge when debating his friends, but they’re still all squarely in the pro-Palestine camp.

Of course, some students do not like the activism they see among their peers. Here is an anecdote from a student in one of the non-Jewish focus groups:

“My friends are very, very, activist. So I feel like they’re always posting every day, like, ‘this is what’s going on, blah blah blah.’ And I’m not annoyed that they’re posting.... I’m kind of just trying to drown it out because I have bills. Like, I worked at Starbucks, and now everyone hates Starbucks. And I sometimes go to Starbucks, and then this lady yelled at me... And she’s like, ‘you got Starbucks?’ And I was like, ‘Yeah. I did.’ And she just, like, lost it. I mean, she went to Walmart, so then I just decided to be annoying back. And I feel like this has to do with the framing where it’s like, if you’re gonna call someone a villain, they’re not gonna listen to you. And when she did that to me at the Starbucks, I was like ‘I got it for free because I’ve worked there.’ So I’m like, ‘At this point, I’m just gonna go even more just to spite you because you really irritated me,’ but I think, like, there have been conflicts there....But, I think in general, I do have the same ideas as my friends, but I just don’t have the same level of caring or, like, activism or anything.”

Outside the activist crowd, some lamented the social tension. One woman, not Jewish but with a Jewish boyfriend, felt saddened that others on the Zoom focus group were in such homogenous social networks in which political views are a

litmus test. She lamented, **“I really love having friends with different perspectives because I feel like I learn so much more than if I’m just talking to someone who believes the same as me....I definitely don’t know everything, not even close, so I love to just hear.”**

Another student felt she learned a lot of different perspectives from an interfaith group she is in, which has produced better conversations than in other settings.

“In there, there have been interesting conversations. It’s been helping some people sympathize and realize the hurt that the Jewish community on campus has been having.”

In general, however, the non-Jewish students articulated views that either they are in exclusively pro-Palestine social groups or that they do not talk much about the issue, especially if they are in the company of peers who have different viewpoints. However, some still try to have respectful conversations and debates among their friends.

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G. VISIONS FOR RESOLVING THE ISRAEL-PALESTINE CONFLICT

The last question of the focus group prompted students to think about how the conflict in Israel and Gaza ought to be resolved. Some of the students focused on the immediate war going on. Students talked about a ceasefire and about Hamas and the Netanyahu government being held accountable for crimes. They talked about humanitarian aid and the return of the Israeli hostages. There were some differences in emphasis between the Jewish and non-Jewish focus groups. For instance, the Jewish students mentioned the hostages and their opposition to the Netanyahu government more frequently. In fact, among non-Jewish students, the hostages were largely not part of the conversations. But overall, there was a shared vision for a speedy end to the conflict.

The students also reflected on how the broader conflict between Israelis and Palestinians could be resolved. During the discussion, there were several awkward silences among the non-Jewish students. They expressed a desire for coexistence and an end to violence. Several imagined in a perfect world that the Jewish Israelis would just leave the territory, but had little idea of where they might go.

Below is a brief dialogue between one student and Dr. Mashek:

STUDENT: **“I feel like there is no easy way to resolve this dispute...because Israel is backed by so many other big countries including the US. Things will probably not end up the way we hope.”**

DR. MASHEK: **“What would you hope?”**

STUDENT: **“Probably like everyone else, probably for the land to be returned to Palestinians.”**

DR. MASHEK: **“If we were wave a magic wand...I realize this is a wishful-thinking question, because a number of you had the ideal situation Israelis would leave the land....again wave the wand...where would the Israelis go?”**

STUDENT: **“I honestly have no clue.”**

DR. MASHEK: **“Any other ideas?”**

[Silence]

Remarkably, given the wide variety of views expressed throughout the focus groups, students across focus groups mostly landed on a two-state solution as the only practical solution to the conflict. Although it may not be their ideal solution, the students expressed some convergence.

ONE STUDENT IN A NON-JEWISH FOCUS GROUP: **“I think that there should be a compromise where Palestine can be free but Israel can also have its own nation.”**

ANOTHER: **“I believe the land rightfully belongs to the Palestinians who have been there for thousands and thousands of years. Ideally though since that will be very difficult to achieve, um just because of world politics and leaders and everybody involved, coexist in a state that is peaceful, not invasive, and just set clear boundaries what land is this and what land is that.”**

The Jewish students reached the same conclusion. Some focused on the Palestinians getting rid of the Hamas leaders, but the end game is the same:

“I think that stronger and more fixed boundaries is a pretty good idea. You want give the people who don’t want to have a discussion on either side at least an opportunity to be in their fixed, local spot.”

ANOTHER:

“I think there would have to be a two-state solution because Israel is founded on the goal of being an ethnostate, of being an apartheid state and being a separate community just for Jews.”

ANOTHER:

“I think that we need people who are less right wing. But overall, I think a two-state solution is one of the best ways that anything can happen.”

ANOTHER:

In a perfect world, after the hostages are returned and the IDF forces are pulled out of Gaza, I think that the ideal solution would be a two-state solution.... But I also agree that the conflict may never end.”

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H. FOCUS GROUP RECAP

These twelve focus groups showcased a wide range of views on campus. One could read the transcripts, or even this summary, and cherry-pick quotations that paint students with different perspectives in negative or positive light. Our hope here is that we have not provided a cherry-picked account but a realistic sense of how different kinds of students think about this year on campus. We encourage others to review the focus group scripts as well.

Here are a few core reflections based on our review:

- ◆ The question of where students get their news and how the news affects their judgments on the conflict merits further study. Jewish community organizations could particularly examine how students engaged with Jewish media (e.g., StandWithUs, Times of Israel) at different moments of the 2023-2024 school year, and how those

sources affected their opinions. Further research would be valuable to understand parents’ influence on the opinions of their young adult children through the news shared with them.

- ◆ Jewish students felt a range of feelings on campus this year, from unsafe to unwelcome to uncomfortable to none of the above. Some factors contributing to negative feelings are related to the specific school they attended, their own personality type, and social and political factors. Nevertheless, Jewish students experienced a general sense of uncertainty about how overt, physical displays of antisemitism could emerge from the anti-Israel protest movement. Jewish students did not describe the bulk of anti-Israel activities as antisemitic or as violent. However, they saw the potential of antisemitism emerging at their schools amidst the protest movement and were unnerved by it.
- ◆ There is a profound difference between Jewish and non-Jewish students in how they perceived the political orientation of their schools. The Jewish students tended to see the schools as overwhelmingly aligned against Israel, evidenced by the opinions expressed by faculty, staff, and students. The non-Jewish students tended to see the schools as overwhelmingly aligned with Israel, as evidenced by opinions expressed by their schools’ senior leadership.
- ◆ A gulf exists between Jewish students who were already involved in Jewish activities (who tend to come from more robust Jewish backgrounds) and those who were less involved. The first group engaged more with Jewish organizations on campus (more learning, more participation) because of the war and its reverberations on campus. The latter group is a mix. Some have leaned into Jewish identity through learning more, overtly identifying as Jewish more, or participating more. Others felt out of place in Jewish spaces because they were not aligned with Jewish organizations about Israel, or they avoided Jewish spaces because they did not want to wade into controversy.

- ◆ The conflict affected relationships in several ways. For one, students who are especially supportive of or opposed to Israel connected more intensely with their own like-minded “side” and experienced a sense of community. Students in religiously or politically diverse social groups tended to stay quiet. Some students embraced the chance to learn from people who are different from them and lean into respectful dialogue, but more did not. Non-Jewish students asked Jewish peers to represent the Jewish side, but not all Jewish students want to, or feel equipped to, serve that role.
- ◆ Our finding that a significant share of non-Jewish students do not want to be friends with someone who supports the existence of Israel as a Jewish state captures a real sense of social tension on campus. Jewish students understood this social isolation is happening and largely blamed a toxic culture of social media and polarization. Non-Jewish students in our focus groups often supported the social isolation, as they believe that support for Israel’s existence is a hateful position that signals a person has bad values.
- ◆ A surprisingly large number of students, including those who are very supportive of the right for Israel to exist and those who are not, believe that the only practical solution to the conflict will be a two-state solution.

Survey Methodology

The three waves of surveys in this study were conducted by College Pulse. College Pulse is a survey and analytics firm that specializes in polling college students. College Pulse maintains a panel of hundreds of thousands of validated current college students at over 1,500 universities. The firm periodically invites these panelists to participate in short online surveys. Students typically take the surveys on smartphones, and they are incentivized through small rewards such as gift certificates. College Pulse surveys are used by major American and Jewish-American organizations, such as the Knight Foundation, Ford Foundation, Hillel, and the Anti-Defamation League.

In all waves of this study, we classified students as Jewish based on two screening questions. In the first screening question, students were asked what religion they identify with, if any. Respondents who selected “Jewish”, “Agnostic”, “Atheist”, or “Nothing in particular” were then shown a second screening question. The second question asked if they identify as Jewish in one or more of the following ways:

- ◆ Jewish from a cultural perspective
- ◆ Jewish from a religious perspective
- ◆ Jewish from a spiritual perspective
- ◆ Jewish from an ethnic or family heritage perspective
- ◆ Jewish in another way
- ◆ No, I don’t identify as Jewish

The Jewish samples consisted of respondents who identified as Jewish by religion, as well as respondents who identified as atheist, agnostic, or of no religion but were Jewish in a cultural, spiritual, or ethnic way.

A. DESCRIPTION OF SURVEY WAVES

1. WAVE 1 – APRIL 2022

The Jim Joseph Foundation initially commissioned a study in 2022 to learn about the lives, interests, and behaviors of Jewish college students, especially those who were not regularly engaged in Jewish life on campus. About half of

Jewish-identifying students seldom or rarely participate in Jewish activities on campus, and the Foundation was interested in learning more about the backgrounds and attitudes of these students so that community leaders could better engage Jewish students on campus. The 2022 questionnaire and report assessed a few items about Israel, antisemitism, and the political and social pressures that might affect Jewish life on campus, but that study was not primarily focused on those issues.

In addition to 1,721 Jewish respondents, the April 2022 survey also included 1,029 non-Jewish students. The non-Jewish sample was designed to be representative of college students nationally. The motivation for surveying non-Jewish students was to provide a comparison set to the Jewish students. For instance, we asked both Jewish and non-Jewish students whether their “religious/ethnic/racial group’s community on campus” was an important factor when they were deciding where to apply to college. About 21% of Jewish students said it was important, which was three times the rate for non-Jewish students (7%). The non-Jewish sample offers a useful benchmark for evaluating whether the answers from Jewish students are high or low when compared to college students at large.

Note that when College Pulse transmitted data in 2023 and 2024, the firm also provided updated weights used to measure the non-Jewish population in 2022. Weights are used for the non-Jewish population in 2022 to make the sample representative of all US college students. Because of the updates to the weights, some of the demographic estimates of the 2022 non-Jewish sample are different than as reported in 2022. In addition, in the updated file, there are 1,033 non-Jewish respondents instead of 1,029.

2. WAVE 2 – NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 2023

In the wake of the October 7, 2023 attacks in Israel and the following Israel-Hamas war, the Jim Joseph Foundation wanted to understand how the conflict affected Jewish students’ experiences on campus. The focus of the second wave of the study was to learn how the war affected students on campus, from social tension and antisemitism to students’ own interest in and participation in Jewish life on campus. In total, we surveyed 944 Jewish students between November 16 and December 21, 2023.

Some of the students we interviewed in the spring of 2022 were still in college in fall 2023, and we were especially interested in re-engaging them in our research. We were able to re-interview 155 of these students. The 2022-2023 panel allows us to study changes in responses from the very same individuals over time. These changes cannot be attributable to the sampling variation where different types of students might be willing to take surveys at different times. Rather, they are attributable to attitudinal change.

As in the first wave of the study, we surveyed non-Jewish students in wave 2, 1,549 in total. However, in wave 2, we used a slightly different methodology. Since the study was centered around social tensions on campus post-October 7, we surveyed non-Jewish students on campuses with substantial Jewish populations. Those campuses are quite diverse. They include public schools (e.g., Binghamton University, University of Michigan) and private schools (e.g., Columbia University, Tulane University); they are in northeast (e.g., Dartmouth College, Northeastern University), the south (e.g., Emory University, University of Central Florida), the midwest (e.g., Washington University in St. Louis, the Ohio State University), and the west (e.g., University of California at San Diego, University of Arizona).

The benefit of this alternative sampling is that we can ask about non-Jewish students’ experience with, and opinions about, the Jewish community on campus. The drawback is that the non-Jewish sample is not directly comparable to the initial 2022 wave of the study.

3. WAVE 3 – APRIL-JUNE 2024

The final wave of the study was conducted from April 28, 2024 to June 26, 2024. The sample includes 1,006 Jewish respondents and 1,516 non-Jewish respondents, both of which were surveyed using the same methods as in wave 2. In order to test for changes in attitudes and behaviors over time, most of the questions that were asked in wave 3 were the same as wave 2. The non-Jewish students were not from exactly the same set of schools as in wave 2, but they were similarly selected because they attend schools that have Jewish communities on campus.

Wave 3 includes a 2023-2024 panel of students who were surveyed both in waves 2 and 3, the fall and spring waves of the 2023-2024 school year. The panel of repeat respondents includes 245 Jewish students and 320 non-Jewish students. Again, we are particularly attentive to within-subject change over time, as we can attribute such changes to attitudinal or behavioral shifts rather than to variations in sampling. Note that a total of 49 respondents were surveyed in all three waves; however, the group is small enough that we do not assess them as a separate subpopulation.

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

Panel surveys are surveys in which the same respondents are interviewed multiple times. We will reference the first panel of 155 Jewish students as the 2022-2023 panel or the wave 1-2 panel. We will refer to the second panel of 245 Jewish students and 320 non-Jewish students as the 2023-2024 panel or the wave 2-3 panel. The full set of respondents in each wave we will refer to as cross-sections or as waves. We have wave 1 (spring 2022), wave 2 (fall 2023), and wave 3 (spring 2024).

At the end of this report, we include a brief methodological appendix. Here, we will summarize two key takeaways from that appendix that will help explain why we analyze the results the way we do. For one, because the true population characteristics of Jewish college students are unknown, we cannot determine whether one or more of our survey waves is representative or unrepresentative. Accordingly, when we do an over-time analysis to see how students' views changed from 2022 to 2023 to 2024, we focus on the panels

of students surveyed multiple times. As will be clear in the analysis, the trends in the panel are usually consistent with trends in the cross-sections. When we look at the full cross-sectional samples, we focus on comparisons of subgroups (e.g., students with robust Jewish backgrounds versus less robust Jewish backgrounds, students who are very liberal versus students who are not very liberal). We have no reason to expect that our sample would not reflect differences in the population across subsets like these.

Second, as detailed in the methodological appendix, the survey vendor, College Pulse, made an error that affected six of the questions asked to non-Jewish students and six of the questions asked to Jewish students in the final wave of the study. Whereas in previous waves, students could answer “don't know” to agree/disagree questions, in 2024 College Pulse mistakenly shifted the response option to “neither agree nor disagree.” When we learned of the error, we asked College Pulse to conduct an experiment to determine how this may have affected results. The results from that experiment are in the appendix. They suggest that responses to almost all the affected questions are comparable across waves.

However, because of this error, we change the way we analyze agree/disagree questions compared to previous reports. In previous reports, we measured the percentage of respondents who agree with a statement among respondents who either agreed or disagreed (i.e., ignoring “don't knows”). For the sake of comparability across waves, we switch the analysis to the percentage who agree based on all respondents who were shown a question, *including* those who said they did not know (in 2022 and 2023) and who answered they neither agree nor disagree (in 2024). While the experiment gives us some confidence that the error did not likely impact most of the responses, we flag the affected questions throughout the report to remind readers that there was a response-option change between 2023 and 2024.