

U.S. COLLEGE STUDENTS
AND THE WAR IN ISRAEL:
JEWISH ENGAGEMENT AND
SOCIAL TENSION ON CAMPUS

**THE COMPLICATED
RELATIONSHIP
BETWEEN IDEOLOGY
AND ATTITUDES
ABOUT JEWS AND
ISRAEL**

INTRODUCTION

There has long been a debate about whether antisemitic attitudes are more common on the political left or the right, and about which variant of antisemitism the Jewish community should be more worried about.

Four years ago, I waded into this debate along with my colleague, Laura Royden. We conducted a major study of antisemitic attitudes among young American adults. Royden and I identified three overarching patterns in the data. **First**, young adults who identify as very conservative had much more negative attitudes toward Jews than young adults who identify as very liberal. **Second**, antisemitic views were much higher among Black and Hispanic Americans compared to White Americans. **Third**, while young people on the left did not agree with antisemitic statements, they did hold very negative views toward Israel.

The Hamas-Israel war following October 7th and the accompanying protest movements sparked a new public conversation about the extent to which young people, particularly on the left, harbor antisemitic views. The activism on university campuses showcased social-justice oriented students embracing slogans like “globalize the Intifada” and **in some instances** engaging in physical aggression targeted at Jews. Spillover of anti-Israel attitudes into anti-Jewish attitudes became a national news story.

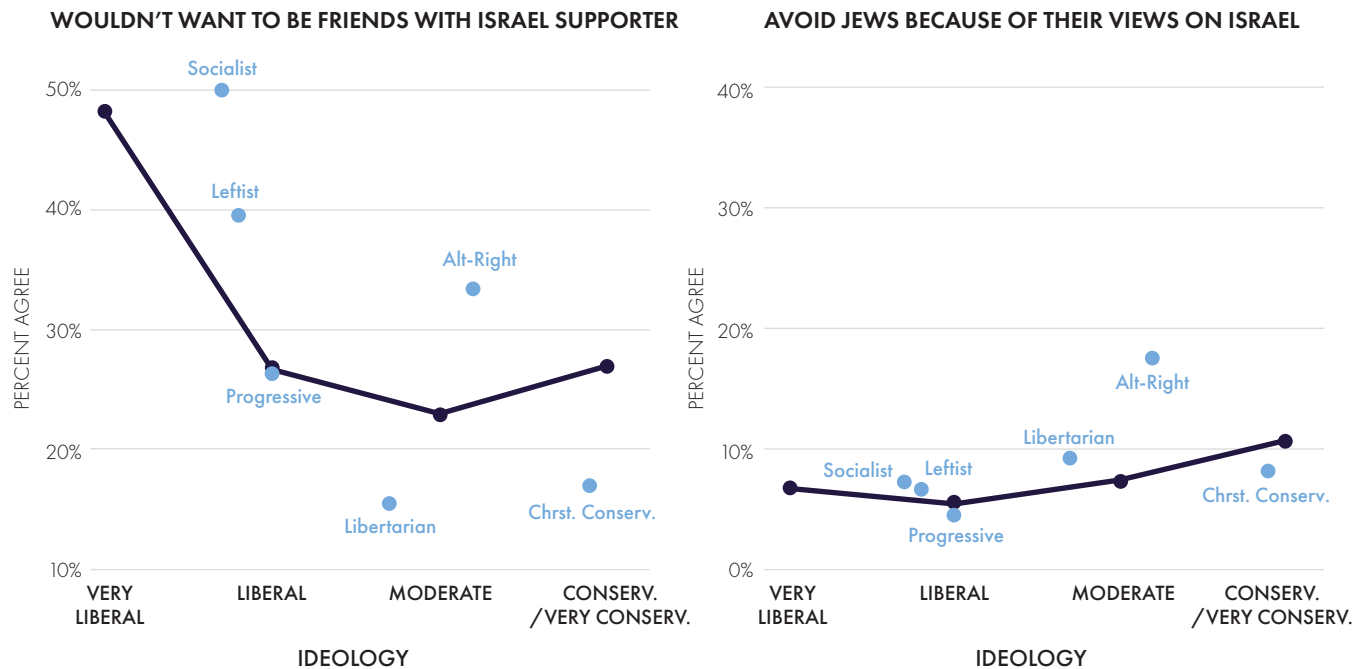
Does this new wave of campus activism suggest the epicenter of antisemitism has shifted from the right to the left?

In this essay, I’m going to showcase survey data collected in November-December of 2023 – the height of campus tensions – to answer this question. My goal is to explain why the answer is quite nuanced.

The survey I’ll discuss is part of a study funded by the Jim Joseph Foundation and implemented by College Pulse, which I helped to organize. In two preceding essays in this series, I looked at Jewish students’ responses to the survey about their experiences on campus. Here, I am now going to focus on the 1,549 non-Jewish students in our survey. These students were selected because they are on college campuses that have sizeable Jewish populations. The survey is not meant to be representative of all college students, but rather it is meant to assess views of Jewish and non-Jewish students who occupy the same spaces.

THE LEFT VERSUS THE RIGHT

To begin, I want to reexamine a graph that I showed in the first essay of this series, because it illustrates an odd but recurring pattern of how liberals and conservatives answer questions about Jews and Israel differently. When we asked non-Jewish students soon after October 7th if they wouldn't want to be friends with someone who supports the existence of Israel as a Jewish state, we found a lot of support for this on the far left (see the left plot). The highest level of agreement comes from students who identify as "socialist" or as "very liberal", about half of whom agree with this statement.



AGREE/DISAGREE...

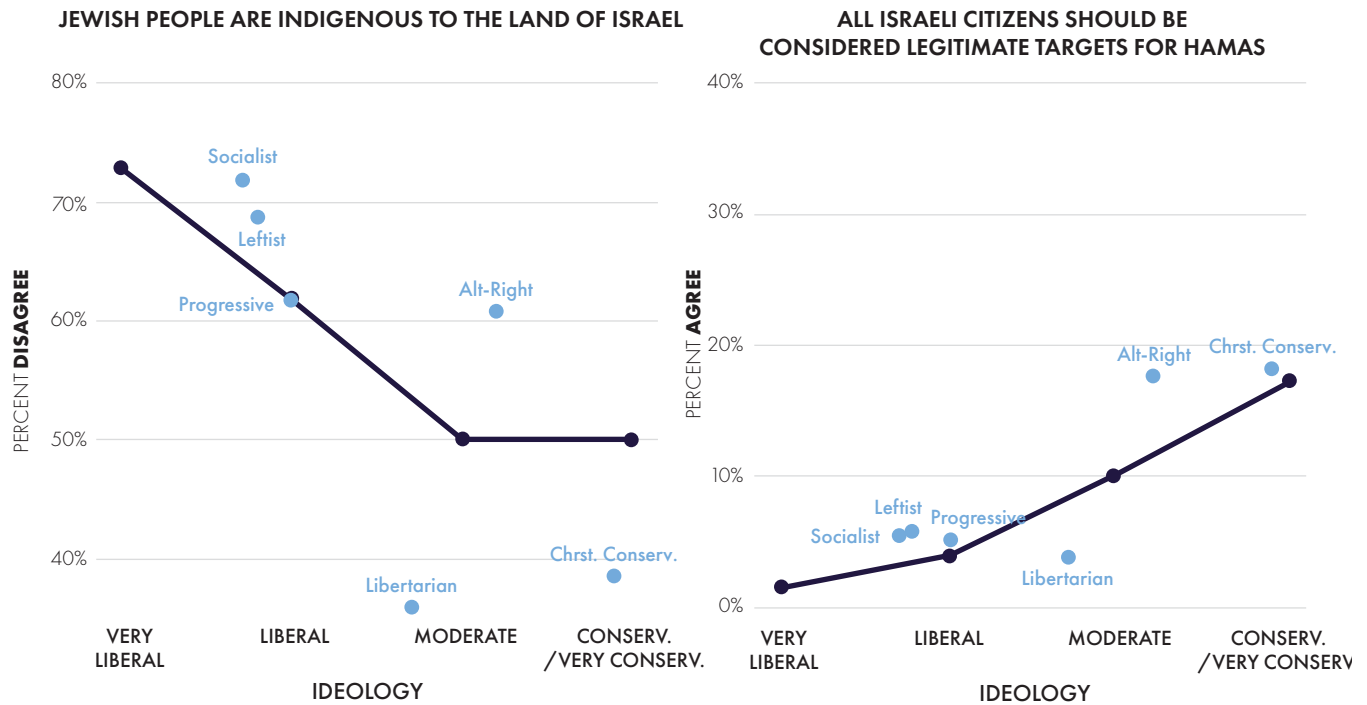
1. I wouldn't want to be friends with someone who supports the existence of Israel as a Jewish state.
2. I avoid socializing with Jews because of their views about Israel.

The right side of this first figure analyzes a survey question more directly targeted at the question of ostracization: do students avoid socializing with Jews because of their views on Israel?¹ Notice two things: first, many fewer students agree to the statement about avoiding Jews; second, the relationship with ideology changes between the two questions even though both are measuring ostracization related to views about Israel. The small number of students who identify as "alt-right" (43 such students are in the sample) have, by far, the highest agreement with this second statement.

1. The two plots are both on 40-point scales, but one runs 10-to-50 and one 0-to-40 to zoom in on the patterns.

This graph may seem puzzling: why are students on the left much more likely to agree to the first statement but comparatively less likely to agree to the second statement? This pattern is not an anomaly related to these particular survey questions. We can see the same pattern in all sorts of questions. Consider these two agree/disagree questions that were also asked to non-Jewish students in Nov/Dec of 2023.

1. Jewish people are indigenous to the land of Israel.
2. All Israeli civilians should be considered legitimate targets of Hamas.



AGREE/DISAGREE...

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About half of the students (53%) said “I don’t know” to the first question. For those who gave an opinion (N=722), 41% agreed with the statement. The left-side plot in the next graph shows the rate of *disagreement* (i.e., denying Jewish indigeneity) by ideology. The more “anti-Jewish” position is held by those on the ideological left.

When asked if all Israeli civilians are legitimate targets for Hamas, 29% said they didn’t know. Of those who gave an opinion, 7% of the non-Jewish students agreed. The right-hand plot in the graph above shows rate of agreement by ideology.² As with graphs depicting social ostracization, agreement with the more extreme statement here is less common overall, but it is more common on the ideological right than on the ideological left. Here we have two questions that gauge delegitimization of Israel, but the left is more likely to agree with one of them and the right is more likely to agree with the other.

2. Both of these side-by-side plots are on 40-point scales, but one runs 40-to-80 and the other 0-to-40 in order to zoom in on the patterns.

EXPLAINING THE PATTERN

It seems counterintuitive that conservative students are the ones taking more extreme anti-Israel positions given that we generally associate anti-Israel attitudes with the left. The left-to-right pattern on the question of civilians targeted by Hamas may seem especially odd, as the right-leaning students appear to be taking a position more sympathetic to Hamas. On college campuses, it was groups associated with the left that were more defensive of Hamas's strategies on October 7th. So why are 20% of conservative students saying that Israeli civilians are legitimate targets of Hamas?

In my research with Laura Royden, we consistently found this same left-to-right pattern back in 2020. Consider these two agree/disagree questions we asked young adults (18-30 year olds):

1. *It is appropriate for opponents of Israel's policies and actions to boycott Jewish American owned businesses in their communities.*
2. *Jewish Americans should be held accountable for Israel's actions.*

For both of these questions, young conservative adults (aged 18-30) were much more likely to agree than young liberal adults. About 10% of respondents on the left agreed with the first statement versus 40% of respondents on the far right. For the second statement, it's 4% for the far left and 28% for the far right.

But why? The young left opposes Israel's policies more than the young right does, so why is the young right more likely to approve of boycotts or collective punishment of Jews on account of Israel? And why do more conservatives say Israeli civilians are legitimate targets of Hamas?

A plausible answer is that a sizeable minority of young adults on the right endorses statements that are explicitly prejudicial against Jews and that endorse violence regardless of the political valence of the statements. But this phenomenon does not only occur when the subject is Jews, as Royden and I learned through a set of experiments. Some of our respondents were instead asked if they agreed with this statement: *Catholic Americans should be held accountable for the Vatican's actions.* Others were asked if they agreed with this one: *Indian American should be held accountable for India's actions.* Young conservatives were also far more likely to agree to those statements than young liberals. Interestingly, these patterns were not present among older adults (ages 31+).

Hardly anyone on the left agrees to the kinds of ominous statements about Jews and other minority groups that the right endorses. The left endorses social stigma against students who believe Israel should exist as a Jewish country and they deny the historical relationship between Jews and the land of Israel. But the left seems to shy away from affirming statements that target identities rather than viewpoints.

IT GETS MORE COMPLICATED

The picture is further complicated, however, by the fact that some identity groups associated with the left answer questions about Israel as negatively as the left answers them, but they also answer questions about Jews as negatively as the right does. For instance, Black students are far more likely than White students to say they wouldn't be friends with someone who supports the existence of Israel as a Jewish state (43% agree vs 16% agree), but they are also far more likely to say they avoid socializing with Jews (14% vs 2%). Black students are also far more likely to say that Israeli civilians are legitimate targets of Hamas than White students are (13% versus 4%). That is, Black students answer the Israel-focused questions like liberals and Jewish-focused questions like conservatives.

Non-binary students follow this pattern as well. Compared to students identifying as men or women, non-binary students are substantially more likely to not want to be friends with someone who supports the existence of Israel as a Jewish state (46% versus 27%), but they are also more likely to say they avoid socializing with Jews (11% versus 6%). They, too, are more likely to say Israeli civilians are legitimate targets of Hamas (15% versus 6%) than those who identify as men or women.

Black students and non-binary students are not more likely to identify as very liberal compared to White students or men and women, respectively. But these are identity groups typically in coalition with the campus left. The patterns of how these groups answer questions about Jews and Israel complicate the story that each side of the ideological spectrum might want to tell. Conservatives are less likely to shun supporters of Israel but they have a problem in their political camp: a sizeable minority of conservative students avoids Jews and endorses Hamas killing civilians at similar or higher rates as some identity groups associated with the left. Liberals are less likely to hold negative views toward Jews as Jews, except that anti-Jewish views are somewhat common among identity groups that are in the left's political camp.

THE TAKEAWAY

The evidence from college students after October 7th is quite consistent with previous research. Young people on the left are more likely to exhibit extreme negative attitudes when it comes to Israel, whereas young people on the right, as well as some minority identity groups typically associated with the left, are more likely to endorse ominous and prejudicial statements about Jews.

The October 7th attack and its aftermath reinforces the existing evidence rather than challenges it. Of course, many important questions are left unanswered: Why do students respond to these survey questions the way they do? What is the relationship between attitudes and prejudicial actions? How are Jewish students affected by all this? And so on. My aim here was to show that even the simplest of questions – are negative attitudes toward Jews concentrated on the left or right? – is more complicated than it may appear. Advocates and leaders who want to address anti-Jewish or anti-Israel sentiment on campuses are better served by confronting this complexity rather than ignoring it. Advocates with strong ideological commitments too quickly seek comfort in focusing on problems on the side opposite their own camp. But the real work comes in understanding the different values and prejudices that motivate intolerance across the full spectrum of the student population.