

BIRTHRIGHT'S IMPACT IN 2022:

KNOWLEDGE, VIEWS, AND FEELINGS TOWARD ISRAEL

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Twenty thousand young Jews from the United States traveled to Israel on Birthright trips during summer 2022. The easing of testing and social distancing requirements during that summer brought the trip experience closer to what it was pre-pandemic. Given that the trips took place in the context of rising political tensions in the United States and Israel, however, we wanted to examine whether these dynamics would hinder trip participants from developing a strong emotional connection to Israel. Would the program help participants understand the complex political situation in Israel? Would the trip influence how participants saw Israel's political and security situation? Would the program change how participants relate to organizations and movements involved in Israel-related activism?

This report documents the impact of Birthright Israel on American Jews' feelings and knowledge about Israel, drawing on surveys of American Jewish young adults who applied to Birthright Israel trips running in summer 2022. A pre-trip survey was conducted online between April 7, 2022 and May 15, 2022, prior to applicants leaving on their trips.

A total of 3,068 responded (2,466 participants, RR2=17.1%; 592 nonparticipants,

RR2=9.0%). A post-trip survey was conducted online between November 10, 2022 and January 3, 2023. A total of 2,389 responded (1,802 participants, RR2=10.7%; 587 nonparticipants, RR2=6.3%).

KEY FINDINGS

- **Participants overwhelmingly reported that the trip was both educational and fun.** Sixty-nine percent of participants reported that the trip felt “very much” like a learning experience, and the same percentage reported that it felt like a journey to their Jewish roots. Over half described it “very much” as “a life-changing experience.”
- **A substantial majority of participants agreed that the trip devoted the right amount of time to discussing Israel's history, Jewish ideas and values, contemporary life in Israel, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.**
- **Birthright Israel improved participants' knowledge of core political issues in Israel.** After returning from the trip, participants scored significantly higher on a “quiz” measuring knowledge of Israeli political issues.

- **Birthright participation had little or no effect on participants' political opinions with regard to Israel's political conflicts.** Going on the trip did not make participants significantly more or less likely to agree that Israel is “guilty of violating the human rights of the Palestinian people,” nor did it lead participants to become significantly more or less likely to agree that Israel “upholds the equality of all its citizens.” Participants did become slightly more likely to agree that Israel was “under constant threat from neighbors that seek its destruction,” but the magnitude of this effect was small.
- **Birthright's strongest impact was on participants' connection to Israel.** Before going on the trip, 30% of participants reported feeling “very much” connected to Israel. After the trip, the share of participants reporting being “very much” connected to Israel increased to 49%.
- **Participants' connection to Israel increased after going on a Birthright trip regardless of their political views.** Notwithstanding concerns about a growing political divide between the predominantly liberal American Jewish population and conservative Israeli governments, Birthright's significant impact on connection to Israel was evident for participants across the ideological spectrum.

The present findings demonstrate that Birthright continues to play a pivotal role in forging connections between young adult American Jews and Israel. By providing an experiential educational program for young adults and engaging them directly with the people of Israel, Birthright nurtures this relationship in a richer and more nuanced way than do news headlines or social media feeds. In an era of contentious political debate about Israel, Birthright's ability to educate participants about the history, culture, and politics of Israel without advancing a particular political line about the country's conflicts or life in Israel is more impressive than ever.

INTRODUCTION

BIRTHRIGHT ISRAEL DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, tens of thousands of young Jews annually participated in free, peer educational trips through Birthright Israel. The pandemic forced the sudden suspension of most forms of in-person educational experiences and significantly restricted international travel, leading to Birthright trips planned for summer 2020 being canceled. Given Birthright's demonstrated impact on participants' connection to Israel, the cancellations represented a lost opportunity to further expand the bonds between American Jews and Israel (Saxe, Wright, & Hecht, 2022a).

After the successful rollout of vaccines and the easing of travel restrictions, Birthright resumed operations in summer 2021, albeit with a significantly smaller cohort of young Jews compared to previous summers. Although Birthright aimed to run trips as it had in the past, the trip experiences that

summer diverged from those of previous years—trips ran under COVID mitigation protocols that included testing and social distancing requirements, and occurred in the aftermath of a new round of violent conflict between Israel and Hamas. In August 2021, only a couple of months after trips resumed, the resurgence of COVID-19 forced trips to be canceled once again. In the end, only around 2,800 young Jews from the United States were able to participate in the program during summer 2021.

Despite these disruptions, research findings demonstrate that the summer 2021 trips remained a success for the smaller cohort of participants. As in pre-pandemic years, compared to their perspectives prior to leaving on the trip, US participants returned home feeling more connected to Israel, to Jewish customs and traditions, and to the broader worldwide Jewish community. Participants also formed and maintained social connections with other Jews in the United States and Israel up to six months after the trip (Wright, Hecht, Volodarsky, & Saxe, 2022).

THE SUMMER 2022 BIRTHRIGHT TRIPS

By summer 2022, travel and social interactions had begun to return to pre-pandemic levels, and nearly 20,000 young Jews from the United States traveled to Israel on Birthright trips. The easing of testing and social distancing requirements brought the trip experience closer to what it was pre-pandemic. At the same time, the trips took place in the context of rising political tensions in the United States and Israel, with the mid-term 2022 congressional elections on the horizon in the United States and the fifth parliamentary election in four years underway in Israel.

These internal dynamics heightened long-standing concerns among observers of the Jewish community in the United States about the relationship between the two countries and possible “distancing” between young American Jews and Israel. Although these concerns are not new (Barnett, 2016; Beinart, 2010; Cohen & Kelman, 2010; Miller & Dashefsky, 2010), they received renewed attention after the election of a hard-right Israeli government and the return of Benjamin Netanyahu as prime minister (Koplow, 2022; Stack, 2022).

This report examines whether the environment of increasingly polarized views of Israel hindered trip participants from developing a strong emotional connection to Israel. Did the program help participants understand the complex political situation in Israel? Did the trip influence how participants saw Israel's political and security situation? Did the program change how participants relate to organizations and movements involved in Israel-related activism?

Considering Birthright's enormous scale prior to the pandemic—as of 2019, nearly 20% of eligible American Jews had gone on a Birthright trip (Saxe, Wright, & Hecht, 2022b)—the extent to which Birthright changes (or does not change) how participants think and feel about Israel has important implications for the future of American Jews' relationship with Israel.

FOCUS OF THIS REPORT

This report addresses the following questions:

- **Who were the applicants to Birthright Israel trips in the summer of 2022?** We begin by examining the background characteristics of summer 2022 Birthright applicants, and the extent to which these characteristics were different from previous years.
- **How do Birthright participants view their experience in Israel?** We then explore how those young Jews who participated in a Birthright Israel trip felt about their experience, in particular about the educational content of the trip.
- **How does Birthright Israel impact what participants know, think, and feel about Israel?** We assess how going on a Birthright Israel trip changed how much participants know about Israeli politics and society, their views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and their emotional connection to Israel.

ABOUT THE DATA

The present findings are based on a pair of surveys of US applicants to summer 2022 Birthright Israel trips. All applicants who were eligible to participate in the trips were invited to complete both surveys regardless of their participation status.

A pre-trip survey was conducted online between April 7, 2022 and May 15, 2022, prior to applicants leaving on their trips. A total of 3,068 responded (2,466 participants, RR2=17.1%; 592 nonparticipants, RR2=9.0%). A post-trip survey was conducted online between November 10, 2022 and January 3, 2023. A total of 2,389 responded (1,802 participants, RR2=10.7%; 587 nonparticipants, RR2=6.3%).

Data for each survey were weighted to account for differential response rates based on respondent characteristics. Weights were calculated separately for the pre-trip and post-trip surveys, and for respondents to both surveys. Complete methodological details about both surveys can be found in Technical Appendix A.

ABOUT BIRTHRIGHT ISRAEL

Since 1999, Birthright Israel has provided intensive educational trips to Israel, typically 10 days, for Jewish young adults from around the world (Saxe & Chazan, 2008). Multiple strands of evidence indicate that participation in Birthright Israel leads young Jews to become more emotionally connected to Israel, the worldwide Jewish community, and their own Jewish identity, as well as more confident in their understanding of the complex political situation in Israel (Saxe et al., 2008; Shain, Saxe, Hecht, Wright, & Sasson, 2015; Wright, Hecht, & Saxe, 2019). Other studies indicate that participation in the program has the potential to transform the trajectory of participants' relationship with Judaism (Sasson et al., 2015) and lead to elevated levels of engagement with Jewish life and Israel that persist over a decade after the trip experience (Saxe et al., 2011; Wright, Hecht, & Saxe, 2020).

APPLICANTS TO SUMMER 2022 BIRTHRIGHT TRIPS

Although applicants to Birthright Israel are not fully representative of the broader American Jewish population, they do represent the diversity of backgrounds and experiences among American Jews: Birthright applicants include those with no or few prior experiences with Jewish life, as well as those raised in highly religious households who visited Israel previously.

Among all applicants, more than two thirds (68%) reported that they grew up with two

Jewish parents (Table 1). Participants were more likely to come from families in which all parents were Jewish compared to nonparticipants.

Over one quarter of applicants (28%) had no formal Jewish education while growing up, and nearly one quarter (24%) attended day school. Participants were more likely to have attended Jewish supplementary school and less likely to have no formal Jewish education compared to nonparticipants (Table 2).

Table 1. Parents' Jewish status (summer 2022 applicants)

	Nonparticipants	Participants	Total
No parent is Jewish (applicant converted to Judaism)	2%	1%	1%
One Jewish parent, one non-Jewish parent	35%	28%	30%
All parent(s) are Jewish	64%	71%	68%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Source: Registration data.

Table 2. Highest level of formal Jewish education (summer 2022 applicants)

	Nonparticipants	Participants	Total
No formal Jewish education	33%	25%	28%
Supplementary school	39%	53%	48%
Day school	28%	22%	24%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Source: Registration data.

Five percent of all applicants identified as Orthodox when they applied for the trip. Participants were less likely than nonparticipants to identify as Orthodox (4% participants compared to 8% nonparticipants). At the time the trips were set to leave, 55% of applicants to summer 2022 trips were ages 18-21 (Table 3). Participants were slightly younger than those who did not participate in the trips.

Nearly 67% of all applicants were students in academic institutions in the 2021-22 academic year (Table 4). Participants were less likely to be graduating high school students and slightly less likely to be working professionals compared to nonparticipants.

Women were more likely than men to apply to summer 2022 trips (56% versus 46%) and more likely to participate in the trips (54% versus 46%).

Table 3. Age (summer 2022 applicants)

	Nonparticipants	Participants	Total
18-21	51%	57%	55%
22-26	33%	31%	32%
27-32	16%	12%	14%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Source: Registration data.

Table 4. Employment status (summer 2022 applicants)

	Nonparticipants	Participants	Total
High school student (2021-22)	9%	4%	6%
Undergraduate student (2021-22)	52%	65%	60%
Graduate student (2021-22)	7%	7%	7%
Working professional	27%	23%	24%
Unemployed	3%	1%	2%
Something else	2%	1%	1%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Source: Pre-trip survey.

Fifty-nine percent of applicants identified as politically liberal, with 10% describing themselves as “extremely liberal” (Table 5). Twenty percent identified as conservative, including 2% who identified as “extremely

conservative.” Participants were more likely to be politically liberal and less likely to be conservative compared to nonparticipants.

Table 5. Self-identified political ideology (summer 2022 applicants)

	Nonparticipants	Participants	Total
Extremely liberal	10%	9%	10%
Liberal	28%	36%	33%
Slightly liberal	14%	17%	16%
Moderate	24%	21%	22%
Slightly conservative	11%	9%	9%
Conservative	12%	7%	9%
Extremely conservative	3%	1%	2%
Total	100%	100%	100%

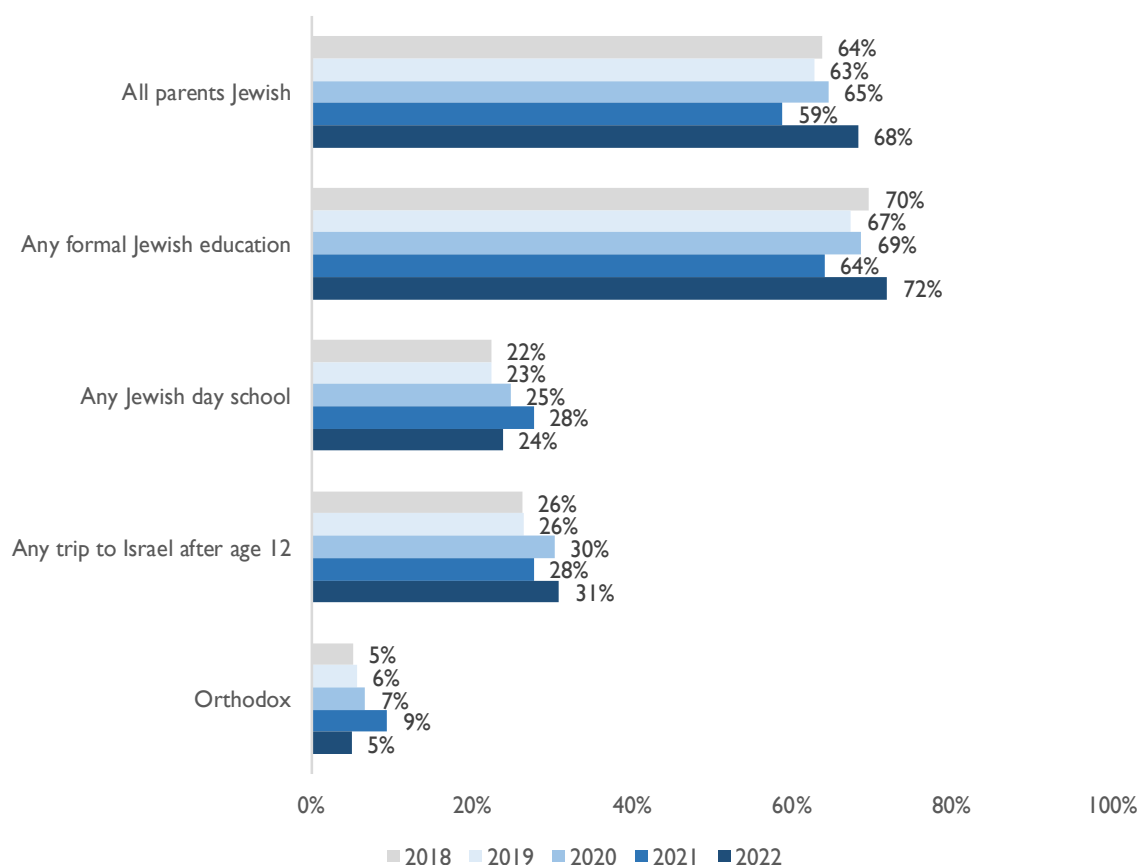
Source: Pre-trip survey.

BIRTHRIGHT APPLICANTS SUMMER TRIPS 2018-21

Because summer 2022 represented the return to pre-pandemic operations, it was important to assess the extent to which the characteristics of 2022 applicants differed from those who applied to the trips in 2021 and from those who took trips before the pandemic.

In general, applicants to summer 2022 trips had similar characteristics to those who applied to Birthright before the pandemic. The 2021 applicant pool, which was significantly smaller in size, was unique in terms of its applicant characteristics: 2021 applicants were less likely to have had any formal Jewish education and less likely to have had exclusively Jewish parents, compared to applicants prior to the pandemic. At the same time, the 2021 cohort also included a higher proportion of applicants who attended Jewish day school and identified as Orthodox.

Figure I. Jewish background of Birthright applicants (2018-21 summer trips)



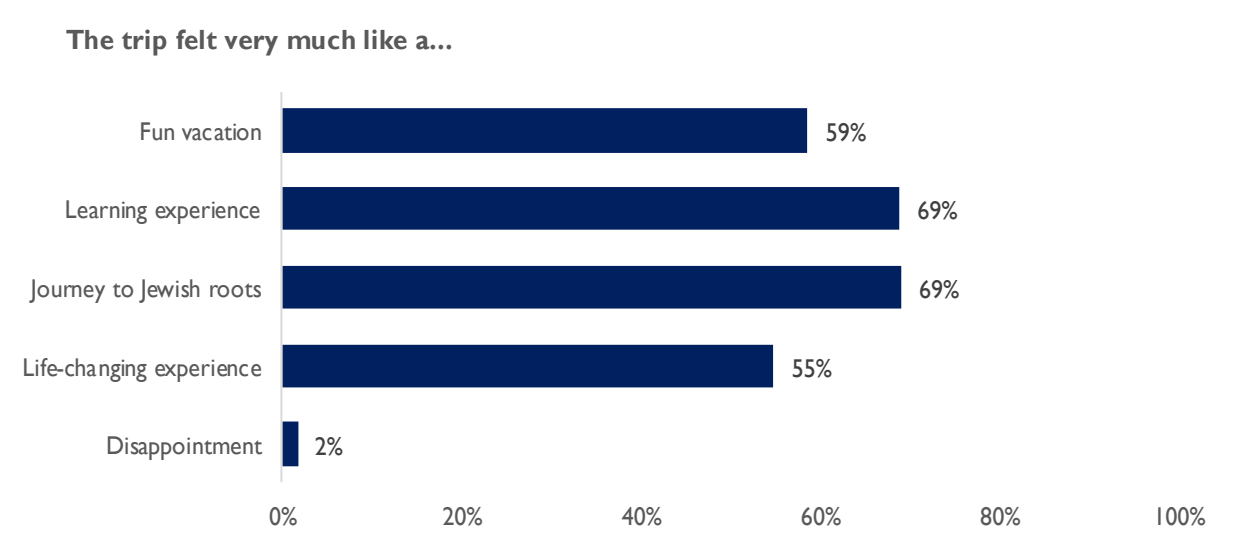
Source: Registration data: 2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021.

THE BIRTHRIGHT TRIP AS AN EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE

Participants overwhelmingly reported that the trip was both educational and fun. Sixty-nine percent of participants reported that the trip felt “very much” like a learning experience, and the same percentage reported that it felt like a journey to their Jewish roots (Figure 2). At the same time, 59% reported that the trip “very much” felt like a “fun vacation.” The trip was also transformative

for many participants, with over half describing it “very much” as “a life-changing experience.” In contrast, very few participants described the trip as a disappointment. Participants’ strong feelings about the quality of the trip was also evidenced by the fact that 92% said that they encouraged friends, siblings, or others to apply.

Figure 2. Evaluation of the Birthright Israel trip experience (summer 2022 US participants)

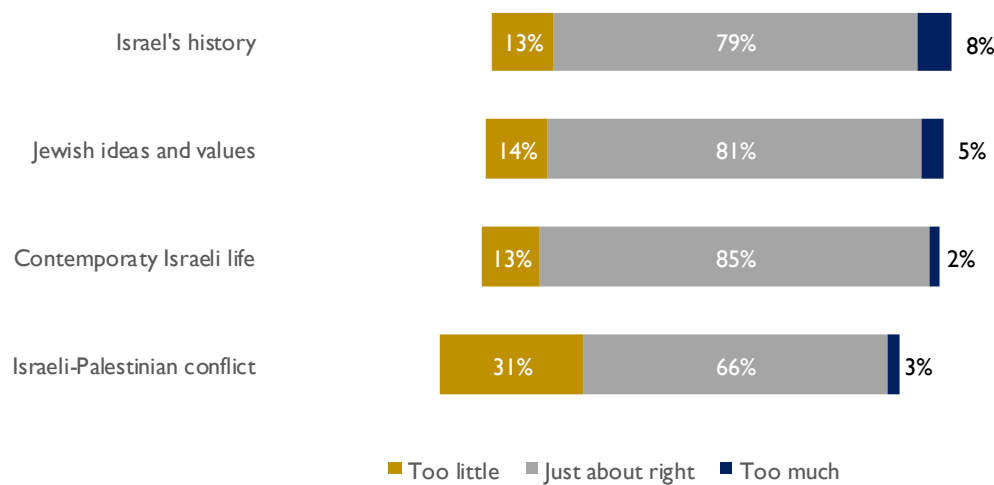


Source: Post-trip survey. Question text: “Trip participants have described the trip in many ways. Overall, for you, did the trip feel like...?” See Technical Appendix Table C1 for 95% confidence intervals.

A substantial majority of participants agreed that the trip devoted the right amount of time to discussing Israel's history, Jewish ideas and values, contemporary life in Israel, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In addition, for all four topics, participants were more likely to say that they wished the trip spent more—rather than less—time covering the topic in question. The desire for more educational

content was strongest with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with 31% of participants expressing a desire for more discussion; very few participants felt that the trip spent too much time discussing this topic (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Time spent discussing topics related to Israel and Judaism (summer 2022 US participants)



Source: Post-trip survey. Question text “On your Birthright trip, was the amount of time devoted to programming and discussion of the following topics too little, too much or just about right?” See Technical Appendix Table C2 for 95% confidence intervals.

BIRTHRIGHT’S IMPACT ON KNOWLEDGE, ATTITUDES, AND FEELINGS ABOUT ISRAEL

MEASURING BIRTHRIGHT’S IMPACT

In this section we look at how participating in a Birthright Israel trip impacts how much participants know about Israel, their views about contentious political issues in Israel, and how they *feel* about Israel.

The impact of the trip is determined by looking at:

- **How the responses of participants changed between the pre-trip and post-trip surveys.**
- **How the responses of applicants who did NOT go on the trip changed during this same period.**

The changes among nonparticipants reflect what we assume *would* have happened to participants if they had not gone on the trip.

The full impact of the trip is represented by the difference between the change between surveys detected among participants and the change between surveys observed among nonparticipants.

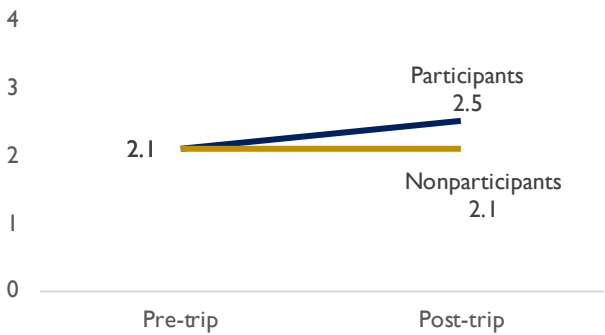


ISRAEL KNOWLEDGE

In fall 2022, both participants and nonparticipants were presented with the same multiple-choice “quiz” on Israel-related topics. The “quiz” included four questions that aimed to identify knowledge about the location of “the settlements,” who can vote in Israel, the area governed by the Palestinian Authority, and the intersection of religious and secular life in Israel.¹ A detailed description of the “quiz” is included in Appendix A.²

Birthright improved participants’ knowledge of core political issues in Israel. After returning from the trip, Birthright participants were significantly more likely to score higher on the four-question quiz (Figure 4). Prior to the trip, participants responded correctly to an average of 2.1 questions. After the trip, the average correct answers increased to 2.5.³ During the same period, there was no significant change in the scores of Birthright nonparticipants.

Figure 4. Average number of correct responses to Israel knowledge “quiz” pre- and post-trip (summer 2022 US participants and nonparticipants)



Source: Pre- and post-trip surveys. Knowledge Quiz index described in Appendix A. The independent effect of Birthright participation for each group was confirmed statistically using difference-in-difference models. See Technical Appendix Table C3 in Technical Appendix C for 95% confidence intervals and significance tests.

UNDERSTANDING THE SITUATION IN ISRAEL AND FOLLOWING THE NEWS ABOUT ISRAEL

In addition to the “objective” measure of Israel knowledge assessed with the quiz, respondents were also asked to rate their own sense of how well they understood the situation in Israel and how closely they followed news about Israel.

Birthright had no significant impact on the degree to which participants followed news about Israel. In spring 2022, prior to any of the Birthright trips leaving, most applicants did not follow news about Israel closely or at all, and only 6% followed it very closely (Table 6). Participation in Birthright did not significantly alter how closely individuals followed news about Israel (not shown).

Table 6. Pre-trip following news about Israel (summer 2022 US applicants)

	%
Not at all	13%
Not very closely	51%
Fairly closely	30%
Very closely	6%
Total	100%

Source: Pre-trip survey. Question text “How closely do you follow the news about Israel on TV, radio, newspapers, or on the Internet?” See Technical Appendix Table C4 for 95% confidence intervals.

Birthright participation contributed to individuals’ confidence in their understanding of the situation in Israel.

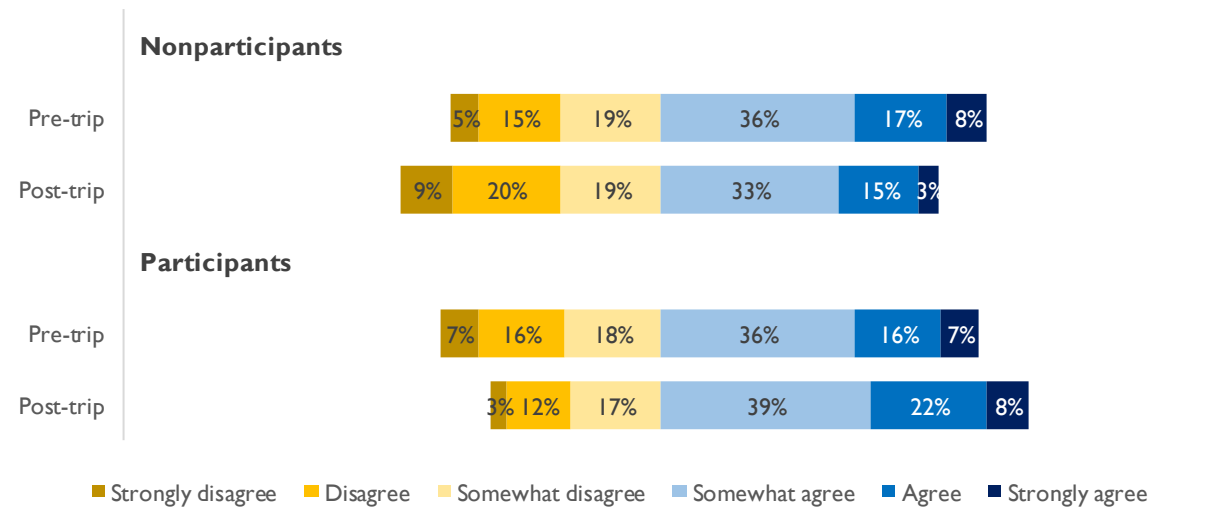
The percentage of Birthright participants who agreed with the statement regarding feeling confident in their understanding of the situation in Israel increased from 59% before the trip to 68% after returning. However, this increase did not capture the full impact of the trip, because during this same period, nonparticipants, who had similar levels of confidence as participants before the trip, became significantly *less* confident (Figure 5). This finding suggests that, if participants had not gone on a Birthright trip, they also would have become less confident in their understanding of the situation in Israel.

POLITICAL VIEWS ABOUT ISRAEL

To assess applicants’ attitudes about political issues in Israel, they were asked if they agreed or disagreed with several statements about Israel, and about their knowledge and support of Israel advocacy groups.

In spring 2022, most Birthright applicants were sympathetic to Israel’s position in regard to its political conflicts. Ninety percent of applicants agreed that Israel “is under constant threat from hostile neighbors,” with 41% strongly agreeing. Most applicants (72%) also agreed that Israel “upholds social and political equality for all its

Figure 5. Confident in understanding the current situation in Israel pre and post trip (summer 2022 US nonparticipants versus participants)



Source: Pre- and post-trip surveys. Question text: “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? I feel confident that I understand the current situation in Israel.” See Technical Appendix Table C5 for 95% confidence intervals and significance tests.

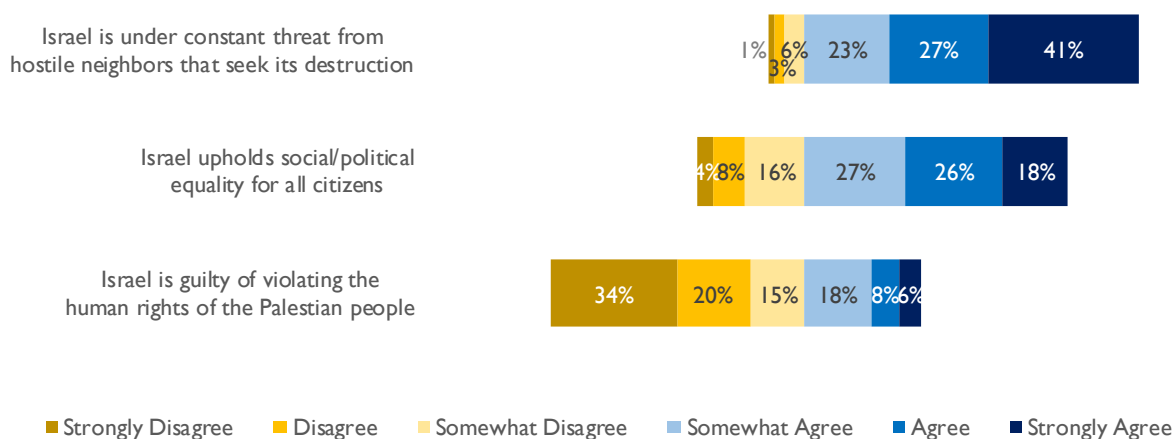
citizens,” although a significant minority disagreed. Similarly, most respondents *disagreed* that Israel is “guilty of violating the human rights of the Palestinian people,” with more than a third strongly disagreeing (Figure 6).

Birthright participation had little or no effect on participants’ political opinions with regard to Israel’s political conflicts.

Although, as discussed above, Birthright participants became more *knowledgeable* about Israel, the program did not appear to have any significant impact on how supportive or critical participants felt toward Israel with regard to particular political issues. In particular, going on the trip did not make

participants significantly more or less likely to agree that Israel was “guilty of violating the human rights of the Palestinian people,” nor did it lead participants to become significantly more or less likely to agree that Israel “upholds the equality of all its citizens.” In spring 2022, prior to the trips leaving, around 90% of both participants and nonparticipants agreed at least somewhat that Israel was “under constant threat from neighbors that seek its destruction.” After returning from the trip, participants became slightly more likely to agree with this statement, while there was no comparable change among nonparticipants (not shown).

Figure 6. Pre-trip views about Israel (summer 2022 US applicants)

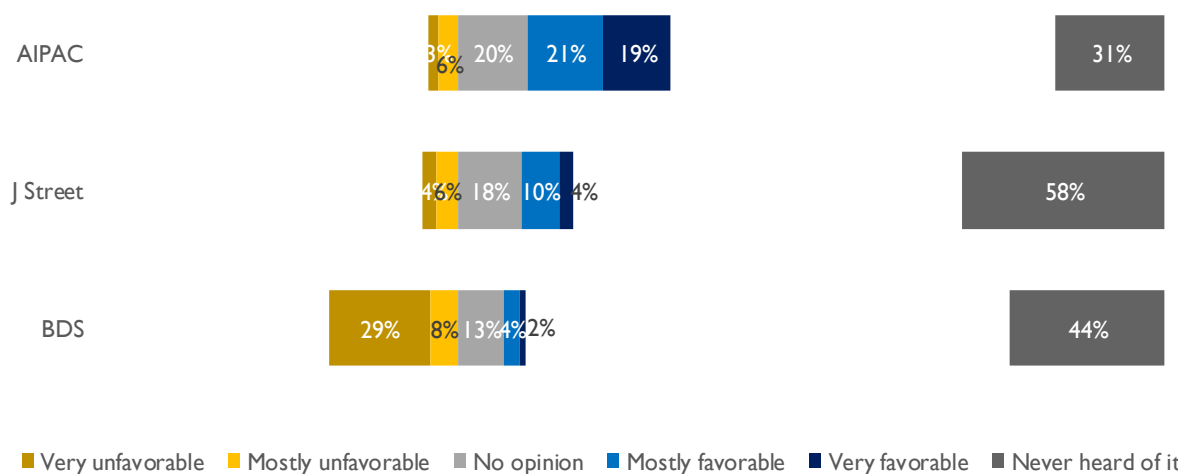


Source: Pre-trip survey. Question text “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?” See Technical Appendix Table C6 for 95% confidence intervals.

Birthright had no significant impact on participants' awareness or opinions of J Street or AIPAC. In spring 2022, over half (58%) of applicants had never heard of J Street, and only one quarter had an opinion about the organization. Thirty-one percent of applicants said they had never heard of AIPAC, 40% had a favorable view of the organization, and another 20% did not have an opinion about the organization (Figure 7). After the trip, awareness of these organizations and favorability remained unchanged (not shown).

Birthright had a slight impact on awareness of the Boycotts, Divestments and Sanctions (BDS) movement but did not change opinions about BDS. Before going on the trip, 44% of applicants had never heard of BDS, another 13% had no opinion about it, and very few viewed the BDS movement favorably. After the trip, participants were slightly more likely to report that they had heard of BDS, while for nonparticipants there was no significant change in awareness. Among those who had heard of BDS, there was no significant change in how favorable or unfavorable they felt toward the movement, neither for participants nor nonparticipants (not shown).

Figure 7. Pre-trip awareness and favorability of Israel advocacy groups (summer 2022 US applicants)



Source: Pre-trip survey. Question text "To what extent is your overall opinion of the following favorable or unfavorable?" See Technical Appendix Table C7 for 95% confidence intervals.

CONNECTION TO ISRAEL

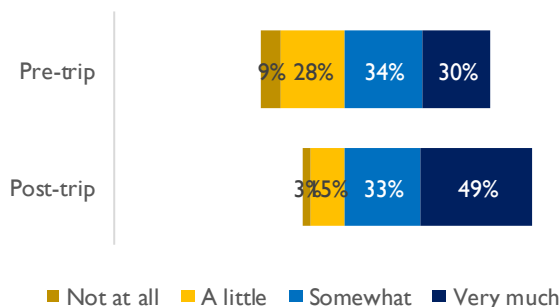
Birthright's strongest impact was on participants' connection to Israel.

Participation in Birthright dramatically increased feelings of connection to Israel. Before going on the trip, 30% of participants reported feeling “very much” connected to Israel. After the trip, the share of participants reporting being “very much” connected to Israel increased to 49% (Figure 8). There was no significant change in feelings of connection to Israel among nonparticipants during this period.

Participants' connection to Israel increased after going on a Birthright trip regardless of their political views.

Notwithstanding concerns about a growing political divide between the predominantly liberal American Jewish population and conservative Israeli governments, Birthright's

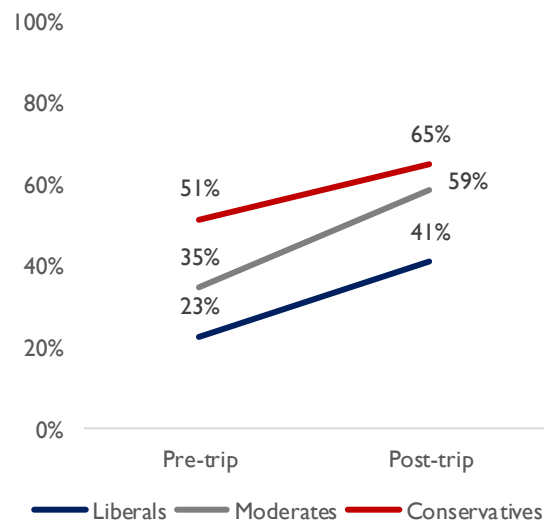
Figure 8. Connection to Israel pre and post trip (summer 2022 US participants)



Source: Pre- and post-trip surveys. Question text: “To what extent do you feel a connection to Israel?” The independent effect of Birthright participation was confirmed statistically using difference-in-difference models. See Technical Appendix Table C8 for full results, 95% confidence intervals, and significance tests.

significant impact on connection to Israel was evident for participants across the ideological spectrum. Before the trip, liberal and moderate participants felt less connected to Israel than conservative participants. Participants in each group became dramatically more connected to Israel after returning from the trip. The proportion of conservatives who reported being “very much” connected to Israel increased from 51% to 65%, and the proportion of moderates who were “very much” connected to Israel increased from 34% to 59%. Among liberal participants, the proportion who were “very much” connected to Israel increased even more dramatically, from 23% to 41% (Figure 9).

Figure 9. Very much connected to Israel pre and post trip by political views (summer 2022 US participants)



Source: Pre- and post-trip surveys. Question text: “To what extent do you feel a connection to Israel?” The independent effect of Birthright participation for each group was confirmed statistically using difference-in-difference models. See Technical Appendix Table C9 for full results, 95% confidence intervals, and significance tests.

BIRTHRIGHT'S IMPACT ON JEWISH CONNECTIONS

Birthright had an impact on participants' connection to Jewish values, Jewish history, Jewish customs and traditions, and on their sense of being part of a worldwide Jewish community (Figure 10).

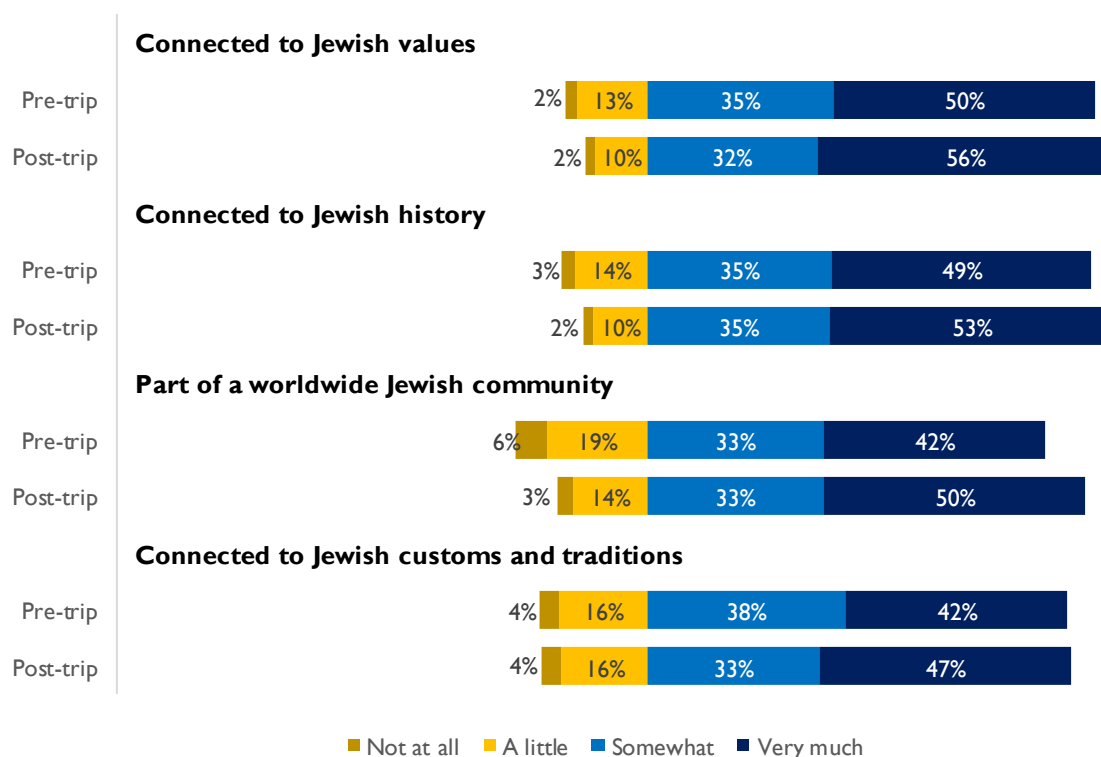
There was no significant change in the responses of nonparticipants to any of these questions during the same period.

Birthright's impact on Jewish connections tended to be concentrated among those who had weaker conceptions of Jewish identity at the time they went on the trip.

As discussed in our earlier report (Wright et al., 2019), this differential impact is

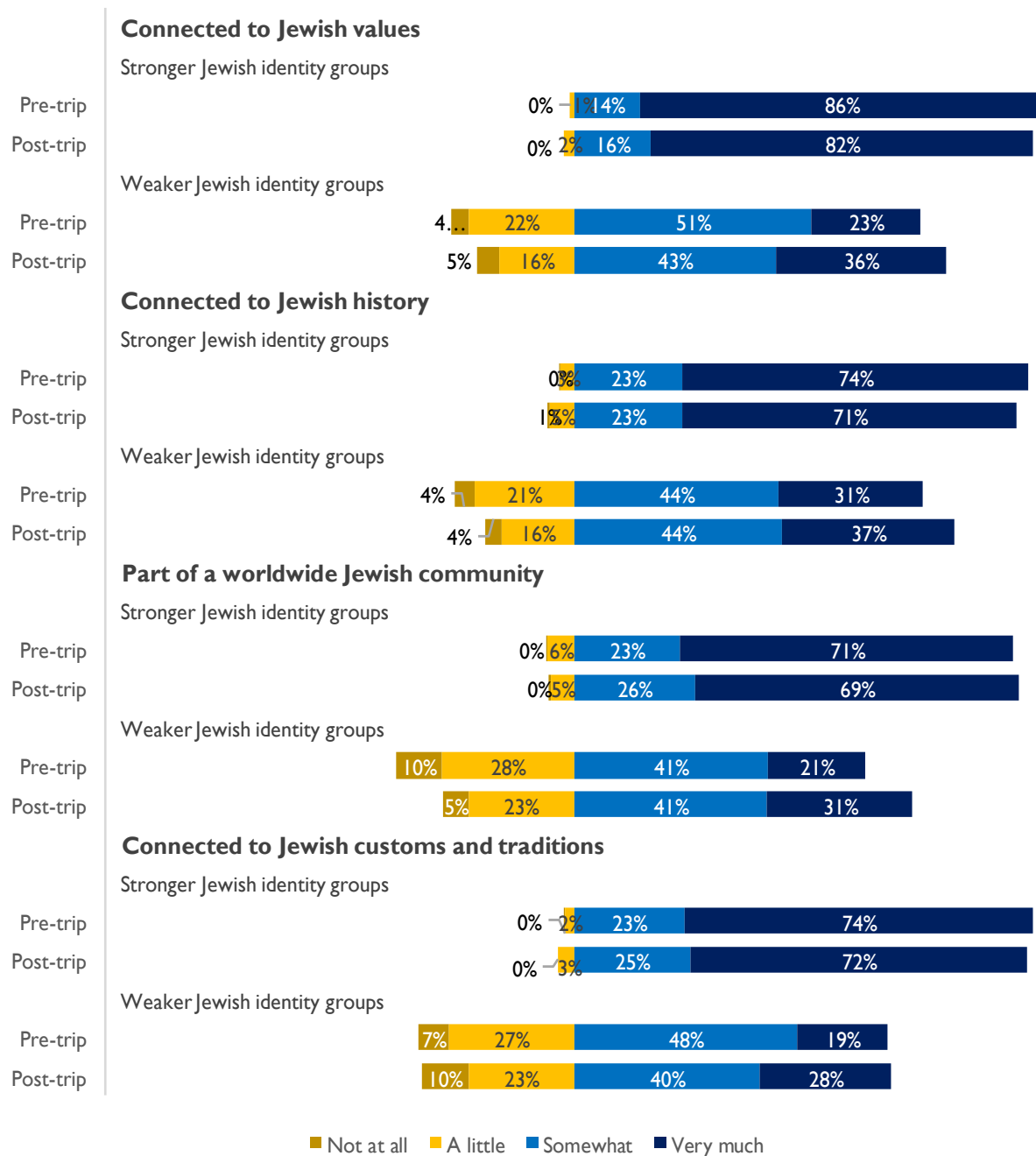
attributable to the fact that participants who had stronger Jewish identities were already very connected to many aspects of Jewish life before going on the trip, and thus had fewer opportunities for growth. Prior to the trip, the vast majority of participants with stronger Jewish identities were “very much” connected to Jewish values (86%), Jewish history (74%), Jewish customs and traditions (74%) and felt “very much” part of a worldwide Jewish community (71%). Their connections remained just as strong after returning from the trip. In comparison, less than a third of participants with weaker Jewish identities were “very much” connected on any of these measures prior to the trip. After returning, the share of participants in this group who felt very connected on each of these measures increased (Figure 11).⁵

Figure 10. Jewish connections pre and post trip (summer 2022 US participants)



Source: Pre- and post-trip surveys Question text “To what extent do you feel...?” The independent effect of Birthright participation was confirmed statistically using difference-in-difference models. See Technical Appendix Table C10 for 95% confidence intervals and significance tests.

Figure 11. Jewish connections pre and post trip by Jewish identity groups (summer 2022 US participants)



Note: Pre- and post-trip surveys, Question text "To what extent do you feel...?" "Stronger Jewish identity groups" includes those in the "Committed" and "Connected" groups, while "weaker Jewish identity groups" include those in the "Ancestry, Secular Peoplehood, and Casual Religious" groups, as defined in Wright et al. (2019). See Technical Appendix Table C11 for 95% confidence intervals and significance tests.

DISCUSSION

The present findings demonstrate that participants' views of their summer 2022 Birthright trips were as positive as those we documented among participants prior to the pandemic (Saxe, Shain, Wright, & Hecht, 2019; Wright et al., 2019). The vast majority of participants found the trip both fun and educational, and more than half felt it was a very much a "life-changing experience." Most were satisfied with the amount of educational content provided about Israel's history, Jewish ideas and values, and contemporary life in Israel, but nearly one third desired more detailed discussions and educational content with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Perhaps most important given the concerns about the political divide between American Jews and Israel, the data suggest that participating in Birthright leads participants to become more emotionally connected to Israel and more knowledgeable about some of the political issues confronting the country, but does not dramatically change participants' views on Israel's political conflicts. Despite longstanding concerns about a divide between American Jewish liberals and the right-wing trajectory of Israeli politics (Gordis, 2019; Stack, 2022), the trip's impact on connection to Israel was evident for participants across the ideological spectrum. Although liberal participants were less connected to Israel than their moderate or conservative peers prior to the trip, liberal participants reported

dramatically stronger connections to Israel after going on the trip—even in the wake of the 2022 Knesset election.

Participants also became more informed about Israel and its political and social context. After returning from the trip, participants performed significantly better on a brief "quiz" of Israel-related knowledge and became more confident in their understanding of the situation in Israel. Altogether, these results suggest that Birthright is fulfilling its educational mission and should continue to embrace conversations about Israel's politics and its relationship with the Palestinians and neighboring countries.

Although there have been concerns that Birthright gives participants a limited view of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, there is no evidence that the trip influences the political attitudes of participants. Prior to going on the trip, most applicants tended to be broadly sympathetic to Israel's position with regard to political conflicts (although there was still broad diversity in opinions related to whether Israel "violates the human rights of the Palestinian people" or "upholds the social and political equality of all its citizens"). Regardless of their opinions prior to the trip, participation did not "push" individuals to be either more or less sympathetic to Israel's position.

Birthright also had little impact on how participants feel about organizations and movements engaging in activism related to Israel, regardless of their political orientation. When asked if they had a favorable or unfavorable view of AIPAC, J Street, or BDS, the majority of applicants either had never heard of the group in question or had no opinion about it. After the trip, participants were slightly more likely to be aware of BDS, but awareness of AIPAC or J Street did not change. More importantly, among those who had an opinion about these groups, participation did not lead participants to be any more or less favorable toward them, suggesting that Birthright does not appear to influence support or involvement with these groups.

These results point to American Jews' ability to separate their emotional connection to Israel from the actions of the Israeli government. This distinction is especially critical for liberal American Jews, who often see criticism of Israel's policies as an essential part of what it means to "care" about Israel, in the same way they see criticism of America's flaws an essential part of genuine American "patriotism" (Wright, Saxe, & Wald, 2022). Studies from the early 2010s found that Birthright led participants to become more

emotionally connected to Israel without fostering nationalistic political views (Sasson, Shain, Hecht, Wright, & Saxe, 2014), and this appears to still be the case in 2022, notwithstanding the dramatic political changes that have taken place in Israel and the United States over the past decade.

CONCLUSION

The present findings demonstrate that Birthright continues to play a pivotal role in forging connections between young adult American Jews and Israel. By providing an experiential education experience for young adults, and engaging them directly with the people of Israel, Birthright nurtures this relationship in a richer and more nuanced way than do news headlines or social media feeds. The findings underscore that Israel remains an important part of the identity and lives of American Jews. In an era of contentious political debate about Israel, Birthright's ability to educate participants about the history, culture, and politics of Israel, without advancing a particular political line about the conflict or life in Israel, is more impressive than ever.

NOTES

¹ The full quiz given to respondents included an additional fifth question asking about the identity of the current Israeli prime minister. Due to the changing political situation in Israel, the correct answer to this question changed between the pre and post-trip surveys. In the spring of 2022, Naftali Bennett was the prime minister. By the time respondents were taking the survey in fall 2022, Benjamin Netanyahu had recently prevailed in the election but had yet to assemble a government, and Yair Lapid was the prime minister. Partly due to this shift, and partly because results of Item Response Theory analysis indicated that this question did the worst job of discriminating between high and low levels of knowledge about Israel, it was excluded from all results presented in the report. As discussed in note 3 below, this decision had little substantive impact on results.

² Following existing protocol to guard against inaccuracy due to cheating, we first asked respondents to commit to answer the questions without the assistance of others or the internet before proceeding. After presenting the questions, we then asked respondents if they answered all questions without seeking external help. Only 6% admitted to using external help, and these responses are excluded from the analyses presented here.

³ A difference-in-differences model indicated that Birthright's impact on Israel knowledge remained positive and statistically significant at $p < .05$ when the question on the current Israeli Prime Minister was included in the index.

⁴ During this period, both participants and nonparticipants became somewhat more likely to agree that Israel violated the human rights of the Palestinian people and less likely to agree that Israel upholds the quality of all its citizens. But in both cases the change among participants was not significantly different from the change among nonparticipants, indicating that the trip itself had no significant impact on how participants thought about these two issues.

⁵ Jewish identity groups were identified using Latent Class Analysis, including 12 of the 14 observed variables and the same model specifications as used in Wright et al. (2019). This LCA model identified the same five classes as in the 2019 report, which were then dichotomized into two groups: "Stronger Jewish identity groups" include those in the "Committed" and "Connected" groups, while "weaker Jewish identity groups" include those in the "Ancestry," "Secular Peoplehood," and "Casual Religious" groups. Statistical models confirmed that Birthright's impact on these four items in 2022 was significantly greater for those in the weaker identity groups, compared to those in the stronger Jewish identity groups.

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APPENDIX: ISRAEL KNOWLEDGE QUIZ

The distribution of pre-trip responses to the four questions, including the percent of respondents who gave the correct answers (highlighted, with a ✓ symbol) is presented in Table A1. Around 70% of respondents knew what the term “the settlements” in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict refers to and were aware that all citizens get to vote in Israel, while 37% could identify the West Bank as the area administrated by the Palestinian Authority. The most “difficult” question was the last one: Only 33% of respondents correctly answered that Jews and non-Jews cannot legally marry in Israel. (As there is no civil marriage in Israel, it is not possible for Jew and non-Jew to hold a legally recognized wedding ceremony in Israel. The state of Israel does, however, recognize marriages conducted abroad.) A roughly equal percentage of respondents incorrectly answered that men and women can pray together at the Western Wall.

To help determine whether performance on this quiz represents a valid measure of Israel knowledge, Figure A2 shows the average number of correct answers (out of four) for different groups of applicants. As we would expect for a

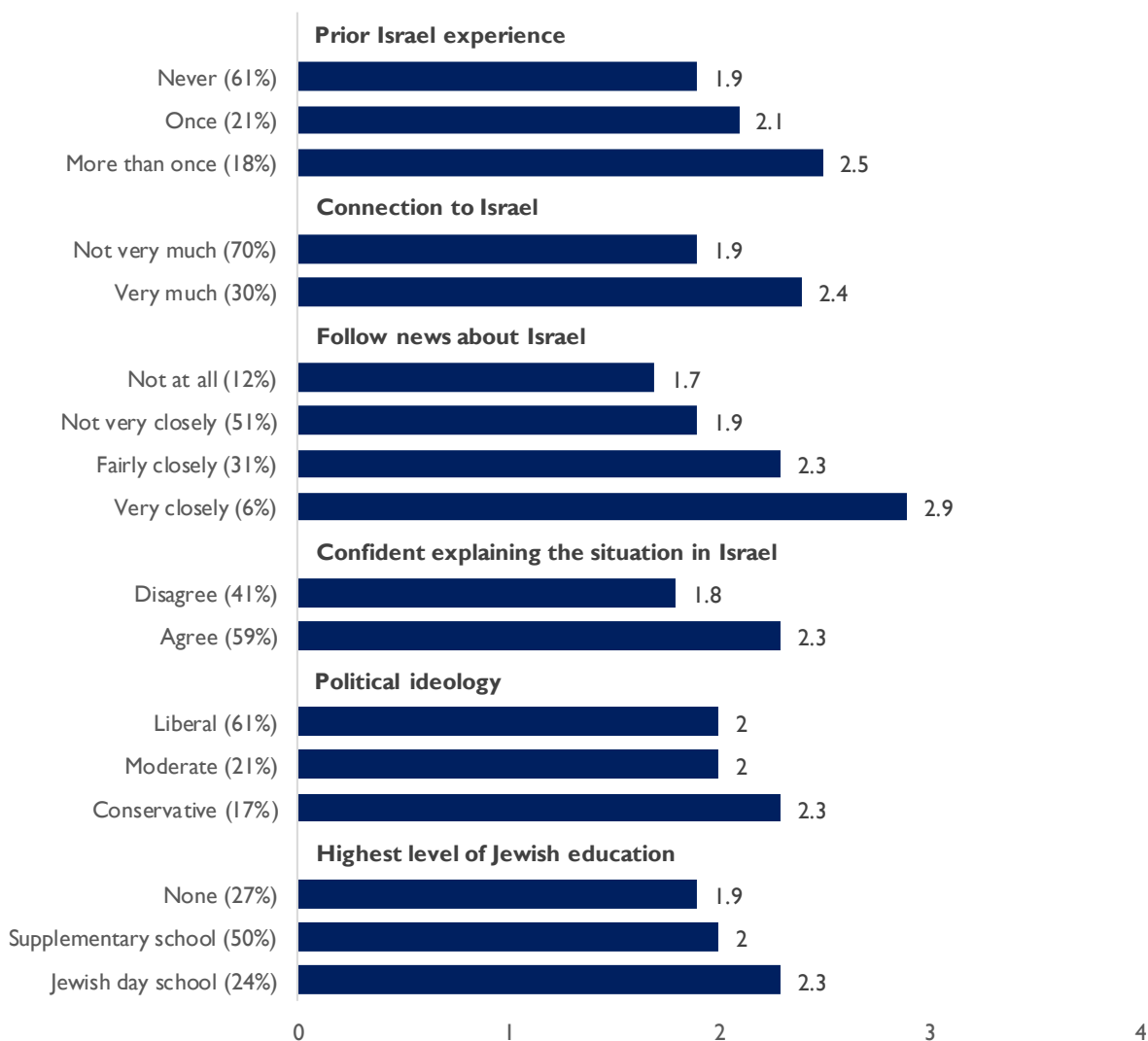
measure of Israel knowledge, applicants who had already been to Israel, who were “very much” connected to Israel, who followed news about Israel more closely, and who felt confident in their own understanding of the situation in Israel tended to score higher on the Israel knowledge questions. For example, on average, the 12% of US respondents who reported that they did not follow news about Israel at all got 1.7 correct answers, while the 6% who reported that they followed news about Israel “very closely” had 2.9 correct answers, on average. The 17% of applicants who identified as politically conservative got 2.3 correct answers on average, in comparison to those who identified as moderate or liberal, who only got 2 questions correct, on average. Those who attended Jewish day school got 3 questions correct, while those who had attended some form of Jewish supplementary school (but not day school) only got 2.5 questions correct on average, only slightly higher than those with no formal Jewish education at all.

Table A1. Pre-trip Israel responses to Israel knowledge quiz (summer 2022 US applicants)

Questions and answers	%
The future of the “settlements” is an issue in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict today. These are:	
√ 1. Jewish settlements in the West Bank	67%
2. Palestinian settlements in the Golan Heights	23%
3. Permanent settlements for the Bedouin people in the desert	3%
4. None of the above	8%
Who gets to vote in Israel?	
√ 1. All citizens	71%
2. Jewish citizens	11%
3. Jewish and Arab citizens but not Druze citizens	10%
4. Citizens who have served in the Israeli army	8%
The Palestinian Authority exercises civil administrative authority in the area of:	
1. The Gaza Strip	50%
2. East Jerusalem	8%
3. Lebanon	5%
√ 4. The West Bank	37%
What is TRUE about Jewish life in Israel?	
1. Men and women pray together in all areas of the Western Wall	31%
√ 2. Jews cannot legally marry non-Jews in Israel	33%
3. The majority of Israeli Jews are ultra-Orthodox	13%
4. Every Jewish Israeli male is required to have a bar mitzvah	24%

Source: Pre-trip survey. See Technical Appendix Table C12 for 95% confidence intervals.

Figure A1. Average number of pre-trip correct answers by applicants' pre-trip characteristics



Source: Pre-trip survey. See Technical Appendix Table C13 for 95% confidence intervals.