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What Does Zionism Mean to Canadian Jews? A Longitudinal Study of Semantic Drift^I

Abstract

A late summer 2024 web panel survey of 588 Canadian Jews found that 49 percent of respondents do not identify as Zionists. Anti-Zionists rejoiced that rejection of Zionism is widespread in the Jewish community. Zionists took comfort from the same survey's finding that 94 percent of Canadian Jews said they support the existence of a Jewish state in Israel. Many observers were puzzled over how both findings could be accurate at the same time. This paper begins to address that issue. It is based mainly on a January 2025 follow-up survey of 332 of the original respondents. The follow-up finds evidence that refusal to label oneself a Zionist is largely due to the increasingly negative connotation of the word Zionism—what linguists call “semantic drift.” This paper also finds that just 1 percent of Canadian Jews (4 percent of those who reject the Zionist label) say they are anti-Zionists.

Résumé

Un sondage par panel en ligne à la fin de l'été 2024 auprès de 588 personnes juives canadiennes a révélé que 49 pour cent des répondants ne s'identifient pas comme sionistes. Les antisionistes se réjouissaient que le rejet du sionisme soit répandu dans la communauté juive. Les sionistes se sont réconfortés de la conclusion du même sondage selon laquelle 94 pour cent des personnes juives canadiennes ont déclaré soutenir l'existence d'un État juif en Israël. Plusieurs observateurs étaient perplexes quant à la façon dont les deux résultats pouvaient être exacts en même temps. Ce document commence à aborder cette question. Il est basé sur une enquête de suivi menée en janvier 2025 auprès de 332 des répondants initiaux. Ce suivi indique que le refus de se qualifier de sioniste est en grande partie dû à la connotation de plus en plus négative du mot sionisme – ce que les linguistes appellent « dérive sémantique ». Ce document révèle également que 1 pour cent des Juifs canadiens (4 pour cent de ceux qui rejettent l'étiquette sioniste) se disent antisionistes.

Zionism and Semantic Drift

Every time one utters a word in a way that departs from its established meaning, a sort of vote is cast for altering its sense. The more people “vote” for the word’s altered sense, the closer it comes to deposing the established meaning. Linguists call this process semantic change or semantic drift.²

Linguists have identified various types of semantic drift, one of which they label “pejoration.” Pejoration takes place when a word that once had a positive meaning takes on a negative meaning. A well-known example is “silly.” In Old and Middle English, calling people silly meant they were happy or spiritually blessed. By the 1500s, calling

people silly meant they were foolish. The established meaning had been deposed and rendered negative.³

Especially in North America, the positive connotation of the word Zionism may have reached its apogee between 1958, when Leon Uris's novel, *Exodus*, was published, and 1967, when Israel fought what most Jews call the Six Day War. As historian Jill Hamilton wrote, the novel "changed the public perception of Israel and the Jews. *Exodus* ... became an international publishing phenomenon [translated into more than fifty languages], the biggest best seller in the United States since *Gone with the Wind* [published twenty-two years earlier]. Both the novel and the subsequent movie thrust Israel into the lives of millions, and with it initiated a new sympathy for the young country."⁴ *The New York Times* hailed the movie as a "fine reflection of experience."⁵

If the word Zionism had a positive connotation for most people in the West from 1958 to 1967, then after the Six Day War it underwent a process of pejoration, which intensified as Israel's occupation of formerly Arab-controlled territory persisted and intensified. A convenient indicator of this reversal may be derived from the Google Books Ngram Viewer, which allows one to search the entire Google Books corpus of more than five million volumes.⁶ I searched the phrase "Zionism is racism" in books published between 1940 and 2022, the last year available as of this writing. Mentions of the phrase first began to increase in 1968, the year after Israel's occupation of the West Bank, Gaza, and the Golan Heights. In 2022, mentions were 129 times more numerous than in 1968.

Since the Hamas pogrom October 7, 2023, the phrase "Zionism is racism" has spread quickly in the mass and social media. It has also proliferated in public demonstrations and in the form of graffiti, banners, t-shirt inscriptions, and adhesive stickers. We should therefore not be surprised if mentions of "Zionism is racism" in books increase even more when 2023 and 2024 Ngram data become available. The fate of Zionism as a word seems to be a case of semantic drift growing into a pejorative semantic avalanche.

Three Hypotheses on Zionist Self-identification

Because we are social animals who want others to like us, resisting substantial semantic drift is difficult. Given the widespread pejoration of the word Zionism after 1967, and especially, it seems, in the wake of October 7, 2023, I therefore hypothesize that (1) many Canadian Jews are now disinclined to label themselves Zionists because they confront negative sentiment concerning Zionism in many settings.

I also hypothesize that (2) perhaps especially in the wake of the October 7, 2023, Hamas pogrom, self-identification as a Zionist has for many Jews become uncertain and unstable. That is because the pogrom and Israel's reaction to it caused old certitudes to collapse, leaving some Jews in a state of attitudinal disorientation and flux. In 2012, the late Irving Abella asserted that "anti-Semitism is no longer ... a major concern for Canadian Jews," and, in 2021, David Koffman wrote that "Canada may now very well be the safest, most socially welcoming, economically secure, and possibly most religiously tolerant home for the Jews than any other diaspora country, past or present."⁷ Yet such assessments soon gave way to a different outlook among many Canadian Jews. By February 2024, the wave of anti-Jewish hate crimes and virulently anti-Israel demonstrations and encampments that followed the October 7 pogrom caused about two-thirds of Canadian Jews to feel insecure and doubt things would improve much in the next five years.⁸ This survey finding attests to the sudden and, for many, disorienting reversal of perceived fortune experienced by many Canadian Jews.

Finally, I hypothesize that (3) not identifying as a Zionist is for most Jews consistent with believing in the need for a Jewish state in Israel and expressing emotional attachment to it. In other words, failure to define oneself as a Zionist is for most Jews a response to semantic drift. It is not a rejection of Zionist movement goals as described in definitions that have been standard in English-language dictionaries and general encyclopedias for many decades—"an international movement originally for the establishment of a Jewish national or religious community in Palestine and later for the support of modern Israel."⁹

Later, I test these three hypotheses using Canadian survey data. Before doing so, I briefly summarize the surveys from which the data derive.

The Surveys

In 2024, three progressive Zionist organizations—the New Israel Fund of Canada, JSpaceCanada, and Canadian Friends of Peace Now—funded a web panel survey tapping Canadian Jewish attitudes toward a range of political issues concerning Israel. I agreed to take the lead in designing the questionnaire, serving as liaison with the public opinion firm that fielded the survey, analyzing the data, and, based on my analysis, writing a report on the results. The survey was in the field from August 28 to September 16, 2024.

In a web panel survey, a polling firm assembles a list of one hundred thousand or more adults who form a cross-section of a country's population and say they are willing to participate in surveys for payment. Members of the panel are invited to respond to polls. Researchers stipulate the characteristic(s) and number of respondents they wish to sample, and when these quotas are reached, the poll is closed. In

the present case, the sponsors stipulated a sample of at least 500 Jewish adults, defined as Canadians at least eighteen years of age who identify as Jewish by religion or identify with no religion but say they identify as Jewish by ethnicity or culture. The contracted polling firm, Léger, using mainly the Léger Opinion Panel, was able to deliver a sample of 588 adult Jews defined as indicated. The maximum margin of error associated with a simple random sample of this size is 4.0 percent in nineteen of twenty similar samples.¹⁰

To improve sample representativeness, I weighted the sample by known characteristics of the Jewish population according to the 2021 Census of Canada: age, gender, region of residence, and educational attainment. I also weighted by Jewish denominational identification as determined by the 2018 *Survey of Jews in Canada*.¹¹ Weighting increases one's confidence that the sample is approximately representative of the Canadian Jewish population. Weighted results are presented throughout this paper.

One of the questionnaire items asked, "Do you consider yourself a Zionist?" I was surprised by what I considered the low percentage of respondents who answered unambiguously "yes." Accordingly, I sought and received permission from the funding organizations to conduct a follow-up study at my personal expense, allowing me to dig deeper into why some respondents do not identify as Zionists.

The follow-up study was in the field from January 3 to 25, 2025. Léger was able to invite 509 of the 588 participants in the August to September 2024 survey (hereafter referred to as "wave 1") to participate in the January 2025 follow-up (hereafter referred to as "wave 2").¹² Three hundred and sixty of the invited individuals (71 percent of the 509 invitees) agreed to participate in wave 2. The effective number of wave 2 respondents was reduced to 332 when the sample was weighted to make it more representative of the Canadian Jewish population.¹³

Three hundred and thirty-two respondents form a small sample. Even for a simple random sample of this size, the maximum margin of error would be 5.4 percent, nineteen times out of twenty. Consequently, the findings that follow should not be regarded as highly reliable. Rather, they amount to empirically grounded and systematically tested speculations about how Canadian Jews relate to Zionism. I think the conjectures I offer make sense and are supported by available data, but we need more research based on larger representative samples to gain confidence in them.

To ensure that wave 1 and wave 2 participants are not substantially dissimilar, I compared the distribution of the two weighted samples by age, gender, province of residence, educational attainment, and Jewish denominational identification (Table 1). On all but one of these dimensions, there is practically no difference between wave 1 and wave 2 respondents. The only discrepancy worth mentioning is that wave 1

respondents are somewhat younger on average. Specifically, 54 percent of wave 1 respondents are under fifty-five years of age, compared to 44 percent of wave 2 respondents.

Does this difference imply that wave 2 respondents are likely to be more traditional or conservative than wave 1 respondents and therefore less likely to say they are not Zionists? The conventional view among sociolinguists that older people are less susceptible than younger people to semantic drift has recently been challenged based on an analysis of a corpus of 7.9 million U.S. Congressional speeches delivered between 1873 and 2010.¹⁴ Moreover, in the present study, the bivariate correlation between respondent's age and not describing oneself as a Zionist is very low and not statistically significant.¹⁵ I conclude that the difference in the age distribution of wave 1 and wave 2 samples is unlikely to bias the findings of this study.

Table 1
Sociodemographic characteristics, weighted wave 1 and wave 2 samples, in percent

	Wave 1 (n = 588)	Wave 2 (n = 332)		Wave 1 (n = 588)	Wave 2 (n = 332)
Gender			Denomination		
Female	50	49	Orthodox/Modern Orthodox	16	17
Male	49	51	Conservative	27	26
Non-cisgender	1	0	Reform	17	16
Total	100	100	Other	3	3
Age			None; just Jewish	36	37
18–24	7	1	Don't know/ no answer	19	0
25–34	16	13	Total	100	100
35–44	16	18	Educational attainment		
45–54	15	12	<13 years	10	10
55–64	16	16	College (13–15 years)	11	8
65–74	18	23	University < Bachelor's degree	6	6
>74	12	17	Bachelor's degree	36	37
Total	100	100	Master's, PhD, professional	38	39
Region of residence			Don't know/no answer	0	0
British Columbia	10	10	Total	100	100
Prairies	8	8			
Ontario	57	54			
Quebec	23	26			
Atlantic	2	2			
Total	100	100			

Sources: Robert Brym, Follow-up survey of 2024 New Israel Fund of Canada, JSpaceCanada, and Canadian Friends of Peace Now survey on Canadian Jewish attitudes toward Israel, 2025, SPSS dataset; New Israel Fund of Canada, JSpaceCanada, and Canadian Friends of Peace Now survey on Canadian Jewish attitudes toward Israel, 2024, SPSS dataset.
Note: Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding.

Bearing in mind the parameters of the wave 1 and wave 2 surveys, it is now possible to test the hypotheses listed earlier.

Hypothesis 1: Many Canadian Jews are now disinclined to label themselves Zionists because they confront negative sentiment concerning Zionism in many settings.

In wave 1, 51 percent of respondents gave an unambiguously positive response to the question, “Do you consider yourself a Zionist?” Twenty-seven percent of respondents just as unambiguously said they do not consider themselves Zionists, with an additional 15 percent expressing ambivalence and 7 percent saying they don’t know or not answering the question.¹⁶ Thus, a total of 49 percent of respondents did not define themselves as Zionists.

Three high-quality American Jewish community surveys conducted between 2020 and 2023 by researchers at Brandeis University’s Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies suggest that the refusal rate is even higher in the US. Some 58 percent of Jews in Los Angeles, 60 percent of Jews in Chicago, and 74 percent of Jews in Portland, Oregon, did not to define themselves as Zionists.¹⁷ I conclude that the Canadian finding is not idiosyncratic.

Table 2 shows that many Canadian Jews confront much hostility toward Israel in certain social settings. These settings are the engines driving the semantic drift of the word Zionism. The pejorative claims about Zionism often expressed in them undermine the willingness of many Jews to identify as Zionists.

Table 2
Perceived friendliness or hostility toward Israel in various social settings, wave 2, in percent, n = 332

	Viewing mass media	Interacting via social media	During college or university classes	In conversations at work	In conversations with acquaintances and friends outside work	In conversations with family members
Very friendly	7	8	6	12	30	66
Somewhat friendly	8	4	2	11	23	14
Neutral	7	5	4	11	11	5
Somewhat hostile	41	26	11	13	14	6
Very hostile	31	33	24	5	5	2
Haven't heard/participated in discussion about the conflict	6	23	54	48	18	8
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Robert Brym, Follow-up survey of 2024 New Israel Fund of Canada, JSpaceCanada, and Canadian Friends of Peace Now survey on Canadian Jewish attitudes toward Israel, 2025, SPSS dataset.
Note: Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding.

Table 2 is based on the following question that I asked wave 2 respondents: “People may hear about or discuss the Israel–Palestine conflict in the mass and social media, during college and university classes, at work, and outside work in conversation with acquaintances, friends, and family members. In general in each of these settings, how friendly or hostile toward Israel is the discussion about the Israel–Palestine conflict you’ve heard or participated in—very friendly toward Israel, somewhat friendly toward Israel, neutral toward Israel, somewhat hostile toward Israel, very hostile toward Israel, or have you not heard or participated in discussions about the Israel–Palestine conflict in these settings?” Here I am interested only in settings perceived as hostile to Israel.

Based on their experience, 72 percent of respondents view the mass media as hostile to Israel. Fifty–nine percent hold the same opinion about social media and 35 percent regard discussion in college and university classes in this way.

Variation in the level of perceived hostility to Israel across settings is likely due only partly to the actual level of hostility in different settings. Variation is probably also due to differences in the exposure of different age cohorts to various settings. Notably, older respondents are less inclined than younger respondents to use social media and attend college and university classes. Moreover, the percentages for perceived hostility in social media and college classes in Table 2 may be underestimates because, as noted earlier, wave 2 respondents are on average somewhat older than wave 1 respondents. Such variation notwithstanding, only between 8 percent and 15 percent of participants in the wave 2 sample regard mass media, social media, and college and university classes as friendly toward Israel. In short, I believe that the data are consistent with hypothesis 1.

Hypothesis 2: Perhaps especially in the wake of the October 7, 2023, Hamas pogrom, self-identification as a Zionist has for many Jews become uncertain and unstable.

Individuals may change their response to an attitudinal question over time as they learn new information or have new experiences. Such instability is especially common in periods of rapid social change. On the other hand, stability of responses to an attitudinal question over time suggests that the attitude is strongly held and therefore relatively impervious to short–term variation¹⁸.

Table 3 helps us understand how the 332 individuals who participated in both survey waves changed their opinions about their Zionist identity over the four months between wave 1 and wave 2.¹⁹ It cross–classifies respondents’ wave 1 and wave 2 responses on the Zionism question.

To illustrate how to read Table 3, consider the 152 respondents in the uppermost left cell of the table. As indicated by the column and row titles of this cell, the 152 respondents said “yes,” they are Zionists, in both survey waves. They comprise 95 percent of the 160 wave 2 respondents (see the total for column 1 in parentheses) and 78 percent of the 196 wave 1 respondents (see the total for row 1 in brackets).

Table 3
“Do you consider yourself a Zionist?” Respondents’ answers in wave 1 by their answers in wave 2, frequencies, (column percentages in parentheses), [row percentages in brackets]

	Wave 1													
	Yes			Ambivalent			No			Don't know + no answer			Total wave 1	
Wave 2														
Yes	152	(95)	[78]	18	(35)	[9]	17	(18)	[9]	9	(38)	[5]	196	[100]
Ambivalent	3	(2)	[6]	24	(46)	[49]	16	(17)	[33]	6	(25)	[12]	49	[100]
No	3	(2)	[5]	9	(17)	[14]	50	(52)	[77]	3	(13)	[5]	65	[100]
Anti-Zionist	0	(0)	[0]	0	(0)	[0]	4	(4)	[100]	0	(0)	[0]	4	[100]
Other	2	(1)	[11]	1	(2)	[6]	9	(9)	[50]	6	(25)	[33]	18	[100]
Total wave 2	160	(100)		52	(100)		96	(100)		24	(100)		332	[100]

Sources: Robert Brym, Follow-up survey of 2024 New Israel Fund of Canada, JSpaceCanada, and Canadian Friends of Peace Now survey on Canadian Jewish attitudes toward Israel, 2025, SPSS dataset; New Israel Fund of Canada, JSpaceCanada, and Canadian Friends of Peace Now survey on Canadian Jewish attitudes toward Israel, 2024, SPSS dataset.
Note: Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding. For wave 2, the “no” response category was subdivided in two—“no” and “no, I’m an anti-Zionist.” It can be assumed that the anti-Zionists in wave 1 answered, “no.”

Twenty-nine percent of the 332 individuals who participated in both survey waves changed their opinions about their Zionist identity between waves 1 and 2. Understandably, opinion was least stable among those who were ambivalent about their Zionist identity in wave 1. About one-half of the 49 respondents who were ambivalent in wave 1 changed their mind about Zionism in wave 2. As the Israel-Hamas war dragged on between late summer 2024 and early winter 2025, and the mass and social media became increasingly critical of Israel’s prosecution of the Gaza war, 33 percent of initially ambivalent respondents decided they no longer identify as Zionists, 12 percent moved to the “don’t know/no answer” category, and 6 percent became Zionist self-identifiers. These findings are consistent with hypothesis 2.

In contrast, the most stable categories of respondents include the 152 individuals who said decisively that they are Zionists and the 65 individuals who said decisively that they are not Zionists in wave 1. Seventy-seven percent of the first group and 78 percent of the second group responded in the same way in wave 2 as they did in wave 1.

The wave 2 questionnaire added a response category to the Zionist question, allowing respondents to reply that they are anti-Zionists. Significantly, just 1 percent

of the 332 respondents chose this option—4 percent of those who refused to label themselves Zionists.

Also relevant to the issue of attitudinal instability is the question of what political circumstances might encourage wave 2 respondents who responded that they are Zionists to change their mind and identify as Zionists at some point in the future. Table 4 provides insight into that question.

Table 4
“Which if any of the following conditions is the minimum that must be achieved for you to be comfortable calling yourself a Zionist? Please read all options and then select the option that comes closest to your opinion,” wave 2, non-Zionists only, in percent, n = 171

	Frequency
If Israelis and Palestinians agree to a ceasefire in the Gaza war.	2
If Israelis and Palestinians agree to a ceasefire in the Gaza war, the withdrawal of all Israeli troops from Gaza, and the return of all hostages to Israel.	9
If Israelis and Palestinians agree to a ceasefire in the Gaza war, the withdrawal of all Israeli troops from Gaza, the return of all hostages to Israel, and they sign a peace treaty.	6
If Israelis and Palestinians agree to a ceasefire in the Gaza war, the withdrawal of all Israeli troops from Gaza, the return of all hostages to Israel, and they sign a peace treaty leading to the creation of a separate Arab state of Palestine alongside the Jewish state of Israel.	10
If Israelis and Palestinians agree to a ceasefire in the Gaza war, the withdrawal of all Israeli troops from Gaza, the return of all hostages to Israel, and they sign a peace treaty leading to the creation of a single state in which Israelis and Palestinians have equal rights.	5
I would not be prepared to call myself a Zionist under any circumstance.	30
Other	12
Don't know/no answer	25
Total	100

Source: Robert Brym, Follow-up survey of 2024 New Israel Fund of Canada, JSpaceCanada, and Canadian Friends of Peace Now survey on Canadian Jewish attitudes toward Israel, 2025, SPSS dataset.
Note: Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding.

Twenty-seven percent of wave 2 respondents who did not identify as Zionists said they would be prepared to call themselves a Zionist under one of the following conditions:

1. Israelis and Palestinians agree to a ceasefire in the Gaza war (2 percent).
2. Israelis and Palestinians agree to condition 1 and the withdrawal of all Israeli troops from Gaza and the return of all hostages to Israel (9 percent).
3. Israelis and Palestinians agree to condition 2 and sign a peace treaty (6 percent).

4. Israelis and Palestinians agree to condition 3 and sign a peace treaty leading to the creation of a separate Arab state of Palestine alongside the Jewish state of Israel (10 percent).

By way of contrast, 35 percent of wave 2 respondents who denied being Zionists said they would not be prepared to call themselves a Zionist “under any circumstance” (30 percent) or only in the extremely unlikely event that Israelis and Palestinians agree to condition 3 and “the creation of a single state in which Israelis and Palestinians have equal rights” (5 percent).

The remaining wave 2 respondents who did not identify as Zionists gave ambiguous answers (12 percent) or said they “don’t know” or didn’t answer the question (25 percent).

The findings that stand out here are that fewer than three of ten individuals who report they are not Zionists are clearly amenable to changing their minds, while more than one-third of individuals who report not being Zionists are highly unlikely to change their minds.

Hypothesis 3: For most Jews, believing in the need for a Jewish state in Israel and expressing emotional attachment to Israel is consistent with not identifying as a Zionist.

In wave 1, 49 percent of respondents did not call themselves Zionists yet 84 percent claimed they are somewhat or very emotionally attached to Israel and 94 percent said they support the existence of Israel as a Jewish state (Table 5). Even among those who do not identify as Zionists, 67 percent said they are somewhat or strongly emotionally attached to Israel and 88 percent said they believe Israel has the right to exist as a Jewish state. From this point of view, nearly all Canadian Jews who say they are Zionists and a large majority of those who do not say they are Zionists meet the standard English-language dictionary and general encyclopedia definition of the term Zionist.

Findings from the recent American community studies mentioned earlier reassure me that these findings are not anomalous. Around 60 percent of Jews in Chicago and Los Angeles do not think of themselves as Zionists. Nevertheless, 80 percent of Chicago Jews think it is important for Israel to exist as a Jewish state and 81 percent of Los Angeles Jews think that caring about Israel is an important or essential part of being Jewish.

Table 5
Attitudes toward Israel by Zionist self-identification, wave 1, in percent, n = 332

	Zionists (n = 300)	Not Zionists (n = 288)
How emotionally attached are you to Israel?		
Somewhat, very	99	67
Not very, not at all	1	30
Don't know/no answer	0	2
Total	100	100
Do you believe Israel has the right to exist as a Jewish state?		
Yes	99	88
No	1	6
Don't know/no answer	0	6
Total	100	100

Source: Robert Brym, Follow-up survey of 2024 New Israel Fund of Canada, JSpaceCanada, and Canadian Friends of Peace Now survey on Canadian Jewish attitudes toward Israel, 2025, SPSS dataset.
Note: Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding.

It seems clear that semantic drift of the word Zionism has led many Canadian Jews to claim they are not Zionists while still feeling emotionally attached to and supportive of Israel. Available survey data add weight to hypothesis 3.

Conclusion

After the release of the report on wave 1 of the survey, anti-Zionists declared the finding that 49 percent of Canadian Jews are not Zionists. Zionists responded by repeating with equal enthusiasm the finding that 94 percent of Canadian Jews support the existence of Israel as a Jewish state.²⁰ This paper goes some way to interpreting the complexities underlying these seemingly contradictory findings.

A large part of the reason so many Canadian Jews do not identify as Zionists is apparently due to semantic drift. Some Canadian Jews, especially those who are not emotionally attached to Israel, have been influenced by the substantial pejoration that the word Zionism has undergone since Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza nearly six decades ago and the accelerated pejoration the word seems to have suffered since the October 7, 2023, Hamas pogrom.

This does not mean that Canadian Jews who refuse to say they are Zionists are unconditionally opposed to Zionism as English-language dictionaries and general encyclopedias define the term. Even among Canadian Jews who refuse to say they are Zionists, 88% agree that Israel has the right to exist as a Jewish state.

One question in the wave 2 survey deepens our understanding of how Zionism is characterized by those who self-identify as Zionists and those who do not. Respondents were asked to respond to the following question: “People think of Zionism in different ways. How would you characterize Zionism? Please read all the following options and then select the option that comes closest to your opinion.” Table 6 presents the results.

Table 6
Respondent definition of Zionism by self-identification as Zionist or not a Zionist, wave 2, in percent

	Self-identification	
	Zionist (n = 160)	Not a Zionist (n = 172)
A Jewish nationalist and democratic movement with the goal of creating and supporting a Jewish state in the ancestral homeland of the Jews and providing equal rights to its non-Jewish citizens.	70	48
A Jewish nationalist movement with the goal of creating and supporting a Jewish state in the ancestral homeland of the Jews.	26	30
A Jewish nationalist movement, some followers of which have developed racist ideas and expansionist ambitions as a reaction to Palestinian violence against Israel.	1	13
A Jewish nationalist movement that has from its inception aimed to violently remove Palestinians from their homeland and occupy territory in which Palestinians are granted few rights.	2	2
Other	1	6
Total	100	100

Source: Robert Brym, Follow-up survey of 2024 New Israel Fund of Canada, JSpaceCanada, and Canadian Friends of Peace Now survey on Canadian Jewish attitudes toward Israel, 2025, SPSS dataset.
Note: Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding.

Some 70 percent of self-declared Zionists and 48 percent of self-declared non-Zionists share a liberal-democratic definition of Zionism that embodies principles articulated in paragraph 12 of The Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel.²¹ They agree that “Zionism is a Jewish nationalist and democratic movement with the goal of creating and supporting a Jewish state in the ancestral homeland of the Jews and providing equal rights to its non-Jewish citizens.”

Another 26 percent of Zionist Jews and 30 percent of non-Zionist Jews proffer a less democratic and more nationalistic definition of Zionism as “a Jewish nationalist movement with the goal of creating and supporting a Jewish state in the ancestral homeland of the Jews.”

However, just 1 percent of Zionists and 13 percent of non-Zionists define Zionism as “a Jewish nationalist movement, some followers of which have developed racist ideas and expansionist ambitions as a reaction to Palestinian violence against Israel.” As well, only 2 percent of both Zionists and non-Zionists regard Zionism as “a Jewish nationalist movement that has from its inception aimed to violently remove Palestinians from their homeland and occupy territory in which Palestinians are granted few rights.” The proportion of non-Zionist Jews who regard Zionism as inherently racist and expansionist is tiny.

In sum, the foregoing analysis suggests that attitudes toward Zionism are more complex than one may at first assume. The mass media, social media, and colleges and universities seem to have undermined the willingness of many Canadian Jews to refer to themselves as Zionists, although they remain highly likely to say they are emotionally attached to Israel and are almost certain to support the existence of a Jewish state in Israel. About three in ten Canadian Jews who deny they are Zionists say would identify as Zionists under certain achievable political circumstances.

The usual qualification when it comes to the sociology of Canadian Jewry applies to the present research: data on the subject of this paper are scant and the need for more research is acute.

Robert Brym is a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada and emeritus professor of sociology at the University of Toronto. He has published more than two hundred scholarly works and received multiple awards for his publications and teaching, including the Northrop Frye Award (University of Toronto), the *British Journal of Sociology* Prize (London School of Economics), the Outstanding Contribution Award of the Canadian Sociological Association, and the Louis Rosenberg Canadian Jewish Studies Distinguished Service Award. His main research projects have focused on the politics of intellectuals, Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union and its successor states, the second *intifada*, and Jews in Canada. For downloads of his published work, visit <https://utoronto.academia.edu/RobertBrym>.

1

I am grateful to Ben Murane, Maytal Kowalski, and Gabriella Goliger, heads, respectively, of the New Israel Fund of Canada, JSpaceCanada, and Canadian Friends of Peace Now, for permission to conduct a follow-up study based on an August–September web panel survey of 588 Canadian Jewish adults that their organizations funded.

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8

Robert Brym, “Jews and Israel 2024: A Survey of Canadian Attitudes and Jewish Perceptions,” *Canadian Jewish Studies / Études juives canadiennes* 37 (2024): 6–89.

9

Merriam-Webster Dictionary, “Zionism,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Zionism>. Nearly identical definitions are found in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, the *Oxford Dictionary*, and the *Cambridge Dictionary*.

10

Web panel surveys are based on non-random samples, which may be unrepresentative of the populations they claim to represent. Weighting by known population characteristics and controlling for suspected confounding variable help to mitigate this possibility. However, surveys based on random samples have their own issues. In the 1960s, students were taught that response rates below 70 percent call representativeness into question, but today a random-sample telephone survey typically has a response rate in the single digits, raising the question of whether people who respond to polls are in fact representative of the population researchers claim they represent. Web panel polls were developed to overcome this issue, though not without their own downside.

11

Robert Brym, Keith Neuman, and Rhonda Lenton, *2018 Survey of Jews in Canada* (Environics Institute, 2019), https://www.environicsinstitute.org/docs/default-source/project-documents/2018-survey-of-jews-in-canada/2018-survey-of-jews-in-canada---final-report.pdf?sfvrsn=2994ef6_2.

12

The wave 1 sample included 509 Jewish respondents from the Léger Opinion Panel and seventy-nine additional Jewish respondents that Léger purchased from the web panel of another polling company, Ekos, a common practice among pollsters. For wave 2, Léger was able to solicit responses only from members of their own web panel.

13

When weights are applied, the variability of the estimates often increase, making the effective sample size smaller than the actual sample size.

14

Gaurav Kamath, Michelle Yang, Siva Reddy, and Dallas Card, “Semantic Change in Adults Is Not Primarily a Generational Phenomenon,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science* 122, no. 31 (2025): e2426815122.

15

I found $r = 0.061$, $p = 0.154$, where "Do you consider yourself a Zionist?" is coded "yes" = 1, "ambivalent" = 2, "no" = 3, and "don't know/no answer" = missing data.

16

The "ambivalent" category is intended to include respondents who are equivocal. The "don't know" category is intended to include people who lack an opinion. The "no answer" category includes respondents who refuse to answer the question.

17

Janet Krasner Aronson, Matthew A. Brookner, and Leonard Saxe, *2020 Metropolitan Chicago Jewish Population Study* (Waltham MA: Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University, 2021), <https://www.brandeis.edu/cmjs/community-studies/chicago-report.html>; Janet Krasner Aronson et al., *2021 Study of Jewish LA* (Waltham MA: Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University, 2022), <https://www.brandeis.edu/cmjs/community-studies/los-angeles-report.html>; Matthew Boxer et al., *2022-23 Greater Portland Jewish Community Study* (Waltham MA: Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University, 2023), <https://www.brandeis.edu/cmjs/community-studies/portland-report.html>.

18

Lauren C. Howe and Jon A. Krosnick, "Attitude Strength," *Annual Review of Psychology* 68 (2017): 327-351.

19

I do not include the four respondents who answered "no, I am an anti-Zionist" in this calculation because this response category appeared only in wave 2.

20

For a recent episode of this clash, see Phoebe Maltz Bovy and Avi Finegold, hosts, *Bonjour Chai* (podcast), "You Can't Spell TDSB without BDS: How a School Board Meeting Turned into 14 Hours of Arguing about Jews," *Canadian Jewish News*, February 20, 2025, <https://thec-jn.ca/podcasts/tdsb-bds/>.

21

Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel," May 14, 1948, <https://www.gov.il/en/pages/declaration-of-establishment-state-of-israel>.