



Connecting the Dots:

American Jews and Civic Engagement

February 2020



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About This Project

The goal of this research was to explore the relationship between being Jewish and civic engagement, including the attitudes and values that shape civic engagement among American Jews and the role that their being Jewish plays. The research included:

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

Benenson Strategy Group (BSG) undertook a literature review of existing work on Jewish civic engagement, as well as five in-depth interviews with thinkers and experts on Jewish life and civic engagement, conducted in April and May of 2019.

FOCUS GROUPS

BSG conducted two focus groups in June 2019. All participants were recruited from around the country by qualitative recruiters from 20|20 Research. To ensure a representative cross-section of American Jews, we recruited and screened respondents with a mix of gender identities, ages, regions of residence, and ways of identifying as Jewish.

NATIONWIDE SURVEY

BSG conducted a 20-minute online survey with 501 American Jews nationwide, fielded in August 2019. Respondents were screened for self-identification as Jewish and sampled and weighted to be representative of the demographics of the Jewish population in America, using benchmarks from the Pew Research Center's Survey of U.S. Jews and other sources. The margin of error for the entire sample is $\pm 4.3\%$ at the 95% confidence level, with larger margins of error among subgroups.

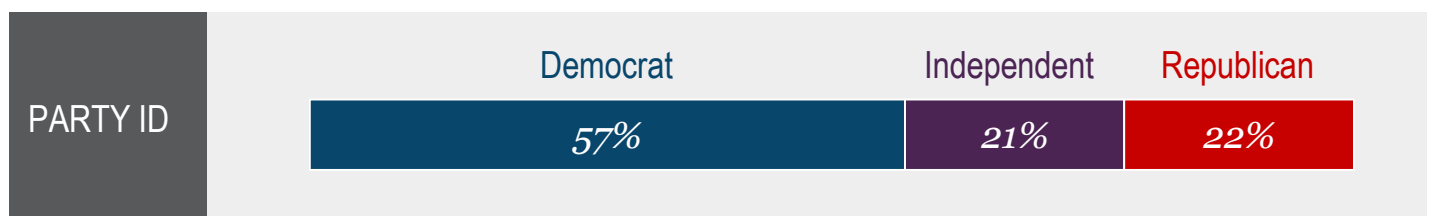
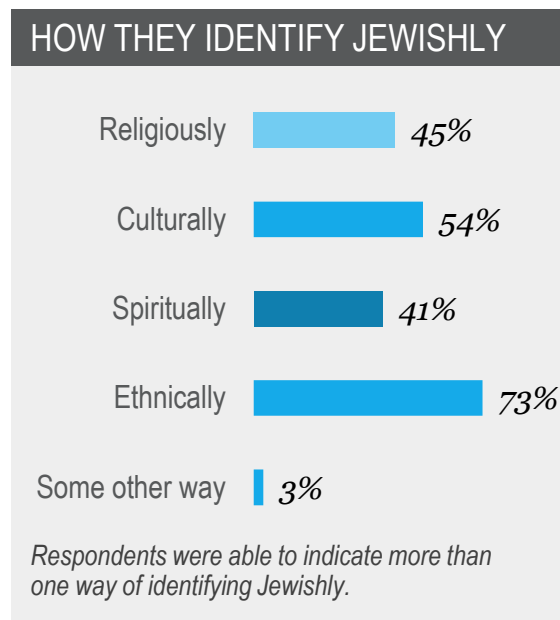
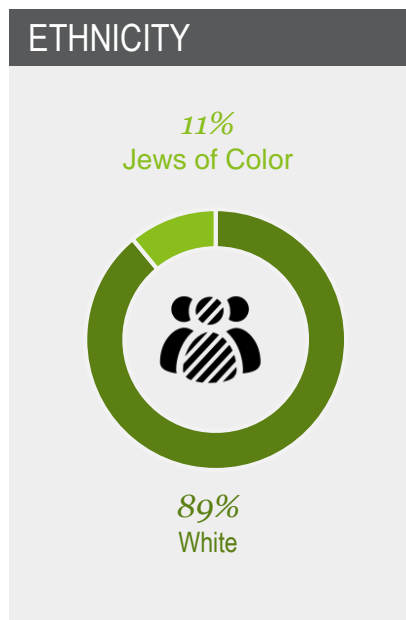
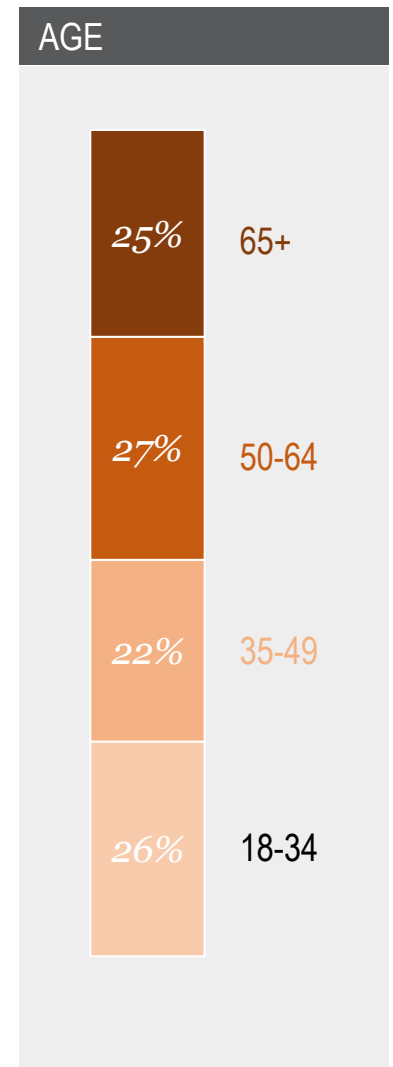
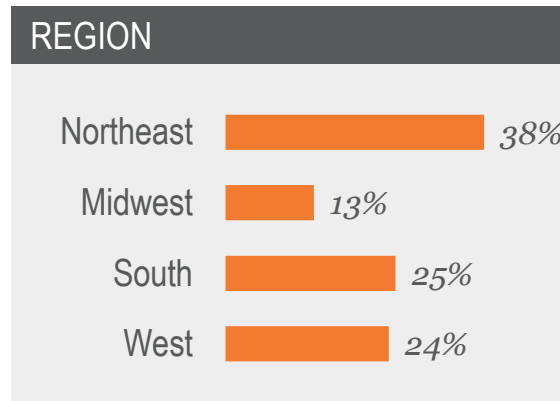
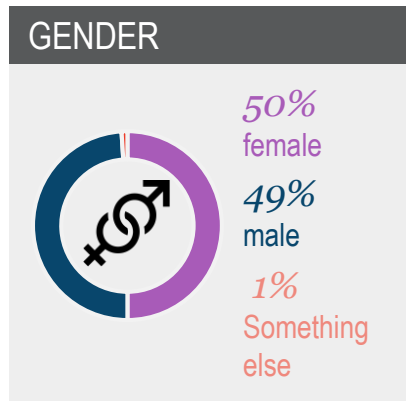
Throughout this research, participants were asked about the ways they engage in their communities and participate in democracy. In this report, we refer to these actions as “civic engagement,” but we know that civic engagement is not just one type of activity. In defining civic engagement, we asked respondents about more than a dozen activities, including voting; volunteering, donating to, or raising money for causes; participating in community meetings and government events; sharing political views in public or on social media; writing letters to the editor or contacting elected officials; and more.

This research project was supported by Lippman Kanfer Foundation for Living Torah and the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation.



Snapshot of the American Jews We Surveyed

Full Sample: n = 501 American Jews



Executive Summary

- **Being Jewish plays a powerful role in the way that American Jews engage in democracy and their communities—as demonstrated by their actions, priorities, and beliefs.**
 - American Jews who say that being Jewish has an influence on *how and why* they engage in democracy and their communities are significantly more likely to engage.
 - Importantly, this group that says that being Jewish influences how and why they engage civically extends beyond those who regularly attend services. Many different aspects of being Jewish can affect the ways American Jews choose to engage.
- **However, being Jewish is only one of many reasons why American Jews engage civically. Many do not make a clear connection on their own between being Jewish and engaging in democracy and their communities.**
 - For most American Jews, being Jewish is just one of many motivations for engaging in civic life. While 59% of civically engaged respondents say being Jewish is a reason to engage civically, just 11% say it is the *most important* reason—fewer than those saying their most important reason to engage is because it's the right thing to do, because they want to make their country a better place, or because they want to make a difference on the issues they care about.
 - Some are reluctant to draw this connection because they hesitate to identify the values, priorities and goals that motivate them to engage as exclusively Jewish. Their reasons for engagement come from the values they were raised with—and even if they took those values from their own Jewish upbringing, they do not believe they would engage differently if they had not been raised Jewish.

“I have a lot of friends that are not Jewish, but I find that many of them have the same values. The values mentioned are important to Jews, but I do not think they are unique. I think they are unique to people who have good character and have concern for others and the earth. I do not want to make it sound like we are the only ones trying to save the world.” – Focus group respondent
 - Others feel a vague sense of a connection, but do not have a cohesive story to explain why civic engagement is related to being Jewish—particularly outside of forms of civic engagement that are explicitly and intrinsically Jewish (e.g. donating to Jewish organizations).
- **Nevertheless, when connections are drawn between being Jewish and engaging civically, American Jews respond strongly. Jewish organizations can connect with American Jews and define civic engagement as one way to live a Jewish life, but it is important to appreciate and explore the nuances across the Jewish community when drawing these links.**
 - We explored various “calls to action,” and found that multiple approaches to making a connection between being Jewish and engaging civically resonated strongly with American Jews.
 - However, there is not only one right way to define the connection between civic engagement and being Jewish. Older Jews responded strongly to appeals to the Jewish people’s history of persecution, while younger Jews were drawn to appeals to timeless Jewish wisdom and values, especially when connected to fighting for justice and standing up for the oppressed.
 - This is an important area for further exploration and experimentation. It is clear that articulating a connection between being Jewish and participating in democracy and one’s community is a powerful way to reach out to American Jews when done authentically.

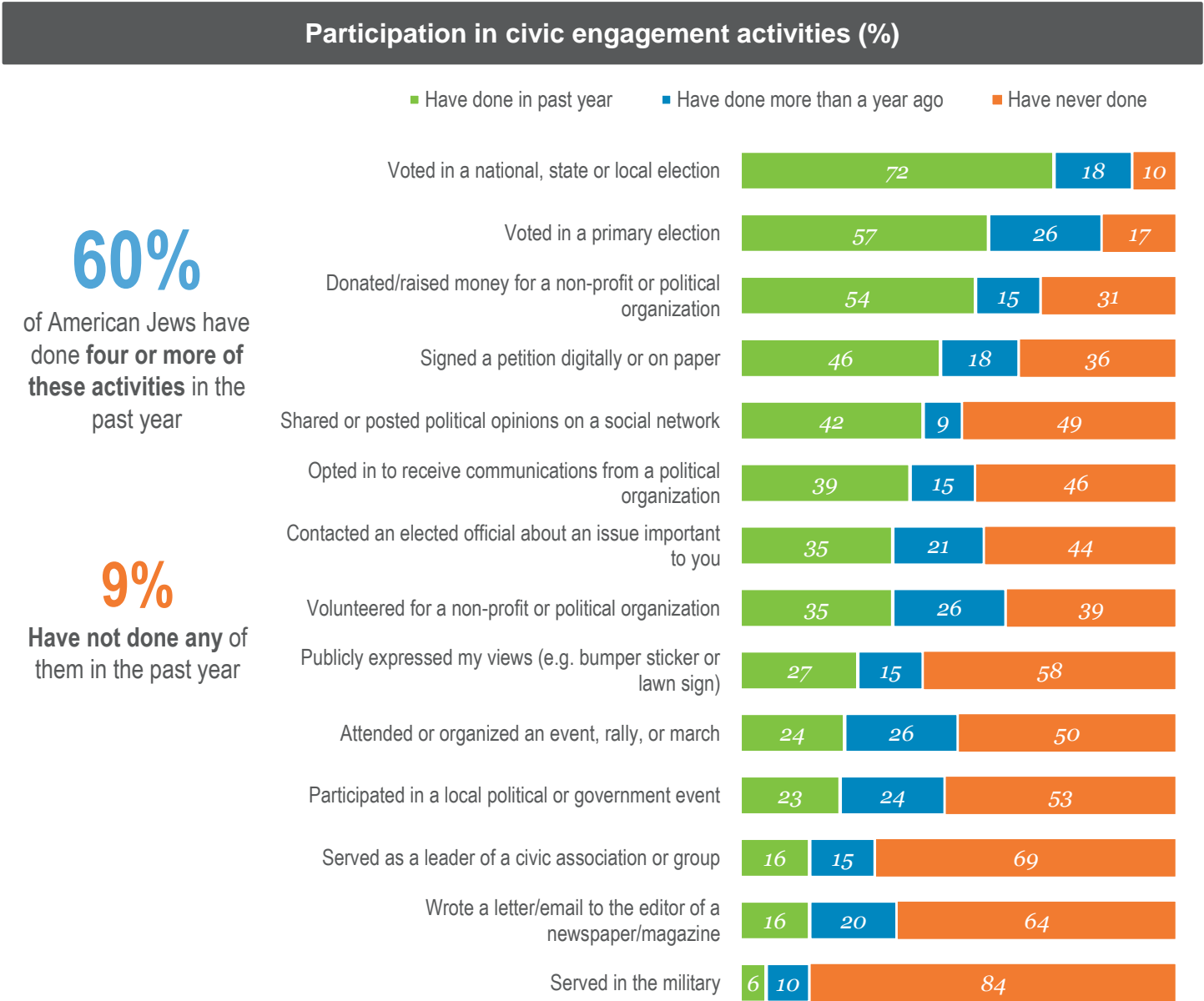


Laying the Groundwork: How American Jews Engage Civically

Most American Jews engage in some way in their communities—but beyond electoral politics, the forms of engagement are varied.

Civic engagement can take many forms and we wanted to explore some of the ways American Jews are involved in their communities and in democracy. We asked respondents about various forms of civic engagement, ranging from volunteering and voting in elections to more intensive forms of engagement, such as serving in a local civic organization.

We found that civic engagement is high: 60% of American Jews have engaged in four or more of the 14 civic activities we tested within the past year, while only 9% had not engaged in any of them. The particular ways in which American Jews are engaging today vary widely.



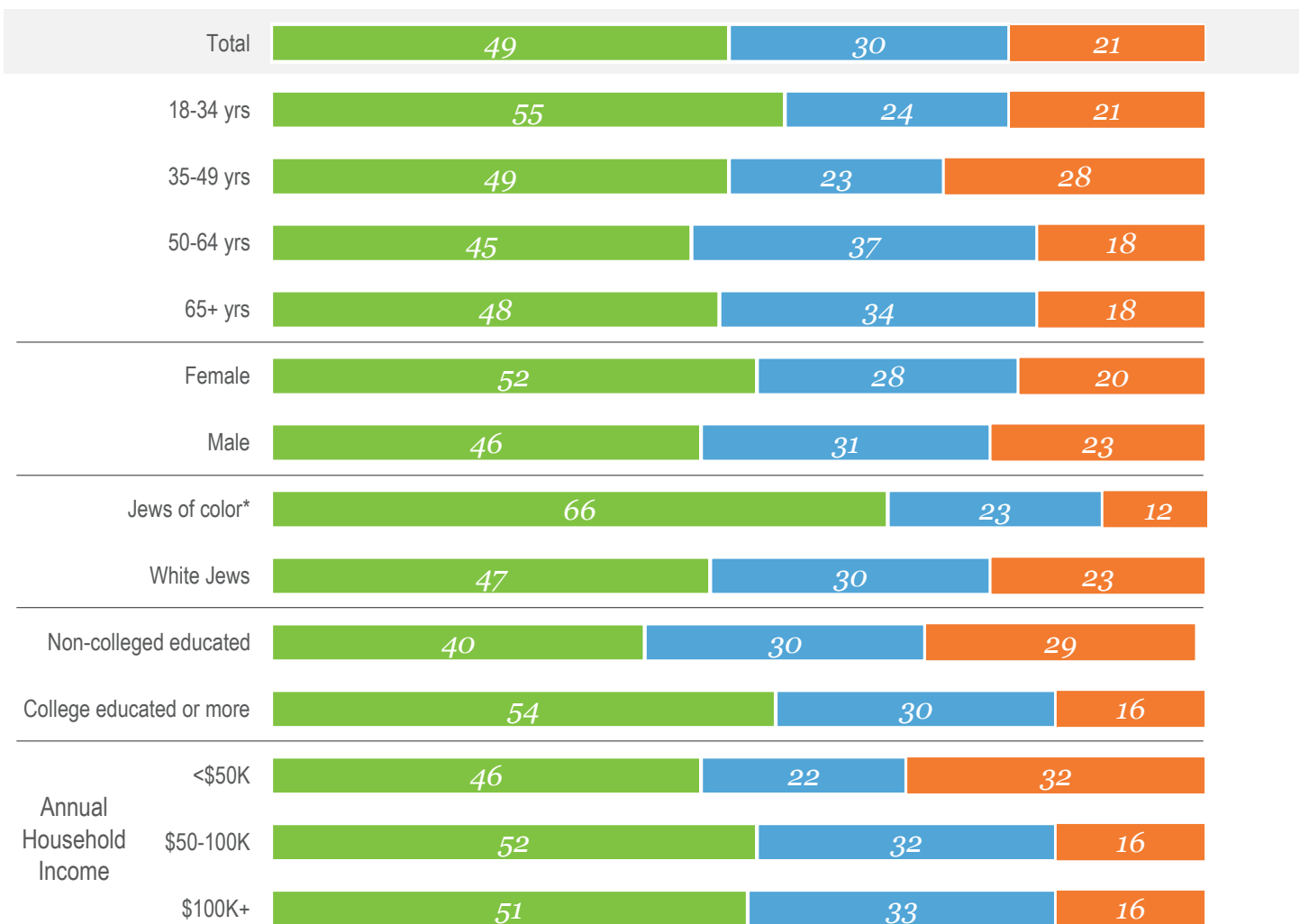
Civic engagement is highest among millennials, women, Jews of color, and those with higher income and education.

Rates of engagement are fairly high across all of the demographic subgroups of American Jews, with at least 40% of each being “highly engaged,” defined as having participated in five or more forms of civic engagement within the past year (with five being the average number of activities overall). However, there are important demographic differences within the American Jewish community when it comes to engagement. Jewish millennials and women, as well as Jews of color and those with higher income and education, report higher levels of civic engagement.

As Jewish organizations look to foster civic engagement, they should not assume that only wealthy, white, or well-educated Jews are willing to get involved in their communities, and should prioritize exploring the barriers that may prevent certain groups of American Jews from engaging further.

Civic Engagement Activities — Number of Activities Done in the Past Year, shown by subgroup (%)

■ Highly Engaged (5+ activities) ■ Medium (2-4 activities) ■ Low engagement (0-1 activities)



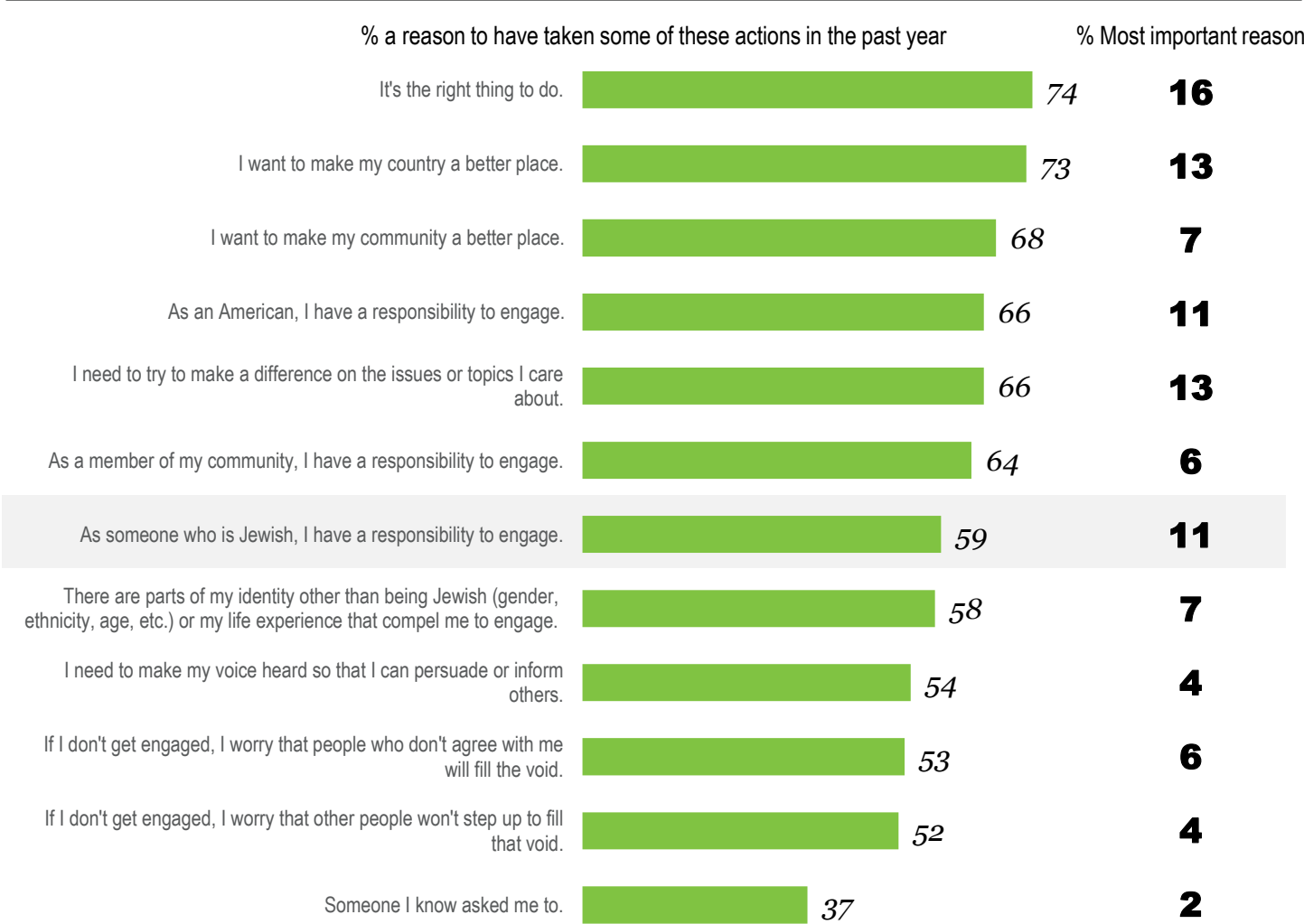
* Sample size for Jews of Color is small (n=47); results should be considered directional.

American Jews have diverse reasons for their civic engagement, with being Jewish playing a supporting role for most.

This research also sought to understand why American Jews engage civically and what role being Jewish plays in that engagement. We asked American Jews about the various reasons they engage, and then asked them to select the most important reason why they engage.

For most, being Jewish is a reason, but not the *primary* reason, for engagement, to the extent it drove them at all—59% said being Jewish was a reason for engagement, with only 11% citing it as the *most important* reason. Instead, American Jews often pointed to what they perceive as more universal values and goals as their reasons for taking action: that **it’s the right thing to do** (16% indicated this as their most important reason), that they want to **make the country a better place** (13% most important), or that they want to **make a difference on issues they care about** (13% most important).

What are the reasons why you have taken some of these actions in the past year?
Multiple answers allowed, asked among those have done two or more civic activities in the past year

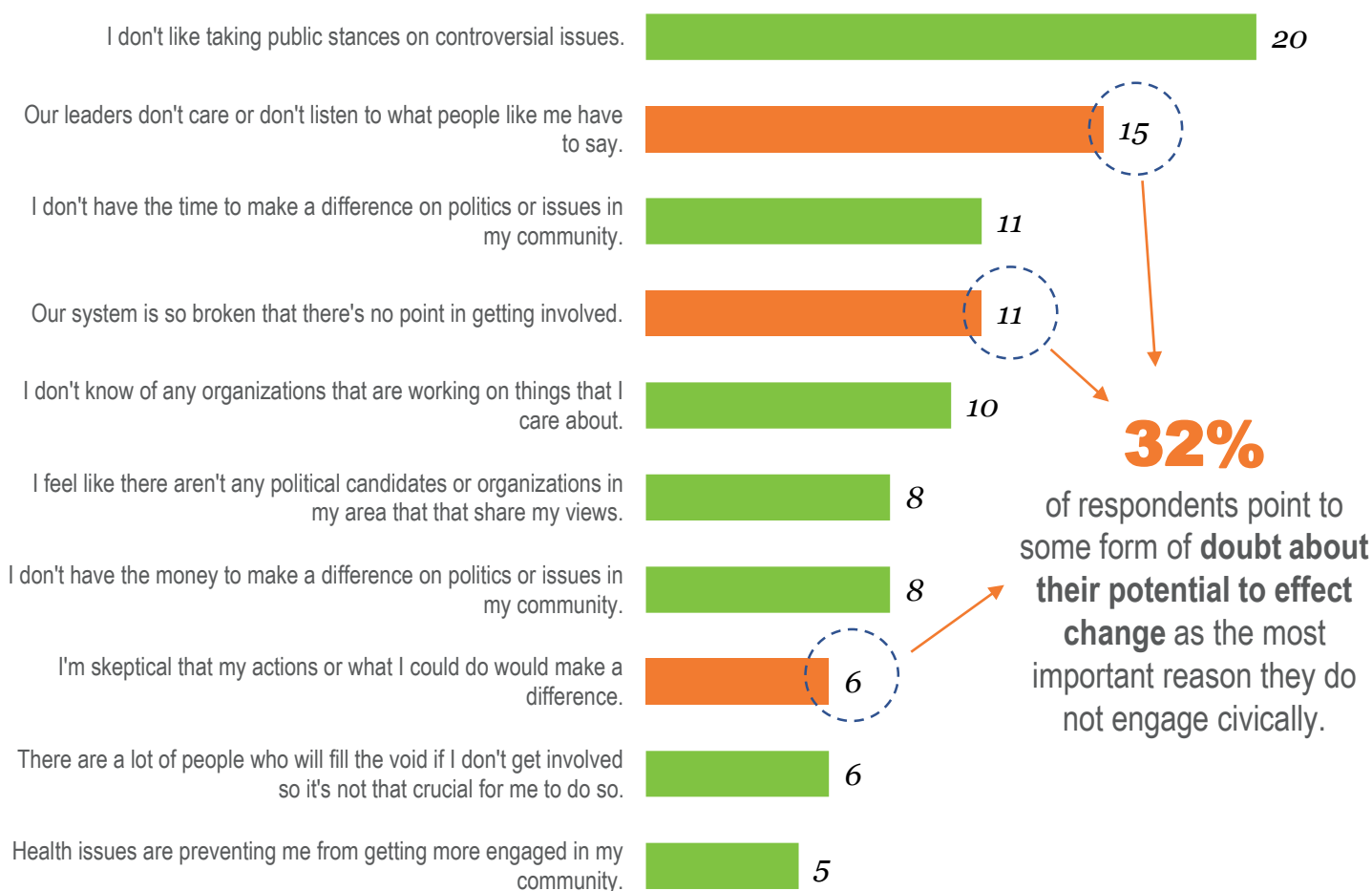


Perceived powerlessness and fear of being “too political” are the top barriers to civic engagement.

When it comes to less civically engaged Jews, an aversion to politics and cynicism about the importance of getting involved stood out clearly as the most important barriers to engagement in democracy and their communities.

One in five less civically engaged Jews said “*I don’t like taking public stances on controversial issues*” was the single most important reason why they generally do not engage civically. The Shalom Hartman Institute’s “Courageous Leadership” report (Fall 2019) documented how fear of taking public stances has held back Jewish leaders; our findings show that fear affects more than just leaders. Another one in three (32%) said the most important reason they did not engage civically was some form of doubt about their ability to effect change—that our leaders do not listen to people like them, that our political system is fundamentally broken, or that their individual actions would not make a difference.

What is the most important reason why you have not taken some of these actions in the past year? (%) Asked among those have done no more than one civic activity in the past year



The difference between those who engage civically and those who do not: belief in their ability to effect change.

Cynicism about the efficacy of civic engagement came through clearly in both our qualitative and quantitative research as a key attitudinal difference between more civically engaged and less civically engaged American Jews. In focus groups, highly civically engaged Jews repeatedly pointed to their own sense of responsibility as a central motivator for action. These individuals held two key beliefs: first, that it was up to them to make the difference they want to see, and second, that they are indeed able to make a difference by taking action. Less civically engaged Jews expressed just as much dissatisfaction with the way things are going, but critically differed in that they doubt their ability to effect change.

To encourage civic engagement among American Jews who are not getting involved today, what is missing is not an awareness of problems that need solving, **it is a sense of empowerment and a belief that one's own actions will make a difference.**

More civically engaged Jews feel personally responsible for translating their values into action

***"We can't let history repeat itself. So you have to be involved and you have to [stand up for things].** I don't know if people felt that way before, [during the Holocaust]. Other people had to have seen what was going on, but they just were passive about it and just went along with it. So today, I think that just drives us not to be like that."*

Male, 50 yrs, More Civically Engaged

*"For me, [engaging in democracy] is extremely important. I grew up in the Soviet Union where there was no democracy, so **I have something to compare it to. I love this country and this is my home now, so for me, it's absolutely critical.**"*

Female, 31 yrs, More Civically Engaged

Less civically engaged Jews also see the need for change in the world, but they doubt their own impact

*"There were some issues that I disagreed on with the state government here, and I wrote to the representative. Unfortunately, he came back with a boilerplate letter that didn't address anything. It kind of made you feel like, **'I'm not even important enough for you to address what I specifically wrote to you about.'**"*

Female, 53 yrs, Less Civically Engaged

*"I think we probably all sort of expect [a disappointing response]... **You just get the impression that they just don't really care.** I think that if politicians really genuinely cared what their constituents thought about them, they probably would govern a lot differently in what they do."*

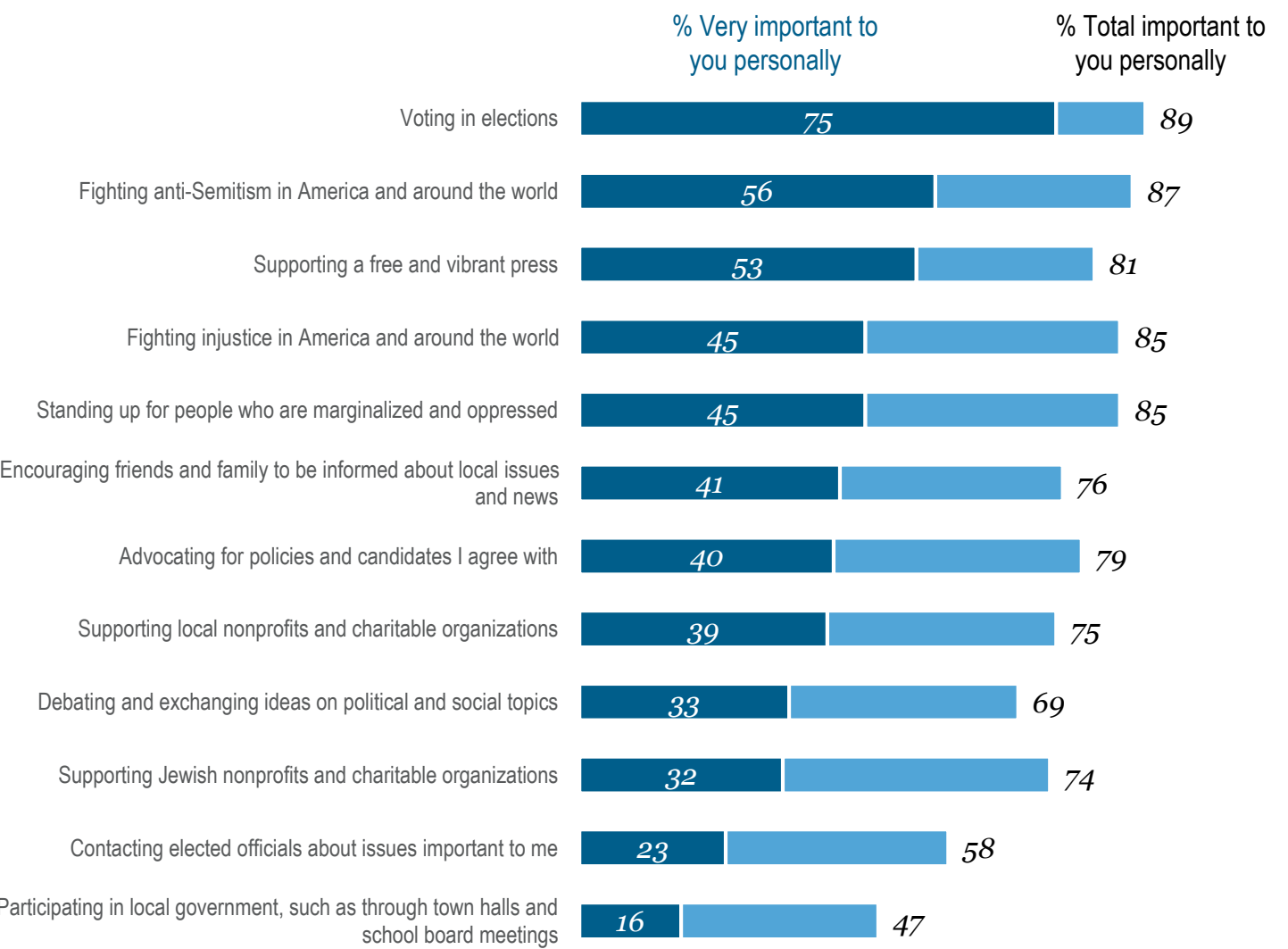
Male, 45 yrs, Less Civically Engaged

American Jews prioritize forms of civic engagement that express their values over practical involvement with government and organizations.

When it comes to civic engagement, American Jews are clearly motivated by broader values and goals. When we asked American Jews which forms of civic engagement are most important to them, they prioritized expressing and acting on their beliefs (such as by fighting anti-Semitism, supporting a free press, or fighting for social justice)—with the highest importance of all placed on the private act of voting for candidates they believe in.

On the other hand, American Jews have **less enthusiasm for the practical, time-intensive, and often more public work** of civic engagement, such as supporting specific organizations, contacting elected representatives, and participating in local government.

Beliefs/priorities about civic engagement and democracy





The Relationship Between Being Jewish and Engaging Civically

Most are open to a connection between being Jewish and engaging civically, but few see being Jewish as central to how and why they engage.

The previous section of this report shows that American Jews are broadly civically engaged—but what is the relationship between being Jewish and engaging in civic life? Do American Jews see civic engagement as part of living a Jewish life? How, if at all, does their being Jewish shape the ways they choose to engage civically? And how can Jewish organizations facilitate those connections?

We found that a majority of American Jews—68%—say that being Jewish plays at least some role in how and why they engage in their communities and the democratic process today. But that belief, while widespread, is not strong. Only 23% of respondents said that being Jewish has “*a lot of influence*” on their civic engagement, while 32% said it had “*no influence*.” Most Jews fall somewhere in the middle—open to persuasion by convincing arguments in either direction.

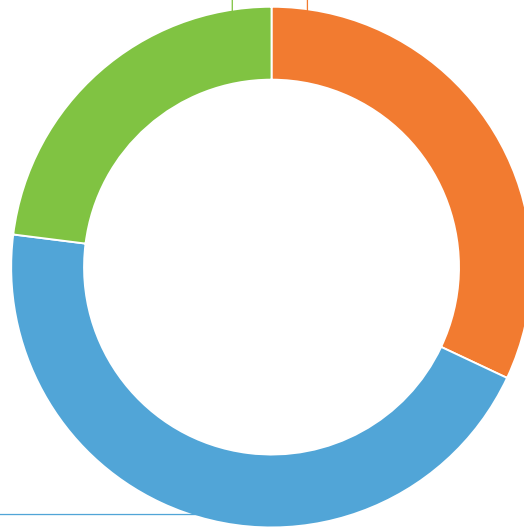
Which of the following best describes you?

23%

Being Jewish has **a lot of influence** on how and why I choose to participate in democracy and engage with my community.

32%

Being Jewish has **no influence** on how and why I choose to participate in democracy and engage with my community.



45%

Being Jewish has **some influence** on how and why I choose to participate in democracy and engage with my community.

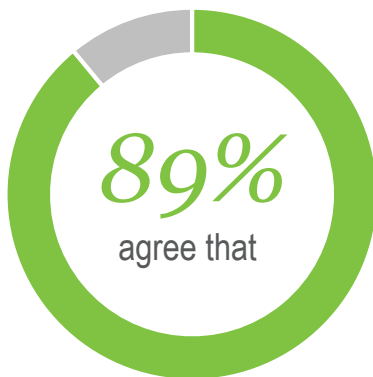
American Jews resist the idea that their reasons for engaging civically are uniquely or exclusively Jewish.

Although American Jews readily identify some level of connection between being Jewish and the ways they choose to engage in democracy and their communities, they are often reluctant to label the foundational values and goals that motivate them as *exclusively* Jewish.

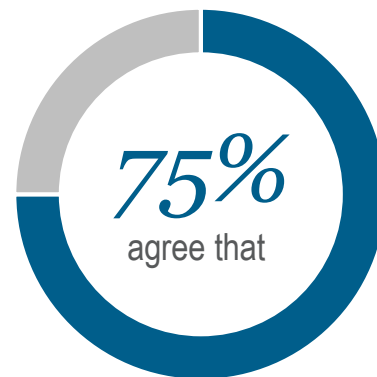
This dynamic was clear in our focus groups, when both highly civically engaged and less civically engaged respondents were wary of the idea that there is a unique connection between being Jewish and engaging in democracy and their communities. Many respondents said they engage because they believe “it is the right thing to do,” and they worried that labeling their engagement as Jewish implies that non-Jews cannot *also* engage for the same reasons. Similarly, they were uncomfortable with the implication that they themselves might engage differently if they were not Jewish. Our quantitative research confirmed these findings, as shown below.

For many American Jews, the values that drive them to engage civically are not seen as Jewish values; they are universal values.

Beliefs about democracy and the American Jewish community



I engage, or would engage, in my community because it's the right thing to do, not because I'm Jewish.



If I weren't Jewish, it would change very little about the ways I choose to engage in democracy and in my community.

Confronting the tension: one's values as a Jewish person need not be exclusively “Jewish values.”

But while most American Jews reject that idea that their foundational values are somehow uniquely or explicitly Jewish, they see the connection in their own lives between being Jewish and those same foundational values.

Nearly two-thirds of American Jews simultaneously agree that their values come from how they were raised—including their Jewish upbringing—and that their core values are not uniquely Jewish, because plenty of non-Jews in America share them. In other words, American Jews see these goals and values as universal, but their personal commitment to those values is rooted in being Jewish.

81% agree that

My values come from the way I was raised, and my Jewish upbringing and identity is a big part of why I have the values that I do.

*“I was raised to be a person who cares about other people, who tries to help where I can... **That was just how I was raised...** Those are **good Jewish values too**, but I think that’s just a good human value.”*

Female, 32 yrs, More Civically Engaged

76% agree that

My core values aren’t uniquely Jewish, because there are plenty of non-Jewish people in America who share them.

*“I have a lot of friends that aren’t Jewish, but I find that many of them have the same values... **I don’t think they’re unique.** I think they’re unique to people who have good character and concern for others and the earth. I don’t want to... sound like we’re the only ones trying to save the world.”*

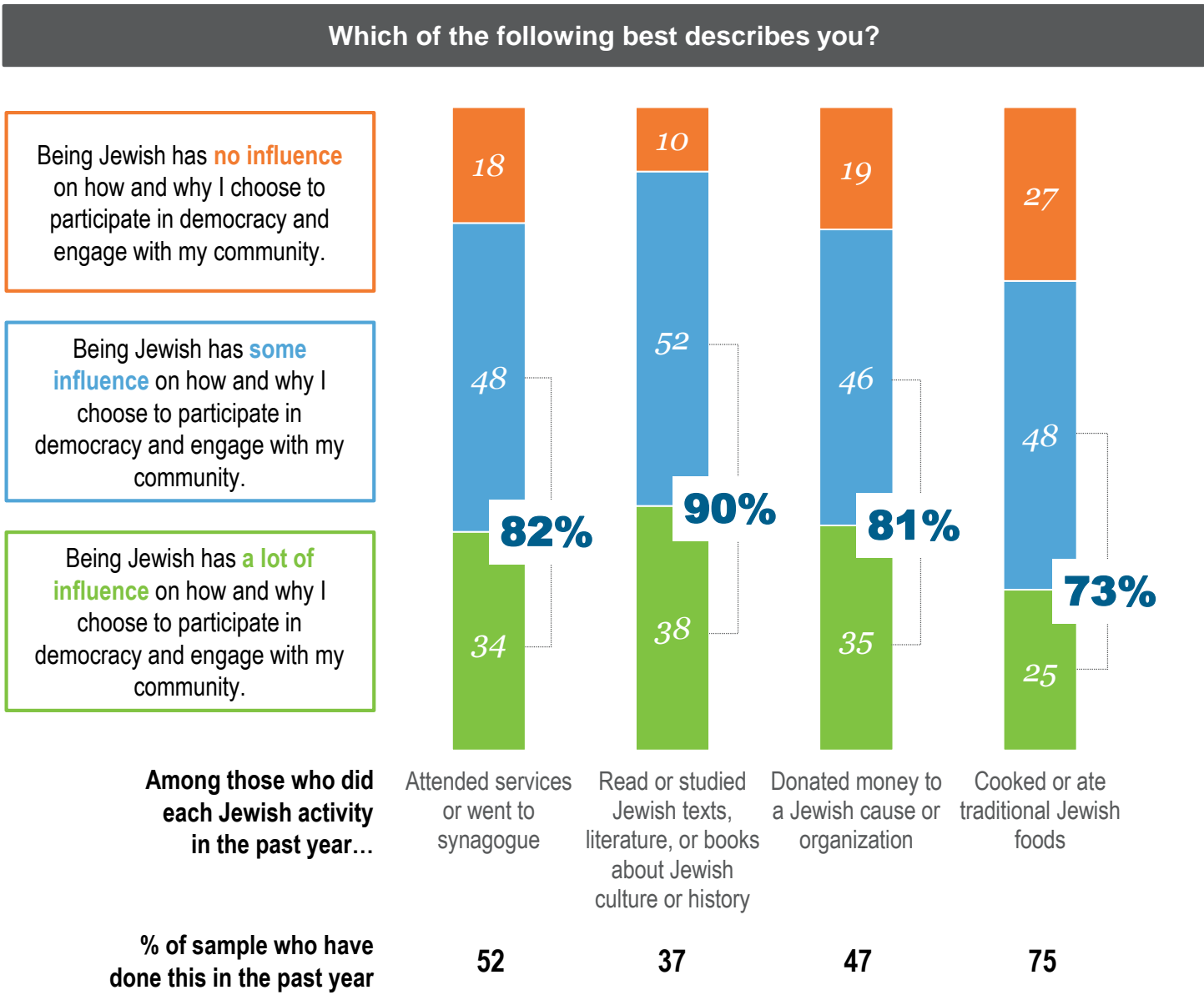
Male, 72 yrs, More Civically Engaged

Most American Jews (64%) agree with both statements

Attending religious services is one way—but not the only way—to develop a stronger sense of connection between being Jewish and engaging civically.

It is not only synagogue-going Jews who are drawing the connection between being Jewish and engaging civically. Jews who attend services say that being Jewish influences their civic engagement—but, as shown in the chart below, roughly equal numbers of those who have participated in Jewish life in other ways within the past year see the connection between being Jewish and engaging in democracy and their communities.

This is welcome news to Jewish organizations, particularly those seeking to reach a diverse, pluralistic swath of the American Jewish community. There are many entry points for Jewish organizations to reach American Jews; attending religious services is likely just one of the many ways to develop a stronger sense of connection between being Jewish and engaging in civic life.



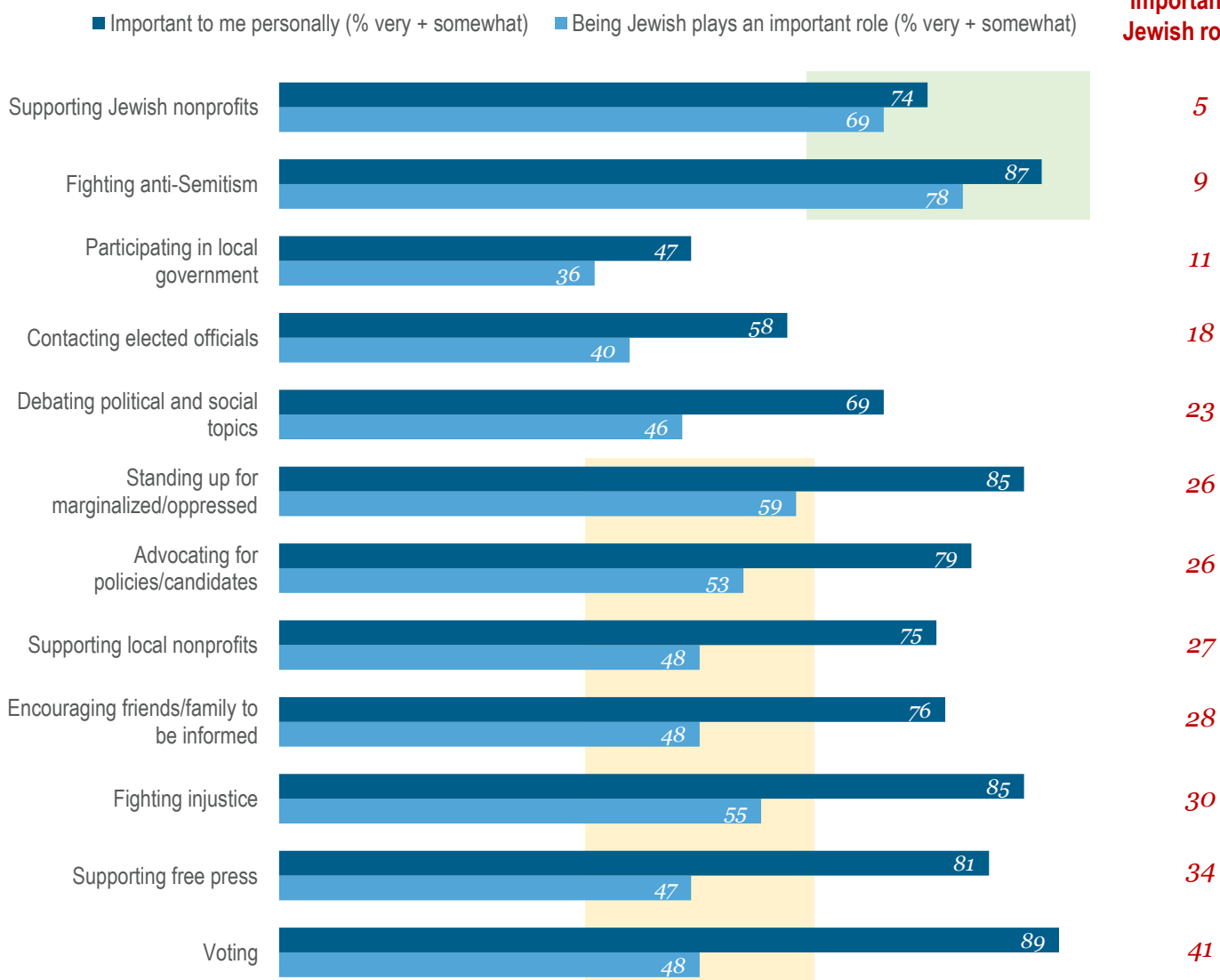
Beyond overtly Jewish civic activity, many struggle to explicitly draw the connection to being Jewish.

While most see some connection between being Jewish and engaging civically, they often struggle to draw the connection when it comes to specific forms of civic engagement that are not obviously Jewish. Using the same list of civic priorities whose perceived *importance* was discussed earlier in this report, we asked respondents how much of a role *being Jewish* plays in whether and how they engage in each.

For overtly Jewish activities (e.g. “supporting Jewish nonprofits” and “fighting anti-Semitism”), American Jews rate both the importance of the activity and the role that being Jewish plays highly. But major gaps emerge when it comes to civic activities that do not explicitly relate to Jews (e.g. “standing up for the marginalized and oppressed,” “advocating for policies and candidates,” and “supporting free press”). These activities are highly important, but being Jewish is not seen to play an important role in how they pursue these activities.

Relationship between importance of civic engagement and the role being Jewish plays in that engagement, sorted by the gap between them

Gap between importance of action and importance of Jewish role (%)

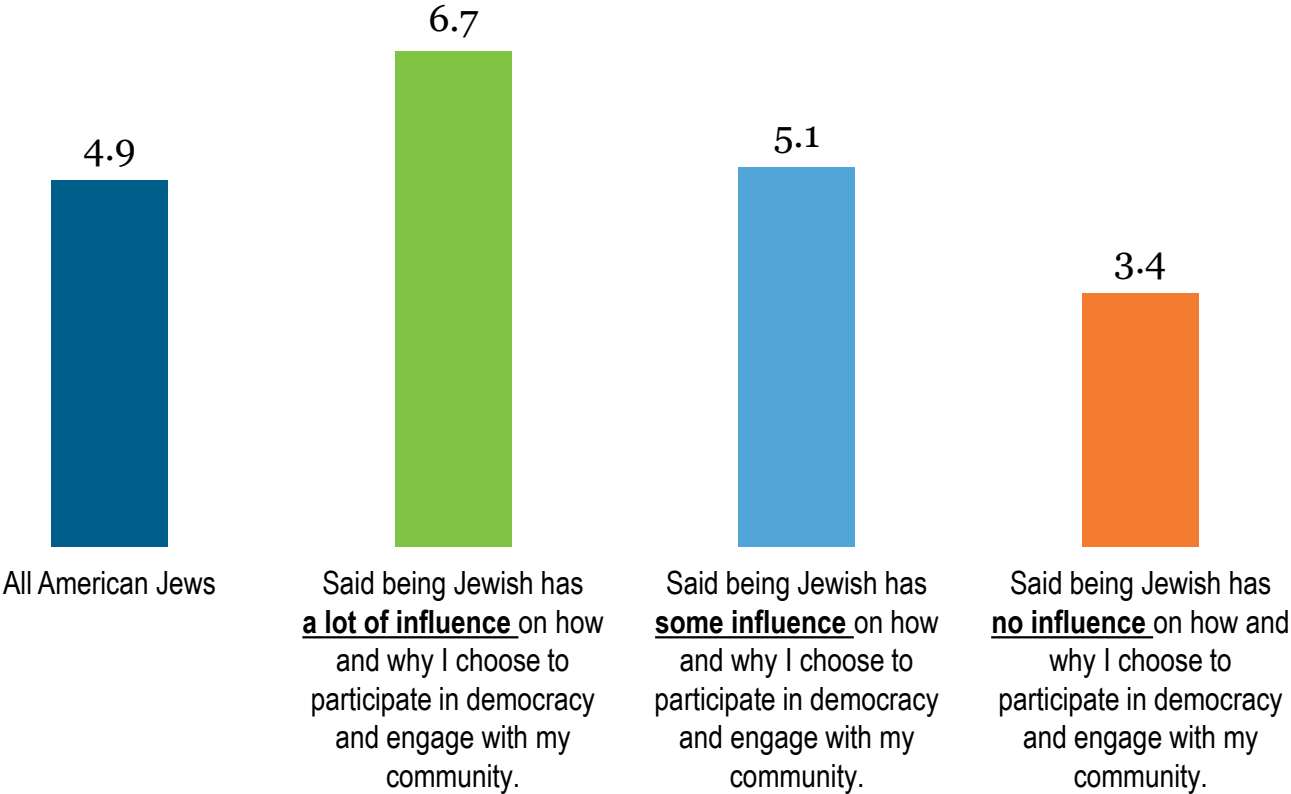


Those who connect being Jewish to civic engagement are more likely to engage broadly in civic life; more exploration is needed to understand this relationship.

Although American Jews may not always draw explicit connections between their being Jewish and engaging civically, our data show clearly that the connection exists.

As shown by the chart below, American Jews who see a *stronger connection* between being Jewish and engaging in democracy and their communities are more likely to engage in more different forms of civic activity. Those who said that being Jewish has “a lot” of influence on how they engage had, on average, participated in *nearly twice as many civic activities in the past year* as those who said “no influence.”

Average number of civic activities done in the past year





Connecting the Dots between Being Jewish and Engaging Civically

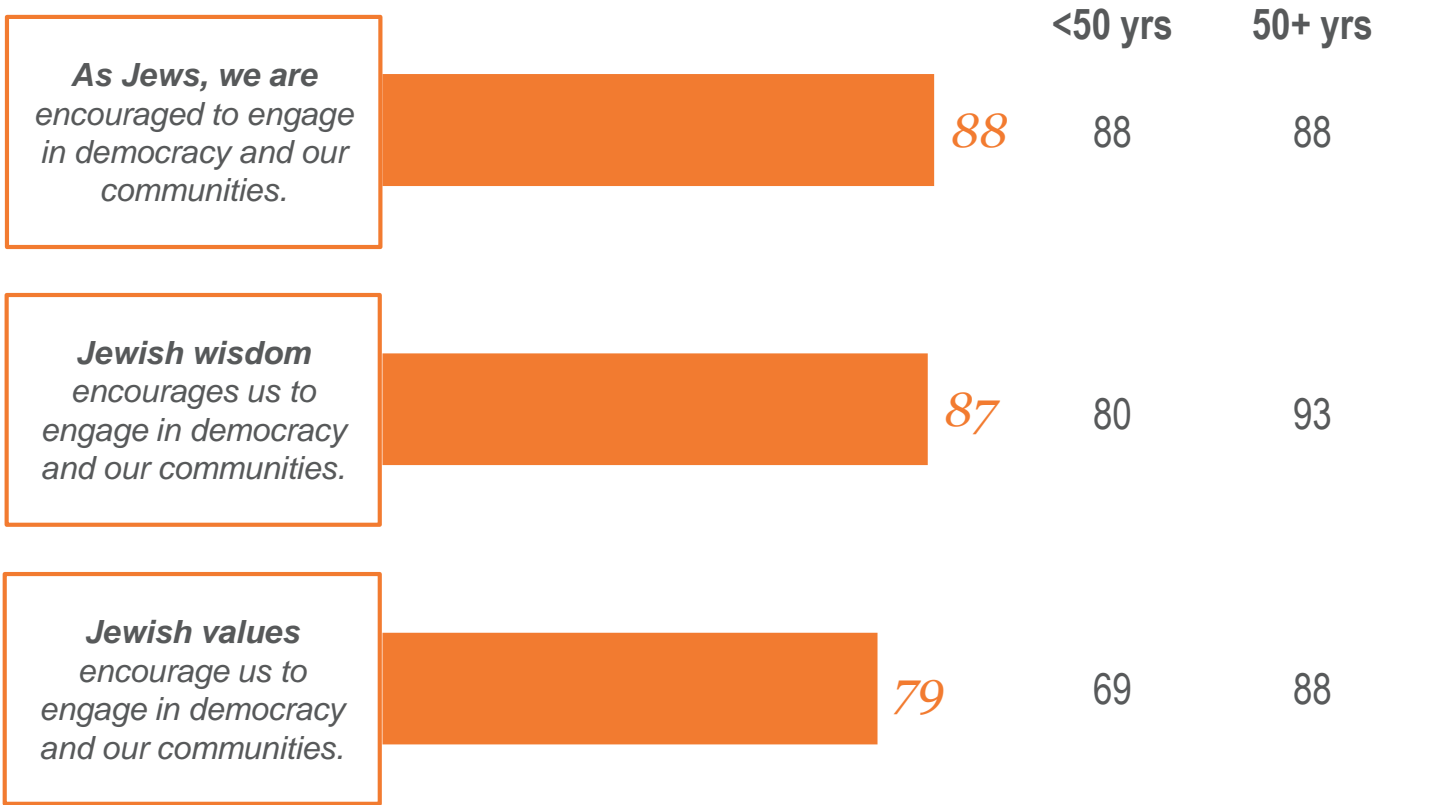
American Jews buy into the idea that being Jewish encourages civic engagement.

For many American Jews, the connection between being Jewish and engaging civically is not necessarily top-of-mind, but when the connection is presented to them, they respond positively to it.

We measured agreement with three versions of the idea that some aspect of being Jewish encourages Jews to engage in democracy and our communities, as shown below. All three versions elicited a strong response, with more than eight in ten American Jews agreeing with each version of the statement.

But there were notable differences by age in *which* articulation of this obligation to engage was most resonant. Jews under 50 years old were much less enthusiastic when the importance of engagement was framed around “Jewish values” rather than “Jewish wisdom” or a commitment “as Jews.”

Beliefs about democracy and the American Jewish community (% agree)



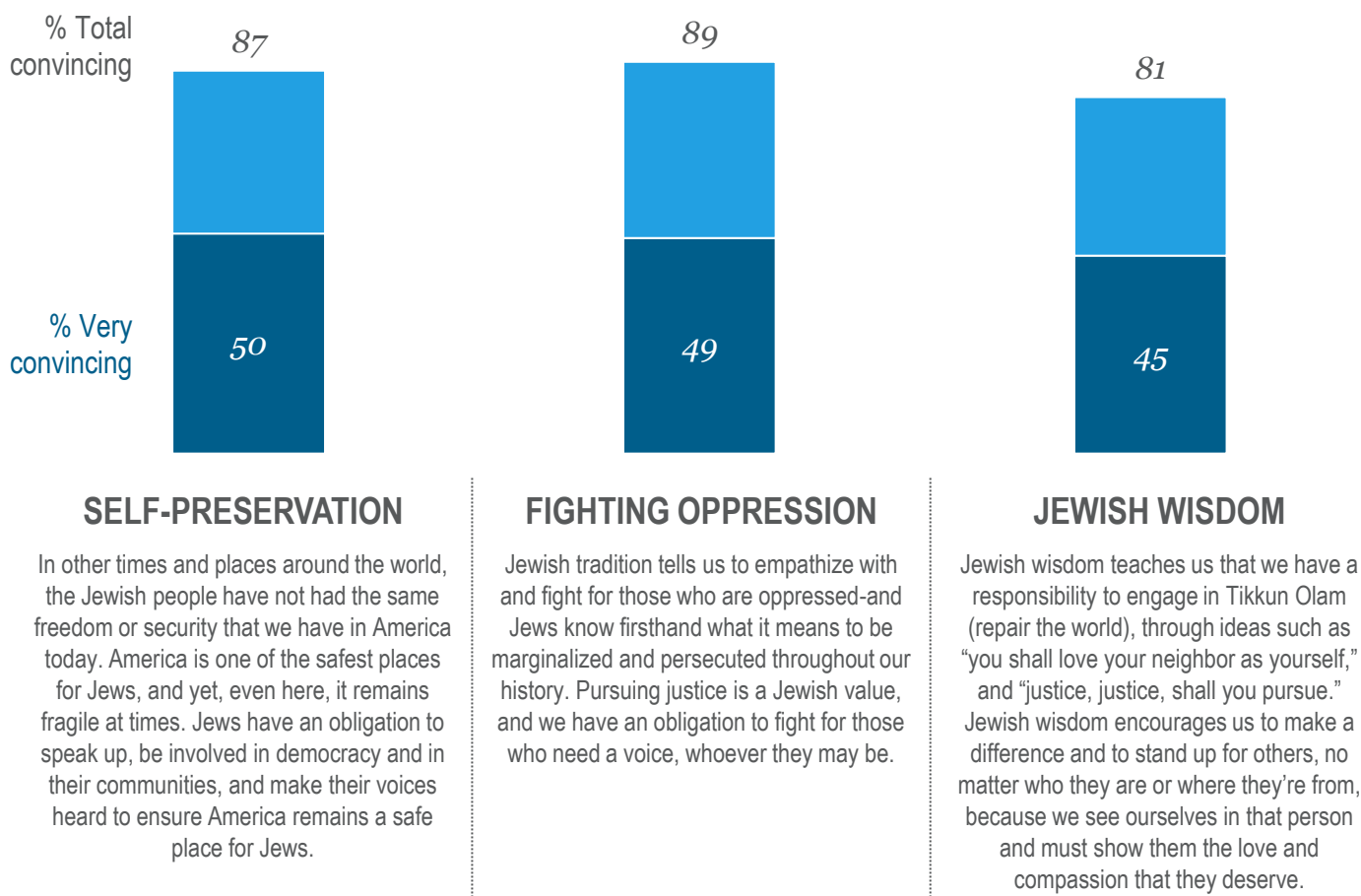
Multiple calls to action connecting civic engagement to being Jewish generate powerful responses.

We explored a range of “calls to action” that tapped into different themes, different aspects of Jewish tradition, and different conceptions of being Jewish to articulate why American Jews should engage in democracy and their communities.

The results of this exploration show two things clearly: first, American Jews respond strongly to calls to action that connect being Jewish to engaging in civic life, even when they do not make that connection themselves. And second, there is no one right way to make this connection for every Jewish person.

Three calls to action, around **Self-Preservation**, **Fighting Oppression**, and **Jewish Wisdom** (full message text below), all had not only broad appeal but intense resonance, with 45 to 50% of American Jews finding them to be *very* convincing reasons to engage. This intense response shows the potential for these kinds of calls to action around civic engagement not just to sound nice, but to motivate participation. Importantly, the appeal of the **Fighting Oppression** and **Jewish Wisdom** statements shows that positive calls to action can provide motivation just as powerfully as negative or fear-based messaging.

How convincing a reason is this for Jewish people to participate in democracy and in their communities?

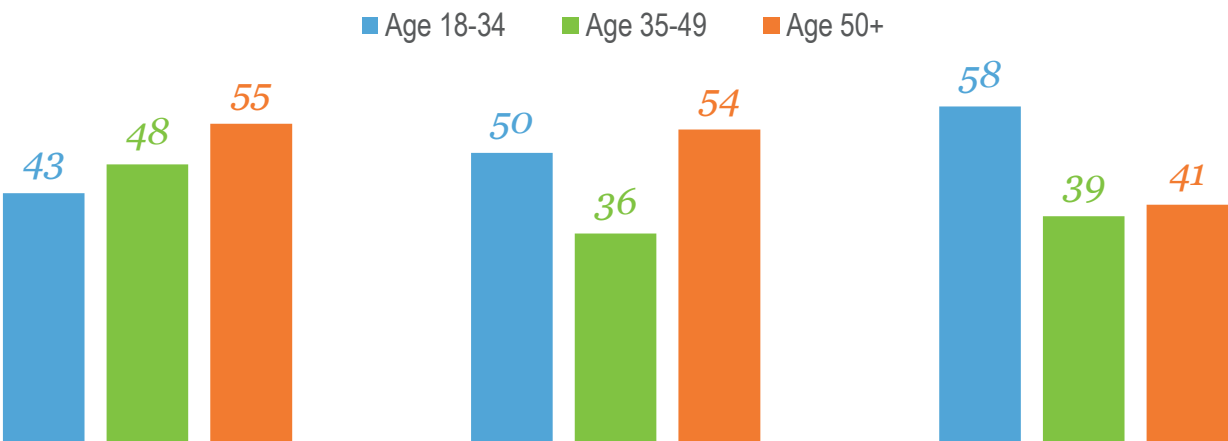


There is no one right way to connect being Jewish to engaging civically, as different generations of Jews respond in their own unique ways.

Our exploration of calls for Jewish civic engagement found clear age distinctions: younger Jews responded very strongly to positive ideas focused on creating change in the **Jewish Wisdom** and **Fighting Oppression** directions, while the more traditional appeal to past persecution in **Self-Preservation** connected powerfully with older Jews. And in some cases, calls to action that linked those ideas together—by articulating an obligation to fight oppression because Jews themselves have been oppressed—connected with both older and younger Jews.

Importantly, more work is needed for Jewish organizations to develop authentic, effective ways to speak to American Jews across generational, geographic, demographic, and ideological lines about the need for Jewish engagement in democracy and civic life. But it is clear that Jews of all ages respond when these connections are drawn in ways they recognize, and that engagement in Jewish life goes hand-in-hand with civic engagement in the actual behavior of American Jews. This is a crucial area for further exploration, and an important way for Jewish organizations to increase their relevance to American Jews in their lives today.

How convincing a reason is this for Jewish people to participate in democracy and in their communities? (% very convincing)



SELF-PRESERVATION

In other times and places around the world, the Jewish people have not had the same freedom or security that we have in America today. America is one of the safest places for Jews, and yet, even here, it remains fragile at times. Jews have an obligation to speak up, be involved in democracy and in their communities, and make their voices heard to ensure America remains a safe place for Jews.

FIGHTING OPPRESSION

Jewish tradition tells us to empathize with and fight for those who are oppressed-and Jews know firsthand what it means to be marginalized and persecuted throughout our history. Pursuing justice is a Jewish value, and we have an obligation to fight for those who need a voice, whoever they may be.

JEWISH WISDOM

Jewish wisdom teaches us that we have a responsibility to engage in Tikkun Olam (repair the world), through ideas such as “you shall love your neighbor as yourself,” and “justice, justice, shall you pursue.” Jewish wisdom encourages us to make a difference and to stand up for others, no matter who they are or where they’re from, because we see ourselves in that person and must show them the love and compassion that they deserve.



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