



CASJE

A lab for research in Jewish education

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CASJE RESEARCH DIGEST

What Do People Mean When They Say “Zionism”?

Editor's note:

This issue of the CASJE *Research Digest* focuses on the term “Zionism”—a concept that has become increasingly prominent in public discourse across media, politics, and campus life, particularly in the wake of the October 7, 2023 attacks and the subsequent war in Gaza.

We chose to center this issue on Zionism not to adjudicate its meaning (or that of its counterpart, “anti-Zionism”), but to better understand how the term is actually used and understood by different publics. **The research presented here highlights a striking disconnect: while “Zionism” is widely invoked, most Americans (Jewish and non-Jewish) lack a shared understanding of what it means, and interpretations of its meaning can vary significantly.**

For this reason, this issue shifts attention away from labels and toward underlying attitudes toward Israel among American Jews, exploring how they relate to Israel in ways that are often more complex and nuanced than public discourse suggests.

We hope this digest becomes an essential tool for leaders navigating a complex and evolving Jewish communal landscape.

[Fill in this form to let us know how we are doing!](#)

Dr. Sasha Volodarsky, CASJE Research Digest Editor

A panel discussion on Jewish–Interfaith Families and the Future of Jewish Life co-hosted by CASJE and eJP

On June 11, from 12:00–1:30 PM ET, join CASJE and *eJewishPhilanthropy* on Zoom for a panel conversation about Jewish–interfaith couples.

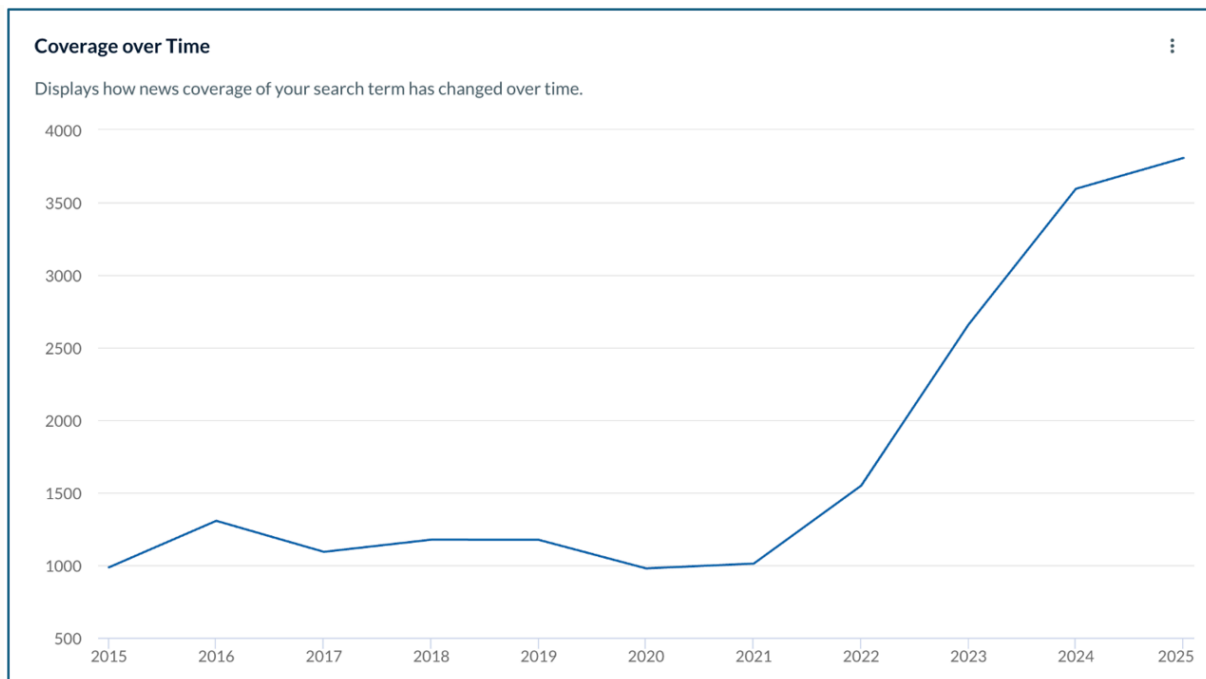
Following the publication of [CASJE's Research Digest on children of intermarriage](#), this panel brings together leading researchers, practitioners, and organizational innovators to explore current trends, lived experiences, and promising strategies for engaging Jewish–interfaith couples and mixed heritage families.

Register

This issue aims to provide a research-based foundation for understanding what people believe, how they interpret key terms, and why moving beyond labels may be helpful for more meaningful dialogue on Israel-related issues.

The term “Zionism” has become a fixture of modern public discourse, appearing with increasing frequency in news coverage, social media, and political debates. Even prior to the October 7 attack and the subsequent war in Gaza, mainstream media references to Zionism were already on the rise, as reflected in LexisNexis data tracking its usage.

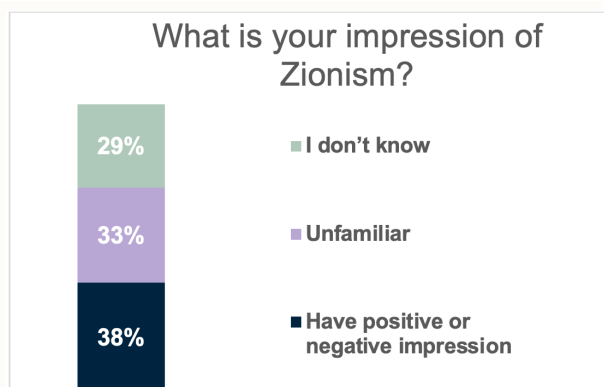
Number of articles in newspapers containing the word Zionism (data from Nexis Uni)



Note: Conditions of the search in Nexis Uni data: Newspaper articles (both print and web) that contain the word “Zionism” from the United States, between 1/1/2015 and 12/31/2025.

Since the October 7 attack and the following war in Gaza, the term “Zionism” has become more controversial. On college campuses, protesters have used anti-Zionist chants with increased frequency (see example [Harvard Law Review](#) or [NYT](#)), and some non-Jewish students openly state that they are unwilling to associate with individuals who identify as Zionists (see examples in [this report](#) or in a [NYT article on this topic](#)). However, it is often unclear what people mean when they use the term “Zionist” and its corollary, “anti-Zionist,” and equally unclear how others interpret these terms.

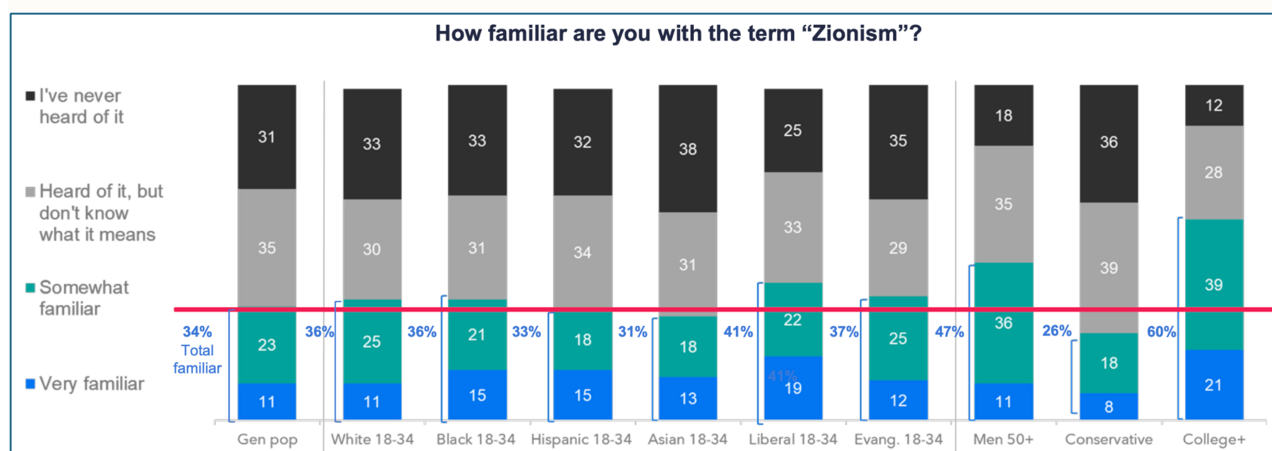
CHALLENGES WITH THE TERM ZIONISM



This chart was created by CASJE using data from [The University of Maryland, "Critical Issues Poll" \(summer 2023\)](#).

Despite its widespread use, research shows that a majority of the U.S. public today does not have a clear shared understanding of what "Zionism" means. A [University of Maryland Critical Issues Poll](#) conducted before October 7 (summer 2023) found that 62% of respondents either weren't familiar with the term Zionism or were unsure of their impression of it.

Notably, even after October 7 and the subsequent high-profile anti-Israel protests on campuses (spring and summer of 2024), the level of familiarity with the term remained steady in the general population. A study released by Boundless in November 2024 found that 66% of US adults either had never heard of the term "Zionism" or did not know what it meant.



Source: Boundless, ["Zionism in Focus" \(November 2024\)](#).

How Question Wording Can Shape Reported Familiarity with Select Terminology

Survey results on public familiarity with political or ideological terms can vary substantially, depending on how questions are worded. **Surveys that provide respondents with the definition of a term tend to produce different results than those that ask about familiarity with a term without offering any contextual guidance or possible definitions.**

For example, the aforementioned surveys from the University of Maryland and Boundless asked respondents directly about their familiarity with the term "Zionism" but did not supply study participants with a specific definition of the term to respond to. In these surveys, more than 60% of respondents reported being unfamiliar with the term or that they did not know what it meant.

By contrast, the Jewish Federations of North America study and the Yale Youth Poll, both discussed later in this issue, asked respondents to select a preferred (or their own) definition from a list of possible options. In these studies, far fewer respondents (approximately 30%) reported that they were unfamiliar with or unsure about the meaning of the term.

The most likely explanation for this substantial difference in reported familiarity is the variation in how the questions were asked. Presenting respondents with possible definitions may have helped them place the term “Zionism” in the correct context (for example, associating it with Israel or Jewish identity) and may have activated prior knowledge. Additionally, it could have encouraged respondents to make an informed or educated guess or share their reaction to a previously unknown term.

WHAT DO PEOPLE THINK ZIONISM MEANS?

The challenge with the term Zionism is that even among those who claim they know what it means, their understanding of the term can vary significantly. As Harvard professor of Jewish history [Derek Penslar argues](#), Zionism cannot be understood as a fixed doctrine: its meaning and significance vary across societies and generations, molded by the context, collective memory, and emotional needs of those who use the term.

Recent studies show substantial variation in how people interpret the meaning of Zionism. A [spring 2025 Jewish Federations of North America](#) (JFNA) study found that while majorities of both Jewish and general population respondents associate Zionism with “the right of the Jewish people to have a Jewish state,” relatively few people see this as its only meaning: just 23% of the general population and 36% of Jewish respondents selected this definition alone. This suggests that individuals often hold multiple or layered understandings of the term. For example, the JFNA study shows that a small but meaningful share of both the general American population and American Jews associate the term Zionism with the oppression of Palestinians by Israel (see statements below, e.g., “Believing Jews are superior to Palestinians”).

Which of the following are part of Zionist beliefs?	General US population	US Jews
The right of the Jewish people to have a Jewish state	66%	86%
The ideology of the Israeli ruling class	20%	15%
Supporting whatever actions Israel takes	28%	26%
Believing Israel has a right to the West Bank and Gaza Strip	35%	35%
Believing Jews are superior to Palestinians	21%	15%
Believing Palestinians are a made-up population	18%	20%
Believing that Palestinians should have a state to their own	10%	13%
Believing that Jews should be eliminated	2%	0%
Believing Jews are not indigenous to the Middle East	4%	2%
Something else	4%	8%
Not sure / Don't know	30%	12%
ONLY "The right of the Jewish people to have a Jewish state"	23%	36%

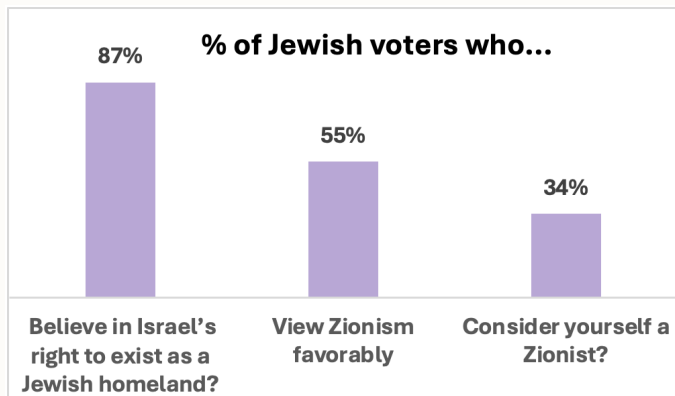
Source: [JFNA study \(spring 2025\)](#)

Findings from the [Yale Youth Poll from Fall 2025](#) reinforce this pattern. Unlike the JFNA study, in the Yale Youth study, no definition of Zionism was clearly preferred by the majority of non-Jewish respondents, likely due to more complex wording and less clearly differentiated answer choices. Still, among Jewish respondents, definitions centered on Jewish self-determination and statehood were the most widely endorsed. A majority (63%) of Jewish respondents identified Zionism as a movement for Jewish self-determination in their ancestral homeland. However, similar to the finding from the JFNA study, only a minority of Jewish respondents selected these definitions exclusively. This indicates the lack of consensus within the Jewish community regarding the definition of Zionism. As in the JFNA study, a notable portion of respondents (both non-Jewish and Jewish) associated Zionism with negative or critical views of Israel's treatment of Palestinians.

Which of the following definitions is closest to how you would define the word 'Zionism?' Check all that apply	Non-Jewish respondents	Jewish respondents	Total
1. A movement for self-determination and statehood for the Jewish people in their ancestral homeland	32%	63%	34%
2. Support for the continued existence of Israel, in the face of calls for its destruction or dissolution	24%	39%	25%
3. The belief that, if the other peoples of the world have a right to statehood, then the Jewish people have the same right	18%	49%	20%
4. Establishing and maintaining a Jewish demographic majority in Palestine by driving out the native Palestinian population	17%	16%	17%
5. The creation of a nation-state where Jews get more rights than others on the land	15%	16%	15%
6. A form of racism and apartheid against Palestinians	13%	15%	13%
None of the above	4%	5%	4%
% of people who selected either definition 1 or 3	39%	73%	41%
% of people who selected either definition 1 or 2 or 3 (statehood related definitions)	47%	79%	49%
% of respondents who selected only definition 1.	14%	17%	14%
% of respondents who selected only definitions 1 or 3 (statehood related definitions)	19%	34%	20%
N	3221	201	3422

Source: This table was produced by CASJE using [data from the Yale Youth Poll \(fall 2025\)](#). Despite its name, the Yale Youth poll uses a representative sample of the general registered-voter population of the United States.

This multiplicity of meanings helps explain an apparent paradox in American Jewish opinion. According to a [March 2026 study by the Jewish Electorate Institute](#), 87% of Jewish voters support Israel's right to exist as a Jewish homeland, and 55% view Zionism favorably (without offering any definition), yet only 34% personally identify themselves as Zionists.

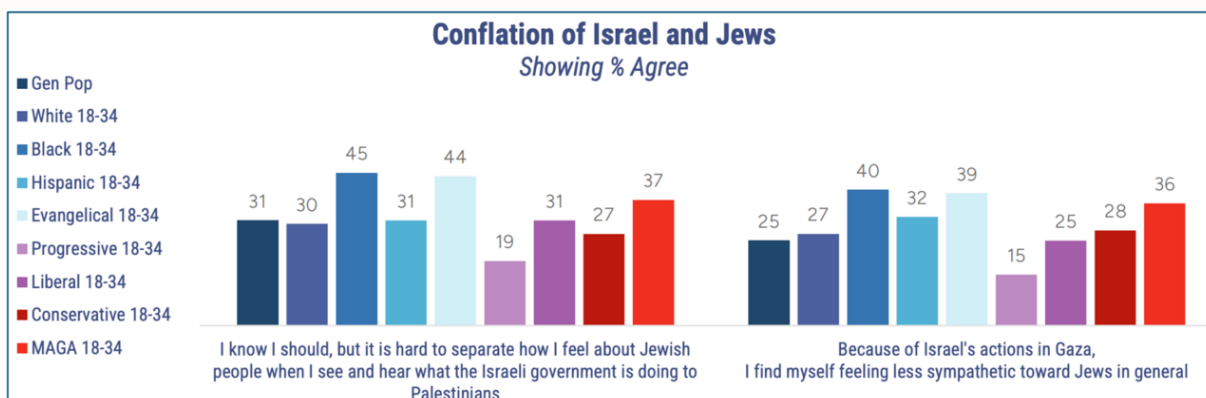


This chart was created by CASJE using [data from the National Online Survey of Jewish Voters \(March 2026\)](#).

Of course, the term Zionism refers to a range of beliefs about Israel and Jewish peoplehood, whereas the term Zionist refers to a personal or group identity. Individuals may endorse a set of ideas without adopting the identity or may adopt the identity while holding differing and even divergent views.

The gap between Zionist belief and identity may also suggest that American Jews, even as they support principles commonly associated with Zionism, avoid the use of the label itself, perhaps due to its contested and politicized meanings ([see a similar argument made by Mimi Kravetz from JFNA](#)).

The concern about being misunderstood is well-founded. A [Boundless study from September 2025](#) shows that a meaningful share of the American general population conflates their views on Israel with their views on Jews. As a result, people may assume that American Jews hold a particular political position simply because of a perceived connection to Israel. This same conflation may also help explain why some Jews interpret anti-Zionist claims as carrying antisemitic undertones. Sometimes, when the discussion about Israel extends to Jews more broadly, the distinction between criticism of Israel and group-based bias blurs.



Source: [Boundless, "Antisemitism in America: Two Years Since October 7," \(slide 18\)](#)

Given multiple and often competing interpretations of the term Zionism, in this issue, we shift the focus away from labels and instead examine more directly the relationships and attitudes American Jews hold toward Israel.

WHAT ATTITUDES DO AMERICAN JEWS HOLD TOWARDS ISRAEL?

The Pew Research Center's landmark 2020 study, [Jewish Americans in 2020](#), remains the most reliable source on the attitudes of American Jews towards various topics, including Israel. The study includes a detailed chapter on how American Jews connect with and think about Israel. According to Pew, 58% of American Jews feel somewhat or very emotionally attached to Israel, and 45% have visited the country at least once. Furthermore, 82% said that caring about Israel is either an "essential" (45%) or "important but not essential" (37%) part of their Jewish identity.

Traveled to Israel	
More than once	26%
Once	19%
Never	54%

Emotionally attached to Israel	
Very much	25%
Somewhat	32%
Not too much/Not at all	41%

Caring about Israel is Essential to being Jewish	45%
Caring about Israel is important but not essential to being Jewish	37%
Caring about Israel is not important to being Jewish	16%

These tables were created by CASJE based on Pew's data from the study of [Jewish Americans in 2020](#).

Although events in Israel and the United States since the Pew study may have influenced attitudes, more recent research suggests that American Jews remain strongly connected to Israel. For example, the [American Jewish Committee's 2025 State of American Jews report](#) found that 77% of American Jews say caring about Israel is somewhat or very important to them. Similarly, the [2025 study by JFNA](#) shows that 71% somewhat or strongly agree that they feel emotionally attached to Israel.

However, it is crucial to note that American Jews differ significantly in what "connection" and "caring" about Israel mean. A peer-reviewed academic [study done by Graham Wright, Leonard Saxe, and Kenneth D. Wald](#) highlights that politically liberal and conservative Jews interpret criticism of Israel in very different ways. **Liberal American Jews** (who constitute [60% of US Jewish voters](#)) **often consider being critical of Israel as an essential expression of their commitment to both Israel and America**, believing that affinity and allyship require holding Israel accountable for its actions. This perspective underscores a complex and often critical relationship between American Jews and the Israeli state (see more on this below). In contrast, **Jewish political conservatives** (who constitute [26% of US Jewish voters](#)) **are more likely to oppose**

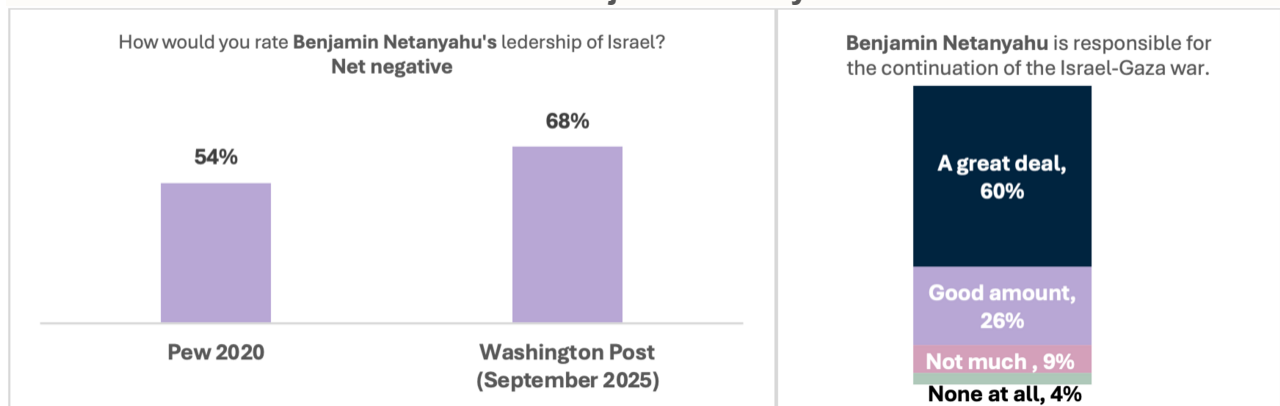
being critical of Israel and America for any reason because they perceive criticism as disloyalty.

The notion that one can simultaneously support the State of Israel and criticize its government was tested during the war in Gaza following the attacks of October 7. Even now, when the war has officially ended, many in the U.S. Jewish community are still navigating tension between the desire of many for Israeli security and moral concerns about the humanitarian cost of the conflict.

A [poll from September 2025 published by the Washington Post](#) found that **76%** of American Jews believe Israel's continued existence is vital for the future of the Jewish people. At the same time, 61% said that Israel committed war crimes in Gaza. While American Jews overwhelmingly blame Hamas for initiating the war (68%) and for its continuation (91%), they are unwilling to give Israel unconditional support for any Israeli action in Gaza: 80% assigned at least some responsibility for prolonging the war to Israel.

Another example of a critical view of Israel among American Jews can be seen in attitudes toward Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's leadership. Even in 2020, a majority of U.S. Jews viewed his leadership negatively. After the October 7 attack and the subsequent campaign in Gaza, these negative perceptions grew even stronger. One potential reason for this shift is that 68% of Jewish Americans assign responsibility for prolonging the war directly to Netanyahu (see the chart below).

Attitudes of American Jews about Benjamin Netanyahu



These charts were created by CASJE using data from the [Washington Post poll \(September 2025\)](#).

In addition, a [poll, conducted by researchers at the University of Rochester and the University of California in collaboration with Ipsos \(late August–early September 2025\)](#), found that **53% of U.S. Jewish adults disapproved of Israel's military campaign in Gaza, while only 31% approved.**

It is also important to acknowledge that while general patterns of attachment to and concern about Israel are well-documented, we know less about how American Jews currently think about key long-term issues such as settlement expansion in the West Bank, the viability of a two-state solution, and broader political and societal changes within Israel.

Looking Beyond Labels

Taken together, the evidence points to a clear but often misunderstood reality: American Jews, on average, maintain a strong emotional, cultural, and identity-based

connection to Israel, with large majorities viewing its existence as vital to the future of the Jewish people. At the same time, this attachment coexists with a meaningful degree of concern, critical reflection, and, for many, moral tension around Israel, particularly in response to recent conflicts and humanitarian issues. Many American Jews are actively trying to reconcile support for Israel's security with ethical considerations about its current policies and leadership.

This complexity—where attachment, critique, and ambivalence coexist—helps explain, in part, why broader public conversations about Israel and Zionism are so often fragmented and difficult to navigate. The term “Zionism” itself carries multiple, contested meanings, shaped by political context, personal identity, and emotional resonance. This dynamic is further complicated by the tendency of some Americans to conflate their views on Israel with broader attitudes toward Jews. As a result, the conversations about “Zionism” (and perhaps “anti-Zionism”) may involve people talking past one another, rather than engaging substantively around points of common interest as well as real disagreement.

Moreover, the label “Zionism” (and its counterpart “anti-Zionism”) may obscure more substantive engagement with people's attitudes towards Israel. Depending on their goals and audiences, some Jewish educational, communal, and advocacy efforts may want to specify their own definitions and stances around Israel, rather than rely exclusively on terms that may confuse or alienate potential allies, stakeholders, and participants.

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Acknowledgements

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