

Public Policy Priorities in Israel

Amnon Cavari, Shany Mor, Omer Yair, and Alex Mintz

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INTRODUCTION

An extant body of work demonstrates the importance of public opinion to understand political action and policy priorities of democratic governments. This effect, however, is mostly at the margin – when opinion changes. When public opinion changes, governments rise and fall, elections are won or lost and old realities give way to new demands (Stimson 2015). Similarly, policy outputs "feed back" on public inputs, serving like a thermostat; when the actual policy "temperature" differs from the preferred policy temperature, the public sends a signal to adjust policy accordingly, and once sufficiently adjusted, the signal stops (Soroka and Wlezien 2010).

Given the importance of identifying change in public opinion, one needs to examine longitudinal trends (Baumgartner and Jones 2015; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Page and Shapiro 1992). This requires time-series data about policy priorities of Israelis and policy evaluations of existing policy programs. Such data, however, do not exist about Israeli public policy. Scholarly public opinion data in Israel are sparse and there is no systematic collection of longitudinal, time-series public opinion data on policy.

We seek to change this limitation in existing work by initiating a recurring semiannual survey of policy sentiment in Israel, a measure of the heartbeat of the Israeli democracy. The surveys include questions about the policy mood in Israel, about the policy priorities of Israelis, and policy evaluations of main government departments and political actors and their policy initiatives and personal reliability.

In our longitudinal study we wish to generate data to test the following overarching questions, which stand at the heart of all Democracies, let alone the Israeli democracy:

- What are the policy priorities of Israelis? In policy priorities we refer to the preferences of Israelis about the problems and issues they want their government to address.
- How Israelis view the competence of the political actors to address the policy priorities? In competence we refer to the confidence Israelis have in the ability of various political actors and institutions to handle problems and issues the public prioritizes.
- How Israelis evaluate existing policy initiatives and to what extent they have confidence in the political actors and institutions that manage them?
- How Israelis perceive and evaluate the political and policy actions of various political actors and institutions?

METHOD

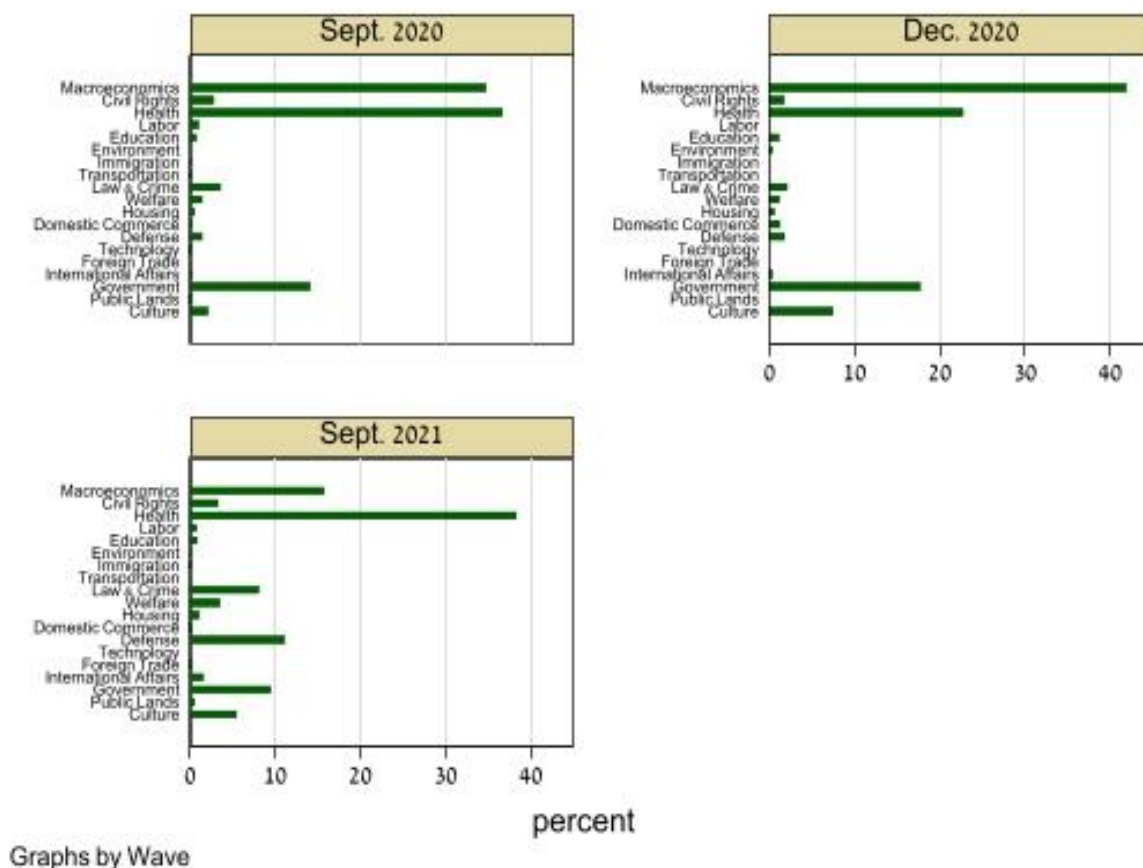
To assess the policy views of Israelis we administered three surveys in 2020 and 2021 – conducted on September 10-16 2020; December 29, 2020-January 6, 2021; and September 1-5, 2021. The surveys were administered by Geocartography, an Israeli online survey company operating an online panel that provides a representative sample of the Israeli population. To maximize representation, we provided the survey in Hebrew and Arabic, and implemented quotas based on age, gender, ethnicity and region.

The surveys include over 60 questions that ask various policy questions, news habits and political engagement as well as a series of demographic and political questions that allow us to examine the sources of attitudes and preferences. In the current report, we summarize only topline responses (aggregate views based on all respondents).

RESULTS: PUBLIC POLICY PRIORITIES IN ISRAEL

We examined issue priorities of Israelis using the most important problem (MIP) facing the country, an open-ended question that offers respondents the ability to voice what they care or concerned about without any a-priori categories of the pollster. Following the surveys, we coded the responses into policy categories using the unified codebook of the Comparative Agendas project (see information about the CAP project here: <https://www.comparativeagendas.net>).

Figure 1: What is the Most Important Problem Facing the Country?



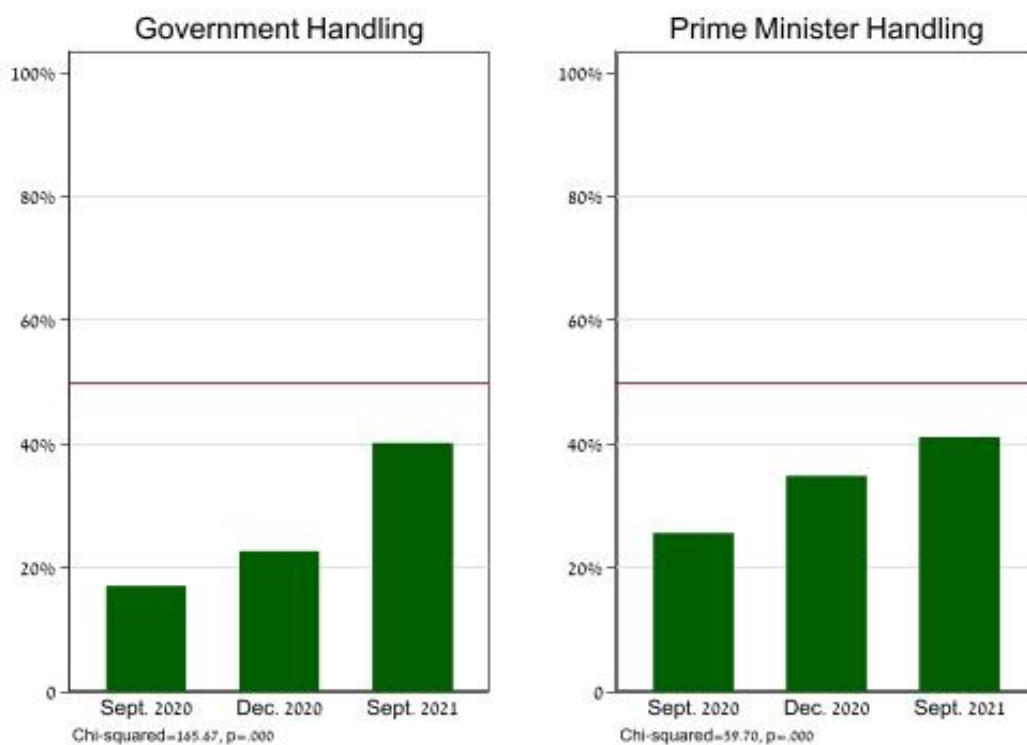
In all three surveys, the concerns about the economy and public health dominated. All three surveys were taken during the coronavirus crisis, and, more specifically, during peak moments of infection waves (the second, third, and fourth Covid-19 waves in Israel, respectively).

WHAT ISRAELIS THINK ABOUT THE COMPETENCE OF THEIR POLITICAL LEADERSHIP?

We asked various questions to assess the public perception of the competence of the Israeli government and its leaders. The first is overall satisfaction from the work of government and its head, the Prime Minister. While we see a significant increase in satisfaction from the first to the second survey (both conducted under the Netanyahu-Gantz coalition government), we see very low levels of satisfaction among Israelis—much lower than the 50% mark.

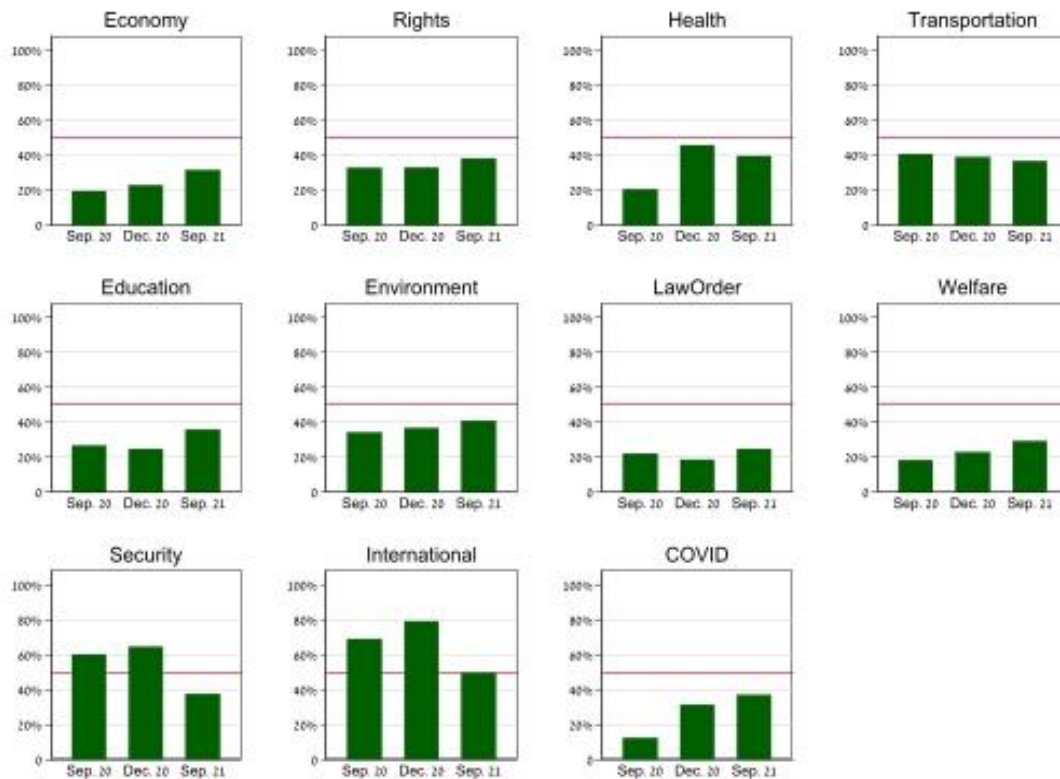
The third survey covers the new Bennet-Lapid coalition government. There is a significant positive jump in the public's assessment of the government as a whole, and a slightly less significant jump in the approval of the new Prime Minister. Prime Minister Netanyahu enjoyed a sizable boost in his popularity from September to December 2020, presumably due to the successful rollout of the Covid vaccine in Israel in the weeks leading up to the second poll. But Prime Minister Bennet enjoyed an even higher public approval in the third survey.

Figure 2: Satisfaction from Handling the Work of Government



Our second measure focuses on specific policy domains. For this purpose, we asked respondents whether they are satisfied with the way the government handles various policy areas—economy, civil rights, health, education, environment, transportation, law and order, welfare, security and foreign affairs. Figure 3 summarizes the responses in all three surveys.

Figure 3: Satisfaction of Government Handling Specific Policy Domains

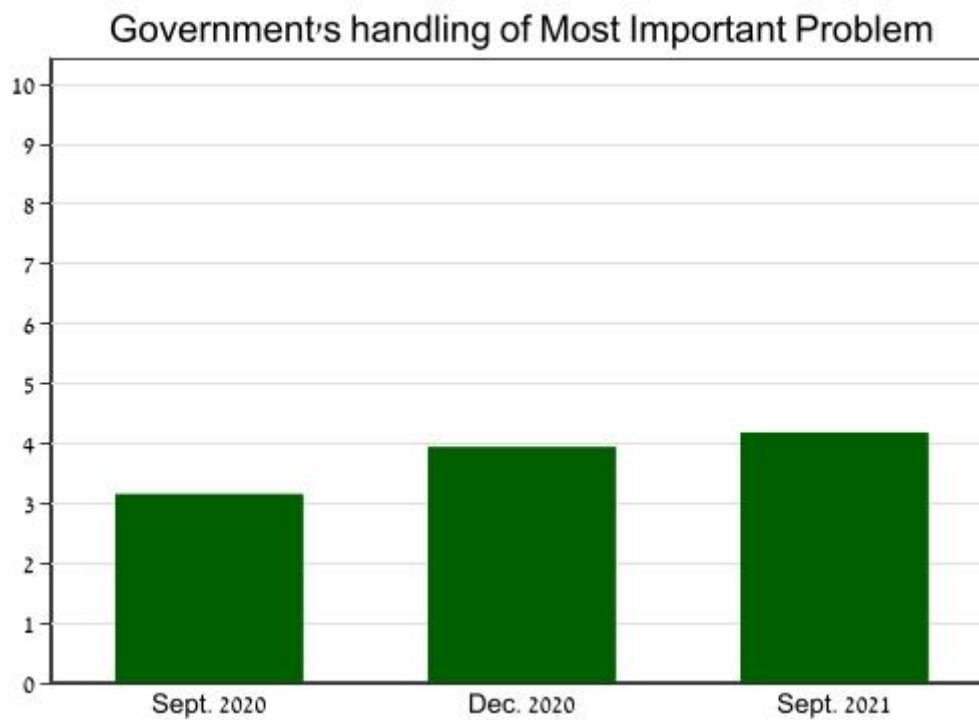


In almost all issue domains, in all three surveys, the Israeli public is not satisfied in the government's handling of its job. Differences between surveys are also small and, unlike with the general questions about the government and the Prime Minister, do not seem to be particularly sensitive to the change in coalition between the second and third surveys.

Two exceptions to both of these findings are in the domains of security and foreign affairs. On both the government got high marks in the first two surveys as compared to low marks in all other fields. And on both, there is a marked decline in approval once the new Bennet-Lapid government takes over. An added irony to this is that the Minister of Defense in both governments is the same man, Benny Gantz.

Finally, we assess how Israelis evaluate the ability of the Israeli government to address the issues people are concerned about. Each individual can choose any issue of interest/concern to her. These concerns are summarized in Figure 1 above. Respondents were then asked if they believe that the Israeli government can address the issue they just mentioned. Our interest here is in the overall evaluations that people have of the ability of the Israeli government to handle these concerns. The advantage of this question is that it refers not to a particular problem but to the issues that matter most to respondents (Cavari 2014; Green and Jennings 2017). The results are shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Handling of the Most Important Problem

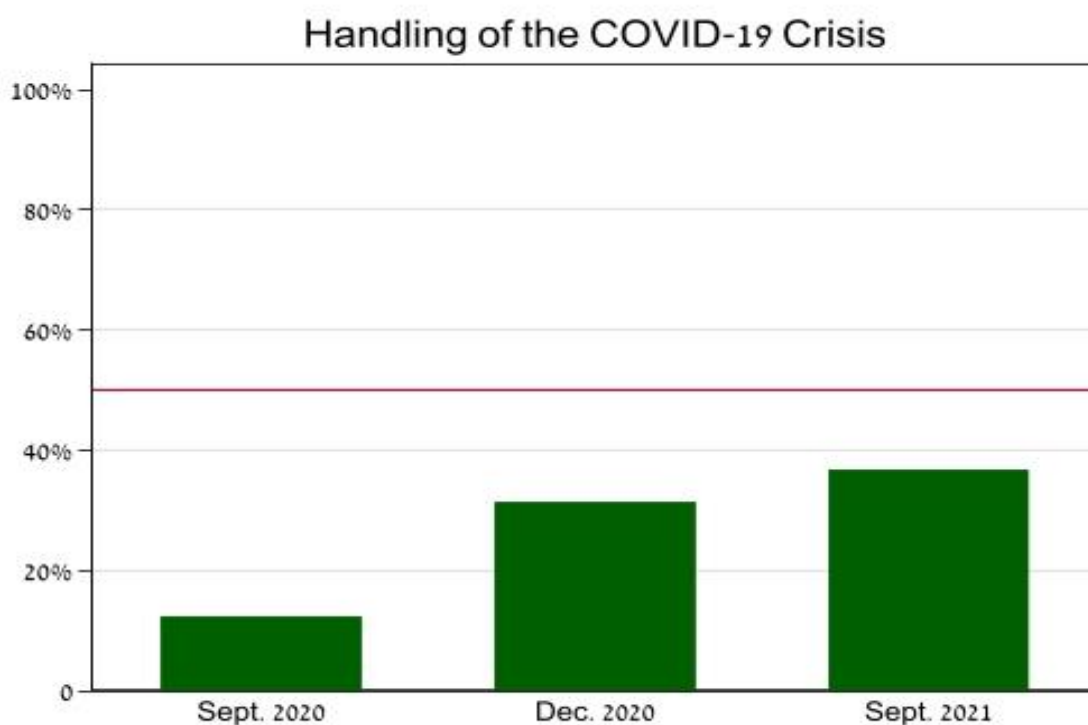


Israelis have little confidence in the ability of its government to handle the issues they care or concerned about. They are, however, slightly more confident now than they were a year ago, a trend that began before the government changed hands and continued after.

HOW ISRAELIS EVALUATE EXISTING POLICY INITIATIVES?

Here we present the views of Israeli about one policy challenge—handling the Corona pandemic. We asked two questions about handling the pandemic—satisfaction with the handling of the pandemic and who respondents believe should handle the pandemic.

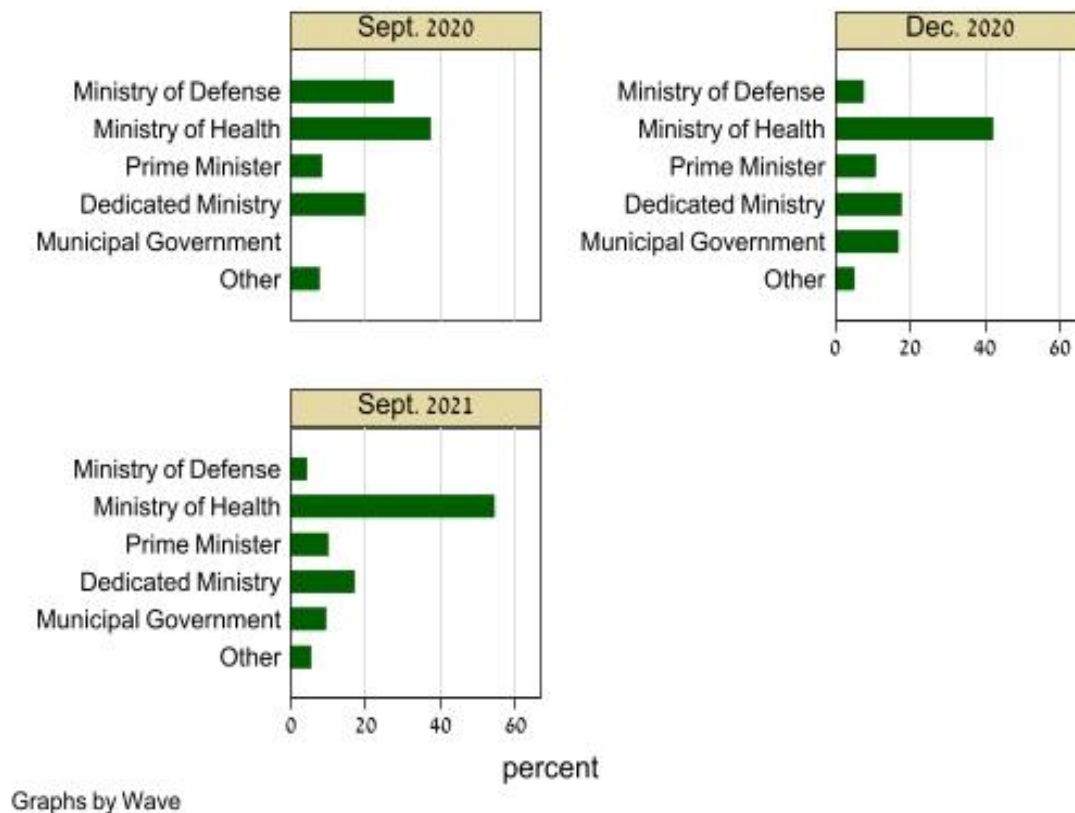
Figure 5: Satisfaction of Government Handling of the Corona Crisis



Israelis are not satisfied with the government's handling of the Corona crisis, but they are much less dissatisfied as time goes on. Satisfaction doubled in a short three-month period at the end of 2020, which coincided with the successful introduction of vaccines. Satisfaction, still low, continued to rise under the new government as well.

Our question about the best function of government to handle the Corona crisis varies between the three surveys. In the first, we asked respondents to choose between the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Defense, the Prime Minister, or a special Ministry that is trusted with this issue. In the second and third surveys we added another option – local municipal authorities. We summarize below the responses to these questions.

Figure 6: Who should Handle the Corona (Health) Crisis?

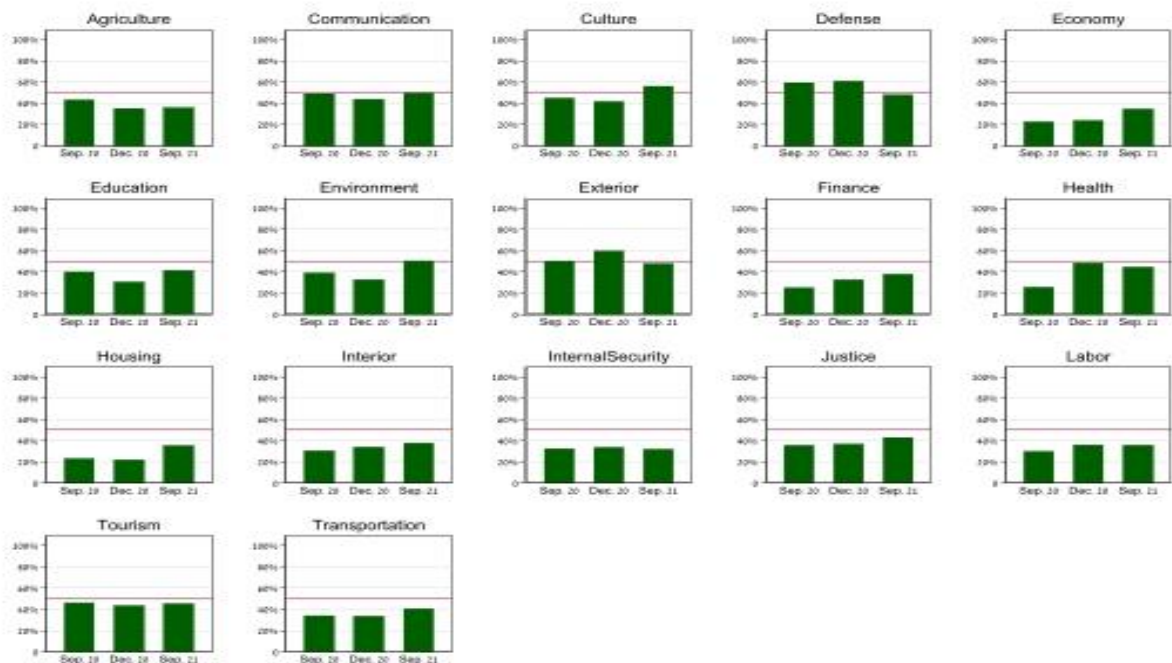


Israelis have most confidence in the Ministry of Health to handle the Corona crisis. This has been the consistent result in all three surveys, with a marked increase over time. In the first survey, a significant minority believed that the Ministry of Defense should take a leading role, but by the second and third surveys, this number had shrunk considerably. Tiny minorities in all three surveys wanted to see the Prime Minister take a lead role, a figure unchanged by the change in Prime Minister in 2021.

HOW ISRAELIS PERCEIVE AND EVALUATE THE POLICY ACTIONS OF POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS?

Finally, we examine the Israeli public's evaluation of the various departments of government. Respondents were asked to evaluate each of the major departments. We purposefully did not provide the name of the Minister heading each of the departments. Though we acknowledge the fact that some respondents have little knowledge of each department, its duties and its actions and functions, we prefer that responses will be about the office rather than the political figure heading it.

Figure 7: Satisfaction from Work of Various Ministries



Results echo the low confidence Israelis have in handling the various policy domains. Not a single ministry has the confidence of at least 50% of the public across all three surveys, though Defense and Foreign Affairs come close. The change in government in 2021 seems to account for a jump in the approval of the Environment Ministry (which does have a dramatic new change of direction) as well as a drop in the approval of the Defense Ministry (ironically, the only Ministry to remain under the same Minister, Benny Gantz).

CONCLUSION

Assessing the public's evaluation of its government is a necessary component for a functioning democracy. Representative need to be attentive to the public interests and accountable for their actions. Without knowledge of what the public wants and how it views the government, we cannot assess the quality of the representative function. This requires routine collection of

data that can be assessed in relation to government actions. In our proposed study, we set this as our goal—to collect longitudinal data of public assessment of government actions.

The report here summarizes the topline responses of the first three surveys in this series. It shows the extent of dissatisfaction with the Israeli government in handling almost all features of government. The first two surveys were administered during the same government; the third under a new one. The small, yet significant differences among all three surveys demonstrate the importance of longitudinal collection of data. Only such empirical data can provide us with the necessary information to evaluate the public perception of the work of government, and how representative can respond to public demands.

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