



Democracy Under Pressure: How Crises Shape Public Trust in Government and Democratic Norms in Israel

Amnon Cavari

Institute for Liberty and Responsibility

Reichman University

Israel today

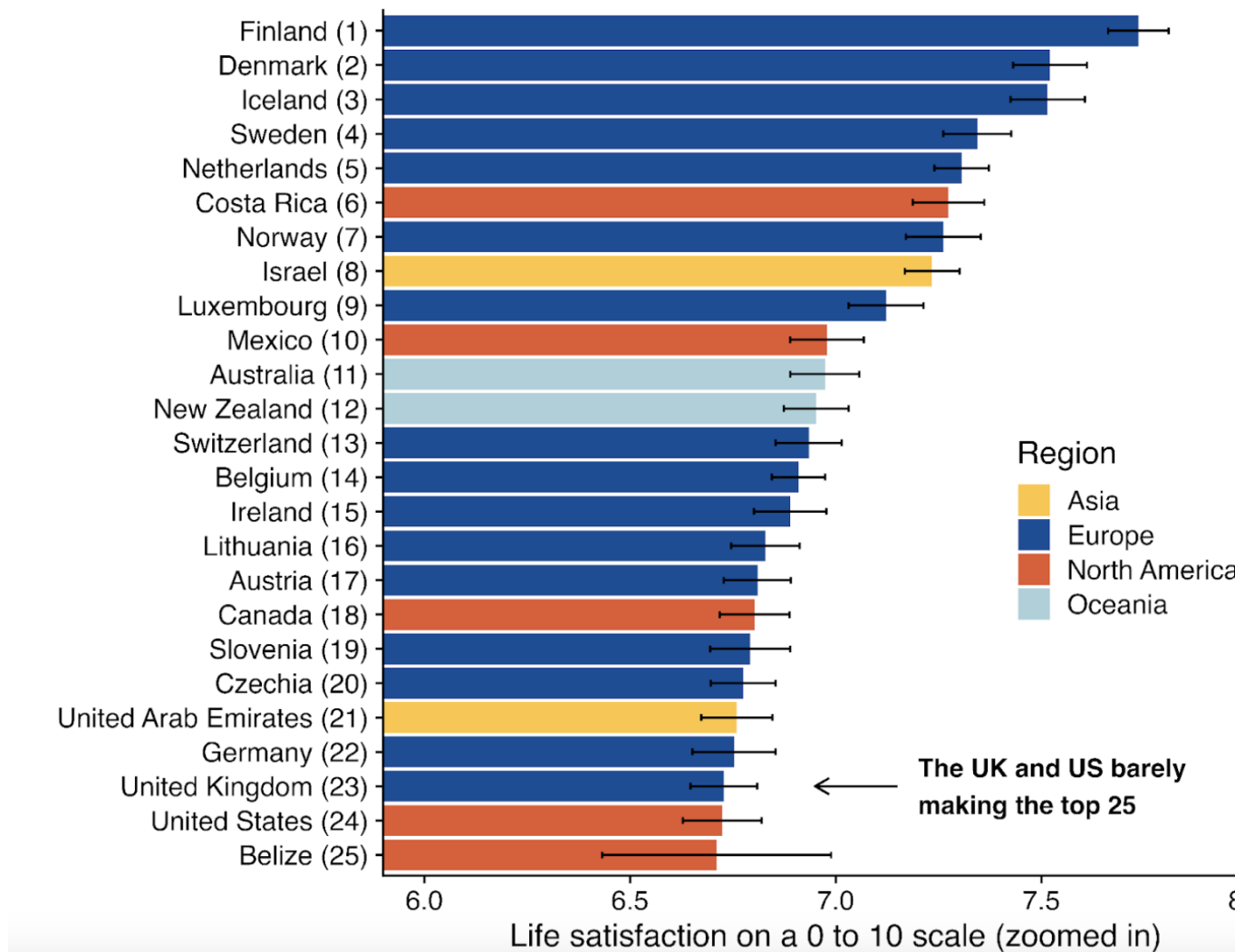
- A democracy under attack
- A country at war
- Government corruption



A Society in Pain

- 48% of Israelis believe that Israel is under existential threat
- 55% of Israelis are afraid of their own security
- 62% of Israelis reported increased anxiety in the last year
- 18% of Israelis have trust in their government (only 12% have trust in parliament)
- A plurality of Israelis see Hamas as the winner in the current war, and a majority believe the goals of the war were not met
- A large majority of Israelis believe the Israeli government will not help them if taken hostage by terrorist organizations
- And yet, we make it to the top list of happiest countries (down three places) – indeed, a country of contradictions (and questionable global measures)

4/7/25



2025 Report of the Wellbeing Research Centre at the University of Oxford in partnership with Gallup. Based on surveys of residents of 147 countries asking respondents how happy they feel.

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Plan of the talk

- The political context
- Measures of democracy
- The effect of the constitutional crisis on views of democracy and civil rights, and of satisfaction with democracy
- The (reverse) effect of the war on views of democracy and civil rights
- The rise of political polarization in Israel
- How resilient is Israel democracy?

An Unstable Democracy

- April 2019: General elections for the 21st Knesset, no coalition formed
- **May 2019: Dissolvement of the 21st Knesset**
- September 2019: General elections for the 22nd Knesset, no coalition formed
- November 2019: Attorney general decided to indict Netanyahu for bribery, fraud, and breach of trust
- **December 2019: Dissolvement of the 22nd Knesset**
- March 2020: General elections for the 23rd Knesset
- May 2020: Establishment of the 35th government (“Netanyahu-Gantz” government)
- **December 2020: Dissolvement of the 23rd Knesset**
- March 2021: General elections for the 24th Knesset
- June 2021: Establishment of the 36th government (“Bennett-Lapid” government)
- **June 2022: Dissolvement of the 24th Knesset**
- November 2022: General elections for the 25th Knesset
- December 2022: Establishment of the 37th government (“Netanyahu” government)
- **January 2023: Announcement of Judicial Reforms**
- **October 2023: The Hamas Attack and the Gaza War**

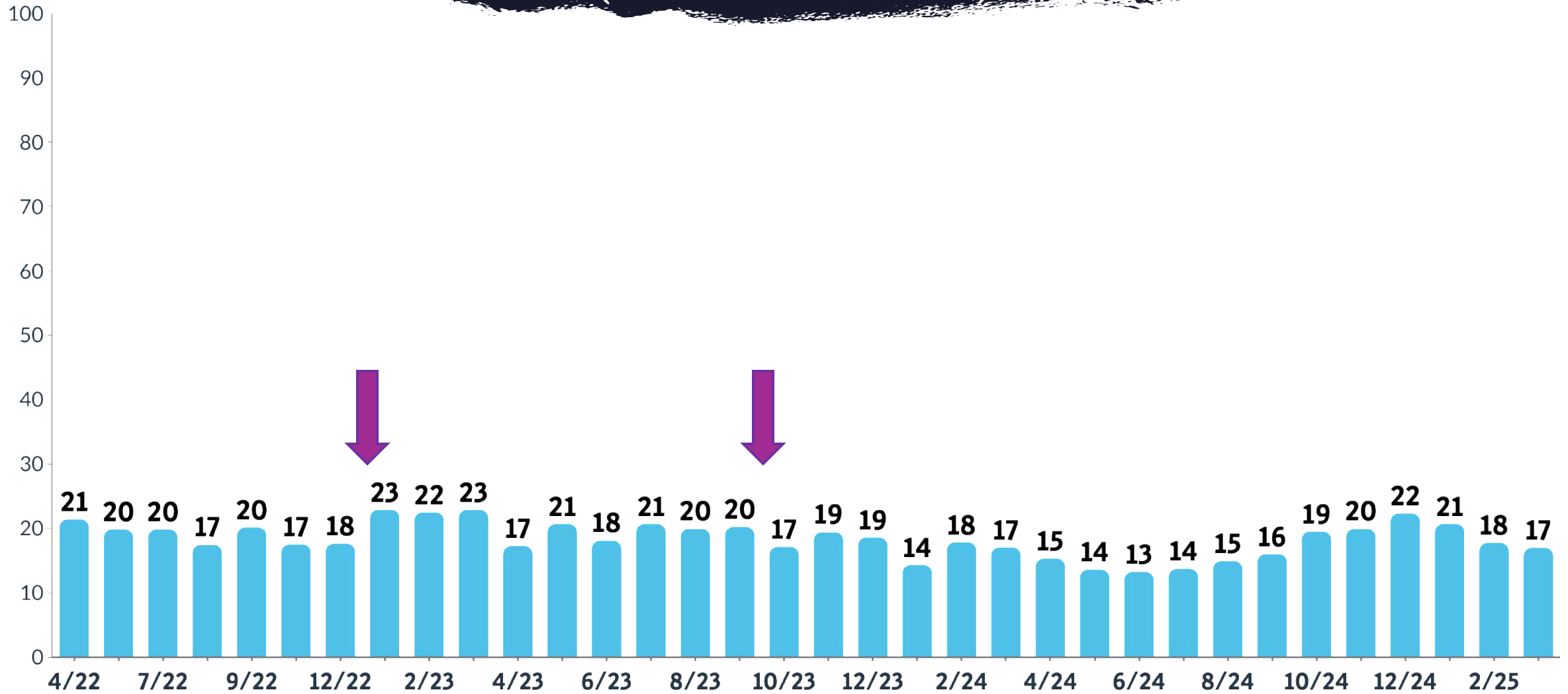
This scatter plot displays the 'Percent Optimistic' metric over time, from 2019m4 to 2023m10. The y-axis ranges from 25 to 75, with a dashed horizontal line at 50%. Blue dots represent individual data points, and a solid red line shows a smoothed trend. The data points are scattered around the 50% line, with a general downward trend in the later periods.

Time	Percent Optimistic (Approx.)
2019m4	55
2019m7	45
2019m10	45
2020m1	38
2020m4	35
2020m7	38
2020m10	35
2021m1	38
2021m4	35
2021m7	50
2021m10	48
2022m1	40
2022m4	38
2022m7	35
2022m10	35
2023m1	38
2023m4	30
2023m7	32
2023m10	30

Source: The Viterbi Family Center for Public Opinion and Policy Research



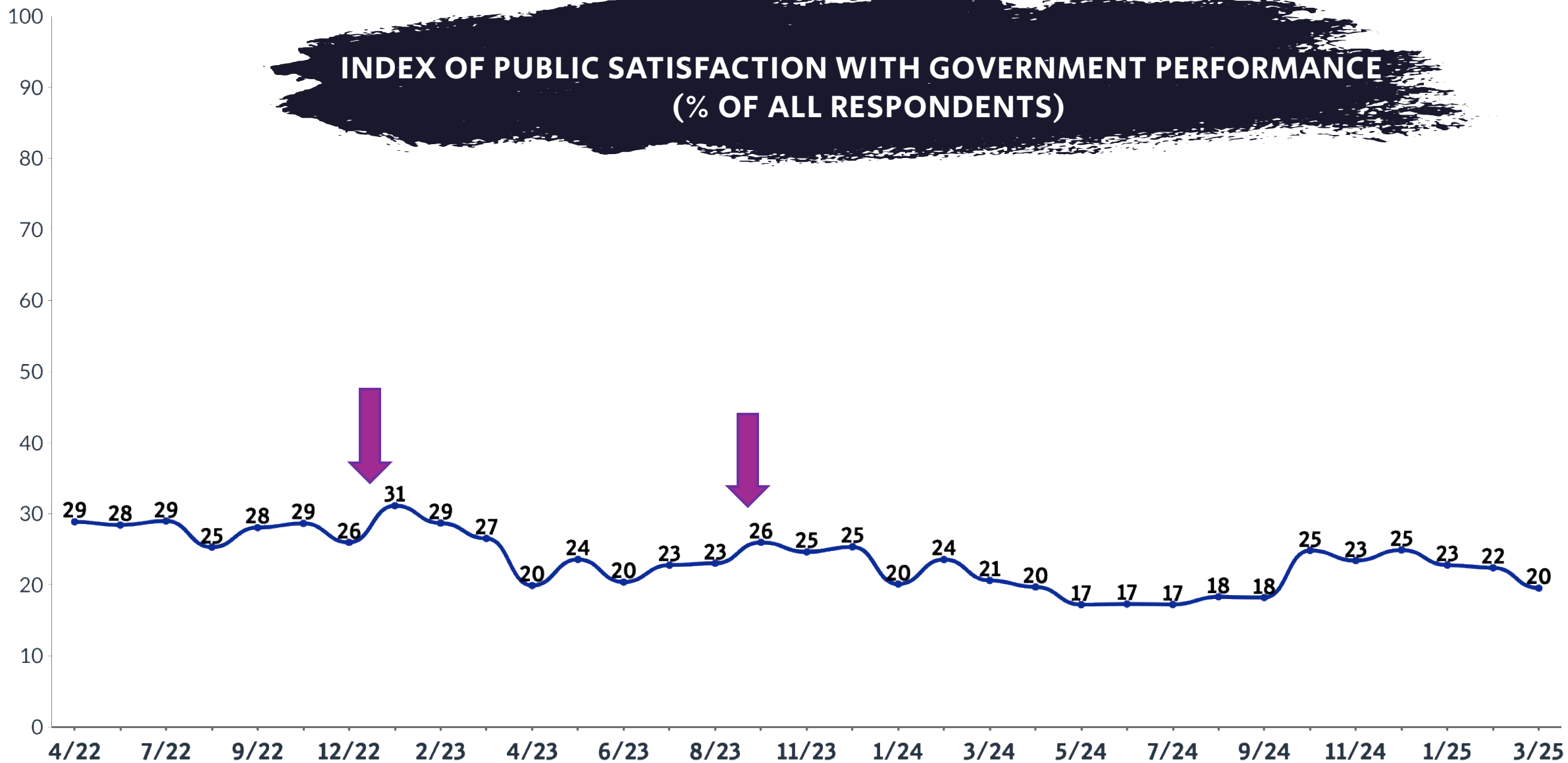
PUBLIC TRUST IN GOVERNMENT (% OF ALL RESPONDENTS)



The numbers in the graph represent percentages (%) and exclude respondents who answered "don't know".



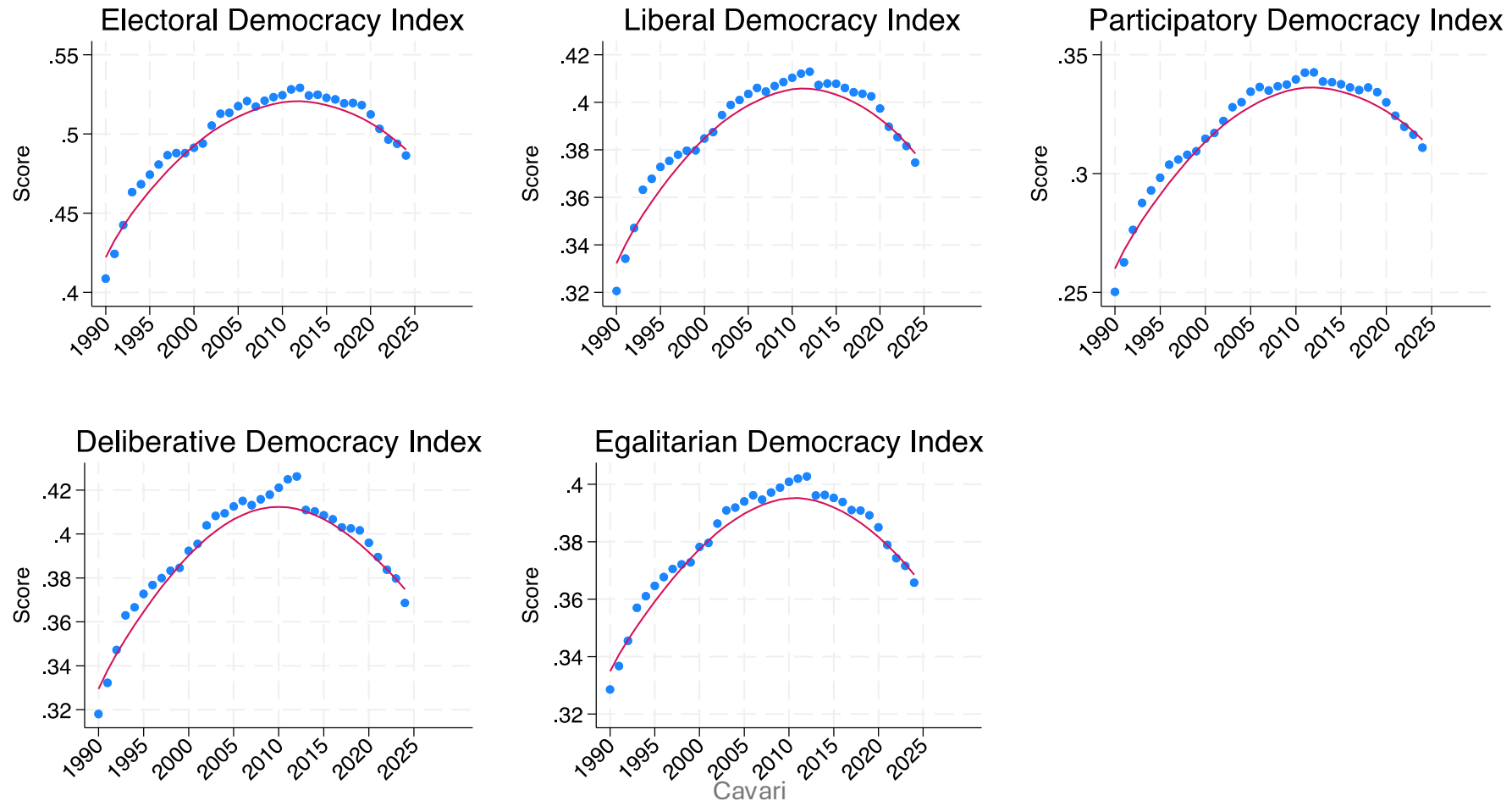
INDEX OF PUBLIC SATISFACTION WITH GOVERNMENT PERFORMANCE (% OF ALL RESPONDENTS)



The numbers in the graph represent percentages (%) and exclude respondents who answered "don't know".

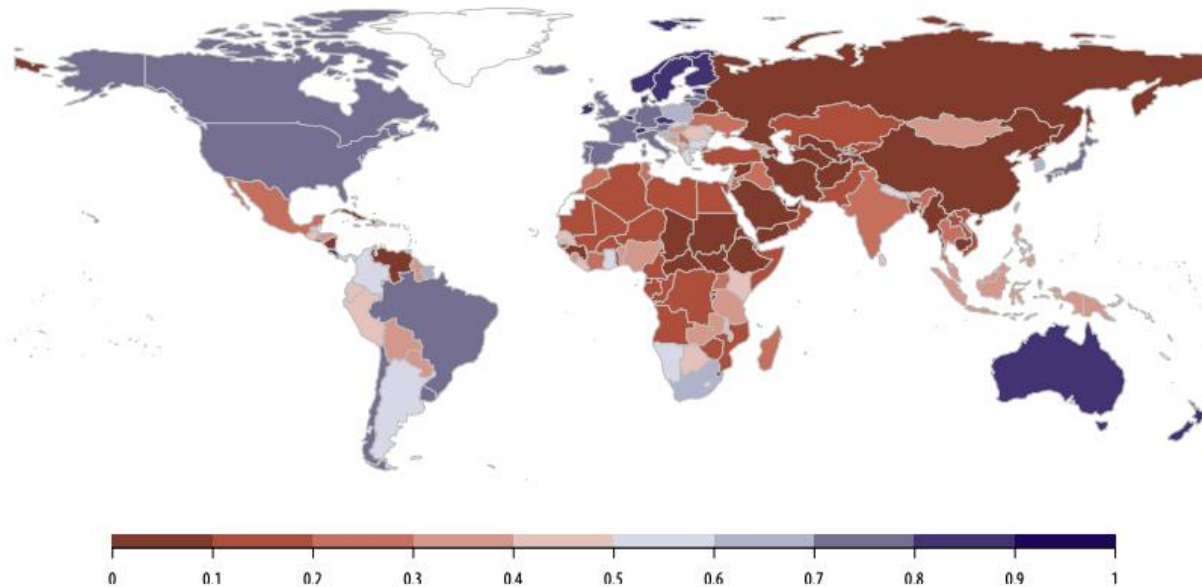
A global democratic decline (VDem)

VDem Global, 1990-2024



Israel – an Eroding Democracy (VDem Data)

FIGURE 1. STATE OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY (LDI), 2024



4/7/25

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LIBERAL DEMOCRACIES

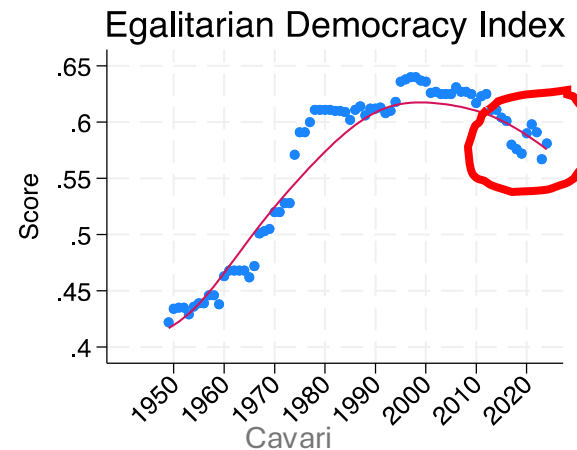
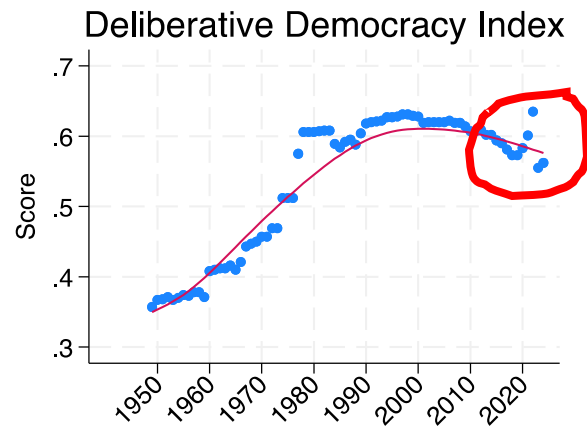
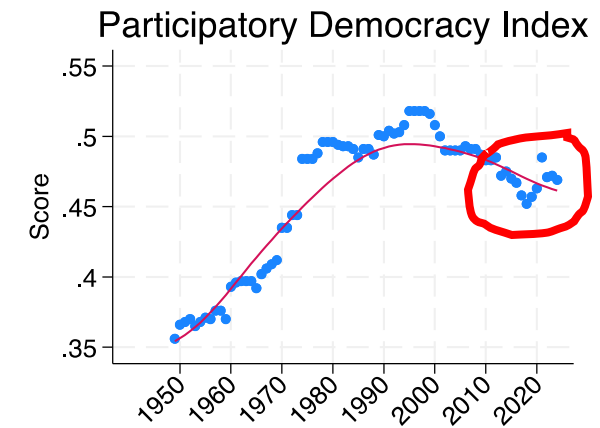
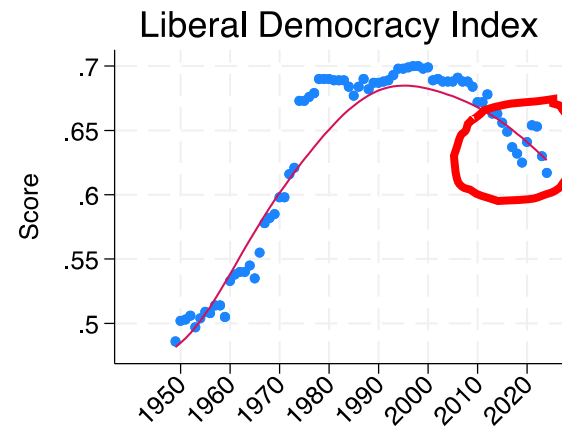
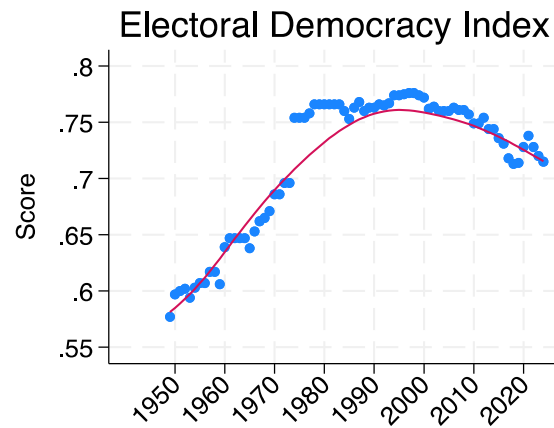
COUNTRY	2024	1 YEAR CHANGE	ERT EPISODES BY 2025
Australia	LD		
Belgium	LD		
Costa Rica	LD		
Czechia	LD		
Denmark	LD		
Estonia	LD		
Finland	LD		
Germany	LD		
Iceland	LD		
Ireland	LD		
Japan	LD		
Latvia	LD		
Luxembourg	LD		
New Zealand	LD		
Norway	LD		
Seychelles	LD		
Spain	LD		
Sweden	LD		
Switzerland	LD		
Taiwan	LD		
USA	LD		
Barbados	LD-		
Chile	LD-		
France	LD-		
Italy	LD-		
Jamaica	LD-	⬆️	
Netherlands	LD-		
South Africa	LD-	⬆️	
Uruguay	LD-		

ELECTORAL DEMOCRACIES

COUNTRY	2024	1 YEAR CHANGE	ERT EPISODE BY 2024
Austria	ED+		
Bhutan	ED+	↓	
Botswana	ED+		
Canada	ED+		
Cyprus	ED+		
Gambia	ED+		↗
Greece	ED+		↘
Israel	ED+		
Lithuania	ED+		
Malta	ED+		
Montenegro	ED+		↗
Portugal	ED+		
Slovenia	ED+		
South Korea	ED+	↓	↘
Trinidad and Tobago	ED+		
United Kingdom	ED+	↓	
Vanuatu	ED+		
Argentina	ED		↘
Armenia	ED		↘
Bolivia	ED		↗
Brazil	ED		↗
Bulgaria	ED		
Cape Verde	ED		
Colombia	ED		
Croatia	ED		
Dominican Republic	ED		↗
Ecuador	ED		↗
Ghana	ED	10	
Guatemala	ED		

Democratic decline in Israel

VDem Israel, 1949-2024





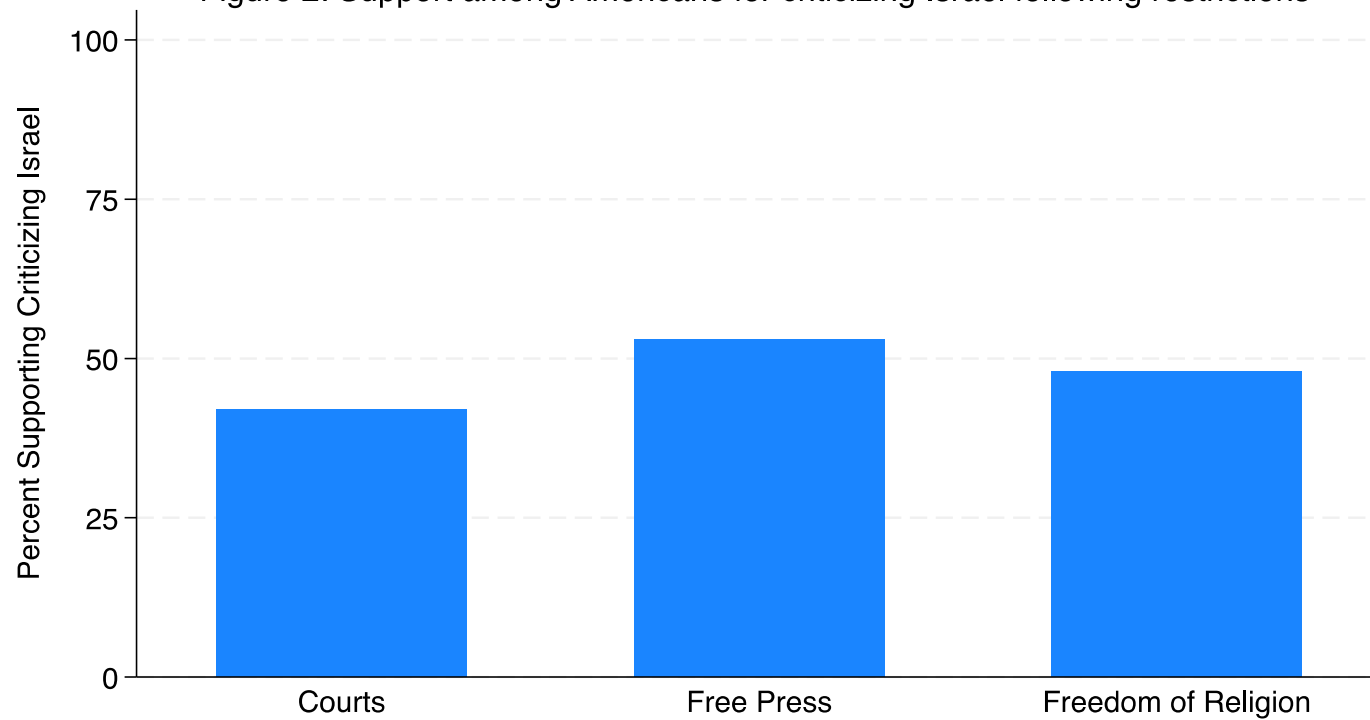
A Tale of Two Crises

- January 2023: Announcement of Judicial Reforms
 - Abolishing judicial limitations on parliament and government power, the only safeguards against government tyranny
 - 101 Israeli politics:
 - Unicameral parliamentary system with a centralized government
 - No written constitution (a set of basic laws that can, mostly, be amended easily).
 - Government controls the coalition, and the Knesset has limited oversight powers
 - Israel is not subject to most international tribunals
 - The “Democratic Spring”: The strongest and longest public demonstrations against the government





Figure 2: Support among Americans for criticizing Israel following restrictions



* Data from LibRes-IPS Survey, May 2023



A Tale of Two Crises

- January 2023: Announcement of Judicial Reforms
- October 2023: The Hamas Attack and the Gaza and Lebanon Wars
 - The longest and one of the deadliest wars in Israel's history
 - 1,862 Israeli casualties
 - 251 hostages (59 remanning, at least half are alive)
 - 330,000 evacuees from the north and around Gaza
 - A continuous rally against government, mostly focused on pressuring government to end the war and release the hostages



What is the effect of the two crises on views of Israeli democracy?

- Commitment to democratic norms
- Commitment to human and civil rights
- Satisfaction with democracy
- Political polarization

Our data

- Monthly surveys by the Institute for Liberty and Responsibility measuring the "pulse of Israeli democracy"

- Public trust
- Satisfaction with government
- Views of democracy
- Attitudes on various policies
- Views of various groups

PUBLIC SATISFACTION WITH THE FUNCTIONING OF DEMOCRACY





Winners and Losers in a Weakening Democracy: The Growing Gap in Democratic Satisfaction

Amnon Cavari, Reichman University

Asif Efrat, Reichman University

Anna Halstenbach, University of Michigan

Motivation for the Study

- Satisfaction with democracy as a key indicator of political behavior, with possible impact on vote choice, turnout, protest participation
- A focus on the power grab (not on elections)
- Winner-loser gap: voters for parties included in government are more satisfied with democracy
- Studies focus on established democracies (and use experiments)
- How does (real-life) democratic erosion influence the winner-loser gap?

Democratic Backsliding and the Expanding Winner-Loser Gap

- Winner-loser gap varies with institutional environment
- Gap is larger in majoritarian systems, compared to consensual systems
- When democracy is eroding, checks and balances are dismantled; power concentrates in the hands of the majority → highly strengthened majoritarianism

Argument: Satisfaction

- Winners experience complete victory with unconstrained government
- Losers face diminished influence; sense of defeat; possible perpetual losing

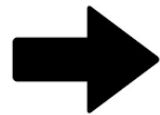


Larger winner-loser gap in
democratic satisfaction



Argument: Democratic Quality

- Winners see a stronger democracy
- Losers see a crippled one



Growing winner-loser gap in the
evaluation of democratic
quality

Hypotheses

H1: The eroding of the country's democratic regime widens the gap between winners and losers in satisfaction with democracy

H2: The eroding of the country's democratic regime widens the gap between winners and losers in the evaluation of democratic quality

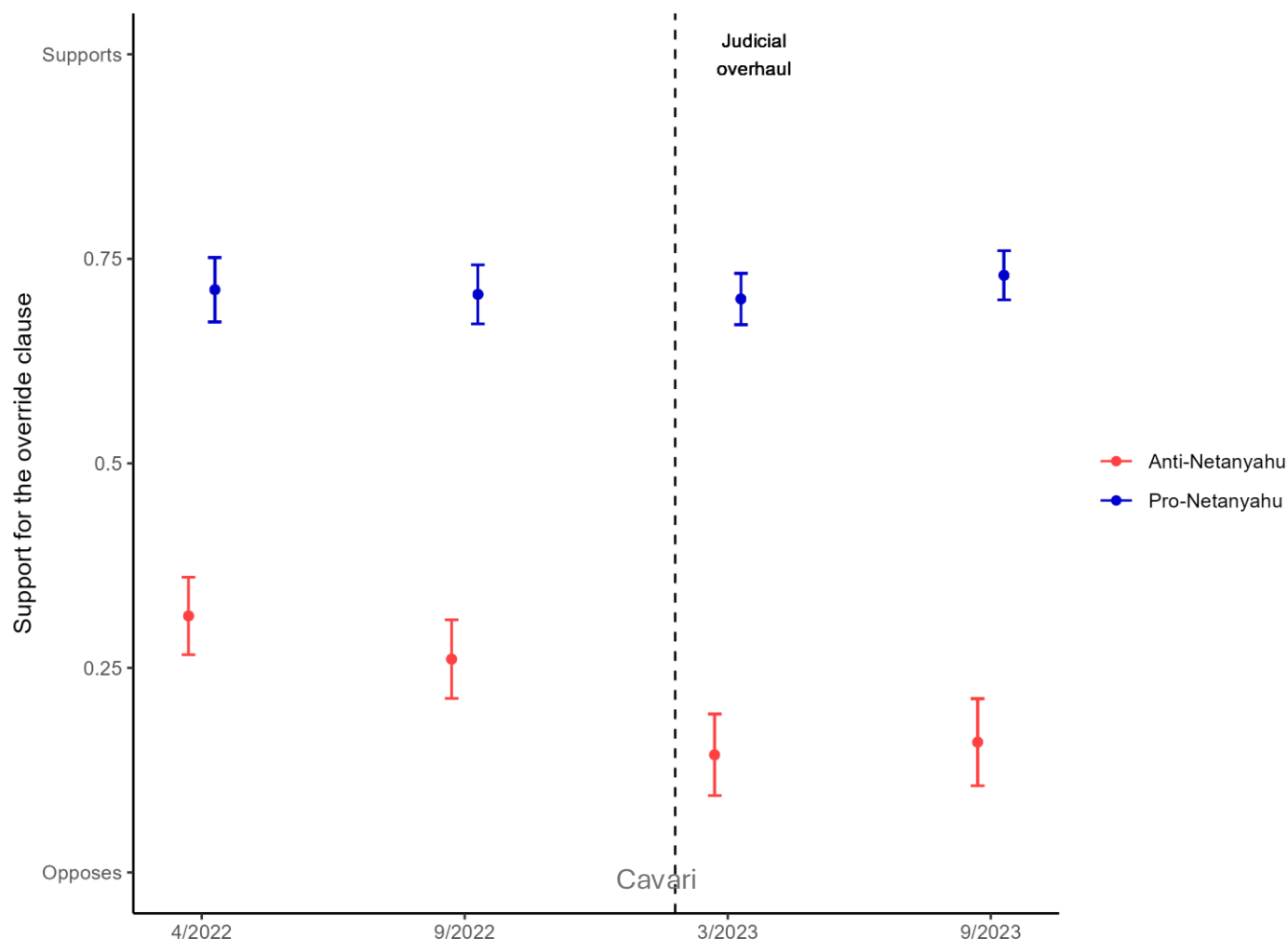


Democratic Backsliding in Israel

- 1/2023: Government announced judicial reform aimed at undermining the judiciary: power grab and onset of democratic backsliding



Polarized Support for abolishing Supreme Court's power to annul legislation



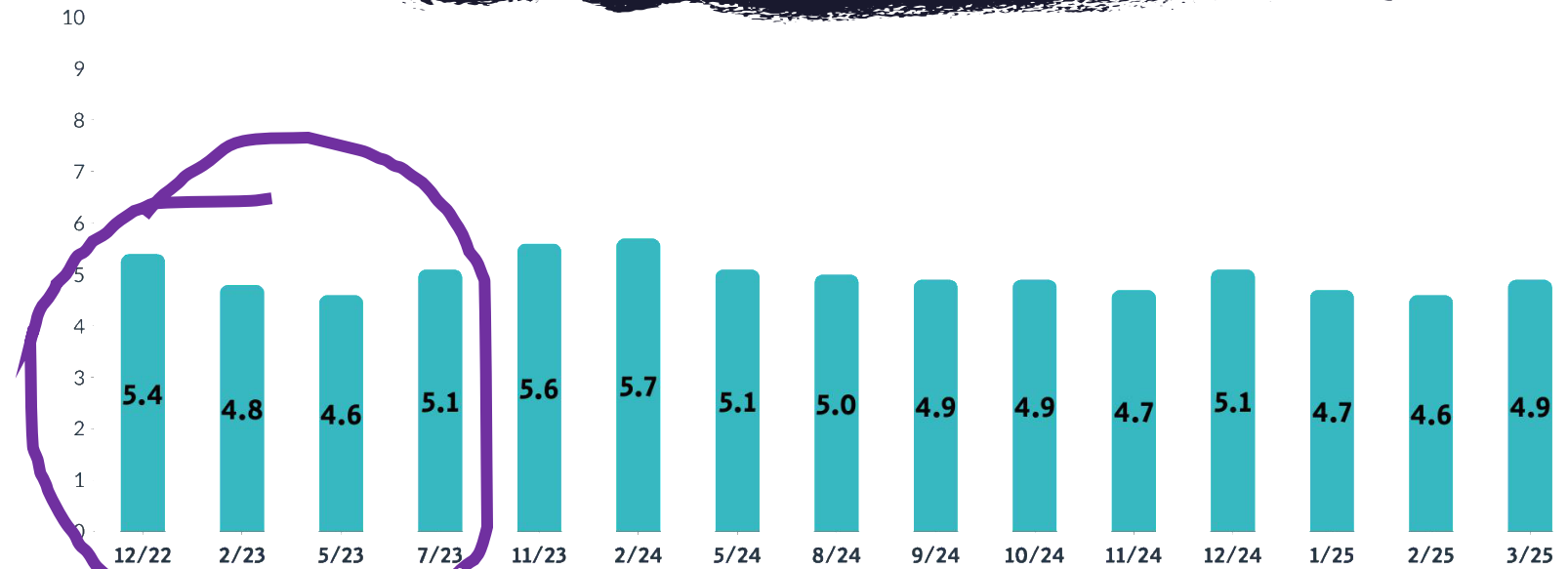
Expectations

- Weakening of court likely increases winners' democratic satisfaction and reduces losers' satisfaction
- Growing gap in the evaluation of democratic quality
- Largest gap should be in July 2023, when reform is implemented (later declared unconstitutional by the court)

Data and Method

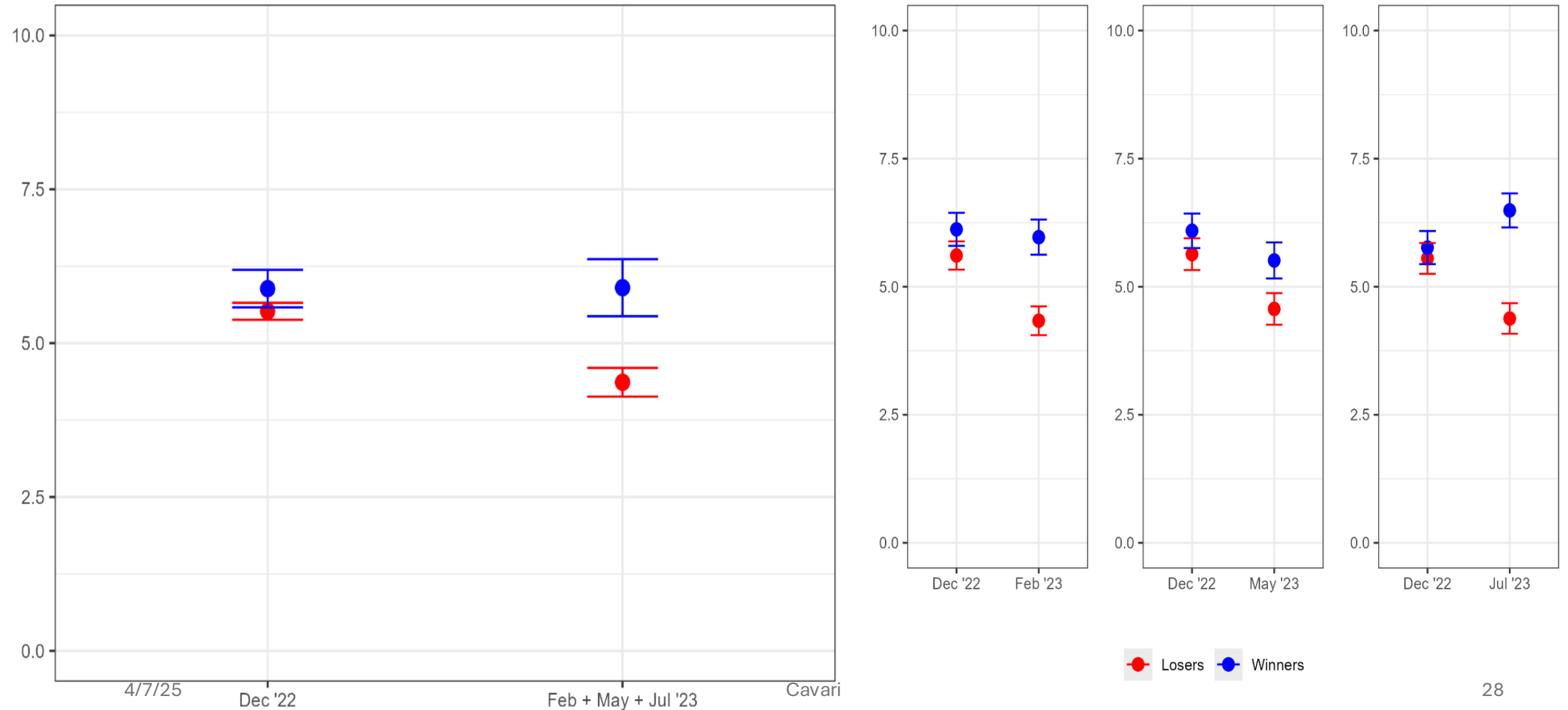
- Four waves of a survey series measuring political attitudes: 12/2022, 2/2023, 5/2023, 7/2023
- Comparing:
 - the 2023 waves (post-reform) to
 - the 12/2022 wave (pre-reform, but after the elections)
- OLS modes, interaction of post-reform and being a winner

PUBLIC SATISFACTION WITH THE FUNCTIONING OF DEMOCRACY

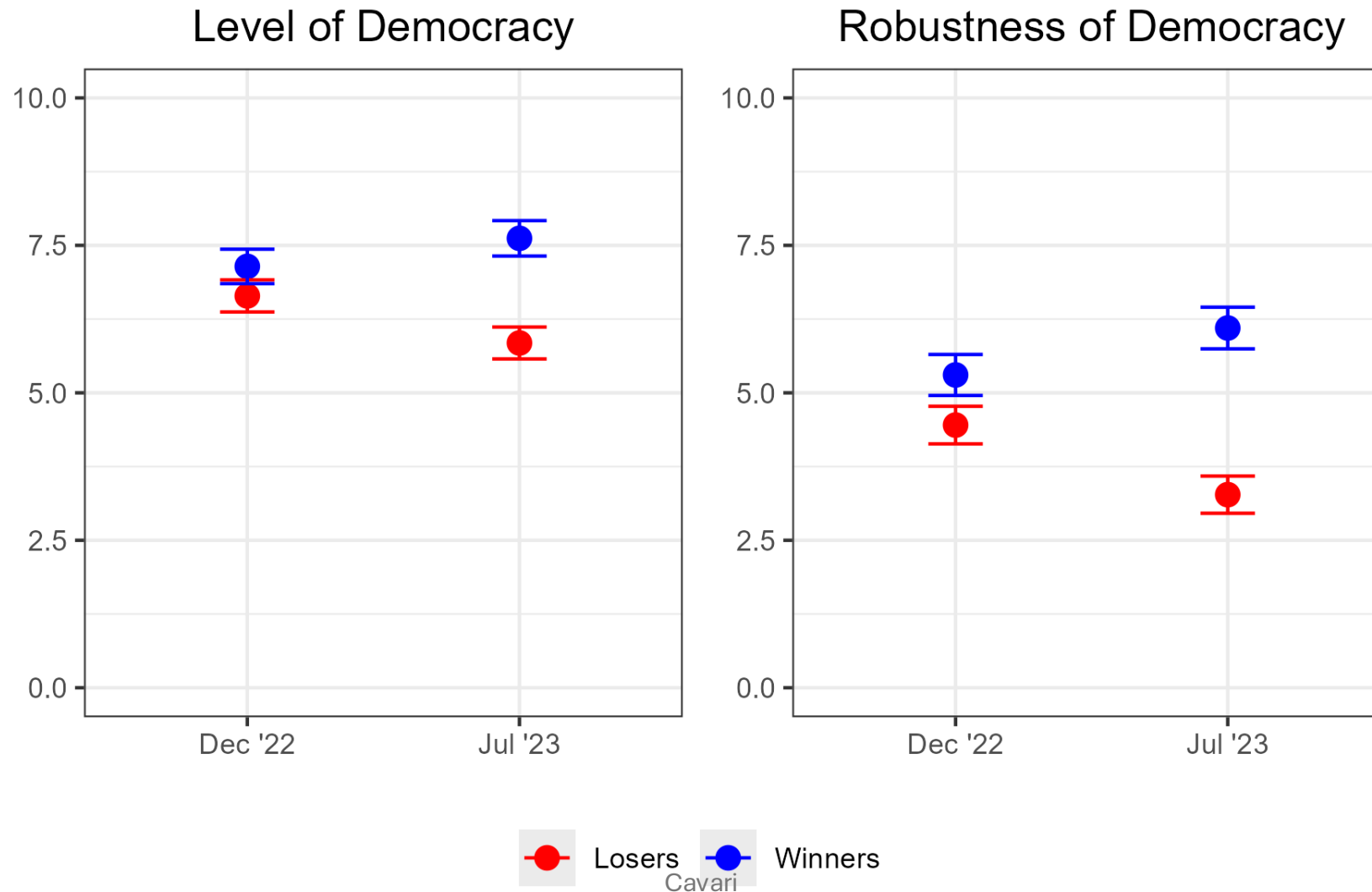


THE NUMBERS IN THE GRAPH EXCLUDE RESPONDENTS WHO ANSWERED "DON'T KNOW".

Growing Gap in Democratic Satisfaction



Evaluation of democratic quality



Conclusion

- Analysis based on real-life data concerning an unfolding power grab
- Importance of institutional context in shaping democratic satisfaction
- Widening gap: losers respond immediately to democratic decline; winners show delayed response – upon implementation
- Voters often fail to recognize democratic backsliding. In Israel, the public nature of the reform alerted losers and fueled resistance



Assessing the effect of the “Democratic Spring”

With Asif Efrat and Yair Amitai
Institute for Liberty and Responsibility
Reichman University

What do we expect to see in response to heightened democratic engagement?

- Increased commitment to democracy – people want what they feel they are losing
- Higher appreciation to democratic norms and weaker support for non-democratic arrangements – people understand the costs
- Partisan differences? Only referring to specific government (cued) policies



Diffused vs. Specific Support

- Distinguishing between diffused and specific support (Easton 1975)
 - Specific democratic support is the extent to which the public approves or disapproves of antidemocratic policies that weaken checks and balances and concentrate power in the hands of the government.
 - Diffuse democratic support captures the commitment to core democratic values and principles, unrelated to any specific policy advanced by the government. (Claassen 2020, 37 and 2022, 872; Magalhães 2014; Norris 2011, chap. 2).

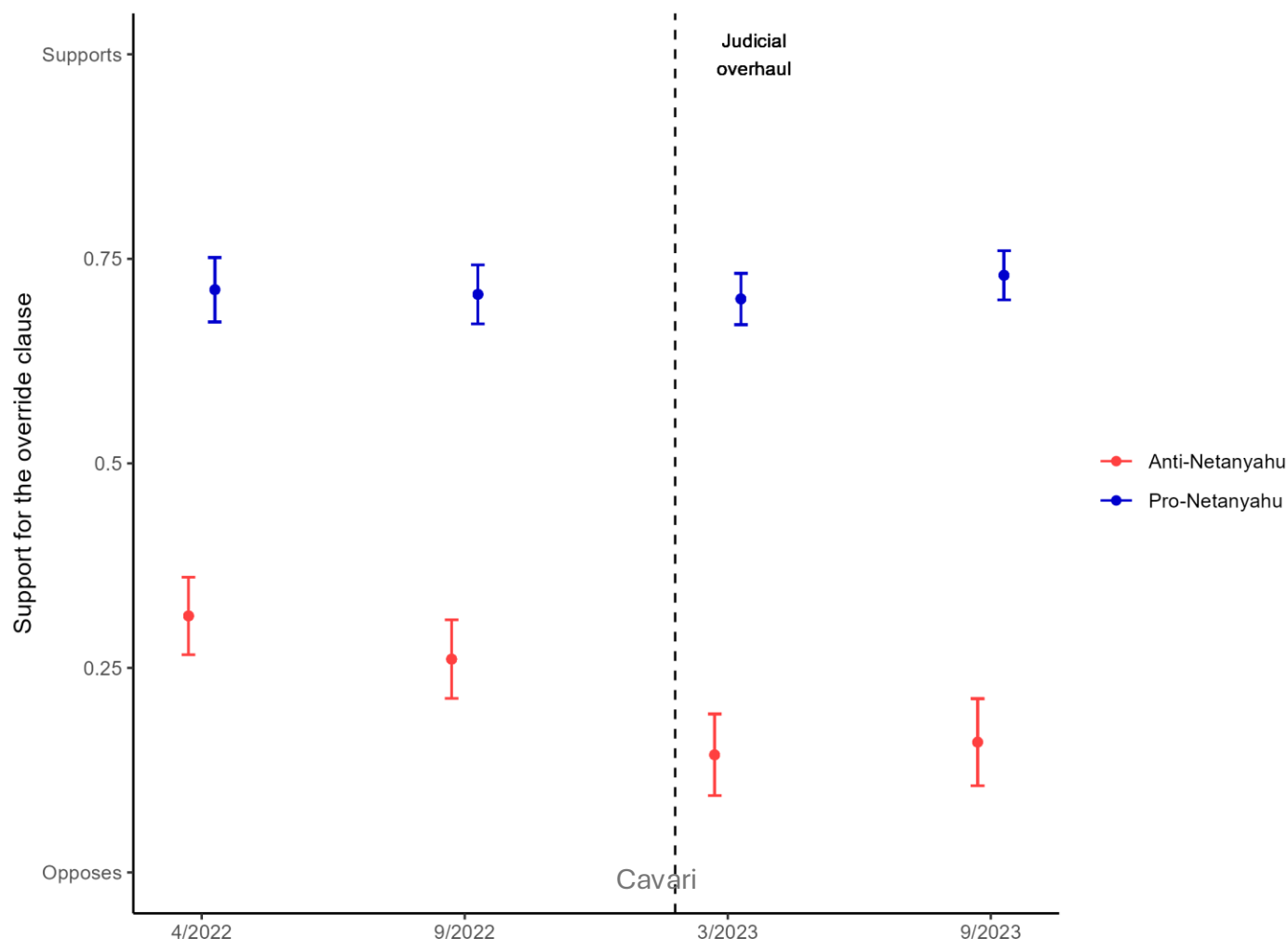
Argument

- A heated public debate over democratic backsliding may affect both levels of support for democracy.
 - Specific support for democracy, that is, lower the approval of the government's antidemocratic measures – chiefly among citizens who support the opposition.
 - At a higher level, the intense discussion may increase diffuse support for democracy – support for democratic values over nondemocratic alternatives – and this effect will show among both supporters and opponents of the government.

Hypotheses

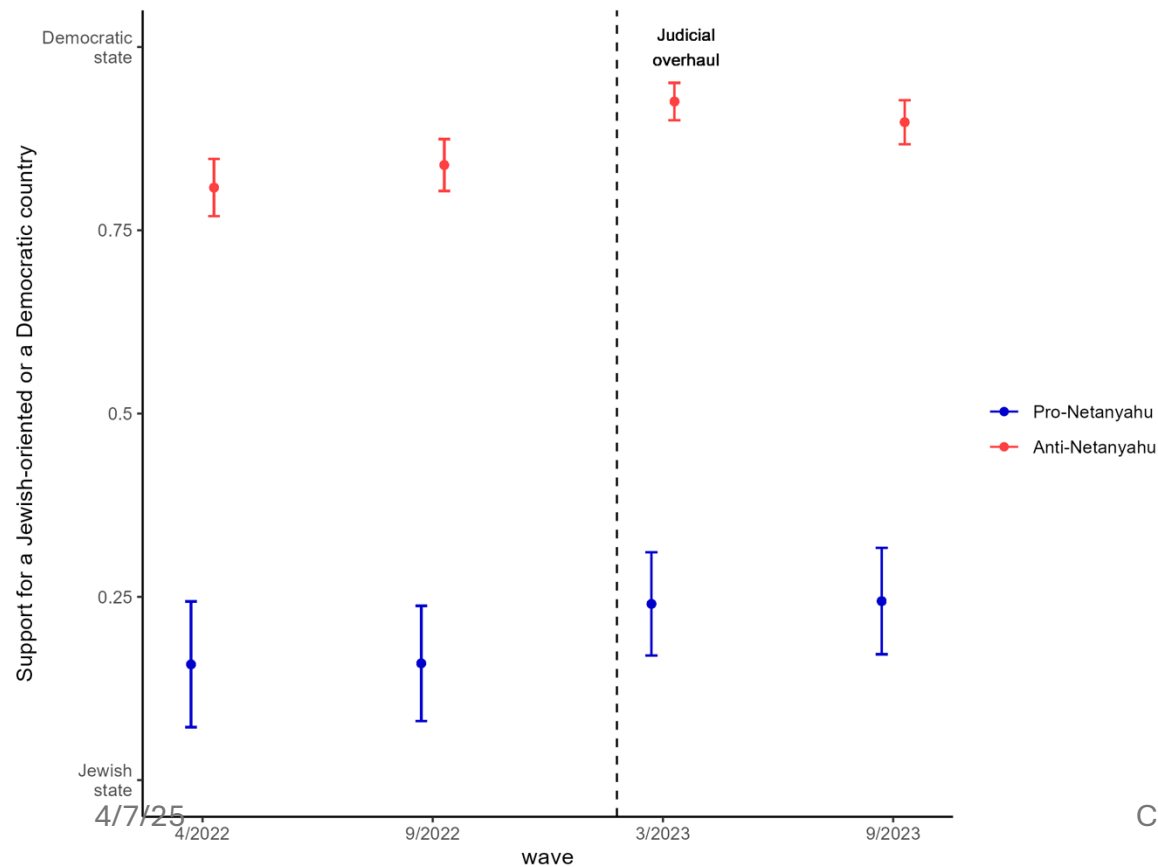
- H1: The debate on democratic backsliding lowers the approval of the government's antidemocratic policies among voters of the opposition.
- H2: An intense debate on democratic backsliding increases citizens' support for democratic principles and their commitment to democracy over nondemocratic alternatives.

Polarized Support for abolishing Supreme Court's power to annul legislation

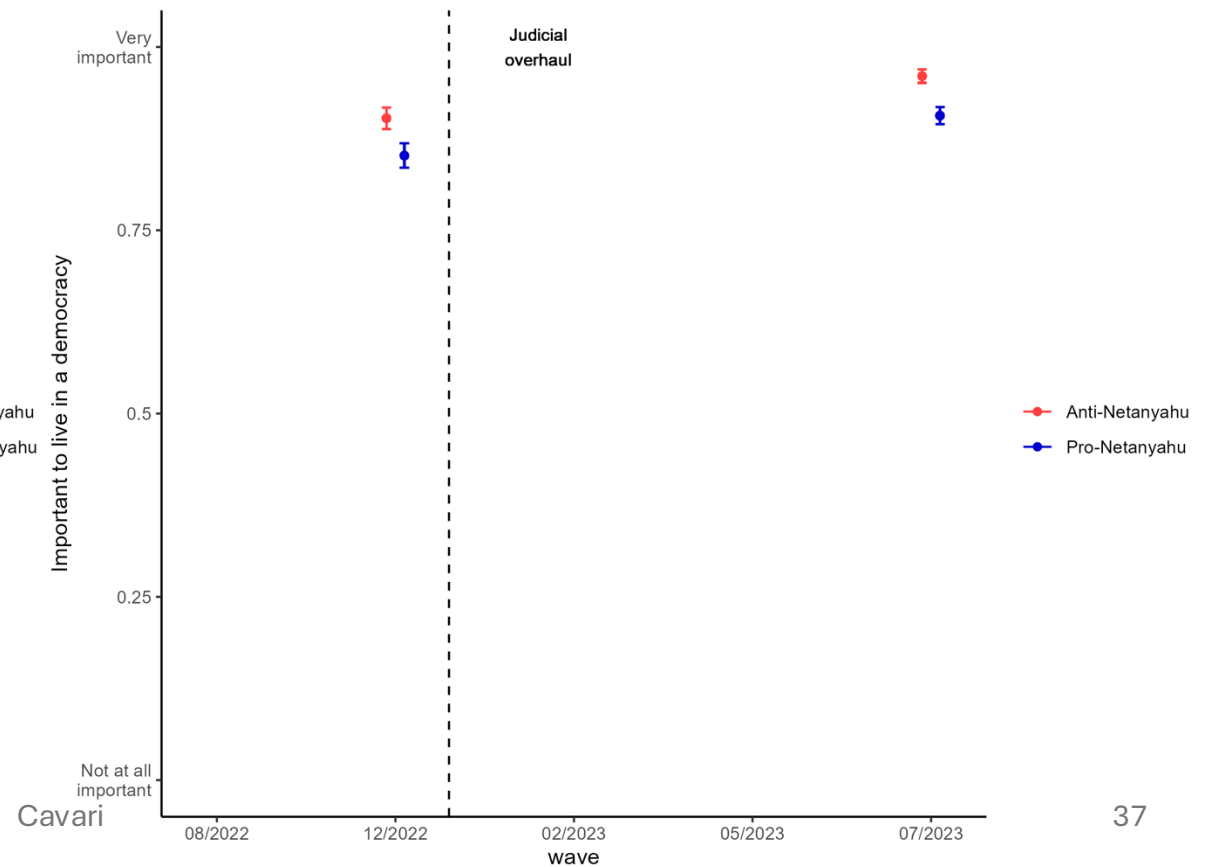


Strengthened Commitment to Democracy

Support for a democratic state

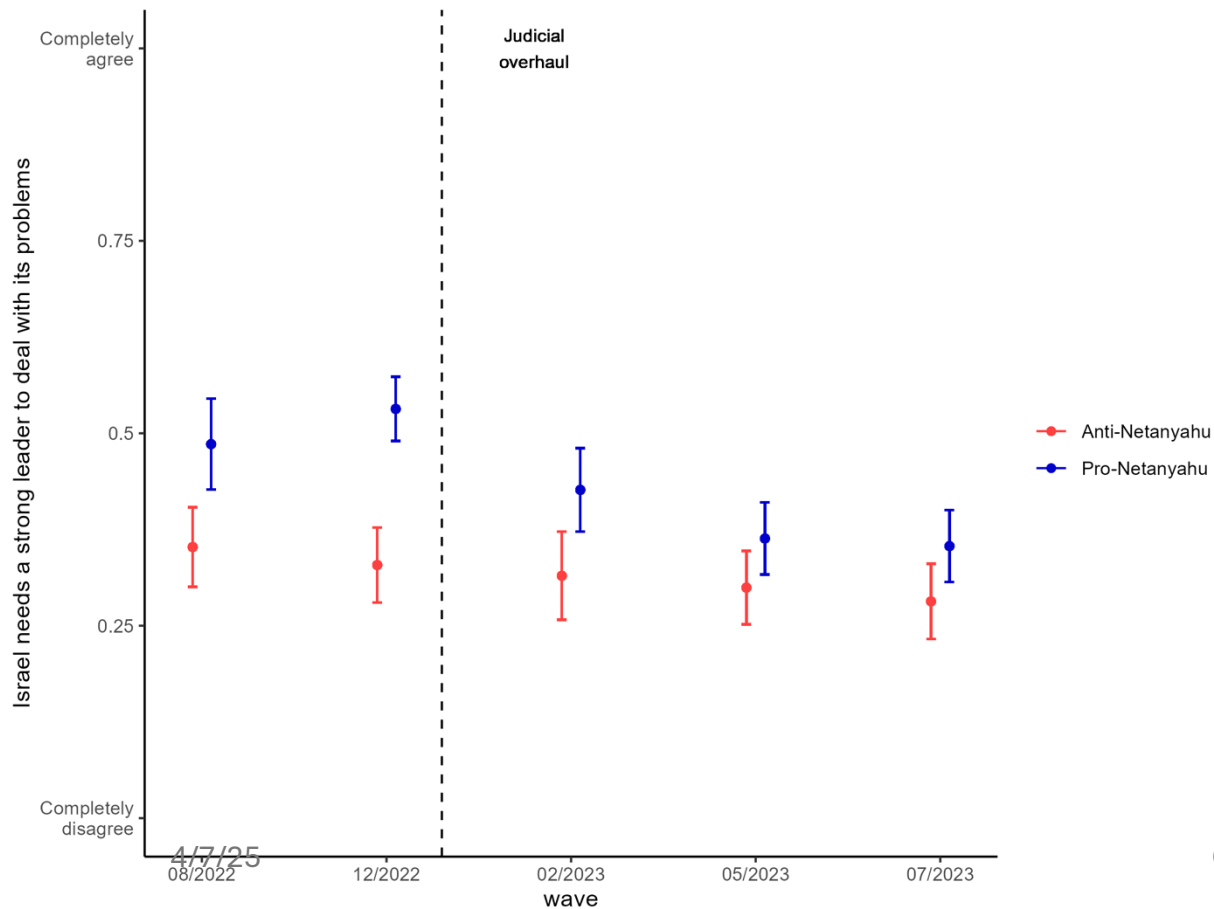


Important to live in a democracy

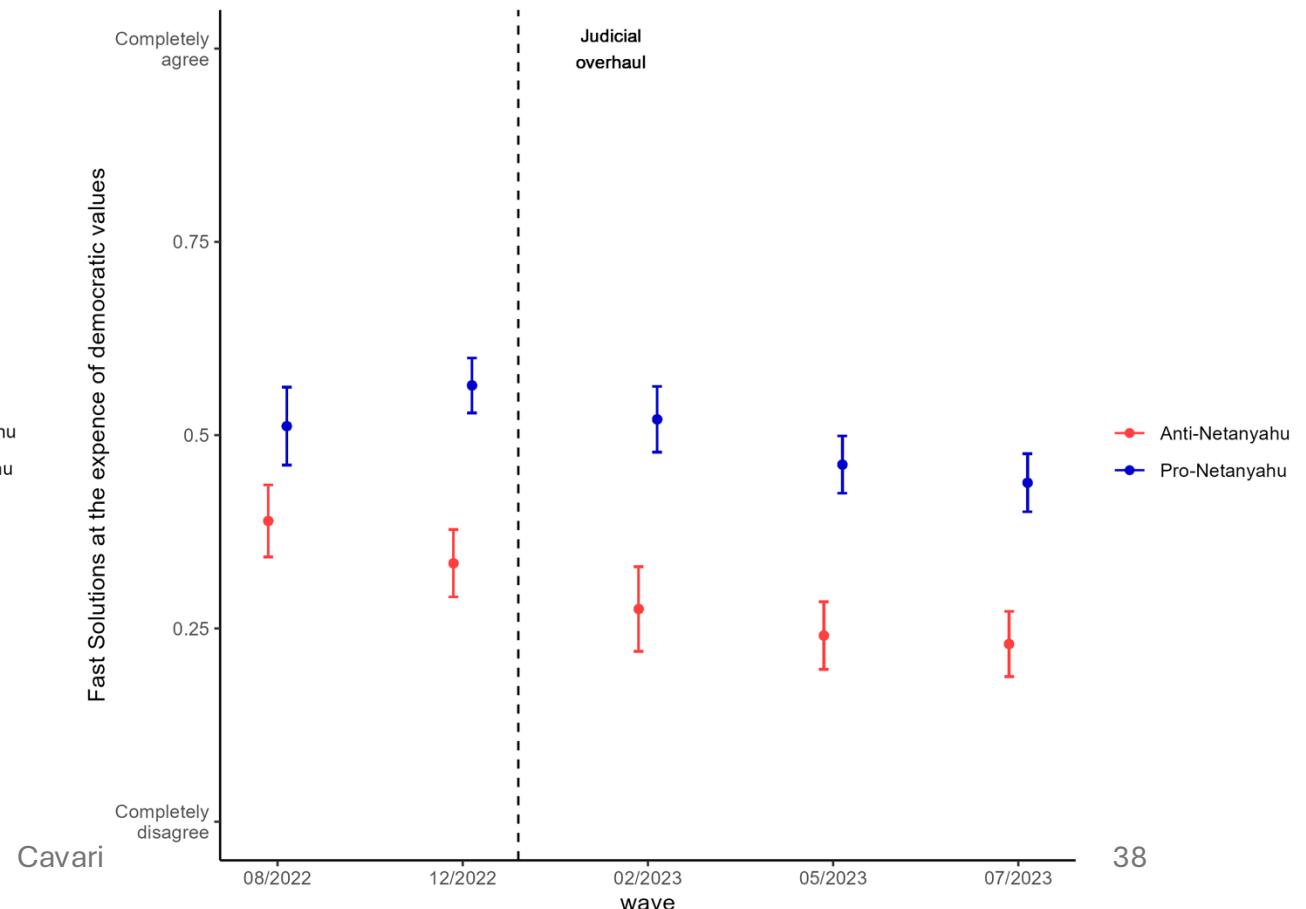


And, decreased support for autocratic solutions

Support for an Unlimited Strong Leader

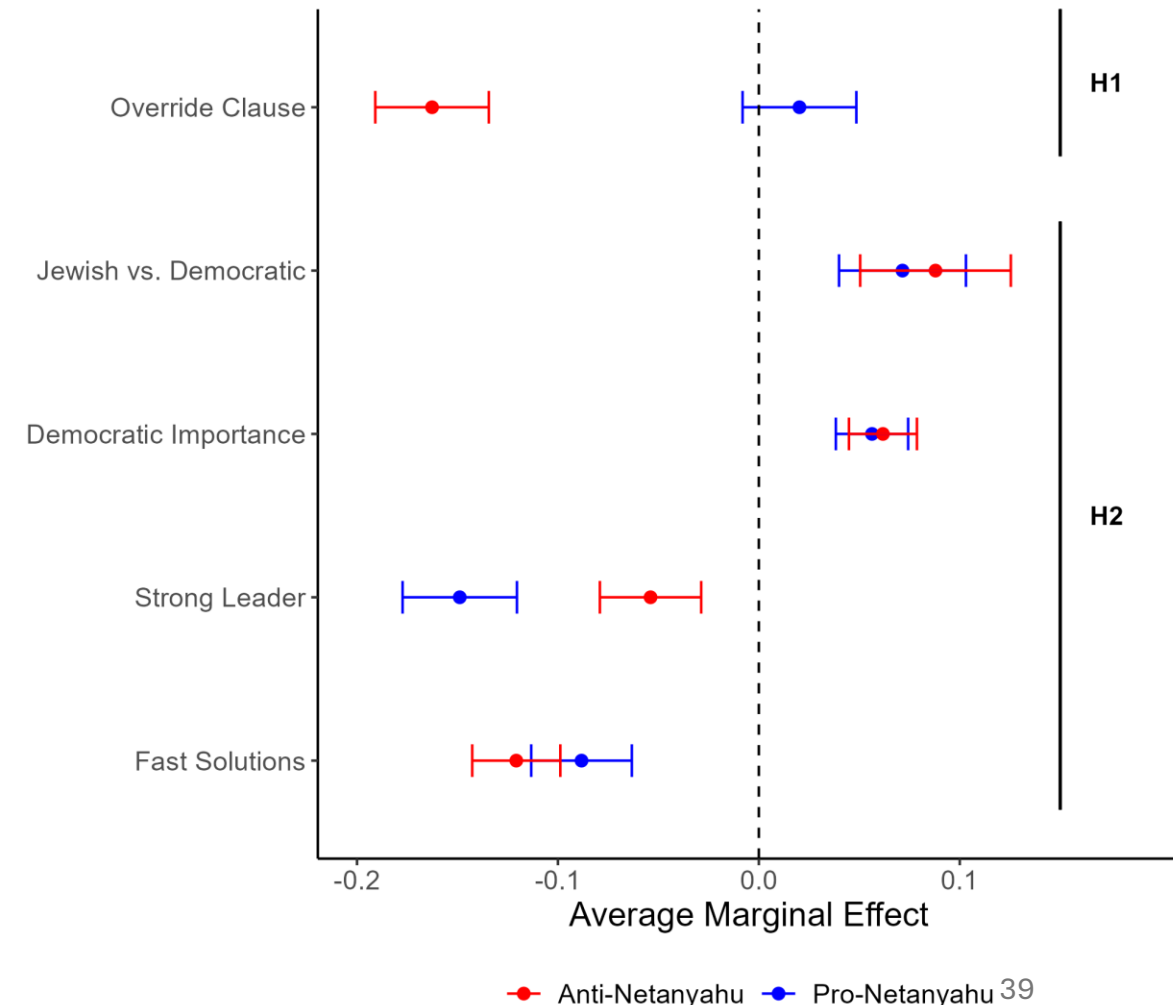


Support for Fast Solutions even if they do not comply with democratic norms



Assessing the effect of the constitutional crisis

- The override clause is the issue of polarization
- Commitment to democracy increases, across partisan groups
- Views of non-democratic arrangements declines, stronger among coalition voters



And then
came October
7 (and the war
in Gaza and
Lebanon)





Public Opinion about Democratic Principles

- Support for limiting freedom of expression for people who are criticizing Israel
 - July 2023, 54%
 - November 2023, 67% 
- Support for preventing public activities of Israeli organizations that criticize Israel
 - July 2023, 37% 
 - November 2023, 47%
- Support for limiting the right to vote only to people who are swear an oath to the country
 - July 2023, 45% 
 - November 2023, 61%



Public Opinion about Democratic Principles

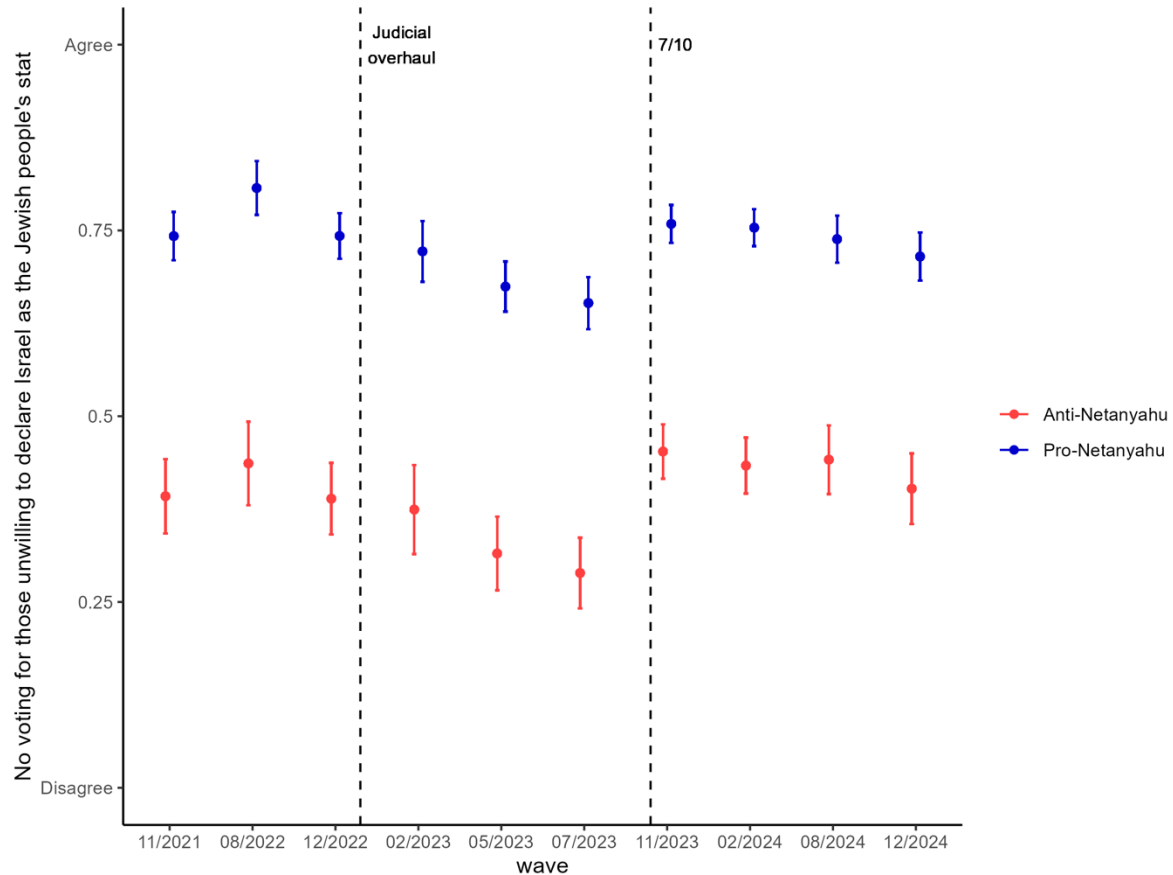
- Democratic perceptions
 - Declining

- Views of minorities (Israeli Arabs)
 - Would you prefer a Jewish mechanic over an Arab one?
 - July – 29%
 - November – 47% 
 - Should the government make efforts to provide equal rights? (disagree)
 - July – 38%
 - November – 56% 

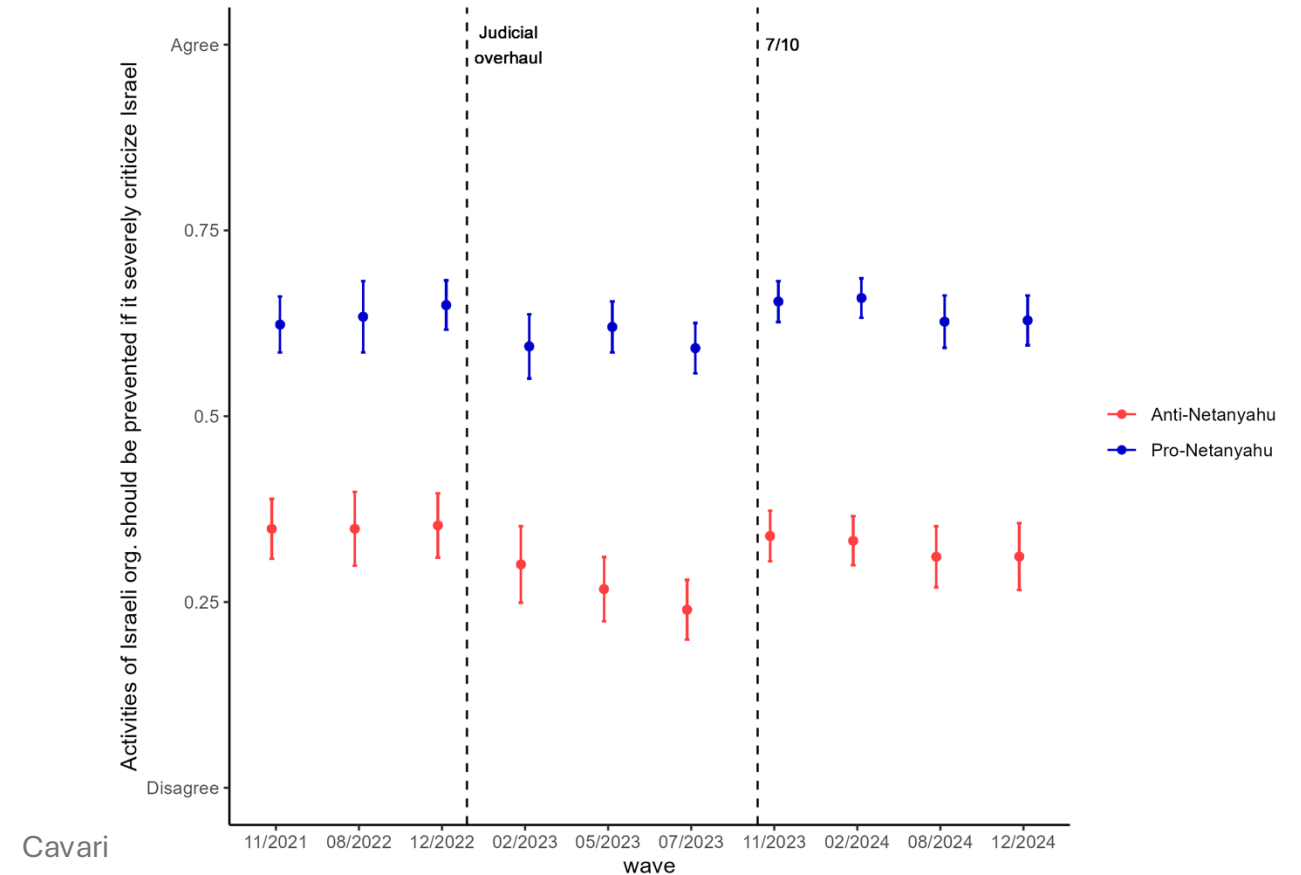


Support for Limiting Political Rights

Limiting Voting

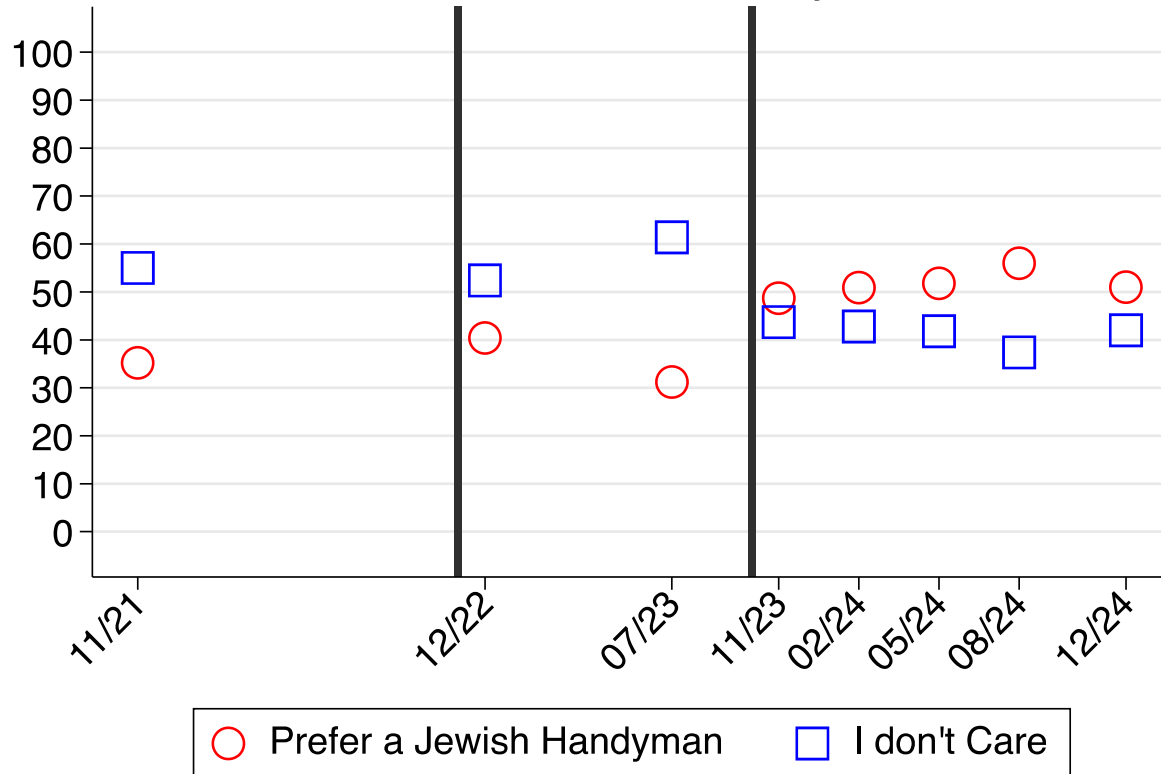


Preventing Critique of Government

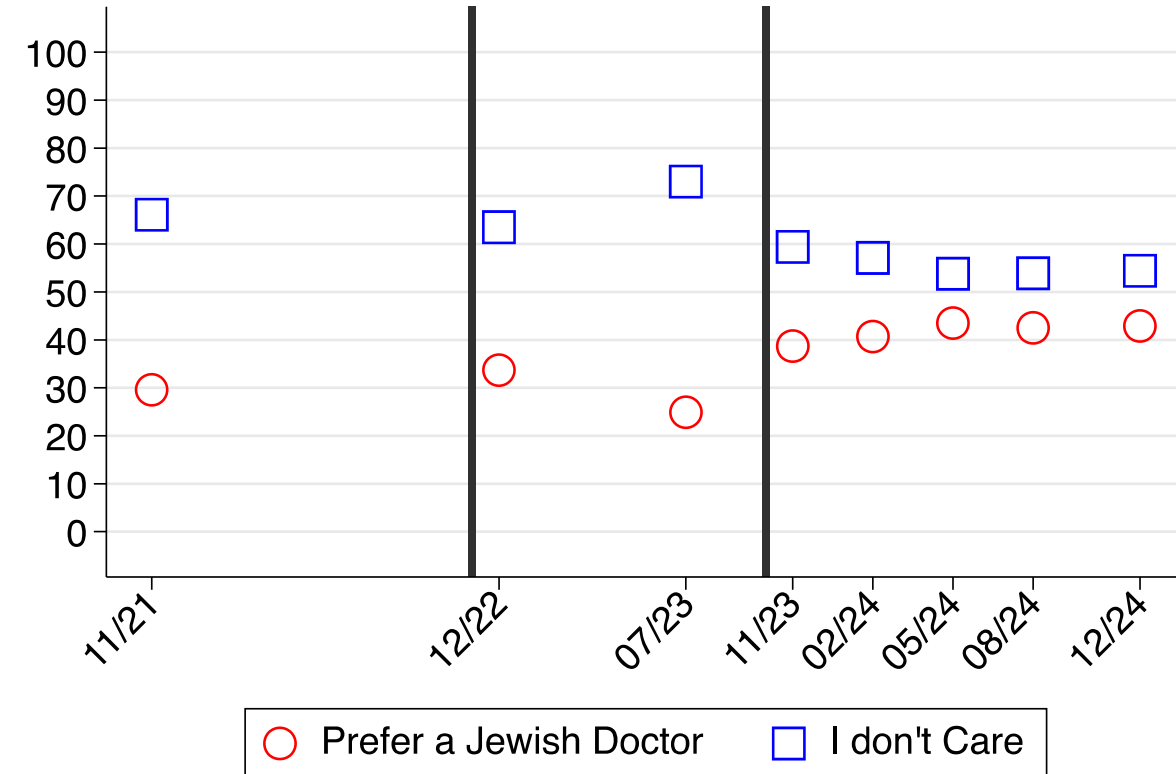


Social Distancing: Israeli Jews and Arabs

Prefer a Jewish Handyman



Prefer a Jewish Doctor

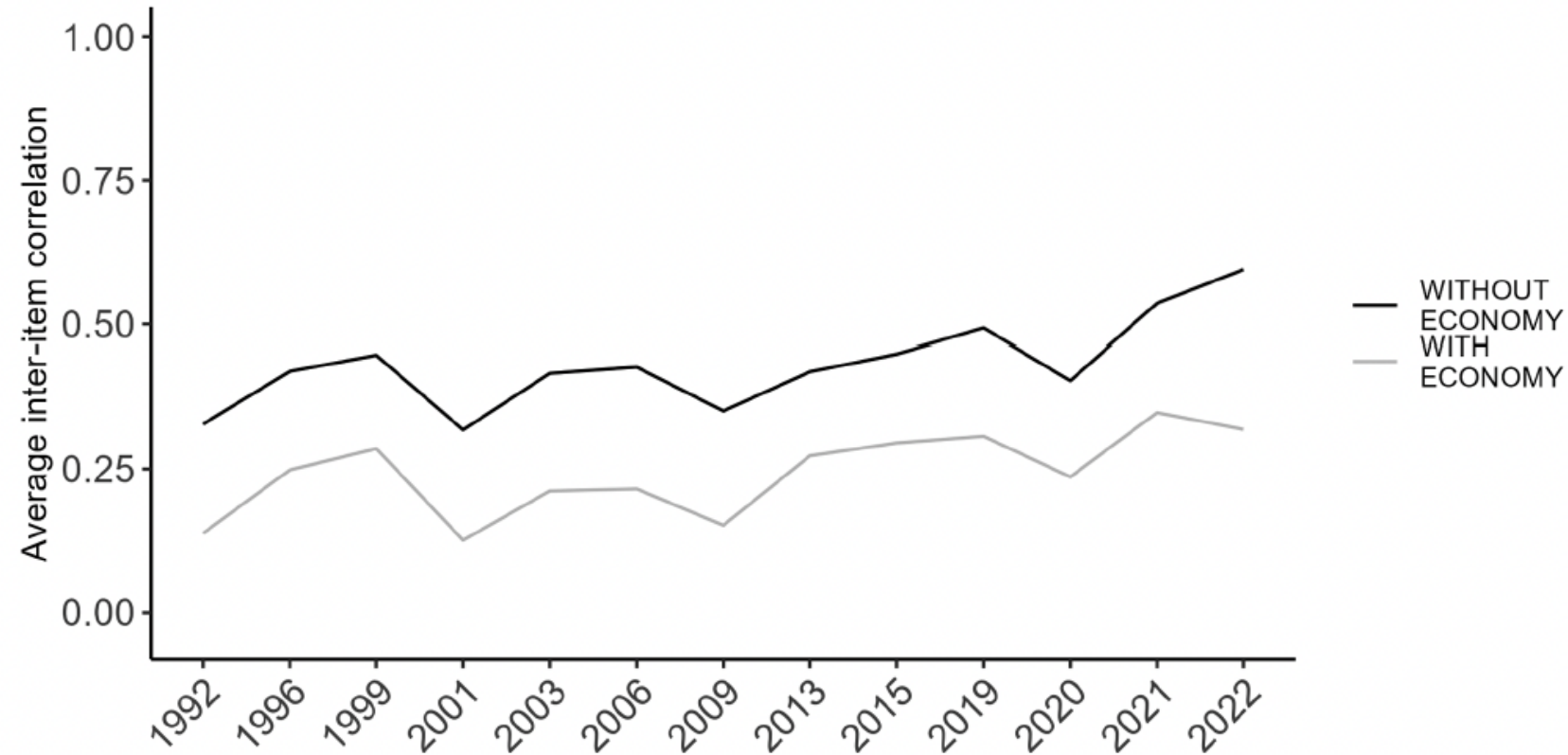


Political Polarization

- Types of polarization
 - Ideological Polarization – relates to differences in a policy preferences
 - Affective polarization – expressed as hostility, disgust, prejudice and negative feelings across party lines (Finkel et al., 2020; Gidron, Adams and Horne, 2020; Iyengar et al., 2019; Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes, 2012).
- Status or Process (DiMaggio et al. 1996)
 - State of affairs - To what extent the public is polarized
 - Process - To what extent are we polarizing

Ideological Polarization

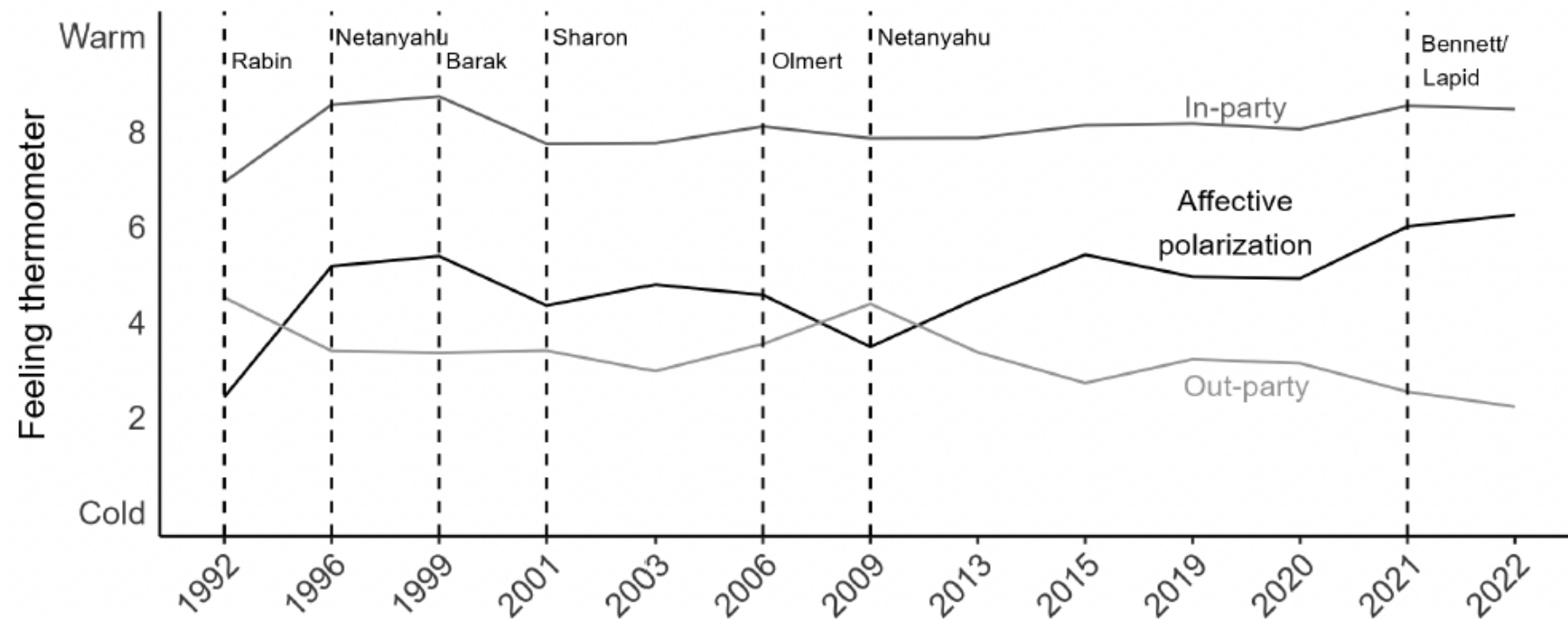
- Not strong
- Slight increase



Yair Amitai, Noam Gidron and Omer Yair. forthcoming. “Political Polarization in Israel, 1992–2022”

Affective Polarization

- Significant Increase
 - Especially during the Netanyahu campaigns (and governments)
 - 1996-1999
 - Since 2015





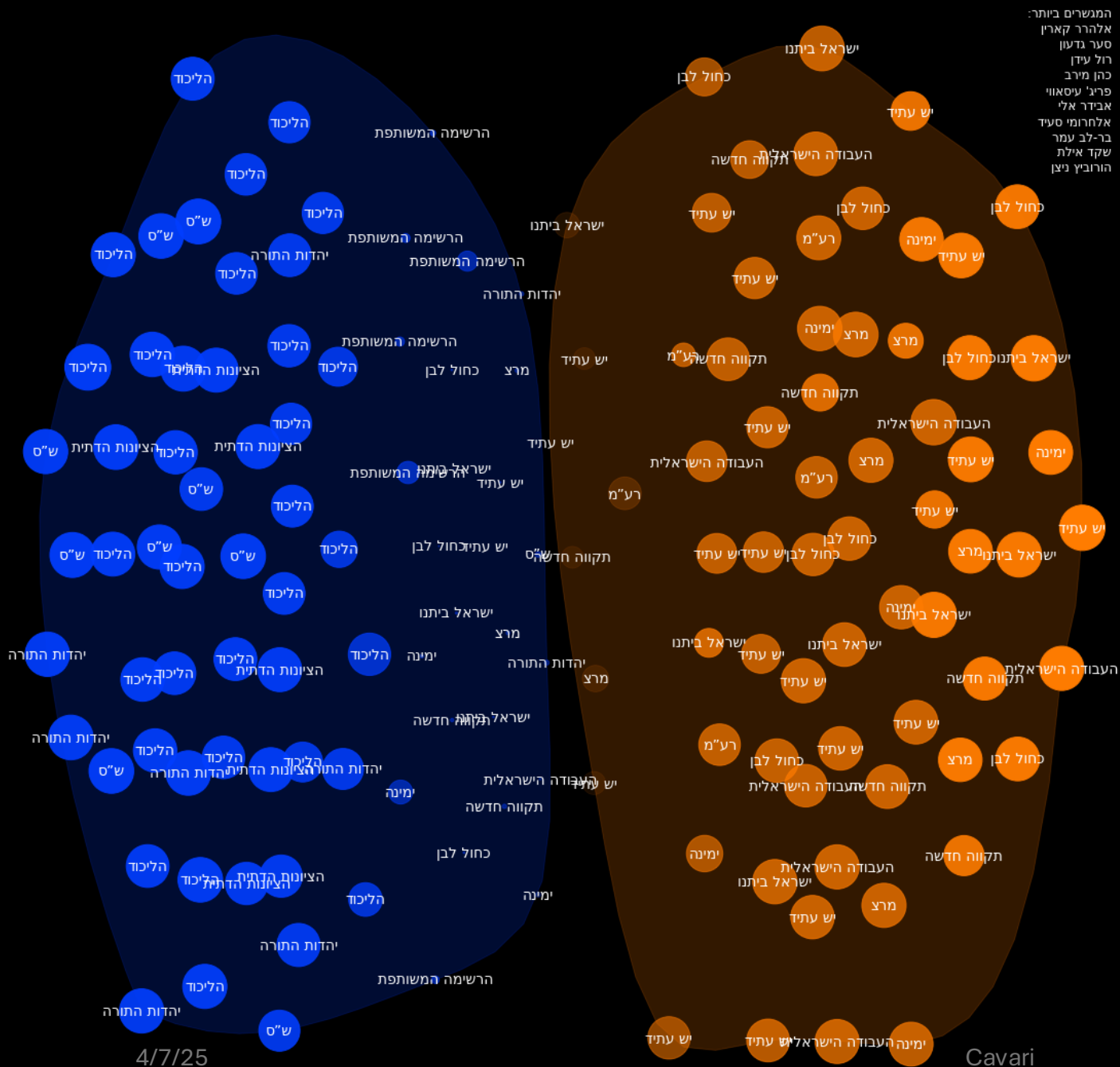
Elite Responsibility



המגשרים ביותר:
רביץ אברהם
פרס שמעון
נפאע סעיד
שרנסקי נתן
שטרן זירי
נוה דני
גלאון זהבה
בשאה עזמי
אותם אפי
צרצור אברהם

Not limited to the PM

- Roll Call votes, Knesset 17 (2006-2009, Olmert Government)
- Dyads of agreements (yea votes)



Not limited to the PM

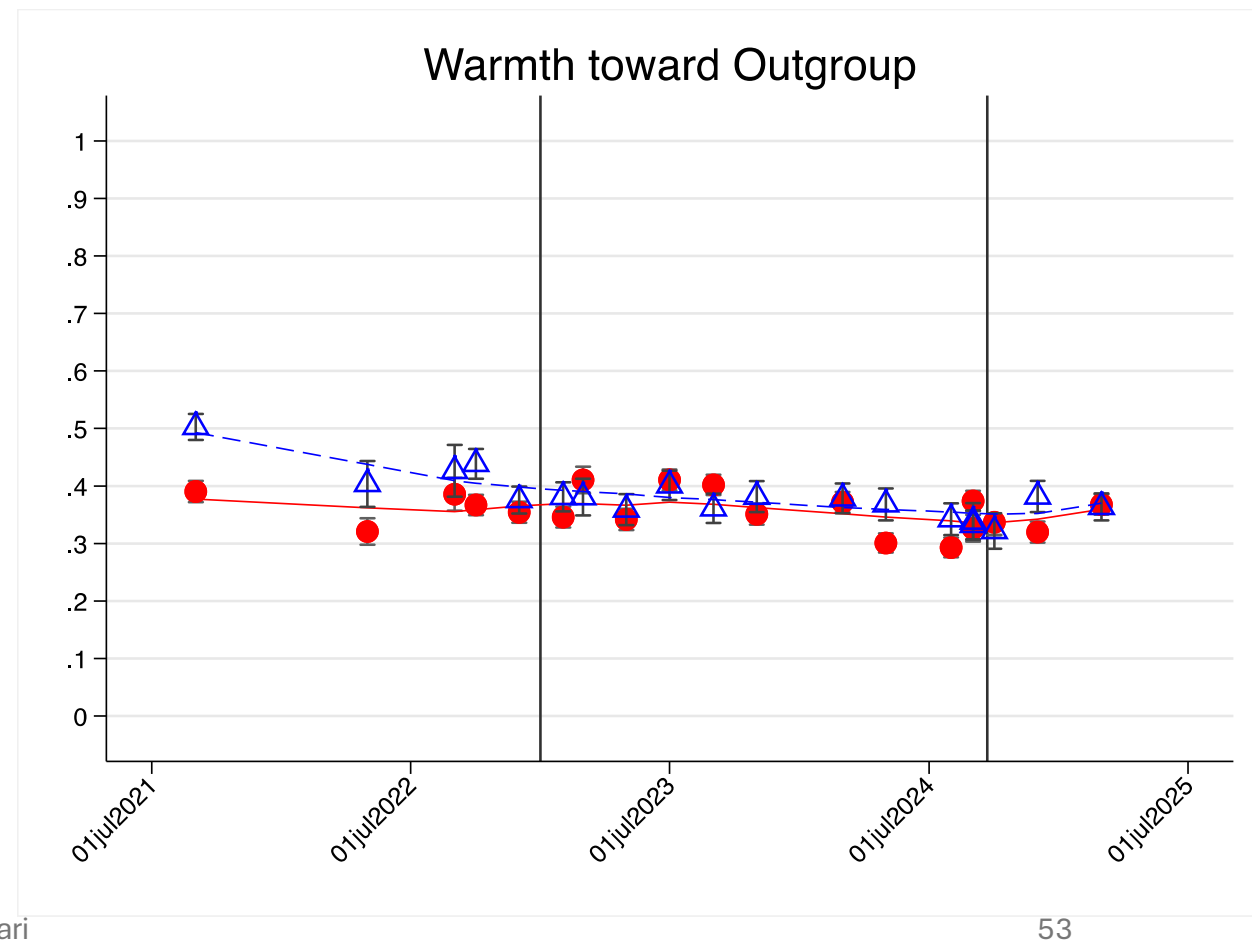
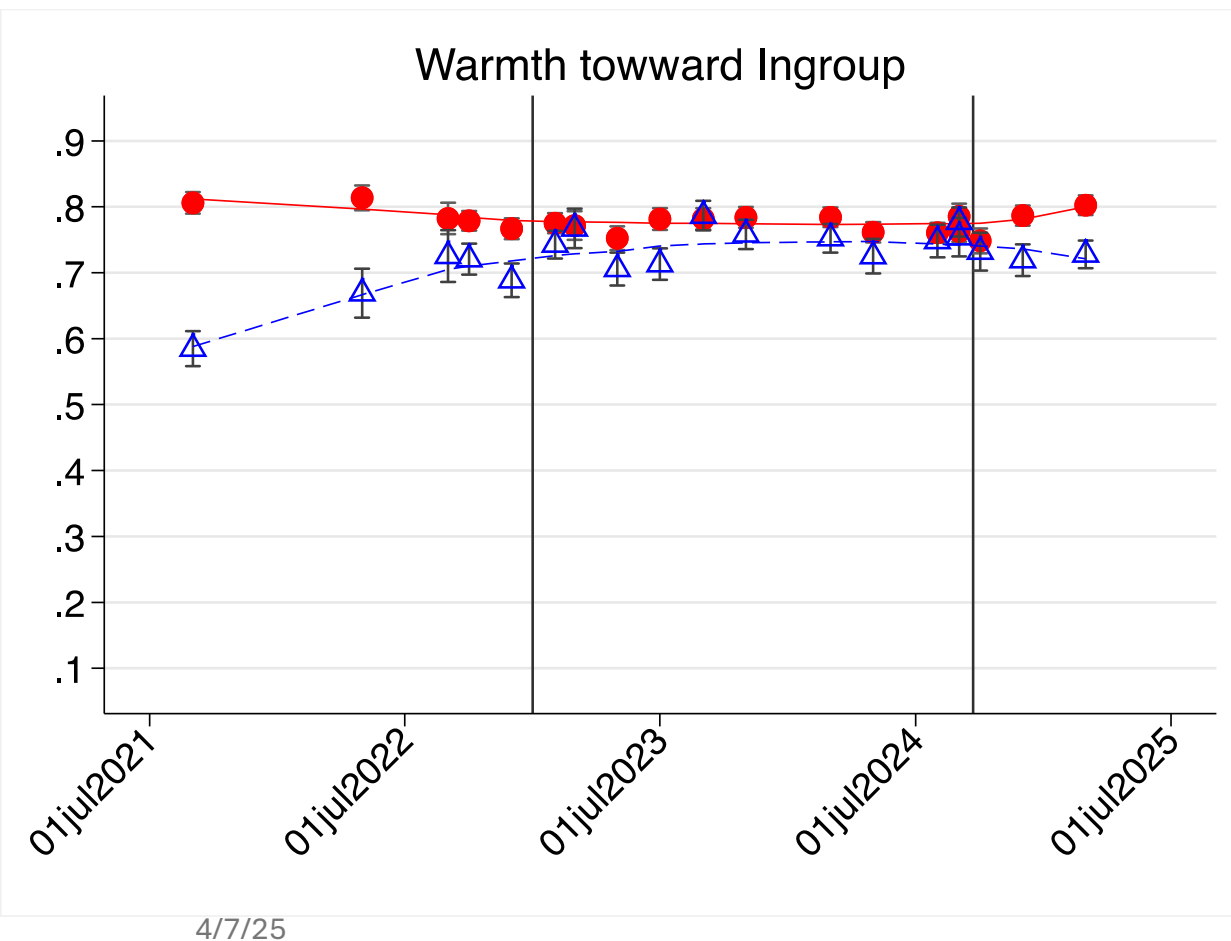
- Roll Call votes, Knesset 24 (2021-2022, Bennett-Lapid Government)
- Dyads of agreements (yea votes)

The Effect of the War on Affective Polarization

- Weakening polarization
 - External threat hypothesis – threats from external enemies reduce polarization because they (1) focus attention on the threat and (2) they strengthen national identity (Myrick 2021)
- Strengthening polarization
 - Internal threat hypothesis – viewing the “other” side as unfit to handle the security threat and as an insider threat to the country (Jahani et al. 2022; Harel et al. 2024)



Strengthening Affective Polarization





Why Important?

- Affective polarization increases support for “your” camp, even at the price of undemocratic norms (Svolik 2019)
- People are willing to accept undemocratic actions as long as the other camp will not be in power





How Resilient is Israeli Democracy?

- Weaknesses
 - Lack of institutional protections
 - Weak opposition, especially in times of war
 - A populist leader enjoying a comfortable coalition that has a strong interest in holding on to power:
 - Settlements – Religious Zionists
 - Religious status quo and funding – Ultra Orthodox
 - A weak governing party that has no real heir
 - Undemocratic sentiments among a growing population
 - Alliance with the Trump administration sharing autocratic principles
- Strengths
 - A powerful active public
 - Strong third sector
 - A strong economy that can pressure the government
 - A centralized unionized labor force







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