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**Jewish Identity or Democratic Values: What Do Israelis  
Prefer?**

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**An Overview**

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## **Introduction:**

Over the past year, Israeli society has undergone significant national upheaval. The judicial reform plan advanced by Netanyahu's government in 2023 deepened societal divisions, with many Israelis feeling polarized—even hostile—toward one another. Currently, the question of how to properly balance Israel's democratic nature with its identity as a state for the Jewish people has become acute, as these two components assign different meanings to the state and its institutions. On one hand, the democratic component is based on principles of equality, liberty, pluralism, human and civil rights, and majority rule. On the other hand, the Jewish religious identity and Jewish values often conflict with the democratic component.

This raises the question of whether the Israeli public believes that Israel should attribute greater importance to its democratic component at the expense of its Jewish identity, or vice versa. This issue has been examined over the past three years by the Institute for Liberty and Responsibility at Reichman University through a series of surveys among the Israeli public.

The findings indicate that in cases of conflict, the public as a whole prioritizes the democratic principle over Jewish identity. However, this tendency is not universal and appears to shift according to the political situation. In circumstances where democratic principles are threatened, such as the threat many Israelis currently feel due to the promotion of the judicial reform, there is a stronger tendency to prefer the democratic principle over Jewish identity. As the data shows, the tendency to prefer Jewish identity increases around election periods. Additional data reveal differences in preferences according to gender, political camp, and nationality. Women, Arabs, and respondents who identify as ideologically left-wing or centrist show a stronger tendency to prefer the democratic principle over Jewish identity compared to men, Jews, and those who identify as ideologically right-wing. Finally, among the Jewish sector, we observe that as the level of religiosity increases, the preference for the Jewish principle strengthens. This pattern is not observed in the Arab sector, which consistently maintains its preference for the democratic principle of the State of Israel. These findings provide a broad picture of the Israeli public's preferences regarding Israel's democratic and Jewish character and the inherent tensions between different population groups.

*For details on survey methodology, see the methodological appendix at the end of this document.*

## Survey Findings

To examine the Israeli public's position regarding the inherent tension between Israel being a democratic state and a Jewish state, the Institute for Liberty and Responsibility conducted seven surveys from 2020 to 2023, in which respondents were asked whether, in case of a conflict between a Jewish state and a democratic state, they prefer the Jewish principle or the democratic principle<sup>1</sup>.

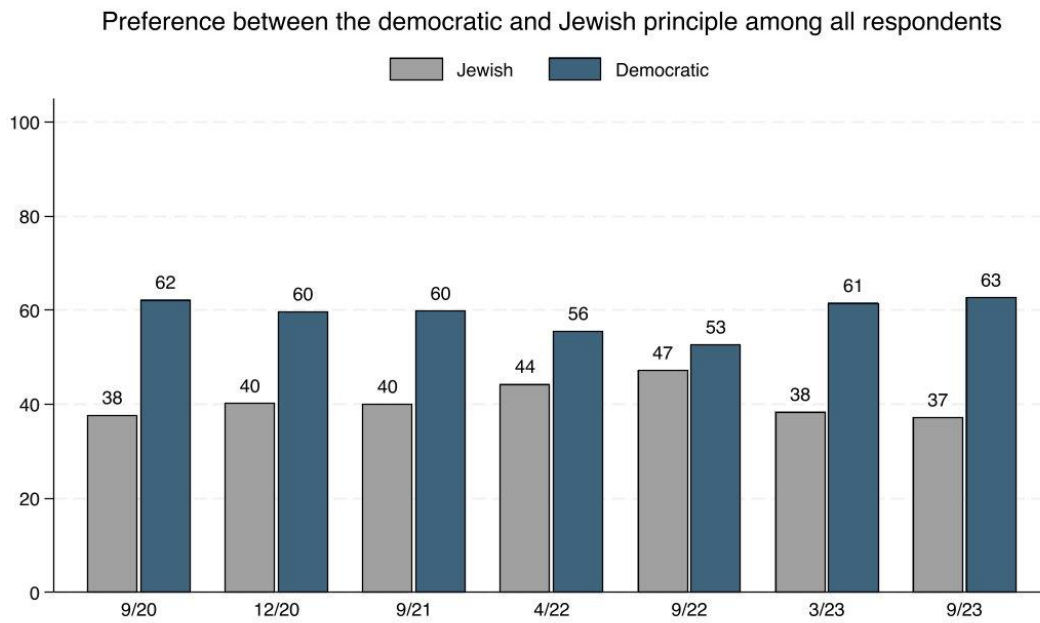
Figure 1 below presents the results across all seven waves among the general population. As the data shows, there has been a consistent tendency over the years among the Israeli public to prefer the democratic principle over Jewish identity in situations where there is a contradiction between the two. On average, 59% of Israelis prefer the democratic principle over Jewish identity.

However, this is not an overwhelming preference, as this tendency fluctuates in response to different political situations in Israel. As shown in Figure 1, support for the democratic principle declined slightly between September 2021 and September 2022 but increased by 10 percentage points in 2023. The decline in 2021 and 2022, as well as the increase in 2023, might be attributed to changes in governments and the attempt by Benjamin Netanyahu's government to pass a reform in the judicial system (the "Judicial Revolution").

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<sup>1</sup> The complete wording of the question was: "There are situations where there is a contradiction between the State of Israel being a Jewish state and being a democratic state. In case of a contradiction, should the principle of a Jewish state or the principle of a democratic state be preferred?" The response options were: Jewish state; Democratic state; Don't know. 10.75% of respondents answered "don't know" to this question and were excluded from the analysis of these items.

**Figure 1.**



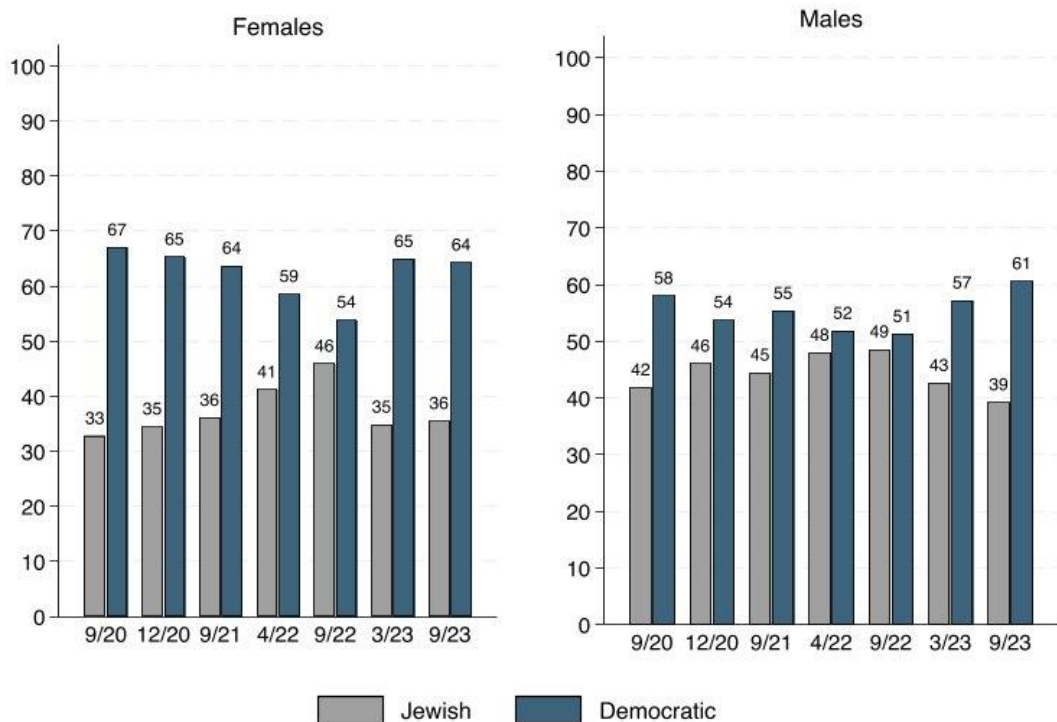
Legend: The vertical axis shows percentages, 0%-100%.

**Preference between the democratic and Jewish principles among women and men:**

The preference between the two components of the State of Israel, Jewish versus democratic, was examined by gender distribution – among women and men. Examining the results presented in Figure 2, on average, men do not show a clear preference regarding which principle to prioritize when there is a contradiction between the two. The preference becomes clearer toward 2023, when men tend to prefer the democratic principle over the Jewish one. This change might possibly be explained by the threat many Israelis feel to democratic principles due to the judicial reform promoted by Benjamin Netanyahu's government. In contrast, women demonstrate a relatively consistent preference for the democratic principle throughout the three years. However, even among women, the preference for democratic principle becomes more pronounced in 2023 compared to 2022.

**Figure 2.**

Preference between the democratic and Jewish principles among females and males



Legend: The vertical axis shows percentages, 0%-100%.

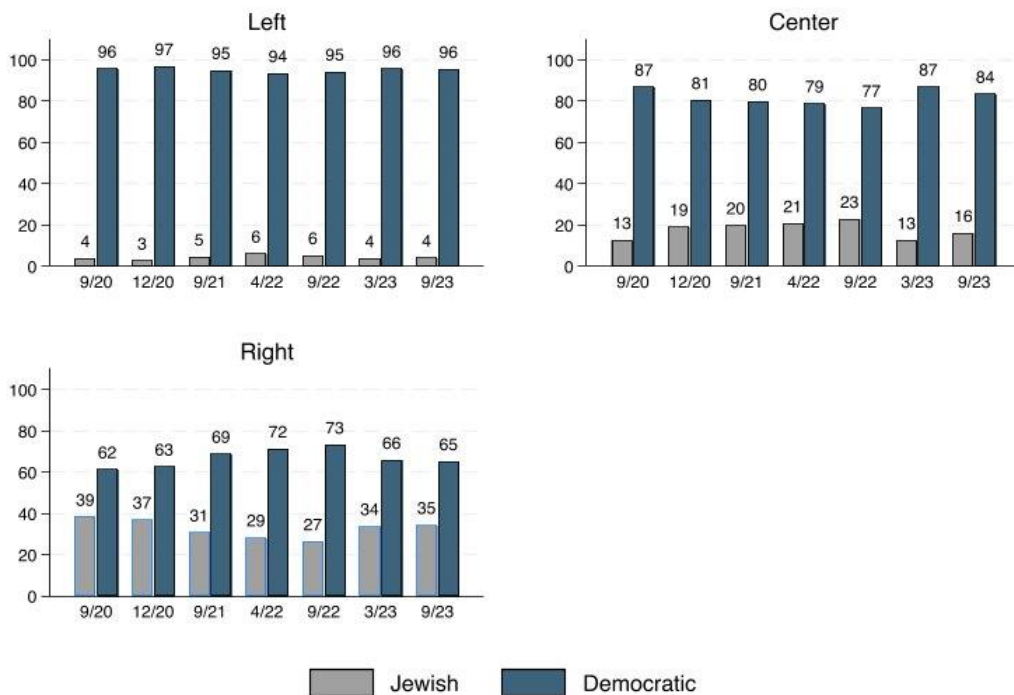
**Preference between the democratic and Jewish principles by ideological left-right division:**

Figure 3 compares respondents who identify as left-wing with those who identify as centrist or right-wing, based on their self-reported political ideology. The figure clearly shows that the tendency of left-wing respondents to prefer the democratic principle over the Jewish principle is the strongest and most consistent over the years compared to centrist and right-wing respondents. However, ideologically centrist respondents similarly exhibit a strong preference for the democratic principle.

Additionally, a shift in preferences can be observed among right-wing respondents, who, compared to their left- and center-leaning counterparts, show a stronger preference for the Jewish principle. Notably, support for the democratic principle among the right-wing public steadily declined between 2020 and 2022, though this trend shifted in 2023. These changes may be linked to the transition of power between Netanyahu's government and the Bennett-Lapid government, as well as to the broader political crisis that has gripped the Israeli public in recent years—underscoring the ongoing tension between Israel's Jewish and democratic identities. This volatility is particularly evident in March and September 2023, when support for the Jewish principle among right-wing respondents rose by 7% and 8%, respectively.

**Figure 3.**

Preference between the democratic and Jewish principles by ideological bloc



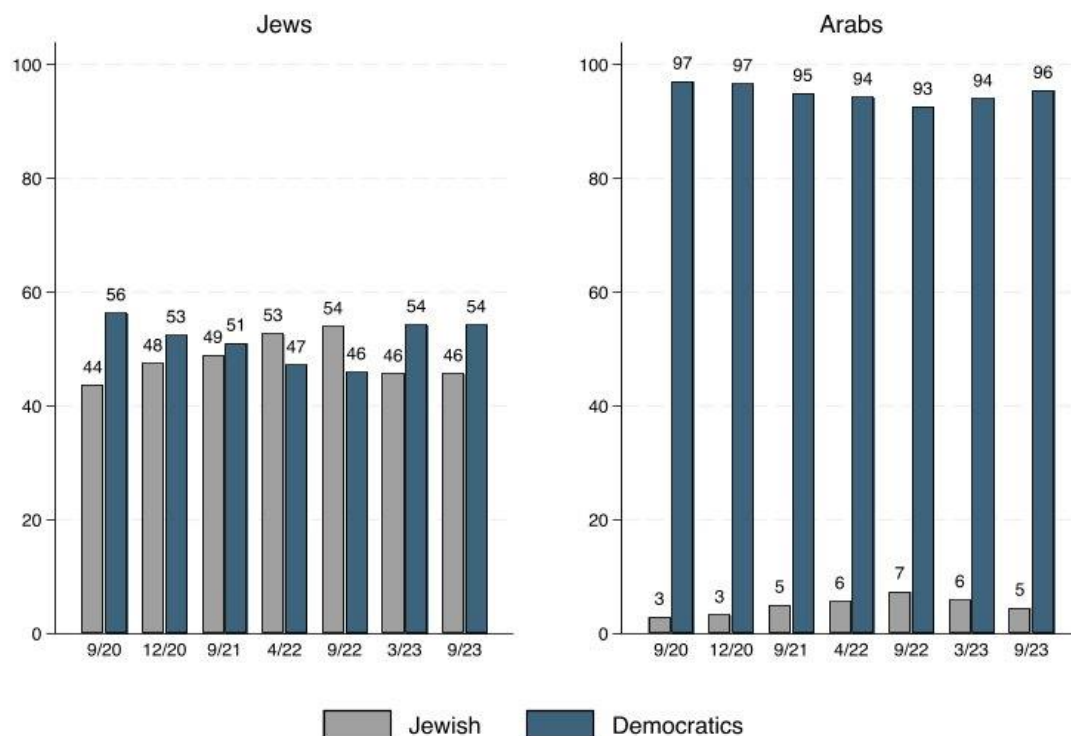
Legend: The vertical axis shows percentages, 0%-100%.

### Preference for the democratic principle among Jews versus Arabs:

The preference between the two principles was also examined by comparing Jewish and Arab respondents. As expected, the Jewish public in Israel places significantly greater emphasis on the Jewish principle than the Arab public when the two principles are in conflict. This pattern has remained consistent over the years. However, among the Jewish public, support for the democratic principle increased in 2023.

**Figure 4.**

Preference between the democratic and Jewish principles among Jews and Arabs



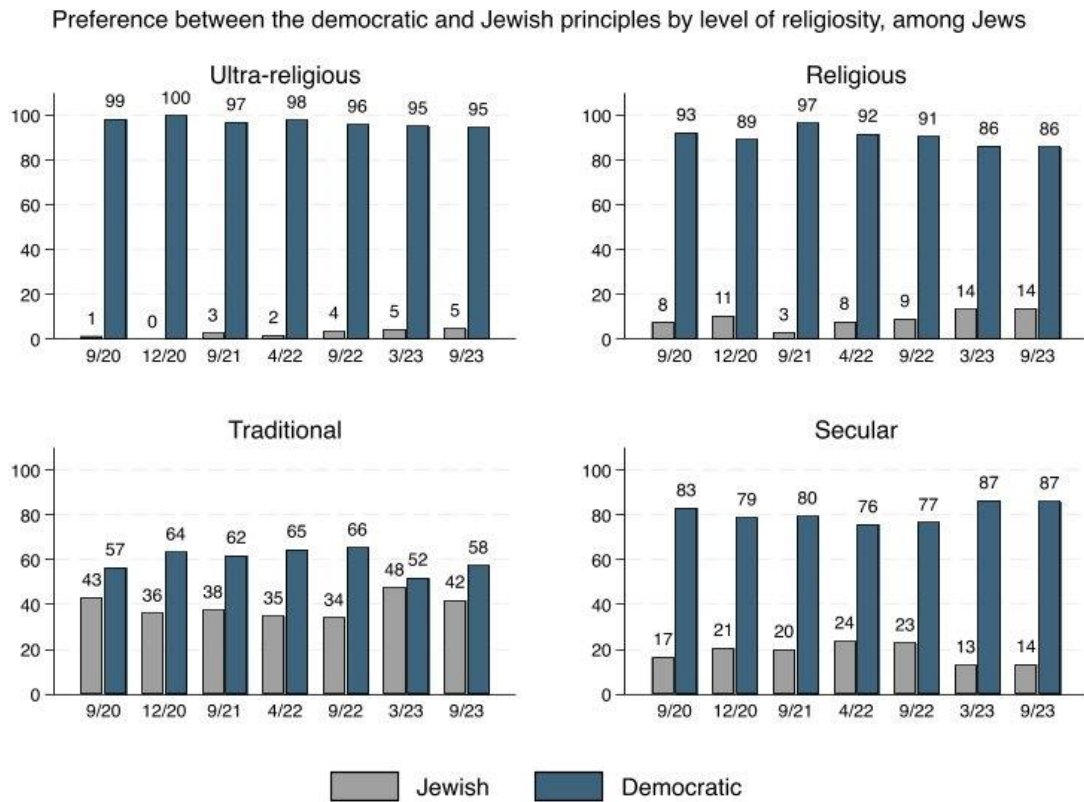
Legend: The vertical axis shows percentages, 0%-100%.

### Preference for the democratic principle by level of religiosity:

Following the analysis by political orientation and sector, preferences were also examined by levels of religiosity among Jewish and Arab respondents separately. Figure 5 presents the findings for Jewish respondents, and Figure 6 for Arab respondents.

Among Jews, the data show a clear trend: as religiosity increases, so does the preference for the Jewish character of the state. This preference is particularly strong among Ultra-Orthodox and National-Religious Jews. Traditional Jews also lean toward the Jewish principle, though their preference is more moderate. In contrast, secular Jews exhibit a clear and consistent preference for the democratic principle.

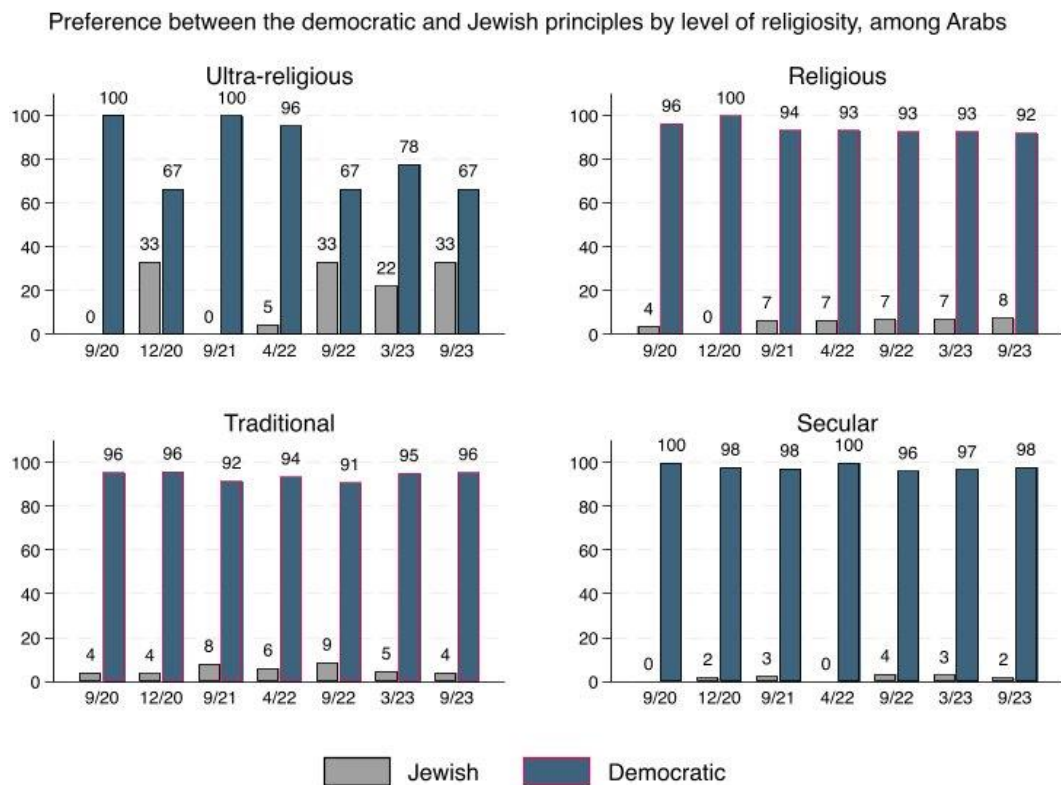
**Figure 5.**



Legend: The vertical axis shows percentages, 0%-100%.

In the Arab sector, no significant correlation was found between levels of religiosity and preference for the Jewish or democratic principle. Across all levels of religiosity, Arab respondents consistently favored the democratic principle. While some fluctuation is observed among those who identify as ‘very religious,’ even within this group, the democratic principle remains the clear preference.

**Figure 6.**



Legend: The vertical axis shows percentages, 0%-100%.

**Summary of findings:**

A broad examination of the Israeli public’s preferences regarding Israel’s identity as a democratic or Jewish state reveals a general tendency to prioritize the democratic principle. However, this preference is not fixed; it shifts in response to political developments that bring tensions between democratic values and Jewish identity to the forefront of public discourse.

The data also highlight important differences across demographic and ideological groups. Women are more likely than men to prioritize the democratic principle when the two values are in conflict. A similar pattern emerges between Arabs and Jews, with the former strongly favoring democracy and the latter showing a stronger inclination toward the Jewish character of the state. Ideologically, respondents who identify as left-wing or centrist are more likely to favor the democratic principle, while those on the right show a greater preference for the Jewish principle.

Among Jewish respondents, religiosity is a key factor: the more religious individuals are, the stronger their preference for the Jewish principle. In contrast, this pattern does

not appear among Arab respondents, whose support for the democratic principle remains consistent across all levels of religiosity

### **Appendix - Methodology:**

The Institute for Liberty and Responsibility team at the Lauder School of Government, Diplomacy and Strategy at Reichman University prepared the survey questions and subsequently analyzed the data. The survey was conducted by Geocartography, which conducts online surveys in Israel. The survey was conducted in seven waves between September 2020 and September 2023. The data in the survey were collected online.

In total, 9,749 respondents aged 18 and over completed all seven surveys. Of these, 7,990 were Jewish respondents and 1,759 were Arab respondents<sup>2</sup>. The maximum margin sampling error for the various samples ranged from 2.4% to 3.0% at a confidence level of 95%.

The Jewish respondents constitute a representative sample of the adult Jewish population in Israel, broken down by gender, age groups, district in the country, and level of religiosity. Additionally, the Arab respondents constitute a sample that is close to representing the adult Arab population in Israel broken down by gender, age groups, district in the country, and level of religiosity, with an under-sampling of male respondents, respondents from the southern region, and respondents aged 40 and over.

Table 1 presents basic descriptive statistics of survey respondents across key variables, compared with data from the Israeli National Election Study (INES)<sup>3</sup> from March 2021, the latest available representative probability survey with comparable data. It can be seen that there are slight deviations between the surveys we conducted between 2020 and 2023 and the INES March 2021 data regarding the percentage of women, Jews, and those with academic education in the sample. There is a slight under-sampling of secular individuals and those with left-wing ideology, alongside a slight over-sampling of centrist ideological respondents and traditional respondents.

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<sup>2</sup> The questionnaire was translated into Arabic so that Arab respondents could choose whether to answer the questionnaire in Hebrew or Arabic.

<sup>3</sup> See at this address: <https://www.tau.ac.il/~ines>

**Table 1. Descriptive statistics of respondents in the various surveys compared to the INES survey from 2021:**

	<b>December 2022 Survey</b>	<b>July 2023 Survey</b>	<b>November 2023 Survey</b>	<b>Israeli Election Survey – March 2021</b>
<b>Age (Mean, SD)</b>	41.8 (15.3)	44.2 (17.3)	44.3 (17.2)	47.3 (18.0)
<b>Women (% of sample)</b>	54.3%	53.1%	53.1%	52.2%
<b>Jews (% of sample)</b>	82.8%	80.9%	79.6%	81.4%
<b>Any academic education (% of sample)</b>	52.4%	51.1%	49.8%	47.8%
<b>Level of religiosity (among Jewish respondents)</b>				
Secular	50.9%	42.9%	44.3%	50.7%
Traditional	24.7%	36.4%	33.0%	26.9%
Religious	12.0%	11.0%	12.1%	12.0%
Ultra-Orthodox	12.0%	9.7%	10.6%	10.4%
<b>Self-identified ideological orientation (% sample)</b>				
Right	50.2%	42.2%	46.3%	51.1%
Center	23.6%	28.8%	27.1%	22.8%
Left	21.9%	24.1%	23.5%	26.1%

Legend: The question examining self-definition on the ideological right-left axis included seven response options, where 1 means right, 4 means center, and 7 means left. Those who answered 1-3 were defined as "right," those who answered 4 were defined as "center," and those who answered 5-7 were defined as "left."

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