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Polarized public agenda in times of crisis

Amnon Cavari  and Asif Efrat 

Lauder School of Government, Diplomacy and Strategy, Reichman University, Herzliya, Israel

ABSTRACT

This study examines public priorities during crises in a polarized political environment and sheds light on the conditions under which crises and political polarization unite or fragment public attention. Using longitudinal cross-sectional data collected before and after two crises in Israel in 2023–2024 – an internal constitutional crisis and an external security crisis – we assess shifts in overall and partisan public attention. Our findings reveal that crises significantly reorient public priorities: the constitutional crisis heightened the focus on government operations and the cultural identity of the country, while the security crisis shifted attention to defense and international affairs. However, only the latter crisis reduced the diversity of public attention. The results underscore a partisan dimension: the constitutional crisis amplified divides in priorities between pro- and anti-government camps, while the security crisis mitigated these divides through a unifying rally of attention. Trust in government emerged as a key mediator in this rally effect. These findings contribute to the agenda-setting literature by highlighting the differential impacts of crises on public priorities and demonstrating the interplay of polarization, trust, and type of crisis.

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KEYWORDS Public agenda; Israel; crisis; political trust; polarization

Citizens' prioritization of issues is central to the study of politics in democracies (Moniz & Wlezien, 2020). This prioritization influences election outcomes (Campbell et al., 1960; Carmines & Stimson, 1989), public policy (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Soroka & Wlezien, 2010), evaluations of government (Cavari, 2019), and the overall responsiveness of democratic governments to their constituents (Erikson et al., 2002; Page & Shapiro, 1992; Stimson, 2015). The factors that affect the policy priorities of the mass public are, therefore, essential for understanding political decisions and actions.

CONTACT Amnon Cavari  cavari@runi.ac.il  Lauder School of Government, Diplomacy and Strategy, Reichman University, Herzliya, Israel

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In forming their priorities, people process information they receive about the state of the world as it affects them or the community, seeing some issues as more prominent than others (Bevan & Jennings, 2019; Wlezien, 2005). In examining the factors that influence which issues will be on the public agenda, most existing work examines the long-term congruence between the public agenda and the institutional agenda or longitudinal measures of the political environment (mostly economic measures). Such work, however, provides only a limited focus on the nature of public attention, which is dynamic and subject to abrupt changes (Yildirim, 2022b). Drawing on the rich work on punctuated equilibrium that theorizes change in attention as a process involving long-term stability with abrupt shifts (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993), we expect that crises or dramatic changes in the political environment will have a significant effect on citizens' policy priorities.

We define a crisis as a punctuating event that offsets normal processes. These are events in which established institutions, procedures, or norms fail to resolve fundamental conflicts between key political actors, leading to a potential or actual collapse in decision-making authority, legitimacy, or governance capacity (Diamond, 1999; Linz & Stepan, 1978). In some cases, like during a war, the identification of an event or a threat as a crisis is clear. In other cases, people differ in their perception of the event as a result of the plurality of values and interests and the competition between the government and the opposition (Boin et al., 2009; Boin et al., 2024). Therefore, crises are events or developments that are widely perceived by members of relevant communities to constitute urgent threats to core community values and structures. In that, crises serve as focusing events that spark intense public attention due to their sheer magnitude or the harm they may reveal (Birkland, 1998). We should therefore expect that crises will solidify citizens' policy priorities, focusing them on the crisis at the expense of 'regular' politics.

And yet, the public is not a monolithic entity. Existing research suggests that public attention varies across social groups, including gender (Crowder-Meyer, 2022; Yildirim, 2021, 2022a), race and ethnicity (Crowder-Meyer, 2022), and social status (Cavari & Freedman, 2019). Beyond these core differences, there is some suggested evidence that partisans differ in their issue priorities and that a strengthened partisan divide, or polarization, further separates partisans in their priorities. In a polarized environment, citizens divide not only in their preferences, but also over factual claims about the political environment (Flynn et al., 2017; Iyengar & Krupenkin, 2018; Prior et al., 2015). In such a political environment, we should therefore expect members of the public to diverge in their policy priorities, which is what they want and what they expect the government to address (Gruszczynski, 2019).

Crises and polarization, therefore, pose two conflicting forces in setting policy priorities of citizens, which motivate the research question of this paper: How do crises that unify attention, influence the public agenda in a polarized environment where the process of division separates attention between two groups of committed partisans? This question is important because, in recent decades, the political environment is consistently shaped by crises that redefine public policy, and party polarization is increasing across the democratic world (Casal Bértoa & Rama, 2021).

Our empirical investigation relies on monthly data (total of 19 surveys) collected during two very different crises in Israel – an internal constitutional crisis triggered by the government and an external security crisis triggered by a surprise attack of Hamas on Israel. We propose that the interrelated effects of a crisis and partisan divide on the public agenda are conditioned by the nature of the crisis, its alignment with existing political divisions, and political trust – a key factor in shaping people's perceptions of the government and their expectations from it.

The effect of crises on the public agenda

While the political environment is dynamic and constantly changing, the diversity of political attention tends to flow along a long-run equilibrium. Consistent with the rich work on punctuated equilibrium in policy attention (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993), this equilibrium is interrupted by 'focusing events' like natural disasters, terrorist attacks, economic crises, large-scale scandals, incidents, or protests that draw intense media attention (Bevan & Jennings, 2019) and raise the sense of urgency that mobilizes punctuations to the long-steady equilibrium. A key actor in the mobilization of change is the public, which responds to the media attention and can be used by policy entrepreneurs to emphasize the need to address the crisis.

In fact, the effect of crises on the public agenda may be even more pronounced than disruptions to the institutional agenda, which is more heavily influenced by institutional friction (Baumgartner et al., 2009; Yildirim, 2022b). The mass public relies heavily on heuristics in interpreting and acting on incoming information (Zaller, 1992). Seeking these heuristics, and in the absence of independent sources or the capacity to process multiple streams of inputs, people turn to mediators such as political elites and the media to assess changes in the severity of problems. When these are focused on the crisis, so is the public (Boydston, 2013; Iyengar & Simon, 1993). And when the public is exposed to the policy challenges created by major events, it demands that the government address these challenges before any other policy interests.

Some recent work finds empirical support for this dynamic. For example, the global economic recession in 2008 drew public attention to economic

issues; the European refugee crisis in 2015 led to an increase in public attention to immigration issues (Stubager et al., 2021); and the COVID-19 pandemic heightened public attention to health issues (Platania et al., 2023). These shifts placed pressure on governments to respond. In this sense, by raising public attention, a crisis may reverse the more common causal direction where the institutional agenda influences the public agenda (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Cavari, 2017; Cohen, 1997). Crises mobilize change in the public agenda, which, in turn, influences the institutional agenda.

Our first hypothesis, therefore, draws directly from existing work on agenda-setting. A crisis, or a focusing event, will have a profound impact on the public's policy priorities. During a crisis, the public's policy priorities will shift to the issue that stands at the root of the crisis.

H1: During a crisis, public priorities will focus on the issue related to the crisis.

And yet, crises vary in the issue they affect and, therefore, in the influence they will have on the diversity of attention. Given the scarcity of public attention and citizens' cognitive limits of information-processing (Lau & Redlawsk, 2006; Simon, 1997), the public usually coalesces around a few issues (McCombs & Zhu, 1995), generating a diversity of public priorities that reflect the status of an issue in the country and the change in that status (Cavari, 2017; Seeberg & Adams, 2024). Attention to one issue is, therefore, inevitably at the expense of attention to another issue. For example, when a health crisis arises, the public shifts its attention to health issues at the expense of other issues, such as education. Such a shift does not necessarily influence the long-run equilibrium of diversity of the agenda, even under low (incremental) or high (punctuated) change observed for individual topics. Although there may be short-term fluctuations in attention, the overall diversity of the agenda remains stable as it absorbs sudden changes. Just as some issues are quickly elevated in importance, others are downgraded to the fringes of attention (Jennings et al., 2011).

However, issues vary in their importance and, therefore, in their potential influence on the diversity of the agenda. In seeking to assess the determinants of the effect of a crisis on the diversity of policy priorities, we draw on the work on the diversity of government attention, which shows that when the political environment pressures the government to address its core functions, the diversity of government attention declines (Jennings et al., 2011). This work assumes rather than examines the causes of government attention to its core functions, stating that a '[g]overnment can decide whether or not to attend to selective issues, in contrast to those issues related to its core functions.' (Jennings et al., 2011, p. 1007). The underlying assumption is derived from the classic theories of the state, which suggest that governments adhere to what is expected of

them, providing security and general well-being for their people (Hobbes, 2012; Locke, 1980; Rousseau, 1993).

We should, therefore, expect that during crises related to the core functions of government, the public would coalesce around the crisis and prioritize it – expecting the government to provide its core functions, including security and economic stability. An increase in attention to such an issue would come at the expense of several other issues, thereby reducing the diversity of attention. In their analysis of the government agenda, Jennings and colleagues (2011) find that the most significant dampening effect on agenda diversity is international issues, followed by economy and security, whereas the smallest is on government operations. Following these findings, and for the first time applying them to public opinion, we expect a dampening effect of an attention shock on agenda diversity when the crisis concerns an external threat (but not during a domestic political crisis).

H2: During a major crisis that touches on an external security threat, the diversity of attention will decline.

Partisan divide in public agenda in times of crisis

Most work on public attention treats the public as a monolithic entity, examining changes in overall public attention or the diversity of attention within it. Recent work has accounted for the fragmentation of the public agenda (Edy and Meirick 2018) and demonstrated demographic variations in public attention, including by gender (Crowder-Meyer, 2022; Yildirim, 2021, 2022a), by race and ethnicity (Crowder-Meyer, 2022), and by social status (Cavari & Freedman, 2019). Beyond these differences, we suggest that the public agenda will vary between partisan groups. Partisans differ in their perceptions of the political world and their understanding of political events (Bartels, 2002). Their partisanship serves as a perceptual screen by which they learn about and understand political events (Jerit & Barabas, 2012). As motivated reasoners, partisans are rarely driven by the desire to arrive at the best conclusion given the available evidence but rather by the desire to reach a predetermined conclusion that aligns with their political identities. Partisan motivations, therefore, significantly influence how people process political information and the subsequent effects of that information on their attitudes toward government (Alon-Barkat, Cavari & Shvarts, 2025; Bolsen et al., 2014; Stagnaro & Amsalem, 2025). If they process information differently and see the world differently, we should expect to see partisans differ in their policy priorities from government.

The process of increasing party polarization that is characteristic of modern democracies further exacerbates these divides. A polarized environment generates strong divides in the sources of information that citizens consume (Stroud, 2010), in how citizens process information (Leeper, 2014), and in the

political trust citizens have in information they receive about out-partisans (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015) – all of which lead opposing partisan groups to rely on different information when evaluating the political environment.

In a study examining the impact of partisan priorities in the United States, Cavari and Freedman (2018) found a positive correlation between the rise of polarization and the divergence in policy priorities between Republicans and Democrats. Similarly, Gruszczynski (2019) demonstrates an increase in partisan agenda fragmentation in the United States that began at the turn of the twenty-first century, coinciding with a substantial increase in political polarization (Abramowitz, 2010). Based on this work, we expect that while the main driving force in issue attention is the obtrusive issues that feed the political environment, we will find partisan differences in the issue attention and issue diversity of the public. Mainly, in contrast to the unifying effect of a crisis on public opinion, a partisan divide in a polarized environment will have a diverging effect on issue priorities.

H3: Partisans will divide in their policy priorities, presenting diverging partisan agendas

In considering how a crisis, which has a unifying effect on public attention, would affect the diverging force of issue priorities between the two partisan groups, we pose two conflicting views. On the one hand, we expect a crisis to strengthen existing partisan divisions in issue attention. People vary in their views of the political world, their understanding of government responsibility, and their expectations of what the government should prioritize, and we should not necessarily expect these differences to change during a crisis. Instead, a crisis can bolster and entrench existing differences. For example, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Gadarian, Goodman, and Pepinsky (2022) show that partisan polarization in the United States was a critical factor in determining individuals' willingness to follow public health guidelines, such as mask-wearing, vaccination, and social distancing. The difference between the two partisan camps is not limited to their preferred policies, but is rooted in different views of the events, varying levels of trust in government, and other expectations from the government. From this perspective, we should expect the crisis to solidify existing differences.

On the other hand, during crises, people tend to coalesce not only in support of the government, but, first and foremost, they shift their attention to the crisis and their expectations of the government to resolve it (Platanía et al., 2023; Stubager et al., 2021). They may disagree on how to solve the crisis, but they will prefer to set aside their regular preferences and focus on the crisis itself. In such situations, we may expect partisan differences in attention to fade.

In addressing these two possible conflicting effects of a crisis on the partisan divide in public priorities, we suggest two factors that may influence

public attention in times of crisis: the nature of the crisis and political trust. These factors lead to two additional hypotheses.

First, a crisis stemming from an external security threat would fuel a more substantial unifying effect on public attention than other crises. A security threat may have grave consequences, raising concerns about the physical survival of citizens. Furthermore, a rich body of work demonstrates that in times of war, the public shifts its priorities from ‘regular politics’ to the handling of the threat (Baum & Potter, 2015; Mueller, 1973). This further aligns with existing evidence suggesting that governments have an interest in launching military operations and identifying external enemies to divert public attention from and mitigate political divisions over domestic issues (Tir, 2010), especially among populist leaders (Destradi et al., 2021). We, therefore, expect a security crisis to dampen partisan divisions in policy priorities.

In contrast, a crisis can be triggered by one of the political camps. This can happen when the cause of the crisis is an action taken by an incumbent government. The crisis may stem, for example, from the government’s decision to use force against an external enemy or from adopting an internal policy, such as a tax increase. Voters of the governing coalition may be less responsive to the crisis in their policy priorities. For them, the issue is an acceptable government action and will therefore be less salient. In contrast, voters of the opposition parties are more likely to view the government’s actions as a cause of the crisis and may turn their attention to it more strongly. The two political camps may also diverge in their perception of the crisis itself – supporters of the government would not necessarily see it as a crisis, but supporters of the opposition would (Alon Barkat et al., 2025). In such a situation, we expect the priorities gap between the political camps to be at its maxim.

H4: An external security crisis will mitigate party differences in policy priorities more than an internal crisis driven by government action.

Finally, a key factor explaining variation in the unifying effect of an external security crisis in policy priorities is the trust people have in their political institutions. Political trust can take the form of generalized and diffused trust in key institutions, where the object of trust is not a particular political actor but instead the system and its actors (Citrin & Stoker, 2018). While party affiliation is a dominant factor in explaining political trust, existing research reveals significant variation within political camps (Hooghe & Kern, 2015). In this context, political trust emerges as a crucial factor in maintaining the functioning and sustainability of a democratic society, enabling citizens to have faith in their government and its ability to address and represent their interests, even when they have little appreciation for the party in power (Easton, 1975; Hetherington, 1998).

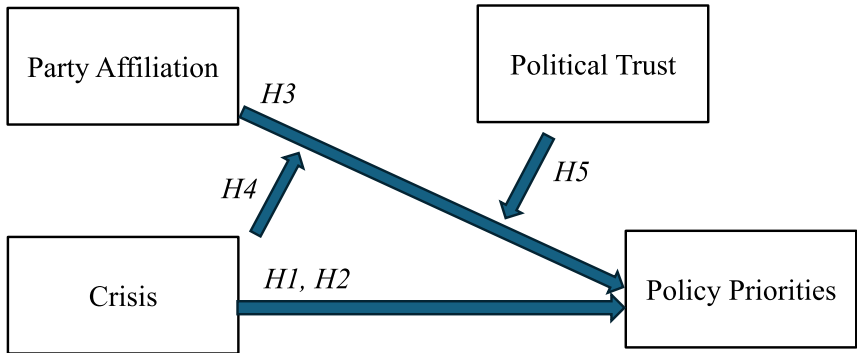
The importance of trust lies in its ability to reduce the complexities of social life by establishing a foundation of confidence in the reciprocal

actions of others (Putnam, 2000). Some limited evidence suggests that when the public perceives that the government does not prioritize the issues they care about, they may lose trust in the government (Meirick & Edy, 2022). This causal direction also works in reverse: citizens who trust their government are more likely to believe it will act in their best interests (Hetherington, 2018; Levi & Stoker, 2000). In this sense, political trust serves as a key determinant of policy priorities, which can moderate partisan differences during an external crisis. People who trust the government, regardless of their partisan loyalties, can turn their attention to events and will therefore prioritize the crisis. In contrast, people who do not trust the government – whether they voted for it or not – may experience feelings of alienation and cynicism (Fox, 2021). They will focus their attention on the government itself and may view it as a policy priority in need of reform or change.

H5: Political trust will moderate partisan differences in policy priorities during a crisis, resulting in a decreased partisan fragmentation regarding the crisis.

In sum, we illustrate our theoretical expectations in Diagram 1. We expect that under a polarized environment, crises (H1) and party affiliation (H3) will both have a direct effect on the policy priorities of individuals. The type of crisis (internal vs. external) influences the diversity of policy priorities (H2) and moderates the fragmenting effect of party affiliation on policy priorities (H4). Finally, political trust moderates the effect of party affiliation on policy priorities (H5).

Diagram 1. A summary of theoretical expectations.



The political setting

Our analysis of the effect of a crisis on public attention takes place during Israel's back-to-back constitutional and security crises in 2023–2024. The severity of the two crises, along with the extreme political polarization and

low political trust that characterize contemporary Israeli politics, provides an ideal case study for examining the effect of a crisis on public priorities.

On December 29, 2022, a new right-wing government was sworn in, following the November 1st election. A few days later, on January 4, 2023, a constitutional crisis broke out when Minister of Justice Yariv Levin announced, on behalf of the government, a judicial reform plan to curtail the judiciary's authority and independence. The plan included four pillars: adopting an override clause that would limit judicial review of legislation; eliminating the Reasonableness Doctrine that allows courts to review government decisions and annul them if they are extremely unreasonable; changing the composition of the judicial selection committee to enable the government to dominate the process of judicial selection; and allow political appointments of legal advisors to ministers (Roznai et al., 2023). The plan was immediately understood as an attack on the independence of the judicial branch in Israel, the most significant check on government power in a political system that lacks strong mechanisms of checks and balances. The announcement of the planned reform triggered mass protests, with hundreds of thousands of citizens taking to the streets to thwart the government's intentions and protect democracy. Against these mass demonstrations, the government and its supporters claimed that the protesting citizens failed to accept the will of the people as expressed in the election results, and that the protest posed a threat to law and order. This constitutional crisis consumed the country for nine months (January–September), raising concerns about the future of Israeli democracy, Israel's national security, law and order, and the economy. The debate centered on the function of government and the identity of the state of Israel as a democratic state. At the core of the discussion was a partisan divide that pitted pro-government voters, who supported at least some of the proposed reforms, against anti-government voters, who viewed the proposed reforms as an undemocratic power grab.

Figure 1 illustrates the public interest in judicial reform and its impact on Israeli democracy by plotting a Google Trends analysis of searches in Israel for the terms 'democracy' and 'government' during this period. Starting in October 2022, prior to the election held on November 1, we observe an increase in public searches for democracy and government. After Minister Levin announced the proposed reform on January 4, 2023 (marked by a dashed vertical line), we see an increase in searches related to the separation of powers. This increase in public interest is maintained, though with some fluctuations, until the outbreak of the war in Gaza and Lebanon in October 2023.

On October 7, 2023, Hamas launched a surprise attack on Israel, killing approximately 1200 civilians and soldiers and taking more than 250 hostages. This led to a war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza. Hezbollah joined this war

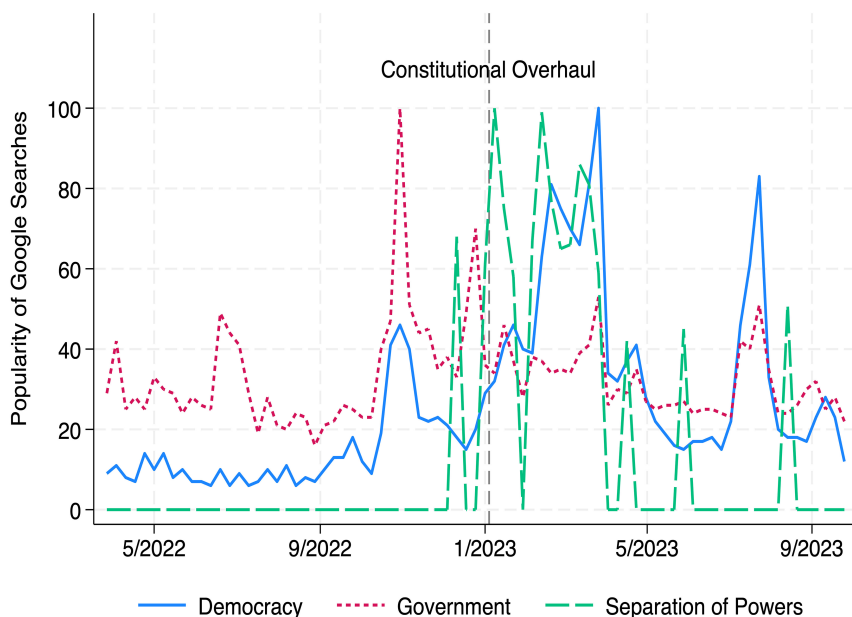


Figure 1. Public interest in democracy, government, and separation of powers, measured through Google searches.

by attacking Israel from Lebanon on October 8. With that, the constitutional crisis was immediately replaced by a security crisis. The security crisis gave rise to political tensions and protests, as many blamed the government for failing to prevent the Hamas attack that started the war, for mismanaging the war, and for not prioritizing a deal to release the hostages. Others blamed the protests against the government over the judicial reform in the previous months – protests that, the critics argued, weakened the government in the eyes of its enemies and drew the government’s attention away from its regular duties. These critics also condemned the anti-government demonstrations during the war for weakening the government and the military in their fight against Hamas and Hezbollah.

Throughout the entire period (spanning both crises), Israel was led by a government that received a very low and highly polarized public support. We illustrate the polarized support in Figure 2, which plots the public trust in government. To measure political trust in government, we use a survey question in monthly surveys conducted by the Institute for Liberty and Responsibility at Reichman University (32 surveys) that asks respondents if they have trust in the government. The question provides four levels of trust: no trust, low trust, high trust and very high trust. Based on this question, we calculated the average trust in each survey and normalized it to a 0–1 scale (mean = 0.24, SD = 0.03).

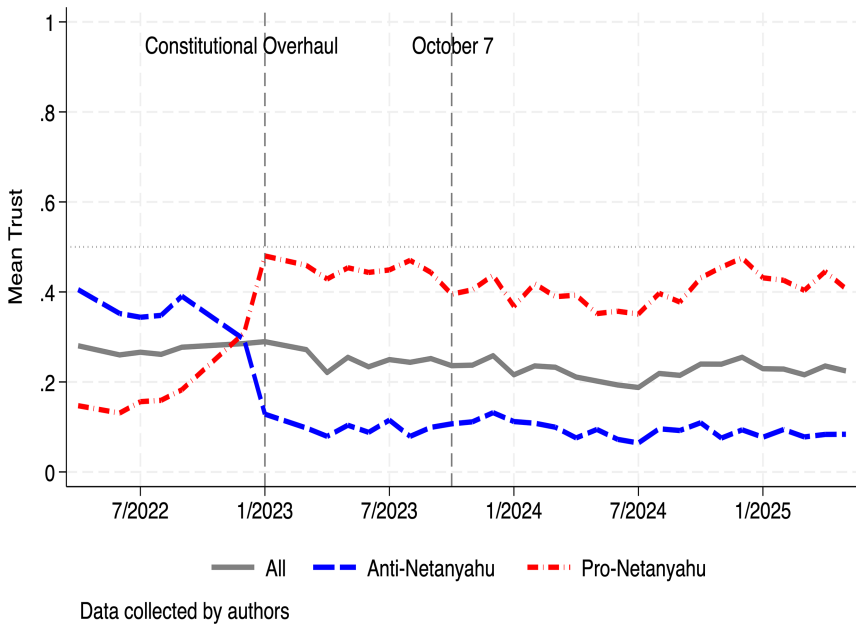


Figure 2. Public trust in government.

The vertical lines represent the announcement of the constitutional overhaul on January 4, 2023 and the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023. The gray line represents overall public trust, indicating low trust in government, at approximately 0.2. Such a low level of political trust is consistent with trends observed in other developed democracies, where political trust has been in sharp decline in recent years (Valgarðsson et al., 2025). Still, the consistently low trust, even following the Hamas attack, further demonstrates the mistrust in the Netanyahu-led government in Israel. War often fuels an increase in support for the government (Feinstein, 2022); however, in this case, overall public trust remained unchanged even during a major war.

Yet, political trust is strongly associated with political affiliation. The red line indicates the public trust among voters of parties that are part of the right-wing coalition in power in 2023–2024 – referred to here as pro-Netanyahu (the prime minister). Even among these voters, trust in the right-wing government never exceeded 0.5, dropping to about 0.35 in the summer of 2024, and, perhaps more remarkably, did not increase following the Hamas attack in October 2023. The blue line indicates the level of trust in the government among anti-Netanyahu voters (those who support parties not part of the right-wing coalition). In 2023–2024, trust in government among this group of voters stands at about 0.1. This low trust is surprising, given that it occurs during a time when the country is engaged in one of the longest and deadliest wars in its history.

This polarization is further supported by data showing that affective polarization between the two political camps reached an all-time high in the 2022 elections (Amitai et al., 2025) and has not since receded (Amitai & Yair 2025).

Data and method

The primary variable of interest is the public’s issue priorities – the public agenda. A common measure of the public agenda is a survey question that asks citizens to identify the most important problem (MIP) facing the nation (Bevan & Jennings, 2019; Jennings & Wlezien, 2011). Our data provide this measure of the public policy agenda encompassing both crises through cross-sectional monthly surveys conducted from April 2022 to April 2024. The data comprise 19 surveys, each administered to 800–1,500 respondents, providing a representative sample of the Israeli adult population. The authors supervised all surveys and administered them through two large polling companies in Israel that are often used in social science research: iPanel and Geocartography. The data cover the entire period of interest, spanning the election campaign, the inauguration of the new right-wing government in December 2022, the constitutional crisis from January 2023, and the war in Gaza and Lebanon from October 2023. Table 1 in the Appendix provides summary statistics of conventional demographic and political variables in each wave. All surveys were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the authors’ academic institution.

Table 1. Survey data for measuring the public agenda.

Date	Total Responses	Policy Mentioned	No Policy Mentioned
April 2022	1559	1497	62
June 2022	807	771	36
July 2022	822	786	36
August 2022	810	779	31
September 2022	1671	1616	55
December 2022	807	780	27
January 2023	1461	1387	74
March 2023	1558	1508	50
April 2023	816	795	21
May 2023	813	794	19
June 2023	811	790	21
July 2023	813	793	20
August 2023	805	788	17
September 2023	1562	1503	59
November 2023	803	766	37
December 2023	807	775	32
January 2024	805	774	31
February 2024	803	768	35
April 2024	804	774	30
Total	19137	18444	693

Each survey asks the MIP question (identical wording) alongside a battery of questions about satisfaction with and trust in government. Each response is human-coded for a policy using the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) codebook, as adjusted for the Israeli project (Bevan, 2019; Cavari et al., 2022). Given the limited information available in MIP responses, coding is based solely on major topics (Cavari & Freedman, 2019; Yildirim, 2022a). While some of the responses are vague, the political context in Israel provides sufficient information for coding. For example, in the Israeli context, security is inevitably related to defense issues (CAP category 16); occupation refers to the occupied Palestinian territories (19). Similarly, Netanyahu refers to government critics (20), and polarization refers to the extent of the political divide (23).

Table 1 provides an overview of the surveys, including the date, the overall number of respondents, the number of responses mentioning a policy in response to the MIP question, and the number of responses not mentioning any policy.

Given our focus on the two consecutive crises, we are primarily interested in capturing public attention to the constitutional overhaul and the war against Hamas. For the constitutional crisis, we classified two categories as related to the crisis – government (CAP category 20) and culture/identity (CAP category 23). The latter includes responses that refer to Israel's identity as a democratic or a Jewish country, perhaps the core of the debate over the nature of the constitutional change. For the security crisis, we classified defense (CAP category 16) and international affairs (CAP category 19) as related to the crisis. Table 2 provides a few examples of responses classified into these two crisis categories.

To measure the public agenda, we examine the diversity of the agenda and the level of attention to the crisis. Using these longitudinal data, we first examine the effect of the two crises on the overall public agenda by looking at three time periods: before the constitutional crisis (April–December

Table 2. Coding examples and crisis categorization.

Sentence	CAP Category	Crisis Issue Category
The reform	Government (20)	Government
Political stability	Government (20)	Government
The electoral system	Government (20)	Government
Netanyahu	Government (20)	Government
The social strife	Culture/Identity (23)	Government
Polarization	Culture/Identity (23)	Government
Extremism	Culture/Identity (23)	Government
Loss of Democracy	Culture/Identity (23)	Government
Security	Defense (16)	Security
Deterrence	Defense (16)	Security
Support for the terrorists	Defense (16)	Security
Terror	Defense (16)	Security
Lack of diplomatic solution	International Affairs (19)	Security
Inability to achieve peace	International Affairs (19)	Security
War against Iran	International Affairs (19)	Security
Occupation	International Affairs (19)	Security

2022), during the constitutional crisis (January–September 2023), and during the security crisis (October 2023 – April 2024). Utilizing individual-level data, which enables us to identify the partisan affiliation of respondents, we further examine the agendas of the two political camps (pro- and anti-Netanyahu). Finally, we test the association between trust in government and the policy priorities of Israelis and demonstrate the moderating effect of trust on the association between partisan identity and policy priorities.

Overall attention

In [Figure 3](#), we summarize the public priorities during the three periods (including the nine topics that received more than 1% overall attention). Consistent with H1, policy attention shifted during each period. During the first period, prior to the constitutional crisis, a plurality of Israelis (35%) mentioned the economy as the most important issue. After the Minister of Justice announced the proposed judicial reform on January 4, 2023, public attention shifted considerably to government and culture/national identity – together occupying 44 percent of the public agenda (a 20-point increase from the pre-January 4 period). Following the onset of war on October 7, 2023, public attention shifted dramatically to defense issues, occupying 61 percent of the public agenda (a 50-point increase from the pre-October 7 period).

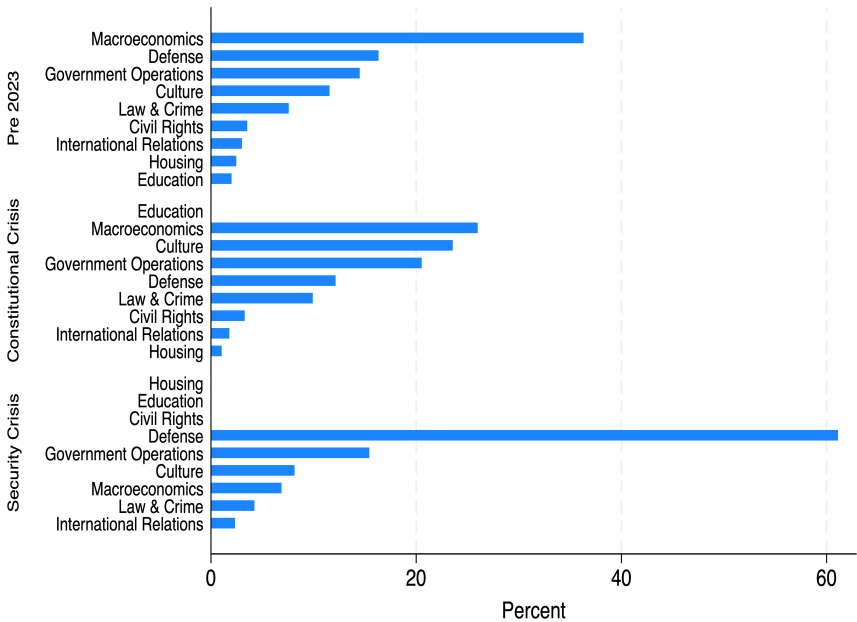


Figure 3. Policy priorities of Israelis from April 2022 to April 2024, divided into three periods of study (including nine topics that receive more than 1% attention).

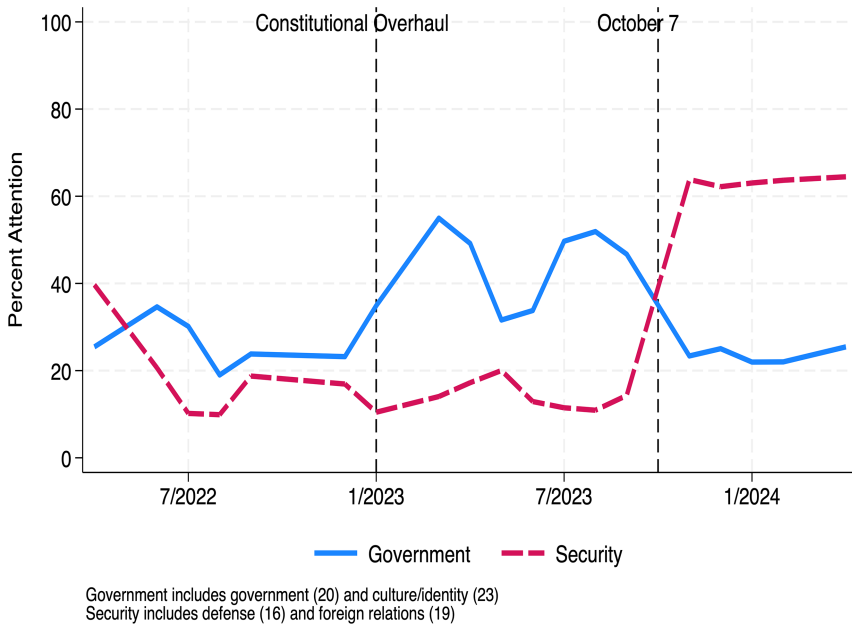


Figure 4. Trends of policy attention to the two main topics: government and security.

As [Figure 3](#) suggests, and consistent with H2, the diversity of attention mostly declined during the third period, the security crisis. To measure agenda diversity, we used Shannon's H which is commonly used to assess agenda diversity (Boydston et al., 2014).¹ The results confirm the change: diversity remains relatively stable from the pre-2023 period (1.930) to the constitutional-crisis period (1.834), but drops 32 percent (from pre-2023) during the security crisis (1.305).

[Figure 3](#) combines all surveys and, therefore, may mask differences in policy priorities over time. To account for that, [Figure 4](#) plots the change by month for the two crises categories (government and security), further demonstrating the relatively consistent shift in attention in each period. During the constitutional crisis we see an increase in public attention to government. The attention dropped in May and June 2023 due to an increase in attention to the economy (not shown) but rose again in July when the Knesset passed the first part of the judicial reform (law to abolish the reasonableness doctrine, enacted on July 24, 2023). Public attention shifted to security immediately following the October 7 attack.

Partisan attention

As an initial test for H3 (partisan differences in public agenda), we measured the overlap in agendas between the two political camps. Our measure is

agenda stability, proposed by Mortensen and colleagues to examine the overlap between two venues (Mortensen et al., 2011). We use this measure to examine the overlap between two groups of voters: those who support Netanyahu and those who oppose him. For this purpose, we utilize the individual-level data available from our survey time-series that offers information about the party affiliation of each respondent.

Overall, 72% of the agenda is similar between the two political camps, suggesting that while the political environment explains much of the variation in public priorities, there exist some significant differences in attention between the two partisan groups – leaving more than a quarter of the agenda unaligned. The most dramatic differences are in attention to defense (an 11-percentage-point difference) and government operations (an 8-percentage-point difference).

And yet, we find differences in partisan agenda overlap between the three periods. As expected, during the ‘regular times’ (pre-2023 period), the partisan agenda overlap is strongest (73%). Agenda overlap declines significantly during periods of crisis: 66% partisan overlap during the constitutional crisis period and 64% partisan overlap during the security crisis period. These findings offer some support for one of the two conflicting views about the effect of a crisis on policy attention (discussed above) – namely that, at least in a polarized environment such as in Israel, during a crisis we will find significant differences in partisan attention to policy.

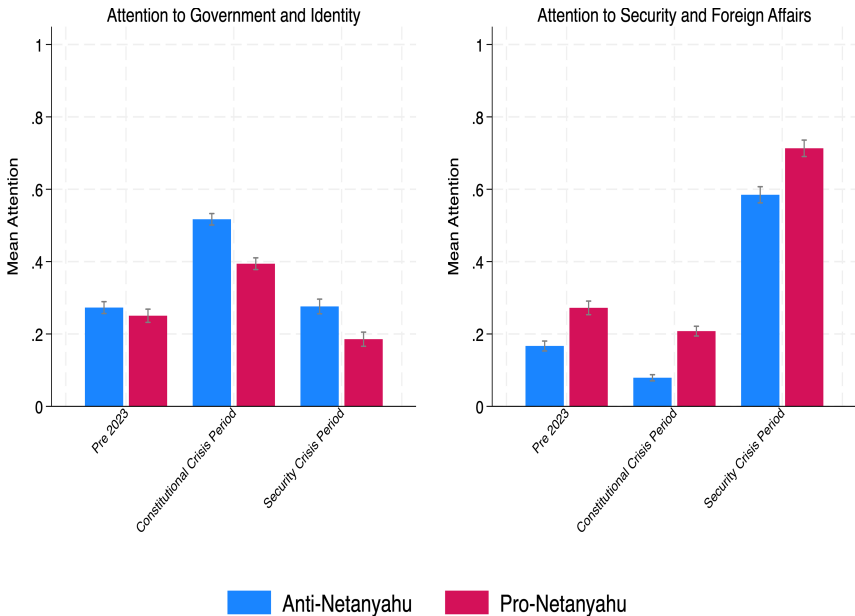


Figure 5. Attention to Government and Security, by period and partisan camp.

To further test the partisan policy priorities, we focus on the two main topics that are directly connected to the crises: government and security. [Figure 5](#) summarizes the share of attention to the two indicators in each of the three periods in our study, divided by partisan camp.

As [Figure 5](#) demonstrates, attention to government issues (left-hand panel) did not exhibit a partisan difference before the constitutional crisis. Consistent with H4, this changed once the judicial reform was announced and Israelis went out to the streets in protest. Attention to the issue went up, but the magnitude of change varied between the two partisan camps: higher among the opposition (Anti-Netanyahu) voters than among coalition voters. While attention to this issue went down during the security-crisis period, the partisan divide persisted.

The pattern for security is very different (right-hand panel). In contrast to existing work on policy priorities in the United States (Heffington et al., 2017), which shows little partisan difference regarding security, we find that the attention of Israelis to defense is already characterized by a partisan divide in the pre-2023 period. The pro-Netanyahu camp, primarily associated with the political right, is more concerned with defense than the opposition camp, which is mostly center-left. During the constitutional-crisis period, overall attention to defense decreased, but the partisan divide in attention widened. Public attention to defense shot up following the October 7 attack among both political camps. And yet, concurring with H4, while attention still maintains a small partisan gap during the security crisis, the gap narrows – both in absolute terms and in proportion to the level of attention.

The conditional effect of crisis and party affiliation on policy attention

To test the conditional effect of crisis and party affiliation more systematically, we estimated a model of public attention in which attention to an issue is a function of the crisis environment and the political camp. The crisis environment is measured using an indicator that receives a value of 1 for all respondents in surveys conducted after the crisis began (January 4 for the constitutional crisis and October 7 for the security crisis), and 0 otherwise. For policy priorities, we created two indicators of attention: government (government operation and culture/identity) and security (defense and international affairs). Each indicator receives a value of one if the respondent mentioned that topic (respectively) and zero otherwise. Political camp is measured using a survey question that asks respondents for which party they voted in the previous elections. We coded voters based on their responses, classifying them into two categories: those in the opposition (anti-Netanyahu = 1) and those supporting parties in the coalition.

To account for alternative influences, we included additional factors and covariates for gender (Female = 1), nationality (Jewish = 1), age (5 age groups, age 25–34 as reference group), religiosity (four groups: secular, religious, and very religious/ultraorthodox, traditional as reference group), and education (three groups: no high school diploma, and academic education, high school diploma as a reference group). We further include a measure of ideology to account for possible variation between each camp. While the two camps are largely aligned along a left-right divide, there is some variation within each camp, as well as several exceptions, such as the Jewish Home, which is an anti-Netanyahu party but leans right. Ideology is a continuous variable ranging from 1 (right) to 7 (left).

Our primary variable of interest is the interaction between time and political camp, which captures the conditional effect of a crisis and political affiliation on the policy attention of Israelis. Given the binary outcome variable, we use binary logistic regression in all models. We cluster the standard errors by survey wave to account for within-wave correlation in responses and shared contextual factors (Cameron & Miller, 2015).

Table 3 presents the results of our models. Models 1 and 2 summarize the effect of the constitutional crisis on public attention to government issues. Models 3 and 4 summarize the effect of the security crisis on public attention to defense issues. In each pair of models, the first model includes our base model, and the second model adds the interaction term between the crisis and the political camp.

The results in models 1 and 3 support H1: Events affect policy priorities. Following each of the crisis-triggering events, public attention turned to the crisis – constitutional or security crisis, respectively. The results also support H3: Political camp is a significant factor in explaining public attention. The Anti-Netanyahu camp prioritized government issues significantly more than the pro-Netanyahu camp and prioritized security significantly less than the pro-Netanyahu camp.

Models 2 and 4 summarize the conditional effect of the crises and political affiliation on attention to government/identity and defense/international affairs during the constitutional and security crises, respectively. In both models, the conditional effect of the crisis and party affiliation is positive and significant. The change in AIC and BIC criteria confirms that adding the interaction effects substantially improves our model fit.

To better illustrate the conditional effects, Figure 6 displays the marginal effects, highlighting the differences between the two crises in their impact on partisan differences in issue attention. Consistent with H4, during the constitutional crisis, the conditional effect explains most of the change in policy priorities. Following the announcement of the judicial reform, respondents who voted for parties associated with the Anti-Netanyahu camp overwhelmingly prioritized government issues, while pro-Netanyahu voters showed little change in their priorities. Following the October 7 attack, the difference

Table 3. Point estimates of the direct and conditional effect of time and political camp on policy priorities of citizens during crises.

	(1) Government	(2) Government	(3) Defense	(4) Defense
Anti-Netanyahu	0.471*** (0.0989)	0.149 (0.129)	-0.554*** (0.0984)	-0.811*** (0.0956)
Post-Crisis (Constitutional or Security, respectively)	0.953*** (0.178)	0.668** (0.214)	2.580*** (0.0876)	2.322*** (0.107)
Crisis*Anti-Netanyahu		0.497** (0.155)		0.538*** (0.131)
Ideology	0.0613** (0.0225)	0.0618** (0.0224)	-0.117*** (0.0222)	-0.112*** (0.0223)
Male	-0.158*** (0.0460)	-0.158*** (0.0457)	0.447*** (0.0681)	0.439*** (0.0688)
Jewish	1.278*** (0.165)	1.300*** (0.164)	0.125 (0.0981)	0.145 (0.0995)
Age: 18–24	0.0974 (0.0801)	0.0988 (0.0800)	0.335*** (0.0858)	0.332*** (0.0859)
Age: 35–44	0.0343 (0.0535)	0.0323 (0.0526)	0.0143 (0.0743)	0.0120 (0.0746)
Age: 45–54	0.148* (0.0600)	0.145* (0.0606)	0.152 (0.0781)	0.157* (0.0783)
Age: 55–64	0.306*** (0.0905)	0.304*** (0.0916)	0.0948 (0.105)	0.0959 (0.107)
Age: 65+	0.718*** (0.0888)	0.712*** (0.0905)	-0.0406 (0.0770)	-0.0451 (0.0752)
Education: No diploma	-0.329*** (0.0606)	-0.331*** (0.0599)	-0.0219 (0.0799)	-0.0132 (0.0768)
Education: College +	0.156** (0.0561)	0.163** (0.0570)	-0.0812* (0.0373)	-0.0759* (0.0366)
Religiosity: Secular	0.153** (0.0560)	0.151** (0.0571)	-0.178** (0.0542)	-0.188*** (0.0551)
Religiosity: Religious	0.344*** (0.0689)	0.337*** (0.0700)	-0.0935 (0.110)	-0.0835 (0.107)
Religiosity: Very religious	0.482*** (0.127)	0.467*** (0.123)	-0.202 (0.138)	-0.196 (0.127)
constant	-2.967*** (0.259)	-2.791*** (0.266)	-1.518*** (0.182)	-1.459*** (0.172)
N	12478	12478	10577	10577
AIC	15255.7	15219.2	9777.7	9751.7
BIC	15352.3	15315.8	9864.9	9838.9

Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

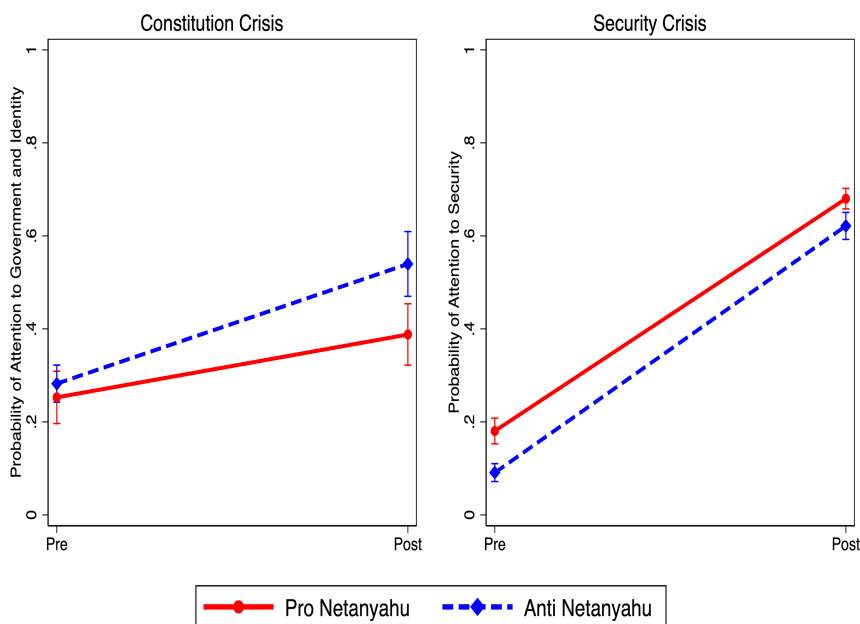


Figure 6. Marginal effects of time on policy priorities of the two partisan groups.

between the two partisan groups in attention to security, although significant, is overshadowed by the surge in attention. Attention to defense grew, but the crisis did not expand the partisan divide. While we do not find support for a dampening effect on partisan differences (H4), we also find no increase in partisan difference (which we do find regarding the constitutional crisis).

Political trust and the partisan priority divide during a security crisis

To further assess the differences between political camps in their response to the security crisis, we examined the conditional effect of trust on attention to defense during the crisis. We argue that political trust serves as a primary determinant of public attention. Given the importance of the event – the onset of war – most Israelis turned their attention to the crisis. And yet, to focus on the crisis, one needs to have trust in the government to handle it effectively. If one has no trust in the government, attention may shift not to the crisis but to the government – suggesting that the most pertinent problem is the government itself.

To measure political trust, we rely on a survey question that asks respondents to report the level of trust they have in government. The question

Table 4. Point estimates of the direct and conditional effect of trust and party on policy priorities of citizens during the security crisis.

	(1) Defense	(2) Defense	(3) Government	(4) Government
Trust	0.406** (0.151)	0.285* (0.120)	-0.206** (0.0745)	-0.176* (0.0725)
Anti-Netanyahu	-0.271* (0.127)	-0.338** (0.116)	0.556*** (0.128)	0.573*** (0.110)
Trust X Anti-Netanyahu		0.738** (0.245)		-0.196 (0.269)
Ideology	-0.0334 (0.0195)	-0.0305 (0.0190)	0.0351 (0.0382)	0.0347 (0.0379)
Male	0.567*** (0.0894)	0.570*** (0.0892)	-0.328*** (0.0845)	-0.329*** (0.0856)
Jewish	0.362*** (0.104)	0.388*** (0.104)	1.135*** (0.0829)	1.130*** (0.0818)
Age: 18–24	0.229 (0.183)	0.233 (0.185)	0.0243 (0.130)	0.0238 (0.129)
Age: 35–44	-0.0886 (0.0814)	-0.0726 (0.0802)	0.323* (0.126)	0.319** (0.122)
Age: 45–54	0.0708 (0.169)	0.0871 (0.164)	0.301 (0.187)	0.297 (0.181)
Age: 55–64	0.0321 (0.155)	0.0468 (0.150)	0.405 (0.209)	0.402 (0.205)
Age: 65+	-0.194* (0.0919)	-0.173 (0.0943)	0.637*** (0.126)	0.631*** (0.122)
Education: No diploma	-0.106 (0.156)	-0.135 (0.159)	0.213 (0.145)	0.217 (0.143)
Education: College +	-0.111 (0.0638)	-0.111 (0.0620)	0.204*** (0.0527)	0.204*** (0.0527)
Religiosity: Secular	-0.188* (0.0748)	-0.171* (0.0759)	0.112 (0.0738)	0.107 (0.0687)
Religiosity: Religious	-0.134 (0.152)	-0.127 (0.153)	0.277 (0.230)	0.277 (0.230)
Religiosity: Very Religious	-0.204 (0.285)	-0.174 (0.297)	0.314 (0.265)	0.308 (0.269)
Constant	0.381** (0.144)	0.371* (0.150)	-2.972*** (0.140)	-2.971*** (0.140)
<i>N</i>	3296	3296	3296	3296
<i>AIC</i>	4146.1	4140.5	3434.9	3434.6
<i>BIC</i>	4170.5	4164.9	3459.3	3459.0

Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

uses a 4-point scale, which we combined into a binary variable of trust (1) and no trust (0).² We include Anti-Netanyahu for political camp, an interaction term of trust and political camp, and all demographic controls included in the pervious analysis. We estimate two sets of models, both of which refer to the security crisis. The first set predicts prioritizing defense and international affairs. The second set predicts prioritizing government and identity. For each set, the first model serves as the base model, and the second includes the interaction term between trust and political affiliation (camp). Given the binary outcome variable, we use binary logistic regression in all models. We summarize the model coefficients in Table 4.

Trust in government has a significant, independent effect on policy priorities. Citizens who have trust in government are more likely to prioritize defense (model 1) and are less likely to prioritize government (model 3). The interaction effect in Model 2 supports H5, indicating that the association between party affiliation and policy priorities is moderated by trust. Voters of opposition parties who trust the government are more likely to prioritize the security crisis than their fellow partisans from the same political camp who do not trust the government.

Figure 7 summarizes the conditional effect of trust and political affiliation. During the extreme crisis triggered by the Hamas attack, a majority of Israelis

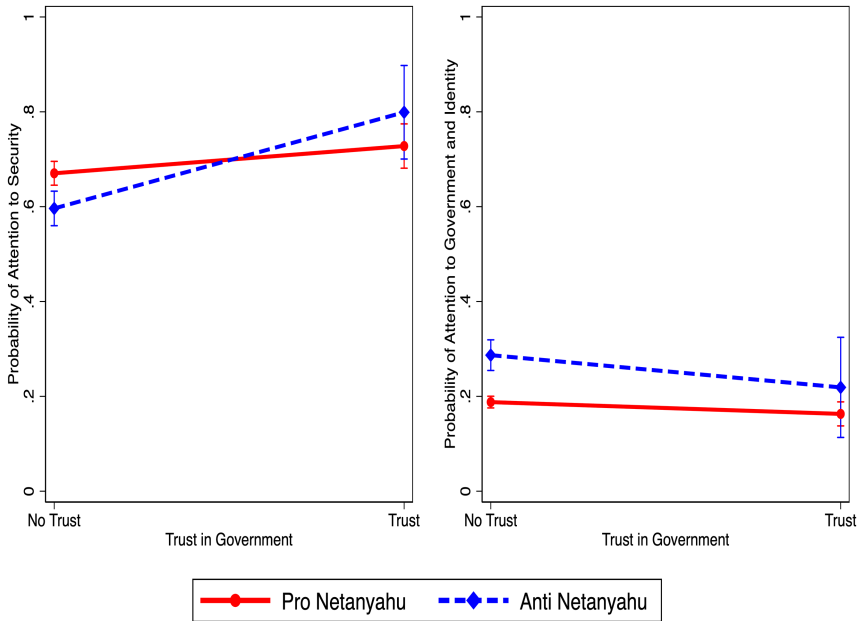


Figure 7. Marginal effect of trust on policy priorities of the two partisan camps during the security crisis.

turned their attention to the crisis. And yet, while we find no significant difference in policy attention between the two political camps among people who trust the government, the lack of trust lowers attention to the crisis only among anti-Netanyahu voters.

In contrast to our expectation, we do not find a significant conditional effect in attention to government issues; however, the trend aligns with our projection: higher attention to government issues among anti-Netanyahu voters who lack trust in the government.

Our data do not allow us to reject the possibility of reverse causation, however. Political trust can be an outcome of policy priorities. People who prioritize security during a security crisis will exhibit higher trust, while those who prioritize government issues will have lower trust. While this is a possibility, the relative stability of trust throughout the two crises suggests that these seminal events influenced priorities but not trust. Another possibility is that during a security crisis there is some rallying effect that increases trust among people who find the government best suited to handle an external threat. This, however, receives little support in the data, which show very little change in trust following the October 7 attack.

Conclusions

The case of Israel in 2023–2024 presents us with a unique window into the impact of crises on the public agenda. Not only did the country experience two intense, large-scale back-to-back crises, but these crises were also completely different. One was an internal constitutional crisis triggered by a government seeking to undermine the judiciary and grab power; the other was a security crisis triggered by the country's external enemies. The highly polarized political environment and low support for the government add another interesting dimension, allowing us to study the interactive effect of a crisis, political polarization, and political trust on public priorities. While the Israeli case provides an excellent opportunity to examine the interaction of these factors – two extreme crises, an extremely polarized political environment, and extremely low political trust – the current political environment in developed countries is becoming more similar than not. We find increasing polarization in most countries (Casal Bértoa & Rama, 2021) and a rapid decline in political trust (Valgarðsson et al., 2025). Crises are specific to each country.

The empirical findings largely conform to our hypotheses. Both crises immediately shifted public attention, first toward the government and identity during the constitutional crisis and then toward defense and international affairs during the security crisis. However, it is only the security crisis that lowered the diversity of attention. In a crisis that touches on a core government function – the provision of physical security and defense – fewer

issues receive public attention. We also found a divergent impact of the two crises on the partisan divide in priorities. The constitutional crisis, resulting from a government initiative, widened the gap between the political camps in their attention to government; by contrast, the gap in attention to defense remained unaffected by a security crisis initiated by external actors. Ultimately, our findings underscore the importance of trust. During the security crisis, it was non-government supporters with some trust in the government who turned their attention to defense, having at least some faith in the government's capacity to live up to its responsibility to provide security.

Overall, this study demonstrates how public priorities can shift quickly and markedly in response to a crisis, and how one's perception of the government influences this shift, specifically whether the government bears responsibility for the crisis and whether it can be trusted to address it effectively. In doing so, this study contributes to the understanding of agenda-setting in polarized democracies, demonstrating that crises are not uniform in their effects on public attention. It also adds to the growing literature on the diversity of priorities among citizens, showing that these priorities are not uniform across groups and individuals.

The role of a crisis in shaping public priorities is important and may have a meaningful impact on the institutional agenda. The ability to deal with a crisis that is salient to the public has the potential to influence how voters evaluate candidates and governing parties at the ballot box. This motivates 'rational anticipation,' where policymakers adjust their priorities in response to changes in the public's priorities, aware of the potential for electoral repercussions (Stimson et al., 1995). When public concern about an issue increases, it signals to policymakers that there may be a future cost associated with failing to address that issue. Due to the scarcity of institutional attention, policymakers must prioritize their attention to reflect the relative importance of issues to the public (Bevan & Jennings, 2014; Jones, 1994; Jones & Baumgartner, 2005). In sum, the heightened public attention forces elite and institutional attention, which in turn may lead to policy change.

Future studies could expand on these findings by exploring similar dynamics in other contexts. Such work would further illuminate the conditions under which crises unify or divide public opinion, enhancing our understanding of public agenda diversity and its implications for democratic governance.

Notes

1. Calculated using the following formula: $H = - \sum_{i=1}^k p_i \ln(p_i)$. Where k is the number of categories (21) and p is the proportion of total value in each category.

2. We also estimated the model using a 4-scale measure of trust. While results are in a similar direction, the statistical power is lower. This, however, can be explained by the limited variation between the two high trust groups (high trust and very high trust). We find no theoretical difference between these two groups and therefore prefer using a dichotomous measure of trust.

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Data availability statement

The data for this paper is available on Dataverse: Cavari, Amnon; Efrat, Asif, 2025, "Replication Files for "Polarized Public Agenda in Times of Crisis" in Journal of European Public Policy". <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/X9SQ8U>, Harvard Dataverse, V1, UNF:6:l2tk2GSVaN6k/5HA1a02OQ== [fileUNF].

Notes on contributors

Amnon Cavari is an Associate Professor at the Lauder School of Government, Diplomacy and Strategy at Reichman University

Asif Efrat is a Professor at the Lauder School of Government, Diplomacy and Strategy at Reichman University

ORCID

Amnon Cavari  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1987-861X>

Asif Efrat  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8325-3932>

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Appendix: Demographic and Political Distributions in Each Wave

MONTHLY	Jewish	Gender	Age: 18–34	Age: 35–54	Age: 55–99	Educ: No HS Diplo.	Educ: HS Diplo.	Educ: Acade- mic	Relig: Secular	Relig: Traditional	Relig: Religious	Relig: V.Relig / Ultra	Anti- Netanyahu	Pro- Netanyahu
2022m4	.82	.55	.44	.35	.21	.08	.36	.55	.46	.3	.14	.11	.62	.38
2022m6	.81	.49	.39	.39	.22	.1	.42	.47	.46	.34	.17	.03	.62	.38
2022m7	.81	.51	.41	.37	.22	.1	.42	.47	.38	.38	.16	.09	.62	.38
2022m8	.8	.5	.4	.38	.22	.12	.4	.47	.38	.39	.14	.09	.6	.4
2022m9	.85	.54	.42	.36	.23	.1	.37	.53	.42	.28	.16	.13	.59	.41
2022m12	.81	.51	.39	.38	.22	.12	.39	.5	.38	.38	.16	.08	.51	.49
2023m1	.82	.51	.4	.38	.22	.12	.41	.46	.38	.39	.14	.09	.51	.49
2023m3	.81	.57	.42	.36	.22	.09	.38	.53	.41	.33	.13	.14	.53	.47
2023m4	.8	.51	.34	.37	.29	.11	.41	.48	.39	.39	.14	.08	.55	.45
2023m5	.81	.51	.34	.35	.31	.13	.4	.47	.38	.39	.15	.08	.52	.48
2023m6	.81	.51	.35	.35	.3	.09	.41	.49	.4	.4	.12	.08	.56	.44
2023m7	.81	.5	.34	.37	.28	.12	.39	.49	.4	.4	.12	.09	.57	.43
2023m8	.81	.51	.35	.36	.29	.11	.43	.45	.39	.4	.14	.08	.54	.46
2023m9	.79	.56	.44	.34	.21	.08	.39	.53	.44	.31	.13	.13	.56	.44
2023m11	.81	.51	.34	.36	.3	.11	.39	.49	.41	.36	.14	.09	.54	.46
2023m12	.81	.51	.35	.35	.3	.12	.4	.47	.39	.36	.15	.09	.57	.43
2024m1	.81	.51	.35	.36	.29	.12	.4	.48	.4	.37	.15	.09	.55	.45
2024m2	.81	.51	.34	.36	.29	.13	.42	.46	.4	.35	.15	.1	.54	.46
2024m4	.81	.51	.34	.36	.3	.09	.36	.55	.4	.36	.15	.09	.55	.45