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Political Polarization and the Regime Revolution in Israel

An Overview

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Polarized Israel found itself in a situation where one side feels it is fighting for its political independence and perhaps even its identity, while the other side feels that the current struggle is about its civil-moral foundation and its very ability to continue living in the country.

Omer Yair

A few weeks after the 2016 U.S. presidential election, tens of millions of Americans gathered for their traditional Thanksgiving dinners. However, [research](#) published in *Science* revealed that Americans dining with family or friends in politically opposing districts shortened their holiday meals by 30-50 minutes compared to Thanksgiving 2015, amounting to over 30 million hours of shared holiday meals that simply didn't happen. As someone who spent Thanksgiving in the United States in 2017 and 2018, I remember my hosts' request/instruction not to mention Trump at the holiday meal for fear of arguments with other guests. Another effect of the 2016 election was recorded among [American users of dating applications](#). While before the election about 25% of women and 17% of men on eHarmony answered questions about their political preferences, after the election these rates jumped to 68% and 47% respectively, with these users sending a clear message about the growing importance of political preferences in choosing partners.

Research from the United States offers explanations for these phenomena, suggesting that political polarization has significant effects not only on political preferences and voting patterns of citizens, but also on many aspects of citizens' daily lives, including avoidance of political conversations with others, romantic preferences, health, economic and consumer decisions, and even choice of residence. More notably, various researchers argue that deep political polarization poses a danger to democracy.

Seymour Martin Lipset, one of the greatest political scientists of the twentieth century, wrote in the 1950s that democratic societies inherently face a persistent threat, as conflicts between groups – which are the beating heart of democracy – could intensify to the extent that they risk fragmenting society. Robert Dahl, also one of the greatest political scientists of the twentieth century, similarly warned that democracy is in danger when it becomes polarized and includes several antagonistic groups. Even today, various researchers like Milan Svolik of Yale University and Jennifer McCoy of Georgia State University argue that polarization and political division lead to political instability and damage democracy, and may even lead to the collapse of the democratic

regime and the entire social order. This is especially true when they are fueled by authoritarian leaders who have an electoral incentive to divide the public into “us” and “them.”

In literature, there are no accepted definitions for political polarization, but at its core, the concept refers to the simultaneous existence of opposing political tendencies or positions among different publics in society, emphasizing rival political groups like left-right in Israel, or Republicans and Democrats in the United States. Until about ten years ago, research in the field focused on ideological polarization, meaning the extent to which rival groups support different policy issues in an ideological context. In the last decade, however, researchers began to examine another type of polarization, called “social polarization” or “emotional polarization.” This polarization refers to hostility between rival political groups and a lack of trust between them.

The research literature shows that members of political groups (partisans) have various problematic tendencies in aspects related to conflict with political rivals. The concern is that political polarization further intensifies these tendencies because political rivals are perceived as even more extreme, hostile, and threatening to “my” side.

For example, members of any political group [tend to attribute hostile](#), deceitful, and more negative motivations to their political rivals and those who hold opposing values and views. The concern is that political polarization increases these tendencies. Indeed, it seems that today in Israel, almost every action by a political leader from the coalition or opposition is interpreted by political rivals as stemming from malicious interests aimed at harming the public.

Members of political groups often perceive [bias against their side](#) in news coverage and public bodies meant to be neutral. They also [tend to view “50-50” compromises](#) on policy issues as a situation where their side “lost” while their rivals “won.” Researchers argue that political polarization intensifies these tendencies. Members of political groups also find it difficult to accept arguments from the other side or admit when they are wrong and the other side is right. Political polarization exacerbates this tendency as well. Who would concede they are wrong when there is a lack of trust in the opposing side and a prevailing fear that any admission will be exploited for their benefit, rather than used cooperatively to enhance the situation for all citizens? The recent cancellation of the tax on sweetened beverages in Israel exemplifies this phenomenon, as the tax was repealed despite serious doubts about the necessity of the repeal even among members of the ultra-Orthodox community

And what about political polarization in Israel more generally? The unprecedented political crisis of recent years, and especially the series of events since the beginning of 2023, indicate that political polarization has great political and social importance in Israel as well. Unfortunately, political science departments at Israeli universities conduct almost no academic research on polarization within the country, largely due to an incentive structure that does not prioritize studies on public opinion and political behavior in Israel. This lack of research makes it challenging to empirically assess the extent of current political polarization, particularly the animosity between the right and the left. However, [the few empirical examinations](#) conducted on the subject show that the level of mutual hostility among supporters of the ideological right and left in Israel has reached its highest level since the late 1990s.

Interestingly, in the elections held in early 2006, about half a year after the completion of the Disengagement Plan, the levels of emotional polarization and hostility between right and left were the lowest in the last 30 years. Since then, there has been a fairly consistent rise in hostility between the sides.

The Israeli public also believes that polarization between right and left in Israel has increased in recent years. In a survey conducted in September 2022 at the Institute for Liberty and Responsibility at Reichman University, about 75% of ideologically right, center, and left supporters answered that they believe political polarization between right and left increased during the past three years. It also seems that this clear hostility is seeping into citizens' daily lives. In the same survey, approximately 30% of Israelis reported that, over the past three years, they had boycotted a business entity – such as a private business or grocery store – due to its support for political positions they oppose.

Israel at the Beginning of 2023: The War of Independence versus The War of Survival

It seems that shortly after the start of investigations against Benjamin Netanyahu in early 2017, and even more and particularly after his indictment in late 2019, a perception emerged among right-wing elites and opinion leaders that the right is engaged in a sort of 'war of independence'. According to this view, if Benjamin Netanyahu is "toppled" and removed from power following his "persecution" by the judicial system, allegedly controlled by the left, the right will no longer be able to govern the country. If a "strong right-wing prime minister" falls in this way, the right will always be at the mercy of the judicial system, which at its discretion can take

down any popular right-wing elected official and maintain its political and public “hegemony.” Therefore, the right is fighting for its independence – for its ability to act as it sees fit, for its ability to choose its preferred leader, Netanyahu, and perhaps also for its identity as a “strong right,” one that isn't afraid of confrontation with left-wing elites and the establishment, and can even overcome them. To win that “war of independence,” it is certainly permissible to act forcefully to ensure that the right can advance the policies it wants, and along the way weaken the power of the judicial system allegedly controlled by the left; for losing this war is equivalent to cementing the weakness and inferiority of the ideological right in the foreseeable future.

On the other hand, it seems that many among the opponents of the judicial “revolution” are not fighting a “war of independence” but rather a kind of “war of survival” on moral-ethical grounds. Even without attributing malicious motivations to them, it's clear that supporters of the “reform” who downplay the public's concern about changes in the judicial system don't understand what's happening among those opposing these changes. There seems to be quite a bit of irony in the fact that the aggressive promotion of these changes is happening precisely while many in the Israeli center and left have internalized, in light of recent election results, that many of their hopes regarding Israel's future – especially regarding the integration of the ultra-Orthodox into Israeli society and the chance to improve relations with Israeli Arabs – are not realistic in the foreseeable future.

For many opponents of the “revolution” who believe that the right's long-term rule is almost guaranteed due to various demographic and educational trends, maintaining a democratic Israel is largely “a hill to die on.” They believe that this “regime coup” will severely damage Israel's status as a democratic state, something that will not allow them to feel morally and ethically connected to the country, and more importantly – to function as citizens of the state. It's hard to exaggerate the feelings of anxiety and emergency among many of them, and consequently their resolute opposition – without conscience qualms or “stomach aches” à la Miri Regev – to the proposed changes in the judicial system. Borrowing from Ernest Gellner's words about the importance of culture for modern humans, a democratic Israel constitutes for them “the boundaries of the world in which they can breathe, morally and professionally.” There's a reason why there is no precedent for the number of reserve soldiers declaring they will refuse to serve if the regime coup passes (and who knows, perhaps that “reform” will prove to be the significant barrier to

advancing various right-wing ideologies in coming years due to the powerful public response against it).

And so, the State of Israel found itself in a terrible situation. Where one side feels it is fighting for its political independence and perhaps even its identity, while the other side feels that the current struggle is about its civil-moral foundation and its very ability to continue living in the country. The political polarization that accompanies us makes it difficult to find common ground and build trust between the two sides, where any retreat from each side's clear position is perceived as a victory for the hated other side – including a temporary halt to the urgent judicial legislation – and not as an agreement intended to serve all citizens.

Are there ways to reduce emotional polarization and hostility between political rivals, which could increase the ability among rivals to cooperate? In recent years, [various studies](#), mainly from the United States, have suggested dozens of different ways to reduce hostility, including providing information about various agreements between the sides, cooperation between rival politicians, or correcting each side's mistakes regarding the positions and perceptions of the other side. However, in a situation of such great distrust between the sides – in a state of wars of independence and survival – it's not clear how effective these methods will be.

The levels of emotional-social polarization in Israel today are the highest since the late 1990s. Then, it was the violent and turbulent Second Intifada that significantly reduced hostility between right and left (in fact, before the 2009 elections, the attitude toward Benjamin Netanyahu was almost identical among supporters of the right, center, and ideological left). In light of various studies indicating that political leaders have great importance in both increasing and reducing polarization, we can only hope that it won't be bloody events but rather agreements between the different camps that will lead to calming the current situation. And that prominent politicians from all sides, especially Prime Minister Netanyahu, will act to neutralize the volatility existing in Israel, which could seep into all of our daily lives.

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