

Community politics and changes in traditional social identity

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Abstract

The research examines the impact of internal changes in a parliamentary and proportional political system such as exists in Israel and the impact of social changes on the contest between the right and the left political blocs. The research moves on to examine if social, cultural and political long term developments in the ultra-Orthodox community can impact the shape of the Israeli political system to an extent that would overturn the traditional two bloc system that identifies Israel for decades. According to the social identity theory, individuals are inclined to identify with groups if they experience a sense of uncertainty, as religious identity threat could be perceived as paramount and can build the politics of identity more than any other force. Based on the above conclusions on the employment of the shared national identity of the connection between religion and state, the research maintains that the success of ultra-Orthodox political influence is related to the consistent commitment to sectorial issues. Examining this issue can lead to conclusion on the main path that Israeli political parties should concentrate on – internal changes in traditional social identity groups rather than campaigning to preserve their hard core supporters or attempting to convince voters to cross over to the opposing political camp.

Key words: *Ultra-Orthodox, Religion, Identity, Community, Politics*

Introduction

The goal of political campaigns is to reach out to voters, to mobilize support among the mass public, to persuade citizens of their causes, and to inform the citizenry about public policies and political activities (Schmitt-Beck and Farrell, 2006). But the types of political campaigns that characterize a democracy are shaped by the strategic environment in which they take place. The nature of the political system and the type of political campaigning include the constitutional design of the political system, the nature of the offices candidates seek, the laws and rules governing party nominations or general elections, and the relatively enduring aspects of a nation's political culture involving citizens' attitudes toward politics, politicians, political parties and interest groups. These aspects are largely related to changes in traditional voting of targeted social groups, which have the ability to determine the nature of a political system even as they represent minorities. Such groups can mobilize voters to become undecided or even turn the support of their members to a party that does not directly represent their community, and in this way change the political power play between the dominant political blocs. This aspect relates to internal social changes in traditional groups and the way that they cope with changes in traditional behavior of their members.

The research examines changes in traditional social identity of targeted groups and the impact on long term political behavior, using the case of the political system in Israel, with the intent to understand the way that internal social community changes can influence voting results and consequently transform political upheaval in democratic systems. The research concentrates on ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) vote since the basis of ultra-Orthodox religious and political considerations provide an alternative source of coalition power which grants small parties a chance to become kingmaker parties, increasing their power and ultimately their ability to demand greater concessions to join any prospective coalition.

The importance of the research since the ultra-Orthodox parties have traditionally been a central component in Israeli politics. They have been a balance between the left-wing bloc and the right-wing bloc, and their influence has far exceeded their relative size. Their role has mounted due to continues political crises in the campaigns that dominated the four elections campaigns of 2019-2021. These elections escalated the confrontation between religious and secular parties and developed into a completely split political system in which parties negotiate a coalition as a united bloc. During this

period Israel was locked in a political dead-lock, primarily on the issue of exemption from military service.

Exemption from military service is a key tool to building the separation of the ultra-Orthodox community from the secular society, and this issue has turned into a major political conflict. The elections in April 2019 were called after the government failed to legislate the Draft Law. The main issue in debate was the demand that ultra-Orthodox religious males would not serve in the military. This issue dominated the election campaign with the result that no political party succeeded to form a governing coalition and other elections were scheduled to September. The main conflict in the second elections was again dominated by the military draft issue, although this debate was intensified to a political conflict between two major blocs – the right-wing bloc that supports the ultra-Orthodox parties and the left-wing bloc that supports military service for all. No bloc could form a government since one small party demanded a national unity government and refused to support any of the rival political blocs. The stalemate led to a third election campaign, which escalated the political conflict to a debate if the Prime Minister – the head of the right-wing bloc – could remain in office with pending criminal cases. The political split was enhanced with an upheaval in the fourth round of election (March 2021) that led to forming a government without the ultra-Orthodox – with the imminent conclusion that these parties could lose their support in the community.

Community Voting

One of the most crucial issues that will impact Israeli political voting is demographics. The research concentrates on the dynamics and social changes of the ultra-Orthodox community, since its rapid demographic growth impacts the economic, social, and political standing in Israel and attracts considerable public, media, and political attention. According to Central Bureau of Statistics (2017), the proportion of the ultra-Orthodox population is expected to rise from 11% of the total population in Israel in 2015 to 20% in 2040 and 32% in 2065. Among the group of Jews and Others, the ultra-Orthodox population is expected to rise from 14% in 2015 to 24% 2040 and 40% in 2065. Ultra-Orthodox Jews as percentage of population grow steadily since the community has birth rates well above the rest of the nation – ultra-Orthodox women have 7.7 children on average, compared to 2.6 children among other Jewish women. Kingsbury (2020) explains that with a fertility rate that nearly triples the national average and increased political power that accompanies demographic growth, ultra-Orthodox Jews are an influential social group that can enforce its religious identity in Israel's social and political structures. Thus, the growth of the community should have a tremendous impact on the future of Israeli politics, since at around 4% per year, the growth rate of the ultra-Orthodox population is higher than that in any developed country worldwide.

The growth of the ultra-Orthodox population is linked to the concept of intergroup behavior. As originally formulated by social psychologists Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1979), the social identity theory introduced the concept of intergroup behavior. They proposed that individuals define their own identities about social groups and that such identifications work to protect and bolster self-identity. Social identities are most influential when individuals consider membership in a group to be central to their self-concept and they feel strong emotional ties to the group. The theory is associated with religious beliefs in group processes and intergroup relations. Originally introduced as an account of intergroup relations, it was significantly extended to focus on issues related to religious grouping, including group norms and leadership. Tajfel (1978) proposed that groups give a sense of social identity and belonging to a group. Once members of the group adopt its identity categorize themselves as belonging to the group, they tend to compare that group with other groups. With this powerful social connection, groups can organize around religious identities to establish powerful political forces – as is the case for the ultra-Orthodox community in Israel.

The importance of community voting is about the cultural diversity of the Israeli society and the multi-party election system, which result in the composition of each cultural minority and the identity politics that they represent. Anabi and Hermann (2021) found that the decision to vote for a particular party is the result of the Israeli voter's position in the social structure. Guided by the social identity theory, the research argues that political conduct involves competition between social groups, since people are more likely to cooperate with members of their own social identity than with other individuals. The theory focuses on how group memberships guide intergroup behavior and influence individual's self-concept. Hogg, Adelman and Blagg (2009) characterized religions as a social group which a person identifies with, subscribes to its ideology and conforms to its normative practices. Social identity is

people's sense of who they are based on their group membership, and a social group is a set of individuals who hold a common social identification or view themselves as members of the same social category (Turner et al. 1987).

Different aspects of citizenship primarily through the needs, demands and struggles of minority groups, provide a comprehensive picture of the dynamics of Israeli citizenship and the dilemmas that emerge at the collective, group and individual levels (Ben-Porat and Turner, 2011). Ultra-Orthodox Jews are commanded to study Jewish texts and separate themselves from modern society although their effective monopoly of over religious issues gives the parties that represent the community tremendous political influence. Religious courts are granted almost full monopoly over the determination of personal status (marriage, divorce, alimony, maintenance, burials and conversions), and religious restrictions are imposed in many fields of life, including the operation of the means of public transportation on Sabbath and other holy days. This situation reflects a broader conflict with secular segments, because the ultra-Orthodox run a separate network of schools, support large families on taxpayer-funded handouts and enforce a public status quo that has enraged the secular majority (Ketchell, 2019). The use of emotions in political campaigns appeals in identity politics in Israeli election campaigns (Marmor-Lavie and Wiemann, 2008), and religious social identity provides a system of guiding beliefs and symbols and can be considered as a powerful force that can determine political processes.

The importance of community vote and the growing impact of the ultra-Orthodox community is since Israel is ruled by a coalition government and no political party has ever had a parliamentary majority. Israel uses a proportional electoral system to elect the Knesset, its unicameral parliament. The 120 members of the Knesset are elected in a single nationwide district using a closed list system, which means that voters cannot express a preference for a candidate or candidates. This makes Israel's electoral system an 'extreme' example of proportional representation. The proportionality of the system is somewhat moderated by an electoral threshold (Shugart 2021). The need of support of small parties to form a government turned Israeli politics into politics of conflict, and as this research demonstrates, politics of conflict has been widely used by different parties to gain influence among voters and political power in the Knesset. The most distinctive conflict is between secular Jews and the ultra-Orthodox community. While ultra-Orthodox parties have always used religious issues as a catalyst to gain political power, secular politicians have moved to capitalize on anti-religious sentiment among secular Israeli Jews.

The influential role of community politics is also since Israeli political system is based on the principle of proportional representation and Haredi vote is committed to their identity party politics. At election time, votes from the entire country are tallied up and parties are represented in the Knesset in direct proportion to the percentage of votes received. This system facilitates the presence of many small parties and makes it virtually impossible for any one party to muster the 61 seats (out of 120) required to pass legislation and to govern. The resulting need to form coalitions comprised of several parties gives disproportionate power to smaller parties that can make or break a potential coalition. Religious parties have been partners in almost every coalition, largely because their primary concerns have not centered on crucial foreign or economic policy, but rather on the religious nature of the state. This made the religious parties' convenient partners who sought only to safeguard religious interests and guarantee that the state would maintain a Jewish character.

Ultra-Orthodox Identity

The research attempts to examine social and cultural changes that could affect the voting of the ultra-Orthodox community, in an effort to understand internal movements that could impact Israeli politics in the years ahead. The most conspicuous aspect examined here is the continuance commitment to vote for ultra-Orthodox parties. According to a survey of the Israeli Democracy Institute (2021), rabbinical leadership is extremely influential, with high levels of confidence (90%). In contrast, another survey of the Israel Democracy Institute (2021a) shows that Haredi lose faith in their political parties, with 38.5% think that their trust in ultra-Orthodox parties has been 'harmed' or 'harmed to a great extent' for not advocating vigorously enough on their behalf at the beginning of the COVID crisis. Disappointment within the community on different levels could mean greater legitimacy in consciousness to the idea that you can be a committed ultra-Orthodox Jew and vote for a party which is itself not ultra-Orthodox. Such development could indicate that ultra-Orthodox Israelis look at the greater political issues and disconnect themselves from the sectoral needs.

In examining the role of religion in Israeli politics according to the social identity theory, it is argued that the political history of Israel has proved that ultra-Orthodox parties assumed political power through identity politics, using it as a vehicle to gain and maintain their political influence and power in the Knesset – the Israeli parliament. The ultra-Orthodox parties have a significant role through identity politics. Traditionally, the Haredi community members vote as a bloc according to directives of their chief rabbis, and thus have tremendous influence in determining who will form Israel's coalition governments. Identity religious politics has been intensified by the growth of the ultra-Orthodox party politics: in the elections to the 22nd Knesset (2019), the ultra-Orthodox parties gained 13.5% of all votes, compared with 8.2% in the 1992 elections (Israel Democracy Institute, 2018). The growing power of religious conceptions can be linked to demographic shifts that have widened the basis of voting behavior over the decades. With identity politics ultra-Orthodox parties enjoy very strong representation in local government too - stronger even than in the Knesset. The significant representation can be attributed to high voter turnout among the ultra-Orthodox population and low voter turnout among the general population in local elections (Malach, 2018). Strong representation of ultra-Orthodox parties in local government is also because the interests of the community are more prominent in local elections than in national elections (Ben-Bassat, Dahan and Klar, 2013).

The core of the religious social identity that dominates the Israeli political spectrum involves the founding objectives of the Jewish state – the connection between statehood and religion. Most of the Jewish population support the links between religion and state and the role of religion and tradition in the public sphere. Most Israelis support the meaning of a “Jewish state” and accept the official stance of the state, which supports Orthodox conversion only. Most Israelis also believe that country can be both a Jewish state that observes religious law and a modern democratic country and feel that they live in accordance with Jewish values. But the conflict of identities regarding the role of religion is demonstrated in the definition the country. Most of those who defined themselves as ultra-Orthodox identify themselves as Jews first, while most of the secular identify themselves as Israelis first (Arian, 2009). As a result, ultra-Orthodox parties enjoy support from non-ultra-orthodox Jews as a vehicle of ethnic Jewish identity (Schiffman and Tanus, 2006).

Religion has played an important part in Israeli politics and religious–secular contentions are likely to remain part of the political landscape (Ben-Porat, 2013). Identity politics by ultra-Orthodox parties is related to the extreme role of religious faith. The Haredi leadership lives in a state of threat from spiritual, social, cultural and political phenomena that surrounds the community. These basic assumptions lead the community in all life aspects: clothing, education, marriage matchmaking and even language. The cultural segregation and sectorial coherency of the community are aimed to protect Jewish culture from western culture and secularism (Cohen, 2006). The community choose to separate itself from mainstream Israeli society, in residential patterns (living in separate neighborhoods), in education (separate educational streams), symbolically, (distinct dress and customs), in cultural life (literature and media unique to the community), in a separate organizational structure, and in the area of political leadership (Israel Democracy Institute, 2019). The religious and ideological gap between the Haredi society and the general society distanced the community from other sectors. Many people in the sector live below the poverty line, and the average income level of ultra-Orthodox workers is 62 % that of other workers. But despite their cultural segregation, the sector has great political influence and thus many young members of the community do not serve in the army and learn Torah with their salary paid by the government.

The dominance of extreme religious laws that represent the binding role of religion in the life of every Israeli is achieved due to the political power of the ultra-Orthodox parties. Small parties, especially the ultra-Orthodox, became more aggressively factionalist, further exacerbating existing divisions in Israeli society. As a result, changes in the Israeli party system affect political parties and the wider society as well (Lehmann, 2012). Fisher (2016) explains that fundamentalist movements that participate in political systems can gain prominent political positions that allow them to impose their extreme ideology on the entire society. In the case of Israeli Haredi, he found that the more political power that fundamentalists accrue the stronger is their tendency to promote their religious agenda. Looking at the fundamental principles of their political policies, Haredi parties are focused on sectorial concerns, not showing much interest in external political issues, but they have important political support for the government. They have been in almost every government and succeeded in exploiting their power over legislation regarding issues relevant to religion, state, and budgets (Shalev, 2019). As a result, creating changes about the status quo governing religious practice is very difficult to achieve, and repeated legislative efforts to weaken the power of smaller parties have largely been unsuccessful. Given the

deep sensitivity towards religion-state issues in Israel, mainstream parties and politicians have favored the “status quo” on such issues, rather than attempting any changes (The Jewish Federations of America, 2017).

Integration in the General Society

The commitment of members of the community to community political interest should also be examined according to their segregation and integration in the general society. The research examines the relations between religious and politics based on the social identity theory and the use of religion as a tool for identity politics by the minority group of the ultra-Orthodox community. The theory found that people categorize themselves as belonging to certain groups and showed how group memberships guide intergroup behavior. The belief system inherent in religion can explain why members associate themselves with their religious group and the theory recognizes that people’s individual characteristics and their group memberships play a significant role in shaping attitudes, values, beliefs and behavior (Tajfel, 1978; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher & Wetherell, 1987). As demonstrated here, based on the power of religion grouping to gain political influence, religious identity serves as a powerful mechanism that is changing the social characteristics of Israeli society. Zandberg (2018) maintains that Israeli Jews of the same ethnic group and class usually share policy preferences and voting choices. Thus, community support is a critical aspect of election results. The electoral model of those parties, emphasizing that ultra-Orthodox identity and the religious obligation of listening to the instructions of rabbis compels an ultra-Orthodox individual to vote for an ultra-Orthodox party (Hermann and Anavi, 2021). This obligates ultra-Orthodox politicians to be aware of any deterioration in public trust and advocate for the positions supported by their communities, even if this means being open to technology and modernity.

According to the Social identity theory, individuals can develop two principal identities: a personal self, which encompasses unique, idiosyncratic information about themselves, and a collective self, which encompasses information about the groups to which they belong (Tajfel, 1978). Berger (1967) explained that “it is clear that religion is intimately bound up with people's identity, their sense of who they 'really' are”. According to Hobsbawm (1989), the core idea of identity groups is that the members are about themselves, for themselves, and nobody else (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, and Wetherell, 1987). The ultra-Orthodox is a minority group fighting for its status in Israeli society and the religious and ideological gap between them and the general society has distanced the community from other sectors. The most distinctive and on-going identity conflict is between secular Jews and the ultra-Orthodox community, and this conflict creates a major constant political debate. But although Ultra-Orthodox are segmented from the general population, they have a lot of political influence. Since the community grows swiftly and maintains its social identity status, it has tremendous political influence through identity politics. Members of the community use the political support of ultra-Orthodox parties, which maintain a high level of representation in the government. The main influence of the community is in maintaining communal advantages and the binding connection between the Jewish religion and heritage and the state of Israel through their political power.

Looking at these findings from the perspective of the secular-ultra-Orthodox spectrum reveals that while 67.5% of the ultra-Orthodox regard religion and state as of paramount importance, 53% of the national religious, 44% of the traditional religious and 47% of the traditional non-religious consider issues of security and foreign affairs as most important. 60% of the Jewish public thinks that public transportation should be allowed on Shabbat throughout the country, except in areas where there is a religious or ultra-Orthodox majority. As expected, there is overwhelming resistance (97%) among the ultra-Orthodox, in contrast with significant support from the secular public (86%). 60% of Jews also support the opening of supermarkets on Shabbat, except in areas where there is a religious or ultra-Orthodox majority. 63% of all Jews support putting an end to the Chief Rabbinate’s monopoly on kashrut; among the secular—89%; and the traditional non-religious—70%. In sharp contrast, 95.5% of the ultra-Orthodox; 63% of the national religious and 48% of the traditional religious oppose doing away with the Chief Rabbinate’s monopoly. 59.5% of all Jews support civil marriage; 84.5% of secular Jews; 68% of the non-religious, 41% of the religious and only 22.5% of the national religious support civil marriage for the citizens who choose this option. Not surprisingly, 96% of the ultra-Orthodox oppose civil marriage (Religion and State, 2021).

Another aspect of the conflict between community identity and integration in the general society is the rate of employment among ultra-Orthodox men in low. According to IDI's Statistical Report on Ultra-Orthodox Society in Israel, employment for ultra-Orthodox men stood at only 50% during the years 2015-2020, compared to 87% among other Jewish men and 55% of ultra-Orthodox children live below the poverty line, as compared with 9% among other Jewish children. In the last decade however the gap in the standard of living has been narrowing, as the increase in both the numbers of Haredi who are employed and the rise in income has had a positive effect on their standard of living. For example, the rate of ultra-Orthodox over the age of 20 reporting that they or someone in their household owned a car rose from 31% in 2003 to 44% in 2018.

The impact of technology is also important, since the percentage using the internet has grown: from 28% in 2008-2009, and 38% in 2010-2011 to 49% in 2017-2018. What identifies Israel most is the combination of technology development and technology use, and this combination has been apparent in the politics of the community. 60% of the Haredi use a computer, compared to 80% among other Jews. 49% of the adult Haredi population reported using the internet – up from 28% in 2008. This leads to the conclusion that greater use of the internet reflects the deep penetration of technology into the ultra-Orthodox community, in part due to their integration in the labor force and the increase in the numbers of students among them. According to Bezeq company, there is a growing demand for Internet connection from the ultra-Orthodox community. The Israeli telecommunications company reported a 40% increase in traffic in ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods since the beginning of the coronavirus crisis. Bezeq said the numbers represent an unprecedented change in the way the Internet is used by this audience, whether to learn, study or shop online. This explains cultural changes in the community, with greater use of digital means, although only 64% of the ultra-Orthodox used the Internet in 2021 and 30% did so on a smartphone (Bezeq, 2021).

Conclusion

Based on the successful implementation of religious identity and community politics, we can understand the role and position of ultra-Orthodox religious parties in Israeli politics. Examining their influence based on the social identity theory, this research looks at the relationship between religion and politics in Israel. According to the theory, religion supplies tradition based on identity-supporting content and sense of belonging, and the research argues that the binding connection between politics and religion has long identified Israel, as the profound connection between religion and identity is related to a cultural construction which provides an essential basis of social identity of the ultra-Orthodox community.

The trigger for the four last consecutive elections in Israel was the role of the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community in modern life. A debate over whether ultra-Orthodox Jews should be exempt from mandatory military service was heated with the fatal result that no government could be established after the April 2019 election, sending Israelis back to the polls in September, for the second time in the same year, for the third time in March 2020, and again in March 2021. As religious questions became politicized, Israeli governments were unable to mediate between new demands of secular and religious groups. It was only due to the Coronavirus epidemic that a new government was established in 2020, although the pressing issue of military draft was not resolved. The government that took over in 2021 was for the first time after almost a decade without ultra-Orthodox parties, and nevertheless attempted to enact a mild military draft law that requires a small number of young ultra-Orthodox to join the army. The paper predicts that despite the efforts to reduce the requirements, the social, political and religious conflict that identifies Israel since its establishment is going to continue in the years to come, since it serves the social aspirations and the political interests of different parties. As a result, the religious debate represents a larger conflict about the different identity narratives within Israeli society.

The integration of the ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) sector into the general Israeli society has been at the center of public debate for decades and this issue has now moved to the top of the political agenda. The main political argument is the demand that young members of the ultra-Orthodox community would not serve in the army and learn Torah with their salary paid by the government. This issue has provoked a major political crisis, since secular groups claim that there is a correlation between the low rate of employment of ultra-Orthodox men and the low rate of army service. Thus, the conclusion of the research is that the divide between secular and Haredi society would continue to widen because of the bridges that have been built between the Haredi world and the rest of Israeli society. No legitimate debate is possible so long the ultra-Orthodox parties use identity politics and one-sided portrayal of the

fundamental cultural and religious issues that make up the Israel society. As the research claims, there are many issues about the role of the Haredi community in modern Israeli life that need to be debated, but no compromise can be reached because the social bridge between secular and ultra-Orthodox identities serves their social and political goals.

The assumption of this research is that the ultra-Orthodox as a targeted group has traditional social identities and is supported by political group interests – and therefore is not in a position to cross over their support to the opposing political camp. Rather, internal changes in the socialization of this interest group can have the power to shake their imminent cultural links to their political belonging. The political impact of their social transformation can be translated into shifting their votes from their traditional identity political parties to other parties within the same political bloc, causing internal changes in a parliamentary and proportional political system such as exists in Israel. An alternative impact of their social transformation can be in their seating on the fences and becoming undecided voters, thus preventing their political bloc from maintaining its traditional public support.

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