

Political Ideology, New Politics and Public Trust in Democracy

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Abstract

Israel is experiencing an unprecedented political crisis and the main reason for the political instability is that the electoral system is too fragmented, allowing small parties to gain disproportional influence on government policy. As a result of the proportional electoral system, the government has always been comprised of a multitude of parties, many of them small parties which gained much greater political influence compared to their actual public support. This unique form of parliamentary democracy has been beneficial to political factions comprised of small and medium-sized parties that have unproportioned influence on governments. This is evident in that religion has played an important part in Israeli politics and religious parties have been partners in almost every coalition, largely because their primary concerns are 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. This political structure brings up important aspects of political ideology which relate to the level of public trust in the democratic process and the right of identity parties to be dominating in the government. This issue is examined according to the political situation in Israel, where ideological parties which represent identity groups dominate key positions in the government and have the political power to make policy decisions that impact the majority of the population. The conflict discussed in this research is if the plurality of conflicting views, dominated by ideological parties and identity politics, is beneficial to maintain public trust in democracy, or political ideology that represents identity parties prevents politicians from implementing practical politics – thus reducing the trust of the people in the government.

Key words: *Ideology, New Politics, Public Trust, Democracy, Israel*

Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a significant escalation in Israel's internal political divide and discourse between left and right (Ben David and Idan, 2020). Israel is experiencing an unprecedented political crisis with five general elections in only four years, between 2019 and 2022. In 2019 two successive elections (April and September) produced no clear outcome with the result that the country lacked a fully empowered government for more than a year. The instability continued in 2020. After the third round of election (March), a national unity government was agreed, but it collapsed after about seven months. After the March 2021 election a new coalition government survived for merely a year, and new election had to be scheduled for November 2022 (after losing their political majority in the Knesset – the Israeli Parliament - these governments served in the interim periods as well, which included the election campaign and the time after the election during the formation of a new government). It was only in the fifth election that a stable government was established – although it is dominated by religious and ultra-Orthodox parties.

The question asked here is if the domination of identity politics is unique to Israel or a part of a global process of multicultural societies? According to Flanagan and Lee (2003), the plurality of conflicting worldviews in the Western advanced industrial democracies is creating values and belief systems which insert a new politics and cultural conflicts into the political agenda. As explained by Vasta (2010), people and politics in many western countries appear increasingly hostile to cultural diversity, claiming that diverse values may threaten national identity and damage social cohesion. As argued by this research, this social identity is a not a new phenomenon, since the tension between the power and consistency of ideology and the and flexibility of practical politics identify the history of political theory (Allen, 2012). Bhambra and Margree (2010) argue that the problem with identity politics is the way in which the traditional principle of identity replaces practical politics. They maintain that productive practical politics should understand that the identity of the political grouping is based on the need to respond to an existing situation in which the need for the identity claim is no longer present. Additional research further exploits the contrast, concluding that political ideology has often been called "the most elusive concept in the whole of social science". This is because while ideologies tend to identify themselves by their position on the political spectrum (such as the left, the center or the right), they can also distinguish themselves from other important issues that may conflict with the basic ideology of

their political camp. The result is that often ideology prevents politicians from implementing practical politics (Gjorshoski, 2015).

Ideology has been a confusing topic for social analysts, since it is a set of beliefs that guide decisions of individuals and communities. Bhambra and Margree (2010) maintain that in identity politics people tend to form exclusive political alliances based on their shared religion, race, class, sex, culture, sexual orientation, disability or other characteristic. Heywood (2007) defines the main levels of ideological values as a model of a desired future and a vision for a better society. Gjorshoski (2015) looks at elements of ideology based in democratic principles, including sustaining, preserving and protecting the system, protecting the rights and freedom of citizens, and preserving public moral. Kirk (2010) introduces principles of ideology that relate to cultural norms: public moral, customs, rules and continuity, cautious, reform, imperfection, freedom, property, volunteer community, limited authority, balance between the changes and consistency. Schmidhuber, Ingrams and Hilgersargues (2020) argue that positive impacts of openness depend on citizen's democratic capacity defined as the individual sense of empowerment to influence governmental systems.

Political Ideology in the Era of New Politics

In examining the influence of identity politics on Israeli political landscape, we have to explain that the distinction between ideology and practical politics is complex for two main reasons examined in this research. First, all ideologies also cash out their guiding principles in specific concrete practices and that all political practices can invariably be decoded as containing ideological assumptions. Second, it's not ideology that prevents politicians from implementing their policies, but the degree of dogmatism or flexibility in each ideological cluster. Ideologies usually excel in adapting themselves to changing circumstances because of the internal plasticity of their components.

In support of the dominating role of identity politics as a valuable political ideology development, research on the determinants and consequences of political ideology concentrates on investigation of genetic influences on ideology (Feldman and Johnston, 2014). The basic assumption of political scientists is that political parties are founded on ideology for which they advance their activities and achieve their policy goals. The ideology of a political party is what makes it distinct and different from others, with related beliefs held by a group of individuals or a particular social class. The growth of ideological parties around the world has been promoted by technology, since the emergence of new politics, based on social media and powerful leadership, brought criticism over traditional politics which is based on solidarity and identity. New politics is largely based on the idea that political dialogue involves differences between different sections of society and therefore incapable of building the broad-based movement necessary to form identity politics (Kumar, Elliot-Cooper, Iyer and Gabriel, 2018). Criticism against identity politics maintains that solidarities based on identities as the basis of political action have become too powerful and therefore increasingly problematic. Criticism is evident both in the academy and the public sphere (Stekelenburg and Klandermans, 2013). It is argued that identity politics is one-sided and treats identities as static entities, aimed only at serving the interests of community interests and defending the sanctuary of their identity through political activity, rather than serving the interests of the entire population (Rectenwald, 2013). In contrast, practical politics can enable people to recognize and deal with political problems (Alexander, 2016).

Academic research provides important classification for basic values that put ideological and practical politics on the same frame. It is argued that political theory is addressing itself to the way political institutions frame political disagreements and orchestrate resolutions to view social ideals (Waldron, 2006). Philip (2010) argues for greater realism in political theory with respect to judgements about what politicians ought to do and how they ought to act. He advocates a version of political realism that is rooted in an understanding of the distinctive character of political rule and provides the basis for a contextualize but non-relativist account of 'what is to be done'.

In competitive elections between ideological parties, there is uncertainty about the eventual victor since voters will be less likely to vote for a candidate as her corruptibility rises. But the main issue in question about the validity of ideology in any political system is the conflict with practical politics. According to Cukierman (2010), ideology determines the broad long-term objectives to which policymakers of a nation aspire, but those objectives are seldom fully achieved and can be considered as practical politics rather than political ideology. Practical politics, in contrast to ideology, is based on practical rather than moral or ideological considerations, and as a result the boundaries between ideology and practical politics have been subject to a continues debate among political theorists (Freedon, 2006).

A study by Boukouras and Koufopoulos (2011) presents a model of political competition that shows that where voter decisions are affected by their ideological adherence to political parties, an equilibrium exists even though voting is

fully deterministic. Acemoglu, Egorov and Sonin (2013) claim that when voters fear that politicians may be influenced or corrupted, these politicians choose “populist” policies aimed to the left of the median voter - as a way of signaling that they are not beholden to the ideological interests of the right. They argue that this populist bias of policy is greater when the value of remaining in office is higher for the politician; when there is greater polarization between policy preferences of the median voter and right-wing special interests; when politicians are perceived as more likely to be corrupt; when there is an intermediate amount of noise in the information that voters receive; when politicians are more forward-looking; and when there is greater uncertainty about the type of the incumbent leader. Philip (2008) further provides an argument that is directly connected to the characteristics of Israeli politics and the traditional ideology policies of peacemaking. He explains that questions of the definition of corruption are central to understanding the significance and prominence of the charges in peacekeeping contexts.

Public Trust in Democracy

Another important aspect for political ideology is the level of public trust in the democratic process and the right of identity parties to participate in elections and become dominating in government. This issue should be examined according to the political situation in Israel, where ideological parties which represent identity groups dominate key positions in the government and have the political power to make policy decisions that impact the majority of the population.

To understand the connection between public trust and political ideology, it is essential to define these terms. Public trust is the foundation upon which democratic societies are built. It encompasses citizens' confidence in the effectiveness, transparency, and accountability of their government and public institutions. Political ideology, on the other hand, encompasses a set of beliefs and values that guide individuals' views on governance, policy priorities, social issues, and the role of government in society.

In examining the influence of political Ideology on public trust, it is argued that political ideology can shape the level of public trust in various ways. Individuals with conservative ideologies often prioritize stability, tradition, and limited government intervention. They may have higher levels of trust in institutions that align with these values, such as law enforcement, military, and religious institutions. Conversely, those with more progressive or liberal ideologies may prioritize social justice, equality, and government intervention to address societal issues. They may have higher levels of trust in institutions that champion these principles, such as social welfare agencies or advocacy groups.

In examining the impact of public trust on political ideology, it is argued that while political ideology can shape public trust, the level of public trust can also influence political ideology. When trust in institutions and political leaders is low, individuals may become disillusioned and skeptical of the efficacy of their chosen ideology. This skepticism can lead to shifts in ideological orientations or increased support for alternative ideologies that promise change and accountability. Conversely, high levels of public trust can reinforce individuals' political ideology, as they perceive that their chosen ideology is effective in delivering positive outcomes.

In order to understand the role of ideological parties in the political system in Israel, it needs to explain that the main reason for the political instability is that the electoral system is too fragmented, allowing small parties to gain disproportional influence on government policy. Friedman Wilson (2015) explains that since the birth of the country, its electoral system has been criticized for favoring small parties over large ones and for granting a disproportionate amount of power to minority and ideological groups. The need to include small and more extreme parties gives these forces what Rahat and Hazan (2015) define as blackmail powers. The failure to reform the electoral system, due to the need of support of small parties to form a government, turned Israeli political system into politics of conflict, which is used by different parties to gain influence among voters and endure political power. The big impact of small parties is since the entire country serves as one electoral zone in terms of allocation of Knesset seats. All lists which pass the qualifying electoral threshold are represented in the Knesset by a number of members which is proportional to the lists' electoral strength. According to Shugart (2020), the electoral system is an “extreme” example of proportional representation because of its use of a single nationwide district. As a result of the proportional electoral system, the Parliament has always been comprised of a multitude of parties, many of them small parties which gained much greater political influence compared to their actual public support.

Parties in the Israeli Knesset exhibit relatively high levels of cohesion, although (Rahat, Hazan and Ben-Nun Bloom (2016). 2006) found that that parties' cohesion is generally lower when they are part of the ruling coalition than when they are in the opposition. The disproportional influence of small parties is because Israel chose a parliamentary system based on the principles of proportional representation. This unique form of parliamentary democracy has been

beneficial to political factions comprised of small and medium-sized parties that have unproportioned influence on governments and in many occasions they prefer the interests of the minority groups that they represent over the interests of the entire population. The failure to reform the electoral system, due to the need of support of small parties to form a government, turned Israeli political system into politics of conflict, which is used by different parties to gain influence among voters and endure political power. Although politics of reform is necessary for successfully promoting the initiatives against veto players who are interested in preserving the status quo (Rahat, 2006), the use of power by small and minority groups helps them move into a position from which they can effectively change public policies (Rosenthal, 2018) and the payoffs they obtain in coalition negotiations are conducive to their policy goals (Evans, 2018).

Polarization of the Political Discourse

Regardless of political ideology, a major challenge is the polarization of political discourse, where ideological differences are amplified, leading to a lack of trust and understanding between opposing ideological camps. Israel is the only state with a Jewish majority and the connection of identity and religion is evident in that Israeli Jews are largely united on the need for their nation to be a homeland for Jews. This aspect has influenced public trust in Israeli democracy and the country's complex political landscape, with a multi-party system, which often leads to coalition governments and frequent political negotiations. This structure creates a permanent perception of instability, which often affects public trust in the effectiveness of democratic governance. As a balance to the uncertainty of the public with the domination of ideological parties, Israel also has a vibrant civil society, including active non-governmental organizations, media outlets, and a strong judiciary. These elements contribute to the checks and balances within the democratic system and help maintain public trust by holding power holders accountable.

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, 2013). Israeli Jews overall are more religious than U.S. Jews – the second largest Jewish community in the world, because American Jews are mostly Conservative while Orthodox Jews make up a greater share of the population in Israel. Jews in Israel identify with one of four major religious subgroups: secular, traditional, religious and Haredi (Ultra-Orthodox). According to Jewish Virtual Library, the population statistics of Israel for 2020 show that of Israeli Jews, 43% self-identify as secular, 22% as traditional and 13% as traditional-religious. The largest growing community is the Ultra-Orthodox. According to Central Bureau of Statistics population projections, the number of Ultra-Orthodox reached one million in 2017, representing 12% of the population, and the Haredi sector is projected to comprise 16% of the total population by 2030. Ultra-Orthodox Jews as percentage of population grow steadily - from 10% in 2009 to 11% in 2014 and 12% in 2017. The community has birth rates well above the rest of the nation – Ultra-Orthodox women in Israel have 7.7 children on average, compared to 2.6 children among other Jewish women. They could constitute a third of all citizens and 40% of the Jewish population in 2065. 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 becoming an influential social group that can enforce its religious identity in Israel's social and political structures.

Religion has played an important part in Israeli politics and religious–secular contentions are likely to remain part of the political landscape (Baumgart-Ochse, 2014). 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. 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, 2018). The religious and ideological gap between the Haredi society and the general society distanced the community from other sectors. Many people in the Ultra-Religious 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 influential role of religious identity in politics is since Israeli political system is based on the principle of proportional representation and religious 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.

Conclusion

The relationship between public trust and political ideology is complex and dynamic. Political ideology can shape the level of public trust, while public trust can also influence ideological orientations. Challenges exist in maintaining trust across different ideological camps, but strategies such as transparency, effective communication, inclusive governance, and bridge-building can help rebuild public trust irrespective of political ideology. By fostering trust and understanding, we can create a more cohesive and inclusive society that transcends ideological divides and works towards the common good.

The issue of public trust in elections has been widely debated as concerns about the fragility of Israeli democracy have grown with the political instability which led to five consecutive election cycles in just four years. Israel suffers from a chronically divided electorate which to a large extent is due to a political system that gives small parties disproportionate leverage. Those factors have been around for decades, and it is commonly agreed that this can be considered as a main source of the political deadlock which resulted in multiple consecutive election campaigns. Public debate of the role of the government in democracy has largely intensified after the November 2022 election, emphasizing the effects of unstable and declining levels of public trust in the political system and its institutions, as Israel is dealing with an extensive constitutional and electoral crisis.

Efforts have been made to address the challenges and strengthen public trust in Israeli democracy. The country has implemented transparency and anti-corruption measures to enhance accountability and restore public confidence. Initiatives have been undertaken to improve civic education, promote political participation, and engage citizens in decision-making processes. These efforts aim to foster a sense of ownership and inclusion, thereby reinforcing trust in the democratic system. As concluded by this research, public trust in Israeli democracy remains a dynamic and evolving subject in Israel, influenced by actions of the government and balanced by the influence of the dicers civil society, as citizens engage in dialogue, promoting transparency, and working towards strengthening democratic institutions. By addressing concerns, reinforcing democratic values, and promoting active participation, Israel can establish strong foundations of public trust in its democratic system.

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