



Partecipazione e Conflitto

<http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco>

ISSN: 1972-7623 (print version)

ISSN: 2035-6609 (electronic version)

PACO, Issue 18(3) 2025: 606-632

DOI: 10.1285/i20356609v18i3p606

Published 15 November, 2025

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Illiberalism in Israeli Public Opinion¹

Hannah M. Ridge

Chapman University

Abstract: Israel has long identified as a democracy. However, scholars have expressed concerns that it is engaged in democratic backsliding (Kremnitzer and Shany 2020; Oren and Waxman 2022). Despite holding repeated elections, its liberal credentials are weakening, as the rule of law and judicial independence are threatened. Institutionally, then, it is fulfilling Dahl's (1971) *contestation* requirement for democracy but not the *inclusiveness* requirement. At the citizen level, there is questionable democratic culture (Inglehart and Welzel 2003). If the public supports electoral institutions but not liberal values, then the democracy's foundation is weak (Mounk 2018). This article analyzes recent Israeli public opinion data on political attitudes and regime preferences – the Israel National Election Survey (2022) and an original iPanel survey (2024) – with machine learning techniques. Both datasets demonstrate that while Israelis assert a preference for democracy, they are open to non-democratic alternatives and illiberal policies. The community is particularly divided on minority rights (i.e. Palestinian Citizen of Israel rights) and free expression/protest rights. As such, democracy is on shaky foundations in Israel in the face of the ongoing democratic recession.

Keywords: Democracy, Israel, Public Opinion, Liberalism, Backsliding, Ethnicity, Minority

Corresponding Author: haridge@chapman.edu

¹ Acknowledgements: Earlier versions of this piece were presented at the Southern Political Science Association annual meeting and a POMEPS workshop. I am greatly indebted for the participants' feedback.

1. Introduction

For a country to be a democracy, at minimum, it must be a state in which citizens have “unimpaired opportunities” to “formulate their preferences,” to share their preferences with their peers and their leaders, and to “have their preferences weighed equally” by the government (Dahl, 1971: 2). That means the caliber of the democracy is measured by a regime’s level of *public contestation* and its *popular inclusiveness* (Dahl, 1971; Coppedge et al., 2008). Regimes that fall short on these components are “democracies with adjectives” (e.g., illiberal democracies, restrictive democracies, limited democracies) (Collier and Levitsky, 1997).

A similar pattern applies to democratic public opinion. Under Democratic Culture Theory, for a democracy to be durable, citizens must endorse both electoral institutions *and* liberal values (Inglehart, 2003; Welzel, 2021). Without these supportive values, the democratic institutions may eventually decline as well (Mounk, 2018; Ridge, 2022a). This article focuses on a particular case of disconnect between public support for the contestation component and the public support for the inclusiveness component – Israel.

Scholars of Israeli politics have raised serious concerns about Israel’s democratic stability, suggesting that it is in decline (Kremnitzer and Shany, 2020; Oren and Waxman, 2022). Although scoring panels like the Varieties of Democracy Dataset (V-Dem) may rate Israel as a democracy based on its combined Polity rating (6 out of 10), the country’s liberal *bona fides* are lacking.² V-Dem scores it a 0.62 (out of 1) on the liberal democracy index and a 0.57 (out of 1) on the multiplicative polyarchy rating (Coppedge et al., 2024). That means when it comes to components like freedom of expression, freedom to assemble, judicial independence, or checks and balances, the expert coder ratings, Israel’s score is moderate, and it has, in fact, declined over the decade.³ Still, Israel represents itself in its Declaration of Independence and its Basic Law as a democracy with equal rights regardless of ethnicity or religion.⁴

Israel has decades of experience running elections. However, it has struggled for decades with questions of inclusion. The position of the Palestinian Citizens of Israel (PCI), who face discrimination as both ethnic and religious minorities, has been a perpetual challenge (Rouhana and Ghanem, 1998; Sultany, 2012; Ridge, 2024).⁵ The PCI have not had equal opportunities for sharing their opinions nor have their preferences been equally weighted by government officials (Dahl, 1971). The position of women and the queer community has been debated, especially between the religious and secular population (Gross, 2014).

The Netanyahu government has also assailed democratic institutions. The government has specifically targeted judicial independence and the rule of law. Israeli citizens have taken to the streets to protest government corruption and attacks on the rule of law and judicial independence (Hitman and Serpa, 2021;

² The most recent Polity score is from 2018. V-Dem’s own Electoral Democracy Index, in 2024, only gave Israel as 0.71 out of 1.

³ For reference, the US scores 0.75 on the Liberal Democracy Index. Italy scores 0.7. In the Electoral Democracy Index, the US scored 0.84 and Italy scored 0.8. The US scored 0.75 and Italy scored 0.69 on the multiplicative polyarchy score. Israel is lower on each metric.

⁴ Israel has not been able to write and ratify a constitution. Instead, the government operates under iterative Basic Laws. These include both the Basic-Law: Human Dignity and Liberty (1992) – which says all humans are entitled to freedom – and the Basic-Law: Israel - the Nation State of the Jewish People (2018) – which emphasizes the primacy of the Jewish citizens in Israel over the non-Jewish citizens. Thus, its governing documents are not internally consistent (Chowers 2024).

⁵ Israel was founded in 1948 in land from the British Mandate in Palestine. Arabs and Druze who were not expelled from the terrain were given Israeli citizenship and are called Palestinian Citizens of Israel because they had inhabited Palestine before Israel formed.

Gidron, 2023). As the largest protests ever seen in Israel, these events demonstrate some public opposition to these policies. However, the Netanyahu regime has been regularly returned to power with increasingly conservative coalition partners. What then, are Israelis' attitudes towards liberal values, democracy, and non-democratic alternatives? Public support for democratic institutions could lead to public opposition to backsliding. However, weakness with respect to liberal values or support for non-democracies favors the anti-democratic movements.

This article analyzes recent Israeli public opinion data on political attitudes and regime-type preferences: the Israel National Election Survey (2022) and an original iPanel survey (2024). It demonstrates the separation between support for liberal values and support for democracy in Israel. First it utilizes factor analysis techniques to demonstrate that these principles are empirically distinct in public opinion. Second, it applies hierarchical cluster analysis, a machine learning technique, to identify subgroups in public opinion. Hierarchical cluster analysis has previously been applied in democratic attitudes surveys in Latin America and the Arab Middle East (Schedler and Sarsfield, 2009; Carlin and Singer, 2011; Ridge, 2022b). These results show that citizens' support for democracy and support for liberal values are distinct and separable.

The results do not paint a rosy picture of Israel's democratic environment. When it comes to Dahl's first component – contestation – the results are somewhat positive. Both datasets demonstrate that Israelis assert a preference for democracy. However, they are also open to non-democratic alternatives. The results are not as good with respect to the inclusiveness component. Jewish Israelis gave mixed responses to questions about liberal values, particularly when it comes to minority rights. The treatment of the Arab population is arguably at the crux of that problem. The desire to be a democracy trades off with the desire to control or expel this community. Palestine and the Palestinian question (even with respect to the Palestinian Citizens of Israel) are fundamental to understanding Israeli democracy. This desire to exclude rather than include their fellow citizens is inconsistent with their democratic support.

Notably, the timespan over which these surveys were conducted shows that this lack of support is not merely a feature of the 2023-2025 Gaza War. It is a perennial problem. Democratic culture theory posits that both dimensions – electoral institutions *and* liberal values – need strong support in order to safeguard democracy (Inglehart and Welzel, 2003; Mounk, 2018). Based on these surveys, democracy is on shaky foundations in Israel.

2. Democracy and Liberalism in Israel

In its founding documents, Israel identified itself as a democracy. It also promised equal rights for all, regardless of sex, religion, and ethnicity. However, Israel has struggled to live up to that agenda since the beginning, particularly with respect to the Palestinian Citizens of Israel (Azoulay and Ophir, 2012). In the early days of Israel, restrictions on the Palestinians, including Israeli citizens, under martial law contributed to Israel's not coding as a full democracy for several years in some democracy scales. Formally Israel has adopted documents like the 1992 Basic Law on Human Dignity and Liberty and liberalized some laws related to personal freedoms. These practices can raise their institutional ratings.

However, Israeli society shows uneven adoption of liberal principles at the popular level. Citizens tout Israel's surpassing the personal freedoms of some Arab states, but it does not reach the level of European states, which it considers its peer states. This is evident in the European Social Survey questions on issues of ethnic or religious minority rights, homosexuality or gay adoption, or women's employment. An exception might be the treatment of immigrants. However, this openness comes with its own caveat – they must be Jewish immigrants to be welcome. Non-Jewish would-be immigrants do not receive the same popular

endorsement. The populace does not necessarily endorse inclusiveness just because government documents have made promises.

The circumstances in Israel seem to fit uncomfortably in the literature on democratic durability. As noted, Israel has had elections. In fact, there have been five elections since 2019 (inclusive). These elections, however, run up against Dahl's second component – inclusiveness. The Israeli government is not designed to emphasize inclusiveness. It is designed to emphasize the Jewish character of the state, as evidenced in the 2018 Basic Law. Public opinion is similarly divided on these axes. Citizens may want democracy – to some extent – but they may not all want inclusive governance. This constitutes an elections-liberalism schism.

3. Liberalism and Democracy

Such a split is potentially dangerous for democratic persistence. In order for democracy to endure, it requires complementary liberal principles and institutions. Without institutions like free speech and an independent press and judiciary, democracies can readily turn into dictatorships (Mounk, 2018). Electoral institutions are certainly necessary to identify a democracy by contemporary standards (Schmitter and Karl, 1991; Schumpeter, 2013; Ridge, 2023a). Experts classifying countries as democracies look at features like constraints on the executive, competition among politicians, and competition among the citizens – the key features in the Polity Scale (Gleditsch and Ward, 1997). However, alongside the ballot boxes, countries require supportive structures both in the government and in the citizenry: “A certain degree of freedom of speech, opinion, and association therefore seems to be a prerequisite for democracy and a necessary condition of its continuation. Negative attitudes or indifference to basic freedoms on the part of the public might therefore make democracy unsustainable even if attitudes to democracy *per se* are positive” (Rowley and Smith, 2009: 294). Many Americans and Europeans would not even call a country a democracy if it lacked liberal elements like a free press or the rule of law (Oser and Hooghe, 2018; Ridge, 2023b). Numerous political science democracy scales include both elements (Coppedge et al. 2008). As such, liberalism and (durable) democracy seem fundamentally tied together.

Democratic culture theory argues that without a democratic culture – public commitment to democracy and these institutions – democracy will weaken and fail. Ronald Inglehart (2003) includes socio-cultural and political elements in his definition of democratic culture. Durable democracies, he suggests, “need a mass culture of tolerance, trust, participatory orientations, an emphasis on self-expression, and reasonably high levels of subjective well-being” (Inglehart, 2003: 51). These values will discourage democratic backsliding (Welzel, 2021). Conversely, a democratic culture has been argued to lead to democratization (Inglehart and Welzel, 2003). This argument is not without its detractors, especially with respect to the causal claims it makes (Teorell and Hadenius, 2006). However, empirically, countries' democracy and liberal principles scores are regularly highly correlated.

Scholars have examined the confluence of liberal values and democratic commitment in a variety of settings. A common assumption in the democracy literature is that democrats are (exclusively) (liberal) democrats. They support democracy and oppose non-democracy. In that case, it would be expected that these kinds of survey items “scale” together. A high score would be pro-democracy, and a low score would be anti-democracy and pro-alternatives. However, that does not necessarily happen in practice. The items may load onto separate scales (Ariely and Davidov, 2011). This could happen because people hold them conceptually distinct or because support for one does not mean opposition to the other. Research on multiple regions has demonstrated that individuals who support democracy may well support non-democratic alternatives. For instance, research on Latin America (Carrión, 2008) and the Arab World (Ridge, 2023) has

shown that people can support *both* democracy and military coups, restrictions on the judiciary, or strong-man regimes. Even avowed supporters of democracy may endorse anti-democratic practices or cheating, under the right conditions (Graham and Svobik, 2020; Krishnarajan, 2023). Citizens might even assign non-democracy meanings to the word *democracy*, suggesting that a military or theocratic regime can themselves be democratic (Mattes and Bratton, 2007; Canache, 2012; Ridge, 2023; Claassen et al., 2025). Often the argument is that these alternatives to democracy can be more efficient or produce superior outcomes. However, those superior outcomes are far from guaranteed.

In other cases, support for the less-than-pure-democracy option is done in the service of protecting individual freedoms or enhancing representation. Bor et al. (2020) pulled survey samples from diverse regime contexts (Denmark, Hungary, India, Russia, and the United States) to demonstrate that citizens generally favor democratic institutions (voting). However, in most of these cases, they also show experimentally that citizens would introduce minority protection protocols, even if the protocols worked against the majoritarianism of voting. The preference shifted towards consensus in the populace, rather than mere majoritarianism. This tradeoff may satisfy an individual desire to protect minority rights. It could also be strategic. Some studies suggest that minority or minoritized groups will sacrifice democracy to protect their personal safety or security (Rizzo et al., 2007; Ridge, 2022). In that case, formalizing minority protections against majoritarianism could be a strategic move to support democracy in the long term.

Several studies in Latin America suggest that liberalism and democracy can operate independently. Schedler and Sarsfield (2007; 2009) examined two waves of survey data in Mexico to demonstrate that opposition to liberal values, such as women's rights, freedom of assembly, and freedom of speech, could co-occur with expressed support for democracy. They referred to these citizens as 'democrats with adjectives' to describe their conditional attitudes. Carlin and Singer employed AmericasBarometer data to evaluate public support for polyarchy.⁶ They showed that while the components of polyarchy had public support, a large majority of respondents were ambivalent or opposed to at least one component. Carlin (2011) focused on Chile to show that citizens' democratic commitments were variable. He identified clusters of democratic and autocratic support, including both liberal and illiberal democrats.

Similar cluster patterns were found in the Middle East. Ridge (2022a; 2022b) examined public support for democracy and liberal values in Egypt and Tunisia. She found that both countries contained 'democrats with adjectives' to continue with Schedler and Sarsfield's terminology. While liberal democrats were a large minority in each case, the liberal non-democrat and illiberal democrat clusters were also sizeable. These several studies demonstrate that, in practice, support for democracy – be it ever so high – is not always coupled with support for the necessary supportive institutions and rights.

This article examines the confluence and discontinuity of support for public contestation and support for inclusive governance in the Israeli case. Israelis have generally expressed public support for democracy in surveys (e.g. in the European Social Survey). This is theoretically good, because public support for democracy has been linked to democratic durability (Claassen, 2020). Nonetheless, scholars have tracked democratic backsliding in Israel for decades (Oren and Waxman, 2022). Decline has been particularly linked to the series of Netanyahu governments (Oren, 2023; Gidron et al., 2025). The public, despite potentially endorsing democracy in theory, keeps this regime going.

⁶ Polyarchy is a term Dahl (1971) used for countries that fulfilled both the competitive and inclusive components. He reserved the word *democracy* for theoretical ideal cases.

The Netanyahu government's efforts to undermine checks and balances and restrict the right to criticize the government are a culmination of long-term efforts to grow government authority. For instance, human rights activists have been arrested, protests have been restricted, and the government attempted to revoke judicial review in defense of the Basic Law rights. While many such policies target minorities, the government has not constrained itself to attacks on Palestinians or Palestinian Citizens of Israel. Instead, policies against the minorities – and public toleration or support for these policies – are rather bellwethers of future general attacks on liberal principles. Publics and researchers have been supporting and analyzing efforts to push back on this administration (Shultziner, 2023). Considering the circumstances on the ground, particularly with respect to the inclusion component, it is expected that support for electoral institutions – regime-type preferences – are decoupled from support for liberal values in Israel.

4. Materials and Methods

This study draws on an original 2024 iPanel survey and the 2022 Israel National Election Survey (INES). The INES was conducted by the Cohen Institute for Public Opinion Research at Tel Aviv University on November 9-30, 2022: “The study investigates attitudes toward various issues on the national agenda such as Israeli-Palestinian relations, socio-economic policy, relations between state and religion; gender and ethnicity issues; evaluation of parties, candidates, and coalitions; values, vote intention and past vote; efficacy, political knowledge and participation.” The 15-minute survey drew on an online probability sample of eligible voters in Israel based on the Ministry of the Interior's database. Questions about the form of government Israelis support were only asked to half of the respondents, so only those respondents are included. While non-Jewish Israelis were included in the National Election Survey, given the division of the sample, there are too few non-Jewish Israelis in the survey set for a separate analysis of their responses. Furthermore, some questions (e.g., about Arab Israelis' rights) were only asked to Jewish Israelis. As such, only Jewish Israelis are included in the following analyses.⁷

The iPanel survey included several questions about support for different regimes and civil liberties alongside demographic questions. iPanel quota sampled Jewish Israelis based on age bracket, sex, region, and religious denomination to create a diverse sample. The quotas were suggested by iPanel, but they are also substantially similar to the INES demographics. The median survey time was approximately 5 minutes. iPanel is the largest survey company in Israel, and it has been used for several academic studies (e.g., Grossman et al., 2018; Ridge, 2024). The survey ran from May 23 to June 16, 2024.

In between these surveys, major events occurred. The Netanyahu government undertook a judicial reform process to prevent Israel's judiciary from checking government policies. This led to mass protests against the attempt to remove constraints on the executive. Other issues, such as the religious-secularist cleavage, were also imbricated in these protests, as the government was seen as advancing conservative or Orthodox religious interpretations. Protestors argued the rollback of judicial autonomy and the inclusion of Orthodox parties in the governing coalition would undermine gay rights and women's rights; some protestors wore red cloaks to invoke *The Handmaid's Tale*. After the October 7th attack, the Israeli government besieged Gaza and killed more than 64000 people by June 2024, engaging in what several prominent human rights

⁷ A supplementary analysis that includes the non-Jewish Israeli responses is shown in Appendix A. The Jewish Israelis were *significantly less likely* to be liberal than the non-Jewish Israelis. The Jewish/non-Jewish variable is not statistically significant on support for non-democracies.

For that analysis, the questions that were only asked to Jews are removed from the question list. If the questions about minority inclusion had been asked to the minority respondents, however, it is likely that they would have been in favor of their own rights. That potentiality must perforce be left to subsequent research.

groups, scholars, and the United Nations have called a genocide (Jamaluddine et al., 2025). The death toll has increased in the subsequent year. While some citizens took this opportunity to turn toward the right-wing government and to strip rights from minorities, others protested the government’s perceived incompetence and its war policies. As such, in theory, much could have shifted in public opinion. However, the timespan also suggests that attitudes here are not merely a function of the current war and related policies.

Table 1: Sample Characteristics

Characteristic	INES	iPanel
Haredi (Ultra-Orthodox)	14.5%	11.8%
Dati (Modern Orthodox)	11.8%	14.0%
Masorti (Traditional)		24.6%
Masorti - Religious	11.7%	
Masorti - Not Very Religious	15.7%	
Hiloni (Secular)	46.4%	49.6%
Male	44.7%	48.6%
Female	55.3%	51.3%
Ashkenazi	41.4%	42.8%
Mizrahi/Sephardi	45.1%	38.6%
Mixed ⁸	4.1%	16.6%
Other	2.4%	1.9%
Israeli ⁹	7.2%	
College Educated	46.0%	49.1%

The INES asked respondents the extent of their agreement with a series of described regimes from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (4). The statements expressed commitment to democracy despite disagreement with the election results, whether a strong leader should operate without consulting the Knesset (the Israeli parliament) or elections, whether experts should replace elected representatives, whether “deviat[ing] from the democratic rules of the game” is “preferable” in order “to achieve significant change,” if the state should secure “full and equal social and political rights to all citizens,” and whether the freedom of speech should protect those who “speak out against the state.” The first two of these are non-democratic regime types. The third is an anti-democratic behavior. The latter two questions address liberal values – equal rights and free speech.

Liberalism was also addressed in other areas of the survey. Respondents answered whether they thought democracy should be considered a purely majoritarian system or whether “to be truly democratic a regime must also maintain principles such as human rights and freedom of speech.” Jewish Israelis could also indicate whether Arab parties should be allowed in Israeli politics: “completely opposed” (1), “Oppose their participation in the coalition, but in favor of their support from the outside” (2), “Supports their participation in the coalition, without ministerial positions” (3), or “Supports their participation in the coalition, including ministerial positions” (4). Liberalism would expect equal rights for ethno-religious minorities, and

⁸ Mixed ethnicity refers to both Ashkenazi and Mizrahi heritage. It does not typically refer to Jewish-Arab intermarriage. Religious law governs marriage law in Israel, and Jewish tradition discourages exogamy. Interfaith marriages may be registered with the state after they have been conducted abroad.

⁹ The Israeli government has attempted to minimize the important within-group ethnic distinction (Khazzoom, 2008). Israel-born children of Israel-born men are coded as “Israeli” in the Census, rather than recognizing their ethnic group. However, citizens are still typically cognizant of their ancestry. However, because of a cultural bias in favor of Ashkenazi (European) Jewishness, Mizrahi/Sephardi (Asian and African) Jews are more likely than Ashkenazi Jews to use a grouping identifier (e.g., Israeli or Jewish) for their ethnicity (Lewin-Epstein and Cohen, 2019).

democracy does not permit barring parties just because of their members' heritage. It fails on the inclusiveness metric. Agreeing with such a ban would be a poor democratic indicator, regardless of the regime type statements.

An economic angle is also considered. Respondents were asked about "the structure of economic life in the country" and whether they supported a socialist (4) or capitalist (1) approach more. Democratic principles would allow any party to participate, but they would not require a capitalist system (Schmitter and Karl, 1991). However, citizens could cluster around economic profiles.

The iPanel survey drew on the questions from Schedler and Sarsfield (2007) and Ridge (2022b). It asked respondents whether an elected government is always best, whether an unelected government is sometimes best, or whether for someone like them it does not matter.¹⁰ Respondents were also asked for their agreement or disagreement with several para-democratic values. They were asked whether women, homosexuals, or ethnic or religious minorities should participate in politics. The principle of democratic equality would permit all citizens to participate.

Other regime types were included as well. Respondents indicated the acceptability from very unacceptable (1) to very acceptable (4) of a majoritarian, theocratic, military, or strongman government. For simplicity, the responses were recoded such that high scores indicated support for democracy and opposition to authoritarianism. The first option taps into a focal element of democratic governance. Notably, this is a low threshold. After all, as noted above, it does not require them to support liberal premises. Furthermore, recent studies in Israel suggest that majoritarians were more willing to support Netanyahu's efforts to undermine the judiciary; Gidron et al. (2025) thus link majoritarian beliefs to backsliding. As such, support for majority rule could be construed as an important but not independently sufficient defense of democracy.

The other regime options are overtly not democratic. In Israel, the role of religion has always been subject to debate, particularly as religious voices have grown in political weight. While the government is formally secular, certain policies and practices are geared towards religion (e.g., marriage law). When religious law is invoked, priority has traditionally been given to the Orthodox interpretation, although about half of Jewish Israelis identify as *hiloni* (secular). The military is a powerful institution in Israel, especially because most people are conscripted into the Israeli military.¹¹ It is seen as a secular and even secularizing institution (Bagno-Moldavski, 2015). A strong man option is one of the more common contemporary tyrannies.

Additional questions tapped inclusive or liberal values. They indicated whether respondents would allow a person's going on television to promote a position they did not support and if citizens should be allowed to protest for social change. They also answered whether or not the government should be permitted to restrict free association. To assess their attitudes toward the rule of law, they had to indicate whether the law should be applied the same to police and rabbis as to civilians and laypersons. The survey also asked if they believed the government could "violat[e] human rights" for the sake of "public safety and security." The survey also included two economic questions. One asked if the government should restrict the income gap between the rich and the poor and if the government should ensure housing and food for the poor. The results are coded such that 1 indicated the liberal position, -1 an illiberal position, and 0 for unsure.

¹⁰ This wording avoids explicitly using the word *democracy*. As such, it reduces the potential for "lip service" or divergent question interpretation in shaping support (Kaftan, 2024; Ridge, 2023).

¹¹ Ultra-orthodox Jews have typically received exemptions from service, despite the fact that the Israeli courts have ruled the exemption is not legal. The current government has divided on whether or not to draft the ultra-orthodox. Druze men also regularly serve in the military. Palestinian Citizens of Israel are also often exempted from the service requirement.

While in theory support for democracy should mean opposition to the non-democracy, that is often not the case. Instead, citizens take a yes-and approach to regime endorsement. How, then, do these systems hang together? After a descriptive consideration, this article considers a factor analysis on these regime type support questions. Next it introduces a cluster analysis of citizens' regime-type and liberal-principle commitments.

5. Descriptive Results

The baseline survey responses themselves reveal important information about public support for democracy and liberalism in the Jewish Israeli population.¹² In the INES sample, overall, the respondents incline toward democracy (Table 2). However, they *did not* roundly reject the non-democratic options. While there was some agreement with the concept of full and equal rights for all citizens, that support was not robust. After all, support for citizens' right to criticize the government and the rights of ethnic minorities were significantly lower than the support for equal rights generally ($p < 0.001$).

Table 2: INES Regime Preferences

Statement	Average Score (1-4)
Feel committed to democracy	3.2
Strong leader	2.3
Expert rule	2.7
Deviate from democratic rules	2.4
Full and equal rights	3.1
Free speech	2.4
Permit Arab parties to participate	2.2

The iPanel results show respondents who are ready to endorse majority rule, but they are not necessarily convinced elected governments are always the best. While 41.0% say they are, 50.5% say sometimes unelected governments are better. This is similarly demonstrable in the tolerance – albeit low for any particular regime – for a religious government, strongman rule, or military control. Each of these had the support of a non-trivial minority (18.9%-23.7%). Strongman rule was more popular than the other two ($p < 0.10$). This is consistent with the observed behavior of the Israeli government. Furthermore, commitment to the liberal values varied greatly. Women's participation and protest rights, for instance, were highly endorsed. Rights to share unpopular opinions or the protection against abusing terror suspects had far less support. Thus, there is uneven support for liberalism and democracy in this sample as well.

Table 3: iPanel Regime Preferences

Statement	Average Score (1-4)
Majoritarian	3.04
Religious veto	1.87
Strong man	1.94
Military	1.87

¹² While the INES targets a representative sample, the iPanel results are opt-in quota samples. As such, these scores are presented with caution. However, they contextualize the cluster patterns demonstrated below.

6. Factor Analysis

If democracy is opposed to non-democracy and democracy and liberalism go hand-in-hand, then these kinds of political items should load together onto one construct scale. This can be assessed using factor analysis. This section employs factor analysis with oblimin rotation to identify the factors in the datasets.¹³

The section also considers the demographic predictors of respondents' scores on each of the factors in turn. A binary indicator identifies sex, and age is included by the INES and iPanel age brackets. A binary variable identifies tertiary education and political knowledge, based on correctly identifying the president of the Supreme Court. A factor variable distinguishes those who think "Israel's general situation" is good or "so so"/bad. In the INES responses, a factor distinguishes those whose economic situation is good, average, or poor based on their reported household spending compared to Israel's average. The iPanel survey asked whether their family income was sufficient to the family's expenses. Religious denomination is included as a nominal variable with *hiloni* (secular) as the reference category. A binary variable indicates immigrants and heritage from the former USSR. Ethnicity is included as a nominal variable with Ashkenazi as the reference category.¹⁴ Prior studies have shown that Mizrahi/Sephardi Jews are less democratically committed than Ashkenazi Jews (Ridge, 2024a). Jewish Nationalism is pervasive in Israeli politics (Oren, 2019) and in the INES it is measured by agreement that "the government of Israel [should] see to it that public life in the country is conducted according to Jewish religious tradition." The iPanel survey included Ridge's (2024b) Jewish Nationalism scale. The iPanel survey also asked whether respondents were interested in politics or not. More politically engaged citizens are usually more invested in democracy. The INES dataset included several questions about regime types, especially related to who is in power and what civil rights protections would exist. It specifically allowed citizens to reject minority participation. The model identifies two factors with eigenvalues greater than 1. Confirmatory factor analysis supports this result (Appendix B). The factor loadings are shown in Table 4. The first factor shows support for liberal principles, like free speech and minority rights. The second loading is the support for non-democratic regime types. Support for "the democratic regime in Israel" did not load highly onto either scale. The results show very distinct scales, rather than democracy and non-democracy being two poles of one democratic attitudes scale.

These scales also have distinct demographic profiles. For the purposes of demographic analysis, respondents are categorized as high or low scoring at the 0 mark on the scale based on the mean and median of the distribution. Table 5 shows the predictors of the two scales utilizing binary logistic regression models. Consistent with previous research, Mizrahi/Sephardi Israelis are less likely to be liberal than Ashkenazi Israelis. They are also marginally more likely to support alternatives to democracy ($p < 0.10$). Women are more likely to accept a non-democracy. Jewish nationalist Israelis and religious Israelis are both less likely to be liberal. Politically knowledgeable Israelis are more likely to be liberal and less accepting of non-democracy.

¹³ Oblimin rotation was preferred to varimax rotation to allow for the theoretical correlation between liberalism and regime-type preferences. The factor analysis results showed slight but non-zero correlations.

¹⁴ Those who identified themselves as Israeli or Sabra are coded as Israeli. Those who identified as "citizen of the world" or "human" are coded with Other. Consistent with prior analyses, Mizrahim and Sephardim are grouped for analyses.

Table 4: Factor Loadings (INES)

Regime	Liberalism	Non-Democracy Support
Any regime that operates according to majority rule is democratic, as opposed to democracy requiring following principles such as human rights and freedom of speech	-0.39	-0.03
You feel committed to the democratic regime in Israel, even if there are times when you don't like the decision	0.24	-0.17
In order to take care of Israel's unique problems there is a need for a strong leader who doesn't take the Knesset or the election into consideration	-0.16	0.61
To deal with Israel's problems, it is best having experts, not elected representatives, make decisions according to what they think is best for the country	0.22	0.65
There are times when it seems it would be preferable to deviate from the democratic rules of the game in order to achieve significant change	-0.13	0.65
The state has to ensure full and equal social and political rights to all citizens, regardless of religion, race, or sex	0.69	0.05
We must secure the freedom of speech of people who speak out against the state too	0.54	-0.08
Allow Arab parties to participate in politics	0.68	-0.05
Do you support a more socialist approach to economic life?	0.05	0.24
SS Loadings	1.56	1.34
Proportion Variance Explained	0.17	0.15

Table 5: Predictors of Support for (Non-)Democracy (INES)

	Liberalism	Non-Democracy Support
(Intercept)	1.10*	0.02
	(0.49)	(0.46)
Jewish nationalism	-0.53***	0.04
	(0.13)	(0.12)
Israeli Ethnicity	-0.25	-0.10
	(0.41)	(0.38)
Mixed Ethnicity	-0.74	-0.37
	(0.60)	(0.63)
Mizrahi/Sephardi Ethnicity	-0.98***	0.40
	(0.26)	(0.24)
Other Ethnicity	2.04	-16.35
	(1.23)	(724.84)
Age Group	0.06	0.02
	(0.07)	(0.06)

	Liberalism	Non-Democracy Support
Male	0.08 (0.23)	-0.67** (0.21)
College Educated	0.27 (0.23)	-0.24 (0.21)
Haredi	-1.27* (0.51)	0.49 (0.44)
Dati	-0.99* (0.43)	0.34 (0.39)
Masorti, Religious	-0.37 (0.37)	0.65 (0.35)
Masorti, Not so Religious	-0.16 (0.31)	0.35 (0.30)
Good Situation	0.28 (0.24)	-0.12 (0.22)
Low Personal Spending	0.32 (0.30)	0.33 (0.28)
High Personal Spending	0.12 (0.30)	0.11 (0.28)
Immigrant	0.03 (0.30)	0.03 (0.28)
Political Knowledge	0.67** (0.24)	-0.64** (0.21)
AIC	585.80	676.51
Log Likelihood	-274.90	-320.25
Num. obs.	468	468

***p<0.001; **p<0.01; *p<0.05

The iPanel dataset has similar questions about regime types. The model identifies two factors with eigenvalues greater than 1. These models also used oblimin rotation; confirmatory factor analysis results are presented in Appendix B. The factor loadings are shown in Table 6. The first factor shows support for non-

democratic regimes. The second loading is the support for democracy. Again, they show very distinct scales rather than forming one regime-types scale.¹⁵

Table 6: Factor Loadings (iPanel)

Regime	Non-Democracy Support	Elected Government Support
Choosing the government by election is always best	0.00	0.997
A government that follows what the majority wants	0.133	0.04
Religious leaders annul laws that violate religious law	0.512	0.06
A strong leader makes decisions without needing permission from parliament or elections	0.794	0.01
The military can replace dysfunctional or incompetent elected governments	0.406	-0.18
SS Loadings	1.07	1.03
Proportion Variance Explained	0.21	0.21

These scales also have distinct demographic profiles. For the demographic analysis, respondents are categorized as high or low scoring at the 0 mark on the scale based on the mean and median of the distribution. Table 7 shows the predictors of each based on binary logistic regression models. While Jewish nationalists are more likely to accept elections, they are also more likely to accept a non-democratic system. This is not particularly surprising given the numerical preponderance of Jews in Israel and the previous research linking religious nationalism to non-democratic sentiment. Mizrahi/Sephardi Jewish Israelis are more open to non-democracy. The results also show that older Jewish Israelis are less open to non-democracies and more financially stable Israelis are more democratic. Women were less likely to endorse elections. This is consistent with previous literature (Rizzo et al., 2007). Educated Israelis and those descended from the former USSR are less likely to support non-democracy options. The results then are broadly consistent across the two samples.

Table 7: Predictors of Support for (Non-)Democracy (iPanel)

	Non-Democracy Support	Elected Government Support
(Intercept)	1.37*** (0.36)	-0.63 (0.34)
JN	0.77*** (0.11)	0.38*** (0.11)
Haredi	-0.46 (0.35)	0.47 (0.32)

¹⁵ It is not common to have one item alone on a scale. In future applications, it would be reasonable to use this item by itself to measure democratic attitudes and not attempt to scale it with the others. Here, though, it shows that democracy support *does not* scale with non-democracy support.

	Non-Democracy Support	Elected Government Support
Dati	-0.35 (0.30)	0.30 (0.28)
Masorti	-0.28 (0.22)	0.46* (0.20)
Female	0.45** (0.15)	-0.62*** (0.14)
Age Bracket	-0.11* (0.05)	0.08 (0.04)
Mixed Ethnicity	0.02 (0.21)	0.38 (0.20)
Mizrahi/Sephardi	0.62*** (0.17)	0.21 (0.16)
Other Ethnicity	0.27 (0.50)	1.55** (0.56)
Family from the USSR	-0.74** (0.25)	0.21 (0.23)
College Educated	-0.54*** (0.15)	-0.10 (0.14)
Sufficient Income	-0.24 (0.18)	0.59*** (0.17)
Prayer Frequency	0.05 (0.05)	-0.06 (0.04)
Interested in Politics	-0.33 (0.18)	-0.16 (0.17)
AIC	1220.66	1340.65
Log Likelihood	-595.33	-655.32
Num. obs.	1011	1011
***p<0.001; **p<0.01; *p<0.05		

7. Cluster Analysis

This discontinuity introduces the potentiality for liberal values and democratic and non-democracy support to bundle in a variety of ways. To assess that possibility, this study turns to the hierarchical cluster analysis used in prior studies (Schedler and Sarsfield, 2007; Schedler and Sarsfield, 2009; Ridge, 2022a; Singer, 2011). Hierarchical Cluster Analysis is a machine learning technique for classifying patterns in a large group.

As Schedler and Sarsfield (2009: 644) explain, cluster analyses “constitute inductive techniques of classification that do not judge a priori either the weight of individual variables or particular group profiles. While factor analysis allows us to discern how different variables hang together across cases, cluster analysis reveals how cases hang together across different variables.” “Where linear relationships between variables are weak,” as is the case here – see above – “cluster analysis may serve as a valuable complement to detect and describe attitudinal inconsistencies among survey respondents” (Schedler and Sarsfield, 2009: 644). The Hierarchical Cluster Analysis method identifies groupings in survey responses by using machine learning to maximize the similarity *within* the group and minimize the similarity *between* the groups. Ward’s Hierarchical Cluster Analysis uses the squared Euclidean distance in the (theoretical) multidimensional space created by plotting each individual response in order to measure the (dis)similarity in respondents’ profiles. After identifying clusters in the sample, the study can also use regression analyses to identify predictors of support. The same demographic covariates are included as were used in the preceding analysis.

The cluster analysis results for the INES sample are shown in Table 8. Overall, the results indicate that most respondents favored democratic rules, although not equally so. However, there is also non-trivial interest in the non-democratic options. That is particularly the case for the first group, dubbed here *Restrictive*. Notably, the standard deviation in responses is lower in the Inclusive group than the Restrictive group. This Restrictive group is significantly more open to strongman rule, breaking the democratic rules, and restricting civil liberties than the Inclusive group is. The differences between the groups are particularly marked with respect to minority rights. Not only is the first group more majoritarian and less invested in civil liberties, but they are also much less likely to permit Arab Israelis to participate in Israeli politics – despite their being Israeli citizens. Thus, despite their avowed support for democracy, they are not interested in actually practicing democracy when reminded of the country’s ethnic diversity. That the Inclusive group would permit this minority to participate in politics is a strong mark for its citizen-encompassing political attitudes. This component has the starkest response division between the two groups. Nonetheless, this inclusive group is not roundly ruling out non-democratic options, like technocracy or cheating. Notably, the Restrictive group is the larger group. It makes up 55.5% of the Jewish Israeli sample. The Inclusive group is just under half (44.5%).

The results for the iPanel sample are shown in Table 9. As noted, the response is more evenly divided between elected and unelected government. On the whole, though, this newer sample is less democratic than the INES sample. When asked if electing government is best, a slight majority said that unelected governments may be superior. That is why, both the overall sample average and the group averages on the table are negative on that question. Even on the majority rule score they are not particularly supportive.

However, one of the cohorts is decidedly more favorable towards individual rights and civil liberties. The difference is particularly marked with respect to their treatment of ethnic and religious minorities – the Palestinian Citizens of Israel. This mirrors the above stark bifurcation with respect to the inclusion of Arab political parties. It is here dubbed the *Liberal* group. These groups also are divided in their attitudes toward the freedom to protest and the right of free association. These rights are particularly salient given the protests

against the Netanyahu government's judicial reform and handling of the war. Apparently, those who would accept minority participation also want the rights to defend themselves against the government. The rights of minorities were linked to the democratic rights of all the citizens.

Although the Liberal group members have lower average support for a religious regime, a military government, or strongman rule than the Illiberal group does, some group members remain open to the several of the non-democratic forms of government. While the two groups express similar levels of interest in elected government and majority rule, the non-democracies are *not* roundly rejected by either. This suggests a contingency for liberal non-democracy, as was identified in countries like Tunisia.

Table 8: INES Group Averages & Standard Deviations

Group	Majoritarian (v. Liberal) Democracy	Democratic Commitment	Strong Man Rule	Expert Rule	Break the Rules	Civil Liberties	Free Speech	Arab Participation
Restrictive	0.30 (0.46)	3.16 (0.72)	2.53 (0.97)	2.61 (0.93)	2.51 (0.95)	2.82 (0.87)	2.17 (0.94)	1.31 (0.53)
Inclusive	0.11 (0.31)	3.44 (0.55)	1.89 (0.84)	2.73a (0.80)	2.15 (0.85)	3.47 (0.63)	2.78 (0.87)	3.55 (0.61)
Full Sample Average	0.21	3.28	2.25	2.66	2.35	3.11	2.44	2.30

a *Not* significantly different by Tukey's HSD test ($p < 0.05$)
scores indicate agreement.

NB: The majoritarian scale was 0-1. The other items are measured 1-4. Higher scores indicate agreement.

Table 9: iPanel Group Averages & Standard Deviations

Group	Women	Religious Minority	Ethnic Minority	Gay	Opinion	Clergy	Police	Redistribution	Income Gap	Free Association	Protest	Threats
Illiberal	0.45 (0.80)	-0.40 (0.78)	-0.28 (0.83)	0.03 (0.87)	-0.06 (0.82)	0.61 (0.70)	0.67 (0.70)	0.58 (0.67)	0.27 (0.84)	0.30 (0.78)	0.49 (0.75)	-0.35 (0.82)
Liberal	0.99 (0.09)	0.86 (0.41)	0.88 (0.36)	0.94 (0.28)	0.54 (0.70)	0.90 (0.39)	0.93 (0.33)	0.48a (0.74)	0.42 (0.79)	0.56 (0.67)	0.93 (0.31)	-0.16 (0.83)
Full Sample Average	0.85	0.52	0.57	0.70	0.39	0.82	0.86	0.51	0.38	0.49	0.82	-0.21

Group	Elected Government is Best	Majority Rule	Religious Regime	Strong Man Rule	Military Regime
Illiberal	-0.03 (0.94)	1.95 (0.78)	2.49 (0.94)	2.58 (0.84)	2.17 (0.88)
Liberal	-0.12a (0.96)	1.96a (0.70)	1.64 (0.70)	1.70 (0.72)	1.75 (0.76)
Full Sample Average	-0.09	1.96	1.86	1.93	1.87

a *Not* significantly different by Tukey's HSD test ($p < 0.05$)
NB: The items in the first group are score -1, 0, 1 for the illiberal position, unsure, or liberal position. "Democrat" is -1 for saying unelected governments are best, 0 is neutral, and 1 supports elected government. The regime types are scored 1-4. Higher scores indicate support

In the iPanel sample, the Liberal group is the larger group. It makes up 73.4% of the Jewish Israeli sample. The Illiberal group is about a quarter of the sample (26.6%). Thus, while the distribution suggests a more democratic sample, it is not singularly or insuperably committed to democracy. That is particularly evident in the regime-type responses.

Next, the predictors of group membership are considered. Because each survey generated two groups, the results are analyzed using binary logistic regression models. Respondent covariates are included. The models predict membership in the Liberal and Inclusive groups respectively.

There are several demographic similarities between the INES (Table 10) and iPanel (Table 11) demographic predictors of group memberships. In both samples, consistent with prior research, Mizrahi/Sephardi Jews are less liberal and inclusive than Ashkenazi Jews. In the iPanel sample, more religious respondents, the Haredim and those who pray more frequently, are less likely to be in the Liberal group. In the INES sample, more religious respondents were less likely to be Inclusive, though that effect was not always statistically significant. In both surveys Jewish nationalist respondents were less likely to be in the liberal or inclusive group. The more political, older, and better educated respondents, on the other hand, are more likely to be liberal and inclusive. That education, wealth, and political engagement are associated with more liberal political attitudes is consistent with patterns identified in other country contexts.

Table 10: INES Group Predictors

	<i>Dependent variable: Inclusive Group</i>
Jewish Nationalism	-0.57*** (0.13)
Haredi	-0.72 (0.52)
Dati	-1.33** (0.47)
Masorti, Religious	-0.44 (0.38)
Masorti, Not so Religious	0.16 (0.31)
Male	-0.34 (0.24)
Age Bracket	0.20** (0.07)

Israeli	0.60
	(0.42)
Mixed	-0.30
	(0.60)
Mizrahi/Sephardi	-0.58*
	(0.26)
Other	0.36
	(0.72)
Immigrant	-0.08
	(0.30)
College Education	0.90***
	(0.23)
High Personal Spending	0.09
	(0.31)
Low Personal Spending	0.28
	(0.30)
Situation in Israel is Good	0.31
	(0.25)
Political Knowledge	0.71**
	(0.24)
Constant	-0.10
	(0.50)
Num. obs.	468
Log Likelihood	-270.06
AIC	576.13
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 11: iPanel Group Predictors

	<i>Dependent variable: Liberal Group</i>
(Intercept)	0.96* (0.45)
Jewish Nationalism	-0.85*** (0.14)
Haredi	-0.84* (0.36)
Dati	0.31 (0.32)
Masorti	0.22 (0.25)
Female	-0.11 (0.18)
Age Bracket	0.21*** (0.06)
Mixed	0.34 (0.28)
Mizrahi/Sephardi	-0.51* (0.20)
Other	-0.14 (0.65)
USSR Ancestry	-0.20 (0.31)
College Education	0.25 (0.18)
Sufficient Income	0.30 (0.20)
Prayer Frequency	-0.12* (0.05)

<i>Dependent variable: Liberal Group</i>	
Interested in Politics	0.22
	(0.21)
AIC	915.65
Log Likelihood	-442.82
Num. obs.	1015
***p<0.001; **p<0.01; *p<0.05	

8. Discussion and Conclusions

This study has examined the confluence and discontinuity of democratic and liberal sentiments in Israel. It has drawn on two recent surveys of Jewish Israeli public opinion – the Israel National Election Survey from November 2022 and an original iPanel survey from May to June 2024. The results demonstrate that Israelis will readily express support for democracy as a system of government. This is nominally a good thing, since support makes democracies more durable (Claassen, 2020). However, these individuals are not necessarily *democrats*. These same individuals may still endorse non-democratic systems, like expert rule and strongman rule. Furthermore, many respondents indicated that unelected governments are sometimes superior to elected governments.

Furthermore, democratic support is decoupled from support for liberal values. Jewish Israelis are more divided on their support for civil liberties and individual rights. Ethnic and religious minorities' rights are the least supported in these samples. That is most evident when it comes to whether or not Arab Israelis may participate in politics. Despite Arab Israelis' Israeli citizenship, many Jewish Israelis would see them excluded from government. This flies in the face of those respondents' other, more inclusive, attitudes and their thinking of themselves as supporting democracy. As such, these respondents could be thought of as *democrats with adjectives*.

In this, some Jewish Israelis are operating differently from the pattern shown by Bor et al. (2020). Rather than the presence of a minority group leading toward a push for inclusive decision-making, awareness of the minority group drives these individuals to want rights for the in-group and majoritarianism to the exclusion of individual rights and minority rights. Where in other regimes minority rights drove citizens to come together, in the case of Israel, socio-political clusters are divided on this point. Crucially, that divide seems quite strong. The fact that it is both illiberal and anti-democratic is a challenge for (re-)democratizing Israel.

These results are particularly troubling in light of Israel's history of democratic decline. This illiberal and non-inclusive tendency in the population is concerning, even if it is not a supermajority view. Israeli politicians are already attempting illiberal and anti-democratic changes (Oren, 2023; Oren and Waxman, 2022). A sizeable population that endorses illiberal policies or supports (or at least tolerates) anti-democratic systems would be a boon to the Netanyahu government's attempts to grow its own power. This places Israel in the cadre of countries that have democratically retrenched in recent years (Little and Meng, 2023; Mechkova et al., 2017;

Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019).¹⁶ Largescale public demonstrations and counter-demonstrations related to the Netanyahu government's "reforms" show the substantial division on these points. However, without persistence in that defense, the iterative efforts at illiberalism and power consolidation can be increasingly successful.

Notably, one of these surveys occurred prior to the current war in Gaza and one occurred after these events started. This timespan demonstrates that the identified effects are not merely a product of the current crisis. If anything, Israeli public opinion has become less liberal on Palestinian rights and protections against abuse and torture since the start of the war (Hermann et al., 2024). Furthermore, the treatment of Palestinians and the Palestinian Citizens of Israel is a long-running concern that will remain central to Israeli politics. Thus, these results speak to a more general pattern in Jewish Israeli public opinion. This general propensity is then a democratic concern.

Overall, this article further demonstrates that merely asking citizens whether they endorse "democracy" is inadequate. This is both a survey methodological concern and a practical politics issue. Citizens may be speaking their truth when they say they support a hypothetical democracy in Israel (or any country), but it is not the whole truth. To understand citizens' political commitments, it is necessary to address the multiple facets of democracy and the non-democratic options they might endorse as well. Given the size and scope of the liberal challenges facing Israel right now and the widespread protests that have taken place, understanding the parameters of public sentiment is necessary for interpreting the avenues forward in Israel.

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¹⁶ NB: These scholars are arguing that democratic decline is concentrated in a few countries. However, other researchers have argued that there is a global problem with backsliding (Wiebrecht et al., 2023).

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AUTHOR'S INFORMATION

Hannah Ridge is an assistant professor of political science at Chapman University. She earned her PhD at Duke University. Her research focuses on Middle Eastern politics, democracy, and public opinion.