

Support for Democratic and Liberal Values in Israel

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INTRODUCTION

The last two years have been a particularly turbulent period for Israeli politics, with four general elections in the span of two years that ended with a new prime minister after a record-breaking twelve years in office for the previous one. In this survey, conducted by researchers at the Institute for Liberty and Responsibility at the Lauder School of Government, Diplomacy and Strategy, we sought to determine the public's position on a number of key issues, focusing on those relating to democratic and liberal values.

We believe the results of this survey can be helpful to both public servants as well as ordinary citizens in assessing the public mood on Israeli democracy.

PUBLIC CONCEPTION OF THE TERM "DEMOCRACY"

How does the Israeli public conceive the term "democracy"? And what are the main properties of democracy's in the popular imagination? To gain an insight on that, we used an open question format, without preset choices to pick from, asking people to define democracy in their own words. The wording of the question was broad: "Different people give different meanings to the term 'democracy.' In one or two words, could you tell us what for you is the most essential property of democracy?"

Many respondents did not limit themselves to only one or two words. In Table 1, we have listed the most common responses (accounting for synonyms and overlaps). What is noteworthy is the dominance of terms involving "freedom" and, just below them on the list "equality" over terms describing the mechanics of democratic politics, such as "elections," "majority rule," or "representation." "Rights" as the most essential property of democracy came up even less.

Table 1: Essential Property of Democracy

Word/expression	Share in the sample (%)
Freedom (חופש)	17.7
Freedom of expression (חופש-ביטוי)	16.7
Equality (שוויון)	12.3
Rule of the people (שלטון-העם)	12.0
Rule of the majority (שלטון-הרוב)	7.5
Elections (בחירות)	5.7
Representation (ייצוגיות)	2.3
Liberty (חירות)	1.5
Rights (זכויות)	1.4
Free elections (בחירות- חופשיות)	1.2

ASSESSMENTS OF ISRAELI DEMOCRACY

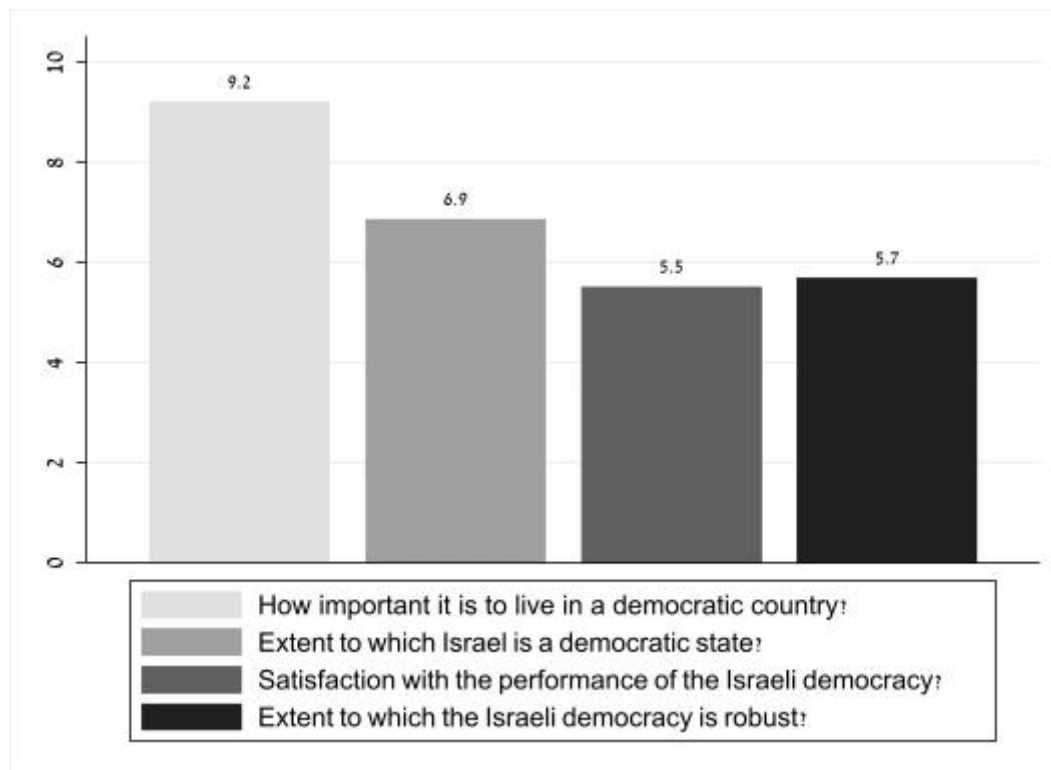
How do Israelis rate their own democracy? A number of questions in the survey sought to figure that out. Figure 1 summarizes the results to four of those.

First, respondents were asked how important on a scale of 0 (not important at all) to 10 (very important) it was for them to live in a democracy. The average answer, 9.2, leaves little doubt as to a strong consensus on this matter.

At the same time, the feelings of the Israeli public (or parts of it) to the functioning of democracy in Israel paint a more nuanced picture. Asked “to what extent would you characterize Israel as a democratic state” from 0 (not at all democratic) to 10 (very democratic), respondents in the survey gave an average answer of 6.9. When asked to rate their satisfaction with the performance of Israeli democracy from 0 (very unsatisfied) to 10 (very satisfied), respondents gave an average response of only 5.5. Similarly, average response to the question of how robust Israeli democracy is, was on a scale of 0 (not at all resilient) to 10 (very resilient) was 5.7.

Taken together, these figures represent a broad dissatisfaction with democracy in Israel despite (or maybe because of) the importance it is seen as having.

Figure 1: How does the public assess Israeli democracy?



OPPOSITION TO POLITICAL VIOLENCE

There was one topic which was a locus of overwhelming consensus in Israeli public opinion, at least according to our survey: political violence. The survey asked people to rate their level of agreement with the statement, “In no circumstance can the use of violence for the attainment of political goals be justified.” The possible responses were 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree somewhat), 3 (agree somewhat), and 4 (strongly agree).

We added responses 1 and 2 together for all those who disagree, as well as 3 and 4 for all those who agree. 93 percent of the public agrees with the statement rejecting political violence (81% strongly and 13% somewhat), while less than 7% disagreed (2% strongly and 5% somewhat).

PRINCIPLES FROM THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

Israel’s Declaration of Independence is widely considered a foundational text for much of the Israeli public. In light of this, we decided to pose several questions in our survey which would measure the public’s fealty to seven main principles featured in the text. Respondents were asked to rate the importance of each principle on a scale of 0 (not important at all) to 10 (very important).

The two principles with the highest support are that the state “will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants” (average score of 8.7) and that the state “it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations” (8.6). Just behind that in public support is the principle that the state will “will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex” (8.5) and that “it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture” (8.5). Both of the latter two are unequivocally liberal democratic principles. Only slightly lower figures for the principle that the state “will be based on freedom, justice and peace” (8.3) and that the State of Israel “will be open for Jewish immigration and for the Ingathering of the Exiles” (8.3). Significantly lower agreement was measured for the principle that the state “it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions” (7.1)

JEWISH-ARAB RELATIONS

Relations between Jews and Arabs in Israel remain the country’s deepest social wound. In the past year, tensions between the two communities erupted into ethnic violence during Operation Guardian of the Walls in the month of May. We decided to measure relations between the two communities with a series of questions in the survey asking citizens if they preferred to receive certain services from within their own communities or not. The questions covered services from three professions: doctors, construction workers, and auto mechanics. Survey respondents were asked if they preferred to be treated by a Jewish doctor or an Arab doctor or didn’t care. And they were also asked if they preferred to have work done on their homes by Arabs or Jews and whether they preferred to have work done on their cars by Arabs or Jews.

By and large most responses to the questions expressed indifference. But the minority of Jews who prefer to get services from Jewish professionals was significantly larger than the minority of Arabs who prefer to get the same services from Arab professionals.

In the survey, we asked the question, “When you need medical care, do you prefer a Jewish doctor, an Arab doctor, or does it not matter to you?” Large majorities — 68.7% of Jews and 88.6% of Arabs — profess not to care. But 30.7% of Jews prefer a Jewish doctor and 8.1% of Arabs prefer an Arab doctor. Very small numbers give opposite preferences, with 0.5% of Jews preferring an Arab doctor and 3.3% of Arabs preferring a Jewish one.

The gaps actually grow with other professions. The survey asked, “When you need renovation work done in your home, do you prefer the worker to be Jewish or Arab, or do you not care?” As with the previous question, majorities (57.7% of Jews and 71.7% of Arabs) profess not to care. But 36.9% of Jews and 27.6% of Arabs express a preference for a worker from their own community, and 5.4% of Jews and 0.7% of Arabs for someone from the other community.

Asked about an auto mechanic, 65.3% of Jews and 79.2% of Arabs did not care about the ethnic identity of the mechanic. But 30.8% of Jews and 19.7% of Arabs prefer a mechanic from their own community, while 3.9% of Jews and 1.1% of Arabs prefer someone from the other community.

Despite deep political divisions and despite the recent burst of ethnic violence in May, large majorities express a willingness for a broad range of interactions across communal lines. It is difficult to make a deeper assessment of these figures without a comparison across time, however.

7. METHODOLOGY

To assess Israelis' Democratic and Liberal attitudes, we, researchers at the Institute for Liberty and Responsibility at the Lauder School of Government, Diplomacy and Strategy administered an online survey, fielded on November 7–9, 2021. The survey was administered by iPanel, an Israeli online survey company operating an online panel that provides a representative sample of the Israeli population. To maximize representation, we provided the survey in Hebrew and Arabic, and implemented quotas based on age, gender, religiosity, and region.

The surveys include over 60 questions that ask various questions concerning democratic and liberal attitudes, as well as a series of demographic and political questions that allow us to examine the sources of attitudes and preferences.