



Lauder School
of Government,
Diplomacy & Strategy

Program on
Democratic Resilience
& Development



Konrad
Adenauer
Stiftung

Policy Priorities and Democratic Integrity in Israel

Amnon Cavari and Alex Mintz

Working Paper

3/2021

[February, 2021]



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* We thank Keshet Firer-Friser and Ido Goldberg for their helpful assistance in organizing and coding the data.

1. INTRODUCTION

An extant body of work demonstrates the importance of public opinion to understand political action and policy priorities of democratic governments. This effect, however, is mostly at the margin – when opinion changes. When public opinion changes, governments rise and fall, elections are won or lost and old realities give way to new demands (Stimson 2015).

Similarly, policy outputs "feed back" on public inputs, serving like a thermostat; when the actual policy "temperature" differs from the preferred policy temperature, the public sends a signal to adjust policy accordingly, and once sufficiently adjusted, the signal stops (Soroka and Wleziën 2010).

Given the importance of identifying change in public opinion, one needs to examine longitudinal trends (Baumgartner and Jones 2015; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Page and Shapiro 1992). This requires time-series data about policy priorities of Israelis and policy evaluations of existing policy programs. Such data, however, do not exist about Israeli public policy. Scholarly public opinion data in Israel are sparse and there is no systematic collection of longitudinal, time-series public opinion data on policy.

We seek to change this limitation in existing work by initiating a recurring semiannual survey of policy sentiment in Israel, a measure of the heartbeat of the Israeli democracy. The surveys include questions about the policy mood in Israel, about the policy priorities of Israelis, and policy evaluations of main government departments and political actors and their policy initiatives and personal reliability.

In our longitudinal study we wish to generate data to test the following overarching questions, which stand at the heart of all Democracies, let alone the Israeli democracy:

- What are the policy priorities of Israelis? In policy priorities we refer to the preferences of Israelis about the problems and issues they want their government to address.
- How Israelis view the competence of the political actors to address the policy priorities? In competence we refer to the confidence Israelis have in the ability of various political actors and institutions to handle problems and issues the public prioritizes.
- How Israelis evaluate existing policy initiatives and to what extent they have confidence in the political actors and institutions that manage them?
- How Israelis perceive and evaluate the political and policy actions of various political actors and institutions?

2. METHOD

To assess the policy views of Israelis we administered two surveys in 2020 – one from September 10 to September 16, and one from December 29 to January (2021) 6. The surveys were administered by Geokartography using an online panel that provides a representative sample of the Israeli population. To maximize representation, we provided the survey in Hebrew and Arabic, and sampled on age, gender, ethnicity and region.

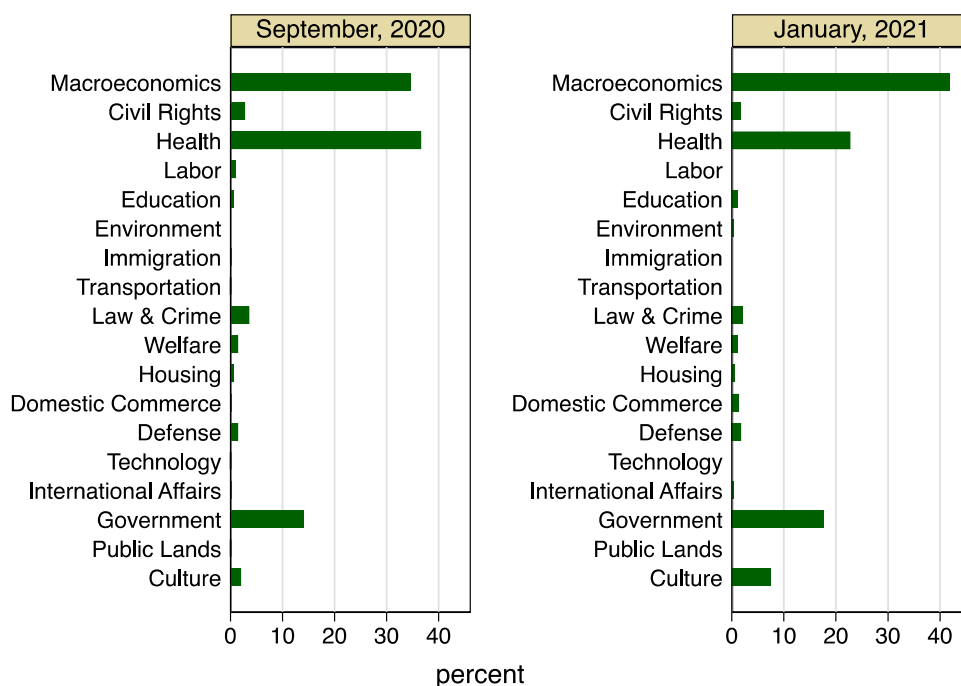
The surveys include over 60 questions that ask various policy questions, news habits and political engagement as well as a series of demographic and political questions that allow us to examine the sources of attitudes and preferences. In the current report, we summarize only topline responses (aggregate views based on all respondents).

3. RESULTS

3.1. POLICY PRIORITIES OF ISRAELIS

We examined issue priorities of Israelis using the most important problem (MIP) facing the country, an open-ended question that offers respondents the ability to voice what they care or concerned about without any a-priori categories of the pollster. Following the surveys, we coded the responses into policy categories using the unified codebook of the Comparative Agendas project (see information about the CAP project here: <https://www.comparativeagendas.net>).

Figure 1: What is the Most Important Problem Facing the Country?



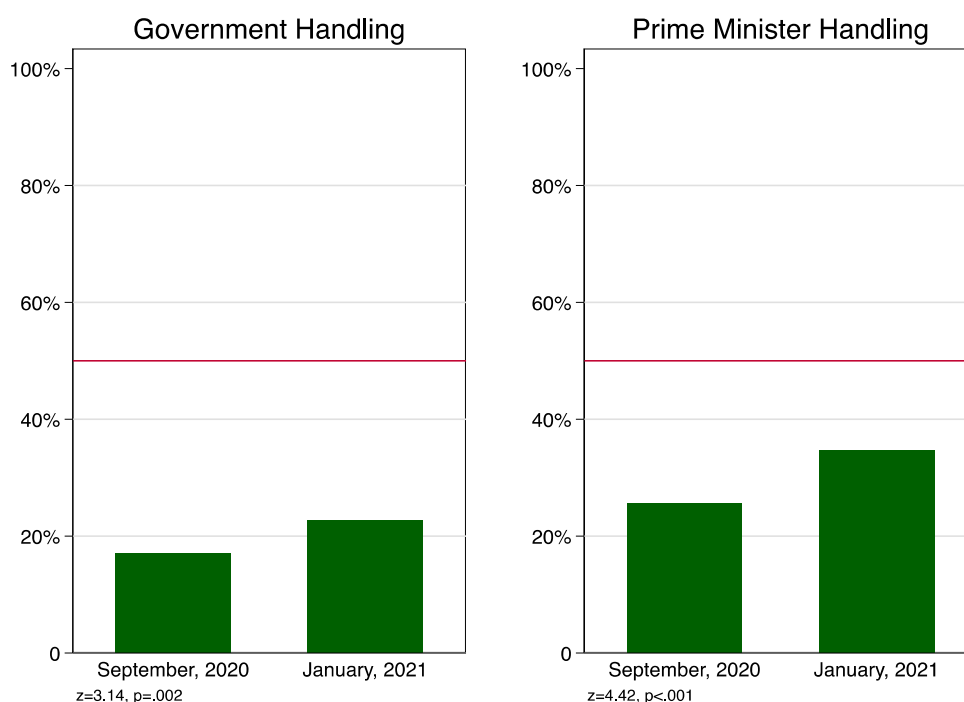
Graphs by Wave

In both waves, the majority (over 70%) of Israelis were concerned with the state of the economy and with health issues. In September, differences between the two issue domains were small. In January 2021, Israelis were overwhelmingly more concerned with the economy. More than 4 of every 10 Israelis are mostly concerned about the economy.

3.2. EVALUATION OF POLICY COMPETENCE OF ISRAELI POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

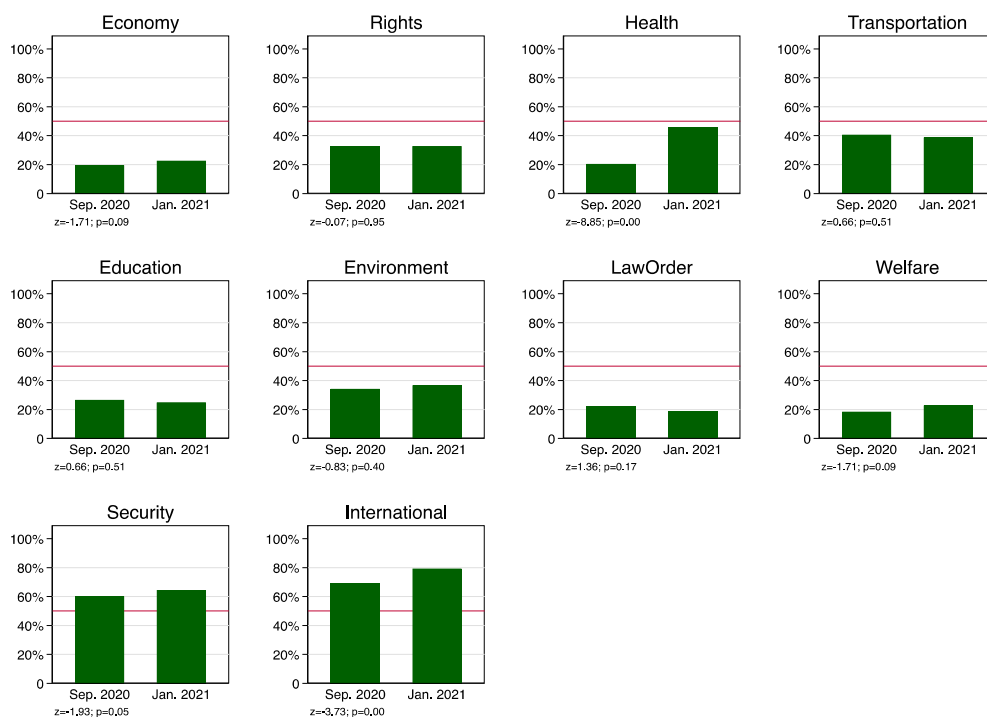
We asked various questions to assess the public perception of the competence of the Israeli government and its leaders. The first is overall satisfaction from the work of government and its head, the Prime Minister. While we see a significant increase in satisfaction from the first to the second wave, we see very low levels of satisfaction among Israelis—much lower than the 50% mark.

Figure 2: Satisfaction from Handling the Work of Government



Our second measure focuses on specific policy domains. For this purpose, we asked respondents whether they are satisfied with the way the government handles various policy areas—economy, civil rights, health, education, environment, transportation, law and order, welfare, security and foreign affairs. Figure 3 summarizes the responses in both waves. Difference statistics are included under each figure.

Figure 3: Satisfaction of Government Handling Specific Policy Domains

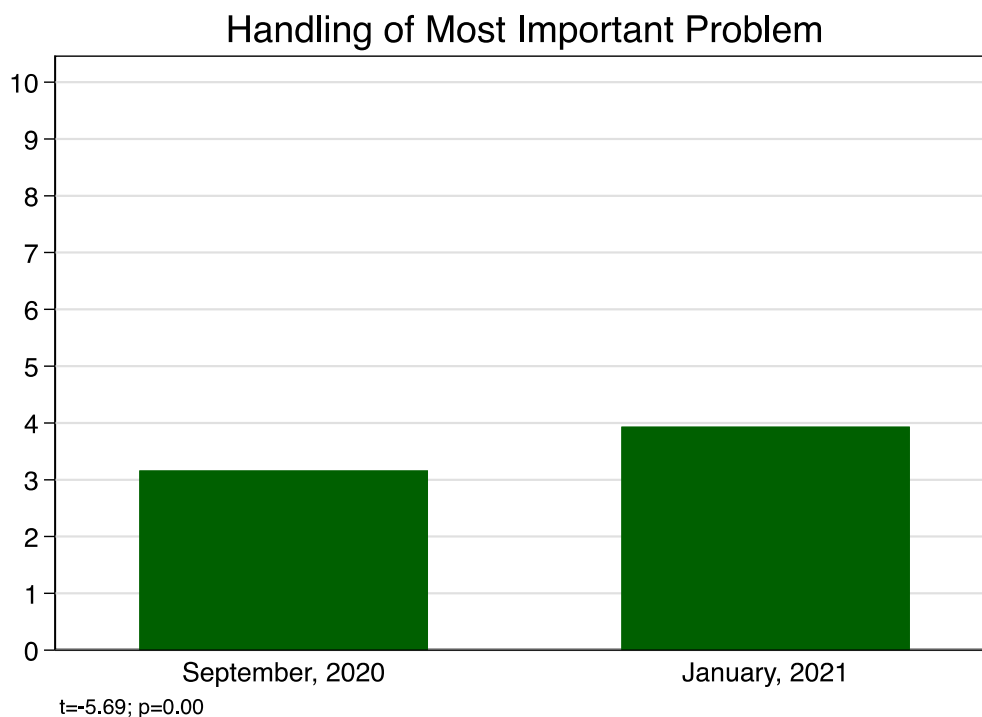


In almost all issue domains, in both waves, the Israeli public is not satisfied in the government’s handling of its job. The two exceptions are security issues and international affairs. Differences between waves are also small and not significant with the exception of health and international affairs.

The increase in satisfaction with handling of health is important. Both waves were administered during an increase in the number of Corona infections and while the government was deciding on a new lockdown that would be imposed on all Israelis.

Finally, we assess how Israelis evaluate the ability of the Israeli government to address the issues people are concerned about. Each individual can choose any issue of interest/concern to her. These concerns are summarized in Figure 1 above. Respondents were then asked if they believe that the Israeli government can address the issue they just mentioned. Our interest here is in the overall evaluations that people have of the ability of the Israeli government to handle these concerns. The advantage of this question is that it refers not to a particular problem but to the issues that matter most to respondents (Cavari 2014; Green and Jennings 2017).

Figure 4: Handling of the Most Important Problem

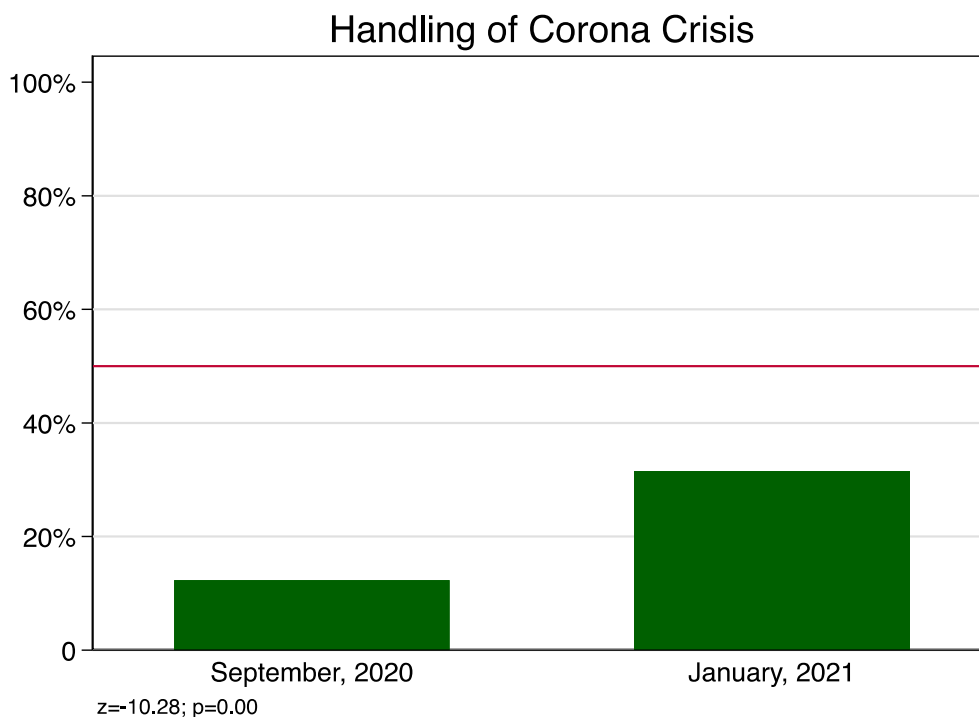


Israelis have little confidence in the ability of its government to handle the issues they care or concerned about. While Israelis had more confidence in the second wave, the mean in each wave is between 3 and 4 (the range is 1 to 10).

3.3. HOW ISRAELIS EVALUATE EXISTING POLICY INITIATIVES AND TO WHAT EXTENT THEY HAVE CONFIDENCE IN THE POLITICAL ACTORS AND INSTITUTIONS THAT MANAGE THEM?

Here we present the views of Israeli about one policy challenge – handling the Corona pandemic. We asked two questions about handling the pandemic—satisfaction with the handling of the pandemic and who respondents believe should handle the pandemic.

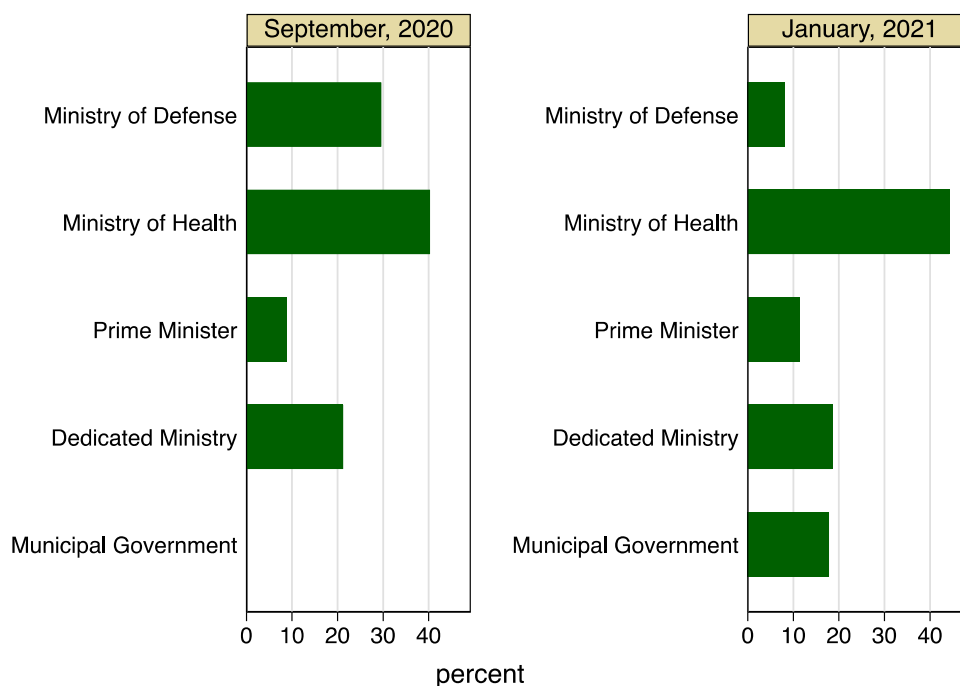
Figure 5: Satisfaction of Government Handling of the Corona Crisis



Israelis are not satisfied with the government’s handling of the Corona crisis. Though there is a significant increase in satisfaction from September to January, the overall, average satisfaction is still very low.

Our question about the best function of government to handle the Corona crisis varies between the two waves. In the first, we asked respondents to choose between the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Defense, the Prime Minister, or a special Ministry that is trusted with this issue. In the second wave we added another option – local municipal authorities. We summarize below the responses to these questions.

Figure 6: Who should Handle the Corona (Health) Crisis?



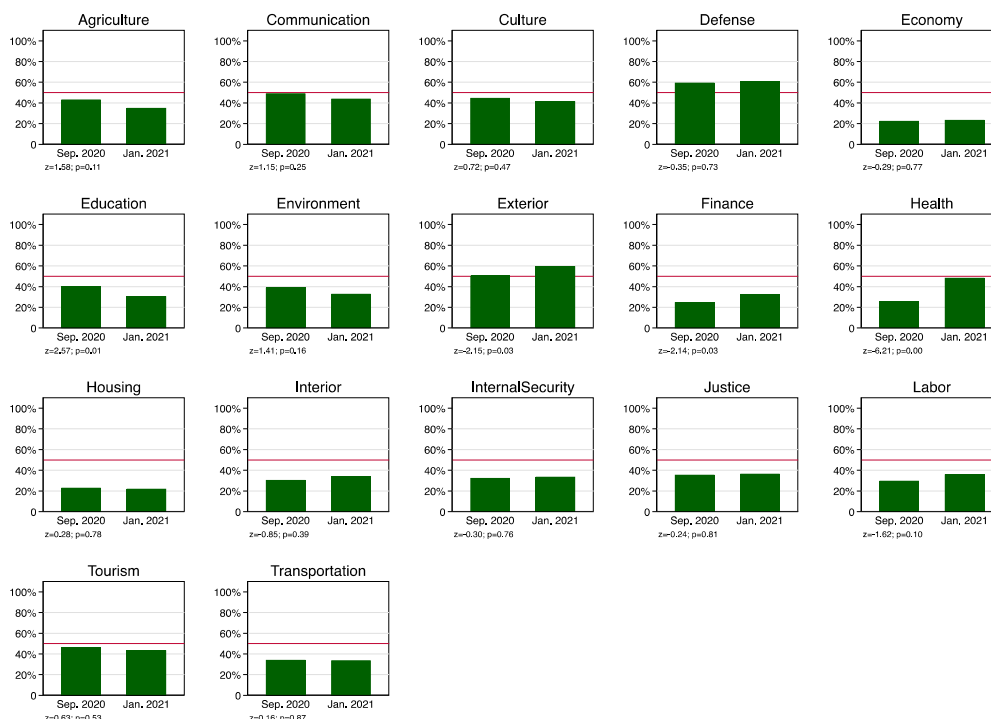
Graphs by Wave

Israelis have most confidence in the ministry of Health to handle the Corona crisis. This was true in both waves, and even increased in January 2021. Despite the extended public discussion about the ability of the ministry of defense to handle the pandemic, Israelis have little confidence in the ability of this Ministry to take this responsibility. Similarly, Israelis have little confidence in the ability of the prime minister to handle it directly. They have some support to the idea of a dedicated ministry and, in January, in their municipality.

3.4. HOW ISRAELIS PERCEIVE AND EVALUATE THE POLITICAL AND POLICY ACTIONS OF VARIOUS POLITICAL ACTORS AND INSTITUTIONS?

Finally, we examine the Israeli public’s evaluation of the various departments of government. Respondents were asked to evaluate each of the major departments. We purposefully did not provide the name of the Minister heading each of the departments. Though we acknowledge the fact that some respondents have little knowledge of each department, its duties and its actions and functions, we prefer that responses will be about the office rather than the political figure heading it.

Figure 7: Satisfaction from Work of Various Ministries



Results echo the low confidence Israelis have in handling the various policy domains. Israelis have confidence in only two departments—defense and exterior.

4. CONCLUSION

Assessing the public’s evaluation of its government is a necessary component for a functioning democracy. Representative need to be attentive to the public interests and accountable for their actions. Without knowledge of what the public wants and how it views the government, we cannot assess the quality of the representative function. This requires routine collection of data that can be assessed in relation to government actions. In our proposed study, we set this as our goal—to collect longitudinal data of public assessment of government actions.

The report here summarizes the topline responses of the two first surveys in these series. It shows the extent of dissatisfaction with the Israeli government in handling almost all features of government. The two surveys were administered during the same government. The small, yet significant differences between the two surveys demonstrate the importance of longitudinal collection of data. Only such empirical data can provide us with the necessary information to evaluate the public perception of the work of government, and how representative can respond to public demands.

Given the low confidence in the current government and its decision to dissolve the Knesset and call for elections, we are not surprised by the low levels of public satisfaction and support

we find in our data. Future surveys can reveal whether these views are a feature of Israeli confidence in its leaders or that it attests for the poor job of the current government.

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