



Lauder School of
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Policy Priorities in Israel

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Assessing Policy Priorities in Israel

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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 Wlezién 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 several surveys in 2020-2023, with the latest survey conducted on March 19-22, 2023. The surveys were administered by Geocartography, 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, ethnicity and region.

The surveys include over 60 questions that ask various policy questions 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) in the latest survey (March 2023).

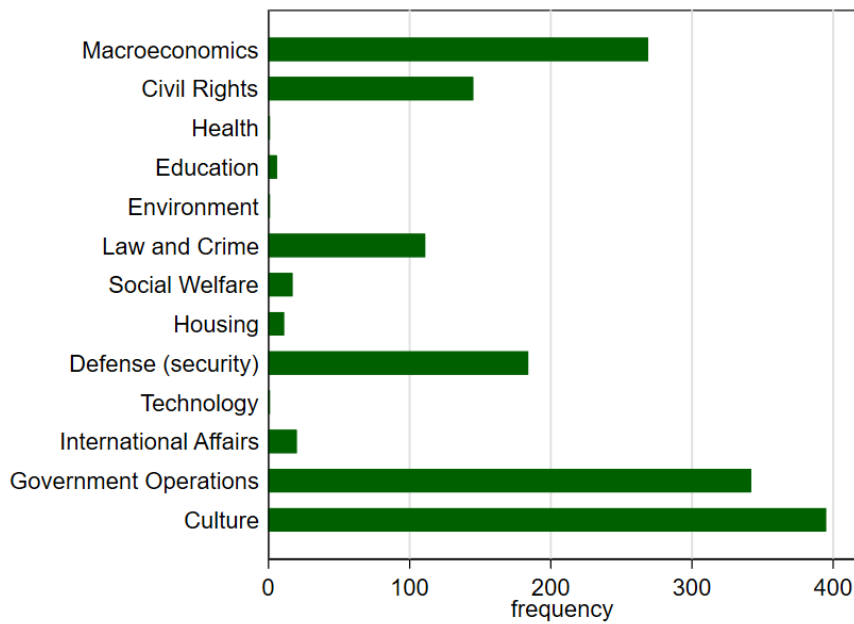
3. RESULTS

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>).

In Figure 1 we see that concerns about the political culture of Israel and the government operations were deemed the most important problems Israel is facing – attesting to the raising polarization in the Israeli public over the new Netanyahu government's attempt to legislate a "judicial reform". Economic issues come in third.

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

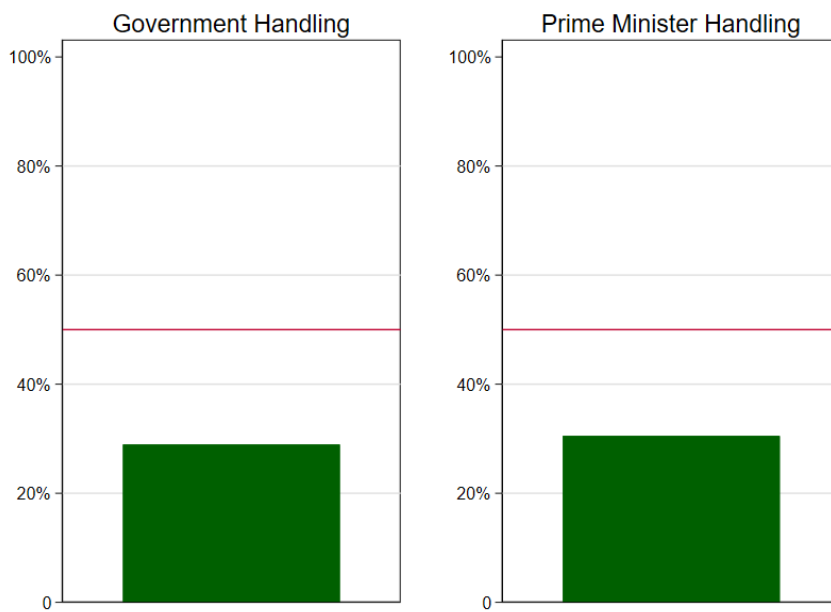


3.2. EVALUATION OF POLICY COMPETENCE OF ISRAELI POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

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. In Figure 2 we can see that satisfaction with both the government and the Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, are rather negative—satisfaction levels of about 33%.

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 our survey.

Figure 3: Satisfaction of Government Handling Specific Policy Domains

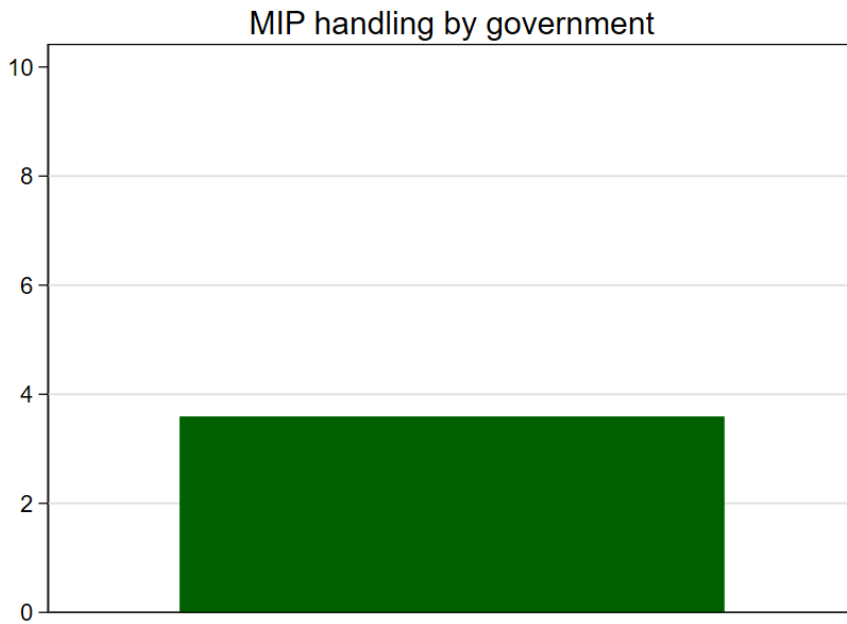


In most issue domains, the Israeli public is not satisfied in the government's handling of its job, with only health and Covid-19 related issues received satisfaction levels of 50% or more. In some issues – law and order, welfare, and security – we see that only about 20% of respondents report that they are satisfied with the government handling.

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, on a scale of 0 (low) to 10 (high). 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). The results are shown in Figure 4.

Israelis had relatively little confidence in the ability of its government to handle the issue(s) they care most for or were most concerned about – a score of slightly less than 4 on the 0-10 scale.

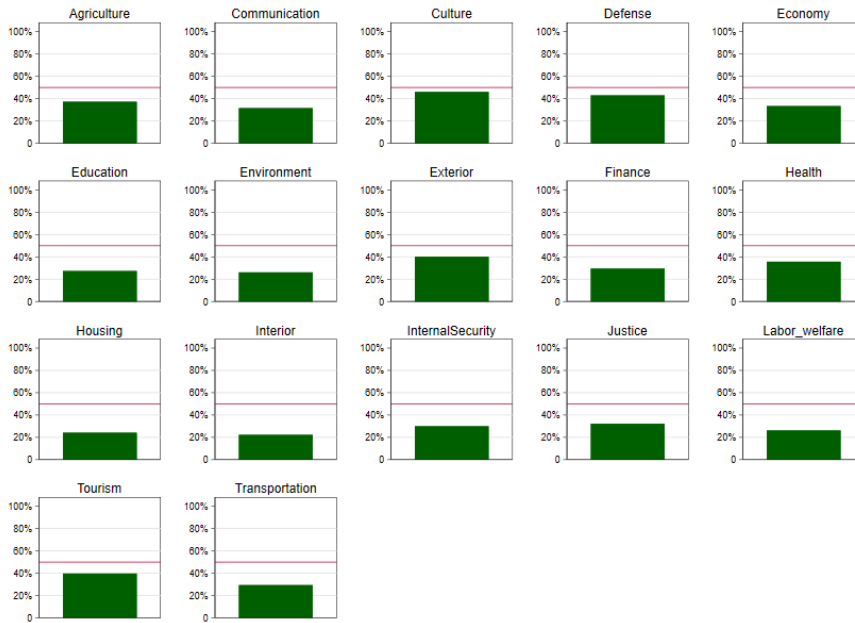
Figure 4: Handling of the Most Important Problem



3.3. 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 5: Satisfaction from Work of Various Ministries



Results, presented in Figure 5, echo the low confidence Israelis have in handling the policy domains. Not a single ministry has the confidence of at least 50% of the public across, though the Culture (and Sports) and Foreign Affairs (i.e., "Exterior") come close.

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 is our goal—to collect longitudinal data of public assessment of government actions.

The report here summarizes the topline responses of the latest survey in this series. It shows the extent of dissatisfaction with the current Israeli government in handling almost all features of government. 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.

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