

religious authority, on the one hand, and voter demand for religiously sanctioned parties and the institutional structure of the religious political parties, on the other, shapes relative radicalization and the power of religious parties resonates well beyond the case of Israel.

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IT'S US OR THEM: PARTISAN POLARIZATION IN ISRAEL AND BEYOND

By Lotem Bassan-Nygate and Chagai M. Weiss

Jewish Israelis are divided into two hostile political camps: center-left- and right-wing supporters. This division, which political scientists often refer to as partisan polarization, is clearly reflected in recent campaign advertisements which emphasize an “us” vs. “them” mentality (see Figure 1). The severity of partisan polarization is also reflected in public opinion, with a plurality of Jewish Israeli respondents in a recent survey identifying the tensions between the left and the right as the most acute cleavage in Israeli society, even more than that between Jews and Arabs.⁸⁵ Recent media reports further emphasize this pattern, which is strikingly apparent from the words of a right-winger, interviewed during a recent support rally for Prime-Minister Benjamin Netanyahu:

“All of you together, all the left-wing supporters... You don’t have a heart, you don’t have emotions, you have nothing... You are just ungrateful traitors.”⁸⁶

Such animosity, often conceptualized as affective polarization, can be measured by the gap between in-party affect and out-party dislike.⁸⁷ Figure 2 uses this measure, based on party feeling thermometers from the Israeli National Elections Studies, to provide a systematic overview of

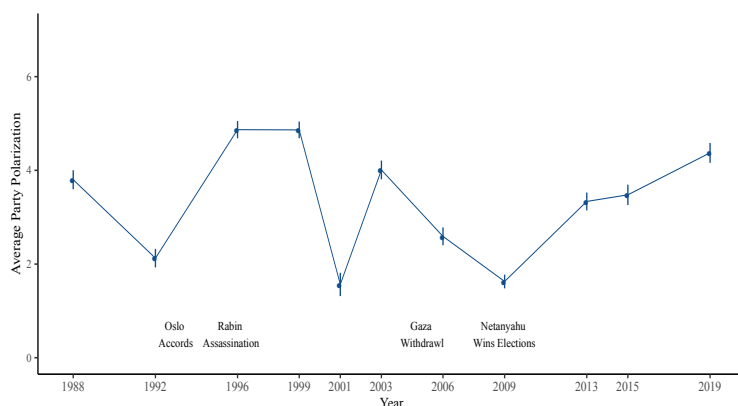
affective polarization in Israel over the last eleven election cycles (1988-2019). It reveals several interesting patterns.



Figure 1: 2015 Zionist Union (top) and Likud (bottom) Campaign Advertisements – Both advertisements employ the same slogan “It’s us or them/him.”

First, affective polarization reached an all-time high during the mid-nineties, following the Oslo accords and the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin by a right-wing extremist. Second, since Netanyahu took office (for the second time) in 2009, affective polarization seems to be on a steady rise. The temporal variation depicted in Figure 2 raises a myriad of questions regarding the causes, effects, and remedies of affective polarization in Israel.

To address these questions, and to encourage scholars of Israeli politics to engage in the study of polarization, we follow three steps. First, we provide a brief account of existing theory and evidence regarding polarization. Second, we describe the nascent literature on affective polarization in Israel, including our recent study which leverages natural and survey experiments to identify institutional causes and remedies of polarization.⁸⁸ Lastly, we conclude with an overview of fruitful paths for future research on affective polarization in Israel, and the Middle East more broadly.



*Red denotes Likud governments, blue denotes Labor governments, and green denotes center/unity governments.

Figure 2: Affective Polarization in Israel over time - Each point estimate represents an average polarization scores amongst voters from a given study of the INES. We measure affective polarization at the respondent level by identifying respondents as either right- or left-wing supporters (employing a common 7-point ideology scale), and subtracting their affect towards the leading out-party from their affect towards the leading in-party. We focus on the two right (left) leading parties during this time period: Likud and Labor.

What Do We Know About Affective Polarization?

Polarization seems to be endemic to modern democracy. Existing theory and evidence from American and comparative politics suggest that political campaigns,⁸⁹ elite ideological polarization,⁹⁰ economic inequality,⁹¹ selective repression,⁹² media consumption,⁹³ and majoritarian electoral institutions,⁹⁴ all contribute to affective polarization. While affective polarization may have some limited virtues, such as enhanced political participation,⁹⁵ scholars have focused for the most part on its adverse social consequences. These negative consequences include challenges to governance,⁹⁶ economic discrimination,⁹⁷ social sorting, and homophily.⁹⁸ The negative consequences of polarization have motivated scholars to search for potential remedies which may depolarize partisans.⁹⁹ Thus,

empirical evidence suggests that correcting misperceptions and stereotypes regarding party supporters,¹⁰⁰ and increasing the salience of a shared national identity as an alternative to a divisive partisan identity,¹⁰¹ can decrease affective polarization. That being said, efforts to emphasize partisan ambivalence or to employ psychological self-affirmation techniques seem to be ineffective in reducing polarization.¹⁰² Taken together, the existing literature, which has for the most part examined the American electorate,¹⁰³ points to institutional as well as psychological causes, effects, and remedies of polarization.

What Do We Know About Polarization in Israel?

The right-left divide has become a dominant cleavage within Jewish Israeli society since the 1970s.¹⁰⁴ This cleavage is closely associated with polarizing debates about whether or not Israel should withdraw from occupied territories.¹⁰⁵ In recent years there has been a growing scholarly interest in exploring polarization amongst the Israeli public. Garrett et al. demonstrate that exposure to co-partisan media outlets is associated with increased affective polarization, and Tsfaty and Nir investigate the mechanisms linking selective media exposure with increased polarization.¹⁰⁶ More generally, Shamir et al. present a longitudinal investigation of polarization trends since the late 1980s, and call for future research to consider the causes and effects of polarization in Israel.¹⁰⁷

We follow Shamir et al.'s call for action in our recent working paper, and employ natural and survey experiments to study the effects of electoral competition and cooperation on affective polarization in Israel.¹⁰⁸ Leveraging the random assignment of survey respondents to interview dates over seven national election studies, we demonstrate that enhanced electoral competition, measured by interview date proximity to an election, increases the gap between in-party affect and out-party dislike. This is an alarming finding, as electoral competition is a central component of democratic practice, yet it seems to have negative externalities for partisan intergroup relations. Therefore, we further ask: what political arrangements might offset the externalities

imposed by elections, and alleviate polarization?

To answer this question, we implemented a unique experiment in which we leveraged the ambiguity around coalition formation in Israel's 22nd Knesset (2019), to shape survey respondents' perceptions regarding the likelihood that a unity government will form in the near future. At the time, it was unclear whether the two leading parties (Likud and Blue White) would form a broad unity government, a narrow coalition led by one or the other, or lead Israel to a third election. Leveraging this uncertainty, we informed subjects in the treatment group that political experts expect that a unity government will form in the near future. Subjects in the control group were told that a narrow government is expected to form.¹⁰⁹

The results of this experiment demonstrate that information regarding cross-party cooperation in the form of a unity government can depolarize the electorate; specifically, respondents who are informed that a unity government will form in the near future, report warmer attitudes towards supporters of competing parties. In interpreting our evidence, we emphasize that elites, and the political arrangements they make, play a central role in shaping polarization. Indeed, we demonstrate that electoral competition and cooperation at the elite level has direct effects on mass partisan polarization. More so, we demonstrate how methodological approaches previously used by scholars of intergroup relations, can be adapted to identify the effects of endogenous institutional variables on polarization.¹¹⁰

Moving Forward: An Agenda for the Study of Polarization in Israeli Politics and Beyond

Our study takes a first step in evaluating the institutional causes and remedies of polarization in Israel.¹¹¹ While our evidence sheds light on several consequential questions, it suggests a number of paths for future empirical research.

1. Does the emergence of centrist parties depolarize voters?
2. How does exposure to violence and conflict affect partisan polarization?

3. Can institutional and electoral reforms (i.e. changing electoral thresholds, or alternating between proportional representation and split ticket voting) influence polarization?
4. Do mass-protests attenuate partisan polarization?

In some regards, Israel is unique to the Middle East, as its relatively stable and competitive electoral institutions facilitated the emergence of strong partisan identities. However, exciting research from Tunisia and Egypt exploring the emergence of political polarization between opposition movements and parties suggests that both affective and ideological polarization are relevant in multiple countries throughout the region, especially those experiencing democratic transitions.¹¹² Our research suggests that democratic transitions that introduce electoral competition may serve to polarize existing (or newly formed) identities, and that the adaptation of “kinder and gentler” forms of governance, may mitigate such externalities.¹¹³

Finally, returning to the Israeli case, it is evident that polarizing discourse has become central to the political arena in recent years. While in our research we focus on citizen's attitudes towards one another, one may wonder if polarized attitudes translate into polarized policy. Anecdotal evidence from Israel suggests that it does. Indeed, right-wing ministers and members of Knesset have targeted cultural centers associated with the Israeli left such as the Barbur gallery in Jerusalem, as well as human right groups such as Breaking the Silence, using both administrative and legislative means.¹¹⁴ Whether these policies are a cause of mass polarization or its effect is yet another fascinating question begging rigorous empirical research.

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