

On democratic backsliding in Israel

Interview with Noam Gidron

By Bruno Cousin

In their recent research about Israeli politics, Noam Gidron and his coauthors explore the country's affective polarization, the support for the judicial overhaul, Likud's populism, and the relations between them.

Noam Gidron is an Associate Professor at the Department of Political Science and the Program in Politics, Philosophy and Economics (PPE) at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel. He earned his PhD from Harvard's Department of Government in 2016 and later completed a post-doctoral fellowship at Princeton's Niehaus Center in 2017-2018.

His research investigates how polarization and populism challenge liberal democracy, with a focus on the policy choices and political strategies that have contributed to their rise over the past several decades. His research examines how affective polarization varies across and within countries. In addition, his work on populism explores how a lack of social recognition, fueled by the economic policies and political narratives, is driving support for populist parties across the ideological divide. Bringing together these two lines of research, his recent studies also explore how an affectively polarized public provides fertile ground for populist leaders to erode democracy.

Books and Ideas: What are the main drivers of support for the democratic backsliding that has occurred in Israel in recent years? And why did part of the Israeli population support the attempted “overhaul” of the judiciary announced in January 2023?

Noam Gidron: In January 2023, the newly appointed right-wing government, led by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, presented a comprehensive plan to restructure Israeli democracy. The plan, which came to be known as the judicial overhaul, had multiple inter-related components with an overarching goal: strengthening the executive branch and weakening the courts. The judicial overhaul fits the familiar patterns of contemporary democratic backsliding – that is, the erosion of checks and balance by duly elected governments.

Who supported the judicial overhaul—and why? While the specifics of the cases were shaped by the particularities of Israeli politics, these questions relate to a broader academic debate about the politics of democratic backsliding, as well as to public concerns about the future of our democracies.

I examined this issue in a study, co-authored with colleagues from Tel Aviv University (Yotam Margalit, Lior Sheffer and Itamar Yakir), which was recently published in the *American Journal of Political Science*. In this research, we explore several arguments we identified in the political science literature about support for democratic backsliding. First, we may expect that support for the overhaul was especially pronounced among voters with a strong emotional attachment to Prime Minister Netanyahu. The second potential explanation focuses on affective polarization, or dislike and animosity across partisan lines. Here, the assumption is that the more people dislike their political opponents, the more willing they are to tilt the democratic playing field in their own favor and against the other side. This suggests that supporters of the right-wing coalition who express more negative feelings toward the opposition parties will be more likely to support the overhaul. Next to these two affective factors, we also examined whether people with a majoritarian understanding of democracy (that is, they believe that the will of the majority should not be constrained) and those who subscribe to a populist worldview (that is, they think about politics as a moral clash between the corrupt elites and the homogenous people) are more likely to support the concentration of power in the hands of the ruling government and weaken institutional checks and balances.

We examined these various arguments using a unique survey data we collected, which traces the same individuals over a long period of time. Without knowing that the government would soon present the judicial overhaul, we collected survey data in early January 2023 in which we asked survey respondents about their perceptions of democracy as well as their feelings toward both Netanyahu and the various parties in the Israeli parliament. We then returned to the same survey respondents in April, after the overhaul was announced and became the most salient political issue in Israeli politics, and asked them whether they support or oppose the overhaul.

And this is what we found: the factors that most strongly predicted support for the overhaul among voters of the coalition parties were their emotional attachment to Prime Minister Netanyahu and their dislike of the opposition parties. That is, emotional factors played a crucial role in explaining support for the overhaul. A majoritarian understanding of democracy was also associated with support for the overhaul, although a populist worldview much less so. All in all, these results suggest that at least in the Israeli context—a deeply polarized public provided fertile ground for advancing democratic backsliding.

Books and Ideas: How has this affective polarization developed in Israel over the last three decades?

Noam Gidron: Analyses of survey data collected in Israel suggest that dislike across party lines has reached a record high during the 2022 elections (at least since the early 1990s)—setting the stage for the clash over the judicial overhaul that unfolded during 2023.

In a study co-authored with Omer Yair and Yair Amitai (Reichman University), we analyzed Israeli survey data collected since 1992 to assess the emotional divide between the largest parties of each of the two ideological blocs. We found that affective polarization—measured as the difference between how much survey respondents like their own party and how much they dislike the main party in the opposing political bloc—intensified during the 1990s, a decade marked by the collapse of the Oslo peace accords and the terror attacks that followed, the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin and the election of Netanyahu as Prime Minister. This trend was reversed during the first decade of the 2000s, when affective polarization has somewhat declined.

However, since 2009, following the return of Benjamin Netanyahu to the office of Prime Minister, affective polarization has gradually yet steadily intensified—reaching a peak in the 2022 elections. The judicial overhaul was thus introduced to the Israeli public in a moment of deep emotional divide across party lines.

Books and Ideas: Shifting from voters to parties, how has the rhetoric of Likud's leadership and representatives changed over this time?

Noam Gidron: When examining changes over time in parties' rhetoric and positions, one source of data is experts' surveys, that is the informed assessment of people who closely follow politics. This is far from a perfect data source and it has multiple potential biases. So, while useful, we should also treat it with caution.

According to one such commonly used data source, V-Party, the Likud has become more and more populist since the early 1990s and specifically since around 2015. Over the last decade or so, representatives of the Likud have increasingly attacked elites of various sorts. At the same time, they also identified their party as the representative of the "true" people. So, at least according to this data source, we can identify a clear change over time toward a more populist worldview.

Another way to address this question is to shift from over-time to cross-national comparisons. Here we can rely on another data source, the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES). What *we then find* is that the Likud party is an outlier in its reliance on populism compared to *mainstream center-right parties* in Europe, such as the Christian Democratic Union of Germany. In contrast, Likud is more similar in its degree of populism to far-right parties, such as the Polish Law and Justice. Bringing together this over-time and cross-national perspectives, the current populist bent of the Likud party clearly stands out.

Books and Ideas: Has the war on Gaza that followed Hamas attacks on October 7th reshaped this Israeli polarization?

Noam Gidron: There were good reasons to assume that the horrible events of the last two years, and specifically the October 7th attack and the war in Gaza that followed, would decrease domestic tensions in Israel. We may expect that when faced

with an external security threat, the partisan divide would be pushed to the background. Alas, this is not what we see in the data.

The main pattern we detect when tracing affective polarization after October 7th is one of continuity rather than abrupt change. That is, affective polarization in Israeli society still fluctuates around the high levels recorded around the 2022 elections. Partisan animosity proved to be more persistent than many had assumed and it remains a fundamental feature of contemporary Israeli politics and society.

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