



POLICY BRIEF

Is Israel in democratic decline?

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While Israel is seeing an uptick in illiberal populist politics, its institutions and civil society remain resilient.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite the “shared values” of democracy and pluralism holding a foundational place in both the history and the contemporary discourse about the U.S.-Israel relationship, American foreign policy discussions of populist politics and democratic decline have not included much investigation of politics in Israel. The question of how we understand a healthy democracy in an age of populism demands attention. And the Israeli case is instructive in some unexpected ways, both for its insights into sources of democratic vulnerability and resilience.

The rise of ethno-nationalist populism in political discourse, alongside specific laws and legislative proposals affecting civil liberties and democratic institutions in Israel, have triggered concerns that the country is falling prey to the same sort of intolerant illiberalism now evident in countries like Turkey, Hungary, the Philippines, and Poland.¹ For some, this trend is personified in the figure of Benjamin Netanyahu, who has deployed

exclusionary and racially-tinged political rhetoric in recent years and built a close partnership with illiberal governments like Hungary’s.² Some critics of Netanyahu see his close political alliance with U.S. President Donald Trump as also facilitating a slide in Israel away from democratic politics.³

Our review, which evaluates questions about Israel’s democratic future in light of what we understand about populism, suggests some indicators of real concern in Israel’s politics. As yet, however, we find no substantial institutional change that indicates democratic backsliding (this is, to be sure, a high bar, and democratic decline without institutional backsliding can also be a basis for concern). The paper will assess on that basis the evidence for whether Israel is in fact experiencing a decline in the quality of its democracy.

The paper will also illuminate trends that offer Israeli politics pathways away from illiberal populism, and that may help protect Israel’s democratic norms and institutions from erosion by exclusionary populist

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appeals. Some of those sources of resilience are institutional—in the structure of Israel’s party system and government. Some of those sources are rooted in Israel’s diverse and dynamic society. One clear implication of the analysis below is that those concerned to preserve and strengthen Israeli democracy must particularly work to protect Israel’s diverse and dynamic civil society.

LIBERAL DEMOCRACY AND ILLIBERAL POPULISM

Scholars of populism like Jan Werner Mueller distinguish between “thin” and “thick” populist styles of politics. The first sees a political entrepreneur campaign to represent the marginalized or the “little people” against out-of-touch and/or corrupt elites, while in the latter a political entrepreneur works to define and enforce a narrow view of the legitimate or natural polity, whose will only he or she can accurately represent, sometimes without reference to or in the face of less-decisive electoral outcomes. In the United States, and in many European countries, the “thin” style is more evident in the class-based populism of leftist parties, while the “thick” or exclusionary variety is more evident in the nativist populism of the right—though this left-right mapping of thin and thick populisms is not a rule.

Mueller and Brookings scholar William Galston both argue that “thick” populism undermines democratic politics. The populist leader’s self-serving and partial definition of a “natural” polity distinct from the legal polity defines anyone in disagreement with him or her as not part of the “real” nation—they must be an outsider, sent by outsiders, or controlled by outsiders. As Galston puts it, “populism is always anti-pluralist. In this key respect, it represents a challenge to liberal democracy, which stands or falls with the recognition and protection of pluralism.”⁴

As this understanding also makes clear, this kind of exclusionary, populist politics is a form of identity politics: The populist leader decides who is in and

who is out, who has legitimacy to speak and to participate, and who gets excluded, marginalized, delegitimized, and silenced.

It should be clear from this review that exclusionary populism is philosophically inconsistent with liberal democratic politics: It opposes legal equality that might differ from the “natural” identity of the political community, it rejects the notion that members of the same national group might have diverse preferences and interests, and it rejects electoral outcomes that do not reflect the populist leader’s “natural” understanding of the popular will.

Mueller identifies three patterns of populist governance that undermine the functioning of democratic government and politics: wielding state authority in a partisan manner such that “only some people should get to enjoy the full protection of the laws,”⁵ wielding the state to produce material benefits for loyalists through a kind of “mass clientelism,” and suppressing independent civil society that acts as a vector for accountability relative to these efforts.⁶ In the next section, we will review the evidence for manifestations of Israeli populism in each of these realms.

MAPPING POPULISM IN ISRAEL

Unlike in Europe, Israel’s embrace of populist politics doesn’t stem from economic grievances or a backlash against liberal economic elites. The 2008 economic recession did not impact the Israeli economy badly. Indeed, the policies of the current, populist, prime minister enabled the rise of Israel’s ballooning private-sector economy. Nor has Israel’s populism emerged as a nationalist cultural reaction to the expansion of individual rights, as we see in some Western countries. Populists in Israel have also not amassed power due to the political system’s decay, as is the case in Poland, where governing institutions found it difficult to accommodate new social groups, and the political class became unresponsive to ordinary citizens’

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needs. However, as we shall see, Israel's rising economic inequality and sustained problems of poverty and marginalization within certain social sectors create the possibility for a different kind of political realignment.

Israeli politics evidences both the "thin" and the "thick" varieties of populism, although the left-right distinction seen in Europe and the United States does not hold.⁷ Partisan politics in Israel are not dominated by opposing views on social policy or equality; left and right instead have differing views of Zionism, separation of state and religion, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.⁸ Voting behavior seems driven primarily by identity—not just Arab and Jewish, but Ashkenazi and Mizrahi identities, and "religious" and "secular" identities for Israeli Jews, are highly correlated with voters' preferences on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and whether Israel should be more Jewish or democratic. Views on the conflict divide Israelis sharply, but also serve to bind Israeli Jews together through a shared sense of existential threat. This sense of threat is then wielded by populist politicians, who build appeals based on fear and label those on the left as heedless of (Jewish) national security and thus disloyal or traitorous. There are, however, homogenous class constituencies underlying the ethnic distinctions.⁹ Today's voting behavior in Israel is a function of identity politics overpowering class politics—a feature that is both relied upon and reinforced by exclusionary populist politicians.

"Thin" populists in Israel include "centrist" Yair Lapid and Aryeh Deri's Sephardic Torah Party, which despite its fervent ultra-Orthodox belief system seeks to appeal also to less observant Mizrahi voters on the basis that it can overcome their legacy of marginalization at the hands of the political elites and advance their interests in government and the economy. Class-based "thin" populism is also evident on the far left of Israeli politics, in the communist Hadash Party, but despite the long history of Jews in Hadash (like retiring Member of Knesset [MK] Dov Khenin), it

is perceived by most Israelis as more "Arab" than ideological in orientation, and was for the past four years a member of the Joint List of Arab parties in the Knesset.¹⁰

When it comes to "thick" populism, what's striking is not the dominance of populist politics (although it's true that populist parties hold the overwhelming preponderance of power in the former government), but the *multiplicity* of exclusionary populist parties in evidence.

Within the Likud, the ruling party since 2009, Netanyahu and his allies such as Culture Minister Miri Regev and Minister of Jerusalem Affairs Zeev Elkin often use exclusionary rhetoric, not only against Arabs, but also against leftist critics in the Knesset and in civil society who disagree on the prevailing government policy towards Palestinians, Israel's Arab minority, and African asylum seekers. The media interviews and Facebook pages of cabinet ministers in the most recent government featured numerous statements calling their critics and their political opponents on the left traitors to Israel, or suggesting that they are tools of outside forces like the European Union or George Soros.¹¹ Netanyahu blamed the New Israel Fund for interfering in Israel's international diplomacy and scuttling a deal with Rwanda to accept deported African asylum-seekers, claiming the organization's goal was to advance "the erasure of the Jewish character of Israel and turn it into a state of all its citizens, alongside a country of the Palestinian people cleansed of Jews, along the 1967 lines, with its capital in Jerusalem."¹² (The charge of interference was made without evidence and never demonstrated.) It is worth noting that while Netanyahu advances a populist rhetoric, and under his leadership the parties of his coalition advance the substantive "thick" style of populism, he is not the primary reason for populists' success in Israel. He has exploited the trend, but as we will show, there are larger dynamics at play.

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Naftali Bennett and Ayelet Shaked, formerly of the Jewish Home Party and now co-founders of the New Right Party, present similar ideas about the natural people of Israel being the Jewish people. For Bennett, the focus on Israel as the land of the Jewish people extends not just to the definition of the polity, but also to the definition of the state's borders—to an embrace of the Greater Land of Israel as an indivisible birthright that must be preserved under Israeli sovereignty forever.¹³ Shaked says plainly that “there is place to maintain a Jewish majority even at the price of violation of rights.”¹⁴ The New Right party they formed is intended to unite secular and religious Israeli Jews in a common effort to prevent a Palestinian state and to retain Jewish control of much of the occupied West Bank.

In addition to these two varieties of Jewish nativist populism on the Israeli right, there is a third, evident in Avigdor Lieberman's Israel is Our Home Party. Lieberman's party, which was founded to appeal to immigrants from the former Soviet Union and their descendants, is avowedly secular in its orientation, distinguishing it from Bennett's former Jewish Home and the ultra-Orthodox parties with which it sat in government until November 2018. Lieberman's populism is of a more ethnic variety, much closer to the nativist populism of European parties. Thus, Lieberman ran in 2009 on a platform demanding that Arabs should take a “loyalty oath” to the Jewish state as a condition of maintaining

their citizenship.¹⁵ He continues to propose a territorial swap with the Palestinian Authority that would forcibly disenfranchise large numbers of Palestinian citizens of Israel in order to reduce the proportion of Arabs within the Israeli body politic.¹⁶

The exclusionary nature of these populist parties was on full display in the municipal council election campaign of October 2018. Both the Likud Party and the Jewish Home Party appealed to frank racism and fear-mongering in their campaign advertisements; in the latter case prompting a backlash strong enough to compel the party to disavow the ads and take them down. In Tel Aviv, Likud posted ads on bus stops headlined “It's Us Or Them,” counter-posing Israeli flags labeled “The Hebrew City” with a photo of demonstrating Eritrean refugees labeled “The Infiltrators,” and another with a photo of a masked Palestinian demonstrator labeled “The Islamic Movement in Yafo.”¹⁷ (See Image A.)

In Ramle, a mixed Jewish-Arab city, the Jewish Home Party posted ads showing a veiled young woman turning away from a Shabbat table, with the following message: “There have been a number of instances of conversion (assimilation) in Ramle and no one cares. Tomorrow it could be your daughter. Only a strong Jewish Home can protect a Jewish Ramle.”¹⁸ (See Image B.)

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IMAGE A



A bus stop in Tel Aviv, with a Likud campaign poster which reads: "It's us or them. Only Likud, the Right of Tel-Aviv Jaffa." October 2018. Source: The Times of Israel: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/likud-party-says-it-wont-halt-hateful-tel-aviv-campaign/>

IMAGE B



A Jewish Home campaign poster in Ramle, which reads: "There have been a number of instances of conversion (assimilation) in Ramle and no one cares. Tomorrow it could be your daughter. Only a strong Jewish Home can protect a Jewish Ramle." October 2018. Source: Haaretz: <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-right-wing-party-campaigns-on-anti-assimilation-in-central-israeli-town-1.6568941>

Most famously, on election day in March 2015, Netanyahu posted a video to his Facebook page where he claimed that “Arab voters are coming out to the polls in droves. Left-wing organizations are bussing them out.”¹⁹ This appeal to Likud voters to turn out, lest the left “hijack” the elections with Arab votes, worked to bring Netanyahu to an election victory that bolstered the strength of his Likud within a right-wing government, at the expense of delegitimizing Arab citizens’ participation in the political process.

There’s no question, therefore, that populist parties in Israel are wielding identity politics in an exclusionary manner that seeks to define certain components of the polity (most notably Arabs and Muslims, but also “leftists”) as illegitimate and dangerous, and to define politics as a means of defending a certain ethnic vision of the political community against those who, though they may be citizens, are labeled as “outsiders” and “infiltrators” who seek to destroy, dilute, or weaken it.

The exclusionary discourse so evident in the October 2018 municipal elections is already pervasive in the campaign for the upcoming parliamentary elections. To give just one example, a Likud Party campaign video warned that “Gantz and Lapid are Left, and Left is dangerous.”²⁰ Critical observers of the exclusionary trend in Israeli politics, and leftist politicians who have experienced the success of these appeals in their shrinking vote totals, see the upcoming election as a pivotal moment for the health of Israel’s democracy. The fears are that this exclusionary discourse is degrading pluralist norms, and that it is contributing to Israeli voters’ tolerance of bribery and corruption at the highest levels of government, corruption that they allege helps to entrench Netanyahu in power. There is no precedent in Israel’s history for a prime minister to remain in office after an indictment hearing; an electoral victory after indictment would thus present a direct test of these fears.

DOES ISRAELI POPULISM PRESENT A THREAT TO ISRAEL’S DEMOCRACY?

Does Israel’s populist political discourse have a deleterious effect on the democratic system or on the liberal protections that help to sustain that system? One way to assess the danger is to look at whether exclusionary politics is being translated into exclusion from political institutions—how populists might prevent others from winning elections, from expressing their dissent through politics, or from having pluralism protected within the political system.

For many commentators, the most troubling manifestation of Israel’s current exclusionary populism is the nation-state law that was passed last summer.²¹ Long debated, the law asserts that the right to national self-determination in the State of Israel is exclusive to the Jewish people. It also declares that Hebrew is the only official language of the State of Israel, eliminating Arabic as an official language. It embraces Jewish settlement as a national value, making some question whether the state will now encourage discrimination in housing and in towns and cities.

The question we face is whether the nation-state law undermines Israel’s democratic institutions or liberal commitments. Certainly it undermines the symbolism of equality for non-Jews in Israel, and certainly it makes it harder for Arab citizens of Israel to be heard by a government that no longer has to accept documents and testimony in Arabic.

Amongst the 20 percent of Israel’s citizens who are Arab—whether Christian, Muslim, Druze or other faiths—this law was widely seen as declaring them second-class citizens in their own homeland, where their families had lived for generations before the establishment of Israel. For many Israelis, Jewish and non-Jewish, who wanted their government to move toward a more secular vision of the state, the lack of a clear statement about equality under the law was also seen as a blow—especially to those who do not embrace the dictates of Orthodox Judaism as defined by the Chief Rabbinate. Equality under the

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law could, for example, allow a Jew to sue in court for the right to marry someone of a different faith or someone not recognized by the rabbinate as Jewish. The ultra-Orthodox parties' ability to trade their support for right-wing governments for a continued stranglehold on personal-status issues in public policy is a key enabler of exclusionary populism.

The debate over the nation-state law and the protests that followed its passage make manifest one challenge in assessing Israel's democratic health: the difficulty of disentangling populism and identity politics in Israel from Israel's conflict with the Palestinians. Demographics in Israel, and political positions on all kinds of questions, are highly correlated with views on the conflict.²² It remains hard for Israelis—Arabs or Jews—to see their differences with one another not through the lens of their binational conflict.

Jewish fans of the nation-state law see equality under the law for Arabs as a threat to the survival of Jewish sovereignty within Israel, as a step toward a democracy in which Jews might one day be a minority and thus Israel no longer a Jewish national state. And Arab opponents of the law see legal equality in one of two ways: For some it's a way of ensuring that their own indigeneity and identity in their historic homeland are recognized on par with those of Israeli Jews and ensuring that Israel operate as a democracy for all its citizens; for others, it's a way of ensuring that Palestinian citizens of Israel will maintain their status within Israel even if a two-state solution is eventually achieved (contrary to the preferences of some politicians on the right, like Avigdor Lieberman). This overlay of ethnic conflict is part of what makes identity politics so effective for Israeli politicians, encouraging and entrenching exclusionary populism.

As an expression of intent, the nation-state law is troubling—particularly in its reduction of the status of Arabic from an official language of government equal with Hebrew to a “language of special status.” This move is symbolic in excluding Arabic from

being recognized by the state; it is also practical in raising new barriers to Arab citizens' participation in politics and interactions with state institutions. The failure to make legal equality under the law a basic principle in the nation-state law may or may not have practical consequences; some insist individual equality is protected in other laws. It has yet to be seen how the law will be implemented in practice and interpreted by the courts. That the law did not ultimately include some even more discriminatory provisions proposed in previous versions of the bill does not rescue it from potentially causing harm to Israel's democratic politics. The only lasting remedy for discrimination against Israel's Arab minority is found in enshrined norms of political equality and majority restraint—and these are not features of most populist politics.

While the passing of the nation-state law is a strong example of how populists wield state power in a partisan way to exclude groups of people from the full protection of the laws, this law does not come in a vacuum. Over the past five years, cabinet ministers from one or another of Israel's right-wing populist parties have advanced an array of bills aiming to curtail institutional checks and balances, as well as the protection of individual and minority rights. These efforts are carried out under the theory—common in populist arguments—that reforms to governance and administration are required in order to strengthen and expand the government's powers to manifest the popular will. Rather than viewing rights guarantees as protecting individuals or groups from state power, this refashioning views rights as pesky interferences in the effort to realize the true preferences of the “natural” polity.

In Israel, populist legislative proposals have repeatedly targeted the primary bulwarks against exclusionary and majoritarian tendencies, foremost among them the judiciary. In 2014, MK Ayelet Shaked, then a backbencher in the Jewish Home Party and now minister of justice, submitted a proposal for an “override clause,” so-called because it would revise the “Basic Law: Human Dignity and

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Liberty” by empowering the Knesset to re-enact laws that have been voided by the High Court of Justice because they conflict with that Basic Law. The bill was launched after the High Court of Justice ruled that detaining African asylum seekers in Israel was unconstitutional; Shaked’s proposal would have allowed the Knesset to override such decisions by the High Court of Justice with a simple Knesset majority of 61 votes. The primary advocates of this bill are parties in Netanyahu’s governing coalition that see the courts as impediments to the realization of their identity-based vision of justice. The bill has been hotly debated in Israeli society, with the Chief Justice of the High Court, Esther Hayut, [reportedly](#) telling Netanyahu that the bill posed “a danger to democracy.”²³

Another bill proposed by Shaked would allow ministers to appoint the attorneys that serve as legal advisors for their ministries—until now, a process overseen by a committee of professional civil servants. As currently structured, legal advisors work under assumptions of neutrality, and are often viewed by sitting ministers as impediments to the preferred policies of those elected by the people. The bill passed its first reading in the Knesset last January.

A third example of populist legislation targeting the institutional protection of legal equality is a bill that would allow the minister of culture to withdraw government funding from cultural institutions that “undermine the principles of the state.” This bill, too, cleared its first reading in the Knesset with the support of the governing coalition. The vague language of the statute calls to mind the criminalization of dissent evident in the laws of many of Israel’s autocratic neighbors—who decides when the principles of the state are being undermined, if not the sitting government?

Apart from the nation-state law, none of the above-mentioned bills have passed into law. The fact that they have sparked intense debate in the Knesset, in the media, and amongst the public is surely a

sign of a healthy democracy. And yet: That parties in the governing coalition do not feel any restraint in proposing them, that the cabinet advances them, and that their backers defend them as necessary to implement the popular will against illegitimate opposition, are all evidence that these political actors have abandoned the principle of pluralism that William Galston identifies as essential to functioning democratic politics.

The second pattern of populist governance identified by Mueller is wielding the state to provide material benefits to loyalists. This type of “mass-clientelism” is not uncommon in Israel. In fact, Israel’s governing system of proportional representation, with until recently a low threshold for entry into parliament, has always encouraged a degree of rent-seeking behavior by parties targeted to defined constituencies, such that parties, especially smaller ones, act as interest groups in much the way party machines in American cities in the last century advanced the interests of labor unions, churches, and other institutions rooted in specific (often ethnic immigrant) communities. In addition, because of the complex relationship between the state and its ethnic and religious subgroups, public funds are regularly allocated on the basis of ethnic group or religious affiliation—for example, to secular, national-religious, ultra-Orthodox, and Arab school systems. It is difficult to distinguish, in the Israeli system, anti-pluralist mass clientelism from politics as usual.

The third and final pattern of populists’ anti-democratic governing style outlined by Mueller has populists taking steps to suppress independent civil society that contradict the populists’ narrative or oppose their policies. Populists dislike civil society not only for the substantive obstacles they present, but also symbolically, as the existence of independent voices championing the marginalized or defining the public good undermines the populists’ central claim to exclusive representation of the will of the “true” people. It therefore becomes important for populist leaders to portray

dissenting political voices and civic groups as lacking indigeneity—they must be seen as either traitors or aliens. As noted above, Israel’s right-wing populist leaders regularly discredit civil society organizations whose policy preferences are more congruent with the Israeli left—and indeed, the left itself—as subversive, treasonous, and funded and controlled by foreign agents.

These efforts go beyond the rhetorical, to Knesset proposals to investigate, impose tax burdens on, or even ban NGOs that receive funding from foreign governments, and most recently with Prime Minister Netanyahu formally requesting the German government to pressure two German foundations to withdraw financial support for dozens of human rights and liberal organizations in Israel.²⁴ Although pro-government NGOs also receive copious funding from foreign individuals and foundations, they are not targets for the Netanyahu government’s ire. Again, the context of the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict also sharpens the populist argument here: The claim against civil society organizations is not just that they are foreign-influenced, but that their work questioning or investigating the government undermines national security.

While the exclusionary and sometimes bigoted political rhetoric, as well as efforts to undermine legal equality and erode checks and balances in Israel’s governing institutions, present troubling indicators of the impact of populist politics on Israel’s democracy, we do not yet see concrete damage to those liberal-democratic institutions, and we do not yet see populist political forces in Israel as having the capacity to take over or supplant liberal democratic norms and institutions in ways that would permanently undermine democratic politics. The limits on populist power in Israel are rooted in sources of resilience within Israel’s political system, some of which we will examine in the next section.

PLURALIST POPULISM UNDERMINES ITSELF

The first source of resilience against illiberal populism in Israeli politics is the fragmentation of Israel’s party system. One interesting feature of Israeli populist politics is how competitive it is. Rather than—as in other Western democracies—a single populist movement on the left and/or on the right bidding for political power amidst more traditional parties, Israel’s fragmented parliamentary democracy has produced multiple, competing populist movements, mostly on the right.

Israel’s system, which combines a pure proportional representation system with a relatively low threshold for entry into parliament (3.25 percent is still low for a parliamentary democracy), has generated an increasingly fragmented party system. Many of Israel’s smaller parties have long been, in essence, rent-seeking actors working on behalf of specific, subjectively marginalized subgroups within the population. Exacerbating this tendency toward interest-group-parties is a noticeable dwindling of the proportion of Israel’s Knesset held by the larger parties. From 1949 through 1992, the parties that are today called Labor and Likud dominated the Knesset, controlling up to two-thirds of the chamber, or 80 seats. In 2015, by contrast, 30 seats for Likud was an overwhelming victory.²⁵

Populist parties claim to represent the organic will of the whole people. Competitive visions of the organic will undermine any single populist party’s claim to represent the people naturally or exclusively. Competition amongst populist leaders and the fragmentation of Israel’s party system also do not bode well for the establishment of a unitary populist coalition under a single leader. If one way populist forces undermine democracy is by establishing a monopoly over the state apparatus in order to reward supporters and punish enemies, that’s hard to do when the populist government is a team of rivals (plus some “special-interest” rent-seeking parties), each with somewhat distinct, if overlapping sets of supporters.

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The “team of rivals” dimension in Israeli populism is particularly strong right now, as the prime minister runs an election campaign while facing indictment on multiple corruption charges; his partner-rivals, and others both within and outside his Likud Party, are positioning themselves to replace him if and when he goes, and thus are less likely than before to subsume their own authority and representational claims to his for the sake of a share in power. In general, the pluralism and competition amongst populist parties on Israel’s right can itself be a bulwark against any populist party exercising illiberal, majoritarian power and undermining democratic competition.

BEYOND INSTITUTIONS

Despite this mitigating factor, other countries’ experiences suggest how difficult it is for political systems to reverse or overcome the grievances and polarization that propel populism and are propelled by it. If not addressed, these factors may, over time, push toward greater dominance of exclusionary populism in the system. How are we to understand the longer-term prospects for pluralist politics in Israel in this light?

Beyond the potentially deleterious impact on democratic institutions, Israel’s exclusionary populism has other consequences that demand examination. The effects of exclusionary populist discourse on social cohesion in Israel’s diverse society have already become a source of concern for Israeli political elites, perhaps most notably the country’s president, Reuven Rivlin.

Polarization in Israel is structured by the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and, through the incentive that gives populist politicians to use fear as a mobilization tactic, it also has an insidious effect on domestic policy and ultimately on the effectiveness of representation in the Israeli political system. Put simply, Israeli politicians have little incentive to respond to the social and economic demands of Israeli voters when they can instead mobilize

support using divisive emotional appeals. Economic disparities between the geographic center and periphery, and between Ashkenazi Israelis and those from Mizrahi, post-Soviet, and Ethiopian communities, remain a major concern—but populist politicians instead offer Mizrahi voters identity-politics policies, like changes to the educational curriculum to include Mizrahi authors. Unlike the “mass-clientelism” that Mueller sees in Europe, then, Israel’s populist politics actually generates fewer policy outcomes of material utility to populist-supporting voters.

RESPONSES: POSSIBILITIES FOR CROSS-CUTTING POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

The growing failure of Israel’s polarized and increasingly populist political system to address citizens’ needs is evident in the rise of protest movements around issues from housing and food prices to violence against women to parental surrogacy benefits for gay men. Last year, Israel [witnessed](#) an unprecedentedly large and widespread set of demonstrations protesting violence against women, after one Eritrean asylum seeker and one Israeli Arab, both young teens, were murdered in the space of a week.²⁶ Last year also saw Israelis across the political spectrum, backed by a wide range of private-sector and civic groups, strike and march to demand that gay men have equal rights under Israeli law to become parents through surrogacy.

The rise of protest movements demonstrates that Israeli civil society is still robust and is mobilizing citizens in ways that suggest the possibility of new political coalitions that could, in principle, challenge populist polarization over time. Two social segments in particular have collective interests that cut across the political and ethnic categories that now define Israeli politics, and that are not well represented by any of the existing parties: women and the LGBT community.

Women

Over the past few years, women across the political and religious divides in Israeli society have been pushing forward to see their interests better reflected in politics. Motivated by harsh economic realities, increasing numbers of Haredi women have been seeking secular education, in an effort to join the workforce. Also, in an attempt to counter the rabbinical courts' monopoly over issues of personal status—divorce and child custody—women have turned to civil courts to advance their rights. The protection and promotion of women's status in Israeli society has proved a cross-cutting issue that is creating a coalition that spanning Israel's secular-religious, Ashkenazi-Mizrachi, and Jewish-Arab divides.

Two recent examples of how women are wielding power to unite forces across the political divide come from Israel's recent municipal elections in October 2018. Aliza Bloch, a former high school principal who is also Haredi, won the mayor's race in Beit Shemesh. She is the first woman to hold the seat; but more relevant is the backing she received from across the non-Haredi political spectrum: from the conservative Jewish Home, Likud, to Labor, Yesh Atid, and Kulanu, all of whom supported her platform of bridging the gaps between ultra-Orthodox, secular, and modern Orthodox residents of this growing city where secular-religious tensions have been rife. Another notable victory was secured in Haifa, by the Labor Party's Einat Kaslich-Rotem, who beat incumbent Mayor Yona Yahav. Haifa, Israel's third largest city, has never had a woman mayor. More astonishing is that the ultra-Orthodox party, Degel HaTorah, broke ranks to vote for her. Their main interest was to unseat Yahav, who had held the mayoralty since 2003. Kaslich-Rotem was also embraced by a wide swath of Israeli politicians, from the left-wing Meretz, to Labor's Avi Gabbay, and appointed an Arab from Chadash as her deputy.

This political renaissance is noteworthy because it reflects a majority view in public opinion that has been stymied by the dictates of ultra-Orthodox political parties. A recent poll by the Israeli Democracy Institute and Tel Aviv University found that a large majority of both Jewish and Arab respondents—73 and 53 percent respectively—rejected the statement that male candidates are better than women to head local authorities.²⁷ But until recently, Haredi parties have prevented women from running on their lists and advance policies of gender discrimination and segregation, even while relying on women's votes to win elections.

Last year, Adina Bar Shalom, a prominent Haredi education advocate and the daughter of Israel's late chief Sephardic rabbi, formed a new political party dedicated to economic empowerment, improving gender equality including in Haredi communities, and advancing peace with the Palestinians.²⁸ The new party's electoral prospects were meager without an alliance with a larger party, and Bar Shalom has now announced the new list will not be on the ballot in April. Over time, though, a growing constituency for this new party could break the monopoly of exclusively male Haredi parties over Haredi voters, encourage other parties to address issues beyond identity politics, and could help reshape political discourse toward more cross-cutting concerns.

Another example of the cross-cutting potential of women's issues is seen in the latest efforts to combat domestic violence. After an uptick in violent murders of young women, 12 local authorities—including Tel-Aviv, Haifa, and Ramat Gan—backed a nation-wide women's strike, granting their employees the right to strike without incurring pay cuts. This comes at the heels of government inaction—after approving a program to promote efforts to prevent violence against women last year, none of program's \$67 million budget has been disbursed. The

coalition in charge of the strike included over one-hundred women's organizations from across the political spectrum. The strike garnered support and participation, as well as sympathetic responses from political leaders, across the spectrum of ethnic, religious, and Arab-Jewish divides in Israel.

The LGBT community in Israel

The cross-cutting potential of the LGBT community is inherent in the simple fact that people who identify as gay, lesbian, transgender, or otherwise queer exist across all of Israel's "tribal" identity groups, so that politicians from all but the ultra-Orthodox parties concerned to sustain their identity-based political support must take account of these voters (and their families). Israel's political leaders have celebrated Israel's relative liberalism on LGBT issues as a way of combating international human rights concerns related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and this has further strengthened the influence of this constituency. The strength of LGBT issues as a platform for political mobilization within Israeli society was illustrated last year after the Knesset—at the insistence of ultra-Orthodox members of the governing coalition—passed a law that prevented gay couples from using surrogacy as a means of having children.

Over 100,000 people joined a rally in Tel Aviv's Rabin Square to protest the measures, and thousands across the country joined a day-long strike (with the vocal support of many major private-sector employers). Support for the cause was led by a gay-rights organization traditionally consisting of members from the leftist party, Meretz. However, a majority of Likud voters, traditionally seen as socially conservative, now support efforts at increasing LGBTQ rights. The breadth of popular support for the cause was evident as more than 40 local and international companies—including Microsoft, IBM, and Facebook—allowed their

workers to join the strikes and/or announced that they would subsidize surrogacy for their gay employees. Likud's prominent gay MK Amir Ohana, proposed that a clause be added to the legislation, extending surrogacy rights to gay couples. Yet, after pressure from the ultra-Orthodox members of the governing coalition, the measure was rejected.

Despite the legislative loss, the overwhelming groundswell of support for LGBT Israelis suggests the possibility for coalitions to form around social issues that could overcome polarized, identity-based divides and break the lock-hold that ultra-Orthodox parties have traditionally had over social policy—and protecting that monopoly has been the bargain that's allowed right-wing parties to maintain a ruling majority for their exclusionary platforms. The evident readiness of Israeli voters to mobilize around shared concerns for full inclusion and equality of women and LGBT citizens may challenge right-wing populist politicians to break from the ultra-Orthodox and form alliances with center and left politicians on these issues; and that would likewise challenge the ability of these populists to advance an exclusionary agenda.

The return of economic issues

A final arena to watch is civic mobilization over economic disparities. While on the macro level the Israeli economy is doing well, it also features record high rates of child poverty, poverty among the elderly, and rising economic inequality. Poverty rates in Israel rank amongst the highest in the OECD. The most-affected communities are the ultra-Orthodox, Bedouin, and Arab sectors, who suffer from disparate educational investments and quality, lower access to the professional opportunities granted by military service, and societal bias. These economic grievances are joined to concerns amongst the younger, urban middle class about the rising costs of housing, food, and higher education.

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These economic grievances create common cause amongst marginalized communities that operate in the current Israel political spectrum on the “far left” (Arabs) and on the “far right” (ultra-Orthodox). They have also, over the past decade, launched a sequence of grassroots protest movements that may generate a new politics of their own. The two leaders of 2011’s social protest movement are now amongst the most popular leaders of Israel’s Labor Party. Last year, an Israeli version of the French “Gillet Jaunes” (Yellow Vests) movement was led by a right-wing Likud supporter. And in advance of this year’s elections, longtime Communist Party member Dov Khnein (the only Jewish Knesset member in Israel’s Joint List of Arab parties), left electoral politics to work with a progressive movement focused on the connections between socio-economic inequality and the political conflict between Arabs and Jews both inside Israel and over the Green Line.

Until now, even as the issues have grown in salience to citizens, class-based conflict has not been a relevant feature of political competition in Israel—which as mentioned above revolves around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, national identity, and state versus religion. But the growing mobilization evident today suggests that the stage is set for class-based political arguments for equality and traditional bread-and-butter issues to come to the forefront, and perhaps help overcome the identity-based left-right divide.

THE ROAD OUT OF POPULISM

The foregoing illustrates the existence within the Israeli political system of latent coalitions that could cut across the identity-based divides now relied upon by populist politicians: coalitions rooted in demands for social and economic equality, education, and civil liberties (legal equality for women and LGBT people). But as long as identity-based populist appeals continue to work to drive voters to the polls, politicians will see little reason to abandon exclusionary, emotional appeals and bring these nascent coalitions into formal politics.

Political realignment in democratic politics rarely forms from the top down; often, movements outside formal politics, in civil society, lead the way and illustrate opportunities that electorally ambitious politicians can then seize and build upon.

One feature evident in other democracies where populists have gained strength is that the party system has weakened, with non-populist parties doing a poor job of incorporating and representing the interests of specific communities within the polity—whose sense of victimization and marginalization then become ingredients for populist mobilization. In Israel, for a long time, right-wing populist politicians have built their base of support on the grievances of Mizrahi Israeli Jews who feel disadvantaged by the secular Ashkenazi elites, whose ancestors helped establish the state and who still benefit from social, economic, and educational advantages.

Today, however, Mizrahi Jews are not the only sizeable constituency who feel marginalized in this way. Arabs, Haredim, Russians, and Ethiopians all feel marginalized and discriminated against by the social and economic elite—and these communities cut across traditional left-right divides over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Within Israel’s fragmented party system, some of these groups are represented by rent-seeking special-interest parties like United Torah Judaism (ultra-Orthodox) and the Joint List (Arab), and the rent-seeking enables populists to buy their support for a ruling populist coalition. But as continued societal and economic change integrates more people within these communities—more Arabs speaking Hebrew, more Haredim joining the workforce, more Mizrahim making it in politics and business—the identity-based, rent-seeking parties that help enable populist politics may well grow less salient to voters within these groups.

As has been true in other times and places, then, it appears that Israel’s civil society may be the likeliest driver of political realignment away from exclusionary populism. It is troubling, then, to note that it’s precisely this sector that is now

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demonized by the ruling coalition. Ultimately, a political realignment will only emerge if civil society succeeds in mobilizing enough citizens to present attractive opportunities for political entrepreneurs. And so the sustained vibrancy of Israeli democracy relies on the civil liberties that enable civil society to organize, communicate, and mobilize across Israel's tribal division.

With elections now scheduled for the spring of 2019, and with the likelihood of the prime minister facing criminal indictments, there is renewed space for change. The emergence of new political parties focused on bridging secular-religious divides and

advancing women and economic empowerment suggest the possibilities for a different kind of politics. While this election may not see new cross-cutting parties like Adina Bar Shalom's Achi Yisraeli reach parliament, in a fragmented party system even marginal electoral success by parties offering something different from identity politics could pave the way for other politicians to try to broaden those appeals in the future. As long as Israel's public square remains open for grassroots movements and civil society organizations, and barring a violent crisis with the Palestinians, we believe Israeli democracy can evolve away from exclusionary populism.

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