

Who Supports Democratic Backsliding? Evidence from Israel

Noam Gidron, Yotam Margalit, Lior Sheffer, and Itamar Yakir

September 2023

Abstract

Concerns over democratic backsliding have proliferated recently, as elected politicians have sought to undermine democratic checks and balances. This study examines the underpinnings of public support for democratic backsliding, delineating five theoretical accounts: personalistic leadership, affective polarization, populism, majoritarianism and entanglement with the law. We test the explanatory power of these accounts within the Israeli context, leveraging panel survey data collected before and after the government announced its plan to curtail the courts. Results suggest that support for the plan is strongly associated with dislike of partisan opponents and attachment to Prime Minister Netanyahu, and more weakly with a majoritarian understanding of democracy and negative experiences with the legal system. Populist attitudes are not associated with support for the government's plan. Our study advances research in the field by disentangling theoretical accounts regarding support for democratic backsliding and demonstrating the pitfalls of analyses that rely on cross-sectional data.

1 Introduction

On the eve of its 75th independence anniversary, Israeli democracy found itself at a crossroads. A hard-right political government emerged from the November 2022 elections, led by Prime Minister Netanyahu from the Likud party, and in a move that captured both national and international attention, it swiftly unveiled a far reaching plan for a judicial overhaul that would fundamentally reshape the institutional architecture of Israeli democracy. In a prime-time address to the nation, newly appointed Justice Minister Yariv Levin laid out the details of his “governance reform,” and railed against what he described as “the growing intervention of the court,” arguing that it “has eroded trust to a dangerous low and has not brought proper governance. People we did not elect - decide for us. This is not democracy.”¹ Instead, the reform proposal included several measures that, taken together, would dismantle checks and balances over the executive, including granting the ruling coalition control over the selection of judges and allowing it to override Supreme Court’s rulings.

While advocates of the reform hailed it as a historic step towards limiting judicial activism and empowering elected branches, its opponents viewed it as a dangerous encroachment on the basic pillars of liberal democracy. Chief Justice Hayut decried the proposed reform as a “fatal blow” to Israeli democracy, a view echoed by many politicians from the opposition parties.² Even prominent former members of PM Netanyahu’s own Likud party joined the critics, with former Defense Minister Moshe Ya’alon stating that the reform will be stopped “because people understand that the State of Israel must not be a dictatorship.”³ As hundreds of thousands of Israelis took to the streets, the protest movement garnered vocal support from legal scholars and economists, high-tech sector entrepreneurs and former top security personnel. Israel thus found itself engulfed in a full-blown crisis.

¹“Levin: Rule by judges is the opposite of democracy”, *Globes*, 12/01/2023.

²Jeremy Sharon, “In fiery speech, Hayut says judicial shakeup plan ‘fatal blow to Israeli democracy’”, *Times of Israel*, 12/1/2023”.

³” Ya’alon: I believe we will not reach a dictatorship”, *Maariv*, 23/02/2023. Another former Likud lawmaker, Michael Eitan, lamented that ”This is not democracy, this is usurpation” (*New York Times*, 10/03/2023).

Notwithstanding its many unique features, the Israeli case follows a familiar path of democratic backsliding, commonly understood as the “erosion of democratic institutions, rules and norms that results from the actions of duly elected governments” (Haggard and Kaufman, 2021, 1). Since democratic backsliding—unlike military coups or revolutionary takeovers—is driven by elected politicians, it requires a certain degree of mass support (Scheppelle, 2018; Svolik, 2019), even if this support is mobilized retrospectively after the attack on democratic institutions has already begun (Bartels, 2023). This raises an obvious question: *Who supports democratic backsliding?* Under what conditions can a political leadership obtain mass support for the concentration of almost unchecked power in the hands of the government?

To be sure, most supporters of the government’s proposed reform would not describe their stance as support for autocracy or dictatorship. On the contrary;; many of them would approvingly cite PM Netanyahu’s claim that the reform would strengthen democracy by transferring power from the (non-elected) judicial branch to the (elected) executive branch. The puzzle is therefore not why people explicitly support autocracy, but rather why they support a policy that removes any meaningful check on the powers of the executive branch.

Answers to these questions regarding the roots of public support for democratic backsliding are far from obvious. Yet valuable insights can be gleaned from the emerging comparative research agenda on this topic (McCoy and Somer, 2019; Svolik, 2019). Drawing upon prior research conducted in other contexts, we lay out five potential theoretical accounts for mass support of democratic backsliding: personalistic politics, affective polarization, majoritarianism, populism, and personal experiences with the judicial system. These explanations are not mutually exclusive but rather complementary, and our goal is to investigate their relative explanatory power.

The first account, that of *personalistic politics*, centers on the appeal of “strongmen” leaders who cultivate a cult of personality (Rachman, 2022; Rahat and Kenig, 2018). According to this view, a deep attachment to PM Netanyahu is the chief factor underlying support for the judicial overhaul that his government is advancing. A second account emphasizes

affective polarization, or animosity across political dividing lines (Iyengar et al., 2012). This suggests that partisans who harbor more negative feelings toward political opponents will be more inclined to overlook transgressions of democratic norms by representatives of their own political camp (Graham and Svobik, 2020).

The third explanation highlights the embrace of *populism*, namely the worldview of politics as a juxtaposition of the “pure” people versus a corrupt elite. By this view, support for the judicial overhaul stems from the perception that the will of the people should not be curtailed by the elites’ sway over intermediary institutions (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017; Müller, 2017). A conceptually related yet distinct account, that of *majoritarianism*, zooms in on people’s belief that democratic rule begins and ends with the will of the majority (Grossman et al., 2020). The dismantling of institutional constraints on majority rule are thus perceived as enhancing democratic rule. The final explanation stresses the role of personal experiences, specifically *entanglements with the legal system*. Given that the reform’s proponents justified it by highlighting alleged dysfunctions of the legal system, individuals who have had negative interactions with the legal establishment may be more inclined to support the government’s proposals.

We explore these five explanations using a combination of an original panel study and a survey of a fresh sample of respondents. The panel data, which crucially covers also the period immediately before the introduction of the judicial overhaul, allows us to overcome challenges of reversed causality. This is because surveys carried out after the judicial overhaul was introduced and intensely debated may already capture a sorting process whereby respondents’ attitudes toward the overhaul could affect their positions on other issues, including those we use to operationalize the five explanatory accounts. A simple cross-section of attitudes is therefore likely to provide biased results. Using panel data allows us to match respondents’ worldviews *pre-announcement* with their *post-announcement* attitudes regarding the judicial overhaul. Then, by surveying an additional sample of voters, we are able to examine (and confirm) that our findings are not skewed by attrition in our panel.

Our analysis yields several findings of note. As expected, we show that support for the judicial overhaul is overwhelmingly concentrated among voters of Netanyahu’s right wing coalition parties. In fact, only 8% of self-identified center-left voters support the judicial overhaul. Yet even among self-identified right wing voters, we show that about 38% do not support the overhaul, highlighting the need for explanations beyond the left-right division.

Second, we uncover significant variation in the degree to which the different accounts explain support for the judicial overhaul. When analyzing the electorate as a whole, and controlling for respondents’ position on the left-right scale, the strength of attachment to Netanyahu (a proxy for personalism) before the judicial overhaul was announced is the strongest predictor of support for the reform. Specifically, an increase of one standard deviation in leader attachment is associated with a 19 percentage point (pp) increase in support for the judicial reform (representing a 54% increase above the baseline rate of support).

Yet as noted, a sizable share of right-wing voters—the coalition’s natural electorate—do not support the judicial overhaul. Even among voters of the coalition parties, one in four does not support the government’s proposal. Understanding this variation is therefore key. Focusing on this sub-set of voters, we find that affective polarization is tied with personalism as having the strongest explanatory power of reform support. Not only does a sizable share of the public exhibit strong aversion to parties on the other side of the divide, this sentiment on the right—measured *before* the judicial overhaul was announced—is one of the two strongest predictors of support for the government’s plan. A standard deviation increase in dislike of the opposition parties predicts an 11 percentage point increase in support for the judicial overhaul, a result that holds also when controlling for ideology alongside demographic controls.

Personalism remains a strong predictor of support for the reform among coalition supporters. A one standard deviation increase in leader attachment among coalition voters predicts an 11pp increase in reform support within this group. A fairly distant third explanation is a majoritarian conception of democracy, where we find that people who lean

towards a narrow definition of democracy as solely an expression of majority rule (i.e., without additional components of a liberal democracy), are about 6pp more likely to support the government’s proposed overhaul even when accounting for all other explanations.

In stark contrast, we find that once controlling for other factors, populist attitudes are not associated with support for the judicial overhaul. This suggests that the common perception that the “populist wave” observed in many advanced economies as an important driver, or at least an omen, of future democratic backsliding, merits further scrutiny (Bartels, 2023). In the Israeli case, we find little to suggest a strong empirical relationship between a populist worldview and support for the judicial overhaul.

The article makes several contributions to the burgeoning research on mass support for democratic backsliding (Şaşmaz et al., 2022; Gidengil et al., 2022). First, by laying out several explanations of backsliding, we help delineate the logic underlying these theoretical accounts and highlight their differences. While our empirical analysis then focuses on a specific case-study, our explication of the different theories would hopefully serve future work on democratic backsliding in other country contexts as well.

An additional contribution stems from our use of uniquely rich data, combining a long-running panel study and augmenting it with a new survey sample, which we use to examine the degree of empirical support for the different theoretical accounts. Our analysis demonstrates the value of using panel data that begins before the government introduced its backsliding measures. As we show, cross-sectional data collected after the government’s push toward backsliding began can lead to skewed inferences, as people sort into political camps in response to the government’s initiative. Our research design allows us to assess the explanatory usefulness of the different theoretical accounts using pre-announcement measurements that alleviate such concerns regarding the validity of the inferences.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. We begin by laying out several theoretical explanations for public support of democratic backsliding, link these explanations to the literature and tie them to the context of our case study. We then describe our data and the

empirical approach, followed by a presentation of the results from our analysis. The final section concludes and offers implications for future research on democratic backsliding.

2 Who supports democratic backsliding?

Contemporary democratic backsliding is often orchestrated by elected politicians who manage to construct a diverse coalition in support of their efforts to undermine democratic checks and balances (Haggard and Kaufman, 2021; Scheppele, 2018; Svoboda, 2019). Such coalitions are in turn composed of multiple groups with different motivations for supporting democratic backsliding. In this section we follow the analytical approach in Margalit et al. (2022), building on the extant literature and delineating five prominent narratives about these potential motivations.

We emphasize that the explanations we present are not mutually exclusive; rather, we anticipate that they will complement and overlap with each other to a certain degree. However, by analytically distinguishing between these theoretical claims regarding support for democratic backsliding, we can empirically assess their relative explanatory role. Although closely associated, these theoretical claims yield distinct observable implications that we will then investigate empirically using panel survey data.

2.1 Personalism

Democratic backsliding is often driven by “strongmen” politicians: leaders who seek to cultivate a cult of personality and are characterized by their contempt for the rule of law (Rachman, 2022). From Poland and Hungary through Turkey to Russia, “elected strongmen have succeeded in turning fledgling democracies into electoral dictatorships” (Mounk, 2018, 2). The strongmen leaders have managed to establish strong connections with a dedicated group of supporters, who perceive them as protectors of their nations (Matovski, 2021).

The emphasis on the role of strongmen leaders in democratic backsliding reflects a long-

term processes of personalization, wherein leaders’ personal authority becomes increasingly significant amidst weakening political parties (Rahat and Kenig, 2018). Consequently, it is reasonable to expect that ardent supporters would endorse anti-democratic measures when their leaders adopt such a course. Indeed, prior research indicates that voters, particularly those who harbor strong emotional connections to their leaders, tend to align their views with the actions of their chosen leaders (Lenz, 2013; Barber and Pope, 2019). In the context of democratic backsliding, this suggests that individuals deeply attached to strongman leaders are likely to demonstrate support for their efforts to dismantle democratic safeguards.

Viewed through this lens, the Israeli right presents fertile ground for personalized leadership to influence support for antidemocratic measures. Israeli politics have undergone a pronounced process of personalization, whereby perceptions of and sentiments towards Netanyahu—often regarded as a ‘strongman’ in the international press (Rachman, 2022)—play an increasingly influential role in shaping mass attitudes and voting behavior (Shamir and Rahat, 2019). Furthermore, this influence extends to perceptions of democratic norms and institutions. Analysis of survey data collected from 2019 to 2021 reveals that stronger support for Netanyahu is associated with diminished support for liberal democratic values (Lavi et al., 2023, 86).

This leads to our first observable implication: individuals with more positive sentiments towards Netanyahu are more likely to support the judicial overhaul.

2.2 Affective polarization

Affective polarization, defined as hostility and animosity across party lines (Iyengar et al., 2012), is an additional source of concern for the stability and quality of liberal democracy. In their influential account of democratic decline, Levitsky and Ziblatt (2019) assert that “the fundamental problem facing American democracy remains extreme partisan division – one fueled not just by policy differences but by *deeper sources of resentment*” (emphasis added). This diagnosis is not limited to the American context. A comparative study encompassing

over 50 countries reveals correlations between higher levels of affective polarization and democratic backsliding (Orhan, 2021), although scholars debate whether this relationship is causal or not (Broockman et al., 2022; Voelkel et al., 2023).

Affective polarization is closely associated with democratic backsliding as it reshapes citizens' trade-offs between partisan interests and commitment to democratic norms. When partisans develop increasingly negative views of their political opponents, they are more inclined to overlook transgressions of democratic norms by their own politicians (Graham and Svobik, 2020; Svobik, 2019). This could be either because the voters see less of a downside to the silencing of their opponents institutional voice, or because they view those transgressions as a welcome means to increase their side's chances of controlling power.

Evidence from the United States seems to confirm this view, showing that elected representatives who attempt to undermine checks and balances while in power receive stronger support from their more affectively polarized voters (Kingzette et al., 2021). But recent comparative studies indicate that partisan animosity extends beyond the American context (Boxell et al., 2020; Gidron et al., 2020). Analyzing challenges to democracy in eleven polarized polities, McCoy and Somer (2019) find that “growing affective polarization and negative partisanship contributes to a growing perception among citizens that the opposing party and their policies pose a threat to the nation or an individual's way of life [...] these perceptions of threat open the door to undemocratic behavior by an incumbent” (p. 258).

Israel, in particular, has witnessed an increase in levels of affective polarization since 2009 (Bassan-Nygate and Weiss, 2020). Specifically, supporters of right-wing parties advocating for the judicial overhaul have exhibited a growing propensity for negative views towards the opposing political bloc in the year leading up to the 2022 elections (Gidron and Sheffer, 2022). This leads to our second observable implication: right-wing voters who express more negative sentiments toward the opposition are more likely to support the judicial overhaul.

2.3 Populism

The relationship between populism and democracy is a subject of theoretical debate. Scholars argue that populism, understood as a worldview based on a moral opposition between the pure people and a corrupt elite, can simultaneously pose a threat and serve as a corrective for democracy (Kaltwasser, 2012). On the one hand, populists have served historically as “a powerful tool for new social groups to demand a legitimate share in political power” (Urbinati, 1998, 111). On the other hand, populists’ anti-pluralist worldview and perception of the people as a homogeneous entity whose will should not be constrained by institutional barriers are fundamentally at odds with the principles of *liberal* democracy (Müller, 2017). In fact, some of the most explicit challenges to contemporary liberal democracy have emerged from populist political actors (McCoy and Somer, 2019).

Notwithstanding the ideological tension between (liberal) democracy and populism, empirical evidence suggests that voters who hold populist views are not inherently opposed to democracy. A study conducted in Germany revealed that populist voters do not reject democracy as a political system but rather express dissatisfaction with its functioning (Vehrkamp and Wratil, 2017). Similar findings emerge from comparative study on populism and democracy across Europe and Latin America, indicating that populists prefer democracy over alternative forms of government—although they “are disgruntled with how the democratic regime functions” (Kaltwasser and Van Hauwaert, 2020, 13). Populists may also not oppose the checks and balances that characterize liberal democracy. Research conducted in the Netherlands found no direct relationship between populist attitudes and citizens’ views regarding the legal constraint of the executive (Zaslove and Meijers, 2023).

Yet there are reasons to believe that populist attitudes may nudge citizens toward weakening democratic checks on the representation of the popular will. In particular, direct democracy appeals to populist citizens—a claim Mohrenberg et al. (2021) support with analysis of data from 4 European countries. This is relevant for the Israeli context, where the government presented the judicial overhaul as an effort to promote more direct democracy.

If correct, this points to a third observable implication: citizens with more populist views are more likely to support the judicial overhaul.

2.4 Majoritarianism

Closely related to populism’s emphasis on the popular will of the homogeneous people is that of majoritarianism, by which we mean the belief that the political will of the majority should not be fettered by checks and balances.⁴ This understanding of democracy emboldens political leaders to challenge and eventually dismantle institutional constraints on executive discretion. And indeed, in their comparative study of democratic backsliding, [Haggard and Kaufman \(2021\)](#) find that “early derogation—particularly the removal of horizontal checks bolstered by *majoritarian* justifications—set the stage for further derogation and [...] the decline of democracy itself” (pp. 72-73, emphasis added).

Limited empirical evidence exists at the individual level regarding the connection between majoritarian views and mass support for democratic backsliding. However, in their experimental research conducted in the United States, [Grossman et al. \(2020\)](#) establish a direct link between majoritarian views and support for lifting constraints on the executive. As these authors explain, majoritarian voters who come out in support of democratic backsliding “do so not by sacrificing their democratic principles on the altar of partisanship, but rather by expressing their own democratic principle: that the electoral majority should rule, over and above the objections of courts” (p. 8). [Grossman et al. \(2020\)](#) estimate that majoritarian voters constitute approximately one quarter of the electorate, highlighting the significance of this sizable constituency that has often been overlooked.

Majoritarian claims featured prominently in discussions of the judicial overhaul in Israel. Prior to the introduction of the reform plan, legal scholars pointed out that “Populist leaders like Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Jarosław Kaczyński in Poland, and *Benjamin Netanyahu*

⁴Note that in the populist account the emphasis was on the conception of the people, whose will should not be subverted by a corrupt elite. In contrast, in this account the emphasis is on the electoral majority and its right to “govern” effectively and execute its mandate.

in Israel [...] stress the importance of voting and majoritarianism as the most important aspect of democracy” (Shinar, 2021, p. 340, emphasis added). Then, in a rare public speech following the introduction of the reform, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court asserted:

We have all heard that the main grounds on which the plan is justified is the will of the majority and the decision of the majority. Indeed, ‘majority rule’ is a fundamental principle that lies at the basis of a democratic regime, but democracy is not just the rule of the majority. Anyone who claims that the majority that elected its representatives to the Knesset thereby gave them a blank check to do whatever they wish bears the name of democracy in vain.⁵

Of course, whether or not such a critique resonates depends on people’s perceptions of democracy. Among majoritarians, it may only further fuel enthusiasm for the judicial overhaul.

This leads us to our fourth observable implications: citizens with more majoritarian views are more likely to support the judicial overhaul.

2.5 Entanglement with the legal system

In addition to ideological leanings and affective evaluations, individuals’ personal experiences with the legal establishment can also influence their attitudes toward the courts and, consequently, their views on the judicial overhaul. Similar to how personal experiences have been shown to affect attitudes toward related political matters (Egan and Mullin, 2012; Margalit and Shayo, 2021), it is reasonable to assume that people draw on their own lived experiences when forming attitudes related to the judicial establishment.

In the Israeli context, the argument linking personal experiences with the legal establishment to attitudes toward the judicial overhaul has been particularly relevant given that government representatives used arguments about the inefficiencies of Israel’s legal system and of the injustices it allegedly causes as an important justification for an overhaul. Simcha

⁵<https://en.globes.co.il/en/article-supreme-court-president-hayut-blasts-judicial-reform-plan-1001435441>

Rothman, chair of the Knesset’s Constitution, Law and Justice Committee, described the judicial system as “dysfunctional” with a frequent critique centering on the time claimants have to wait for their complaints to reach the courts.⁶ Others have railed against the “mis-carriage of justice” resulting from the fact that trials often drag on for extended periods due to under-staffing issues and extended backlogs in the courts. The judicial reform, its proponents argue, is needed to provide a jolt to an inefficient, ailing justice system.

These pronouncements suggest that individuals’ perspectives on the judicial overhaul may have been shaped by their own experiences with the legal system. Specifically, prior entanglement with the law may sensitize people to problems with the judicial system and thus increase their support for an overhaul.

The five theoretical accounts laid in this section all offer seemingly plausible explanations for mass support for the government’s proposal for a judicial overhaul. To assess the explanatory usefulness of these accounts, we turn next to describe the data we use and our empirical approach.

3 Data and Case Selection

3.1 The Context

Our analysis revolves around the introduction in January 2023 of the Israeli government’s “judicial reform,” a proposed set of sweeping changes to Israel’s judiciary and its relationship with the government. Chief among the proposed changes, is that it prevents in all but very rare cases the Supreme Court from being able to strike down laws that have passed through parliament. It also allows a simple majority in parliament to ignore a court decision and also provides the government with an inherent majority in the committee that appoints judges at all levels. In a system where the courts are the only meaningful check on the government’s action, this reform package concentrates almost unlimited power in the hands

⁶“MK Rothman on Ynet Radio: The judicial system is not functioning” *Ynet*, 18.10.2022

of the executive (Gidron, 2023, 33).⁷ As such, it is widely seen as an emblematic case of government-led democratic backsliding.

Importantly, while the reform has been the most salient political issue in Israel since its introduction, resulting in sustained mass protests by those opposing it, the overwhelming majority of the proposed reforms has not been codified into law yet, and various pieces of legislation introduced as part of the reform package are still going through debate and hearings. As such, at the time of our data collection, the eventual outcome of this process is unknown, meaning that the attitudes we measure regarding the reform do not reflect post-hoc adjustments to its realization (or failure).

In analyzing backsliding of democracy in this specific case, one must recognize that Israeli democracy, even before the government’s judicial overhaul was put forth, applies only within its internationally recognized borders (i.e., excluding the West Bank and Gaza) and as such is often a target of criticism. Furthermore, even within this narrower scope, Israel is a highly imperfect democracy in which Palestinian citizens of Israel often suffer from systemic discrimination. Thus, our analysis of the current retreat of democracy in Israel should be considered firmly within this context.

3.2 Data and Empirical Strategy

The analysis in this study is based on the Israel Polarization Panel (IPP) (Gidron et al., 2022a). The IPP is a longitudinal study consisting of twelve panel waves that cover the period between March 2019 and April 2023, during which five general elections took place, the most recent of which in November 2022. In this study, we analyze data collected in waves 11 and 12 of the panel. Wave 11 was fielded between 2-9th of January 2023, with the overwhelming majority of responses collected in the first two days in . While originally meant to cover the post-election period, its timing coincided with the public introduction of

⁷While changes to some components of the judicial overhaul have been up for discussion, its core has remained almost unchanged.

the entering government’s judicial reform on January 4th.⁸ We therefore limit our Wave 11 responses to those collected up until the public introduction of the reform on the evening of January 4th, and exclude about 150 responses that were collected later. Limited in that way, Wave 11 of the IPP captures attitudes towards the judicial reform right before it was announced and became the most salient political issue in Israel.⁹

The first significant protest in opposition to the judicial overhaul package took place on January 7th in Tel Aviv, followed by weekly demonstrations over the next six months. Wave 12 was administered between April 2-11, when the protests against the judicial reform were in full swing. We therefore refer to Wave 11 (again, limited here to responses collected right up to the reform announcement) as the “pre-announcement wave” period, and to Wave 12 as the “post-announcement wave.”

We augment the post-announcement Wave of the IPP with 2,090 new participants who did not take part in previous IPP panel waves, a design choice we made to increase the wave’s representativeness in light of potential attrition of panel members. As a result, the total number of respondents in this wave reaches 3,102 (the remaining 1,012 individuals, whom we refer to as “panelists,” also participated in one or more earlier waves of the survey. The majority of them (880) took part in the pre-announcement wave). After excluding participants who responded to the survey after the press conference took place, and focusing on participants who have complete data relevant for the analysis, we end up with 712 participants in the panelists group and another 1599 participants in the “new sample” group.

Table 1 reports basic descriptive statistics for both sample types and the pooled sample, along with means and proportions for our variables of interest (see below). The similarity between the two groups is assessed in Table 3. As the table shows, the two samples show very similar distributions of voting patterns, but new respondents in the post-announcement

⁸The first draft of the bills included in the reform was published exactly a week later (January 11th).

⁹While calls for reforms meant to weaken the court have been voiced by political actors in Israel for years, the government’s judicial reform was not prominently featured in the Likud’s election campaign, nor was it a flagship issue of any other major party (Keinan, 2023). Its full scope and substance became widely known only after its public unveiling by Justice Minister Levin’s nationally televised speech. By any measure, this was a surprise to the vast majority of Israelis.

wave have a slightly higher proportion of younger respondents and a lower proportion of secular respondents. To improve comparability between the samples, we perform the main analyses with a host of demographic control variables (see below for details).

Table 1: Descriptive statistics

	Panelists	New smp.	All
<i>Education</i>			
Up to secondary	17%	19%	19%
Non-acad. post-second., or during	19%	19%	19%
BA, or during	39%	40%	40%
MA+, or during	24%	21%	22%
Total	100%	100%	100%
<i>Religiosity</i>			
Secular	63%	54%	57%
Traditional	17%	18%	17%
Religious	13%	16%	15%
Ultra-orthodox	7%	13%	11%
Total	100%	100%	100%
<i>Gender and age</i>			
Female	45%	50%	49%
18-26	1%	15%	10%
27-44	41%	46%	44%
45+	59%	39%	45%
Total	100%	100%	100%
<i>Vote choice</i>			
Haavoda	7%	5.1%	5.7%
Hadash-Taal	0.4%	0.1%	0.2%
Balad-Raam	0.1%	0	0%
Habayit Hayehudi	2.2%	0	0.7%
Hamahane Hamamlahti	11.4%	12.2%	12%
Hazionut Hadatit	11.4%	12.0%	11.8%
Israel Beitenu	4.5%	5.4%	5.1%
Likud	21.5%	24.8%	23.8%
Meretz	3.9%	2.6%	3%
Raam	0.1%	0.2%	0.2%
Shas	4.1%	8.2%	6.9%
Yahadut Hatorah	4.2%	6.4%	5.7%
Yesh Atid	29.1%	22.4%	24.5%
Total	100%	100%	100%
Left-Right self-placement	6.3	6.5	6.5

Note: This table shows means of main variables used in the article, by samples.

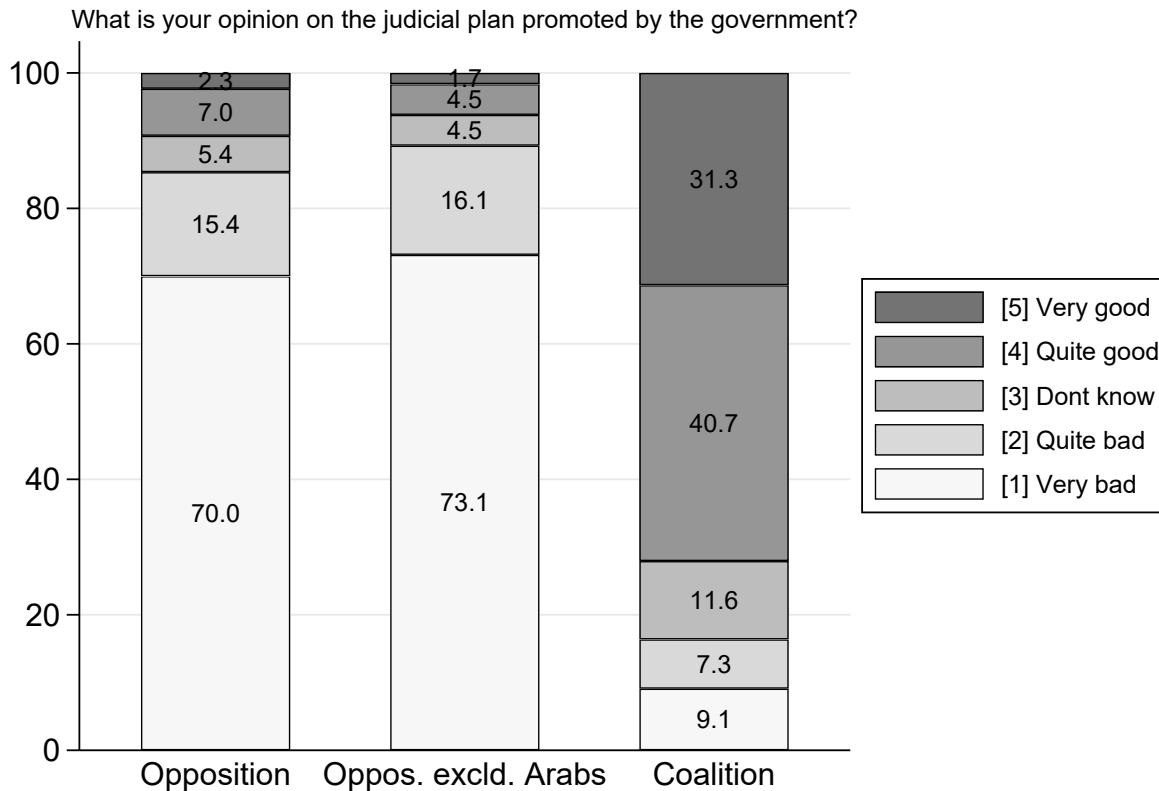
The requirements of our panel design presented significant challenges for local sample vendors. Most importantly, none of the vendors were able to offer the option of a repeat-interview of a sizable sample of Palestinian citizens of Israel, preventing us from collecting a representative sample of Palestinian Israelis (for a discussion of these systemic problems in Israel’s polling terrain, see [Gidron et al. \(2022a\)](#).) In the 2022 election, the overwhelming majority of citizens from this demographic voted for Raam, Hadash-Taal, and Balad (the latter did not cross the electoral threshold for representation in the Knesset). As such, our analysis does not include data collected from supporters of these parties, all of which are in staunch opposition to the Netanyahu government and whose voters are overwhelmingly opposed to the judicial reform. (In contrast, the ruling coalition, is comprised exclusively of Jewish parties.)

To substantiate our claim that the opposition sample remains a valid comparison group, we utilize another sample of respondents collected in April 2023 (i.e., around the timing of our post-announcement wave) by the Israeli Democracy Institute (IDI). Importantly for our purposes, the IDI survey assessed attitudes towards the reform among a sample of respondents that included a substantial number of Arab respondents. Results are reported in [Figure 1](#), showing that rejection of the reform among opposition voters is similar when it includes Arab voters. We report additional comparisons with that survey in the appendix.

Our outcome of interest—support for the judicial reform—is measured in the post-announcement wave. As such, we examine it for both IPP panelists and for new participants. We also measure four of our five relevant explanatory variables of interest in both the pre- and post-announcement waves.¹⁰ Specifically, as we observe the exact timing of each response, we are able to remove responses that were made in the pre-announcement wave after 8 pm of January 4th, i.e., when the Justice Minister first introduced the reform in national media. This allows us to create a clean pre-announcement sample, and then examine correlations among IPP panelists between their level of support for the reform and

¹⁰One explanatory variable, a history of entanglement with legal system, was only collected in the post-announcement wave.

Figure 1: Support for the Reform, by Voting Block and Ethnicity



Source: Israel Democracy Institute, April 2023

Note: The figure shows support for the reform based on a nationally representative sample collected by the Israeli Democracy Institute during the second half of April 2023 (n=758). Results are calculated based on 613 participants for which an answer was available for both the reform evaluation and voting block. The number of respondents for which results are shown is: *Opposition*=328; *Opposition, excluding Arabs*=242; *Coalition*=285.

their *pre-announcement* attitudes. Doing so neutralizes, by design, any possible convergence in attitudes that may have taken place as a result of the introduction of the reform.

To illustrate this empirical challenge, consider for example that researchers would like to assess whether political personalization underlies support for the government’s proposal. Measuring the correlation between attitudes toward Netanyahu and the judicial overhaul after the reform was announced will likely overstate the empirical relationship. This is because respondents who were previously supporters of Netanyahu but turned against him in response to his government’s legislative initiative will report low support for both, thereby

providing a (mistaken) picture as if attitudes toward the leader are drivers of attitudes toward the judicial reform. By using panel data, in which the association between voters and each of the different explanations is measured *pre-announcement* of the judicial overhaul, allows us to overcome such inference problems. Furthermore, the panel component provides a strong base rate for comparing the results we obtain in the post-announcement wave, for which we measured attitudes concurrently with reform support.

In the analyses below we distinguish between ‘full sample’ results, which include respondents of all political persuasions, and ‘coalition-only’ results, in which we limit the analysis to respondents who voted for parties in Netanyahu’s governing coalition. Because support for the reform is overwhelmingly concentrated in the coalition’s voter base, we are primarily interested in the latter.

3.3 Measurement

To measure support for the judicial reform we use the following item (translated from Hebrew): “Do you support or oppose the judicial system reform that the government is promoting?”. Responses ranged on a five-point scale from “Strongly oppose” to “Strongly support”. For ease of exposition, we recode responses to a binary variable of reform support that takes the value 1 for support and strong support, and 0 otherwise (including the neutral “Neither support nor oppose” category).

We test the predictive role of five different theoretical explanations in accounting for support for the judicial overhaul: *personalism*, *affective polarization*, *populism*, *majoritarianism*, and *entanglement with the legal system*. Table 2 provides an overview of the variables and Table 3 reports mean values for these variables in each of the samples we use. Before describing in detail how we measure each of the explanations, we note that they are all operationalized using two different specifications. First, a continuous variable, standardized to a mean of 0 and standard deviation of 1. Second, a binary version of each variable, where values are coded 0 or 1 for low/high levels based on our understanding and judgment of

the suitable threshold for each variable.¹¹ As further robustness, we report in the online appendix additional results from a third operationalization that uses a median split version of each binary variable, where responses above the median value are coded 1 and 0 otherwise.

Table 2: Description of Main Variables

Variable	Measured Using	Notes
Reform Support (DV)	5-point support/oppose scale	Recoded to binary.
Personalism (IV)	11-point Netanyahu feeling thermometer	
Affective Polarization (IV)	11-point party feeling thermometer, from which a weighted mean of sentiment towards all out-parties in the opposing block (coalition/opposition) is calculated.	Scale reversed so that higher values reflect higher out-party hostility.
Populism (IV)	Mean of three items on a populist attitudes battery, all measured using a 5-point agree/disagree scale.	
Majoritarianism (IV)	Agreement with competing definitions of democracy on an 11-point slider scale.	Scale reversed so that higher values reflect support for ‘thin’/majoritarian definition of democracy.
Entanglement with the legal system (IV)	Single item asking whether you or a family member of yours were unfairly treated by law enforcement authorities in the past few years. Choices are ‘No’, ‘Yes, once’, and ‘Yes, several times’.	

To capture *personalism*, we evaluate respondents’ sentiment towards PM Netanyahu using a standard 0-10 feeling thermometer, where 0 represents hate and 10 represents love. We use its values from the pre-announcement wave; for new respondents, in a separate analysis, we use responses from the post-announcement wave.

We operationalize *affective polarization* by focusing on out-party animosity, and in doing so separate our respondents by whether they voted for coalition or opposition parties. All respondents were asked to rank their sentiment toward all parties represented in the Knesset using a 0-10 feeling thermometer (Gidron et al., 2022b). We use responses to the party feeling

¹¹For example, strong attachment to Netanyahu on the 10-point thermometer is coded 1 for values of 8 or above, reflecting what we observe to be high levels of support among coalition voters.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics

Sample			Panelists		New
			pre	post	post
Personalism	Loves Netanyahu (8-10 vs. 0-7)	binary (love=1)	0.31	0.23	0.28
	Netanyahu thermometer	categ. (0-10)	4.69	3.92	4.48
Affective polar.	Out-party dislike (0-2 vs. 3-10)	binary (hate=1)	0.43	0.51	0.48
	Out-block weighted thermometer	categ. (0-10)	2.98	2.67	2.96
Populism	Stronger populist tend. (4-5 vs. 1-3)	binary (populist=1)	3.28	3.24	3.18
	Populist tendency	categ. (1-5)	0.23	0.23	0.20
Majoritarianism	Narrow def. of democ. (8-10 vs. 0-7)	binary (narrow=1)	0.56	0.48	0.53
	Definition of Democracy	categ. (0-10)	3.55	3.14	3.45
Entanglement	Any negative experience	binary (any=1)		0.26	0.28
	Several negative experiences	binary (several=1)		0.14	0.18
Outcome	Reform support (4-5 vs. 1-3)	binary (support=1)		0.35	0.41
	Reform support (5=strongly support)	categ (1-5)		2.65	2.86
N			712	712	1598

Note: The table presents the mean values of all five independent variables and the outcome variable used in the analysis. Means are shown for both the categorical and the binary measures of the variable, and for each measure we report the means in both pre- and post-announcement waves. Note that the variable *Entanglement with the legal system* was measured only in the post-announcement wave.

thermometers from the pre-announcement wave for panelists, and post-announcement wave for non-panelists. Using these responses, we calculate a mean out-party sentiment score for all out-parties (weighted by each party’s vote share, see [Reiljan, 2020](#)). For coalition (opposition) voters, we use ratings of all opposition (coalition) parties. To maintain comparability among respondents in what these values signify, the measure is reverse-coded for coalition voters, such that among all voters, higher values reflect greater animosity towards parties from the other political camp.

We construct a measure of *populism* using a mean of three items, adopted from the fifth

wave of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems [CSES] (Hobolt et al., 2016; Wuttke et al., 2020).¹² Respondents were asked whether they agree with the following statements: (1) *The people should take the important policy decision, and not politicians.* (2) *Most politicians don't care about the people.* (3) *What people call "compromise" in politics is in fact a betrayal of principles.* These questions capture, respectively, different dimensions of populism: people-centrism, anti-elitism, and Manichean outlook of politics.

To capture the degree to which respondents hold a *majoritarian* view of democracy, we ask respondents which of the following two statements they agree with more: "Every regime that operates according to majority rule is a democracy" and "For a regime to truly be a democracy it needs to protect additional principles like human rights", using a 0-10 slider where the 0 represents the first definition to its fullest and 10 represents the latter. This is a continuous measure based on a binary question that has been included in the Israeli National Election Studies (INES) surveys. Our more fine-grained item allows for capturing levels of agreement with each view. We reverse-code the measure so that higher values reflect a more majoritarian view. For panelists, responses from pre-announcement wave are analyzed and for non-panelists we use responses collected in the post-announcement wave.

Finally, to evaluate *entanglement with the legal system* we ask all post-announcement wave respondents whether they or a close relative of theirs were unfairly treated by Israeli law enforcement authorities in recent years. Response categories were 'No', 'Yes, once', and 'Yes, several times'. The continuous version for this variable uses the standardized responses (i.e., a mean of 0 and standard deviation of 1); respondents who reported "don't know/don't remember" are assigned the value 0 (i.e., mean).

After we rescale the above variables to one of the three operationalizations (continuous, binary-discretionary, binary-median - the latter is only reported in the online appendix), we estimate linear probability models with support for the reform as the outcome variable of interest. We prefer the linear regression specification over alternative models due to ease of

¹²Following Wuttke et al. (2020) and Steiner (2022), we exclude several less relevant items in the CSES module.

interpretation, but as a robustness check we also re-analyze all specifications using logistical regression models (see appendix). Estimation is thus based on the following equation:

$$Support_i = \beta_1 R_1 + \dots + \beta_5 R_5 + \delta' X_i + \varepsilon_i$$

where *support* – i.e., reform support – is a binary outcome variable; $R_1 - R_5$ are independent variables capturing each of the five different explanations, examined together; and X is a vector of control variables (including gender, age, academic education, marriage status, religiosity, and an indicator for residing in the geographical periphery of Israel). We also use a specification that includes an additional control for ideology, using respondents’ self-reported left-right placement on a 0-10 scale, collected in the pre-announcement wave for panelists and in the post-announcement wave otherwise. We report the levels and distributions of these control variables in the online appendix.

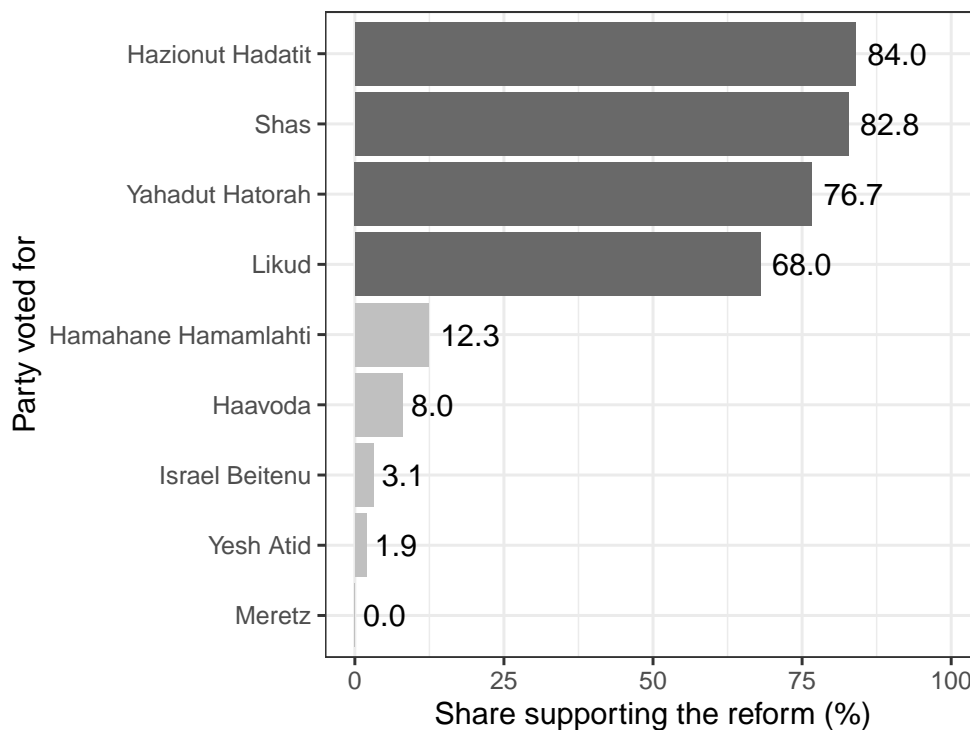
As noted above, we estimate separate models for the full sample and for coalition party voters only, and report results from both analyses side by side, for each type of model specification. We further differentiate between ‘panelists’ (those for whom we measure our explanatory variables pre-announcement), and ‘new respondents’ (who only participated in the post-announcement wave), by conducting our analyses separately for each group.

4 Results

Figure 2 provides a descriptive breakdown of support for the reform by the parties our respondents voted for in the last elections. It shows that reform support is overwhelmingly concentrated among voters of coalition parties (dark bars) and is substantially lower among voters for the opposition parties. Nevertheless, support for the reform among coalition voters was far from uniform, ranging from a high of 84% among voters of the Ultra-Orthodox party Shas and of the religious-Zionist Hazionut Hadatit, to a low of 68% among Likud voters. Overall, as Table 4 indicates, only 35% of the sample support the proposed reform, and even

among the coalition parties' voters, 25% oppose the reform.

Figure 2: Share Supporting the Reform, by Party



Note: The figure shows the share of respondents who support the reform by their vote choice in the national elections of November 2022. Colors of bars distinguish between coalition parties (dark) and opposition parties (light).

Figure 3 provides a breakdown of reform support among each of our potential ‘suspect’ groups: *personalists* (i.e. those with strong attachment to Netanyahu), affectively polarized voters, those who hold strong majoritarian views of democracy, those harboring populist attitudes, and respondents who report prior entanglements with law enforcement authorities.

As can be seen in the chart, belonging to some of these groups is strongly predictive of support for the reform, while with other groups there is no clear association. First, respondents we identify as ‘personalists’ show a very high degree of support—about 81 percentage points (pp)—compared with about 15pp among non-personalists. Second, coalition supporters who are affectively polarized also exhibit high levels of reform support (90%) while those lower on affective polarization among coalition supporters show a still-high degree of support

Table 4: Reform support, by Ideological Self-identification and Voting Block

		Right	Center-left	Total
Opposition	Support	8.5%	3.7%	4.7%
	Share	0.203	0.797	1
Coalition	Support	7.8%	4.8%	7.5%
	Share	0.893	0.107	1
Total	Support	62%	7.9%	3.5%
	Share	0.503	0.497	1

Note: The table reports the share of support for the reform within cells of ideological self-placement and voting bloc based on self-reports in pre-announcement wave (i.e., prior to the announcement of the reform). Totals pertain to the relative size of each cell.

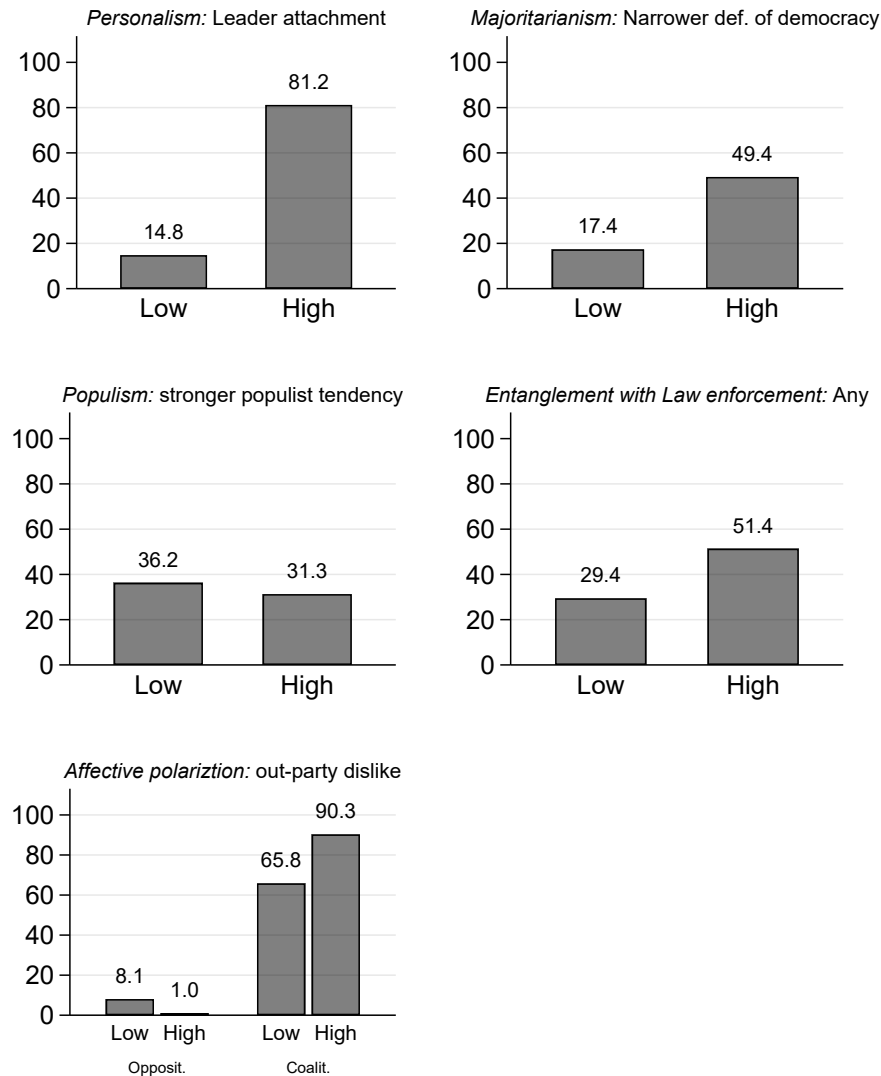
(66%). In contrast, affectively polarized supporters of opposition parties almost unanimously oppose the reform (1% support), while less affectively-polarized ones also exhibit a minimal degree of support (8%).

Respondents who are strongly majoritarian tend to support the reform at higher rates than non-majoritarian respondents (49% vs. 17%, respectively), but even among that group we do not find majority support for the reform. Respondents high on populist attitudes do not express strong reform support, with only 31% supporting the reform, a figure that is even lower among the rest of the sample (36%). Finally, respondents who reported negative experience with law enforcement support the reform substantially more (51%) than those who did not report such personal experience (29%).

These results provide a first indication that not all variables capturing the competing theoretical accounts have a clear association with support for democratic backsliding. This is further borne out when we examine these relationships using continuous rather than a binary measures. Figure 4 shows the bivariate correlation between the continuous explanatory variables and predicted support for the reform.¹³ The figure also presents the distribution

¹³Reform support is based on predictive values from a bivariate regression of each of the relevant variables. The analysis of entanglement with the law is omitted because of its categorical nature and is reported separately in the online appendix.

Figure 3: Share Supporting the Reform, by Group Type



Note: The figure shows the share of people supporting the reform when the sample is split by types of respondents, corresponding to the five theoretical explanations described in the main text (see Tables 3 and 2). For each explanation, the sample is split into two levels, high and low, that refer to the scale described in each subtitle. For example, *Personalism* is captured by *leader attachment*, so that "high" means the more attached, and "low" – less attached. The split in each case follows the binary definition – as described in table 3. Affective polarization is defined per block of voters, hence outcomes are shown separately for coalition and opposition voters.

of respondents across the scale, together providing further insight regarding the explanatory usefulness of the different theoretical accounts. Recall that all explanatory variables are measured pre-announcement, i.e., only among panelists.

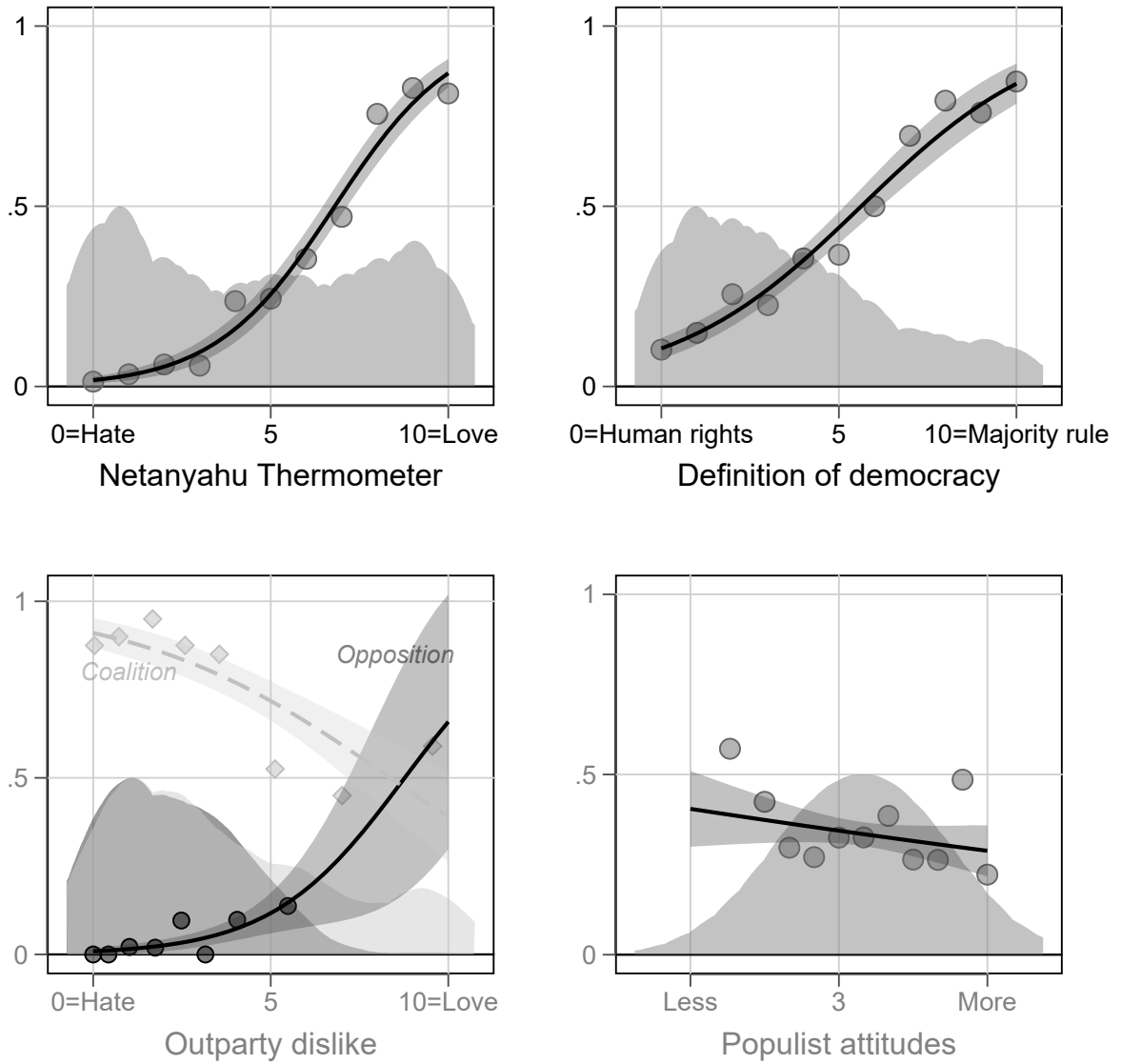
As the figure indicates, the patterns we observe are generally similar to those we obtained when using the binary measures. However, several patterns stand out. First, personalism (measured with the feeling thermometer toward Netanyahu) has a clear bimodal distribution that reflects a high proportion of respondents with extremely negative or extremely positive attitudes towards the Likud leader. This measure is strongly correlated with attitudes toward the reform, with a steep rise in support the more extreme respondents are in their attachment to the leader (top left panel). To a large degree, we see that holding a very positive view of Netanyahu pre-announcement almost guarantees support for the reform in the subsequent wave of the panel.

Affective polarization, measured using out-party dislike, is also strongly correlated with reform support. Here, we separately evaluate out-party dislike of coalition supporters towards opposition parties, and of opposition supporters towards coalition parties, as they naturally exhibit opposite relationships (bottom left panel). Almost all respondents espouse a negative sentiment towards their rival out-parties. Yet among coalition supporters, out-party dislike is strongly predictive of reform support, while for opposition supporters it is almost uniformly associated with opposition to the reform.

Respondents' conceptions of democracy (top right panel) are strongly correlated with reform support, with majoritarian positions predicting strong support. However, note that the bulk of respondents adhere to a more liberal conception of substantive democracy, indicating that this explanation is less differentiating across the electorate. Finally, we again find that populist attitudes are not meaningfully associated with reform support (bottom right panel).

Next, we turn to the main analysis, in which we evaluate the relative predictive role of each of our five theoretical concepts together. Table 5 reports regression results from models using the panelists' sample—that is, the models estimate the relationship between reform support and variables measured pre-announcement. Models 1-4 report analyses using the continuous standardized operationalization of our independent variables; models 5-6 use the

Figure 4: Bivariate Correlations of Reform Support, Pre-Announcement Measures



Note: This figure shows the relationship between the four independent variables and predicted reform support. The variables capturing the four explanations are based on the pre-announcement wave.

binary operationalization. In the former, coefficients represent the change in reform support associated with a one standard deviation increase in each independent variable. All models include demographic controls, and models 3-6 also control for self-reported ideology on the 11-point left-right scale. For ease of interpretation, we focus the discussion on models 1 and

2, but results in models 3 and 4 (respectively) are almost identical and also replicate when using binary coding of the same explanatory variables (models 5-6).

Estimates for the full sample (model 1) show that an increase of one standard deviation in personalism (i.e., leader attachment) is associated with an increase of 19 percentage points in reform support. Similar increases in affective polarization (i.e., greater out-party hostility) and in majoritarianism are associated with a 8pp and 6.5pp increase in reform support, respectively. Populist attitudes do not show a meaningful correlation with support for the reform, while entanglement with the law is positively correlated with it (7.8pp).

Yet when we limit the analysis to coalition voters (model 2), i.e., the political camp in which support for the reform is overwhelmingly concentrated, the picture that emerges differs in some important ways. Perhaps most notably, we see that among coalition supporters, affective polarization becomes a stronger predictor of reform support (11pp increase). In contrast, the predictive role of personalism drops to a similar 11pp effect (from 19 points in the full sample). Put differently, among coalition supports, the degree of hostility one harbors towards the other political camp, together with leader attachment, are the main predictors of support for the judicial reform.

Majoritarianism remains a weaker predictor (6pp increase in reform support), and populist attitudes are not associated with opposition to the reform. In contrast to the finding among the general population, entanglement with the law is not significantly predictive of reform support among voters of the coalition parties.

We interpret the reduced explanatory role of personalism among coalition voters as a function of leader attachment being a major sorting factor between the uniformly pro-Netanyahu coalition and the uniformly anti-Netanyahu opposition (Lavi et al., 2023). Personalism nevertheless remains one of the two most important factors predicting reform support (alongside affective polarization) among the subset of coalition voters, suggesting that it has a central role in explaining support, even once leader-based sorting has taken place in the form of political blocks. This is, in our view, quite remarkable given that in Israel the current po-

litical blocks sort parties almost perfectly based on their pro- or anti-Netanyahu attitudes, with coalition parties wholly endorsing his leadership and the opposition parties adamantly opposing it.

Figure 5 plots the coefficients from models 1 and 3 (full sample, left panel) and 2 and 4 (coalition voters, right panel). As the figure makes clear, the results are highly robust to the inclusion of ideological self-placement (models 3 and 4). The plots highlight the decrease in correlation between personalism and reform support when limiting the analysis to coalition voters, and the increased role that affective polarization plays in predicting reform support among coalition voters.

We repeat the same analyses using the fresh sample of new respondents (recruited in the post-announcement wave and not part of the original IPP panel). Recall that with this sample we are only able to measure our explanatory variables at the same time that we measure reform support, with both taking place *after* the judicial reform was announced and became the focus of debate in Israel. We benefit however from a larger sample that is not subject to concerns about attrition.

Table 6 reports the results of this analysis. Results are only partly consistent with those we obtain from the panelists sample: in model 1, a one standard deviation increase in leader attachment predicts a 19pp increase in reform support (similar to the 19pp observed in the panelists sample). This value drops to about 17pp in model 2, which is limited to coalition voters, whereas for panelists the value we observed was 11pp. In other words, using the post-announcement measures leads to an estimate of the influence of personalism that is inflated by close to 50%. We elaborate below on potential causes of these differences.

A direct comparison of the results based on pre-announcement and post-announcement waves is shown in Figure S1 in the online appendix. An important difference from the results obtained from the panelists sample is that leader attachment remains a relatively stronger predictor of reform support even when we limit the analysis to coalition supporters. In models 2 and 4 that use the coalition-only sample, it is now the strongest predictor, whereas

it was tied with affective polarization when both were measured pre-announcement.

While we cannot definitively identify the causes of this pattern, one likely reason for this difference could be *sorting*: if the substance of the reform, the protests against it, or other related factors caused Netanyahu to lose support among his own (coalition) voters between the introduction of the reform and the post-announcement wave, then reform support within the coalition should be more strongly correlated with attitudes towards Netanyahu.¹⁴

Overall, then, we observe several notable patterns: support for the judicial reform—which serves here as a proxy for support for democratic backsliding more broadly—is predicted first and foremost by leader attachment, particularly when analyzing the full spectrum of voters. This correlation is highly significant, robust, and substantively large. Leader attachment remains a significant and substantively sizable predictor of reform support even when we limit the analysis only to coalition voters, but its magnitude is more than halved, and affective polarization becomes as important for explaining reform support among coalition voters. Finally, holding a majoritarian view of democracy and experiencing an entanglement with law enforcement authorities both consistently predict reform support, but to lesser degrees. We find no support for the expectation that holding populist attitudes explains reform support.

¹⁴Indeed, anecdotal polling evidence from this period of time shows a drastic drop in electoral support for Netanyahu and his government that is closely associated with opposition to the reform.

Table 5: Pre-Announcement Predictors of Reform Support

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Personalism	0.191*** (0.02)	0.110*** (0.04)	0.167*** (0.02)	0.101** (0.04)	0.435*** (0.03)	0.195*** (0.05)
Affective Polarization	0.0842*** (0.02)	0.113*** (0.02)	0.0784*** (0.02)	0.108*** (0.02)	-0.0111 (0.02)	0.192*** (0.05)
Populism	0.00185 (0.01)	-0.0319 (0.02)	-0.00418 (0.01)	-0.0345 (0.02)	-0.0618** (0.03)	-0.0922* (0.05)
Majoritarianism	0.0652*** (0.01)	0.0615*** (0.02)	0.0604*** (0.01)	0.0601*** (0.02)	0.0944*** (0.03)	0.118** (0.05)
Legal Entanglement	0.0778** (0.03)	0.0318 (0.05)	0.0774** (0.03)	0.0354 (0.05)	0.0720** (0.03)	0.0384 (0.05)
Constant	5.038*** (1.87)	5.894 (3.68)	5.424*** (1.86)	5.892 (3.68)	4.614** (1.88)	6.805* (3.68)
Demographic controls	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Ideological self-placement			Y	Y	Y	Y
N	712	309	712	309	716	311
R^2	0.569	0.256	0.574	0.259	0.561	0.239
Sample	full	coal.	full	coal.	full	coal.
Specification	cont.	cont.	cont.	cont.	binary	binary

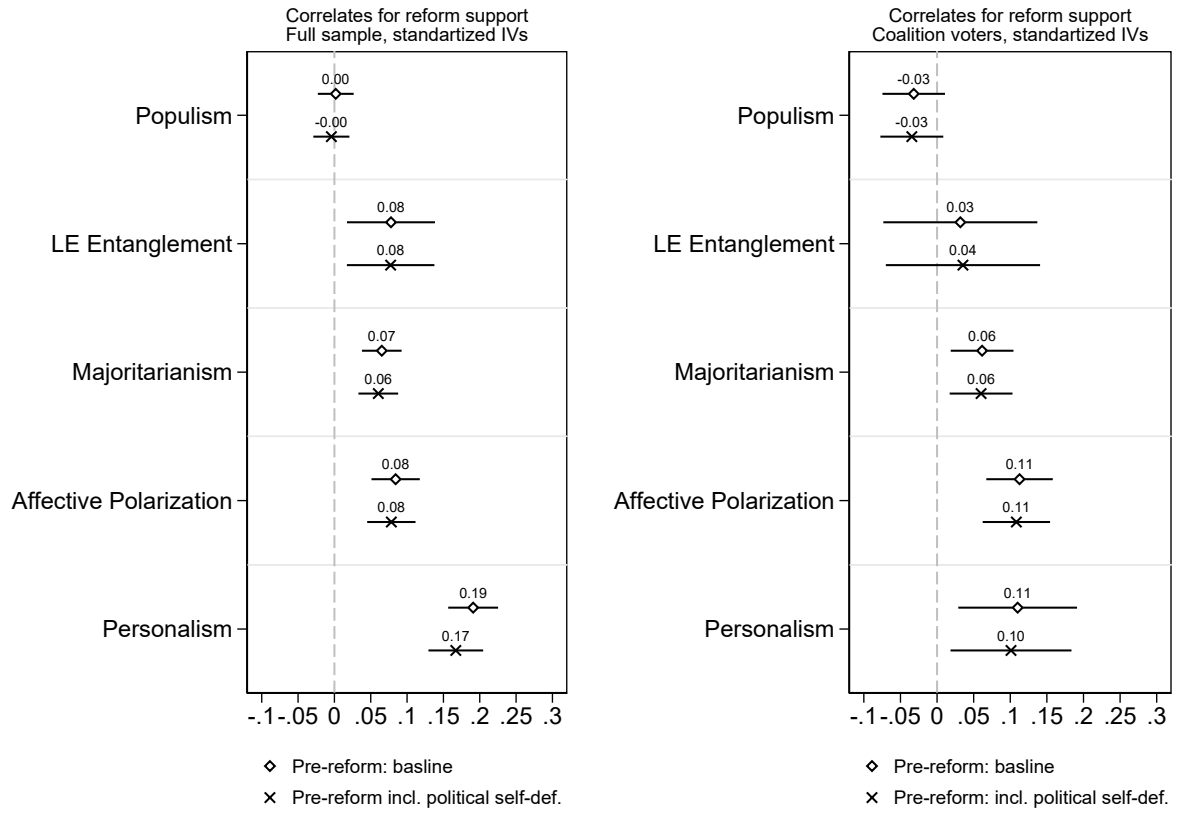
Note: The table shows estimates from the main regressions in which the (binary) dependent variable is *reform support*, and the independent variables capture the five explanations examined in the paper. All measures are based on pre-announcement wave except the *entanglement* variable (measured only in the post-announcement wave). All regressions includes additional control variables (not reported): female, college degree, married, age, resident of the periphery and religiosity.

Table 6: Post-Announcement Predictors of Reform Support

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Personalism	0.189*** (0.01)	0.174*** (0.02)	0.180*** (0.01)	0.168*** (0.02)	0.330*** (0.02)	0.187*** (0.03)
Affective Polarization	0.0924*** (0.01)	0.103*** (0.02)	0.0892*** (0.01)	0.101*** (0.02)	0.0338** (0.02)	0.173*** (0.03)
Populism	-0.0199** (0.01)	-0.0351*** (0.01)	-0.0211*** (0.01)	-0.0369*** (0.01)	-0.0181 (0.02)	-0.0276 (0.04)
Majoritarianism	0.0621*** (0.01)	0.0591*** (0.01)	0.0599*** (0.01)	0.0583*** (0.01)	0.190*** (0.02)	0.125*** (0.03)
Legal Entanglement	0.0541*** (0.02)	0.0407 (0.03)	0.0554*** (0.02)	0.0405 (0.03)	0.124*** (0.02)	0.108*** (0.03)
Constant	2.633** (1.27)	2.997 (2.23)	2.793** (1.27)	3.289 (2.25)	2.503* (1.37)	4.532* (2.33)
Demographic controls	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Ideological self-placement			Y	Y	Y	Y
N	1645	862	1599	830	1598	830
R^2	0.608	0.344	0.609	0.345	0.530	0.274
Sample	full	coal.	full	coal.	full	coal.
Specification	cont.	cont.	cont.	cont.	binary	binary

Note: The table shows estimates from regressions in which the (binary) dependent variable is *reform support*, and the independent variables capture the five explanations examined in the paper. All measures are based on the post-announcement wave. All models include additional control variables (not reported): female, college degree, married, age, resident of the periphery and religiosity.

Figure 5: Pre-announcement Correlates of Reform Support



Note: The figure shows coefficients from the main regression, corresponding to columns 1-4 in table 5

5 Discussion

After years in which democracy was on the march, the last two decades have been characterized by democratic backsliding (Boese-Schlosser et al., 2022; Haggard and Kaufman, 2021; Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019). Given the profound implications of this shift, it comes as no surprise that social scientists are devoting close attention to the political dynamics underlying this decline of democracy. Through our analysis of the Israeli case, we contribute to this growing body of literature by providing a framework for examining the drivers of mass-level support for democratic backsliding.

Synthesizing multiple bodies of research on the topic, we began by outlining several explanations concerning mass support for democratic backsliding and then analyzed data to test their explanatory power within the context of Israel’s judicial overhaul. Our investigation revealed that two explanations are dominant: personalism and affective polarization. Specifically, our findings indicate that the key factors underlying mass support for the judicial overhaul are strong attachment to the leader heading the backsliding charge, Benjamin Netanyahu, and the intensity of dislike for the opposition. In contrast, populist attitudes fail to explain support for the overhaul, while majoritarianism and personal entanglement with the legal system appear relevant, albeit more limited explanations.

Providing a first exploration of a ‘live’ case of democratic backsliding that is currently unfolding, our analysis benefited from a panel design that allows us to see whether attitudes held by citizens *prior* to the introduction of the reform predict support for the judicial overhaul. Our analyses of both panel and cross-sectional data are generally consistent, although they reveal the importance of relying on predictors collected before the announcement of the judicial overhaul. Specifically, our results suggest that following the announcement of the reform, respondents sorted into camps based on their attachment to Netanyahu, which in turn biases the results of the post-announcement survey data.

This study, of course, is not without limitations, and these provide ample opportunities for future research. First, future work should more closely examine the lack of association

between populist attitudes and support for the judicial overhaul. This null finding stands out in light of the prominence of populism in scholarly and media debates on the current crisis of democracy. That being said, this (non-)finding resonates with recent work on populism in Turkey, another case of democratic backsliding. [Balta et al. \(2022\)](#) show that while the ruling AKP (Justice and Development Party) is highly populist, its voters do not express strong populist views. They suggest that the reason for this phenomenon is that the AKP has been in power for an extended period, making it harder for its supporters to express strong anti-elitist attitudes. Further understanding the role of populist attitudes in shaping political preferences of voters of populist parties in power—such as the AKP in Turkey and Likud in Israel—is a promising direction for future research.

While our findings uncover an empirical link between affective polarization and support for democratic backsliding, the underlying mechanisms behind this relationship remain outside the scope of this study. It is plausible that an urge to aggravate political opponents is behind the association between negative out-party affect and support for the judicial overhaul, which is strongly opposed by those who did not vote for the coalition parties ([Webster et al., 2022](#)). Alternatively, this relationship may reflect partisans' desire to see their side consolidate power, a sentiment that leads them to overlook transgressions of democratic norms if those efforts serve their political camp's interests ([Graham and Svobik, 2020](#)). With the data at our disposal, we are unable to distinguish between these non-mutually exclusive claims, however we regard this issue as an important avenue for future research.

And while our results highlight the role of attachment to the leader in democratic backsliding, this factor may prove to be a double-edged sword: while it galvanizes support among the leader's followers, it also helps the opposition mobilize against the leader's efforts to curtail democracy ([Luo and Przeworski, 2023](#)). This logic suggests that there could be a tipping point after which strong feelings toward the leader have a negative marginal value for those wishing to weaken democracy. In the Israeli case, attachment to Netanyahu is strongly predictive of support for the judicial overhaul but also of opposition to it, probably accounting

for some of the vigor and persistence of the protest movement against the overhaul.

Our analysis provides in-depth insights into a single-country case study. There are of course idiosyncrasies of the Israeli case, chief among them the long period of electoral unrest that preceded the judicial overhaul. Nevertheless, Israel is a case that not only attracts wide public scrutiny but also merits close scholarly attention. The *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman, who extensively covered the political developments discussed in this study, recently noted that he “considers Israeli trends to be a harbinger for wider patterns in Western civilization.”¹⁵ Whether in this instance that is the case is of course too early to tell. But analyzing mass attitudes in Israel through the theoretical framework we developed above may nonetheless offer useful insight into the broader challenge of democratic backsliding that liberal democracies currently face.

¹⁵Ben Samuels, “How Thomas Friedman Became the De Facto U.S. Ambassador of Israel’s Protest Movement.” *Haaretz*, 8.10.2023.

References

- Balta, E., Kaltwasser, C. R., and Yagci, A. H. (2022). Populist attitudes and conspiratorial thinking. *Party Politics*, 28(4):625–637.
- Barber, M. and Pope, J. C. (2019). Does party trump ideology? disentangling party and ideology in america. *American Political Science Review*, 113(1):38–54.
- Bartels, L. M. (2023). *Democracy Erodes from the Top: Leaders, Citizens, and the Challenge of Populism in Europe*. Princeton University Press.
- Bassan-Nygate, L. and Weiss, C. M. (2020). It’s us or them: Partisan polarization in israel and beyond. *APSA MENA Politics Newsletter*.
- Boese-Schlosser, V. A., Alizada, N., Lundstedt, M., Morrison, K., Natsika, N., Sato, Y., Tai, H., and Lindberg, S. I. (2022). Autocratization changing nature? *Democracy Report*.
- Boxell, L., Gentzkow, M., and Shapiro, J. M. (2020). Cross-country trends in affective polarization. Technical report, National Bureau of Economic Research.
- Broockman, D. E., Kalla, J. L., and Westwood, S. J. (2022). Does affective polarization undermine democratic norms or accountability? maybe not. *American Journal of Political Science*.
- Egan, P. J. and Mullin, M. (2012). Turning personal experience into political attitudes: The effect of local weather on americans’ perceptions about global warming. *The Journal of Politics*, 74(3):796–809.
- Gidengil, E., Stolle, D., and Bergeron-Boutin, O. (2022). The partisan nature of support for democratic backsliding: A comparative perspective. *European Journal of Political Research*, 61(4):901–929.
- Gidron, N. (2023). Why israeli democracy is in crisis. *Journal of Democracy*, 34(3):33–45.

- Gidron, N., Adams, J., and Horne, W. (2020). *American affective polarization in comparative perspective*. Cambridge University Press.
- Gidron, N. and Sheffer, L. (2022). Differentiating the sources of post-election partisan affect warming. *Working Paper*.
- Gidron, N., Sheffer, L., and Mor, G. (2022a). The israel polarization panel dataset, 2019–2021. *Electoral Studies*, 80:102512.
- Gidron, N., Sheffer, L., and Mor, G. (2022b). Validating the feeling thermometer as a measure of partisan affect in multi-party systems. *Electoral Studies*, 80:102542.
- Graham, M. H. and Svobik, M. W. (2020). Democracy in america? partisanship, polarization, and the robustness of support for democracy in the united states. *American Political Science Review*, 114(2):392–409.
- Grossman, G., Kronick, D., Levendusky, M., and Meredith, M. (2020). Let the majority rule. *Unpublished manuscript*.
- Haggard, S. and Kaufman, R. (2021). *Backsliding: Democratic regress in the contemporary world*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hobolt, S., Anduiza, E., Carkoglu, A., Lutz, G., and Sauger, N. (2016). Cses module 5: Democracy divided? people, politicians and the politics of populism (final report). *CSES Planning Committee Module 5*.
- Iyengar, S., Sood, G., and Lelkes, Y. (2012). Affect, not ideology: A social identity perspective on polarization. *Public opinion quarterly*, 76(3):405–431.
- Kaltwasser, C. R. (2012). The ambivalence of populism: threat and corrective for democracy. *Democratization*, 19(2):184–208.
- Kaltwasser, C. R. and Van Hauwaert, S. M. (2020). The populist citizen: Empirical evidence from europe and latin america. *European Political Science Review*, 12(1):1–18.

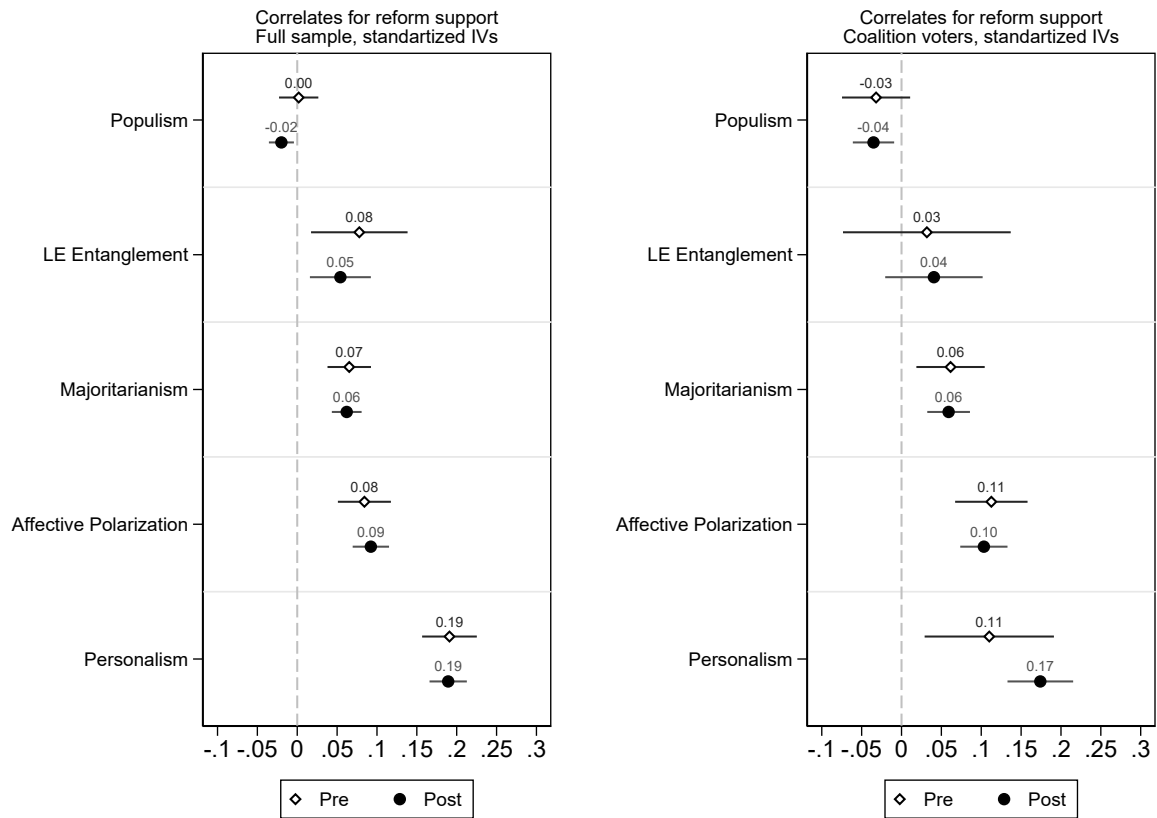
- Keinan, L. (2023). The revolution was not promised in advance: Likud’s campaign focused on security and economy. *Reshet 13 News*.
- Kingzette, J., Druckman, J. N., Klar, S., Krupnikov, Y., Levendusky, M., and Ryan, J. B. (2021). How affective polarization undermines support for democratic norms. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 85(2):663–677.
- Lavi, L., Rivlin-Angert, N., Treger, C., Sheaffer, T., Waismel-Manor, I., and Shamir, M. (2023). King bibi: The personification of democratic values in the 2019–2021 election cycle 1. In *The Elections in Israel, 2019–2021*, pages 77–98. Routledge.
- Lenz, G. S. (2013). *Follow the leader?: how voters respond to politicians’ policies and performance*. University of Chicago Press.
- Levitsky, S. and Ziblatt, D. (2019). *How democracies die*. Crown.
- Lührmann, A. and Lindberg, S. I. (2019). A third wave of autocratization is here: what is new about it? *Democratization*, 26(7):1095–1113.
- Luo, Z. and Przeworski, A. (2023). Democracy and its vulnerabilities: Dynamics of democratic backsliding. *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*, 18:105–130.
- Margalit, Y., Raviv, S., and Solodoch, O. (2022). The cultural origins of populism. *Available at SSRN 4001543*.
- Margalit, Y. and Shayo, M. (2021). How markets shape values and political preferences: A field experiment. *American Journal of Political Science*, 65(2):473–492.
- Matovski, A. (2021). *Popular Dictatorships: Crises, Mass Opinion, and the Rise of Electoral Authoritarianism*. Cambridge University Press.
- McCoy, J. and Somer, M. (2019). Toward a theory of pernicious polarization and how it harms democracies: Comparative evidence and possible remedies. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 681(1):234–271.

- Mohrenberg, S., Huber, R. A., and Freyburg, T. (2021). Love at first sight? populist attitudes and support for direct democracy. *Party Politics*, 27(3):528–539.
- Mounk, Y. (2018). The people vs. democracy. In *The People vs. Democracy*. Harvard University Press.
- Mudde, C. and Kaltwasser, C. R. (2017). *Populism: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press.
- Müller, J.-W. (2017). *What is populism?* Penguin UK.
- Orhan, Y. E. (2021). The relationship between affective polarization and democratic backsliding: Comparative evidence. *Democratization*.
- Rachman, G. (2022). *The age of The strongman: How the cult of the leader threatens democracy around the world*. Other Press, LLC.
- Rahat, G. and Kenig, O. (2018). *From party politics to personalized politics?: Party change and political personalization in democracies*. Oxford University Press.
- Reiljan, A. (2020). ‘fear and loathing across party lines’(also) in europe: Affective polarisation in european party systems. *European journal of political research*, 59(2):376–396.
- Şaşmaz, A., Yagci, A. H., and Ziblatt, D. (2022). How voters respond to presidential assaults on checks and balances: Evidence from a survey experiment in turkey. *Comparative Political Studies*, 55(11):1947–1980.
- Scheppele, K. L. (2018). Autocratic legalism. *The University of Chicago Law Review*, 85(2):545–584.
- Shamir, M. and Rahat, G. (2019). Four elections in two years: A unique crisis or a sign of things to come? In *The Elections in Israel, 2019–2021*, pages 3–26. Routledge.

- Shinar, A. (2021). Democratic backsliding, subsidized speech, and the new majoritarian entrenchment. *The American Journal of Comparative Law*, 69(2):335–385.
- Steiner, N. D. (2022). Economic inequality, unfairness perceptions, and populist attitudes. *Gutenberg School of Management and Economics and Research Unit “Interdisciplinary Public Policy” Discussion Paper Series*.
- Svolik, M. W. (2019). Polarization versus democracy. *Journal of Democracy*, 30(3):20–32.
- Urbinati, N. (1998). Democracy and populism. *Constellations*, 5(1):110–124.
- Vehrkamp, R. and Wratil, C. (2017). A populist moment? populist attitudes of voters and non-voters before the german federal election 2017.
- Voelkel, J. G., Chu, J., Stagnaro, M. N., Mernyk, J. S., Redekopp, C., Pink, S. L., Druckman, J. N., Rand, D. G., and Willer, R. (2023). Interventions reducing affective polarization do not necessarily improve anti-democratic attitudes. *Nature human behaviour*, 7(1):55–64.
- Webster, S. W., Glynn, A. N., and Motta, M. P. (2022). Partisan schadenfreude and candidate cruelty. *May*, 11:2022.
- Wuttke, A., Schimpf, C., and Schoen, H. (2020). When the whole is greater than the sum of its parts: On the conceptualization and measurement of populist attitudes and other multidimensional constructs. *American Political Science Review*, 114(2):356–374.
- Zaslove, A. and Meijers, M. (2023). Populist democrats? unpacking the relationship between populist and democratic attitudes at the citizen level. *Political Studies*.

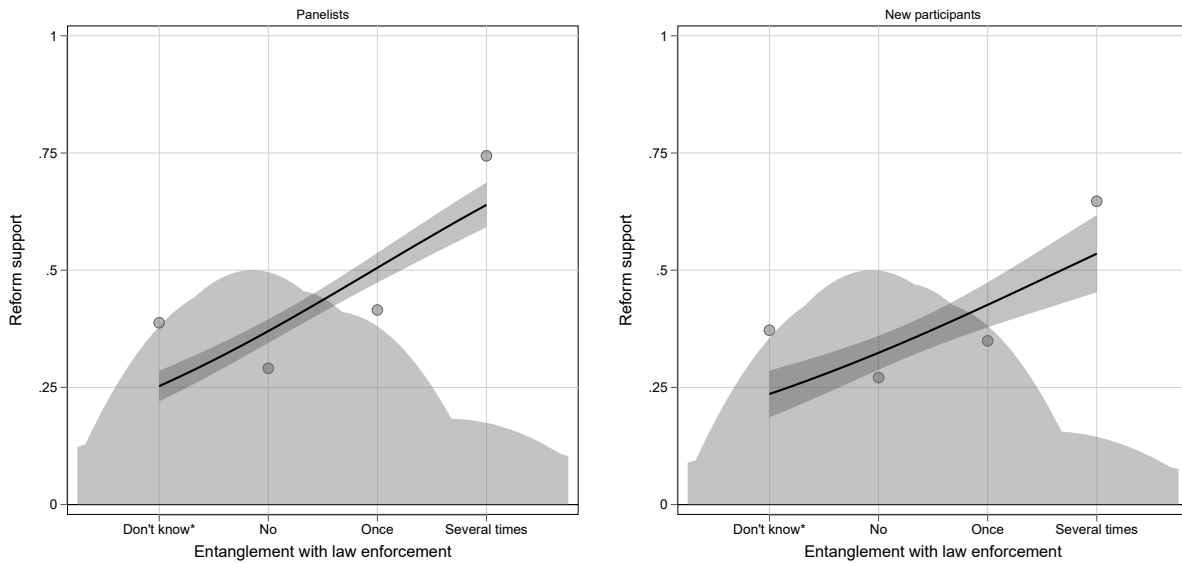
A Online appendix

Figure S1: Correlates for reform support, pre- and post-announcement waves



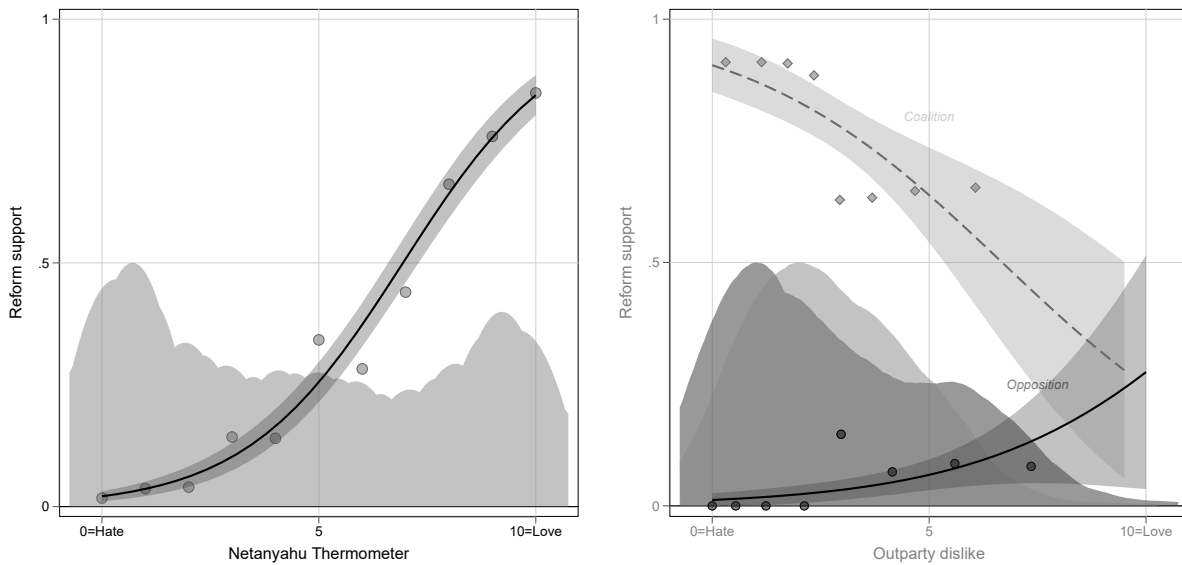
Note: The figure shows coefficients from the main regressions, corresponding to column 1 in table 5 and column 1 in table 6 (left panel); and to column 2 in table 5 and column 2 in table 6 (right panel).

Figure S2: Correlations for reform support and fifth main explanation in post-announcement wave



Note: The figure complements figure 4 – showing the density of the fifth predictor (LE entanglement) and correlation between this predictor and reform support.

Figure S3: Correlations for reform support and two main explanations in wave 10



Note: The figure replicates figure 4, using the predictors that are available in wave 10 of the IPP. Recall that figure 4 uses data from wave 11.

Table S1: Correlates for reform support – median-based specification

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Affective Polar.: Outparty dislike	0.0385 (0.03)	0.267*** (0.05)	0.0853*** (0.02)	0.254*** (0.03)
Personalism: Leader attach	0.464*** (0.03)	0.185*** (0.06)	0.487*** (0.02)	0.331*** (0.04)
Majoritarianism: Narrow democ. def.	0.102*** (0.03)	0.112** (0.05)	0.0931*** (0.02)	0.0807** (0.03)
Populism: stronger popul. attitude	0.0180 (0.03)	-0.0407 (0.05)	-0.0291 (0.02)	-0.0589** (0.03)
Constant	4.606** (2.01)	6.569* (3.69)	2.575* (1.34)	3.178 (2.27)
Demographic controls	Y	Y	Y	Y
N	712	309	1598	830
R^2	0.501	0.235	0.553	0.295
Wave, relative to reform announcement	pre	pre	post	post
Sample	All	Coal.	All	Coal.

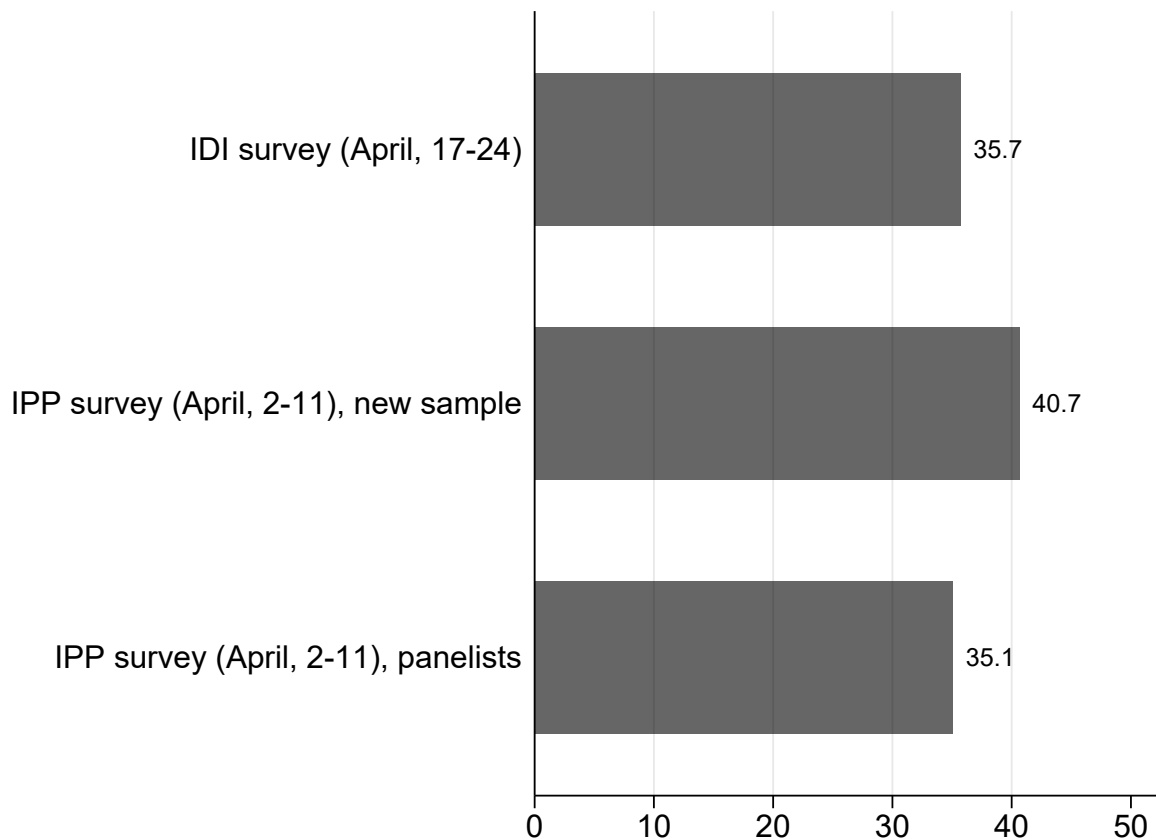
Note: This table shows estimates from regressing reform support on four of independent variables, each of which capturing a different explanation, based on both pre- and post-announcement waves, using the median-based coding.

Table S2: Correlates for reform support – probit-based specification

	(1)	(2)
Affective Polar.: Outparty dislike	0.0843*** (0.02)	0.117*** (0.02)
Personalism: Leader attach.	0.228*** (0.03)	0.266*** (0.02)
Majoritarianism: Narrow democ. def.	0.0885*** (0.02)	0.117*** (0.02)
Populism: stronger popul. attitude	-0.0161 (0.02)	-0.0515*** (0.02)
Entanglement with LE	0.0960* (0.05)	0.103** (0.04)
Demographic controls	Y	Y
N	712	1598
pseudo- R^2	0.57	0.58
Wave	pre-announcement	post-announcement
Sample	All	All

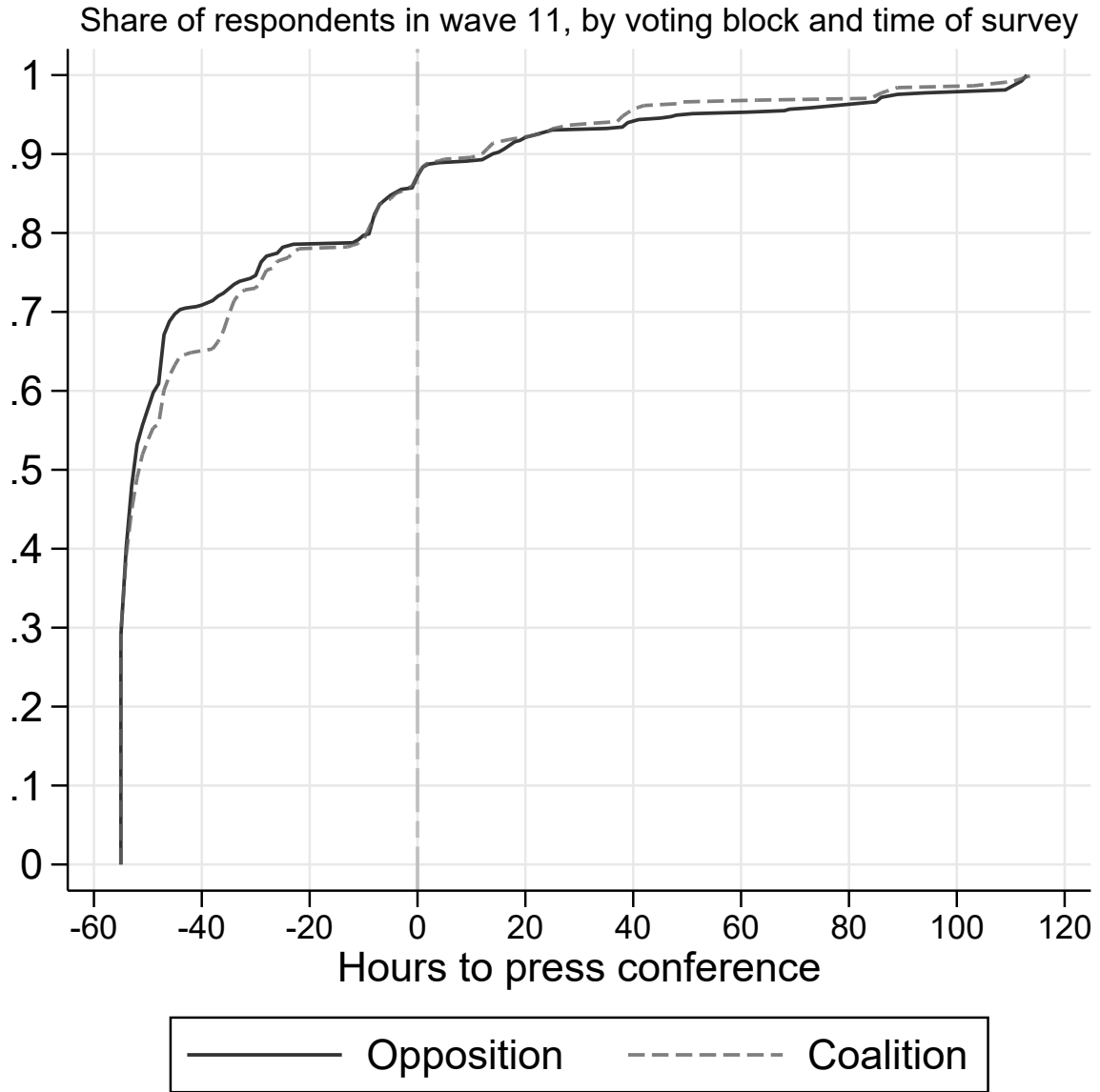
Note: This table shows replication of the main regression shown in tables 5 and 6, but this time using probit rather than OLS. The coefficients shown are marginal effects.

Figure S4: Reform support, by source and sample



Note: This figure shows means of the outcome variable used in this paper, reform support, across the two samples used, based on the IPP data; as well as the mean for the corresponding outcome using the IDI data (in which case the question is "What is your opinion on the judicial plan promoted by the government?" and the answers range from very bad to very good. The outcome in both cases is coded the same (levels 4 and 5 are regarded as *support*).

Figure S5: Share of respondents, by block and timing



Note: This figure shows time-wise cumulative distribution of survey responses – by distance, in hours, from the press conference in which the judicial overhaul was first presented by the Justice minister.