

The Elections in Israel, 2019–2021

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Projections During a Protracted
Political Crisis¹

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The Evolution of Citizens' Election Projections During a Protracted Political Crisis¹

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Uncertainty is inherent to democratic elections. Even when a candidate or a party is the clear favorite to win, the final outcome depends on citizens' free choice – both whether to vote and to whom – and on the various developments in the run-up to the elections, possibly until the very last minute (see Fuchs, 2017). This uncertainty is even larger in a multiparty system, such as Israel, where the outcome is not binary (as in the United States, for instance) and the eventual composition of the government depends on coalition negotiations. However, the 2019–2021 elections in Israel have taken this uncertainty to a new level. Repeated failures to form a government led to three rounds of elections within less than one year (between April 2019 and March 2020), followed by the establishment of a short-lived government and another, fourth election (in March 2021). In that, the 2019–2021 Israeli elections link to global trends of political turmoil that challenge liberal democracies, and fit observations that we live in an age of radical uncertainty about the future (e.g., Harari, 2018; Mounk, 2018).

One of the central human mechanisms for coping with uncertainty – both individually and collectively – is the construction of future scenarios (Gilbert & Wilson, 2007; Kay & King, 2020; Neiger, 2007). Accordingly, before elections, the public sphere is filled with projections about the outcomes and implications of the upcoming elections, made by pollsters, commentators, politicians, and other actors (see Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2018; Weimann, 1990). The citizens, in turn, formulate their own expectations vis-à-vis the various projections they are exposed to, reflecting their political identities and desires (Babad, 1997; Tenenboim-Weinblatt, Baden, Aharoni, & Overbeck, 2020). The case study of the successive Israeli elections offers a unique opportunity to examine how such expectations evolve over time, under increasing political uncertainty: How do the predicted outcomes change, if at all, and on what grounds? Do people become less certain about their predictions? Do they lose or maintain hope that the desired outcomes will be achieved, and how does it affect their motivation to vote?

This chapter thus sets out to answer the following broad question: How did Israeli citizens' election projections – as set against the backdrop of a deepening political crisis – evolve over the course of the successive elections, and with what consequences? For this investigation, we introduce a conceptual framework that understands projections as complex dynamic discursive constructs with social implications. Focusing on the 2019–2020 elections, we examine the evolving projections of Israeli citizens, using data from a panel survey and focus groups. We show that despite the growing conditions of uncertainty, Israeli citizens' overall optimism about the elections' outcomes and implications did not decrease over the three successive elections, and argue that this persistent optimism may explain the higher voter turnout in each round. In the epilogue we consider additional insights from the 2021 election, which saw a reversal in voters' growing optimism and turnout, but which eventually redeemed the opposition's hopes for political change.

8.1 Political Projections: A Conceptual Framework

Political projections are scenarios about the expected outcomes and implications of political events, such as elections, referenda, crises, and wars. Much previous work has focused on the challenges and cognitive biases associated with the attempt to accurately predict the future (e.g., Silver, 2012; Tetlock & Gardner, 2015; Kahneman, 2011). However, getting it right is not the only motivation for projections. For instance, future scenarios encapsulated in campaign slogans such as “Bibi or Tibi” (a Likud slogan juxtaposing Netanyahu and an Arab-Israeli politician)² or “Kahol-Lavan or Erdoğan” (a Blue and White slogan likening Netanyahu to the Turkish president)³ portray binary future outcomes that play to the fears of the respective parties' constituencies for mobilization purposes. Moreover, projections can affect political reality regardless of whether they are accurate: they can propel political action aimed at bringing about desirable futures or avoid undesirable scenarios, and sometimes trigger self-fulfilling and self-defeating dynamics (Merton, 1948; Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2018).

Based on theoretical and empirical work of the PROFECI project (<http://profeci.net/>), we suggest a conceptual framework of projections (see Figure 8.1) that centers upon the expected outcome (Predicted State), qualified by its estimated likelihood (Probability), as well as its desirability (Evaluation). Furthermore, expectations may be warranted by specific considerations (Anchors) and imply suitable responses (Implications).

The **predicted state** refers to the expected outcomes of future events – for example, who will win the elections, or how will the elections affect the economic situation in the years to come. From a discursive perspective, the predicted state can be viewed as an assertive speech act that expresses a belief in a future state of the world. As such, it differs from other future-oriented speech acts (e.g., promises, calls for action), which express a desire for specific future states (Searle, 1979; see also Kampf, 2013; Stalpuskaya,

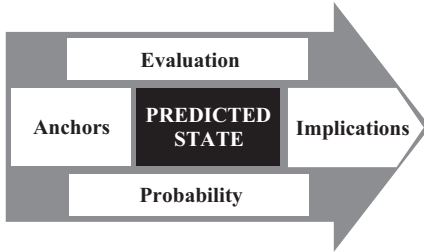


Figure 8.1 Projections.

2020). Predicted states may refer to specific outcomes within a prestructured set of possibilities (e.g., the winning candidates, allocation of seats in parliament), or lay forth open-ended scenarios (e.g., about the security situation in Israel); they may pertain to fixed points in time (e.g., election day), or to an indefinite future (Neiger & Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2016). In Israel, the composition of the government, as well as the identity of the prime minister, are determined by coalition negotiations rather than the popular vote alone, elevating the relevance of narrative projections beyond the immediate election results.

Next, projections can incorporate an assessment about the **probability** of the predicted state. Besides estimates of low to high chances, such assessments may also eschew specified probabilities and concentrate on whether a proposed outcome is possible and relevant. Specified probabilities can be expressed numerically (e.g., one-in-ten, 95% chance), graphically (see Pentzold & Fechner, 2020), or verbally (e.g., unlikely, certain), whereas possibilities are usually expressed in verbal, narrative forms (e.g., there is a chance, not impossible). Specific probability estimates have been considered key to professional forecasting and have largely dominated the literature on political predictions (Silver, 2012; Tetlock, 2005; Tetlock & Gardner, 2015). Nevertheless, numerical probabilities appear relatively alien to laypeople’s thinking about the future (Kahneman, 2011; Westwood, Messing, & Lelkes, 2020) – especially under radical uncertainty (Kay & King, 2020), when projections might lend themselves better to possibilistic rather than probabilistic reasoning.

Projections frequently include **evaluations** of the predicted state. People can evaluate future scenarios as positive (desirable) or negative (undesirable) for themselves, their communities (their family, political camp, country, the human race), or for others (e.g., opposing parties, specific political actors). In addition, evaluations can foreground normative considerations (i.e., whether the predicted state satisfies specific values), interest-based assessments (e.g., whether it serves an actor’s aspirations), or affective evaluations (i.e., how a person expects to feel about the predicted future; “affective forecasting”; see Wilson & Gilbert, 2003; Tenenboim-Weinblatt et al., 2022).

While probability and evaluation are attributes of predicted states, **anchors** capture any reasoning used to justify the projection. People infer likely future events or developments from presently available knowledge, following two main strategies: First, they can rely on projections made by other people, such as political commentators, pollsters, politicians, or trusted friends. Second, they can make their own inferences, extrapolating future developments from present or past states of the world (e.g., predicting the identity of the next prime minister based on a contender's character and believed intentions, observable behavior, track record, poll performance, or historical analogies).

Finally, projections can also raise behavioral **implications**. If a predicted state is viewed as undesirable, it may trigger attempts to avert it or dodge its impact (e.g., adjust voting intentions, protest, migrate to another country). Conversely, a desirable predicted state may motivate people to work toward achieving it (e.g., turn out to vote, donate to a campaign, help mobilizing voters). In political and communication science, scholars have examined the relationship between electoral expectations and behavior in contexts such as the bandwagon and underdog effects, focusing mostly on the influence of public opinion polls (e.g., Mutz, 1998; Rothschild & Malhotra, 2014; Stolwijk, Schuck, & de Vreese, 2017). The ways in which political projections – in their complex, multifaceted form – play into political participation are still to be delineated.

The meaning and social significance of projections arise from the interplay between predicted states, their probability and desirability assessments, as well as linked anchors and planned responses. While projections can be constructed bottom-up, reviewing possible anchors to derive likely future states and then appraising these, other paths are also possible. For instance, behavioral implications can be the starting point for constructing and evaluating predicted states, as in politicians' dire or rosy scenarios strategically aimed at mobilizing voters. In voters' own projections, the evaluation component sometimes domineers, as manifested in wishful thinking, where expectations are being shaped by political preferences (Babad, 1997; Krizan, Miller, & Johar, 2010), or optimism bias, that is, people's tendency to "overestimate the likelihood of positive events, and underestimate the likelihood of negative events" (Sharot, 2011, p. 941; see also Kahneman, 2011). Estimations of desirability and likelihood may also be on more equal footing, as in the case of hope, constituting a combination of expectations and wishes (Leshem & Halperin, 2020). Anchors can attenuate the impact of voters' evaluations on their expectations, as shown in studies that document the combination of preferences and available information (e.g., poll results or knowledge about previous elections) in peoples' expectations about parties' electoral success (Blais & Bodet, 2006; Meffert & Gschwend, 2011).

In this chapter, we examine the development of projections related to the 2019–2020 Israeli elections and the interplay of their constitutive elements, with a focus on the optimistic trends that emerge from this analysis.

8.2 Methods

The investigation draws upon two data sets – a panel survey and a series of focus groups – that have been collected as part of the ERC-funded project PROFECI at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

For the panel survey, we recruited 1,191 Israeli voters, using a stratified sampling procedure to represent the composition of the electorate. The survey, which was administered online, underrepresents ultra-Orthodox voters (who do not normally participate in online surveys), and to a lesser extent also Arab citizens of Israel and older voters (see the Methodological Appendix). There were ten survey waves altogether – seven full waves prior to the elections, aimed to capture respondents’ expectations, as well as three brief postelection waves (see Figure 8.2). In each of the seven pre-electoral waves, participants were asked to predict the identity of the next prime minister and the largest party, as well as the composition of the future government coalition. Furthermore, the survey recorded respondents’ estimated probability and affective evaluation of the predicted outcomes, as well as a range of control variables. For the present study, we focus on those 442 participants that participated in all seven full survey waves.

The focus groups comprised five groups of 10–12 Israeli voters (four groups of Jewish voters and one of Arab voters). Each group was convened five times over the duration of the first two election rounds. In each meeting, participants were asked to predict what would happen in the forthcoming elections and coalition talks, and what might be the future implications of these events. Each meeting also included a discussion of current election-related media discourse. All meetings were transcribed and qualitatively analyzed, focusing on participants’ strategies for constructing and negotiating projections. For additional methodological details, see the Appendix.

In the following sections, we first present key findings in relation to each aspect of projections separately. Next, we consider the interplay of elements in connection with people’s political identities, which reveals an overall pattern of persistent optimism among Israeli voters.

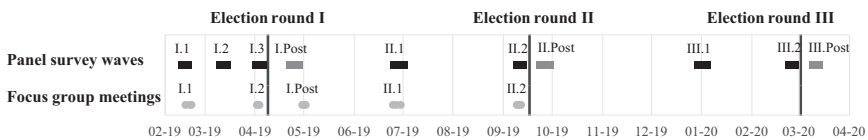


Figure 8.2 Timeline of data collection.

Note: I–III: election rounds; 1–3: survey waves/focus group meetings relevant to each round.

8.3 Evolution of the Elements of Political Projections Across the 2019–2020 Elections

8.3.1 Predicted State

Over the seven pre-electoral waves (see Figure 8.2 for the index), survey participants expressed their predictions regarding the identity of the future prime minister (Figure 8.3), the party expected to win the largest number of seats in parliament (Figure 8.4), and the parties expected to join the next government coalition (Figure 8.5).

Throughout the three election rounds, a majority of respondents predicted the incumbent Netanyahu to remain prime minister. However, this majority decreased from 79% in February 2019, following the announcement of election round I, to 57% prior to round III, one year later. Inversely, the percentage of respondents who expected Gantz to become prime minister grew from 18% to 35%.⁴ The beginning of the third election campaign (III.1) was the highest point for Gantz (39%) – and correspondingly, the lowest point for Netanyahu (52%).

Likewise, a majority of respondents expected Netanyahu's Likud to win the largest number of seats in the Knesset (Israeli parliament) throughout the first two election rounds. However, their percentage dropped sharply from 80% (I.1) to 51%–54% (I.2–I.3) following the establishment of the challenger list Blue and White. The two parties eventually tied in election round I, while in round II, Blue and White emerged as largest party. Subsequently, a majority of respondents (56%) initially expected Blue and White to hold on to its lead in the third round (III.1). Toward the end of the campaign, which

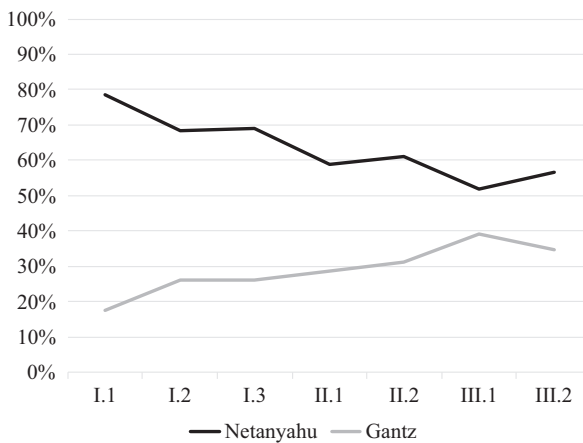


Figure 8.3 Expected prime minister (percentage of respondents).

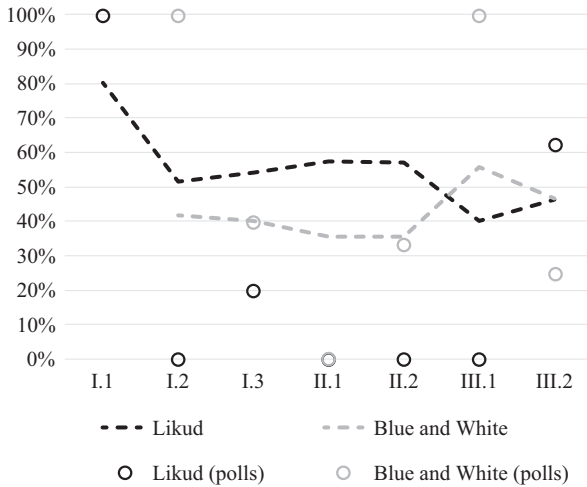


Figure 8.4 Expected largest party (percentage of respondents and opinion polls).

Note: Circles represent the share of polls in the three main TV channels (Kan 11, Channel 12, and Channel 13) that predicted either party to win most seats during the survey wave and the week before; the remaining polls predicted a tie.

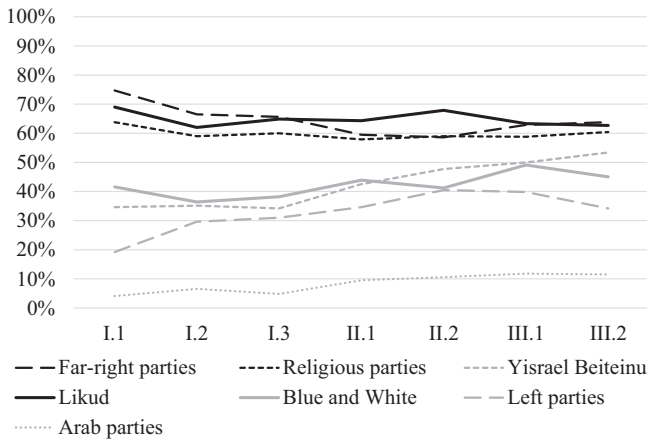


Figure 8.5 Expected parties in the coalition (percentage of respondents).

resulted in a Likud win, both parties almost tied in people’s expectations. All trend reversals in voters’ expectations cohered with the projections published in election polls – in direction if not in magnitude.

Concerning the coalition composition, a persistent majority of respondents expected the Likud, the parties to its right, and the ultra-Orthodox parties to

comprise the future government.⁵ All other parties and lists were projected to join the coalition by a lesser, albeit overall rising share of respondents. Generally, participants tended to expect increasingly inclusive coalitions.

The same patterns were also reflected in the focus group discussions. Before Blue and White was established, the dominant projection was that Netanyahu would be the next prime minister, Likud would be the largest party, and the government would be similar to the outgoing, right-wing religious government. Few participants cautiously projected possible changes, while most agreed that, in the words of one participant, “What has been is what will be” (Or, M, 49, I.1).⁶ However, scenarios grew in diversity and complexity during the subsequent meetings. While many still expected Netanyahu to remain prime minister, participants also developed projections regarding other possible outcomes (e.g., rotation, another prime minister). The following interaction, recorded in June 2019, anticipated what would materialize 11 months later:

GIL (M, 35, II.1): Blue and White will split. There are guys there who will say ‘we are not going to be in the opposition again. And we are not having another election’

HANI (F, 49): They won’t have a problem being martyrs and sacrifice themselves for the Israeli nation.

GIL: And people will understand this. Ten of them will leave and there will be a big government.

8.3.2 Probability

Survey respondents reported an overall high level of certainty about their projections (on a scale of “very low chance” – 0 to “very high chance” – 100), which decreased only slightly over the three election rounds (see Figure 8.6). On average, participants predicted the largest party with higher probability (86%–80%) than the future prime minister (83%–77%), and the coalition composition with lower probability (77%–71%). Considering the complexity of coalition talks, however, this level of certainty still appears unrealistic.

Yet, the responses also suggest some rational adjustment of probabilities, concerning both the higher certainty for the less contingent predictions of the largest party and prime minister, and the diminishing confidence following the repeated failure to form a government. The same awareness of increased uncertainty is reflected in the declining share of people that expressed absolute certainty (100%) in their projections (37%–21%, 32%–19%, and 17%–11% regarding the largest party, prime minister, and coalition, respectively).

The focus groups showed some similar trends, with several participants expressing a small decline in certainty through decreasing probabilities. For instance, Tzeela (F, 26) initially estimated “80%” chance for a Netanyahu government (I.1), but later gave her unity government prediction only “70%” chance (II.1). More commonly, however, people shifted from high certainty to confusion. For example, before the first election, Natan (M, 43) claimed to be

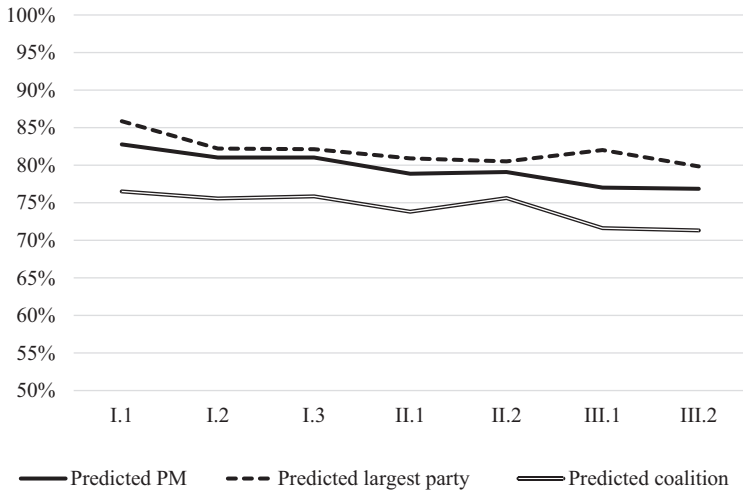


Figure 8.6 Mean chance attributed to expected outcome.

“100% (sure) that Bibi is going to be elected” (I.1), but conceded that “everything is possible” afterwards (II.1). The open structure of the focus groups generally opened more opportunities for possibilistic rather than probabilistic discourse, as will be demonstrated below.

8.3.3 Evaluation

Asked to assess how they would feel if their predictions were to materialize, on average, voters expected to be happy – the political crisis and radical uncertainty notwithstanding. Expected affect was least positive in wave I.1 (largest party: $M=56.7$; prime minister: 56.2; coalition: 56.4), and well above 60 in all later waves (see Figure 8.7). Across all waves and all projections, 18% to 28% of respondents marked their expected happiness at the positive endpoint (100). This high degree of optimism contrasts against participants’ slightly negative affect experienced following the actual election results, which averaged below the neutral starting point for all three postelection waves (round I: $M=49.6$; round II: 47.8; round III: 43.5). Yet, respondents expected to feel happy again when the second and third elections were called, with a small over-time increase in expected happiness.

Beyond expected election outcomes, survey respondents were also asked to evaluate their implications for the overall state of the country in three years (see Figure 8.8). In all waves, respondents expressed, on average, a slightly positive outlook (3.32–3.62 on a five-point scale), with a plurality of respondents (40%–45%) rating Israel’s future state as “good”. Over-time changes were small (mostly, a slight, temporary rise toward Election Day). Envisaging

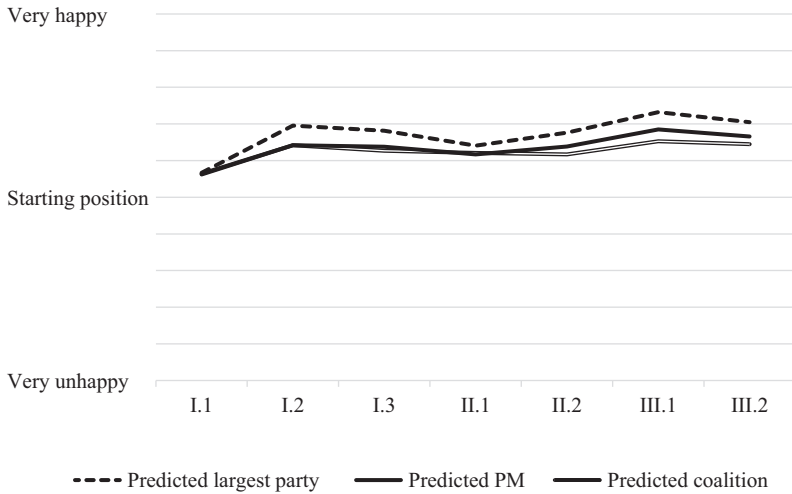


Figure 8.7 Mean expected affect toward projected outcome.

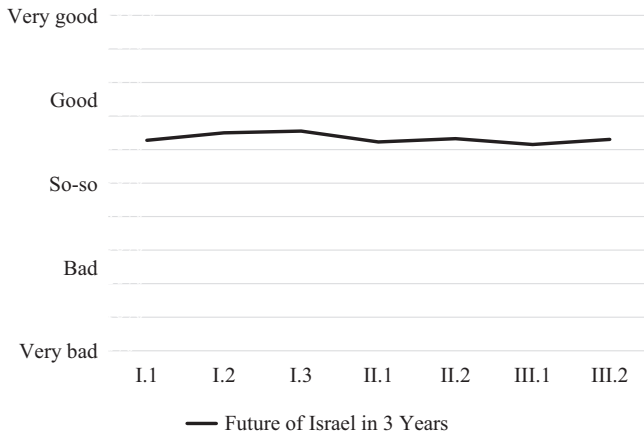


Figure 8.8 Mean expected future of Israel in three years.

neither doom nor a bright future, the political crisis barely affected Israelis’ general confidence that things will be okay – a finding echoed also in the focus groups, as expressed for instance by Hani (II.1): “We will survive”.

8.3.4 Anchors

To anchor their projections, voters relied on a variety of sources, as well as on their own experiences, logics, and worldviews. The survey shows

respondents' stable reliance on central news outlets for political information – mostly, the popular website *Ynet* and the main TV channels (Channel 12, followed by Channel 13 and Kan 11), and to a lesser extent, the leading newspapers (*Israel Hayom*, *Yedioth-Ahronot*), other news sites (*Walla!*, *Mako*) and radio stations (Galei-Tzahal, Kan). Mainstream Arabic-language television channels and news sites likewise dominated among Arabic-speakers. A majority (54%–57%) reported that they follow polls to a large or very large extent. Over time, we recorded a slight increase in respondents' tendency to follow key political and media actors on social media (e.g., the share of respondents following political analyst Amit Segal rose from 7% to 10%).

Focus group participants' media exposure patterns resembled those identified in the survey. Interestingly, however, other than a few instances – for example, Gil (I.Post) humorously quoting Amit Segal's saying that “in Israel you go to elections every four years and eventually Bibi wins, it's sort of a ritual” – people rarely mentioned specific media outlets, actors, or texts in relation to their projections, even when asked directly about their sources. Polls were more commonly mentioned, and some participants relied heavily on these (“You can't ignore the polls!” [Benny, M, 60, I.1]), while others dismissed them as unreliable. In most cases, participants presented their projections as informed by their own observations, omitting any sources that might have informed these conclusions.

8.3.5 Behavioral Implications

Political participation, and particularly voting turnout, is one of the key potential behavioral implications of election-related projections. In the three rounds of elections, turnout increased from 68.5% in round I, to 69.8% and 71.5% in rounds II and III, respectively, with a more dramatic increase in Arab towns (from 49.2%, through 59.2%, to 64.7%). Our survey findings match these trends: The share of participants determined to vote rose from 76.4% in wave I.3 to 79.2% in wave III.2, especially among native Arabic-speakers (from 46% to 66.7%).

In the focus groups, many participants predicted that turnout would decrease for the second and third elections, owing to people's growing frustration. Nevertheless, an overwhelming majority of participants continued to express strong commitment to voting themselves. When one participant admitted being unsure whether to vote, others united to persuade him to turn out – one even offered him his gift card (received for his participation in the study) for voting (II.1). In the Arab group meetings, participants were divided on whether to vote from the outset, with passionate opinions both for and against. Following the failure to form a government in the first election and the (re)unification of the Joint List, calls for voting gained in traction, accompanied by scenarios regarding the Arab parties' possible role in enabling a center-left coalition: “I want to go back to ninety-three [when the Arab

parties supported Rabin's coalition] [...] You are betraying your homeland when you are not voting" (Sami, M, 34, II.2).

Participants furthermore discussed who to vote for so as to best make their votes count. They engaged in heated debates about the merits of ideological and value-based voting, as opposed to strategic voting informed by current polls and election projections. The dilemma was vividly presented by Denis (M, 34, I.1):

I am very confused, every election, every time once again. If I see a poll going here or there [...] I say 'walla', maybe I will vote this or that, because whoever I wanted to vote for has no chance [...] [but maybe [...] the values that are the reason I vote should determine [...], whether I think it will be successful or not.

Toward the second election, participants increasingly focused on the competition between the two largest parties, invoking pragmatic motives. Hoping to secure the mandate for government formation for the party leading their preferred camp, fewer participants advocated in favor of supporting third parties, especially those who might not pass the electoral threshold.

8.4 The Interplay of Projection Elements: Optimistic Expectations

In the following, we examine how the different projection elements work together to give shape to an overall pattern of optimism.

8.4.1 Expectations and Evaluations: Wishful Thinking

Throughout our analysis, several patterns emerge that suggest a strong connection between predicted and preferred outcomes. This is evident in the shares of survey respondents who expected to feel good (above 55 on the 0–100 slider), bad (below 45) or neutral (45–55) about their respective predicted election outcomes (see Figures 8.9 and 8.10).

First, in line with the overall prevalence of positive evaluations (see Figure 8.7), both Figures 8.9 and 8.10 show a dominance of respondents who expect to feel good about their predicted outcomes.

Second, in both figures, we see a third major group of respondents who predicted a Netanyahu/Likud victory and expected to be unhappy about this outcome. All other combinations (unhappy about a predicted Gantz/Blue and White victory; neutral regarding either outcome) are marginal. While both supporters and opponents predicted an electoral victory for Netanyahu and the Likud, those who predicted Gantz to become prime minister and Blue and White the largest party on the whole preferred this outcome (for further elaboration on this asymmetry, see Tenenboim-Weinblatt et al., 2022). The

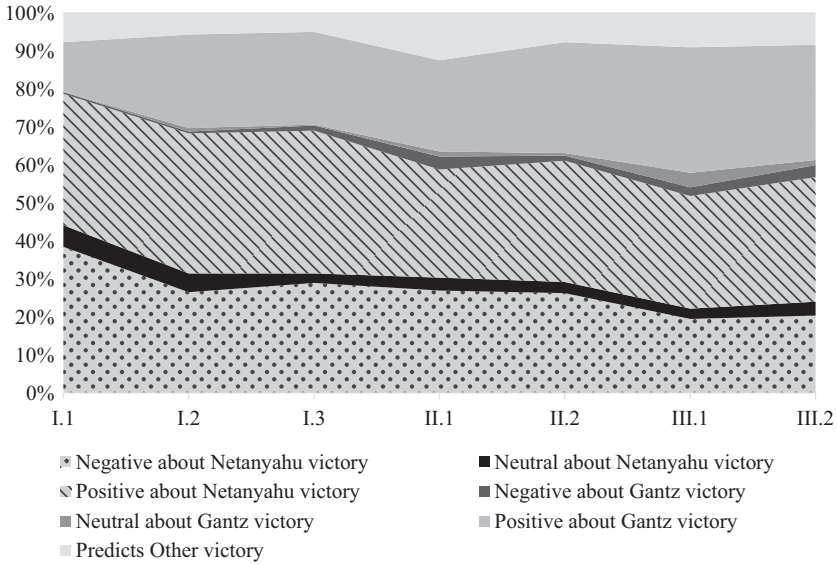


Figure 8.9 Expected affect by projected next prime minister (percentage of respondents).

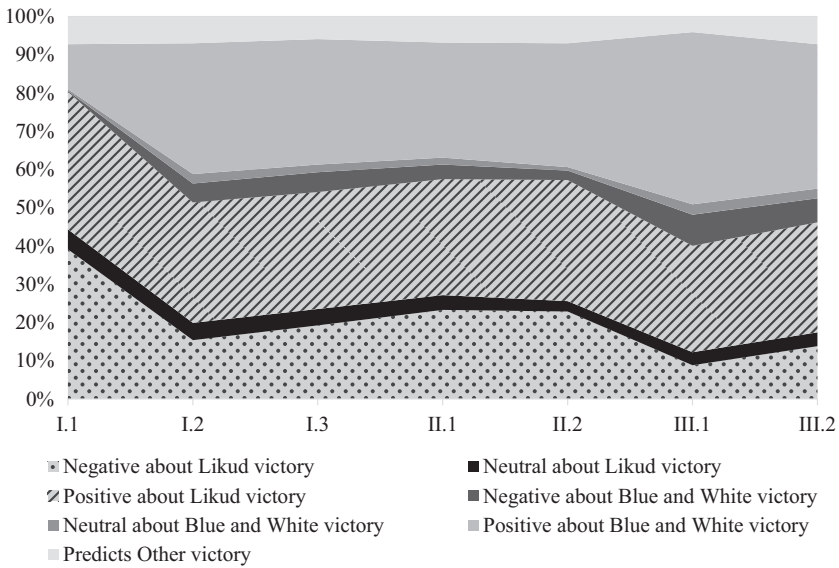


Figure 8.10 Expected affect by projected largest party (percentage of respondents).

same pattern was also found in the focus groups, with Netanyahu as the focal point of almost all evaluations. Even participants who saw Gantz as future prime minister mostly welcomed this outcome as an alternative to another Netanyahu government. As Yoel (M, 62, I.1), a right-wing anti-Netanyahu participant explained: “I prefer that he [Gantz] will run a bad government than to have a corrupted leader [...] That’s the worst thing that can happen”. The three groups can thus be characterized as *Pro-Netanyahu Optimists*, *Anti-Netanyahu Optimists*, and *Anti-Netanyahu Pessimists*.

Third, we find that the group of Pro-Netanyahu Optimists remained relatively stable over time (about one third of the respondents in all waves). By comparison, many participants in the Anti-Netanyahu camp turned from pessimists into optimists, changing their initial projection of an undesired Likud/Netanyahu victory to predict a desired victory of Blue and White/Gantz. The first major transition occurred following the establishment of Blue and White prior to wave I.2, with another major shift following the second election (III.1), in which Blue and White emerged as the largest party. The observed optimistic trend thus reflects partly Netanyahu supporters’ persistent belief in their victory, and partly the growing belief among their opponents that a change in government could be achieved.

The connection between wishes and expectations is also reflected in respondents’ projected coalition composition. Specifically, projections strongly correlate with political leaning: Left-leaning participants were more likely to project that the center-left parties (including the Arab parties) would be part of the coalition, while right-leaning participants mostly expected a coalition dominated by right-wing parties. Most tellingly, over time, different participants expected Yisrael Beiteinu to join the coalition: Before the first election, when its leader Avigor Lieberman was considered part of the “right-wing bloc”, right-leaning participants were more likely to predict that it would join the coalition; however, after Lieberman’s refusal to rejoin a Netanyahu-led right-wing religious government and the subsequent failure of coalition talks, the same expectation became positively associated with leaning to the left.

In the focus groups, too, the scenario of a secular unity government including Netanyahu, Gantz, and Lieberman was proposed mainly by center-left participants toward the second election, and resisted by Netanyahu supporters. In many instances, participants freely admitted to wishful thinking. They answered questions about predicted states with a wish rather than a prediction, tied their predictions directly to their wishes (“I think the Likud will get stronger, I hope the Likud gets stronger” [Zohar, F, 38, II.1]), and even acknowledged the possible causal relation: “Maybe I believe it because I want to believe in it” (Peleg, F, 24, II.1).

8.4.2 Probabilities and Anchors: The Bases for Optimism

To understand the reasoning underlying contrasting optimistic projections, we examined how pro-Netanyahu and anti-Netanyahu focus group participants

justified their optimistic predictions and presented the likelihood of desired outcomes.

One key difference between the two optimist groups concerns anti-Netanyahu participants' greater tendency to avoid probabilistic discourse. Especially toward round I, Pro-Netanyahu Optimists presented the scenario of another Netanyahu government as highly probable, using expressions such as "95%" (Zohar, I.1), "I am certain" (Vered, F, 36, I.1), "closed deal" (Dvir, M, 52, I.1), or "a very good chance" (Gil, I.2). Anti-Netanyahu Optimists resisted such high probability estimates, with one participant referring to them as "wrong thinking" (Tal, M, 44, I.1). Instead, they foregrounded possibilities: "either status-quo or a changeover [...] all scenarios are possible" (Bar, M, 44, I.2), "it's not certain that Bibi will easily win" (Yoel, I.1); "There is also chance that maybe there will be surprises" (Harel, M, 52, I.1).

One explanation for this caution is that Anti-Netanyahu Optimists foresaw no sweeping victory for the center-left camp, but relied on gradual processes that would eventually tip the scale (Or [I.1]: "Even a journey of a thousand miles begins in one step") or more indirect mechanisms. For instance, participants considered the possibility that some parties might not pass the electoral threshold, shifting the balance of power (Dalal [F, 36, I.2]: "there are some small right wing parties that are in risk of not passing the needed percentage. [...] It risks Netanyahu's potential government"). Likewise, they referred to Netanyahu's pending corruption cases, which might lead to his demise (Kobi [M, 23, I.1]: "even if he is elected, it is possible that [...] an indictment will be filed, and then he will have to retire").

Pro-Netanyahu Optimists vehemently dismissed such scenarios, suggesting instead backlash narratives. For instance, Aliza (F, 58, I.1) was confident that the corruption cases would strengthen Netanyahu:

The Likud will rise big time, and it's going to rise only because everything that happened with Netanyahu [...] what the media did was to raise Bibi [...] Someone told me: "I will take my wife and I will take my children [...] to vote Likud, precisely because of everything they did to Bibi".

Furthermore, Pro-Netanyahu Optimists regularly referred to Netanyahu's unmatched capabilities and experience: "I don't see anyone equaling him [...] in his power, in his charisma, in his ability to run a country under so many threats" (Vered, I.1); "There is no one who communicates like him. Everyone looks small next to him" (Carmela, F, 55, I.1).

After Netanyahu's failure to form a government, Pro-Netanyahu Optimists no longer expressed absolute or extremely high certainty in his success, either. Continuing to predict a Likud victory, they nevertheless hedged their predictions and more frequently provided justifications based on complex political scenarios. Accounts ranged from detailed explanations of how a Netanyahu-led unity government would be established to descriptions of how

right-wing voters would finally come around to vote for the Likud or to pro-Netanyahu parties:

I'm not sure [...] I don't believe so much in the polls, it doesn't seem to me that there will be another tie. In my opinion, whoever supports Lieberman will think twice (and) [...] vote for the Likud or one of the parties that will go with Bibi.

(Zohar, II.1)

While distrust in the polls was more common among right-wing participants, also some left-wing optimists resisted their predictions. "Anybody in this room sees a possibility that Gantz will form a government in two weeks?", asked Benny, a right-winger, in wave II.2. "Why not?" queried Gloria (F, 51). "Because he doesn't have 61 (seats)!" replied Benny, anchoring his response in recent polls. "It's a possibility", insisted Yasmin (F, 47), a left-wing optimist, "it can still happen! [...] there are surprises coming in my opinion!"

Notably, for Anti-Netanyahu Optimists, the failure to form a government and the call of new elections were often the very basis for increased optimism, leading to further intensification of the discourse on open possibilities for change:

I felt hope (when new elections were called). "Walla", there might be an opportunity here for a correction. My hope is that more seculars will vote, more Arabs will vote [...] and maybe there will be an opportunity to really make a change here.

(Harel, II.1)

The mobilization of Arab voters played a key role in scenarios advanced by the Anti-Netanyahu Optimists, including those among the Arab participants. Ahmad (M, 30, II.1), who would have liked to see Arab parties join the coalition, explained: "I expect there will be an awakening, that [...] the dissolution of the Knesset will give a push [...] The Arab parties will come together, consolidate, and get more (seats)". While a majority of focus group participants predicted that the Arab parties would not join the government, the "blocking bloc" scenario was recurrently invoked to anchor the possibility of change: Bar (II.1): "I think they (the Arabs) will not recommend Bibi and then there will be a blocking bloc for Gantz. I don't know, anything can happen".

Alongside explanations based on possible behaviors of voters and politicians, Anti-Netanyahu Optimists also started to challenge Netanyahu's stamina, basing their observations on visuals ("You can see on his face that he's taking it very hard" [Or, II.1]) and psychological analysis:

I think that with all the pressure there is and the failure to form a government, that was the beginning of the end. [...] I think he will not last and there is really going to be a revolution

(Yasmin, II.1)

Pro-Netanyahu Optimists, of course, fiercely rejected such claims. Continuing to believe in Netanyahu’s superior capabilities, they invoked both precedent and the possibility of surprises: “the magician always succeeds in the end somehow” (Gil, II.2).

8.4.3 Implications of Positive Expectations for Political Participation

Finally, we find an important link between optimistic expectations and political participation, and in particular voting. As shown in Table 8.1, people were more likely to vote the happier they expected to feel about the projected outcome in all survey waves but the first (before the establishment of Blue and White). This association is even more intense in the small subsample of Arab participants.

In the focus groups, too, while most participants were determined to vote (least so in the Arab group), enthusiasm was notably reduced among the more pessimistic participants. The following interaction between an Anti-Netanyahu Optimist (Yoel) and an Anti-Netanyahu Pessimist (Ksenia, F, 52, II.2) illustrates the point:

KSENIA: I will go (to vote). But I’m much more indifferent [...] And if there will be a huge queue then maybe I will not return.

YOEL: It’s really your chance that something will happen! [...] how do you allow yourself to be so passive and not fight? [...]

KSENIA: I’ll tell you why, because I’m in despair. [...] I think we’re deteriorating on some slope without seeing its end, and I’m desperate.

Table 8.1 Spearman’s rho correlations between intention to vote and expected happiness about the election outcomes

| Survey wave | Correlation between expected happiness about predicted largest party and intention to vote | | Correlation between expected happiness about predicted prime minister and intention to vote | |
|-------------|--|-------------------------------|---|-------------------------------|
| | Entire sample (N=442) | Arabic native speakers (N=51) | Entire sample (N=442) | Arabic native speakers (N=51) |
| I.1 | .065 | .083 | .096* | .164 |
| I.2 | .201** | .302* | .172** | .281* |
| I.3 | .192** | .293* | .140** | .312* |
| II.1 | .150** | .355* | .122* | .371* |
| II.2 | .174** | .217 | .200** | .339* |
| III.1 | .242** | .341* | .177** | .392** |
| III.2 | .147** | .334* | .118* | .361* |

Note: Intention to vote was measured on a four-point scale (will surely not vote, will probably not vote, will probably vote, will surely vote); Expected happiness was measured on a scale of 1–100 (0 = I will feel very bad; 100 = I will feel very good).

* p<.05 ** p<.01.

Among the persistent optimists, the failed government formation not only did not diminish, but actually reinforced their commitment to political participation:

I was very happy. I think it [the new election] gives some hope that something can be done, and so I joined the Labor party [...] I think that we should fight and that it was a decisive proof that it ain't over 'til it's over.
(Yasmin, II.1)

8.5 Summary and Discussion

In this chapter, we have explored Israeli citizens' evolving projections regarding the outcomes of the 2019–2020 elections. Based on an integrative conceptualization of political projections, and using a combination of panel survey and focus groups, we have examined both the aggregate evolution and social-discursive dynamics of prospective public opinion (Price, 1992; Shamir & Shamir, 2000).

We show how voters' expectations of a Netanyahu and Likud victory declined over time, and how this decrease was matched by a growing belief that Gantz's Blue and White might stand a chance to form a center-left coalition. Nevertheless, Netanyahu held on to a solid majority that believed him to be the most likely future prime minister throughout all three rounds of election. We show that people rarely attributed their expectations directly to specific sources, such as media reports, political commentators, or politicians, but rather presented them as personal extrapolations from available indicators, ranging from polls to personal impressions of the candidates' psychological states. We furthermore document voters' high, barely declining certainty about their projections, as well as their persistent expected happiness about the outcomes, reinforcing their commitment to voting.

The analysis also shows important interrelations between these elements: First, voters' expectations (predicted states) were linked to their desired outcomes (evaluations), forming three main groups that reflect the polarized and personalized Israeli political climate (Rahat & Sheaffer, 2007; Shamir, Dvir-Gvirsman, & Ventura, 2017): Pro-Netanyahu Optimists, Anti-Netanyahu Optimists, and Anti-Netanyahu Pessimists. Over the three rounds of elections, these groups developed along different trajectories: While Pro-Netanyahu Optimists continued to believe in Netanyahu's desired victory, Anti-Netanyahu Pessimists gradually became Optimists, leading to an overall increase of optimist citizens. Besides people's dispositional optimism – “the generalized, relatively stable tendency to expect good outcomes” (Scheier & Carver, 2018, p. 1082) – part of political optimism thus appears to adapt to circumstances and new information. As these findings show, such new information is not only an antidote to wishful thinking (Babad, 1997; Blais & Bodet, 2006) but sometimes its catalyst. Somewhat paradoxically, the failure

to form a government only reinforced such thinking, particularly among supporters of the two big parties.

Second, different groups relied on somewhat different strategies to anchor their optimistic projections and estimate their probabilities. For Anti-Netanyahu Optimists, hoping for a change in government, specific likelihoods were cast aside in favor of a belief that change is possible – owing to the complexity of hard-to-predict interdependencies (e.g., electoral thresholds, coalition arithmetic, possible indictments) and some irreducible role played by luck. By contrast, Pro-Netanyahu Optimists were initially able to derive confident, desirable projections by extrapolating from the present situation and past elections. However, following Netanyahu's initial failure to form a government, also Pro-Netanyahu Optimists had to use increasingly contingent explanatory strategies to justify positive expectations. In line with the approach that sees optimism as an explanatory style (Seligman, 1991; Peterson & Steen, 2002), negative events were thus viewed as caused by transient conditions, which can change in the next elections.

Finally, our findings emphasize optimism's motivational aspects, which propel voters to invest efforts in goals that are believed to be attainable (Carver, Scheier, & Segerstrom, 2010; Peterson, 2000). Voters' belief in positive election outcomes correlated with their intention to vote throughout all three rounds of elections. Together with the persistent and growing optimism identified in this study, this stable association may explain the counterintuitive increase in turnout from election to election, despite all sides' repeated failure to achieve their desired outcomes.

Conceptually, the analysis presented in this chapter thus shows the usefulness of the conceptual framework of projections in accounting for the interplay of cognitive, emotional, motivational, and discursive aspects of optimism in politics. By combining surveys and focus groups in a longitudinal perspective, the study enabled a nuanced identification of key dynamic processes in future-oriented political thinking. Yet, the extraordinary setting of the case study, its reliance on self-reports and its not-fully-representative sample limit its generalizability and call for additional research.

Normatively, our findings raise the question what to make of the documented, persistent optimism. The benefits of optimism, most notably its motivational force and potential for facilitating positive self-fulfilling prophecies, contrast against the perils of hubris, planning fallacies, unhealthy delusions, and dangerous risk-taking (for useful discussions of optimism's benefits and costs, see Kahneman, 2011; Peterson, 2000).

In politics, optimism's capacity to foster participation and persistence in the face of obstacles is crucial to healthy democracies, arguably outweighing its costs. Yet, one cannot avoid wondering whether persistent optimism in the face of failure was not also part of what led Israel into three election rounds in less than one year, with major economic and various other repercussions. Society and democracy might be better served if optimistic impulses were directed more toward addressing pressing social issues, rather than the

persistent expectation that the outcomes of new elections will eventually favor one's side.

Finally, in the present study, optimism was mostly not enthusiasm, but more an expectation that "things will be okay" (Hani, II.1), somewhere between "so-so" and "good" in the survey's measure of participants' expected future of Israel. Given the ongoing crises and conflicts structuring politics, our persistent hope that, despite all, positive outcomes are possible may be exactly what is needed to move forward toward an uncertain future.

8.6 Epilogue: The 2021 Election

The government formed following the third election in spring 2020 turned out to be short-lived. Instead of the agreed rotation between Netanyahu and Gantz, the coalition collapsed within half a year, prolonging the political crisis. To assess Israeli citizens' electoral expectations toward this fourth round of elections in less than two years, we ran another wave of the survey in the week before the election.⁷

Projections concerning the largest party were relatively uncomplicated. With the disintegration of the Blue and White alliance, following Gantz's decision to join Netanyahu's government, no center-left list could challenge the Likud's status as the largest party in parliament. Accordingly, a large share of respondents (80%) predicted Likud to be the largest party, matching the responses from wave I.1, before the establishment of Blue and White (see Figure 8.4), as well as the eventual election results.

However, the prevalent projections concerning the prime minister's identity and the composition of the government were far off from the eventual outcome: a rotation government headed by Naftali Bennett (leader of the right-wing party Yemina with seven seats) and Yair Lapid (leader of the center-left party Yesh Atid, the second largest party, with seventeen seats), based on a broad coalition of eight parties (including the Arab party Ra'am). In the pre-electoral survey, not only was Netanyahu most often projected as the next prime minister, but the share of respondents making this projection (73%) significantly increased compared to the previous six pre-electoral survey waves (I.2–III.2; Figure 8.3). Lapid was expected to become prime minister by no more than 13% of the respondents, and a mere 3% correctly predicted that Bennett would assume the prime minister position. Only 14 respondents (1.4%) rightly projected a government that included both Yemina and the left-wing party Meretz and that excluded the Likud and the ultra-Orthodox parties. While 10% of respondents imagined a coalition that included Ra'am, none of them anticipated the eventual constellation of this coalition. And yet, as in previous elections, people expressed high certainty about their various projections (averaging 74–86, on a 0–100 scale).

Despite this high degree of certainty, participants' overall optimism declined. On average, people still expected to feel good about the electoral

outcomes (mean values of 54–58 for the different projections, on a 0–100 happiness scale), but less so than before previous elections (see Figure 8.7). Respondents also expressed a slightly diminished positive outlook about the overall state of the country in three years (3.42 on a five-point scale). While still on the positive side, it was the first wave in which participants selected “so-so” more often than “good”. As in previous waves, there was a significant association between optimistic expectations and intention to vote, particularly concerning projections about the prime minister’s identity and most intensely among Arab respondents. These findings tally with the substantially lower turnout in the March 2021 election (67.2% overall; 45.6% in Arab towns) in comparison to the three previous rounds, and further underscore the important role of optimism in political participation.

In line with the dynamics detected in the previous elections, the change in optimism was driven primarily by the Anti-Netanyahu camp. Whereas the group of Netanyahu supporters maintained its stable optimism (Pro-Netanyahu Optimists were 35% of the sample, alongside a negligible share of pessimistic Netanyahu supporters), the group of Anti-Netanyahu Pessimists (33%) grew in size in relation to Anti-Netanyahu Optimists (22%). The trend that developed over the second and third rounds, where many Anti-Netanyahu voters abandoned their pessimistic outlook, was thus reversed toward the fourth election. Although the Anti-Netanyahu camp did not manage to form a government following both the first and second elections, it seems that as long as Netanyahu also failed, the realm of possibility grew wider from the perspective of his opponents, and their hopes rose. Once Netanyahu succeeded in forming a government after the third election and Gantz agreed to join his coalition, it became more difficult to envision change in the fourth round.

And yet, this was precisely the election where such a change came about – less as a consequence of citizens’ optimism, which declined toward the fourth round, and more due to realignments among Israel’s political elites. The successive four elections, along with the growing discontentment among Netanyahu’s former allies (from Lieberman’s resignation in 2018 to Sa’ar’s formation of the New Hope [Tikva Hadasha] party in 2020), eventually prepared the ground to the formation of an initially-unlikely government. The politicians’ own persistent optimism in their ability to unseat Netanyahu – despite the extreme obstacles on the way – has likely played a crucial role in this process. “I am an optimist by nature”, said Lapid following the third election (when he remained in the opposition), “otherwise I would probably be in a different profession” (Lapid, 2020). Within a polarized political climate and with the next crisis always around the corner, both Israeli politicians and citizens would do well to cultivate those aspects of optimism that sustain democratic societies: belief in the possibility of winning in the next elections, but also in the ability of societies and governments to move toward better futures between elections.

Notes

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- 2 www.jpost.com/israel-news/netanyahu-stump-speech-to-be-aired-with-10-minute-delay-judge-rules-582433
- 3 www.jpost.com/israel-news/gantz-warns-netanyahu-becoming-israeli-erdogan-618803
- 4 Sums in Figures 8.3 and 8.4 do not add up to 100%, as some respondents predicted third actors/parties to emerge as prime minister/largest party.
- 5 Figure 8.5 accounts for the changing party configurations: “Far-right parties” include the Jewish Home/Yemina/The New Right and Otzma Yehudit/Union of Right-Wing Parties; “Religious parties” include Shas and United Torah Judaism; Before Blue and White was formed, its line refers to its constituent parties; “Left parties” include Labor/Labor–Gesher–Meretz and Meretz/Democratic Camp; and “Arab parties” include either the Joint List or its constituent parties. Kulanu, Zehut, Hatnua’h, and Gesher (when it ran separately) are not included in this figure.
- 6 All names are pseudonyms; participants’ gender (F/M) and age are marked at first appearance; focus group meeting numbers are as introduced in Figure 8.2.
- 7 The survey was completed by 329 of the 442 respondents who participated in all previous waves. Additionally, 697 new participants were recruited as a refreshment sample, resulting in a total of 1,026 respondents.
- 8 The Arab groups were recruited and moderated by Nidaa Nassar (Baladna Director, MA Hebrew University of Jerusalem) and Aysha Agbarya (PhD Candidate, Hebrew University of Jerusalem).

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Methodological Appendix

Panel Survey

Participants

1,191 participants were recruited by the Israeli survey company iPanel, using a stratified sample (response rate according to AAPOR RR3 code: 0.71). Figure 8.11 represents the target quotas set to represent the Israeli population eligible to vote, as well as the composition of both the initial survey wave (I.1) and of those 442 participants who completed all seven full waves and whose responses are analyzed in this chapter (excluding the epilogue). Compared to the actual election results, survey responses suggest a persistent overrepresentation of center-left and, to a lesser extent, far-right voters. However, over-time shifts in recorded voting intentions tally with those observed in the elections.

Procedure

All survey waves were administered online, in Hebrew or Arabic. The survey contained four main question blocks: (1) Predictions about the future prime minister, largest party, coalition composition (multi-choice), and the future of the country (1: very bad – 5: very good). The believed probability of predicted outcomes and their desirability were measured using continuous sliders (0: very low chance/will feel very bad – 100: very high chance/will feel very good; starting position at 50); (2) news and social media usage; (3) political participation and voting intention; and (4) demographics. In the brief postelection waves, only participants' vote choice and satisfaction with the electoral results were recorded.

Data Processing and Analysis

Participants were assigned anonymous identifiers to match responses across waves. Analyses were performed using SPSS software.

Focus Groups

Participants

A total of 55 Israeli voters participated in five focus groups (one of young Jewish voters; three of Jewish voters above the age of 29; one of Arab voters), each of which were convened five times. Each group was designed to ensure an even gender representation and varied religious identifications and education levels. The Jewish groups were recruited by IPSOS to include at least three voters each who would self-identify as right-wing, centrist, or left-wing voters respectively, and at least five undecided voters. Meetings were convened in Hebrew by the first and third author, at the IPSOS premises in Ramat Gan. For the Arab group, participants were recruited to vary political leaning, considering the different political cleavages in the Arab sector. Meetings were convened in Arabic by a native speaker in the Haifa area.⁸ Each meeting lasted 90 minutes and was recorded in audio and video. Each group retained between six and nine participants in the final wave. Participants received remuneration in the form of gift vouchers.

Procedure

Each meeting commenced with instructing participants to respect different viewpoints and engage in an open-ended discussion. The meetings comprised four phases: (1) collection of participants' projections and expectations regarding the forthcoming elections (or, in the postelection meetings, the coalition talks) and their wider implications for the country; (2) in-depth discussion of selected scenarios, wherein participants were prompted to explain their reasoning; (3) engagement with election-related media coverage;

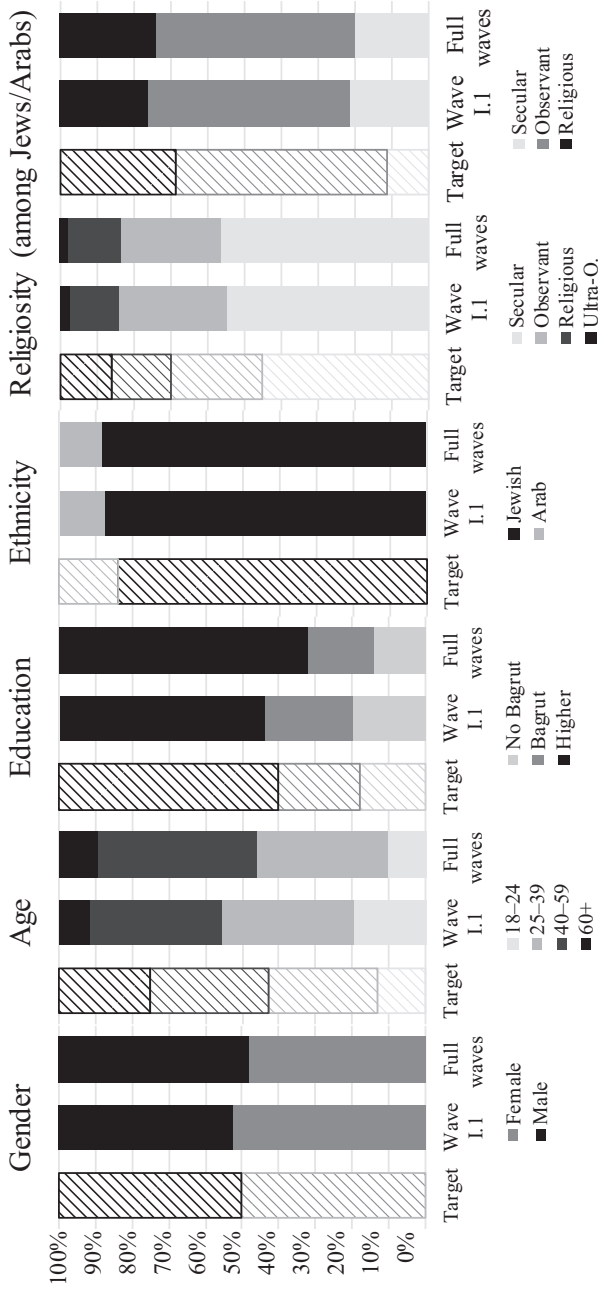


Figure 8.11 Sample composition and sampling biases.

Note: Population values obtained from cbs.gov.il, Agudat HaGalil (for the Arab population), iPanel, and Wikipedia.

and (4) discussion of what, in view of the participants, should be done with regard to the elections. Throughout all discussions, moderators kept their interventions to a minimum, encouraging an interactive discussion between participants. Following each meeting, participants filled out a short questionnaire, addressing their media exposure and voting intentions.

Data Processing and Analysis

All analyses were conducted based on fully anonymized transcripts, using MAXQDA software. The qualitative analytic strategy departed from an initial deductive coding based on the broad conceptualization of projections and their elements, which was further refined through the inductive identification of recurrent patterns. Finally, findings were contextualized against the results of the panel survey for integrative analysis.

All procedures for the collection and analysis of data used in this study were approved by the IRB (Institutional Review Board) of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, the PROFECI project's ethics advisory board, and the panel of ERC ethics review