

Israelis Want Democracy, and Also Judaism

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Key Findings

There is **overwhelming support** among **Jews and Arabs** for Israel as a **democratic state**, without deep disparities between different subgroups.

There is **strong support** for Israel as a **Jewish state**, with significantly less support among secular Israelis.

In all population groups, a majority say that a democratic state has **both free elections and protects human rights**.

Those on the right believe (wrongly) that those on the **center-left** are less interested that Israel be a **Jewish** state.

Those on the left believe (wrongly) that those on the **right** are less interested that Israel be a **democratic** state.

Nearly **half of Israeli Arabs** (44%) say they **do not oppose** that Israel be a **Jewish** state.

The Jewish public as a whole expresses **very strong agreement** with central clauses in the **Declaration of Independence**.

However, there is **weaker** agreement among right-wing groups with the Declaration's stance on **equal** rights.

Assessments of **religious coercion** on the part of secular Israelis, and assessments of **secular coercion** on the part of Religious-Haredi Israelis, are at nearly equal levels.

There is a continuing overall **decline** in the degree to which those living in Israel feel comfortable being themselves in the country – this year among **the secular, those on the left, and Arabs**.

Background

This is the ninth year the Jewish People Policy Institute has published its annual Pluralism Index, and the eighth year that the Index is based, among other things, on a comprehensive survey of attitudes. As in past years, the survey included Jewish and non-Jewish respondents. In the Jewish sector the survey was conducted by theMadad.com and included a relatively large number of respondents (1700). Of these, nearly 600 completed both last year's questionnaire and this year's questionnaire, enabling accurate and individualized comparison of changes in opinion among the same respondents from different groups. The Index has an established list of topics that recur periodically so that their development can be monitored; some of the trends identified with regard to these topics are discussed below. This year (as in previous years) the survey was supervised by Prof. Camil Fuchs of Tel Aviv University. Analysis was provided jointly by Prof. Fuchs and JPPI fellows Noah Slepko and Shmuel Rosner.

Background conditions for the Index

The survey underlying the Pluralism Index is conducted under prevailing political and social conditions, and against the background of new developments that must be factored into the analysis. In recent months the main development impacting the data has been a roiling confrontation over the government's desire to institute a comprehensive reform of the system of checks and balances regulating relations between Israel's legislative and judicial branches of government. This confrontation emerged in the wake of

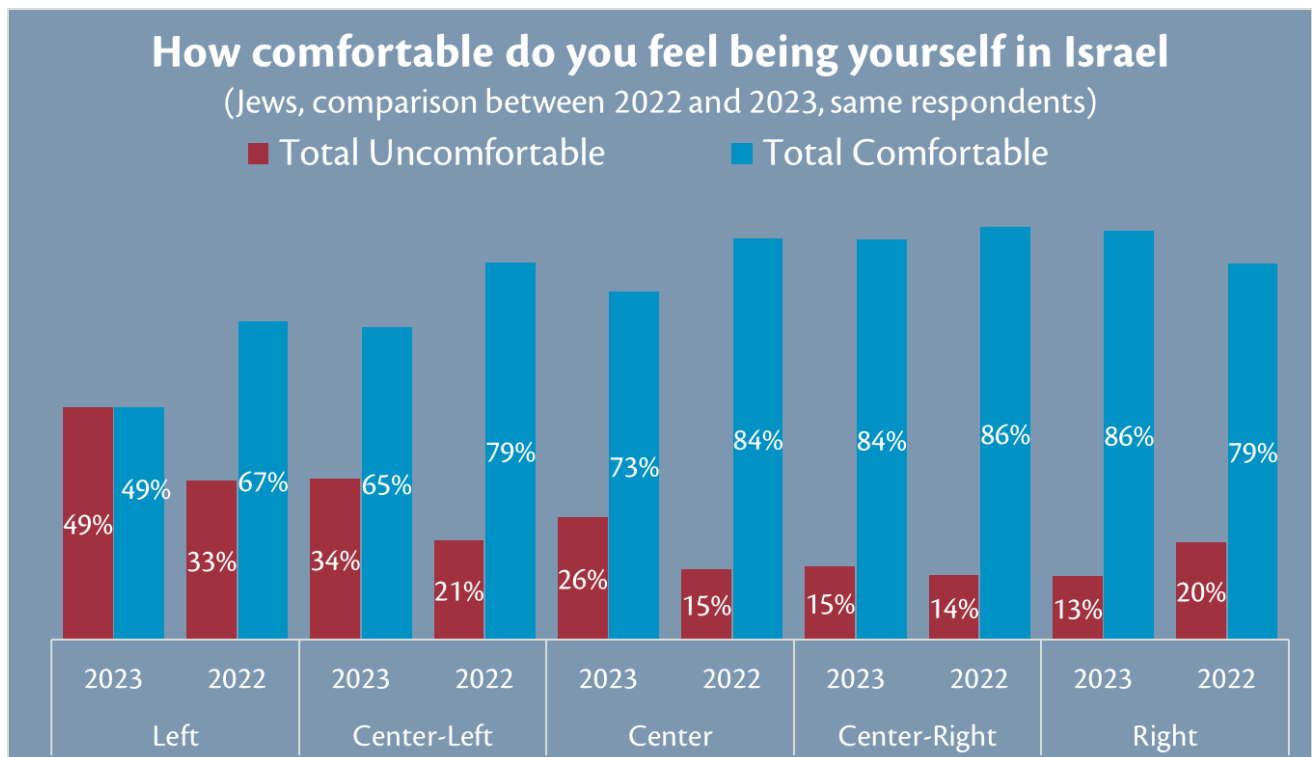
Israel's fifth round of elections in four years, with the most recent elections (November 2022) achieving, for the first time in this period, a clear majority for one of the blocs – a bloc consisting of the Likud, the Religious Zionism Party, and the two Haredi parties, Shas and United Torah Judaism. Those opposed to the new government were deeply distressed by this election victory. Moreover, the rapidity with which the coalition moved to implement reforms, some of which are far-reaching in scope and relate to the character of Israel's political system, led to a major crisis, described in mid-February by the President of Israel as “the brink of constitutional and social collapse” and as the moment before an “explosion.”

The Pluralism Index questionnaire has several components that cannot be addressed without attention to the developments noted here. This is true of the questions regarding the strength or weakness of institutions such as the Supreme Court and official positions such as the Attorney General, it is true of questions pertaining to levels of agreement with clauses in Israel's Declaration of Independence, and it is true of questions about opposition and coalition voters' attitudes toward each other. It should be added that the judicial reform controversy's clear dominance of the public discourse need not obscure other ways in which current developments affected respondents' answers this year. We have mentioned the recent election cycle in which the right-wing bloc won a majority, the left-wing bloc shrank considerably as a veteran member of that bloc (the Meretz Party) dropped below the electoral threshold, and the Arab parties returned to their all-but-permanent place in the opposition (after Ra'am's short tenure in the previous coalition). The beginning of the rightist-Haredi government's tenure was marked by tension on several issues pertaining to religion-state relations (a proposed law prohibiting the entry of chametz into hospitals during Passover), Israel-Diaspora relations (a demand to change the Law of Return), and more.

Sense of comfort living in Israel

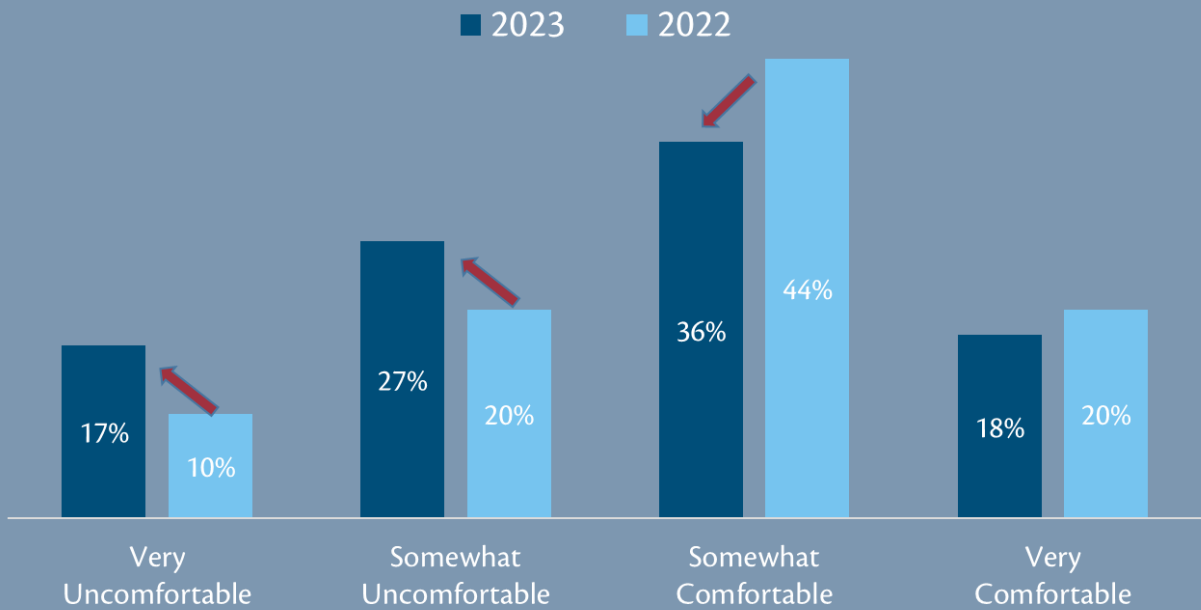
This year as in previous years the survey opened with a question regarding the respondents' sense of comfort: the degree to which they feel comfortable being themselves in Israel. Responses to this question are routinely influenced by Israel's social-political situation, and that is certainly evident in this year's survey. In light of the changing political balance of power and the raging conflict between coalition supporters and opponents on a variety of issues, there has been a clear decline in the comfort level of centrist and left-leaning Israelis and a contrasting rise (if more moderate) in the comfort level

of right-leaning Israelis. Arab Israelis exhibited some decline in their comfort level and a rise in their sense of discomfort compared with last year. This year evinces the continuation of a trend that emerged three years ago: an overall decline in the sense of comfort within both the Jewish and Arab populations.

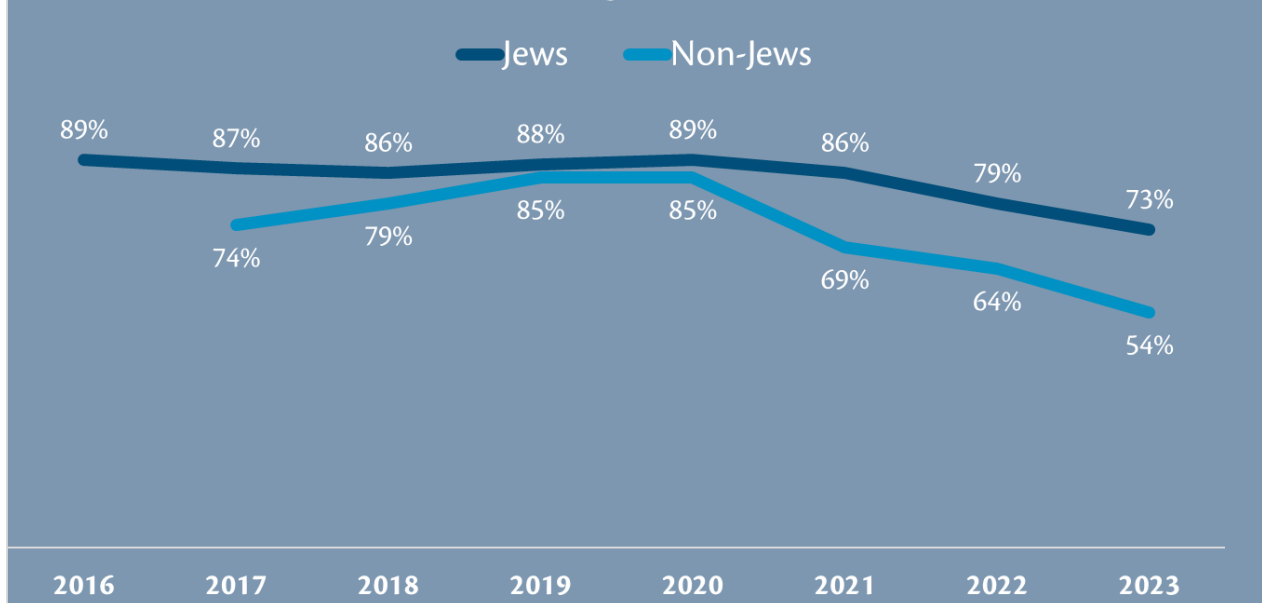


How comfortable do you feel being yourself in Israel

(Arabs, comparison between 2022 and 2023, same respondents)



Multiyear Trend: Percentage of respondents who are comfortable being themselves in Israel



Jewish or Democratic?

“Jewish and democratic state” has become a catchphrase, but one cannot always discern the objectives of its users. What was meant to be a unifying formula has become, over time, a contentious one. Because it has two components that are not necessarily symmetrical, a kind of competition has emerged that can be seen both in statements by Israeli leaders and in survey questionnaires. In the words of Prof. Ruth Gavison: “The enshrinement in the 1992 Basic Laws of the explicit term ‘Jewish and democratic,’ and that term’s entrenchment in public discourse, have substantially contributed to the impression of a country oscillating between two competing poles.”¹ This being the case, Israeli citizens are often categorized on the basis of one of two questions: Do they support Israel as a Jewish-democratic state (or as a Jewish and democratic state), or do they favor one of the components over the other? In such representations, respondents are required to decide based on a tacit assumption of contradiction or tension between the two components. It is as though in certain, perhaps many, instances, one component must come at the expense of the other.

Without entering into a theoretical discussion on the meaning of “Jewish and democratic,” a construction that remains vague and controversial, we chose this year to pose questions to the Israeli public that do not embody a tacit assumption of contention between the components. Rather, these questions offer the option of expressing a view on each of the components, entirely independent of the other. We asked, separately, about the importance that Israel be **a Jewish state**, and the importance that Israel be **a democratic state**. The results are clear: a large majority of Jews want Israel to be Jewish; a very large majority of them want Israel to be democratic. Only the Arab minority does not agree on a framework encompassing both components; the Arab respondents expressed very broad support that Israel be a democratic state, but also significant reservations that Israel be a Jewish state.

It is worth noting, however, that nearly half of Arab Israelis (44%) support Israel as a Jewish state, or say they “don’t care” if Israel is or is not a Jewish state. The share of Arabs who do not oppose Israel as a Jewish state is essentially the same as the share of Arabs who say they prefer that Israel not be a Jewish state, or who oppose Israel being a Jewish state (46%). This finding supports other studies that have assessed the extent of Arab-Israeli agreement with Israel being defined as a Jewish state. In one study, for

example, most Arabs agreed with the statement “If there were a referendum regarding a constitution that defines Israel as a Jewish and democratic state and guarantees Arabs full civil rights, I would support it.”²

Views of Israeli Jews			
It is very important to me that Israel be a Jewish state	66%	88%	It is very important to me that Israel be a democratic state
It is somewhat important to me that Israel be a Jewish state 27%	27%	10%	It is somewhat important to me that Israel be a democratic state
It is not important to me that Israel be a Jewish state	6%	1%	It is not important to me that Israel be a democratic state
It is important to me that Israel not be a Jewish state	1%	0%	It is important to me that Israel not be a democratic state
Don't know	0%	1%	Don't know

Views of Israeli Arabs			
I support Israel being a Jewish state	9%	84%	It is very important to me that Israel be a democratic

			state
I don't care if Israel is or isn't a Jewish state	35%	4%	It is somewhat important to me that Israel be a democratic state
I prefer that Israel not be a Jewish state	14%	5%	It is not important to me that Israel be a democratic state
I object to Israel being a Jewish state	32%	2%	It is important to me that Israel not be a democratic state
Don't know	9%	4%	Don't know

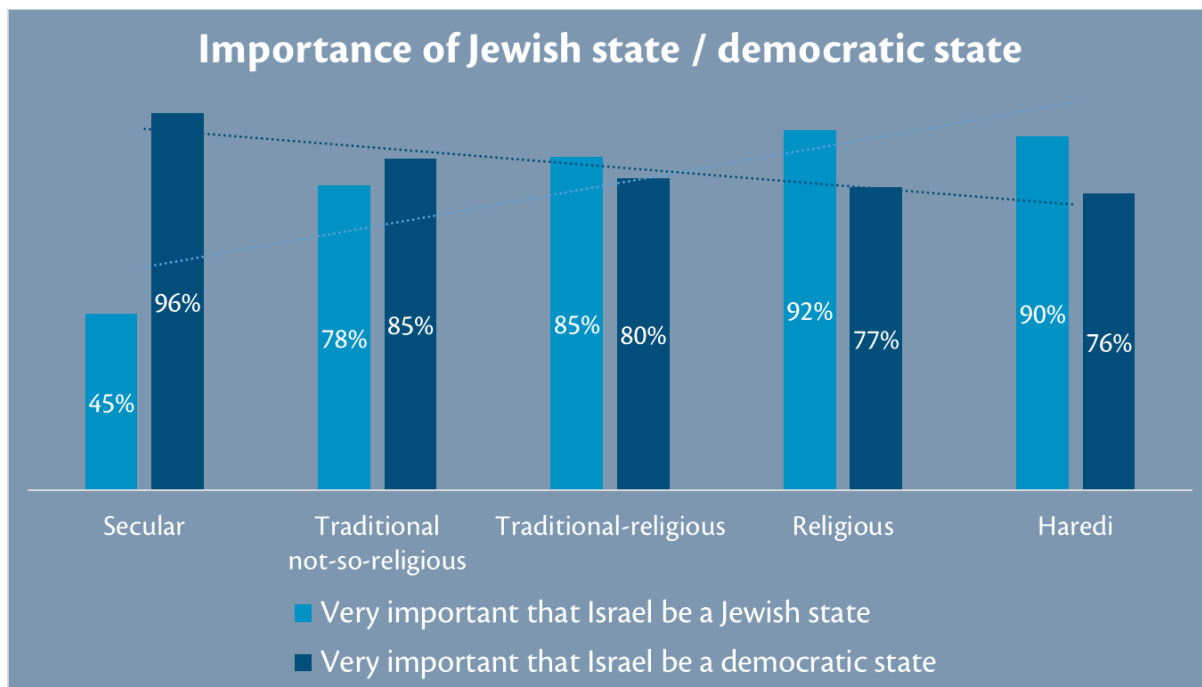
A careful examination of the numbers reveals that, contrary to what is often claimed, **the more contentious of the two definitional components is the Jewish aspect of the state, not the democratic aspect.** Israeli Arabs support democracy but in large measure oppose Israel being a Jewish state, while the share of support for Israel as a democratic state among Jews is significantly higher than the share of support for Israel as a Jewish state. While 88% of Jewish respondents said it was very important to them that Israel be a democratic state, the share of Jews who said this of Israel as a Jewish state was 66% - a significant disparity.

A look at the various subgroups in Israeli Jewish society highlights the reasons behind the gaps in support between the democratic and the Jewish components. In the group with the lowest share of strong support ("very important to me") for the democratic component, those who identify with the political right, the figure is 73%. By contrast, in the group with the lowest share of strong support for the Jewish component, those who identify with

the political left, the figure is only **31%**. Although the right-leaning group is much larger than the left-leaning group (30% versus 5%), a comparison based on a different scale –religiosity level – reveals similar gaps.

Among the religious, the group whose support for the Jewish component is the highest, the share of strong support (“very important to me”) is 92%. Among the secular, the largest group in Israel (over 40% of Jews), the share of strong support for the Jewish component is just 45%. In other words, although agreement levels regarding the democratic component are unequal, the gaps between groups are not very large. By contrast, agreement levels regarding the Jewish component exhibit major gaps. Among the secular public, the share for whom the Jewish component is very important drops to a much lower level than in the other segments of the Jewish population.

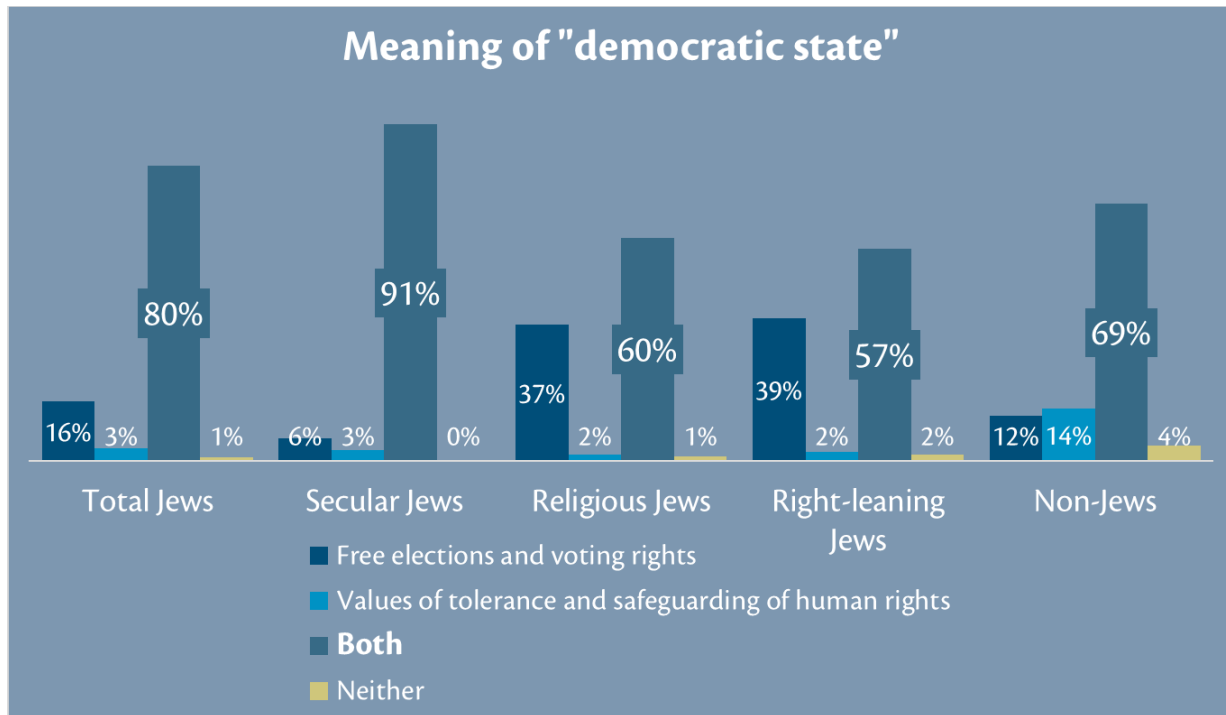
Of course, we need to speak in precise terms here; the secular group also shows overwhelming support for Israel as a Jewish state, but in half the cases it is “somewhat,” not “very,” important to them that Israel be a Jewish state (45% very important, 42% somewhat important). There are a number of hypotheses that can be offered as to why this is so, not least is the political constellation at the time of the survey, when a fierce battle was underway between the more traditional population groups (who support the coalition) and those with a secular orientation. The partial or full identification of the state’s Jewishness with the government’s agenda could potentially drive the erosion of support among secular Jews for the state’s Jewish component. In this context it is worth noting that a large share of the secular public feel that there is “religious coercion” in Israel (58% rated the religious coercion level an 8 on a scale of 1 to 10), which they associate with the pressure exerted by the sectors that emphasize the state’s Jewishness.



Attitudinal gaps regarding the state’s Jewish component versus the state’s democratic component were also found for the question of how these concepts should be understood. Most Israeli Jews (and Israeli Arabs as well) believe that “Jewish state” means the Jewish nation-state (62%).³ However, many among the religious (about a quarter) and Haredim (44%) understand the concept of a Jewish state as referring to “the state of the Jewish religion.”⁴

Among all population groups, Jews and Arabs, a majority believe that the state’s democratic component comprises two sub-components. One is that the state “has free elections and voting rights;” the other is that the state is “characterized by values of tolerance and safeguarding human rights.” However, a third of the Jews who self-identify as “religious” or “Haredi” choose only one of the two – “elections and voting” – as the crux of a democratic state, as do 39% of those on the political right (this is, of course, the same population, identified via a different scale of definitions). Here it should be noted that only two possible definitions were presented for the “what is a democratic state” question (as well as an option, which was selected by a large majority: to choose both components). One may assume that a question offering additional options as answers would have made it possible to identify other diverging interpretations regarding the concept’s applicability to Israel (especially had we included options at the heart of the public discord that prevailed while the survey was being conducted, such as

the independence of the judiciary, governmental transparency, separation of powers, and the like).



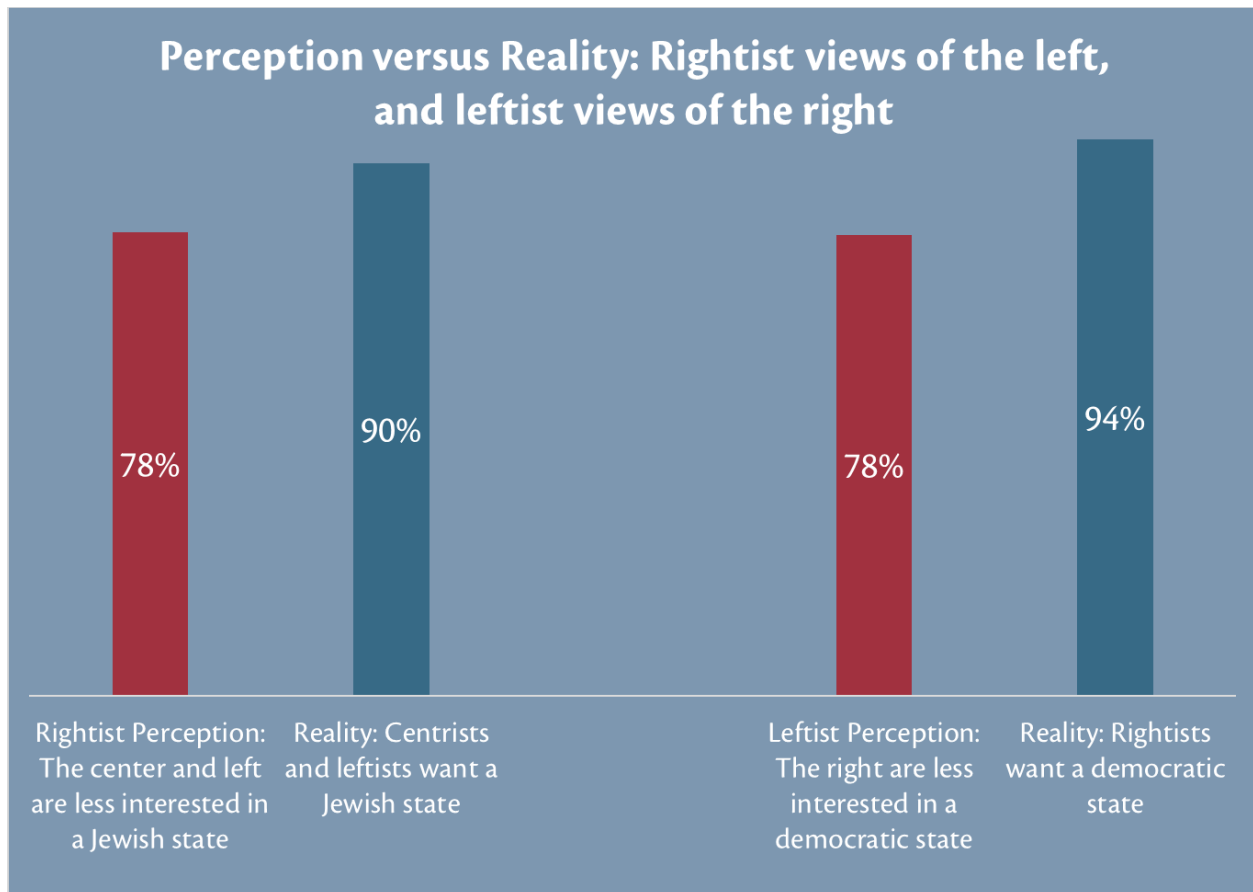
What do the others think?

In light of the overwhelming support among Jews for Israel as a democratic state, as well as for Israel as a Jewish state, we also looked at how various groups in Israeli society perceive other groups with regard to this issue. Simply put: Does the right (in the Jewish sector) understand that the left also wants a Jewish Israel, and does the left understand that the right also wants a democratic Israel?

Our examination of the image each group has of the other was conducted as follows: Those at the political center or left (opponents of the current government) were asked: "It is sometimes claimed that the Israeli right considers it less important that Israel be a democratic state. To what extent do you agree with this assertion?" Likewise, those on the right were asked if they agreed that the Israeli left considers it less important that Israel be a Jewish state. The findings show how commonly the two poles underestimate the true feelings of the opposing camp. Nearly 80% of those on the Israeli right agreed (strongly or somewhat) that centrists and leftists consider it less important for Israel to be a Jewish state. Likewise, nearly 80% of those

leaning left agreed (strongly or somewhat) that the right wing considers it less important for Israel to be a democratic state.

The following graph depicts the gap between image and reality. This gap attests to a high degree of polarization and the attribution of negative views to the opposing political camp – and an inability to identify common ground on the main components of the vision for Israel (both democracy and Judaism) among Israeli Jews. There is truth to the assertion that support for a democratic Israel on the right is slightly lower than on the left, and there is truth to the claim that support for a Jewish Israel on the left is lower than on the right. However, given the very high support levels for both components within the Jewish population as a whole, it appears that the image of the other side not sharing the full vision is inconsistent with reality.

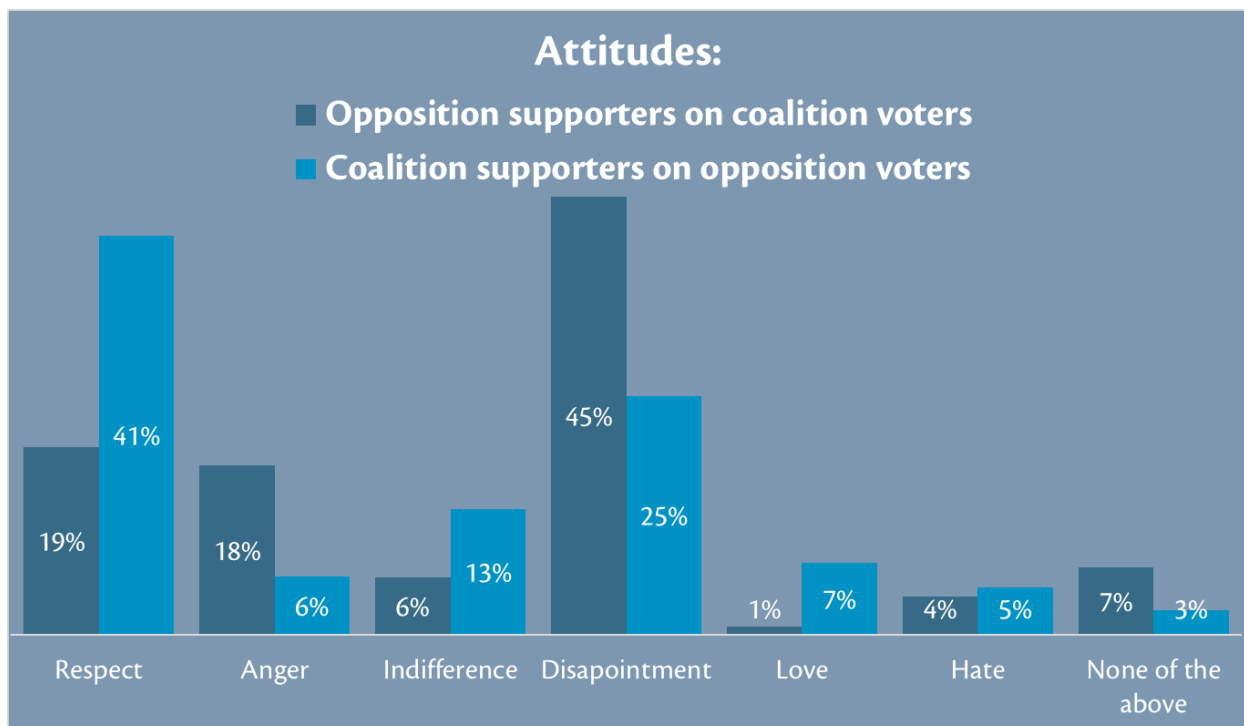


When we look at the views of different subgroups within the camps (such as left-leaning secular or right-leaning Haredim), we find that the groups at the extremes have the most negative image of the opposing side – and that there is a significant gap between these groups and those at the center of

the religiosity and the political scales. For example, there is a substantial disparity between “rightists” and those in the “center-right” camp regarding perceptions of center-left views. Eighty-eight percent of rightists feel that those in the center-left consider it less important for Israel to be a Jewish state, but among center-right voters the percentage drops to 62%. Still a majority, but less pronounced.

Similarly, 82% of secular-left respondents feel that right-wing Israelis consider it less important for Israel to be democratic, but when one looks at the views of the traditional not-so-religious (still supporters of the left) on the same question, the figure drops to 66%. A third of those on the left who are Traditional not-so-religious did not agree with the supposition that rightists are less interested in Israel as a democratic state.

We examined the reciprocal attitudes of Israelis from different camps with another question, that of how supporters and opponents of the government feel about each other. Before we look at the responses, it should be noted that the questionnaire was distributed and completed in January 2023, at a point when the confrontation over judicial reform was already present in the public discourse, but before it had reached full intensity. At that time, the largest subgroup of opposition supporters chose the phrase “very disappointed” to describe their feelings about the coalition voters (45%), while the largest subgroup of coalition voters chose the option “I respect them” to express their feelings about the opposition electorate (41%).

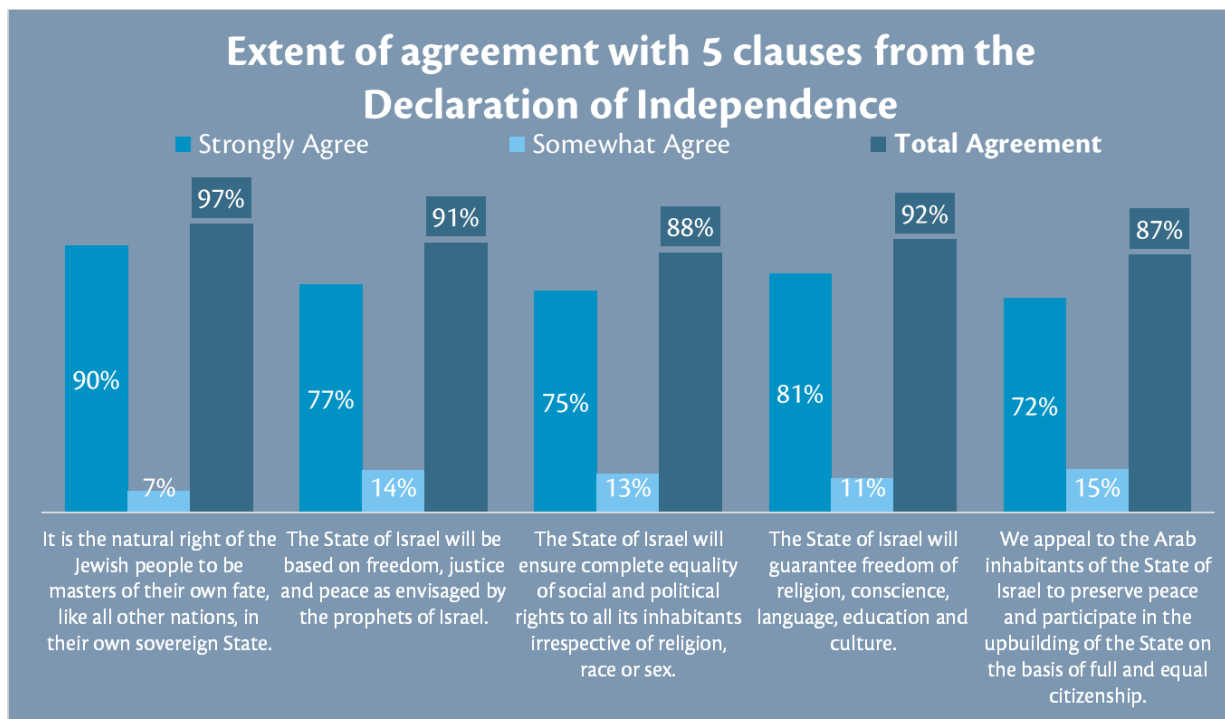


Agreement with the Declaration of Independence

The text of Israel's Declaration of Independence has been deployed by the anti-judicial-reform camp, and therefore occupies (not necessarily for its own good⁵) a central position in the present political dispute. Opposition head Yair Lapid defined the struggle against the reform as a campaign in which "we're fighting for the values of the Declaration of Independence."⁶ Former Prime Minister Ehud Barak said at one of the demonstrations against the government "We are here to defend the Declaration of Independence," and called those opposed to the reform "the Declaration of Independence camp." The Declaration text, sometimes enlarged to billboard proportions, was hung on city and town halls and at other sites (Tel Aviv, Herzliya, Kfar Saba), and was carried and read aloud by demonstrators. The demonstrators' and objectors' explicit contention was that advocates of the judicial reform had forsaken the principles of the Declaration of Independence.

Can a real tendency be discerned on the part of the reform supporters to disavow the Declaration and its values? This year's questionnaire included five statements from the Declaration, without citation of their origin. We noted that the statements had been "written about the vision for the State of Israel," and one may assume that some of the respondents recognized their source while others answered without having recognized it.⁷

The level of agreement with **all of the statements** taken from the Declaration was **very high** among Jewish respondents. Several differences were, of course, found between sectors on some of the statements, to be discussed below. Among Arab respondents, agreement was much lower. We hypothesize that a large proportion of Arab respondents did not regard the statements as an aspirational "vision" but rather as a reality test. That is, they did not necessarily answer the question of what is desirable, but rather of what, in their view, actually exists. Agreement levels among the Arab respondents were around 50% for the statements queried (four statements, not including the direct "appeal to the Arab inhabitants of the State of Israel").

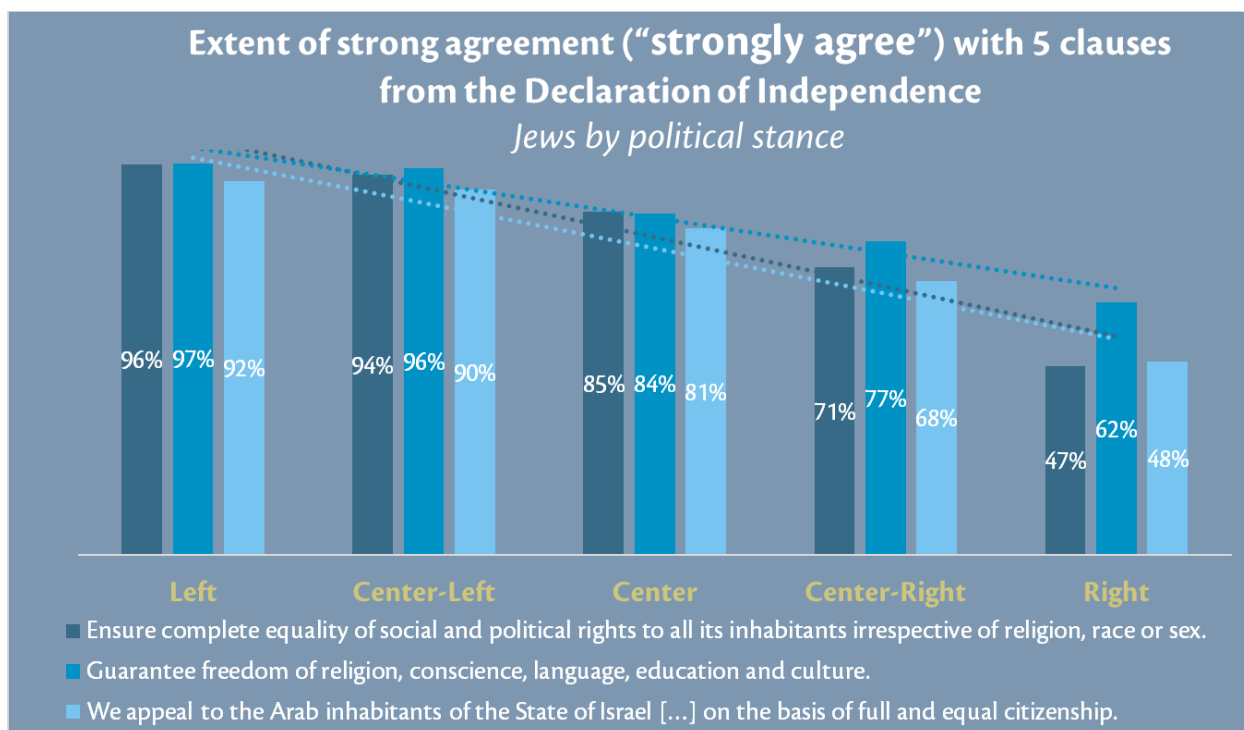


Where can gaps be found between different groups regarding the vision set forth in the Declaration of Independence? The two first statements in the list – the one pertaining to “the natural right of the Jewish people,” and the one affirming that Israel will be founded on “freedom, justice and peace” – are accepted by all Jewish subgroups to a very high degree. Divergent views can be seen regarding the other three statements. Support is high for all of them, but differences emerge both in share of support and, to a greater extent, in agreement level (“strongly agree” versus “somewhat agree”) as one moves along the left-right political spectrum, and from secular to Haredi along the corresponding religiosity scale. For all three of these statements, support grows significantly stronger as one moves “leftward” along the scale, and weakens as one moves “rightward.”

A variety of hypotheses may be advanced as to why those on the right, or Religious and Haredi Israelis, choose “somewhat agree” rather than “strongly agree” in response to some of the Declaration statements. The Declaration of Independence, as noted, is currently at the heart of a public dispute that could potentially affect support for what is stated in its text. At the same time – and this is, of course, also related to the current Israeli public discord – it may be that for the more conservative groups the term “somewhat” expresses conditional support – support for the statement as they understand it, accompanied by fear of, or reservations about, the way in

which the statement may be interpreted by other groups, or by the Supreme Court.

Again, it should be emphasized that when all those who “agree” (strongly or somewhat) in each group are taken together, the gaps between the groups diminish greatly. For example, 62% among those on the right agree “strongly” with the statement that Israel should “guarantee freedom of religion, conscience [...],” versus 97% of those on the left. However, if those on the right who agree “strongly” or “somewhat” with the statement are taken together, the gap narrows to 83% of the right versus 97% of the left. The same narrowing can be seen for all of the statements where disparities were found. In all groups and for all of the statements, the total agreement rate does not drop below 70% in any instance.



Relations between groups

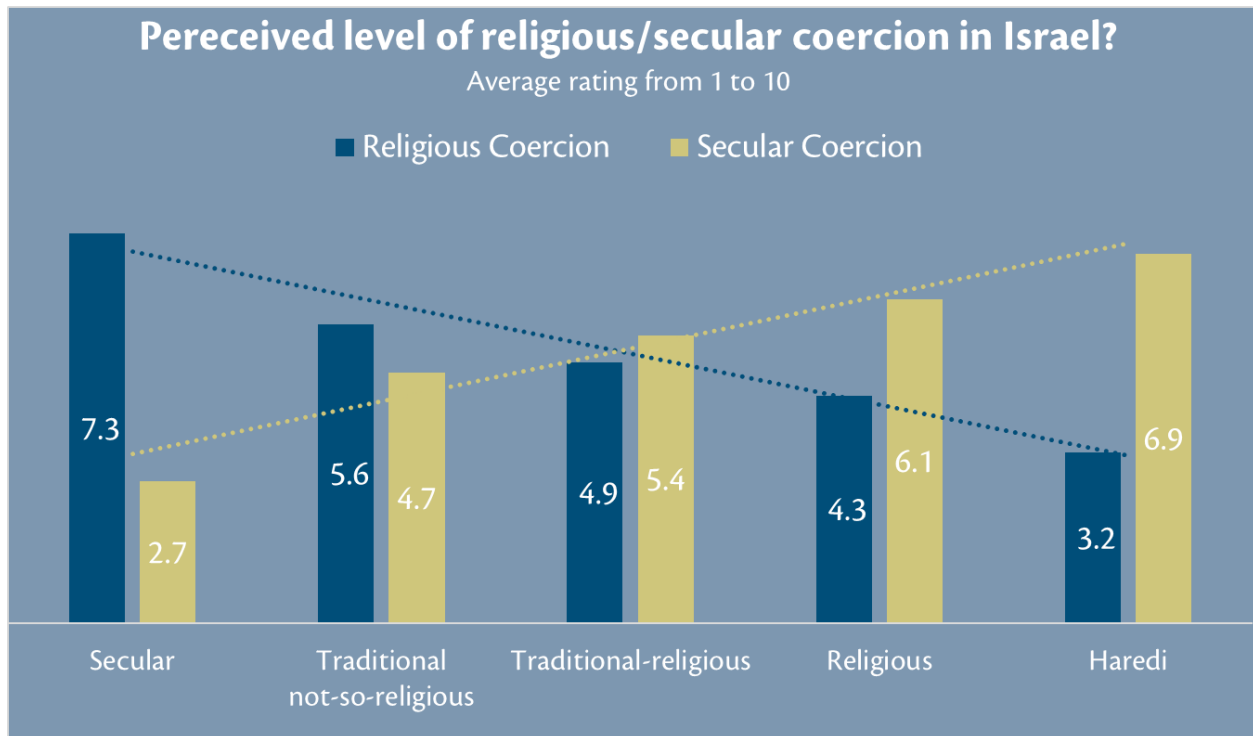
JPPI’s annual Pluralism Index tracks various parameters that reflect relations between different groups in Israeli society. Some of these parameters recur each year, or every few years, enabling comparison between past and present.

This year, after a five-year interval, we repeated a question about the level of religious/secular coercion in Israel as perceived by Jews from different sectors. It should be emphasized, again, that this year's questionnaire was administered against the background of heated political-social tension in Israel, as well as the fact that the political camps currently - more than in the past - align with religiosity levels. A significant proportion of the groups that make up Israel's current governing coalition are Religious and Haredi, while a substantial majority of opposition supporters are secular or traditional not-so-religious. However, impressions and attitudes about religious or secular coercion in Israel are nothing new. In 2018 a strong sense of religious coercion was detected, which rose as one moved toward "secular" on the religiosity scale; at the same time, a certain (less strong) sense of secular coercion was found, which intensified as one moved toward the Religious-Haredi end of the scale.

In the case of religious coercion, no very meaningful change was found this year. The share of secular Jews who feel that there is significant religious coercion in Israel remains very high; on a coercion scale ranging from 1 (no coercion) to 10 (very significant coercion), the secular respondents, on average, rated it at 7 or higher. A certain increase over five years ago was found for the "mirror image" - Religious and Haredi claims of secular coercion. As in the questionnaire of half a decade ago, the secular coercion picture corresponds to, and is the flip side of, the religious coercion picture. However, this year the Religious-Haredi claim of secular coercion approaches the level of religious coercion claimed by the secular camp. Some 61% of Haredim rated the degree of secular coercion at over 7 (out of 10), as did 49% of the religious group.

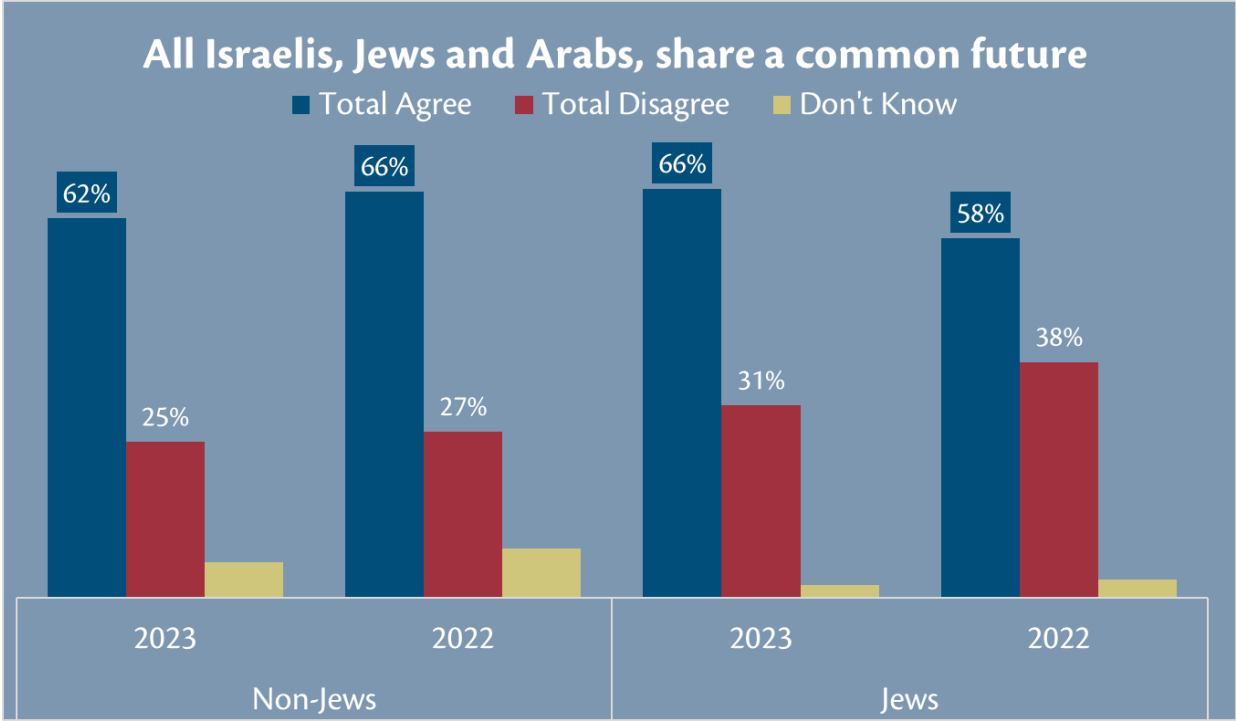
The implication of these findings is that Israel is in a state of polarization even regarding the sense of coercion felt by the two opposing camps: The feelings manifested at both ends of the scale are ones of "being" coerced, but with little acknowledgement of claims that one's own camp is perceived as the "coercer" by the other camp. Sixty-one percent of Haredim rated Israeli religious coercion in the 1 to 3 range, while the religious group rated it at 1 to 4. That is, the Religious-Haredi camp does not agree that there is significant religious coercion in Israel. At the same time, 61% of the secular public rated secular coercion in Israel at 1 to 2, evincing a very low degree of recognition that there is secular coercion in Israel. Among the traditional not-so-religious, 64% rated Israeli secular coercion at 1 to 5 - a fairly low level of recognition that secular coercion exists in Israel. Regardless of the factual

question of who is right (a question that cannot be easily answered), it is clear that a controversy of fact prevails in Israeli perceptions of reality, one that makes it very hard to arrive at satisfactory arrangements. When each side assumes that it is the one suffering from coercion while leaving the other side uncoerced, willingness for compromise on disputes pertaining to religion-and-state arrangements may be expected to be low.



Another time-based comparison, one pertaining to the sense of partnership between Jews and Arabs in Israel, was conducted vis-à-vis last year's data. The comparison was felt to be worthwhile due to a major change in circumstances: Last year Israel's government was run by a coalition that included an Arab party in the mix, while this year's government comprises parties that explicitly reject the idea of including Arab parties in the coalition. Against the background of these changes, no very significant gaps have emerged in Jewish and Arab attitudes toward a common future for the two populations. There has been a slight increase among Jews for the idea of a common future, along with a slight drop among Arabs. Centrist Jews constitute the group that exhibits the most meaningful change, per this survey - among this group, the share of those who "strongly agree" that all Israelis have a common future rose from 33 to 47%. But this increase is not confined to centrists; it was also detected in all other groups along the political spectrum at varying levels. It is interesting to note, from a

methodological perspective, that these differences are discernable both when we compare the present and previous survey findings generally, and when we perform individual comparisons for those who completed both this and last year's survey to some extent (nearly 600 respondents). That is: the same Israelis who completed the 2022 questionnaire and the 2023 questionnaire changed their views to some extent (the Haredim were the sole exception; their answers this year show almost no divergence from their answers last year).



1 *Constitutional Anchoring of the Vision of the State: Recommendations to the Minister of Justice*, Ruth Gavison, 2014.

2 See: *The Arab Public 2019*, Smootha Surveys - University of Haifa, Data Israel website. This questionnaire also included several different wordings that elicited varied responses. A third of the respondents answered in the negative to the question about whether Israel has a right to exist "as a Jewish-Zionist state," while a quarter responded in the affirmative, and another third answered yes with "reservations" (which were not specified).

3 It is interesting to compare this finding with the choice of Jewish Israelis when asked to what the definition of human beings (and not of the state) as Jews refers. In this case, 28% chose nationality. See: "*Who Are Jews*:" *the Views of Israeli Jews*, Rosner, Fuchs, Slepko, the Jewish People Policy Institute, 2022.

4 A comparable finding can be found in an Israel Democracy Institute survey of a decade ago, in which the question was worded differently but the results were quite similar. Over half of the Jewish respondents regarded the state's Jewishness as a "national marker," versus a third of those who viewed it as a "religious" marker. See: *Public Views Regarding a Jewish and Democratic State*, Dror Walter, Chanan Cohen, 2011.

5 See: "Don't Drag the Declaration of Independence into the Court," Yedidia Stern, *Haaretz*, 2018; "Moshe, Hang the Declaration Please," Shmuel Rosner, *theMadad.com*, 2023.

6 Sources: <https://www.ice.co.il/local-news/news/article/934250> ; <https://www.israelhayom.co.il/news/local/article/13735117> ; <https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/sjc1084ui> a

7 The full text of the question: Now we will read to you five sentences that were written about the vision of the State of Israel, and we will ask you to what extent you agree or disagree that this is the vision that most closely accords with the State of Israel today.