

ISRAELI DEMOCRACY EXAMINED

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Auditing Israeli Democracy – 2010 Democratic Values in Practice

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Abstract

Democratic Values in Theory and in Practice: Attitudes of the Israeli Public

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Part One: The Democracy Index 2010

The opening section of the 2010 Israeli Democracy Index examines the state of Israeli democracy according to a series of internationally recognized quantitative measures in the field of political science. The qualities presented in the indices were examined along two axes: (1) Israel's current functioning vis-à-vis that of 35 other democracies around the world; and (2) its performance as a democracy, past and present. As with previous Indices, the data has been compiled in text and graphic form to highlight overall trends (improvement, decline, or no change) in Israel's situation as compared with other countries and with past years. In this year's Index, 19 of the 37 indicators measured in the Democracy Index were updated.

Major Findings

- In most international indices, Israel is ranked immediately after the established democracies, near the new democracies of Eastern Europe, Central America, and South America.
- In recent years, there have not been major changes in Israel's overall ranking as a democracy: its relative position has not improved, but neither has it worsened.
- Many weaknesses of Israel's democracy are associated with the "rights aspect" (one of three aspects of Israeli democracy examined by the Index, together with the institutional aspect and the stability aspect); for example, Israel's high incarceration rate

combines with shortcomings in the rule of law, which falls short of the accepted standard in Western countries.

- While Israel's ranking in the gender equality indicators has declined in recent years, Israel is still positioned above most of the new democracies in this regard.
- In the Political Stability Index, Israel ranks in last place among the democracies studied.
- Israel scores low marks in the area of social cleavages; these divisions affect the country's democratic quality and are not diminishing with time.
- The strongest improvement is in the institutional measures, primarily as a result of the rise in Israel's score in the governance indicators.
- Indicators of corruption in the political system did not register noticeable changes in comparison with 2009.

Part Two: The 2010 Democracy Survey

The second section of the 2010 Israeli Democracy Index analyzes the findings of a public opinion poll conducted in Israel in March 2010 among a representative sample of Jewish and Arab respondents. The survey focused on the public's assessment of the practice of democracy in Israel, and the level of support for, and satisfaction with, Israeli democracy. The purpose of this section of the Index is to gauge the public's views on a series of democratic values, and its perceptions regarding the functioning of democracy in Israel in comparison with previous surveys from 2003 to 2009.

Major Findings

- While there is broad support for the assertion that Israel must remain a democratic state, the Israeli public tends to characterize the country's democracy as weak and ineffective. The preferred solution is a more centralized government. The bulk of the survey's respondents (60%) ascribe advantages to an authoritarian

government and a strong leadership, which, as they see it, solve problems efficiently.

- Israelis are disappointed by the low degree to which their preferences (as reflected in voting patterns) influence the government's policies. The majority (59%) prefer a regime made up of experts, who would make decisions based on professional considerations rather than political ones. This is compounded by disappointment with the functioning of elected bodies and a lack of trust in the Knesset and political parties. As in the past, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) enjoys a high level of trust on the part of the Israeli public. The office of the President of Israel continues to improve its image, and this year a majority (70%) expressed a high degree of trust in the incumbent president.
- Of the Jewish public, 86% believe that critical decisions for the state should be taken by a Jewish majority. A total of 53% maintain that the state is entitled to encourage Arabs to emigrate from Israel.
- Since the Democracy Index was first published in 2003, significant gaps have been observed between the opinions of long-time Israelis and those of immigrants from the Former Soviet Union (hereafter: FSU immigrants). It seems that the latter are among the less liberal Israeli groups with regard to such issues as majority-minority relations and gender equality.
- This year, as in previous years, the Democracy Survey indicates an unwavering optimism in the public's attitude toward Israel's future. Although the majority of Israelis are very troubled by corruption, have lost faith in politicians, and are convinced that another war will break out in the next few years, they continue to want to live in Israel, are proud of their state, and feel that they belong to the Israeli collective.

Part Three: Democratic Principles in Practice

The analysis in this section was conducted on two planes: the vertical and the horizontal. On the vertical plane, we focused on comparing support for core democratic values with citizens' assessment of the extent to which these values are realized by government institutions and agencies. The horizontal plane, by contrast, centered on relations between citizens, as individuals and as groups, and examined whether the citizens of Israel in fact uphold their stated commitment to constitutional values and the rights derived from them.

The Vertical Dimension

- The public in Israel, as in many other democracies, explicitly supports a democratic regime: 81% of the general public agrees with the basic assertion that “democracy is not a perfect regime, but it is better than any other form of government.”
- Despite the support in principle for a democratic regime, more than half the general public (55%) supports the statement that “Israel’s overall situation would be much better if there were less attention paid to the principles of democracy and greater focus on observing the law and on public order.” A breakdown of the responses of the Jewish interviewees according to self-reported political orientation on a left-right continuum shows significant differences between the groups: The above statement is supported by 60% of those who identify themselves as right-wing; 50% of those in the center; and 49% of those on the left. In other words, among right-wingers, there is greater willingness to waive democratic principles than there is among centrists or left-wingers.
- Some 36% of respondents feel that Israel today is not democratic enough; 34% believe that it is sufficiently democratic; and 27% hold that it with too democratic. If these results are broken down by sector, the view that Israel is not democratic enough is particularly strong among FSU immigrants (49%), as compared

with 41% of the Arab population and only 31% of long-time Israelis.

- The distribution of responses to the question: “What grade would you give Israeli democracy today, where 1 = failed and 10 = excellent?” shows that the Jewish public as a whole assigns Israeli democracy an average grade of 5.4, while FSU immigrants feel it deserves a slightly higher grade (5.6). The Israeli Arab public gives Israeli democracy a lower average grade of 5.1.
- The public is divided in its attitude to the statement that Israel was more democratic in the past than it is today. Among the Jewish population, the percentage of those who disagree with this statement stands at 47%, which exceeds the percentage who support it (39%).
- With regard to a constitution for Israel: 65% of the general public indicate that the subject is important to them. Among the Jewish public, 69% feel this way, as compared with only 45% of the Arab respondents.
- Israel as a Jewish and democratic state: Among the Israeli public as a whole, the highest percentage—43%—consider both parts of this definition (“Jewish” and “democratic”) to be equally important; 31% classify the Jewish component as more important; and only 20% ascribe greater importance to the democratic component. Among Arab citizens of Israel, the democratic element takes precedence (38%).
- Freedom of religion and freedom of expression: The prevalent view with respect to both these rights is that they are implemented to a suitable degree (approx. 41% in both cases). With regard to human rights, however, 39% feel that they are not implemented sufficiently.
- Trust in institutions: Only slightly more than half the general Israeli public—54%—state that they trust the Supreme Court fully or to some extent, as opposed to 44% who state openly that they do not trust it. Only 41% of the respondents express full or partial trust in the police. As for Israel’s political parties, 72% of the general public assert that they do not trust them. A

large majority (63%), however, are opposed to the view that the parties are no longer necessary and can therefore be abolished.

The Horizontal Dimension

- The notion that citizenship is a legal status conferring equal rights has been only partially internalized by the Israeli public: 51% of the general public support full equality of rights between Jews and Arabs. A breakdown of the Jewish public by level of religiosity shows that the greater the level of religious observance, the stronger the objection to equality of rights between Jews and Arabs: only 33.5% of secular Jews are opposed to such equal rights, in contrast to 51% of traditional Jews, 65% of religious Jews, and 72% (!) of ultra-Orthodox Jews.
- Almost two thirds (62%) of the Jewish sample feel that as long as Israel is in a state of conflict with the Palestinians, the views of Arab citizens of Israel on foreign affairs and security issues should not be taken into account.
- Roughly two thirds (67%) of Jewish Israelis feel that first-degree relatives of Arabs should not be allowed entry into Israel under the rubric of family unification.
- As for equality in the allocation of resources, a majority of respondents (55%) think that greater resources should be allocated to Jewish communities than to Arab ones. Only a minority (42%) disagree with this statement. Among right-wingers, a clear majority (71%) agree with it, while only a minority (46%) of centrists, and an even smaller minority (38%) of leftists, agree. Breaking down the data by religiosity shows that among ultra-Orthodox Jews, 51% agree with this statement; among religious Jews, 45%; among traditional Jews, 28%; and among secular Jews, only 18%.
- With regard to equality in the financing of religious services (needs and amenities), the situation appears to be better: 39% of the general public support equal funding, while 35% are opposed.

As for equal financing of schools, the percentage of supporters among the general public is even greater (51%), in contrast with 27% who are opposed. If we look solely at the Jewish public, the proportion of support for equal financing of religious services stands at 41%, compared with 33% opposed. With reference to equal financing of schools, the level of support reaches 54%, in contrast with 26% opposed.

- Examining the extent of Jewish Israelis' tolerance for neighbors who are "other" (immigrants from the FSU, ultra-Orthodox Jews, former settlers, homosexual couples, foreign workers, Arabs, mentally retarded individuals, Ethiopian immigrants, mentally ill individuals in community treatment settings, people who do not observe the Sabbath and holidays) reveals that the neighborly relationship considered most troubling is that with Arabs (46%), followed by people who are mentally ill and foreign workers (both 39%). The notion of being neighbors with a homosexual couple bothers 25% of respondents; with ultra-Orthodox Jews, 23%; with Ethiopian immigrants 17%; with non-Sabbath observers 10%; and with FSU immigrants, 8% of respondents.
- Based on the survey data, the Arab public seems to be less tolerant than the Jewish public when it comes to living as neighbors with people who are "other." In this case, the most undesirable types of neighbors are homosexual couples (70%), ultra-Orthodox Jews (67%), and former settlers (65%). The most "tolerable" neighbors, in the view of Arab respondents, are foreign workers (48%).
- Some 72% of the general public feel that Israel is being harmed as a democracy by the increasing gaps in society.
- A total of 54% of the Jewish public object to the statement that there should be legal penalties for persons who speak out against Zionism; likewise, 50% agree with the statement that it is important to allow non-Zionist parties to take part in elections.
- A slim majority of the Jewish sample—51.5%—agree with the statement that only new immigrants who are Jewish according

to Halakhah (Jewish religious law) should be entitled to automatically receive Israeli citizenship. Of long-time Israelis, a total of 59% agree with this statement, while among FSU immigrants, this figure drops to 34.5%. If we examine the responses of the Jewish public according to self-reported level of religiosity, we find that support for the exclusion of non-Jews breaks down as follows: 41% among the secular; 63% among the traditional; 79% among the religious; and 88% among the ultra-Orthodox.

- There is virtually total consensus (82%) among the Jewish public that emergency medical treatment should be provided to patients, whether or not they have health insurance. Among the Arab public, by contrast, this position is supported by only 40% of the respondents.
- On the question of denying the right to elect or be elected to those who are eligible for conscription but do not serve in the army, we found sizeable differences between sectors: 56% of long-time Israelis agree with this position, whereas 62% of FSU immigrants do not agree. Examining the same issue according to self-reported level of religiosity level of yields the finding that 76% of the ultra-Orthodox public is opposed to this idea.