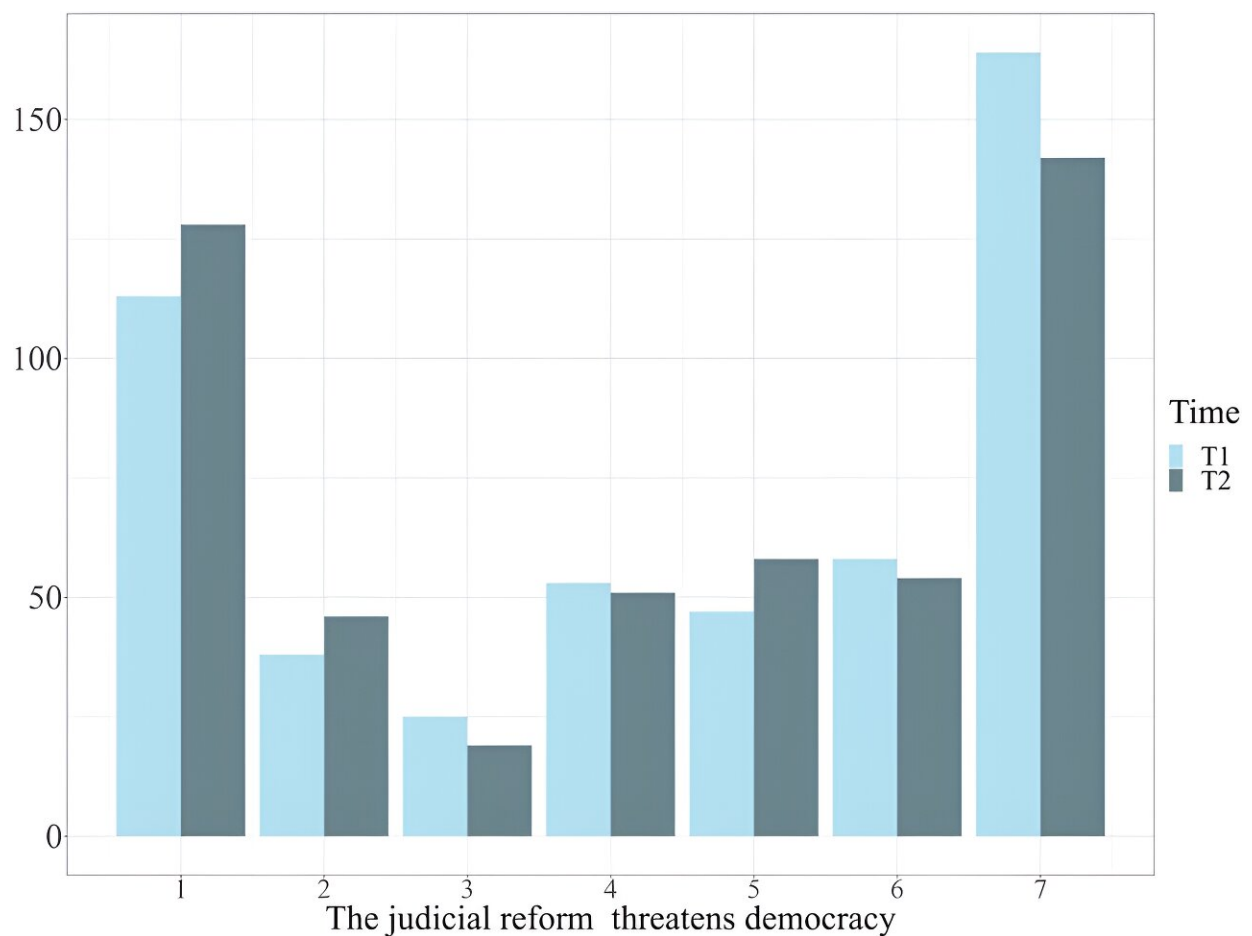


Motivated to disagree: What can be learned about rapid polarization from the Israeli judicial reform?

July 5 2024



Distributions of responses to the statement "Reform is a threat to democracy" at T1 and T2. Time 1 (T1) distribution appears in light blue, Time 2 (T2) distribution appears in dark blue. Responses ranged from 1 = Disagree completely to 7 = Agree completely. Credit: *Communications Psychology* (2024).

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A recent study, conducted in the midst of last year's widespread protests in Israel, has uncovered extreme polarization in public opinion regarding the judicial reform introduced by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government.

The [study](#), published in *Communications Psychology* by researchers at Bar-Ilan University, highlights the significant role of motivated reasoning in shaping people's views on this controversial issue.

In January 2023, Israel's newly elected government proposed a judicial reform aimed at curtailing the Supreme Court's power over the government. While some groups expressed support, many others saw it as a weakening of democratic institutions.

The reform was pushed forward despite a lack of widespread voter support. Protests erupted across the country, reflecting deep concerns about the reform's potential negative impacts on various sectors, including health care and academic freedom.

The study, conducted among the general Jewish population in Israel in the midst of the protests, involved two rounds of surveys in March and May 2023. It found that opinions about the reform were extremely polarized, with most individuals either strongly supporting or opposing it.

This polarization was driven by motivated reasoning, where people's pre-existing beliefs significantly influenced their views. This thought process leads people to arrive at conclusions that align with what they already believe.

The study was led by Dr. Dora Simunovic, of Constructor University in Germany and Bar-Ilan University in Israel, and Dr. Anna Dorfman and Dr. Maayan Katzir, of the Department of Psychology and Conflict Management, Resolution and Negotiation Program at Bar-Ilan University.

Key findings include:

- **Trust Dynamics:** Reform supporters showed high trust in the government and mistrust in the judiciary, while opponents exhibited the opposite.
- **Views on Protests:** Reform opponents viewed extreme protest measures as legitimate, whereas supporters justified the use of forceful means, such as stun grenades and water cannons to disperse demonstrations.
- **Democratic Principles:** Reform supporters, who won the electoral majority, prioritized Majority Rule as a core democratic principle, while opponents valued the protection of Minority Rights and Independent Media more highly.
- **False Consensus:** Both supporters and opponents believed their camp represented the majority, reflecting the psychological phenomenon of False Consensus.

"We were surprised by how quickly polarization over this newly emerging issue developed and the strong false consensus effect we observed," said researcher Dr. Maayan Katzir.

"People were convinced that their camp was the majority, no matter what their actual opinion was. This is a serious issue, because when each side is certain that they represent the majority, they are less willing to compromise, which maintains and deepens polarization."

Dr. Dora Simunovic, the study's lead author, explains that motivated

reasoning affects everybody, regardless of partisanship, religion, education, and other characteristics. She adds, "The phenomenon of false consensus is concerning because it suggests that both sides feel emboldened by their perceived majority status, reducing the likelihood of compromise."

The study underscores the importance of understanding how motivated reasoning affects opinions on controversial topics and the potential for rapid polarization in societies, like Israel, with segregated education streams. Future research will explore how these educational differences influence national identity and democratic understanding.

"We need to look at how people understand what democracy is, because distorted and biased understanding of democracy can lead to support of undemocratic policies and actions," concludes Dr. Dorfman.

More information: Dora Simunovic et al, Exploring motivated reasoning in polarization over the unfolding 2023 judicial reform in Israel, *Communications Psychology* (2024). [DOI: 10.1038/s44271-024-00080-x](https://doi.org/10.1038/s44271-024-00080-x)

Provided by Bar-Ilan University

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