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From democratic backsliding to political violence: evidence from Israel

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ABSTRACT

This study examines whether democratic backsliding increases public legitimization of, versus willingness to engage in – political violence against public officials. We draw on two nationally representative surveys ($N = 1200$ each) conducted at pivotal democratic junctures: one during relative institutional stability and another amid a severe constitutional crisis. This design captures real-time shifts in political attitudes during an actual episode of democratic decline. Findings show that while legitimization of violence against public officials rose significantly during backsliding, this attitudinal shift did not translate into greater willingness to commit violent acts. Instead, democratic erosion reshaped patterns of non-violent political engagement: opposition supporters and minority groups became more politically mobilized, while government supporters grew less engaged. This study offers two contributions. *First*, it shows that democratic backsliding expands the moral boundaries of legitimized political violence without directly increasing violent behavioural intentions. *Second*, it distinguishes between the acceptance of political violence and the willingness to act, highlighting a critical gap between normative support and behavioural escalation. These findings challenge conventional assumptions about the consequences of democratic backsliding, suggesting that it primarily reshapes moral landscapes rather than precipitating violent behaviour, with asymmetrical effects across political and ethnic groups. Policy and research-related implications are discussed.


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KEYWORDS Democratic backsliding; political violence; legitimization of violence; non-violent protest; political polarization; democratic attitudes; exposure to violence

Introduction

Democratic backsliding – the gradual weakening of democratic institutions – has become a defining feature of global politics, raising urgent questions about its

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consequences for political conflict. Recent data highlight the scale of this phenomenon. According to the 2024V-Dem Democracy Report, 72% of the world's population now lives under autocracies, while Freedom House documents the 18th consecutive year of global democratic decline.¹ Within this widespread phenomenon of democratic backsliding – the sustained weakening of democracy through the gradual expansion of executive powers and the erosion of institutional checks and balances – has been identified as one of the most prominent patterns.²

From the United States to Turkey and Hungary, even established democracies face institutional reforms that concentrate power in the executive and weaken checks and balances, mirroring trends across Europe where radical-right parties increasingly challenge liberal democratic norms.³ Particularly notable is the rise of radical right parties across Europe that openly challenge liberal democratic values – including the National Rally in France (formerly National Front), Alternative for Deutschland (AfD), Sweden Democrats, Vox in Spain, and Law and Justice (PiS) in Poland. These parties, which have gained significant electoral support in recent years, often advocate for policies that undermine judicial independence, restrict media freedom, and promote exclusionary nationalism.⁴ Despite extensive research on democratic erosion's institutional dynamics, far less is known about how backsliding shapes citizens' attitudes and behaviours. Existing studies show that democratic crises can increase public approval of political violence, but it remains unclear whether such attitudinal shifts translate into actual willingness to commit violence against political leaders.⁵ Specifically, while the connection between democratic backsliding and public legitimization of violence against public officials has been widely established, it remains unclear whether the same processes also promote actual behavioural shifts, driving people towards actual willingness to hurt public officials and political leaders. This gap is particularly significant given the established relationship between regime instability and public sentiment,⁶ as well as the general rise in legitimization of violence against politicians and public officials evident in recent years.⁷

This study addresses this gap using two nationally representative surveys conducted during contrasting periods in Israel: one under relative institutional stability and another amid a severe constitutional crisis. We make two contributions: first, we demonstrate that democratic backsliding expands moral acceptance of political violence without directly increasing behavioural intentions to commit it. Second, we show that these effects are asymmetrical across ideological and ethnic groups, offering broader insights into how democratic erosion reshapes political conflict. Israel provides a critical test case because it experienced rapid institutional change between our two surveys, including proposed judicial reforms, unprecedented executive consolidation of power, and widespread polarization.

Our study addresses this theoretical lacuna by examining the effects of democratic erosion on both public legitimization of political violence against public officials and citizens' actual willingness to engage in violent political action. We investigate this relationship through a comparative analysis of public attitudes during distinct periods of democratic stability and constitutional crisis. By distinguishing between the legitimization of violence and violent behavioural intentions, we offer a more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of how democratic backsliding shapes both attitudinal and behavioural dimensions of political violence. This approach challenges conventional assumptions about the linear relationship between democratic decline and violent political behaviour, suggesting that democratic erosion may recalibrate

moral thresholds for legitimizing violence without correspondingly increasing citizens' propensity to personally engage in violent action.

From legitimization to action: the gap between violent attitudes and violent behaviour

Violence is defined as extreme physical aggression on the aggression continuum.⁸ Accordingly, political violence encompasses acts that inflict physical, psychological, or symbolic harm on individuals and/or property with the intention of influencing audiences and advancing or resisting political, social, or cultural change, and includes the use (or threat thereof) of force against political actors and institutions to alter political outcomes.⁹ Our analysis centres on violence against public officials,¹⁰ which tends to gain public support amid legitimacy crises, a core feature of democratic backsliding.¹¹

During periods of democratic erosion, the weakening of institutional stability – particularly judicial independence, electoral oversight, and media freedom – significantly reduces public trust in democratic institutions and processes. This erosion of trust increases the likelihood of extra-institutional conflict resolution, including resorting to violence.¹² More specifically, as executives chip away at democratic constraints through unconventional appointments and extreme legislative reforms,¹³ they create conditions that may push different segments of society towards viewing violence as a legitimate political tool. As Haggard and Kaufman observe, “crosscutting cleavages are submerged into a single, reinforcing dimension that pits ‘us’ against ‘them’ on a range of issues.”¹⁴ This collapse of complex political, ethnic and national identities into binary opposition provides fertile ground for legitimization of violence among affected groups.

However, a critical distinction exists between legitimizing violence and actual intentions to act violently. While democratic erosion may shift attitudes towards violence,¹⁵ behavioural intentions appear to be more constrained. Research suggests that actual personal willingness to engage in violence depends heavily on personal predispositions such as psychopathy, narcissism, or aggressive tendencies.¹⁶ This implies that structural phenomena like democratic backsliding may reshape moral boundaries around violence without necessarily driving widespread violent behaviour. Along these lines, our overarching hypothesis is that democratic backsliding leads to an increase in legitimization of violence, while not affecting violent behavioural intentions (**H1**).

The distinction between legitimization of violence and actual violent intentions is particularly important given recent findings by Westwood et al.,¹⁷ who demonstrate that partisan violence is frequently “characterized by approval rather than perpetration,” with many citizens supporting violence they would not themselves commit. Their research shows that while political animosity can increase approval of violence, most individuals remain unwilling to engage in violent behaviour themselves – even when offered substantial financial incentives. This underscores the importance of our approach in examining both legitimization of violence and actual behavioural intentions separately, rather than assuming they move in tandem.

The gap between legitimization and action is by no means anecdotal, but rather has important social and political implications. While democratic erosion may not directly precipitate violent behaviour, it may increase willingness to engage in non-violent forms of political action, particularly among groups negatively affected by the

backsliding process.¹⁸ Furthermore, while public legitimization of violence in itself does not necessarily lead to violent action in the short range, the normalization of violence and violent discourse it causes may lead to higher levels of violent action in the long range.¹⁹ Thus, understanding this distinction between attitudinal shifts and behavioural intentions is crucial for developing effective policy responses to democratic erosion and maintaining social resilience during these challenging periods.

Who is most likely to legitimize political violence during democratic backsliding?

Political violence is most likely rationalized when individuals perceive that those conventional institutions can no longer safeguard their core interests. When institutional trust declines and political channels seem ineffective, citizens may come to view these institutions as illegitimate, increasing their openness to alternative – sometimes violent – forms of political action.²⁰ In that context, minority groups tend to see democratic backsliding as an emerging threat. Executive overreach, exclusion from decision-making, and populist rhetoric portraying minorities as obstacles to “the people’s will” amplify feelings of alienation and injustice. Research shows that such marginalization can heighten the moral legitimization of violence as a last-resort tool to defend democratic rights and secure group interests.²¹

However, democratic erosion can also radicalize formerly dominant groups. Drawing on Walter’s (2023) work on civil conflict, Sons of the Soil groups – those that historically held political, cultural, or economic privileges – may perceive institutional changes as undermining their traditional status and hierarchies.²² For these constituencies, legitimizing violence can be a way to preserve prior advantages and resist perceived threats from emerging power blocs.²³ Taken together, large-scale attitudinal shifts towards legitimizing political violence are most likely in societies undergoing simultaneous democratic backsliding and shifts in power relations between political camps. Consistent with this perspective, we adopt a nuanced conceptualization that distinguishes between legitimization of political violence and behavioural intentions, as these facets may associate differently with democratic backsliding.

Under the increasing political and social polarization characteristic of it, democratic backsliding has the potential to lead both opposition and regime supporters to view violence as a justified tool to restore their preferred status quo. The difference lies in the target towards which violence is legitimized in each camp. Due to the heavy use of populist discourse by political elites during backsliding processes, dehumanizing the executive’s political opponents and portraying them as corrupt elites and even traitors, regime supporters are more likely to legitimate interparty violence, i.e. acting violently against rival partisans or against the media. As Levitsky and Ziblatt put it, “If the public comes to share the view that opponents are linked to terrorism and the media are spreading lies, it becomes easier to justify taking action against them.”²⁴ Meanwhile, opposition groups are more likely to view the threat as stemming from the executive itself, due to its extreme disruption of democratic structures, thus legitimizing violence against public officials and political leaders.²⁵

While both opposition and regime supporters may increasingly legitimize political violence during democratic backsliding, the former are more inclined to direct it at public officials and state institutions. In contrast, regime supporters’ violent attitudes predominantly target the political opposition, i.e. rival partisans. We rely on this

distinction in our following hypothesis that during periods of democratic backsliding, support for violence against public officials will increase more among the political opposition than among regime supporters (**H2a**).

While the ideological opposition to the regime definitely stands as a group exposed to threat stemming from democratic backsliding, other populations may experience an even greater threat and thus exemplify even higher levels of support for violence in that context. According to Walter, ethnically diverse countries are significantly more plausible to experience increases in political and anti-institutional violence.²⁶ And indeed, ethnic and national minorities face particular vulnerability during democratic erosion, as populist leaders often scapegoat these groups to consolidate support for anti-democratic measures.²⁷ Examples include the targeting of Kurds in Turkey and Roma in Hungary,²⁸ where pre-existing prejudices were inflamed by populist rhetoric, leading to increased legitimization of violence both against and by these groups. While the ideological opposition from the national majority group experiences the legitimacy crisis mainly due to concrete processes of deep institutional changes characteristic of backsliding, ethnic and national minorities bear such grievances as an integral part of their group history, due to reasons of consistent political misrepresentation and systemic racism.²⁹ Thus, democratic backsliding – often accompanied by escalation of elite-driven intergroup hostility – marks an even more severe existential threat in the eyes of such groups compared to political minorities, potentially pushing them towards radicalization and the embracement of violence against the establishment. Therefore, we hypothesize that during periods of democratic backsliding, ethnic and national minorities will exemplify a greater increase in legitimization of violence than political opposition groups (**H2b**).

Current research

Our research relies on data from two politically distinct periods in Israeli politics. The first survey was conducted in 2022, in which the Israeli government was led by a unity coalition, housing leftist, centrist and rightist parties, with the large aim of reducing gaps and fractures within Israeli society. Importantly, this coalition was the first one since the inception of the state of Israel to include Arab sectorial parties, i.e. political parties that implicitly and explicitly promote the priorities of the Arab minority in Israel. The second survey (which was based on a new sample of participants) was conducted in 2023 after the establishment of arguably the most hardline rightist government in the history of Israeli politics. Right after its establishment, the latter announced several extreme policy and legislation proposals regarding the independence and jurisdiction of the Israeli judiciary in general and the Supreme Court in particular, leading to an unprecedented wave of demonstrations across the country, both for and against it, effectively deepening existing fractions and grievances within Israeli society.³⁰ Shortly after, still during its first few months, the government announced a series of appointments that granted the most extreme rightist and religious factions in the executive branch with unprecedented jurisdiction over homeland security, as well as policymaking in the West Bank. While the former had to do with the Arab population within Israel and its longstanding claim for selective law enforcement by Israeli police; the latter touched upon Palestinian aspirations for self-determination and autonomy.³¹

The events described above depict an increasing process of democratic backsliding during the 6th Netanyahu government, through both the weakening of the judiciary as a democratic check on the executive and through an excessive aggregation of power by executive officials.³² This notion is further validated by data extracted from the V-Dem dataset, recording a sharp increase in executive-led attacks on the judiciary and attempted judicial reforms, as well as a similar scale of decrease in executive's respect for constitutional constraints since the inauguration of the said executive (see [Figure 1](#)). These events were further followed by an escalation in processes of societal polarization, mainly along political lines and regarding the proposed judicial overhaul.³³

Both the processes of executive assaults on the judiciary as well as the overall disproportional power aggregation by the executive branch are not only characteristic of the definition of democratic backsliding,³⁴ but also resonate with contemporary trends worldwide.³⁵ We thus see the Israeli case study as a good fit for analysing the relationships between democratic backsliding and public legitimization of, and willingness to engage in, violence against public officials.

In addition to examining the shifts between the legitimization of violence against public officials and the actual willingness to take violent action between the two time points mentioned, we also tested whether they were moderated by two key socio-political variables: political orientation (opposition vs. regime supporters) and national majority vs. minority (Jewish vs. Arab citizens, respectively). We see these distinctions as providing additional robustness to our findings as well as increasing their generalizability to other politically and ethnically diverse societies that experience democratic erosion.

Political orientation was operationalized based on ideological self-placement, with Jewish participants identifying as left or centre classified as opposition supporters, and

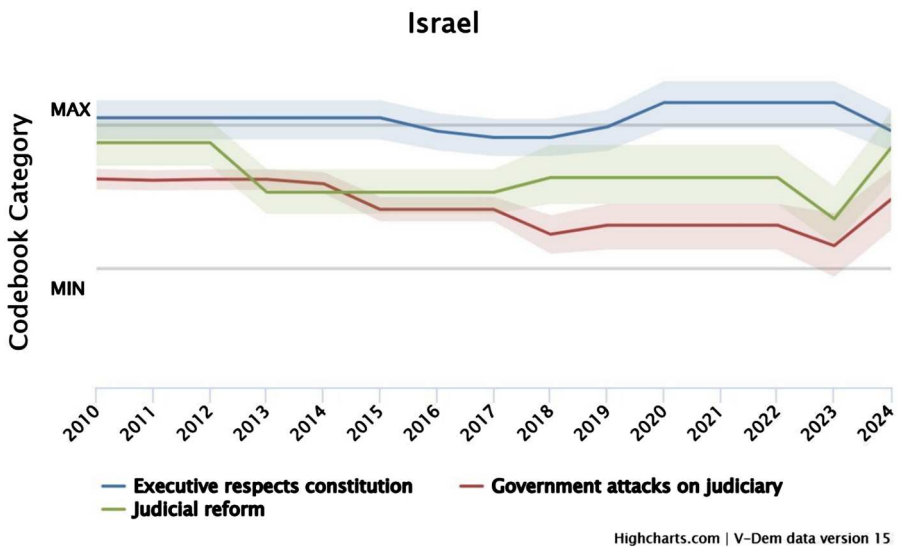


Figure 1. Indicators of democratic backsliding during the 6th Netanyahu Government.

Graph generated using the V-Dem Country Graph tool. Source: V-Dem Institute (Coppedge et al. 2024), V-Dem Country Graph Tool, Dataset v14.

those identifying as right classified as regime supporters. This approach reflects the sharp partisan alignment in Israeli politics during this period, where left- and centre-aligned parties uniformly opposed the judicial overhaul, while right-aligned individuals largely supported the ruling coalition. This operationalization also builds on consistent empirical evidence that ideological self-placement in Israel maps closely onto support for or opposition to the executive.³⁶ We limited this analysis to Jewish participants due to insufficient variance among Arab respondents, due to their overwhelming identification with the opposition.

Our second moderator – nationality – enabled us to explore how democratic backsliding affects groups differently depending on their position within the societal power structure. Specifically, we examined whether shifts in attitudes towards violence diverge between majority-group members (Jewish citizens) and minority-group members (Arab citizens), who differ in their longstanding relationship with state institutions and perceptions of legitimacy.³⁷

Finally, we conducted exploratory analyses examining willingness to engage in non-violent political action – both legal and illegal – to determine whether democratic backsliding influences broader patterns of political engagement or specifically amplifies support for violence. This comprehensive approach allows us to disentangle how democratic erosion reshapes both the normative boundaries of acceptable political behaviour and citizens' behavioural intentions across different sectors of society.

Samples

Participants for both surveys were recruited through Israel's leading online panel (iPanel). T1 sample included 2008 adults (80% Jewish; 54% female; M age = 39.31, SD = 14.16; range = 18–71). T2 sample included 1957 adults (84% Jewish; 52% female; M age = 40.12, SD = 14.28; range = 18–85). Both samples were representative of the adult Israeli population by nationality, gender, age, and region (Central Bureau of Statistics, <http://www.cbs.gov.il/ts/databank/series>). The two samples were highly equivalent, with no significant differences in gender, religiosity, education, age, or political orientation; the only difference observed was a slightly higher mean income at T2 (see Online Appendix).

A sensitivity power analysis indicated that the combined sample (N = 3965) provided 90% power to detect a small effect size (f = .05, $\eta^2 p$ = .003) in a two-way ANCOVA including both Jewish and Arab respondents. The Jewish subsample (N = 3259) was also representative of the Jewish-Israeli population by political orientation (55% right, 30% centre, 15% left) and religiosity (43% secular, 36% traditional, 11% religious, 10% ultra-Orthodox). A separate power analysis for this subsample showed 90% power to detect a small effect size (f = .06, $\eta^2 p$ = .004) in a two-way ANCOVA.

Procedure and measures

Questionnaires were translated into Arabic by a professional translator, and were administered in either Hebrew or Arabic, according to the national subsample (Jewish/Arab). The design of the questionnaires in T1 and T2 was identical.³⁸ Participants in both samples first completed a demographic questionnaire, including a political orientation item rated from 1 (= extreme right) to 7 (= extreme left). Then, they rated their support for 3 items representing legitimization of violence against public officials: “*In the Israeli*

reality, a violent struggle may sometimes be justified in order to achieve political achievements (against the government),” “When a political disaster is imminent and all means of protest have been exhausted to no avail, physical harm to politicians may be forgiven,” “There are situations where there is no choice and even weapons must be used to prevent the government from carrying out its policy” ($\alpha = .78$). Items were rated on a scale ranging from 1 (= strongly disagree) to 7 (= strongly agree).

Next, participants completed four items in which they were asked to rate the extent to which they would be willing to “take the following steps personally in order to bring about an end to a dangerous policy of the government” (all rated between 1 [= not at all] to 7 [= to a great extent]): two items represented violent action (“*Damaging property and public equipment of public employees or of the security forces,*” “*Using physical force against public servants or the security forces*”; $r = .79, p < .001$), one item represented non-violent illegal action (“*Participating in blocking roads or closing streets*”) and one item represented non-violent legal action (“*Participating in demonstrations or political rallies*”). A principal component factor analysis with direct oblimin rotation on all 4 items yielded two factors (loadings above .86; explained variance: 87%) representing violent political action (2 items) and non-violent political action (2 items; $r = .59, p < .001$). The first subscale (violent action) was used as one of our main dependent variables, whereas the second subscale (non-violent action) was used for exploratory analyses.

Measurement invariance

Given that the present study involved participants from distinct ethnocultural backgrounds (i.e. Arab and Jewish citizens of Israel) and employed different samples at the two measurement time points, establishing measurement invariance was essential to ensure that the constructs – legitimization of violence against public officials, violent political action, and non-violent political action – were interpreted and measured equivalently across both cultural groups and time points. Although full invariance was not achieved, 93% of the parameters were equivalent across measurement points for each of the ethnocultural groups. This level of invariance exceeds the commonly accepted threshold for partial invariance, which requires at least two invariant indicators per factor,³⁹ thereby supporting the validity of mean comparisons across time points. Further elaboration of this process is available in the Online Appendix.

Results

We test our expectations in sequence. First, H1 examines aggregate shifts in legitimization and willingness associated with democratic backsliding. Second, H2a addresses ideological heterogeneity among Jewish Israelis. Third, H2b focuses on ethnic heterogeneity between Arab and Jewish respondents. Descriptive statistics and correlations for all main variables are provided in the Online Appendix.

Shift in legitimization of political violence and willingness to act violently as a function of political orientation (H1 & H2a)

Analyses testing this hypothesis were limited to Jewish participants, as political orientation typically shows insufficient variation among Arab respondents, who

overwhelmingly identify with the opposition. Within the Jewish sample, however, ideological self-placement provided meaningful variation to examine the link between government support and attitudes towards political violence. Consistent with our hypothesis, before conducting the analyses, we recoded the political orientation item such that 1–3-> 2 (“right”), 4-> 1 (“center”), and 5–7-> 0 (“left”).

First, we conducted a two-way ANOVA examining the interactive effects of sample/wave (T1 versus T2) and political orientation (left/right/centre) on *legitimization of political violence*. The analysis revealed a significant main effect for Time ($F(1,3253) = 17.32, p < .001, \eta^2 = .01$), which was qualified by political orientation ($F(2,3253) = 4.58, p = .010, \eta^2 = .003$). An examination of this Time x Political orientation interaction revealed that legitimization of violence significantly increased between T1 and T2 among leftists (T1: $M[SD] = 1.47[.88]$, T2: $M[SD] = 1.74[.99]$; $p = .007$) and centrists (T1: $M[SD] = 1.58[1.08]$, T2: $M[SD] = 1.85[1.12]$; $p < .001$), but not among rightists (T1: $M[SD] = 1.74[1.21]$, T2: $M[SD] = 1.77[1.17]$; $p = .607$). Similar results were obtained when controlling for demographics (age, gender, level of religiosity, income and education; see Online Appendix).

We then conducted a two-way ANOVA to examine the interactive effects of measurement wave (T1 versus T2) and political orientation (left/right/centre) on *personal willingness to engage in violent action*. The analysis revealed non-significant effects both for Time ($F(1,3253) = .89, p = .436, \eta^2 < .001$) and for the Time x Political orientation interaction ($F(2, 3253) = 1.06, p = .345, \eta^2 = .001$). Similar results were obtained when controlling for demographics (age, gender, level of religiosity, income and education; see Online Appendix).

To summarize, consistent with our hypotheses, we found that citizens’ legitimization of political violence, but not their personal willingness to engage in political violence, increases between T1 and T2 (**H1**), and that the increase in legitimization is particularly pronounced among Jewish-Israeli leftists and centrists, compared to Jewish-Israeli rightists (**H2a**).

As an exploratory analysis, we also examined whether citizens’ personal willingness to engage in non-violent political action shifts between T1 and T2, and whether this shift is qualified by political orientation. To that end, we conducted a two-way ANOVA for the interactive effects of measurement wave (T1 vs T2) and political orientation (left/right/centre) on *personal willingness to engage in non-violent action*. The analysis revealed a significant main effect for Time ($F(1,3253) = 17.28, p < .001, \eta^2 = .01$), which was qualified by political orientation ($F(2,3253) = 35.74, p < .001, \eta^2 = .02$). An examination of this Time x Political orientation interaction revealed that willingness to engage in non-violent action significantly increased between T1 and T2 among leftists (T1: $M[SD] = 4.04 [1.55]$, T2: $M[SD] = 4.86[1.79]$; $p < .001$) and centrists (T1: $M[SD] = 3.32[1.67]$, T2: $M[SD] = 3.81[1.86]$; $p < .001$), but significantly decreased among rightists (T1: $M[SD] = 3.39[1.82]$, T2: $M[SD] = 2.96[1.77]$; $p < .001$). The interactive effects and directions are specified in [Figure 2](#). Similar results were obtained when controlling for demographics (age, gender, level of religiosity, income and education; see Online Appendix, p. 3).

As an exploratory follow-up, we examined whether ideological differences in the outcome variables could be explained by subjective perceptions of the judicial reform’s democratic character. This perception was measured only at T2 using a six-item scale, where higher scores reflected the view that the reform was more democratic ($\alpha = .95$; see Online Appendix for full details of the scale). Using PROCESS

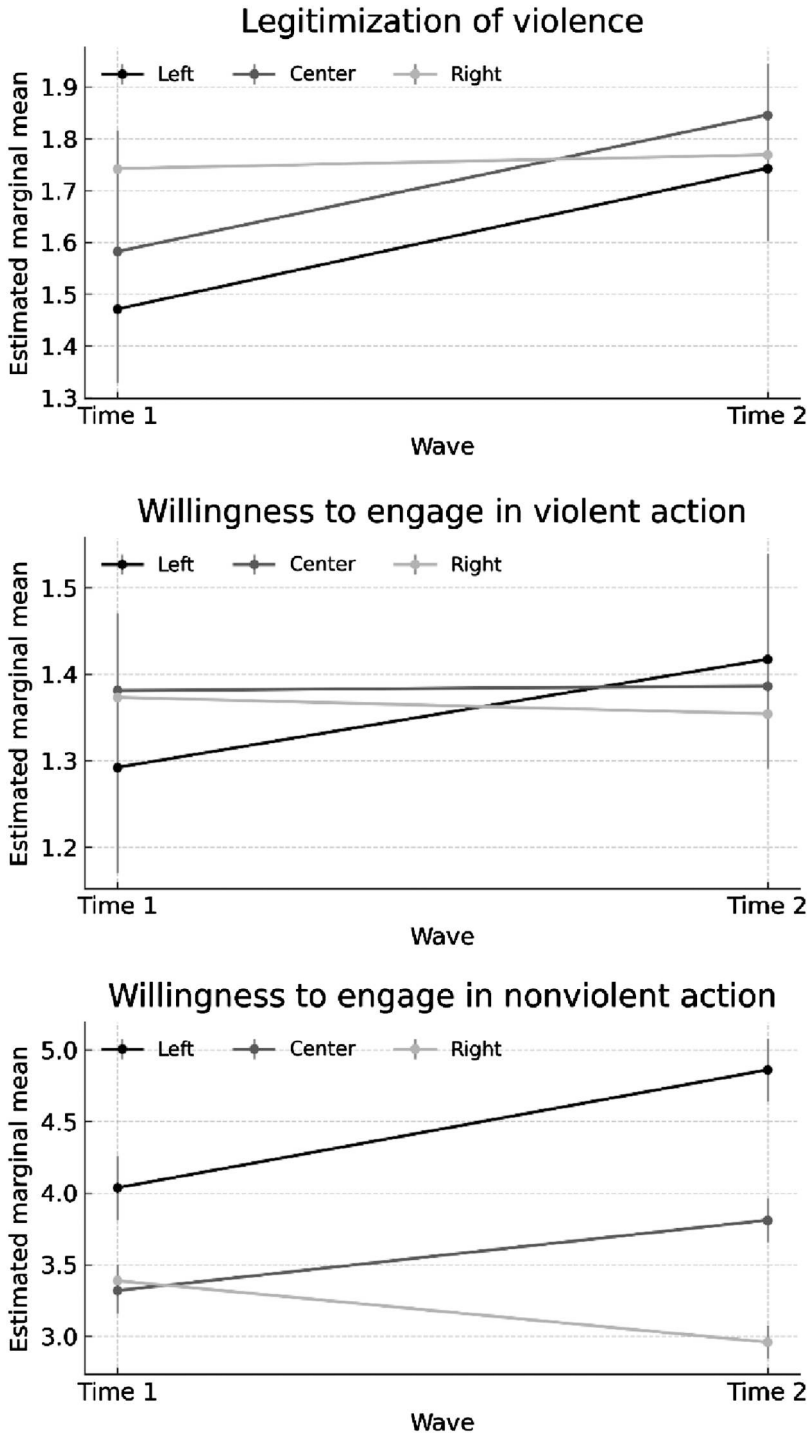


Figure 2. Interactive effects of the different samples (T1/T2), and political orientation (left/centre/right) on the dependent variables.

Model 4 ($N = 1618$), political orientation (1 = right, 7 = left) significantly predicted lower perceived democracy ($b = -0.787$, $SE = 0.028$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .334$). In turn, perceived democracy predicted lower legitimization of violence ($b = -0.083$, $SE = 0.017$, $p < .001$) and lower willingness to engage in nonviolent action ($b = -0.180$, $SE = 0.026$, $p < .001$). The indirect effects of political orientation through perceived democracy were significant for both legitimization of violence (ab = 0.065, Boot 95% CI [0.037, 0.093], completely standardized ab = 0.088) and nonviolent action (ab = 0.142, CI [0.098, 0.187], completely standardized ab = 0.112). Categorical contrasts using right-wing respondents as the reference group replicated these patterns: participants identifying as centrist or left-wing reported lower perceived democracy, and the corresponding indirect effects on both legitimization of violence and nonviolent action were positive and significant. Although these analyses are cross-sectional and specific to the reform context – thus precluding causal inference over time – they nonetheless suggest that ideological differences in both outcomes are statistically explained by subjective perceptions of the reform’s (un)democratic character.

Shift in legitimization of political violence and willingness to act violently as a function of nationality (H2b)

We first conducted a two-way ANOVA to examine the interactive effects of measurement wave (T1 versus T2) and nationality (Jewish/Arab) on *legitimization of political violence*. The analysis revealed a significant main effect for Time ($F(1,3961) = 29.18$, $p < .001$, $\eta p^2 = .01$), which was qualified by Nationality ($F(1,3961) = 7.18$, $p = .007$, $\eta p^2 = .01$). An examination of this Time x Nationality interaction revealed that legitimization of violence significantly increased between T1 and T2 among both Jewish (T1: $M[SD] = 1.65[1.13]$, T2: $M[SD] = 1.79[1.13]$; $p = .001$) and Arab respondents (T1: $M[SD] = 1.99[1.33]$, T2: $M[SD] = 2.37[1.44]$; $p < .001$), with this effect being significantly stronger among Arab respondents (Mean difference = .40, 95% CI of difference [.22, .57]) than among Jews (Mean difference = .13, 95% CI of difference [.05, .22]). Similar results were obtained when controlling for demographics (age, gender, income and education⁴⁰; see Online Appendix).

We then proceeded with a two-way ANOVA to examine the interactive effects of measurement wave (T1 versus T2) and nationality (Jewish/Arab respondents) on *personal willingness to engage in violent action*. The analysis revealed non-significant effects both for Time ($F(1,3961) = 3.38$, $p = .066$, $\eta p^2 = .001$) and for the Time x Nationality interaction ($F(1,3961) = 2.60$, $p = .107$, $\eta p^2 = .001$). The interactive effects and directions are specified in Figure 3. Similar results were obtained when controlling for demographics (age, gender, income and education; see Online Appendix).

To summarize, consistent with our hypotheses, we found that citizens’ legitimization of political violence, but not their personal willingness to engage in political violence, increases between T1 and T2 (H1). This increase in legitimization is particularly pronounced among Arab, compared to Jewish, citizens (H2b).

As an exploratory analysis, we also examined whether citizens’ personal willingness to engage in non-violent political action shifts between T1 and T2, and whether this shift is qualified by nationality. To that end, we conducted a two-way ANOVA for the interactive effects of measurement wave (T1 versus T2) and nationality (Jewish/Arab respondents) on *personal willingness to engage in non-violent action*. The analysis revealed non-significant effects both for Time ($F(1,3961) = 1.87$, $p = .171$, $\eta p^2 < .001$)

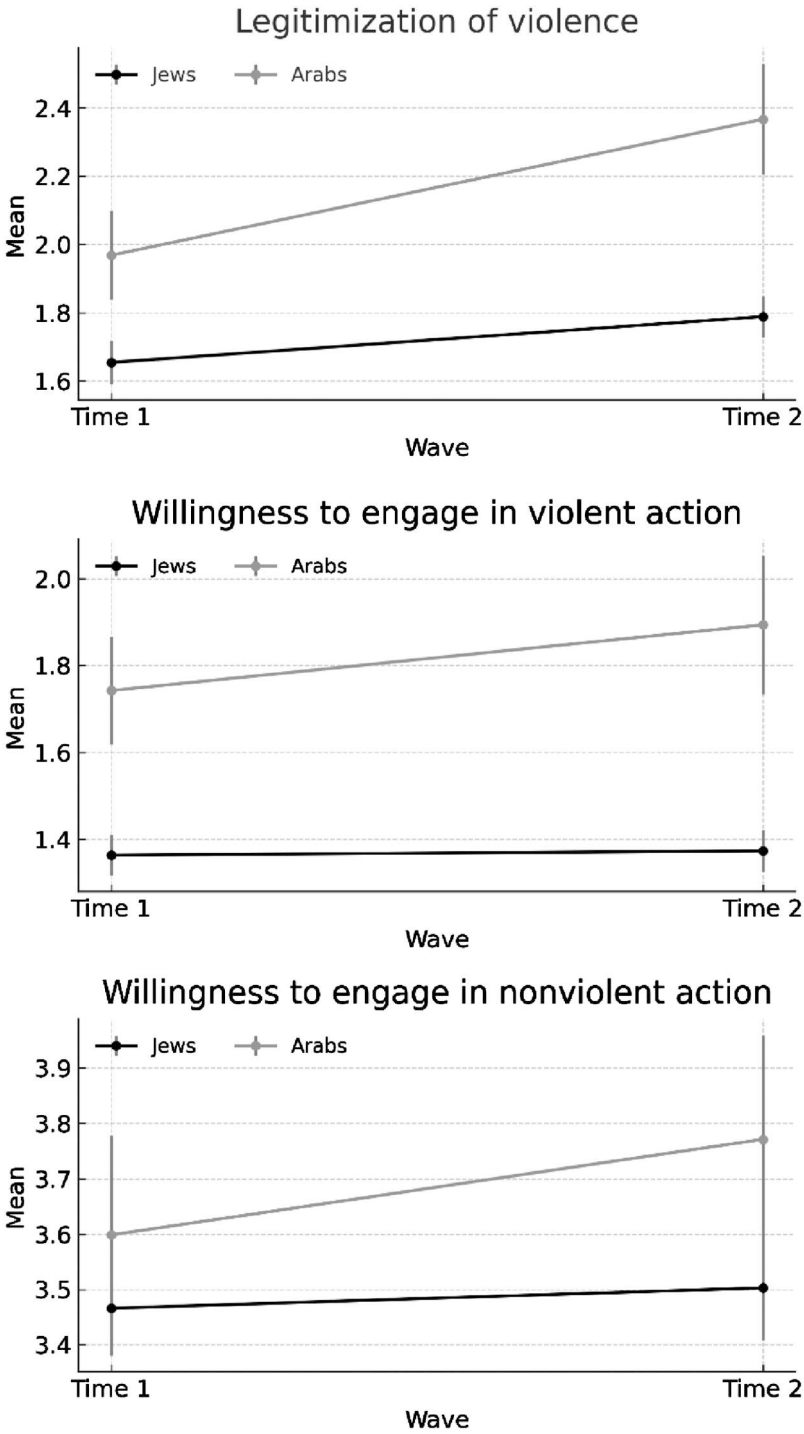


Figure 3. Interactive effects of the different samples (T1/T2), and nationality (Jewish/Arab respondents) on the dependent variables.

and for the Time x Nationality interaction ($F(1,3961) = .78, p = .376, \eta p^2 = .001$), on personal willingness to engage in non-violent action, similar to violent action.

Discussion

How does democratic erosion influence citizens' views of legitimate political action? Does it merely expand moral boundaries, increasing the legitimization of political violence, or does it also heighten individuals' willingness to personally engage in violence? These questions carry broad implications for social cohesion and resilience in contemporary democracies, especially amid the growing prevalence of backsliding across both newer and established regimes.

Our findings support H1: democratic backsliding was associated with greater legitimization of violence against public officials among Jewish and Arab Israelis alike. By contrast, we find no corresponding increase in respondents' self-reported willingness to engage in violence. This distinction advances the study of political violence by demonstrating that while backsliding reshapes moral boundaries, it does not necessarily escalate violent behaviour – at least in the short term. Such behavioural shifts may require more than institutional change alone, depending instead on interactions between predispositions and contextual factors such as social norms, group narratives, and histories of conflict.⁴¹ Future research along these lines should incorporate prior exposure to violence, a well-established predictor of psychological distress and authoritarian tendencies that may facilitate attitudinal and behavioural change.⁴² Such incorporation would potentially enable social and political scientists to better describe behavioural patterns during democratic backsliding, further promoting the theoretical landscape around this phenomenon.

Although behavioural intentions remained stable, it is important to stress that the rise in legitimization of violence is concerning. Normalization of such attitudes can foster extremism and lower barriers to violence, with potential long-term consequences for domestic and regional stability. As Armaly and Enders observe in the US context, “mass political violence may now be less abstract in the minds of ordinary people.”⁴³

A closer examination shows that the increase in legitimization of political violence was not uniform. From a political orientation perspective, it was more pronounced among Jewish-Israeli leftists and centrists than among rightists, consistent with H2a. This finding resonates well with contemporary theories on affective polarization and relative deprivation, both of which are characteristics of democratic backsliding processes.⁴⁴ The trajectory of this relationship starts with political grievances and senses of alienation, further translating into a crisis of legitimacy in the eyes of political minorities, eventually leading to the said increase in legitimization of violence among these factions.⁴⁵ Also, according to Walter,⁴⁶ shifts in interparty power relations between political camps – like the one taking place between the two measurement periods – significantly contribute to these senses, increasing the probability of supporting violence. These feelings among disenfranchised political minorities are further exacerbated by democratic backsliding processes as in addition to the erosion of democracy, they are also targeted by heavy populist discourse framing them as traitors and corrupt elites.⁴⁷

An alternative interpretation of our findings is that different conceptions of democracy shape responses to backsliding. According to this view, heterogeneity in public

reactions reflects divergent democratic attitudes: liberal versus majoritarian. Liberal democrats emphasize institutional checks and minority rights, whereas majoritarians prioritize majority rule and are more likely to align with leadership decisions even when institutional stability is strained. From this perspective, underlying beliefs, rather than positional gains or losses, explain why the right and left respond differently to democratic erosion.⁴⁸ In Israel, this account fits the long-standing mapping of liberal and majoritarian traditions onto Jewish left–right cleavages,⁴⁹ but it does not extend well to the Arab minority. Although Arab citizens have often aligned with the left due to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, their communities are generally traditional and cannot be neatly categorized as liberal in this sense.⁵⁰ Their political concerns centre on intragroup issues such as selective law enforcement and systemic discrimination, both of which worsened under the sixth Netanyahu government.⁵¹ These patterns suggest that perceived threat, rather than abstract democratic ideals, better accounts for the attitudinal shifts such as those measured in this study.

Further diving in, we see that support for political violence was higher among Arab than Jewish respondents, consistent with H2b. This finding aligns with research portraying ethnic and national minorities as primary victims of backsliding, both because majoritarian leaders exploit preexisting grievances⁵² and because minority marginalization deepens under populist rule.⁵³ It also echoes Walter's conclusion that political violence is more likely in highly diverse societies.⁵⁴ For Arab citizens of Israel, executive power concentration and judicial weakening were perceived as especially threatening, reinforcing their heightened legitimization of violence compared to other groups.

It is worth addressing the question of why the increase in the legitimization of violence among political minorities did not reach the scope of the legitimization of violence among ethnic minorities (in our case – Arab citizens of Israel). First, while the Arab public in Israel is mainly concerned with radical-right executives gaining excessive power, it is likely that the Jewish left and centre viewed the weakening of the Israeli Supreme Court as the main threat. In other words, the nature of the threat in the case of leftist and centrist Jews is more symbolic than realistic, targeting values and world-views more than basic needs for security (as is the case for Arabs). While symbolic threats may indeed cause considerable distress and increase legitimization of violence, it is not as strong a catalyst of such attitudes as actual, existential threats.⁵⁵ In addition, the immediacy of this threat is substantially lower, as the judicial reform required wide legislative and public consent (unlike the immediate power aggregation by rightist hardliners). This distinction by itself marks an important theoretical contribution, suggesting to distinguish between different subgroups and their reactions to democratic backsliding in ethnically diverse societies.

Importantly, although our findings show no increase in citizens' personal willingness to engage in political violence, we did observe a significant shift in some groups' willingness to engage in *non-violent* political action, such as protests. Specifically, we identified a between-wave increase in the willingness of Jewish-Israeli leftists and centrists to engage in non-violent political action, accompanied by a decrease in the willingness of Jewish-Israeli rightists to participate in such actions. This finding suggests that democratic erosion does not necessarily leave citizens' personal willingness to engage in political action unchanged; rather, it depends on the types of political actions involved. While the willingness to engage in violent political action remains stable and low at times of democratic backsliding, the willingness to engage in non-violent actions undergoes changes, and the direction of these changes is determined

by whether the political camp stands to gain or lose from the democratic erosion. Clearly, those who object to the change increase their willingness to engage in political actions such as protests, while those who support this change decrease their level of willingness for such actions. Indeed, we have seen that non-violent protests against the reform were much more salient than protests in support of the reform, confirming such assumptions.⁵⁶

Although this study focused on the Israeli context, our findings may be generalizable beyond this specific case. While providing solid findings that correspond with current trends in other regions, the Israeli case is indeed particular in a few ways that may affect the relationship measured in this article and, by extension, its generalizability.

While our findings align with patterns observed in other regions, the Israeli case has features that may affect the relationship we estimate and thus its generalizability. Most notably, Israel lacks a written, codified constitution, which may heighten perceived institutional fragility during periods of democratic erosion.⁵⁷ Where a written constitution clearly delineates the structure and norms of the regime, it can serve as a focal safeguard that constrains executive overreach and offers affected groups a legal anchor for contestation. In its absence, executive attempts to loosen checks and balances may be experienced as more threatening, potentially elevating support for political violence. In addition, Israel's proportional representation and the regime's ethnic foundations can shape elite signalling and identity-based threat perceptions, which may further condition the backsliding–violence link.⁵⁸ We therefore recommend comparative analyses that examine similar levels of democratic erosion across countries with and without a written constitution, and across different party-system and identity configurations, for example Israel and Poland, or the United Kingdom and Germany.

Another particularity that distinguishes the Israeli case from others is its specific security situation, i.e. being engaged in a protracted conflict for over five decades, allegedly making the Israeli public more prone to normalizing violence. The basic logic underlying this assumption is that during protracted conflicts, the public changes its normative landscape due to individual- and social-level processes (e.g. post-traumatic exposure to violence, political polarization, etc.), potentially influencing public views of legitimate political action, among other constructs. While living under protracted conflicts may indeed increase the level of public support for political violence⁵⁹, we claim that it should be regarded as the contextual framework inside which populist claims and public views are shaped, instead of an independent, detached driver of public sentiment. Putting it otherwise, separating the Israeli Palestinian conflict from our model would be similar to measure the effect of democratic backsliding on public sentiment in Western Europe and the United States without taking immigration into account.⁶⁰

While our analysis necessarily reflects the Israeli case, its implications extend well beyond it. Similar dynamics of democratic backsliding have unfolded across Eastern Europe and Latin America,⁶¹ as well as in established Western democracies. The United States, for example, has combined elite incitement to political violence⁶² with unprecedented levels of affective polarization⁶³ trends mirrored in countries such as the United Kingdom, Portugal, Austria, Spain,⁶⁴ and more recently Germany.⁶⁵ Although the specific institutional contexts differ, the societal effects are strikingly similar: intensified polarization, delegitimization of political rivals, and a widening moral space for violence.

This study contributes to democratization theory by reframing how democratic backsliding affects political violence. Rather than assuming a direct escalation from institutional erosion to violent behaviour, we show a two-stage process: backsliding first reshapes the moral boundaries of violence, expanding its legitimization without immediately increasing behavioural intentions. We also identify an asymmetrical mechanism in which political minorities respond primarily to symbolic threats, while ethnic minorities respond to existential ones. Together, these insights advance theory by clarifying both the sequencing and distribution of violence-related attitudes under democratic erosion, highlighting how institutional decline reverberates through society not only by undermining trust but also by redefining the moral landscape of political action.

In sum, the case of Israel illustrates more general patterns of how democratic backsliding reshapes public attitudes towards violence, offering broader lessons for both emerging and established democracies confronting similar challenges. These findings remind us that the erosion of institutions does not only weaken checks and balances at the elite level. It also recalibrates the moral boundaries of ordinary citizens. Recognizing this shift is essential for understanding how fragile democracies slide into deeper crisis, and how resilient ones might still be safeguarded.

Notes

1. Nord et al., *25 Years of Autocratization*; Freedom House, *Freedom in the World*, 2024, 30.
2. Bermeo, "On Democratic Backsliding," 5–6; Druckman, "How to Measure Democratic Backsliding," 4–5; Elad-Strenger, Hirsch-Hoefler and Ben-Shitrit, "Mainstreaming Democratic Backsliding," 1400; Haggard and Kaufman, *Democratic Regress in the Contemporary World*, 1–6.
3. Gidengil, Stolle and Bergeron-Boutin, "The Partisan Nature of Support for Democratic Backsliding"; Haggard and Kaufman, *Democratic Regress in the Contemporary World*, 39–56; Meyerrose, "Building Strong Executive and Weak Institutions," 308–10; Walter, *How Civil Wars Start*.
4. Mudde, *The Far Right is Today*; Norris and Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash*.
5. Mechkova, Lührmann and Lindberg, "How Much Democratic Backsliding?"; Waldner and Lust, "Unwelcome Change"; Gidron et al., "Why Masses Support Democratic Backsliding?"; Levitsky and Ziblatt, "How Democracies Die"; Walter, *How Civil Wars Start*."
6. Tilly, *The Politics of Collective Violence*; McCoy and Sommer, "Pernicious Polarization and How It Harms Democracies."
7. Kalmoe and Mason, "Radical American Partisanship"; Simi et al., "Rising Threats to Public Officials."
8. Anderson and Huesman, "Human Aggression: A Socio-Cognitive View," 298.
9. Ben-Shitrit, Hirsch-Hoefler and Elad-Strenger, "Gender Differences in Support for Direct"; Feierabend, Feierabend and Gurr, *Anger, Violence and Politics*.
10. Elad-Strenger et al., "Explaining Public Support for Violence," 418–20; Pedhazur, Hasisi and Brichta, "New Proposed Model for Political Violence," 18–20; Sprinzak, "The Process of Delegitimation"; Sprinzak, "Right-Wing Terrorism in a Comparative Perspective," 18–21; Walter, *How Civil Wars Start*.
11. Abels et al., "Dodging the Autocratic Bullet," 18–19, Armaly and Enders, "Who Supports Political Violence," 428–9.
12. Graham and Svobik, "Democracy in America?"; Haggard and Kaufman, *Democratic Regress in the Contemporary World*, 6.
13. Meyerrose, "Building Strong Executive and Weak Institutions," 311–14.
14. Haggard and Kaufman, *Democratic Regress in the Contemporary World*, 6.
15. Berntzen et al., "Consequences of Affective Polarization," 932; Orian-Harel et al., "Examining Real-World Legitimization," 310–11.

16. Belanger et al., "Supporting Political Violence," 1188–90; Gotzsche-Astrup, "Dark Triad, Partisanship and Violent Intentions," 173; Nai and Young, "They Choose Violence," 230.
17. Westwood, "Current Research Overstates American Support."
18. Armaly and Enders, "Who Supports Political Violence."
19. Ajzen, *The Theory of Planned Behavior*, 1114–15.
20. Palacios, "Democratic Backsliding and Populism," 5–6; Sprinzak, "The Process of Delegitimation"; Sprinzak, "Right-Wing Terrorism in a Comparative Perspective"; Walter, *How Civil Wars Start*.
21. Craig, Rucker and Richeson, "The Pitfalls and Promise," 189–90; Druckman and Shafranek, "The Intersection of Racial and Partisan," 1603–5.
22. Walter, *How Civil Wars Start*.
23. Sprinzak, "Rational Fanatics"; Sprinzak, "Right-Wing Terrorism in a Comparative."
24. Levitsky and Ziblatt, "How Democracies Die," 66.
25. Armaly and Enders, "Who Supports Political Violence," 429; Armaly, Buckley and Enders, "Christian Nationalism and Political Violence," 938–9; Haggard and Kaufman, *Democratic Regress in the Contemporary World*, 16.
26. Walter, *How Civil Wars Start*.
27. Craig, Rucker and Richson, "The Pitfalls and Promise of Increasing Racial Diversity"; Druckman and Shafranek, "The Intersection of Racial and Partisan Discrimination"; Elad-Strenger et al., "Explaining Public Support for Violence Against Politicians"; Hirsch-Hoefler et al., "Conflict Will Harden Your Heart."
28. Oder, "Turkey's Democratic Erosion," 480–1; Vachudova, "Ethnopolitism and Democratic Backsliding," 329–30.
29. Brown, "Crisis and Ethnicity"; Carment, "Exploiting Ethnicity"; Hassan, *Identities, Nationalism, and the State*.
30. Ariely, "The Democratic Backsliding Debate"; Roznai and Cohen, "Populist Constitutionalism."
31. "Smotrich Handed Sweeping Powers over West Bank, Control over Settlement Planning" (Times of Israel, 23/02/2023); "Israel OKs Ben-Gvir's 'National Guard' but Hedges on His Powers" (Reuters, 03/04/2023).
32. Roznai, Dixon and Landau, "Judicial Reform or Abusive Constitutionalism," 297–301.
33. Gidron et al., "Why Masses Support Democratic," 1–3.
34. Bermeo, "On Democratic Backsliding"; Druckman, "How to Measure Democratic Backsliding"; Haggard and Kaufman, *Democratic Regress in the Contemporary World*.
35. Laebens, "Beyond Democratic Backsliding," 20–1; Khaitan, *Executive Aggrandizement in Established Democracies*, 346–50.
36. Oshri, Yair and Huddy, "The Importance of Attachment to an Ideological Group," 1165–7.
37. Peleg and Waxman, *Israel's Palestinians*; Smooha, "Arab-Jewish Relations in Israel."
38. The questionnaires were administered as part of a larger project and included additional measures unrelated to the present research.
39. Chen, "Sensitivity of Goodness of Fit Indices."
40. Oshri, Yair and Huddy, "The Importance of Attachment to an Ideological Group," 1165–7.
41. Ajzen, *Theory of Planned Behavior*; Belanger et al., "Supporting Political Violence"; Gotzsche-Astrup, "Dark Triad, Partisanship and Violent Intentions in the United States."
42. Canetti-Nisim et al., "A New Stress-Based Model of Political Extremism," 374–80; Hobfoll et al., "The Association of Exposure," 14–18; Elad-Strenger et al., "Explaining Public Support," 418–20; Hirsch-Hoefler et al., "Conflict will Harden your Heart," 846–8.
43. Armaly and Enders, "Who Supports Political Violence," 428.
44. Bermeo, "On Democratic Backsliding"; Levitsky and Ziblatt, "How Democracies Die."
45. Walter, *How Civil Wars Start*; Pedhazur, Hasisi and Brichta, "A Proposed Model for Explaining."
46. Walter, *How Civil Wars Start*.
47. Kalmoe and Mason, "Radical American Partisanship"; Kim, "The Effects of Partisan Elites' Violent"; Zeitzoff, *Nasty Politics*.
48. Ariely, "The Democratic Backsliding Debate," 67; Gidron et al., "Why Masses Support Democratic Backsliding," 4–5; Grossman et al., "The Majoritarian Threat to Liberal Democracy."
49. Gidron, "Why Israeli Democracy is in Crisis"; Roznai, "Israeli – a Crisis."

50. Smootha, "Arab-Jewish Relations in Israel."
51. Ron and Khalaily, "The Judicial Revolution and Arab Society in Israel," Israel Democracy Institute (<https://en.idi.org.il/articles/48240>).
52. Brown, "Crisis and Ethnicity."
53. Kim, "The Effects of Partisan Elites' Violent"; Zeitzoff, *Nasty Politics*.
54. Walter, *How Civil Wars Start*.
55. Hirschberger et al., "How is Existential Threat."
56. Israel Policy Forum, "Majoritarian Israelis, Liberal Americans."
57. Landau, "The Importance of Constitution-Making," 611; Bulmer, "What is a Constitution? Principles and Concepts."
58. Alonso and Ruiz-Rufino, "Political Representation and Ethnic Conflicts"; Theuerkauf, "Institutional Design and Ethnic Violence."
59. Elad-Strenger et al., "Explaining Public Support for Violence"; Canetti et al., "A New Stress-Based Model"; Hirsch-Hoefler et al., "Conflict Will Harden Your Heart."
60. Albertson and Gadarian, "Anxious Politics"; Norris, "Is Western Democracy Backsliding?"
61. Freidenberg, "Democracy in Latin America," 91–9; Oder, "Turkey's Democratic Erosion"; Anna Vachudova, "Ethnopolitism and Democratic Backsliding," 327–9.
62. Kalmoe, "Fueling the Fire," 546–7; Kalmoe and Mason, "Radical American Partisanship"; Kim, "The Effects of Partisan Elites' Violent"; Zeitzoff, *Nasty Politics*, 14–17.
63. Druckman and Levy, "Affective Polarization in the American Public," 2–4; Iyengar et al., "The Origins and Consequences," 130–1.
64. Nord et al., *25 Years of Autocratization*.
65. "Germany's Defense of Democracy – Democratic Erosion," April 20, 2025. <https://democratic-erosion.org/2025/04/20/germanys-defense-of-democracy/>.

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