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**Political identification of youth - delineating differences between left and right in Israel**

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## **Political Identification of Youth – Delineating Differences between Left and Right in Israel**

Politische Orientierung Jugendlicher – Unterschiede zwischen  
Links und Rechts ins Israel

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*The distinction between political left and right has been blurred through the years in western countries and probably more so in Israel. Using a national random sample of high school students, this study is an investigation of which political attitudes distinguish between right and left in Israel. In addition, the influence of religiosity and socioeconomic status on political identification was explored.*

*The findings show that right and left attitudes are demonstrated in diametrically opposite ways with reference the extent of land compromises that should be made with the Arab countries. The more positively one scores on religiosity scale the stronger the identification with the right. On the other hand, despite the leftis claim of being pro labor and the champion of the working classes, it appears that the lower the socio-economic status the stronger the identification with the right rather than, as might have been expected, the left. The implication of the findings are discussed.*

*Der Unterschied zwischen politisch linken und politisch rechten Orientierungen ist in den meisten westlichen Ländern, besonders in Israel, in den letzten Jahren unklar geworden. In dieser Studie werden auf der Basis einer Zufallsstichprobe von Schülerinnen und Schülern der Oberstufe politische Einstellungsunterschiede herausgearbeitet. Zusätzlich wird der Einfluss religiöser Orientierungen und der sozioökonomische Status auf die politische Orientierung in Israel untersucht. Ergebnisse zeigen, dass Unterschiede zwischen linken und rechten Einstellungen vor allem Blick auf territoriale Kompromisse gegenüber den arabischen Ländern bestehen. Auch Religiosität hat einen starken Einfluss, indem sie direkt mit der politischen Rechtsorientierung zusammenhängt. Je niedriger der sozioökonomische Status, desto stärker ist die Identifizierung mit der politischen Rechten. Diese Tendenz ist auffällig, weil die politische Linke sich intensiv um die Zustimmung von sozial benachteiligten Gruppen bemüht. Die Implikationen der Untersuchungsergebnisse werden ausführlich diskutiert.*

### **Left and Right in Israel**

The concepts of left and right, liberal and conservative are widely used to denote individuals' political orientations. Over the years the meaning of these terms has become confusing when examining the political platform of each political camp. In the first part of this paper we place in historical context social changes in the Israeli society that have brought about a convergence of ideas in the two major opposing political camps and look at what remains of the concepts of left and right. Next, we empirically study how adolescents in Israel today perceive these

concepts. Finally we show how religiosity, socio-economic status, and altruistic orientation are associated with attitudes that support the left and right.

It might be of interest to notice that this study is conducted in a broader research context of a national youth survey which is conducted by the Minerva Center for Youth Studies in Israel. The study will enable us, in the future, to compare, among other things, the changes in the attitudes of young people concerning political issues, their religious orientation and attitudes toward peace in the light of important political changes that have been taking place in the country such as government change, and progress in the peace process.

From the time that the state of Israel was established until the mid 70s, the concept of left and right had connotations and social meaning that were compatible with what used to be assumed when referring to political left and right in all western democracies.

The Israeli left was socialist by ideology, a devout supporter of trade unions, and committed to a socialist life style. For many years the political elite was drafted from the kibbutz movement. The medical system was inexpensive and accessible to all through insurance plans that had been subsidized by the different labor governments since the establishment of the state until 1977 (Alkana, 1991; Diskin, 1988; Etzioni-Halevy, 1997; Shapiro, 1996; Shiloah, 1991; Ventora & Shamir, 1991; Yatziv 1979).

The economic development was based on heavy state intervention. Most of the major industrial and service sectors had been monopolistic and were state owned. The major industries were established by state investments or incentives for partnership with private entrepreneurs. Either way the state maintained its control by being the major share holder and through regulatory legislation in favor of government owned or supported ventures. Undoubtedly this came at a heavy cost with regard to efficiency, but at the same time unemployment was kept relatively low and balance sheet considerations were not driving the economic decisions.

Furthermore, for many years the state of Israel managed to keep the gap between rich and poor very narrow through progressive high taxation. Also the prices were kept depressed due to heavy subsidies for essential consumer goods such as: food (basic products), utilities (electricity and water), transportation, education, and health. That is part of a social ideology that strove for the consolidation of a welfare state and the realization of the belief in social equality. This put the government in a very strong parenting position, and its involvement in every sphere of life was very noticeable. The toll has been being governed by the stifling tyranny of the bureaucrats in addition to professional incompetence and inefficiency (Alkana, 1991; Yatziv 1979).

A sudden economic boom, following the Six day War, brought about a rapid growth of the private sector because the public sector was unable to fulfill the needs of the expanding economy. Also, foreign investors realized that governmental controls were too limiting and demanded a hands off policy with less bureaucratic intervention. In 1977, there was a dramatic change in government in Israel when the leading party of 30 years, the labor party, lost the elections. Since then, the Likud, which is perceived predominantly as national democratic in its political orientation and liberal in its economic orientation (liberalization over foreign currency control as an example) has been (with a 4 year

intermission) a dominant party in Israeli politics. The new trend can be seen in: sales of government companies, monetary tax controls, and a shift from government ownership to private and public ownership of major industries and services, such as telecommunication and the postal office (Diskin, 1988; Etzioni-Halevy, 1997; Shapiro 1996; Ventora & Shamir, 1991).

Icons that were symbols of the old ideology and bastions of the previous elite were demolished. There were massive attacks on the Kibbutz movement that tried to portray the kibbutz members as unproductive, lazy and hedonistic (Kanzler, 1984). This attempt to destroy national myths was made to establish a new social and economic order, that is, a set of new priorities and a new social and economic agenda.

The irony, of course, is that the social democratic values of the Labor party had been on the decline for a decade before the Likud came to power, and the issue of economic ideology apparently was hardly a divisive issue between the two political blocks. Clearly there is a convergence toward the center, which suggests a moderate form of Capitalism with some social responsibility still being expected of the state. However the full fledged welfare state is quickly becoming a fading dream for those who still see in the state an entity that ought to bring about social equality, job opportunities, and ensure a minimal standard of living and care.

Although the content changes, the labels remain. The terms Left and Right in Israel are associated with the two big parties and their satellites but, now, as a political rather than a socio ideological concept. While, the left in Israel presents itself as social democratic in its social and economic outlook, the Likud is perceived as more conservative in its social views and prefers minimization of state intervention as a rule. However these differences are nuances rather than clear splits between competing ideologies (Goldberg 1992).

On the other hand, the political ideology of the right vs. the left has been very clear and untainted. The differences are mostly manifested in a hard line the right takes against the Palestinians and the whole peace process, while the left is considered more liberal, more willing to give up and give back land to the Palestinians (Diskin, 1980; Doron, 1996; Etzioni-Halevi & Shapiro, 1977; Gilon, 1990; Golan, 1984; Goldberg, 1992; Shamir, 1986a; Sprinzak, 1995; Talmod, 1985; Ventora & Shamir, 1991).

Even before the reconciliation process started in Oslo in 1993, the difference between the Israeli right and left has been that the right underlined the right of Jews to settle in all the area west of the Jordan river. They refused to accept and recognize the rights of Palestinians to a state or to a political entity that is distinguished as separate from Israel. The left, on the other hand, exhibited a variety of views all of which acknowledged the existence of a Palestinian people, and some also supported the Palestinian expectations that at the end of the process there would be a Palestinian state (Goldberg 1992; Harkabi, 1994; Kanzler, 1984; Peri & Goldberg, 1985).

Now that there is already wide acceptance, in both camps, of the principles of the Oslo agreement, it appears that the differences focus on minute issues that have more to do with form than with substance. The right exhibits less enthusiasm and trust towards the Palestinian counterparts and expresses it by being

tough negotiators and stopping the process at any excuse. The left, on the other hand, is supportive of developing more trust and good will between the two sides and is more optimistic about the possibility of a successful completion of the process (Harkabi, 1994). The difference today between the two main parties, Labor and Likud, however, is more semantic than substantive. It is clear to everyone that a Palestinian state is an unavoidable development, and it is the vision of the future and the shape of that state that might still separate the left from the right.

Our study tries to identify what differentiates between left and right, and what constitutes left as opposed to right. In addition we wanted to determine whether religiosity and socio economic status influence the political identification of adolescents. The logic in looking for such connection is not unique to Israel. In many countries in the western world poverty and right wing orientation has been almost an unavoidable tie. While traditionally socialists and liberals were drawn from the more privileged and educated social strata, the unemployed, the poor and those generally ranked low on the socio- economic scale have been the source for mobilization for the ultra right, conservative and nationalistic movements, recent examples of it are seen today in England, France Germany and the US. American studies have shown that the influence of the christian right is higher among the elderly, the less educated, and the economically insecure. They tend to vote for the Republican party (Regnerus, M.D, et al., 1999). Such affiliation which also draws on feelings of xenophobia gives a sense of belonging and channels the feelings of frustration into political radicalism.

In Israel much of the support for the right comes from such elements who generally are less educated, have lower income, and many reside in the periphery. Much of their political conviction is associated with feelings of hostility and suspicion against the Arabs and any reconciliation attempt between Jews and Arabs. Religiosity ties into it in a very peculiar way. On the one hand many of the lower class Jews are of a religious-traditional background. In addition, the political struggle between Jews and Palestinians has taken a religious twist. The Israeli ultra right is associated with the nationalist religious elements who considered the settlement of the whole of Palestine as a religious commandment. They have become the pushing force in the previous right wing government in refusing to make any progress in the peace process and were the catalyst in heightening internal conflicts over removal of settlements within the Israeli public. The fact that religiosity is associated with nationalism and right wing politics makes the association also of low socio-economic status almost a default option.

## **Data and Methods**

A stratified random sample of 360 classes in 150 schools all over Israel was drawn from a list of all 9-12 grades with each class level representing a strata, in academic schools under the supervision of the ministry of education. The list did not include the parochial schools of the ultra orthodox sector and the vocational schools. Data, for the original and comprehensive study, were collected in 1997 by asking all students in each class to fill out a questionnaire. Of the 12,343 students sampled, 395 returned questionnaires that were unreliable because of omitted or inconsistent responses and needed to be discarded. The group that was discarded did not show unique characteristics and was similar in its demographic characteristics to the selected sample. However, due to the

method of data collection, that will be described next, the sample that was relevant for our analysis shrunk by close to 50%.

The method used to collect the data was a split half design. Two versions of the questionnaire were designed, and they were distributed at random in the various classes. There was a core of questions that appeared in both versions, but to keep the questionnaire manageable, and thus as short as possible, each of the split halves included also different questions in addition to the core questions that were identical. In this particular study the sample consists of only 6017 respondents (about half of the total study population), those who were given one of the split halves which included questionnaires that focused, among other things, on political attitudes.

The questionnaire was very structured and was administered by trained university students who were ready to answer any questions that were raised.

Dependent variables: First we wanted to identify the characteristics of “left” and “right” in Israel. Leftist orientation was determined according to the answer to the following items: on a scale of 1-5, to what degree do you identify with the ideas of the Labor party; to what degree do you identify with the ideas of the parties on the left spectrum of the political scene. In addition questions were asked about the peace process with the Palestinians. A strong support was coded 4 and disagreement was coded 1. The questions were: how do you feel about allowing the Palestinians to establish an independent state; do you agree that the peace process should continue even though terrorist activities continue; how much should Israel give up in the Golan for peace with Syria; to what extent is it necessary to evacuate settlements in the West Bank; if there is peace, is there a possibility that East Jerusalem will be under Palestinian control; if the government decides to evacuate settlements should the settlers cooperate with the government with no resistance.

All these variables were subjected to a confirmatory factor analysis, all the variables had a high factor loading and the scale had high reliability score ( $\alpha=.84$ ).

Table 1: Identification with the Left – a component matrix

variables	factor loading
identify with labor	.770
identify with left wing ideology	.804
agree to a Palestinian independent state	.709
make concessions in the Golan for peace with Syria	.786
if necessary for peace, remove settlements in the west bank	.732
willing to divide Jerusalem for the sake of peace	.573
continue the peace process despite terrorist attacks	.610
if settlements are removed the settlers should not resist	.503

To identify the Israeli Right we asked the following questions: to what degree do you identify with the ideology of the Likud party; to what extent do you identify with the ideology of the right wing parties; to what extent do you identify with the ideology of the religious parties; to what extent do you identify with the ideology of the extreme right. In addition the same questions regarding peace policy that were asked of the left were also asked of the right, however the direction of the coding was changed so that 4 was strongly disagree, and 1 strongly agree.

The confirmatory factor analysis showed that those with a positive loading on identification with the right also had positive loading on the various variables that check their objection to concessions and compromise. The scale showed high reliability as well ( $\alpha=.83$ ). Thus we can suggest that we have not only identified supporters of left and right parties, but also the substantive divisive line in the Israeli politics.

Table 2: Identification with the Right – a component matrix

variables	factor loading
identify with the Likud party	.782
identifies with the Israeli right	.793
identifies with clerical parties	.692
identifies with extreme right groups	.640
opposing to allow a Palestinian state	.656
against concessions in the Golan	.718
opposing any removal of settlements	.716
Jerusalem will not be divided	.516
stop peace process if terrorist activities occur	.594
settlers should oppose actively to removal	.512

Independent variables: Father's education, was measured by years of schooling. Family income was measured by a self evaluation of whether one is family income is above, at, or below the national mean income. In addition, we have created three composite variables through factor analysis, one was religiosity was composed of 8 items: to what extent does prayer affect things, to what extent can the spirit of a "holy man" be effective also after his death. Can a contemporary "holy man" help other people; how probable is the coming of the messiah in your life time; is it probable that the messiah will come in the distant future; how likely is it that, in the future, you will study in a religious institution or a Yeshiva. The alpha reliability of the scale was .90. Satisfaction

with the government functioning consisted of 2 questions: how satisfied are you with the functioning of the parliament, and of the government of Israel ( $\alpha=.61$ ). Altruism was composed of 6 items checking the willingness of a person to contribute to society; to what extent is it important to you to be an honest person, a law abiding citizen, loyal to your friends, to empathize with others, and to contribute to the society you live in, ( $\alpha=.79$ ).

## Findings

### *Sample characteristics*

Each class-strata was differentially represented, grade 9 constituted 24.7% of the sample, grade 10, 26.5%, grade 11- 27.1% and grade 12- 20.9%. The sample consisted of 45% boys and 55% girls. The majority of the students (83.2%) were Jewish and the rest Arabs, however this particular analysis pertains only to the Jewish population. The family income had an interesting distribution, 41.6% claimed that their family income corresponds to the national average and 47.8% said that their family income was above average, out of them 17.6 said that it was much above average. Only 10.7% reported below average income. The level of schooling for the parents was above 12 years for both fathers and mothers, and 12% identified themselves as religious, 51% as traditional and 37% as secular. The data show that in our sample the percentage of youth identifying with the right and the left is very similar, 47% and 53% respectively. At the moment it seems that although the youth participating in the survey have not reached the voting age, their political preferences in general exhibit the same pattern that emerged in the general elections in Israel of May 1999.

### *Multivariate Analysis*

Next we tried to explore what predicts the belonging to the Israeli left or to the right. For that purpose we used a multiple regression analysis. Looking at what is related to the identification with the left, as Table 3 suggests, all 5 independent variables were statistically significant. However, only religiosity and satisfaction with government had a high beta and these variables had a negative sign which means, that religiosity is negatively associated with identification with the left, and apparently those associated with the left do not show much appreciation for the functioning of the government.

An interesting finding was the relationship between socio-economic status and identification with the left. The effect of father's education and income was small but positive and statistically significant, indicating that the higher the socio-economic status the higher the identification with the left. In sum, it appears that adolescents expressing identification with the left are from relatively wealthier and more secular families, are less satisfied with government action, and believe that individuals should contribute to their society.

Looking at the regression when the dependent variable is identification with the right shows the opposite picture. The religiosity and satisfaction with government had a positive value and they were the most significant variables ( $\beta = .46$ , and  $.36$  respectively). The effect of socio-economic status was negative. Father's education and family income was negatively related to identification with

the right. This was also the case with the altruism variable. Both models account for considerable variance (see Table 3).

Table 3: Multiple Regression for Left and Right

variables	Dependent variable: Left			Dependent variable: Right		
	B	Std. Error	$\beta$	B	Std. Error	$\beta$
Constant	-.655			.420		
Altruism	.0938***	.015	.089	-.0845***	.014	-.081
Religiosity	-.417***	.016	-.411	.466***	.015	.462
family income	.0862***	.015	.079	-.0453***	.014	-.042
satisf. With government	-.315***	.015	-.311	.364***	.014	.361
father's educ.	.0207***	.004	.068	-.0165***	.004	-.054
R <sup>2</sup>	.395			.482		

P < 0.001\*\*\*    P < 0.01\*\*    P < 0.05\*

The results of the regression analysis clearly indicate that religiosity is a very important component in the political identification of adolescents. Therefore, we were interested in exploring what variables predict a religious orientation. There was no point in including the effect of political participation because this variable alone was closely related to religiosity, as we learned from the effects of religiosity on political participation (see Table 3) and its inclusion would make the argument more statistically significant but circular. Thus, the independent variables included altruism, family income, and father's education and ethnic origin (Sephardic or non-Sephardic). The results in Table 4

Table 4: Multiple Regression effect of on Religiosity

variables	B	Std. Error	$\beta$
Constant	1.070	.091	
Altruism	.219*	.016	.210
family income	-.104*	.017	-.097
satisf. With government	.282*	.015	.281
father's educ.	-.056*	.005	-.183
Sephardic	.426*	.037	.181
adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.266		

\* P < 0.001

show that the total explained variance is close to 27 percent ( $R^2=.27$ ) (it would have been .39 and .43 if we had also included the identification with the left and right ideologies, respectfully). However, interesting trends are revealed. Religiosity was positively associated with satisfaction with government functioning, with being of Sephardic descent, and with having altruistic feelings. On the other hand, religiosity is negatively associated with family income and father's education. This means that religiosity is related to lower SES.

## Discussion

From the way the variables "identification with the right" and "identification with the left" were constructed through factor analysis it is clear that two diametrically opposite ideologies are represented. What characterizes the right? Besides claiming the identification with certain right parties, it also was associated with: opposition to establishing a Palestinian state, objection to removing Jewish settlements in the West Bank, opposition to the division of Jerusalem, opposition to concessions in the Golan Heights, condition the continuation of the peace process to stopping terrorist activities, and justification of active resistance to any attempt to remove settlers from the West Bank. All in all, the findings draw a very stereotypical picture of the right which fits much more the extreme right, and also perhaps the slogans of the more moderate right. In reality, there is a much more pragmatic and sober approach that recognizes the limitations and political reality. Thus, the need for territorial concessions in the west Bank and the Golan are realized but are not manifested formally in the political platform of the right wing leading party. Actually many of the declarations made, especially during the election campaign (and this paper has been written a few weeks before the general elections of 1999 so that the rhetoric was very obvious) are more radical and non-compromising than the actual policies of the current right wing government that is about to step down following the 1999 election results. Furthermore, while making slogans and formal declarations, the Likud party leaders also point out that the next government, if they win the elections, will be a coalition government with the Labor and the new Center party. Such a statement can only mean moderation and willingness to continue the peace process. This really means, and it is very transparent in the Israeli political context, willingness to compromise over land issues and perhaps even a realization that a Palestinian state is an inevitable result of the process.

On the other hand, identification with the left entails a very dovish approach that includes an acceptance of a Palestinian state, compromises in the Golan, willingness to use force to remove settlers from the West Bank, separating terrorism and bombing from the peace process, and full commitment to the continuation of the peace process almost at any cost. In addition there is an agreement among the left respondents that for the sake of peace, it is conceivable that Jerusalem could be divided. This statement is in contradiction with all official statements that the Labor party has been making. At the leadership level there is a declared national consensus that Jerusalem will never be divided again, but the reality and attitudes of the supporters of the left seem to be more pragmatic and to deviate from the formal party line. Generalizing from the findings, one can conclude that although the leaders of the Likud today use rhetoric that might be interpreted as less extreme, their constituents are more extreme in

their expressed attitudes. We tend to attach special meaning to this because the survey was done long before the election and its extremist rhetoric even started, therefore, the responses are even more credible. The left, on the other hand, is more moderate and willing to compromise than the formal position adopted by the Labor party leadership. Hence although there is some convergence in the leadership positions, the gap is wide among the grass roots supporters of each side.

Our findings also suggest that the left and right division is identified along two axes, the religious and the socio-economic. Religiosity has been the variable that explains the most variance of party identification in the right and the left. And inversely, the single most significant variable to account for religiosity has been party identification. The right is positively and the left is negatively associated with religiosity. This finding brings us back to the traditional differences between the left and right parties in Israel in the early years of statehood. The left was traditionally socialist, cosmopolitan, and secular. The early elite of the Labor party were Kibbutz members who were totally secular and demonstratively anti-religious. They created new meanings for traditional holidays and opposed almost any external symbol of Jewish religiosity. The right, on the other hand, in addition to its nationalistic orientation was never anti-religious, and many of its supporters were very traditional if not religious in orientation (Arian 1997, Goldberg 1992).

As the political divisions crystallized along the lines of relationships with the Palestinians and the attitudes toward the peace process, the right aligned itself along extreme nationalistic lines, which were in high concordance with religious nationalistic views. From here it was only a short way to become allies also with other non-Zionist religious groups who perceived the left as secular and hostile to religion and the right, especially the Likud, as a political element that is more favorable to it. Hence the political alliance between the right and its nationalistic agenda with the religious parties (nationalistic and non-Zionist alike).

Although the convergence between right and left on economic issues and the role of the state has minimized significantly, it is still a drum to beat during election campaigns, but the reality is that changes in governments produce minimal policy changes, and the changes are mostly a result of the government caving in to demands by various supporting sectors rather than due to ideologically driven policy.

From the regression designed to explain political identification we see that the two socio-economic variables that associate with political identification, i.e., family income, and father's education, are negatively associated with identification with the right and positively associated with identification with the left. This all means that the lower the family income and the lower the father's education, the stronger the identification with the right. Stronger identification with the left occurs when there is a higher the income, and a higher father's education.

The negative relationship between socio-economic relations and religiosity clearly indicates that the higher one scores on religiosity the lower the income and

the less the father's education. In other words poverty, rather than affluence is more closely related to religiosity. This finding did not depend on the respondents' political identification. In short, lower status people are more religious and also tend to identify with the right. Supporters of the left are more affluent, and less religious. But among people those identify with the left, the lower the SES the more likely the person is to be religious regardless of the political identification.

Our findings might seem to be unique to Israel and to its geo-political context. The relationship between religiosity and political right might be construed as associated to the religious dictate to inhabit the land of the fathers. However the intensity of the political discourse and the politicization of religion in Israel might leave us with a very misleading impression. The alliance between religious forces and political conservatism is noticeable in most societies in the western world. Religiosity and political preference are, to a large extent a manifestation of social attitudes (Brooks, C. and J. Manza, 1997). However these attitudes reflect some very fundamental set of social values from which the religious intensity and the political preferences emerge. A hint to the validity of such a thesis might be the fact that a scale of altruism that was developed for this study is clearly associated with what is defined as political left in Israel and negatively correlated with the right.

Political and religious manifestation are context relevant, therefore what is considered leftist issues in Germany or Britain might not apply in Israel where the issue of the peace process is the dominant issue of political discourse, however it is very likely that a person holding left oriented ideas in Israel will adopt also left oriented ideas in another culture (regardless of how it is defined or manifested in the respective culture), and the same is true about one who is defined as a right winger. The reason for that might be that such identification draw on fundamentally diverse values that further studies of comparative political socialization should try and answer.

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