

## Religion and National Identity: Negotiating Democratic Governance in Israel

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**Abstract:** This study examines how religion and national identity interact with democratic governance in Israel, addressing the limited integration of institutional, electoral, and identity-based analyses in previous scholarship. Employing a qualitative case-study design, the research uses thematic documentary analysis, supported by descriptive secondary quantitative evidence from legal documents, policy materials, official statistics, electoral data, and public opinion surveys. The findings show, first, that religious influence on policymaking is domain-specific, coalition-dependent, and institutionally mediated, operating through religion–state arrangements in personal status, education, public funding, military service, and related policy domains. Second, religious–secular differentiation is reflected in socioeconomic participation, electoral behavior, and contrasting public assessments of Israel’s Jewish and democratic character. Third, Jewish national identity has a clear constitutional expression, while minority recognition, political inclusion, and social cohesion vary across communities and institutional contexts. These findings imply that democratic governance requires institutional mechanisms capable of balancing religious autonomy, accountable representation, and equal citizenship. The study contributes an original integrated framework showing that religion, coalition politics, and national identity shape democratic governance through conditional and interconnected institutional processes.

**Keywords:** democratic governance; Haredi politics; Jewish national identity; minority rights; religion–state relations.

**Abstrak:** Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana agama dan identitas nasional berinteraksi dengan tata kelola demokratis di Israel, dengan menanggapi keterbatasan integrasi antara analisis kelembagaan, elektoral, dan berbasis identitas dalam penelitian sebelumnya. Dengan menggunakan desain studi kasus kualitatif, penelitian ini menerapkan analisis dokumen tematik yang didukung oleh bukti kuantitatif sekunder deskriptif dari dokumen hukum, bahan kebijakan, statistik resmi, data elektoral, dan survei opini publik. Temuan menunjukkan, pertama, bahwa pengaruh agama terhadap pembentukan kebijakan bersifat spesifik menurut ranah, bergantung pada konfigurasi koalisi, dan dimediasi secara kelembagaan melalui pengaturan hubungan agama–negara dalam bidang status personal, pendidikan, pendanaan publik, wajib militer, serta ranah kebijakan terkait. Kedua, diferensiasi religius–sekuler tercermin dalam partisipasi sosial-ekonomi, perilaku elektoral, serta perbedaan penilaian publik terhadap karakter Yahudi dan karakter demokratis Israel. Ketiga, identitas nasional Yahudi memiliki ekspresi konstitusional yang jelas, sementara pengakuan terhadap kelompok minoritas, inklusi politik, dan kohesi sosial berbeda-beda menurut komunitas dan konteks kelembagaan. Temuan ini mengimplikasikan bahwa tata kelola demokratis memerlukan mekanisme kelembagaan yang mampu menyeimbangkan otonomi keagamaan, representasi yang akuntabel, dan kesetaraan kewarganegaraan. Penelitian ini memberikan kerangka integratif yang orisinal dengan menunjukkan bahwa agama, politik koalisi, dan identitas nasional membentuk tata kelola demokratis melalui proses kelembagaan yang kondisional dan saling terkait.

**Kata kunci:** tata kelola demokratis; identitas nasional Yahudi; hak-hak minoritas; politik Haredi; relasi agama–negara.

## 1. Introduction

Israel presents a distinctive case in which democratic institutions operate within a society marked by strong religious, ethnic, and national differentiation. Religion–state relations therefore extend beyond matters of private belief and directly shape citizenship, public policy, political representation, and the distribution of social authority. At the end of 2024, Israel’s population was approximately 9.81 million, of whom 78.6% were classified as Jews and Others and 21.4% as Arabs (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2025). Among Jewish adults, 42.7% identified as secular and 11.4% as ultra-Orthodox, while the Haredi population as a whole reached approximately 1.39 million, or 13.9% of the national population, with an annual growth rate of about 4% (Cahaner & Malach, 2025). These demographic patterns are politically significant because religious and ethnonational identities can become institutionalized through public norms, representation, and competition over state resources. Previous scholarship has shown that ethno-religious majorities may use political institutions to reinforce dominant norms (Goldstein, 2022), while disputes over religious visibility in public space often expose deeper tensions between secular principles and minority recognition (van der Tol & Gorski, 2022). Such dynamics can intensify intergroup boundaries, weaken perceptions of equal belonging, and encourage the association of national loyalty with dominant religious identity (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2004; Laurence & Vaisse, 2006). In Israel, religious plurality and national identity are therefore not peripheral cultural issues but structural dimensions of democratic governance.

This structural complexity becomes especially visible in the political position of the Haredi community, whose influence is amplified by Israel’s coalition-based parliamentary system and the bargaining leverage of religious parties in government formation. Although Haredi parties have historically concentrated on sectoral interests, their participation in governing coalitions has enabled them to shape policies concerning religion–state relations, education, public funding, and military service, while contributing to the preservation of long-standing institutional arrangements (Shalev, 2019; The Jewish Federations of North America, 2017). The socioeconomic dimension is also significant: in 2024, approximately 54% of Haredi men were employed, while yeshiva and kollel study remained a central component of Haredi social organization (Cahaner et al., 2025). Tensions intensified on June 25, 2024, when the Israeli Supreme Court ruled that the state could no longer maintain a blanket exemption from military conscription for eligible Haredi yeshiva students, bringing questions of equality, religious autonomy, citizenship obligations, and coalition stability into sharper focus (Lubell, 2024). These disagreements reflect a broader normative division over the relationship between Israel’s Jewish and democratic characteristics. The 2025 Israeli Democracy Index found that 44% of Jewish respondents considered the Jewish component of the state too dominant, whereas 24% viewed the democratic component as too dominant; moreover, secular Jews and Haredim displayed markedly different assessments of this balance (Hermann et al., 2025). Military-service disputes should therefore be understood not as an isolated controversy, but as an empirical manifestation of a wider struggle over how democratic equality, religious autonomy, collective identity, and citizenship are negotiated within Israeli governance.

Research on religion, national identity, and democratic governance in Israel can be grouped into three major tendencies. First, a substantial body of scholarship examines the institutional relationship between religion and the Israeli state, particularly the persistence of religious authority within formally democratic institutions. Ram (2008) identifies a shift in Israeli political culture from strong nationalism with relatively weak religionism toward a configuration in which nationalism and religionism are simultaneously intensified. Fox and Rynhold (2008) likewise examine the tension between Israel’s Jewish character and democratic commitments amid extensive state involvement in religious affairs, while Lehmann (2012) shows that religion–state relations operate reciprocally, with religious institutions shaping citizenship practices and state authority rather than merely remaining subject to governmental regulation. This institutional embeddedness is particularly visible in Haredi society, where long-standing arrangements have preserved considerable autonomy, especially in education and communal life (Dödtmann, 2022), with important socioeconomic implications for integration and participation (Kingsbury, 2020). Kimmerling (2001) further situates these developments within the

broad historical transformation of Israeli society and collective identity. Although this literature explains the institutional persistence of religion effectively, it pays less attention to how such arrangements are translated into electoral behavior, coalition bargaining, public attitudes, and contemporary patterns of democratic governance.

Second, a substantial body of research focuses on religious parties, coalition politics, and democratic competition in Israel. Tepe (2005) argues that religious parties cannot be adequately classified simply as moderate or radical because their democratic implications depend on how religious and secular symbols are strategically mobilized within political competition. Similarly, Elman (2008) shows that participation in electoral politics does not necessarily lead Jewish religious parties toward ideological moderation. Tepe (2012) further distinguishes between behavioral and ideological moderation, demonstrating that these processes may produce different consequences for democratic politics. More recent studies indicate that religious identity can also function as a resource for political boundary-making and populist mobilization, as illustrated in the strategies of Shas and Likud (Ben Porat & Filc, 2022). At the coalition level, ethnic and religious cleavages, including the strategic position of Haredi parties, can both facilitate and constrain government formation and political bargaining (Belder, 2021), while the continued leverage of ultra-Orthodox parties illustrates how sectoral interests can acquire broader policy significance within coalition governments (Shalev, 2019). Although this literature explains party strategy, electoral competition, moderation, and coalition formation effectively, it has paid less attention to how religious-party leverage interacts simultaneously with religion-state policy, citizen attitudes, minority rights, and broader democratic legitimacy.

Third, another major strand of scholarship examines the tension between Jewish national identity, minority rights, and democratic equality in Israel. Smootha (2002) conceptualizes Israel through the framework of ethnic democracy, describing a system that maintains democratic institutions while granting structural priority to a dominant ethnic nation. Berent (2010) later questions whether this model fully captures the particular formation of Israeli national identity and the complexity of its civic and ethnonational dimensions. From a broader identity perspective, Kinnvall (2004) shows how religion and nationalism can become powerful sources of collective identification under conditions of insecurity, while Ram (2008) highlights the increasing convergence of religious revivalism and nationalism in Israeli political culture. More recent scholarship has focused on the constitutional and political implications of these developments. Jabareen and Bishara (2019) argue that the 2018 Nation-State Law strengthened the constitutional status of Jewish national identity, whereas Ben-Porat and Filc (2022) demonstrate how Jewishness can also be mobilized in political boundary-making and populist strategies. Rogenhofer and Panievsky (2020) further connect ethnoreligious mobilization with broader processes of democratic erosion. Although this literature provides important insights into national identity, citizenship, constitutionalism, and minority rights, it less frequently connects these macro-level dynamics with religious-secular attitudes, coalition-dependent policymaking, and the everyday institutional processes through which democratic equality is negotiated.

These three strands of scholarship provide a substantial foundation for understanding religion and democracy in Israel, but they remain only partially integrated. Studies of religion-state arrangements explain the institutional embeddedness of religious authority (Fox & Rynhold, 2008), research on religious parties clarifies how coalition structures and political strategy shape democratic competition (Belder, 2021; Tepe, 2012), and scholarship on national identity highlights enduring tensions between Jewish statehood, citizenship, and democratic equality (Ben Porat & Filc, 2022; Smootha, 2002). Yet less attention has been paid to how these dimensions operate simultaneously. In particular, the interaction among religious-party leverage, religious-secular divisions, and Jewish national identity remains insufficiently examined in relation to policy formation, perceptions of democratic balance, minority rights, and social cohesion. This gap is especially significant because controversies such as Haredi military-service exemptions demonstrate that institutional arrangements, electoral incentives, identity boundaries, and public attitudes are interconnected rather than independent processes. A more integrated analysis is therefore needed to explain how these overlapping dynamics collectively shape contemporary democratic governance in Israel.

This study aims to analyze how religion and national identity interact with democratic governance in Israel. Specifically, it examines how religious parties and institutional religion-state arrangements influence policymaking; how religious-secular divisions are reflected in voting patterns, public opinion, and disputes such as military-service exemptions; and how Jewish national identity intersects with democratic equality, minority rights, and social cohesion. Using a qualitative case-study design supported by descriptive secondary quantitative evidence, the study connects institutional and political processes with public attitudes in order to explain these dynamics as interrelated dimensions of contemporary Israeli democracy rather than as separate phenomena.

Building on these debates, this study argues that tensions within Israeli democratic governance intensify when institutionalized religion-state arrangements, coalition-dependent political leverage, and ethnonational conceptions of state identity operate simultaneously. Ram (2008) demonstrates how nationalism and religionism have become increasingly interconnected in Israeli political culture, while Tepe (2005, 2012) shows that the democratic consequences of religious parties depend less on religious doctrine alone than on their strategic behavior and institutional position. Kinnvall (2004) further explains how religion and nationalism can reinforce collective identity under conditions of insecurity, whereas Smootha's (2002) framework of ethnic democracy highlights the structural tension between majority nationhood and democratic equality. On this basis, the study proposes that religion shapes democratic governance through the interaction of religious authority, coalition leverage, national identity, and policy outcomes rather than through belief alone. Its theoretical contribution lies in testing whether these perspectives are mutually reinforcing or require qualification to explain how internal religious-secular cleavages and majority-minority relations jointly shape democratic governance in Israel.

## 2. Methods

The unit of analysis in this study is the interaction between religion, political institutions, and democratic governance in Israel. The analysis focuses on the institutional and political processes through which religious authority and national identity shape governance, particularly in relation to religion-state arrangements, coalition politics, Haredi political leverage, military-service policy, religious education, personal-status regulation, the Nation-State Law, minority rights, and religious-secular divisions. Religious communities, political parties, legislation, and policy controversies are therefore treated as empirical sites through which these broader processes are examined.

The study employed a qualitative case-study design with an interpretive and document-based approach, supported by descriptive secondary quantitative evidence. This design was selected because the research seeks to explain how religious authority, coalition structures, national identity, and institutional arrangements interact within democratic governance in their specific political and social context, rather than to test causal relationships experimentally. Qualitative case-study research is particularly appropriate for examining complex institutional processes and context-dependent meanings in depth (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). Quantitative indicators, including demographic, employment, electoral, and public-opinion data, are used descriptively to contextualize and strengthen the interpretation of the qualitative documentary evidence.

The study draws on four categories of evidence. First, primary institutional documents include Israel's Basic Laws, particularly Basic Law: Israel – The Nation-State of the Jewish People, Supreme Court decisions, legislative and policy documents, and materials concerning military conscription, religious education, and personal-status regulation. Second, official secondary data were drawn from institutions such as the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics and the Israel Democracy Institute, including demographic, employment, electoral, and public-opinion data. Third, political and organizational materials concerning political parties, coalition formation, religion-state arrangements, and major policy controversies were examined. Fourth, peer-reviewed scholarship and authoritative policy studies were used for contextualization and source triangulation rather than as substitutes for empirical evidence.

Data were collected through purposive documentary selection based on their relevance to five analytical domains: religion–state regulation, religious-party and coalition politics, Haredi military service and education, Jewish–democratic identity and minority rights, and religious–secular division and social integration. Documentary sources were selected according to institutional authority, direct relevance to the research questions, reliability, and temporal relevance. Secondary quantitative evidence, including demographic indicators, employment rates, electoral data, and public-opinion survey findings, was collected from official and established institutional sources to support the contextual interpretation of the documentary material.

The qualitative evidence was analyzed using thematic document analysis through five stages: document familiarization, initial coding, cross-source comparison, thematic categorization, and interpretive analysis (Bowen, 2009; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initial codes included religious authority, religion–state status quo, coalition leverage, military-service exemptions, religious education, personal-status regulation, national identity, minority rights, religious–secular division, political representation, social integration, and democratic equality. These codes were subsequently consolidated into broader analytical themes that structured the Results section. Secondary quantitative evidence, including demographic composition, employment rates, electoral patterns, and public-opinion percentages, was analyzed descriptively to identify relevant patterns and contextualize the documentary findings rather than to test inferential relationships. Analytical credibility was strengthened through source triangulation across legal documents, official statistics, survey data, policy materials, and peer-reviewed scholarship (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### 3. Results

#### *Institutionalized Religion–State Arrangements and Religious-Party Influence on Policymaking*

The findings indicate that religion influences Israeli governance not only through individual belief or religious affiliation, but also through institutionalized religion–state arrangements embedded in specific policy domains. Documentary evidence identifies these arrangements in personal-status regulation, religious education, public funding, Sabbath and kashrut regulation, military-service provisions, and coalition-related policymaking. Historically established arrangements continue to preserve religious authority in several of these domains, particularly where legal and administrative frameworks formally recognize religious jurisdiction (Ben-Porat, 2013; Dödtmann, 2022). At the same time, these arrangements are neither uniform nor static. Some domains retain long-standing forms of religious authority, whereas others have undergone regulatory change, partial liberalization, judicial intervention, or institutional reversal (Perez & Rosman, 2022). Religion–state arrangements are therefore best understood as differentiated and continuously negotiated rather than as a single fixed institutional structure.

Historically established arrangements have preserved substantial religious authority in several of these areas, especially where state institutions formally recognize or accommodate religious jurisdiction (Ben-Porat, 2013; Dödtmann, 2022). At the same time, the institutional configuration is not uniform or static. Some policy domains continue to reflect long-standing religious monopolies or accommodations, whereas others have undergone regulatory change, partial liberalization, or greater involvement of non-state actors (Perez & Rosman, 2022). Electoral and policy developments likewise indicate that religion–state arrangements remain subject to recurrent political negotiation rather than following a single trajectory of either secularization or religious expansion (Lipshits & Neubauer-Shani, 2019). Thus, religious influence on policymaking is best understood as institutionally differentiated and continuously negotiated across policy domains.

Personal-status regulation provides a clear example of how religious authority is institutionally embedded within Israeli governance. Recognized religious communities retain jurisdiction over key areas such as marriage and divorce, while, for Jewish citizens, Orthodox rabbinical institutions hold formal authority over these matters within the domestic legal framework (Ben-Porat, 2013; Perez & Rosman, 2022). The absence of a general civil-marriage framework means that personal-status

administration continues to operate through recognized religious authorities, making questions of marriage, divorce, and conversion central points of contact between individual citizens and institutional religion. These arrangements also have implications beyond Jewish citizens, as different religious communities are governed through distinct personal-status frameworks, producing differentiated administrative experiences across groups (Yefet & Shahar, 2023). The resulting pattern is therefore not simply one of religious influence in the abstract, but of legally allocated jurisdiction that structures how personal-status rights and procedures are administered across Israeli society.

Haredi education further illustrates how religious autonomy and state involvement coexist within Israeli policymaking. The Haredi educational system has historically retained substantial communal autonomy, particularly in curricula centered on intensive Torah and Talmud study, while continuing to interact with state funding and regulatory structures (Dödtmann, 2022; Finkelman, 2011). This arrangement has generated recurring policy negotiations over the extent to which publicly supported Haredi schools should incorporate core curricular subjects and comply with broader educational standards. Kingsbury (2020) highlights the socioeconomic implications of limited exposure to general education, while institutional reports similarly point to continuing debates over participation, funding, and integration (Malach & Cahaner, 2019). More recent research shows that attempts to expand public Haredi education or strengthen state oversight have not followed a linear reform path; instead, they have involved sustained negotiation among schools, religious authorities, and the Ministry of Education (Katzir & Perry-Hazan, 2019, 2024). The evidence therefore indicates that Haredi educational policy is shaped by an ongoing balance between communal autonomy, public financing, and state regulatory objectives.

Coalition politics provides a second mechanism through which religious influence enters policymaking. Israel's proportional representation system and frequent reliance on multiparty governing coalitions can give religious parties substantial bargaining relevance when their support is necessary for government formation or survival. This leverage does not imply that religious parties control the political system; rather, their influence varies according to coalition composition and the strategic value of their parliamentary support. Jewish religious parties have generally operated through democratic electoral competition while retaining distinct ideological commitments and sectoral priorities (Elman, 2008). Coalition-building can therefore both reflect and reinforce existing religious and ideological cleavages, particularly when negotiations concern education, public funding, military service, or other religion-state arrangements (Belder, 2021; Ben-Porat, 2013). At the same time, religion-state issues do not follow a uniformly escalating trajectory, as their prominence in electoral agendas and coalition bargaining changes across political periods (Lipshits & Neubauer-Shani, 2019). The evidence thus indicates that religious-party influence is conditional, coalition-dependent, and concentrated in policy domains where institutional authority and political bargaining intersect.

**Table 1. Institutional Domains of Religion-State Interaction and Policy Influence in Israel**

| Policy domain       | Institutional arrangement                                  | Relevant actor/institution                             | Empirical policy implication                                                | Principal evidence                                                                                                              |
|---------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Personal status     | Religious jurisdiction over Jewish marriage and divorce    | Rabbinical courts; recognized religious authorities    | Formal allocation of personal-status jurisdiction to religious institutions | <i>Rabbinical Courts Jurisdiction (Marriage and Divorce) Law, 5713–1953 (1953); Ben-Porat (2013); Perez &amp; Rosman (2022)</i> |
| Religious education | Haredi educational autonomy combined with public financing | Haredi educational institutions; Ministry of Education | Continuing negotiation over curriculum, supervision, educational            | State Comptroller (2020); Knesset (2024); Katzir & Perry-Hazan (2019, 2024)                                                     |

|                  |                                                                                                    |                                                                             |                                                                                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                  | and state supervision                                                                              |                                                                             | standards, and funding                                                                                               |                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Public funding   | Public financing of religious councils and recognized religious services                           | Ministry of Religious Services; religious councils; local authorities       | Institutional allocation of public resources to religious-service provision                                          | <i>Jewish Religious Services Law [Consolidated Version], 1971; State Comptroller (2023)</i>                                                                                                        |
| Sabbath          | Statutory weekly-rest arrangements and regulated permits for Sabbath work                          | Ministry of Labor; employers; workers                                       | State regulation balances weekly rest, religious-national traditions, labor needs, and public interests              | <i>Hours of Work and Rest Law, 1951 (2000) and subsequent amendments</i>                                                                                                                           |
| Kashrut          | Statutory regulation of kosher certification subject to successive reform and reversal             | Chief Rabbinate Council; authorized local rabbis; government regulators     | Shift toward broader certification competition in 2021 followed by statutory reversal in 2026                        | <i>Economic Plan Law (Legislative Amendments to Implement Economic Policy for the 2021 and 2022 Budget Years), 2021 (2022); Prohibition of Fraud in Kashrut Law (Amendment No. 5), 2026 (2026)</i> |
| Military service | Statutory conscription with historically differentiated exemption arrangements and judicial review | Government; Ministry of Defense; Haredi institutions/parties; Supreme Court | Legal and political contestation over conscription, exemptions, institutional funding, and equal service obligations | <i>Defense Service Law [Consolidated Version], 5746–1986 (2025); HCJ 6198/23 et al. (2024); Almasi and Weininger (2025)</i>                                                                        |

*Note.* The table synthesizes primary legal, governmental, institutional, and scholarly evidence. Policy implications refer to documented institutional arrangements and policy processes and should not be interpreted as uniform outcomes across all periods or governing coalitions.

As summarized in Table 1, religion–state arrangements are subject to continuity, contestation, reform, and institutional reversal rather than following a linear trajectory. Kashrut regulation provides a particularly clear example. The 2021 reform introduced greater scope for competition by allowing private organizations to provide kosher certification under a new regulatory framework. In July 2026, however, Amendment No. 5 to the Prohibition of Fraud in Kashrut Law repealed the provisions permitting private certification bodies and restored certification authority to the Chief Rabbinate Council, authorized local rabbis, and the Military Rabbinate (Knesset, 2026; Perez & Rosman, 2022). This sequence demonstrates that changes in religion–state arrangements can be politically renegotiated and subsequently reversed. Similar variation across other policy domains indicates that the status quo functions as an evolving institutional settlement rather than an immutable arrangement.

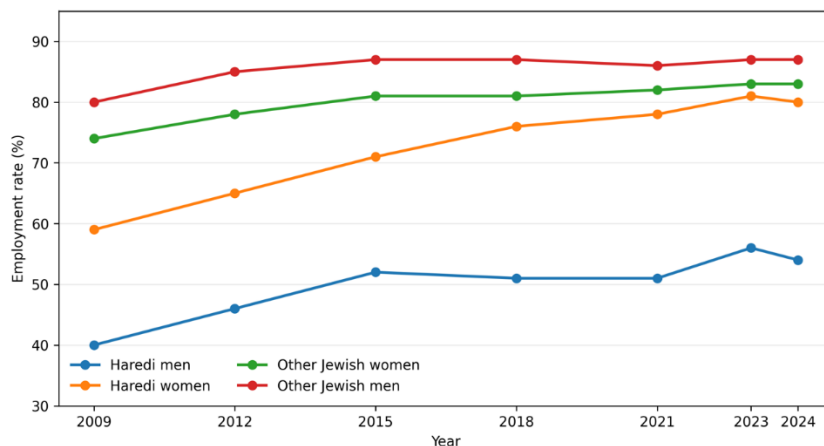
#### *Religious–Secular Divisions in Military Service, Electoral Politics, and Public Opinion*

The findings indicate that religious–secular differentiation in Israel extends across multiple social and political arenas rather than being confined to a single policy dispute. Religious identification is associated with differentiated patterns of institutional participation, labor-market engagement, electoral alignment, and attitudes toward religion–state relations and the Jewish–democratic character of the state. Earlier research already demonstrated a relationship between religious involvement and electoral behavior in Israel (Wald & Shye, 1995), while contemporary public-opinion data indicate that this association remains pronounced. In the 2025 Israeli Democracy Index, 84.5% of Haredi Jewish respondents identified their political orientation as Right, compared with 37.2% of secular Jewish respondents (Hermann et al., 2025). These differences should not be interpreted as evidence of two homogeneous religious and secular blocs; rather, they indicate that religiosity is associated with distinct patterns of political orientation and institutional participation that vary across social groups. This broader differentiation provides the empirical context for examining military-service controversies, socioeconomic participation, electoral behavior, and public attitudes in the sections that follow.

The military-service controversy provides a particularly visible arena in which religious–secular differences are translated into competing claims about citizenship, communal autonomy, and state obligation. Historically, arrangements concerning Haredi Torah study and exemption from military service developed within the broader framework of state–Haredi relations, while Haredi attitudes toward military service have remained more internally differentiated than a simple pattern of categorical rejection would suggest (Stadler & Ben-Ari, 2003). This institutional tension became more pronounced on June 25, 2024, when the Supreme Court ruled that the state could no longer maintain a blanket exemption for eligible Haredi yeshiva students in the absence of a valid legal framework (AFIK & Co. Attorneys & Notaries, 2026). The conscription dispute therefore became an institutional arena in which competing claims concerning equal civic obligation, religious autonomy, and the preservation of Haredi communal life were negotiated. At the social level, enlistment can also carry consequences within the community: research on former Haredi soldiers identifies experiences of stigma and conditional social regard associated with military service, indicating that conscription involves questions of communal belonging as well as legal duty (Malovicki-Yaffe et al., 2023). Military service should therefore be understood as a multidimensional controversy linking state policy, religious autonomy, and intra-community social norms rather than as a simple opposition between religion and democracy.

The military-service debate is closely connected to broader patterns of socioeconomic participation, although these dimensions should not be treated as a direct causal relationship. In 2024, the employment rate among Haredi men was approximately 54%, while intensive participation in yeshiva and kollel study continued to shape educational and occupational pathways within the community (Cahaner et al., 2025). Earlier studies have likewise shown that the structure of Haredi education and its emphasis on religious study influence access to general education, labor-market preparation, and patterns of economic integration (Dödtmann, 2022; Finkelman, 2011; Kingsbury, 2020). However, labor-market participation among Haredi men is not homogeneous. Perelman et al. (2024) found that aspirations for upward mobility were associated with a greater likelihood of entering paid employment, whereas stronger preferences for continued religious study were associated with lower labor-market participation. These findings indicate that socioeconomic participation reflects the interaction of educational pathways, religious commitments, institutional incentives, and individual aspirations rather than a simple opposition between religious observance and employment.

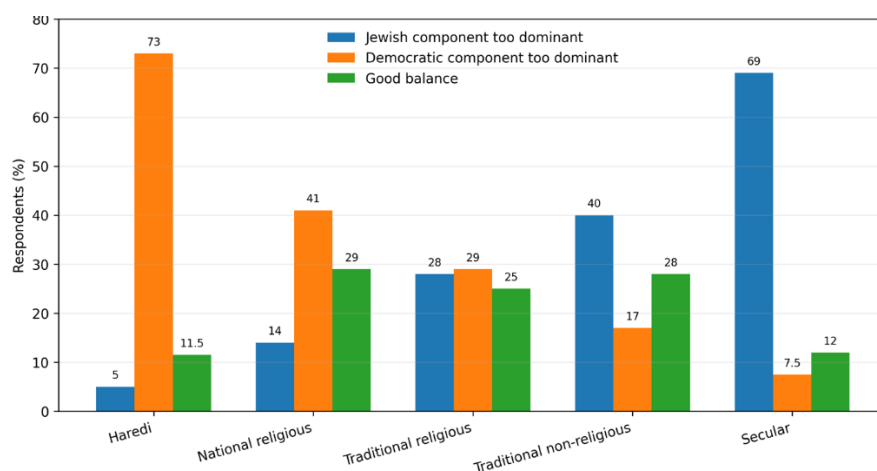
Figure 1. Employment Rates by Population Group and Gender, 2009–2024



Source: Authors' visualization based on Cahaner, Malach, and Bachar (2025), Israel Democracy Institute, Statistical Report on Ultra-Orthodox Society in Israel 2024.

Public opinion provides further evidence that religious–secular differentiation extends beyond institutional participation to contrasting assessments of the state's Jewish and democratic character. Among Jewish respondents in the 2025 Israeli Democracy Index, 44% considered the Jewish component of the state too dominant, 24% viewed the democratic component as too dominant, and 19% perceived an appropriate balance between the two (Hermann et al., 2025). These aggregate figures conceal substantial variation by religious identification. Among Haredi respondents, 73% regarded the democratic component as too dominant, whereas only 5% considered the Jewish component too dominant. By contrast, 69% of secular respondents viewed the Jewish component as too dominant, while 7.5% regarded the democratic component as too dominant (Hermann et al., 2025). Traditional and national-religious respondents occupied intermediate positions, indicating a differentiated continuum rather than a simple binary religious–secular divide. The findings therefore show that assessments of the relationship between Israel's Jewish and democratic components vary substantially across religious-identification groups.

Figure 2. Perceptions of the Balance Between Israel's Jewish and Democratic Components by Religious Identification, 2025



Source: Authors' visualization based on Hermann et al. (2025), The Israeli Democracy Index 2025, Table 2.26, Israel Democracy Institute.

Note. "Don't know" responses are not displayed and account for the remainder to 100% within each religious-identification group.

Electoral behavior provides further evidence that religious identification is associated with distinct patterns of political alignment. Electoral behavior provides further evidence that religious identification is associated with distinct patterns of political alignment. Based on Viterbi Center survey data on voting patterns in the March 2021 election, 89% of respondents who identified as Haredi voted for Haredi parties, including 60% for United Torah Judaism and 29% for Shas (Finkelstein, 2022). By contrast, these parties received minimal support from secular respondents, indicating a pronounced relationship between religious affiliation and party choice. This pattern is consistent with earlier research showing the relative electoral stability and mobilizational capacity of the Haredi political camp (Cohen & Susser, 2010b; Leon, 2015). More recent analysis further shows that Shas has combined sectoral Haredi representation with broader national-political messaging, suggesting that religious-party support operates through both communal identification and wider electoral positioning (Leon, 2022). Electoral differentiation should therefore be understood not as a mechanical outcome of religiosity, but as a structured association between religious identity, communal organization, party attachment, and political-bloc alignment.

The evidence further indicates that religious–secular differentiation among Jewish Israelis is better understood as a continuum than as a binary cleavage. The 2025 Israeli Democracy Index distinguishes Haredi, national-religious/Haredi-leumi, traditional religious, traditional non-religious, and secular respondents, each displaying distinct patterns of political orientation (Hermann et al., 2025). Identification with the political Right was reported by 84.5% of Haredi respondents and 84.2% of national-religious/Haredi-leumi respondents, compared with 76.8% of traditional religious, 64.2% of traditional non-religious, and 37.2% of secular respondents. These figures reveal a differentiated religious–political continuum rather than two internally homogeneous camps. At the same time, this continuum should not be treated as representative of Israeli society as a whole, since Arab citizens and other non-Jewish religious communities have distinct configurations of identity, political affiliation, and institutional experience. These broader majority–minority dynamics are examined separately in the following subfinding.

The evidence indicates that religious–secular differentiation in Israel extends across civic obligations, socioeconomic participation, electoral behavior, and public understandings of democratic governance. Military-service disputes provide one of the most visible manifestations of this differentiation, but they form part of a broader pattern in which religious identification is associated with distinct institutional experiences, labor-market pathways, electoral preferences, and assessments of the relationship between the state's Jewish and democratic components. These differences are neither uniform nor reducible to a binary religious–secular divide, as substantial variation exists among Haredi, national-religious, traditional religious, traditional non-religious, and secular populations. The findings therefore point to a differentiated religious–political continuum within Jewish society rather than two internally homogeneous camps. At the same time, these internal differences coexist with a broader question concerning how Israel's Jewish national identity relates to equal citizenship, minority recognition, and social cohesion, which is examined in the following subfinding.

#### *Jewish National Identity, Minority Rights, and the Negotiation of Democratic Equality*

The findings indicate that Jewish national identity functions not only as a cultural or religious form of collective identification, but also as an institutional and constitutional dimension of the Israeli state. This identity is expressed through state symbols, language policy, principles of national self-determination, immigration frameworks, national commemorations, and public institutions. The 2018 *Basic Law: Israel – The Nation State of the Jewish People* formally defines Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people, affirms Jewish national self-determination, and regulates state symbols, language, and the relationship between the state and the Jewish people (Knesset, 2018). These provisions establish an institutional framework in which national self-definition, citizenship, and minority recognition are

negotiated simultaneously. Scholarship on Palestinian-Arab citizens further shows that minority recognition within this framework operates through both national-group and recognized religious-community dimensions, indicating that citizenship and collective rights cannot be reduced to a single axis of identity (Karayanni, 2012). The resulting pattern is therefore one of layered institutional recognition in which Jewish national identity, religious affiliation, and minority citizenship intersect within the broader structure of democratic governance.

The 2018 *Basic Law: Israel – The Nation State of the Jewish People* provides the clearest constitutional evidence of how Jewish national identity is formally articulated within the state. Enacted on July 19, 2018, the law defines Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people and states that the exercise of national self-determination in the state is unique to the Jewish people (Knesset, 2018). It also designates Hebrew as the language of the state, accords Arabic a “special status,” and identifies the development of Jewish settlement as a national value. Importantly, the language provision specifies that the new formulation does not diminish the practical status previously accorded to Arabic, a point later emphasized in judicial interpretation of the law. Subsequent scholarship has nevertheless debated the constitutional implications of these provisions for minority recognition and equal citizenship. Jabareen and Bishara (2019) offer a critical interpretation of the law’s implications for Palestinian-Arab citizens, while Jabareen et al. (2026) specifically identify the shift of Arabic from an official language to a legally less defined “special” status as a significant change in the institutional position of linguistic minority rights. The evidence therefore shows that the Nation-State Law simultaneously consolidates the constitutional articulation of Jewish national identity and creates a focal point for ongoing legal and scholarly debate over language, minority recognition, and democratic equality.

Moving from constitutional provisions to citizenship and minority recognition, the findings indicate that non-Jewish citizens in Israel experience differentiated forms of institutional recognition rather than a single uniform minority status. Academic scholarship describes Palestinian-Arab citizens as occupying both a national-minority position and membership within recognized religious communities, including Muslim, Christian, and Druze communities, thereby linking minority rights to individual citizenship, collective identity, and religious affiliation (Karayanni, 2012). This layered structure means that questions of recognition are shaped by more than the majority-minority distinction alone. The Druze case further illustrates this complexity. Eldar and Young (2024) show that, following the Nation-State Law, Druze experiences of belonging were negotiated through overlapping claims of citizenship, loyalty to the state, communal identity, and non-Jewish status. The evidence therefore cautions against treating Arab citizens, Palestinian-Arab citizens, Druze, Muslims, and Christians as a homogeneous political or religious category. Minority recognition in Israel is instead differentiated across national, religious, and communal lines, producing distinct institutional experiences within the broader framework of citizenship.

Religious pluralism within Jewish society further demonstrates that questions of recognition in Israel cannot be reduced to a simple distinction between Jewish and non-Jewish citizens. The Jewish religious field itself is institutionally differentiated, particularly in matters of conversion, marriage, divorce, and religious recognition. Orthodox institutions retain formal authority in several personal-status domains, while non-Orthodox Jewish movements receive varying forms of recognition depending on the administrative and legal context (Ben-Porat, 2013; Fisher, 2019). Fisher (2019) shows that state policy toward conversion has developed through an ongoing interaction between governmental institutions and the Chief Rabbinate, producing differentiated recognition across religious streams rather than a uniform institutional framework. Perez and Rosman (2022) similarly demonstrate that religion-state arrangements increasingly combine enduring religious authority with selective regulatory change. Religious pluralism within Jewish society is therefore shaped not only by differences in belief and practice, but also by differentiated forms of institutional recognition and access to religious authority.

These findings show that national and religious identity recognition operates through multiple institutional arenas rather than through a single legal or administrative framework. The patterns identified above involve different dimensions of recognition—including national identity, language,

minority status, personal status, and intra-Jewish religious pluralism—and affect different communities and religious actors. Table 2 synthesizes these findings by mapping the principal institutional arenas, the identity dimensions involved, the communities or actors concerned, and the empirical issues identified in the documentary evidence.

Table 2. Institutional Arenas of National and Religious Identity Recognition in Israel

| <b>Institutional arena</b>              | <b>Identity dimension</b>                | <b>Relevant communities/actors</b>                               | <b>Empirical issue</b>                                                                                              | <b>Principal evidence</b>                                                        |
|-----------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Nation-State<br>Basic Law               | National<br>identity                     | Jewish citizens;<br>minority citizens                            | Constitutional<br>articulation of<br>national self-<br>determination                                                | <i>Basic Law: Israel – The Nation State of the Jewish People</i> (Knesset, 2018) |
| Language                                | National-cultural<br>identity            | Hebrew and Arabic<br>speakers                                    | Hebrew as state<br>language; Arabic<br>accorded special<br>status                                                   | Knesset (2018);<br>Jabareen et al.<br>(2026)                                     |
| Minority<br>recognition                 | National<br>and<br>religious<br>identity | Palestinian-Arab,<br>Muslim, Christian, and<br>Druze communities | Individual<br>citizenship, collective<br>identity, and<br>recognized religious-<br>community status                 | Karayanni<br>(2012); official<br>institutional<br>documents                      |
| Personal<br>status                      | Religious<br>identity                    | Orthodox, non-<br>Orthodox, and non-<br>Jewish communities       | Differentiated<br>jurisdiction over<br>marriage, divorce,<br>conversion, and<br>related personal-<br>status matters | Fisher (2019);<br>Ben-Porat<br>(2013); relevant<br>legal provisions              |
| Religious<br>services and<br>conversion | Intra-Jewish<br>religious<br>pluralism   | Orthodox and non-<br>Orthodox Jewish<br>movements                | Differentiated<br>institutional<br>recognition across<br>religious streams                                          | Fisher (2019);<br>Ben-Porat<br>(2013); Perez &<br>Rosman (2022)                  |

*Note.* The table synthesizes constitutional, legal, institutional, and scholarly evidence concerning national and religious identity recognition. The identified arrangements describe differentiated forms of institutional recognition and should not be interpreted as implying uniform experiences across all Jewish and non-Jewish communities.

Public-opinion data further show that democratic equality and political inclusion are perceived differently across social groups. In the November 2025 validation survey of the Israeli Democracy Index, 77% of Arab respondents supported the inclusion of Arab parties in government, while 71.5% of Jewish respondents opposed such inclusion (Hermann et al., 2025). Substantial variation was also evident within the Jewish sample. Support for including Arab parties in government reached 69% among respondents on the Left, compared with 26% in the Center and 7% on the Right (Hermann et al., 2025). These findings indicate markedly different assessments of political inclusion between Jewish and Arab respondents, while also revealing substantial variation within the Jewish public according to political orientation.

The evidence indicates that social cohesion in Israel is characterized by the simultaneous presence of societal attachment and substantial intergroup differentiation. In the 2025 Israeli Democracy Index, 79% of Jewish respondents and 64.5% of Arab respondents agreed that Israelis could generally rely on fellow citizens for assistance in times of difficulty, while more than 70% of respondents in both groups indicated that they would prefer to remain in Israel rather than relocate permanently to a Western country if given the opportunity (Hermann et al., 2025). At the same time, perceptions of the country's

most acute social tensions differed across groups: Jewish respondents most frequently identified the Right-Left divide, whereas Arab respondents more often identified Jewish-Arab relations as the principal source of tension (Hermann et al., 2025). These patterns suggest that social cohesion should not be understood as either wholly absent or uniformly strong. Rather, shared societal attachment coexists with marked differences in perceptions of political inclusion, democratic equality, and intergroup relations. The Druze experience similarly illustrates how strong attachment to the state can coexist with contested questions of recognition and belonging within a Jewish nation-state (Eldar & Young, 2024).

The findings indicate that Jewish national identity, minority recognition, and democratic equality constitute interconnected but distinct dimensions of Israeli governance. Constitutional and legal provisions establish a formal framework of Jewish national statehood, while the practical experience of citizenship and institutional recognition varies across Palestinian-Arab citizens, Druze, Orthodox Jews, non-Orthodox Jewish communities, and other religious groups. Public-opinion evidence further shows that shared societal attachment can coexist with substantial disagreement over political inclusion, democratic equality, minority recognition, and Jewish-Arab relations. These findings therefore suggest that national belonging and democratic participation are negotiated through multiple institutional and social channels rather than through a single uniform framework. Across the three subfindings, religion-state institutions, religious-secular differentiation, and national identity operate concurrently rather than independently, together shaping the institutional and social conditions within which democratic governance is practiced in Israel.

#### 4. Discussion

The findings reveal not a single religion-democracy conflict, but an interconnected configuration in which institutional religious authority, coalition politics, religious-secular differentiation, and national identity jointly shape democratic governance in Israel. First, religion-state arrangements embed religious authority across personal-status regulation, education, public funding, Sabbath and kashrut policy, and military-service provisions, although this influence remains domain-specific, contested, and subject to institutional reversal. Second, religious-secular differentiation is reflected in socioeconomic participation, electoral behavior, and public attitudes: Haredi male employment stood at approximately 54% in 2024, 89% of Haredi respondents who reported voting in 2021 supported Haredi parties, and Haredi and secular respondents displayed sharply different assessments of the balance between the state's Jewish and democratic components. Third, Jewish national identity has a clear constitutional expression, while citizenship, minority recognition, and political inclusion are experienced differently across social and religious groups. At the same time, public-opinion data indicate that substantial disagreement over equality and representation can coexist with continued societal attachment.

The persistence of religious authority in Israeli governance is best explained by its institutional embedding rather than by religiosity alone. Religious institutions retain influence through legally recognized jurisdiction, public funding arrangements, educational autonomy, and administrative recognition, particularly in personal status and Haredi education (Dödtmann, 2022; Kingsbury, 2020). This supports Lehmann's (2012) argument that religion-state relations are reciprocal rather than reducible to state control over religion, and it is consistent with Fox and Rynhold's (2008) emphasis on the institutional entanglement of Jewish identity and democratic governance. At the same time, the findings qualify Ram's (2008) account of strengthening religionism by showing that institutional religious authority does not develop along a uniformly expansive trajectory. Changes in Haredi education policy and the reform and subsequent reversal of kashrut regulation demonstrate processes of preservation, negotiation, regulatory intervention, and institutional reversal (Katzir & Perry-Hazan, 2024; Perez & Rosman, 2022). The religion-state status quo is therefore better understood as a negotiated institutional equilibrium than as either fixed religious domination or linear secularization.

Religious-party leverage is best explained not by religious doctrine alone but by the interaction of organized communal constituencies, concentrated electoral support, and coalition-dependent

bargaining opportunities. The 2021 electoral evidence is particularly illustrative: Viterbi Center survey data show that 89% of respondents who identified as Haredi voted for Haredi parties, including 60% for United Torah Judaism and 29% for Shas (Finkelstein, 2022). This concentration of electoral support can translate into parliamentary relevance when coalition configurations make Haredi-party representation consequential for government formation. The finding supports Tepe's (2005, 2012) argument that the democratic consequences of religious parties depend substantially on their strategic and institutional behavior rather than on religious doctrine alone, while also reinforcing Belder's (2021) emphasis on coalition formation as a boundary-setting process. It further extends earlier studies of Haredi electoral stability and mobilization by showing how concentrated communal support can become a resource for bargaining over specific policy domains (Cohen & Susser, 2010a; Leon, 2015, 2022). Parliamentary participation, however, should not in itself be interpreted as evidence of either democratic moderation or democratic erosion; its consequences depend on how electoral concentration is converted into coalition leverage, the policy domains involved, and the institutional constraints within which bargaining occurs.

The third finding shows that the relationship between national identity and democratic equality cannot be reduced to a single majority-minority divide. The Nation-State Law gives Jewish national identity clear constitutional expression, yet the institutional consequences of this framework differ across Palestinian-Arab citizens, Druze, Orthodox Jews, and non-Orthodox Jewish movements. Smootha's (2002) concept of ethnic democracy remains useful for explaining the structural tension between majority nationhood and democratic equality, while Jabareen and Bishara (2019) and Jabareen et al. (2026) illuminate how this tension is reflected in constitutional and linguistic recognition. However, the findings also qualify an overly binary reading of ethnic democracy because recognition operates through overlapping national, religious, linguistic, and communal regimes (Fisher, 2019; Karayanni, 2012). The Druze case further demonstrates that strong state attachment can coexist with contested recognition and belonging (Eldar & Young, 2024), supporting Berent's (2010) argument that Israeli identity cannot be fully captured through a simple ethnic-civic dichotomy. Kinnvall's (2004) account of religion and nationalism as sources of collective identification also helps interpret these patterns, although the present study does not establish insecurity as a direct causal mechanism. Democratic equality in Israel is therefore negotiated through multiple and overlapping regimes of recognition rather than through a single uniform boundary between majority and minority populations.

The findings require a refinement of the study's initial theoretical proposition rather than a simple confirmation of existing perspectives. Ram's (2008) account of the growing interconnection between religionism and nationalism helps explain the broader political-cultural context, while Tepe (2005, 2012) clarifies how the democratic consequences of religious parties depend on strategic and institutional behavior. Kinnvall (2004) further illuminates the role of religion and nationalism as collective identity resources, and Smootha (2002) identifies the structural tension between majority nationhood and democratic equality. However, the present findings show that religion does not influence democratic governance through a single causal pathway. Its effects emerge through the concurrent interaction of institutionalized religious authority, coalition-dependent political leverage, differentiated social identification, and the constitutional articulation of national identity. This convergence does not necessarily produce democratic erosion; it can generate outcomes ranging from religious autonomy and political representation to policy rigidity, differentiated citizenship, minority-recognition disputes, judicial correction, and regulatory reform or reversal. The study therefore extends existing theory by demonstrating that the relationship between religion and democracy is conditional and institutionally mediated: similar religious identities may produce different governance outcomes depending on legal authority, coalition configuration, judicial intervention, and patterns of social differentiation.

The findings also reveal both functional and dysfunctional consequences of the religion-state relationship. On the functional side, religious autonomy can sustain communal continuity, religious parties can provide organized political representation, and differentiated institutional arrangements can preserve religious practices within a plural society. The persistence of social attachment despite

substantial disagreement likewise indicates that political and religious differentiation does not necessarily eliminate societal cohesion. At the same time, these arrangements generate recurring tensions over equal civic obligation, socioeconomic integration, coalition bargaining, personal-status recognition, and minority political inclusion. The principal governance implication is therefore not the removal of religious identity from public life, but the development of institutional mechanisms capable of balancing religious autonomy with equal citizenship, transparent policymaking, and accountable representation. Such mechanisms may include greater transparency in public funding and coalition commitments, clearer regulatory standards for publicly financed education, legally sustainable military-service arrangements, stronger protection of religious pluralism, and regular monitoring of minority inclusion and public perceptions of equality. These measures should be understood as institutional safeguards rather than as guarantees of eliminating underlying social and political disagreement.

This study has several limitations that should qualify the interpretation of its findings. As a single-country qualitative case study based primarily on documentary and secondary quantitative evidence, it does not capture the full range of lived experiences among Haredi, secular, Palestinian-Arab, Druze, Orthodox, and non-Orthodox communities. The electoral, employment, and public-opinion data also derive from different periods, and the observed associations should not be interpreted as causal relationships. In addition, categories of Jewish religiosity do not represent Israeli society as a whole, while rapidly changing legal and institutional arrangements may alter some of the patterns identified here. Future research should therefore employ longitudinal designs across multiple electoral cycles, comparative analysis with other democracies combining religious-national identity and political pluralism, qualitative interviews with diverse social actors, and multivariate analyses of religiosity, political orientation, citizenship attitudes, and policy preferences. The principal contribution of this study is to demonstrate that religion, coalition politics, and national identity should not be treated as separate pressures on democracy; rather, they constitute interconnected institutional and social processes whose democratic consequences depend on how authority, representation, identity, and equality are negotiated within specific political arrangements.

## 5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that religion, national identity, and democratic governance in Israel are interconnected through institutional, political, and social mechanisms rather than through a single religion–democracy divide. Religious authority operates through established religion–state arrangements in areas such as personal status, education, public funding, Sabbath and kashrut regulation, and military service, while religious parties gain influence through coalition-dependent bargaining. At the societal level, religious identification is associated with differentiated patterns of employment, electoral behavior, and public attitudes, whereas Jewish national identity is constitutionally articulated alongside continuing debates over minority recognition, political inclusion, and democratic equality.

The study contributes to scholarship by integrating four dimensions that are often examined separately: institutionalized religious authority, religious-party strategy, collective identity, and democratic equality. The findings refine existing perspectives by showing that the democratic consequences of religion are conditional and institutionally mediated rather than uniform. Religious autonomy and political representation may coexist with policy contestation, differentiated citizenship, judicial intervention, and regulatory change. The principal theoretical contribution therefore lies in demonstrating that religion, coalition politics, and national identity jointly shape democratic governance through overlapping mechanisms of authority, representation, identity formation, and institutional negotiation.

These conclusions should nevertheless be interpreted within the limitations of a single-country qualitative case study based primarily on documentary evidence and secondary quantitative data. The study does not capture the full range of lived experiences across Haredi, secular, Palestinian-Arab, Druze, Orthodox, and non-Orthodox communities, while the use of data from different periods limits

causal inference and longitudinal comparison. Future research should combine longitudinal and comparative designs with interviews and multivariate analysis to examine how changes in religious authority, coalition configurations, political identity, and citizenship attitudes affect democratic governance over time.

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