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**THE INTERSECTION OF IDENTITY POLITICS AND RELIGIOUS INFLUENCE****\*Yaron Katz**

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**Abstract**

This research investigates the intersection of religion and politics in Israel through the lens of social identity theory, focusing on the Ultra-Orthodox community as a critical player in identity politics. It reveals that conflict is a defining feature of Israeli politics, with various parties leveraging it to gain political advantage. It underscores the unique nature of Israel's political landscape, suggesting that while it may be considered a liberal democracy, it falls short of a secular democracy due to the entrenched role of religious and political parties and the lack of clear separation between state and religion. Social identity theory posits that personal and collective identities are significantly shaped by religious affiliations, impacting individuals' roles, self-perception, and society. The Ultra-Orthodox, a minority within the predominantly secular Jewish population, engages in a complex identity struggle that fuels persistent political debate. Despite their relatively small size, the community exerts substantial political power through support for specialized ultra-Orthodox parties, which command notable representation in the government. Integrating the sector into broader Israeli society has been a focal point of political contention, particularly regarding exemptions from mandatory military service. This issue has contributed to political instability, evidenced by frequent elections and difficulties forming a stable government. The paper forecasts that the enduring social, political, and religious conflicts that have characterized Israel since its formation will continue, reflecting various political factions' diverse aspirations and interests, and the persistent nature of these conflicts is a testament to their endurance. A key issue under debate is the exemption of young Ultra-Orthodox men from military service in favor of studying Torah, funded by government salaries. This controversy has sparked significant political conflict, with secular groups linking low employment rates among Ultra-Orthodox men to their minimal military service. The research concludes that the divide between secular and ultra-politics and biased portrayals often overshadow substantive discussions on cultural and religious issues. Orthodox communities are likely to widen, driven by entrenched social and political interests that perpetuate existing divisions, and the potential widening of this divide is a serious concern.

**Keywords:** Politics, Religion, Influence, Ideology, Culture.

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**INTRODUCTION**

As a collection of guiding beliefs, political ideology has posed challenges for social analysts, given its significant role in influencing individual and communal decisions. Bhambra and Margree (2010) argue that identity politics often leads to the formation of exclusive political alliances based on shared characteristics like religion, race, class, gender, culture, sexual orientation, or disability. Heywood (2007) identifies vital ideological values as a blueprint for a desired future and a vision for a better society. Gjorshoski (2016) explores elements of ideology grounded in democratic principles, such as sustaining the system, protecting citizens' rights and freedom, and preserving public morality. Kirk (2010) introduces ideological principles related to cultural norms, including public morality, customs, rules, continuity, caution, reform, imperfection, freedom, property, volunteer community, limited authority, and a balance between change and consistency. Political ideology is a collection of ideas about the preferred form of government. However, the historical tension between ideology's power and consistency and practical politics' pragmatism and flexibility is a recurring theme in political theory. Bhambra and Margree (2010) argue that the challenge with identity politics lies in how the traditional concept of identity supplants practical politics. They contend that effective practical politics should acknowledge that the identity of a political group arises in response to a specific situation, and maintaining the identity claim becomes obsolete when the underlying need is no longer present.

Some researchers highlight the elusive nature of political ideology, often considered "the most elusive concept in the whole of social science," as ideologies identify themselves based on their position on the political spectrum while also conflicting with other crucial issues within their political camp (Gjorshoski, 2016). The advent of new politics, propelled by social media and charismatic leadership, has prompted criticism of traditional politics grounded in solidarity and identity. New politics asserts that political dialogue must engage with differences across society, challenging the notion that a broad-based movement can be built solely on identity politics (Kumar *et al.*, 2018). Critics argue that identity politics tends to be one-sided, treating identities as static entities primarily serving community interests and defending the sanctity of their identity through political activities rather than prioritizing the broader interests of the entire population (Rectenwald, 2013). In contrast, practical politics is seen as an avenue for addressing political problems and fostering collective recognition (Alexander, 2016).

**Religion and Politics**

Politics has historically been intertwined with religion, with scholars emphasizing the profound connection between the two through the lens of identity politics. Over a century ago, Emile Durkheim (1912/1995) asserted that religious beliefs and social practices operate at group and individual levels. Urbinati and Zampaglione (2016) argue that ideologies often find expression in religious affiliations due to their comprehensive nature. Olson (2011) notes that scholars from various disciplines have extensively discussed the crucial role

of culture in understanding the intricate relationship between religion and politics. Examining the Israeli political system, Maoz and Henderson (2020) elucidate that political elites often manipulate religion to further their primary objective of political survival. They posit that the close alliance between religious and political institutions can create symbols that become contentious issues among different segments of society. This research delves into the role of religion in shaping the identity and culture of the Jewish state and the political ramifications stemming from this identity struggle. The analysis draws on the insights of social identity theory, emphasizing the significance of group identity. The theory underscores how individuals categorize themselves into specific groups and delineates how group affiliations influence intergroup behavior. The inherent belief system within religion elucidates why individuals align themselves with their religious groups. Moreover, the theory recognizes that individual characteristics and group memberships are pivotal in shaping attitudes, values, beliefs, and behavior (Tajfel, 1978; Turner *et al.*, 1987). As illustrated here, owing to the potent political influence wielded by religious grouping, religious identity emerges as a formidable mechanism reshaping the social fabric of Israeli society. Disparities in religious commitment among various subgroups of Israeli Jews manifest in their differing religious beliefs and practices. A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2016 revealed that nearly all Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox adherents observe the majority of Jewish religious traditions, while secular Israelis consistently exhibit lower levels of adherence to these customs. This discrepancy underscores the prevalent conflict of religious identity. Due to the absence of a legal separation between the state and religion, religious influence over general societal life is particularly pronounced. The prevalence of stringent religious laws, reflective of the influential role of religion in every Israeli's life, is attributed to the political power wielded by ultra-Orthodox parties. Despite constituting a minority of the population, the Ultra-Orthodox can bring down the government if their demands are not met, and historical reliance on their support has led governments to seek their involvement in forming majority coalitions.

The identity politics pursued by ultra-Orthodox parties is closely tied to the extreme significance accorded to religious faith. The Haredi leadership perceives a constant threat from spiritual, social, cultural, and political phenomena surrounding the community. These foundational assumptions guide various aspects of the community's life, including clothing, education, marriage matchmaking, and language. The cultural segregation and sectorial coherency within the community aim to shield Jewish culture from influences of Western culture and secularism (Cohen, 2006). The community deliberately distances itself from mainstream Israeli society through residential patterns (living in separate neighborhoods), educational practices (utilizing distinct streams), symbolic representations (unique dress and customs), cultural life (exclusive literature and media), organizational structure (distinctive institutions), and political leadership (Israel Democracy Institute, 2018). Despite cultural segregation, many individuals in the ultra-Orthodox sector live below the poverty line, with the average income level of ultra-Orthodox workers being 62% of that of other workers. However, owing to their substantial political influence, numerous young members of the community opt not to serve in the army and instead devote their time to Torah study, with their salaries supported by the government.

Analyzing the role of religion in Israeli politics through the lens of social identity theory, the contention is that ultra-Orthodox parties have strategically wielded identity politics to acquire and sustain political influence and power in the Knesset, Israel's parliament. Through identity politics, the ultra-Orthodox parties have played a significant role in shaping political dynamics. Traditionally, members of the Haredi community vote cohesively, following directives from their chief rabbis, thus exerting considerable influence in determining the formation of Israel's coalition governments. The growing influence of religious ideologies correlates with demographic shifts, particularly the rapid growth of the ultra-Orthodox population, outpacing demographic trends in other developed countries.

The impact of identity politics is not confined to the national level; ultra-Orthodox parties enjoy formidable representation in local government, surpassing even their presence in the Knesset (State Comptroller Report, 2015). This strong representation is attributed to high voter turnout among the ultra-Orthodox population and comparatively lower voter turnout in the general population during local elections (Blander, 2008; Malach, 2018). Furthermore, the prominence of ultra-Orthodox parties in local government is linked to the heightened relevance of the community's interests in local elections compared to national ones (Ben-Bassat *et al.*, 2013). The influential role of religious identity in Israeli politics is amplified by the country's electoral system, which is grounded in proportional representation. During elections, votes from across the nation are tallied, and parties are allocated seats in the Knesset proportionate to their percentage of votes. This system fosters the presence of numerous small parties, making it challenging for any single party to amass the 61 seats needed to pass legislation and govern independently. The necessity to form coalitions, often comprising several parties, grants disproportionate power to smaller parties capable of influencing the viability of a coalition. Religious parties, including the Ultra-Orthodox, have been integral coalition partners due to their primary focus on preserving the spiritual character of the state rather than central concerns in foreign or economic policy. This alignment makes them convenient partners in coalition-building, reinforcing their sway in the political landscape.

In Israel's history of coalition governments and the absence of a parliamentary majority for any single political party, ultra-Orthodox parties hold significant sway in coalition-building and party politics, leveraging a level of political power that surpasses their numerical size. These parties play a pivotal role in Israeli politics as crucial players in maintaining a delicate balance between left-wing and right-wing blocs. Their influence extends beyond their proportional representation, giving them essential leverage in coalition negotiations. However, caution is warranted, as the assertion of religious identity as a decisive force in intergroup conflict can lead to fundamentalism. The competition between social identities results in one identity asserting dominance over others (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2004). Fisher (2016) elucidates that fundamentalist movements participating in secular political systems can attain prominent positions, enabling them to impose extreme ideologies on society. In the case of Israeli Haredi, Fisher observes that as fundamentalists accrue more political power, their inclination to advance their religious agenda intensifies. While Haredi parties primarily focus on sectorial concerns and exhibit limited interest in external

political matters, they wield substantial political support, consistently participating in nearly every government. Their strategic use of power extends to influencing legislation on issues related to religion, state affairs, and budgets (Shalev, 2019). Consequently, attempts to change the established status quo governing religious practices face formidable challenges. Legislative efforts to diminish the influence of smaller parties have proven mainly unsuccessful, given the deep sensitivity surrounding religion-state issues in Israel. Mainstream parties and politicians, cognizant of this sensitivity, tend to uphold the "status quo" on such matters rather than initiating significant changes (The Jewish Federations of America, 2017).

## Religion and State

The exploration of identity politics has prominently focused on the intricate relationship between religion and the state. Kuo (2017) elucidates that issues of identity and nationhood have become pervasive organizing themes in democratic politics. Social identity, a system of guiding beliefs and symbols, imparts distinctive functions to religious identification within group membership (Yesseldyk *et al.*, 2010). It is important to note that social identities are not isolated entities, and religious identification may interact with other identities (Muldoon *et al.*, 2007; Shechtman & Tanus, 2006; Simon & Ruhs, 2008; Verkuyten & Yildiz, 2007). The issue of dual identities, encompassing both religious and nationalist dimensions, has been a salient feature of Israeli politics since the country's establishment. The ethno-religious notions of state and nationhood were integral to the objectives of Zionism, emphasizing the creation of a "state of the Jews" and underscoring the significant role played by collective threats (Fritsche *et al.*, 2011). Perceptions of existential threats have dominated the Israeli narrative, with a prevailing view that the country faces ultimate threats aiming at the destruction of the "Jewish state" (Heller, 2019). The central role of Jewish history in shaping Israeli and Jewish identity has contributed to a deep-seated sense of insecurity ingrained in the Jewish-Israeli collective experience amid the ongoing conflict with neighboring nations. This conception has reinforced the role of religion in Israeli society and culture (Zerubavel, 1995). However, amid state-building challenges and absorbing successive waves of immigrants, religious issues received limited attention from the public and policymakers (Kimberling, 2001). In recent decades, religious parties have adopted an ideological stance positioning Israel as a nation-state based on religion, aligning with the dominant perception within the right-wing sphere of the Israeli public. This ideological shift has transformed the discourse of the right-wing bloc, advocating for increased nationalism and religious extremism (Talshir, 2019). Israeli politics serves as an example of identity politics rooted in religion, characterized by the dominance of religious groups and the absence of a constitution separating religion and state. The country's Basic Laws define it as a Jewish and Democratic state, with the foundational declaration in the Declaration of Independence (1948) affirming Israel as a 'Jewish state.' The Law of Return (1950) reinforces the Jewish identity of the state, allowing for the 'return' of all Jews. The Law of the Rabbinical Courts (1953) mandates that all Jewish Israelis must marry and divorce according to the Orthodox Chief Rabbinate's rules, despite the majority of Israeli Jews not practicing Orthodox Judaism. Other branches of Judaism hold no legal authority concerning the Israeli state and must adhere to the Orthodox criteria defined by the Chief Rabbinate for Jewish identity.

Miller (2014) explains that in such a close relationship between religion and politics, this connection becomes integral to the state's political identity, protecting religious freedom while rejecting the separation of religion and state, with the Orthodox Jewish Rabbinate officially influencing many aspects of family law. The impactful role of identity politics in Israel as a Jewish state is evident in the policy pursued by the right-wing bloc to pass the Basic Law: Israel - the Nation State of the Jewish People. Enacted by the Knesset in 2018, this law asserts that the Land of Israel is the historical homeland of the Jewish people, emphasizing the State of Israel as the nation-state where Jews realize their natural, cultural, religious, and historical right to self-determination. The law further underscores that the exercise of national self-determination in the State of Israel is exclusive to the Jewish people. Addressing the state's symbols, official language, the status of Jerusalem, the state's connection with the Jewish people, and the Ingathering of Exiles, this law solidifies the intertwining of political identity and religious affiliation in the Israeli context.

The ascendancy of the political identity associated with the right-wing bloc and religious communities attests to the constitutional primacy of the Basic Law over other legislation. According to the Knesset transcripts, the law's status as the outcome of the Knesset functioning as the Constituent Assembly and its classification as a "basic law" implies its constitutional superiority. Despite representing a clear ideological stance, this research seeks to comprehend the government's rationale for adopting a policy emphasizing religious identity to redefine a shared national identity based on the connection between religion and the state. Diverging from conclusions drawn by scholars investigating religious national identities, the research explores alternative perspectives. Awan (2008) posits that transitions to fundamentalist religion are foreseen in contexts of socioeconomic deprivation, political disenchantment, and compromised identity constructions. Rieffer (2003) suggests that the development of religious national identities often involves the identification of "alien others" depicted as threats to the nation's vitality. Simon (2008) finds that the politicization driven by dual identification may lead to shifts from normative political involvement to radicalization, impacting social integration. Laurence and Vaisse (2006) elucidate that religion and national identity often contribute to perceiving religious minorities as disloyal and unwilling to adopt the values of the national community. According to McGregor, Reeshma, and So-Jin (2008), social identity theory indicates that individuals are more inclined to identify with groups when experiencing a sense of uncertainty. Wellman and Tokuno (2004) propose that the threat of religious identity can be perceived as paramount, influencing identity politics more profoundly than other forces. The research then explores the same question within the Israeli context. Alonso (2008) examines the Jewish State as a definition of uniting national character and belonging to a religious community in one term - a unique case where religion defines the boundaries of a geographically dispersed national community. Ben-Porat (2013) contends that religion remains instrumental to the national discourse, albeit with diverse perceptions and significance attached to religious rituals among ethnic groups. Leon (2014) discovers that a fundamentalist religious interpretation of elements of Israeli national identity seeks to position Jewish law as a source for conserving and maintaining Jewish identity. Lehmann (2012) explains that political struggles lead the state to favor ultra-Orthodox observance and

criteria of belonging despite its minority status in the country. Yadgar (2020) argues that the absence of a political definition of Jewishness in a state premised on the notion that Jewishness is a matter of political identity results from Zionist ideologists' failure to provide a proper alternative to the religious framework they sought to overcome. Instead, the state delegated the role of "national gatekeepers" to the rabbis, reinforcing their primitive notions of religion in the understanding of Jewish identity, as perceived by secularist discourse. Smocha (2002) examines Israel's model of ethnic democracy, contending that despite its self-image and international reputation as a Western liberal democracy, Israel functions as an ethnic democracy where Jews dominate the state to advance issues like national security and culture while extending varying rights to its Arab citizens, perceived as a threat. An alternative explanation for the prominent role of religious identity in Israel's national heritage and political system is rooted in the notion that religious fundamentalism often emerges as a response to modern threats (Almond *et al.*, 2003). In the case of Israel's Ultra-Orthodox community, their response to the crisis of modernity is characterized by heightened isolation within closed communities, aiming to safeguard Jewish identity from global influences (Zandberg, 2018). Sharabi (2014) represents the Haredi community as engaged in a battle with the modern world, adopting a belligerent ideology. Despite this struggle against modernity and secularism, the Haredi community has effectively maintained political influence (Etinger & Leon, 2018).

Examining how Ultra-Orthodox Jews perceive the country's character as a source of Jewish roots reveals an excessive role granted to religion in both the public and private spheres of Israeli society. Former Knesset Member Yossi Yona (2012) notes that Israel's national symbols, flag, and national anthem derive from religious sources. The Jewish religion significantly shapes Israel's Basic Law of Return, recognizing the right of Jews worldwide to citizenship, contingent upon maternal Jewish lineage or conversion to Judaism without affiliation to another religion. Religious courts possess near-complete authority over personal status determinations, including marriage, divorce, alimony, maintenance, burials, and conversions. Moreover, religious restrictions extend to various aspects of life, such as the operation of public transportation on the Sabbath and other holy days. This situation engenders a broader conflict with secular segments, given the Ultra-Orthodoxy's separate network of schools, reliance on taxpayer-funded support for large families, and enforcement of a public status quo that has stirred discontent among the secular majority (Ketchell, 2019). Based on the conclusions regarding utilizing the shared national identity concerning the connection between religion and state, the research asserts that the Ultra-Orthodoxy's success in influencing religion and state relations is linked to their unwavering commitment to sectorial issues. This aligns with the overarching understanding derived from decades of political behavior research, emphasizing the centrality of group identities in politics (Huddy, 2003). However, the political impact of national identity hinges on its significance (Wong, 2010), with group identification typically more pronounced among members of minority groups than majority groups (Brewer, 1991). Examining the political strategies of religious communities in identity struggles reveals that traditionally, Judaism holds social significance in the pursuit of recognition and claims within identity-based struggles, asserting that modern cultural and religious pluralism is part of a broader system of class reproduction

(Kaplan & Werczberger, 2015). Ultra-Orthodox religious politics object to modern issues critical in shaping political discourse and altering the global electoral landscape. It is rooted in fundamental cultural and spiritual principles upon which Israel was founded while resisting modern aspects of globalization, including international politics, economy, culture, and technology - issues that a high-tech nation like Israel cannot disregard.

## Conclusion

The research explores the relationship between religion and politics in Israel, employing the social identity theory to analyze the role of religion, particularly within the minority Ultra-Orthodox community, as a tool for identity politics. According to the theory, individuals develop personal and collective identities, with religion significantly shaping one's sense of self (Berger, 1967; Tajfel, 1978). The Ultra-Orthodox community, a minority group in Israeli society, engages in an ongoing identity conflict with the secular Jewish population, leading to a constant political debate. Despite separating from the general population, the Ultra-Orthodox community wields considerable political influence through identity politics. This influence is manifested in their support for ultra-Orthodox parties, which secure significant representation in the government. The integration of the ultra-Orthodox sector into Israeli society has been a contentious issue, sparking political debates and influencing recent elections. Central to this debate is the question of whether ultra-Orthodox Jews should be exempt from mandatory military service. The unresolved nature of this issue has contributed to political instability, prompting multiple elections and hindering government formation. The paper predicts that the deep-seated social, political, and religious conflicts characterizing Israel since its inception will persist, serving different parties' diverse social aspirations and political interests. A critical political argument revolves around the demand for exemptions from military service for young ultra-Orthodox individuals who opt to study Torah with government-funded salaries. This contention has led to a significant political crisis, with secular groups asserting a correlation between the low rate of employment among ultra-Orthodox men and their limited army service. The research concludes that the divide between secular and ultra-Orthodox society will likely widen, fueled by the entrenched social and political interests served by maintaining the existing social bridges. The study underscores the challenge of fostering legitimate debate when identity politics and one-sided portrayals dominate discussions on fundamental cultural and religious issues within Israeli society. The study found that conflict has characterized Israeli politics, which various parties strategically employ to secure political influence. It highlights the distinctive nature of Israel's political landscape, suggesting that while the country may be classified as a liberal democracy, it falls short of being a secular democracy due to the structural inclusion of religious and political parties and the absence of a clear separation between state and religion.

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