

# Populism in Israel

A study of the manifestation of populist rhetoric among  
Israeli right-wing political actors between 2015 and 2020



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# Abstract

This thesis examines four Israeli elections between 2015 and 2020 with the purpose of describing how populist rhetoric has been manifested within right-wing political discourse during this period. Two separate theoretical frameworks are utilized for the analysis, based on theories by Cas Mudde, Jordan Kyle and Kurt Weyland, conceptualizing populism both as an ideology and as a political strategy. The discourse of right-wing political actors during the examined time period has been characterized by significant populist rhetoric, in particular with regard to issues of national sovereignty and security. However, references to economic issues and immigration were not very prominent in the rhetoric. The marginalization of the left-wing escalated as the election campaigns became more polarized and complex political maneuvering through personalistic leadership was a prominent feature. Controversial statements and actions within the immediate period before the elections were generally followed by backtracking afterwards. The increasingly right-wing populist character of the rhetoric can be said to have contributed to a gradual “lowering of the bar” with regard to political correctness as well as the general “turn to the right” of Israeli political discourse.

*Keywords:* Israel, Likud, Yisrael Beiteinu, The Jewish Home, Yamina, Netanyahu, Lieberman, Populism, Right-wing, Rhetoric

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# 1 Introduction

This thesis examines how populist rhetoric has manifested itself within the political discourse of right-wing actors in Israel, focusing on the rhetoric of the Likud party and its leader, Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, during the Israeli national elections in March 2015, April 2019, September 2019 and March 2020.

The two general elections that were held in Israel during 2019 both ended in political deadlock, with no coalition being able to attain a majority in the parliament and form a government. The third consecutive election that was held in March 2020 resulted in a unity government being formed (Haaretz 2020b; Heller 2020).

The three Israeli elections that were held in 2019 and 2020 have been described as being characterized by a divisive political discourse, with a main issue being Israeli prime minister Netanyahu's future role in Israeli politics with regard to his long tenure as prime minister and the criminal investigation conducted against him. The Israeli government has been led by Likud and by Netanyahu as prime minister since 2009 in various constellations (The New York Times 2019a; Voice of America 2019a). Netanyahu came under a criminal investigation in December 2016 and was eventually indicted in November 2019 by the Attorney General of Israel for breach of trust, bribery and fraud (BBC News 2019c).

It has been claimed that many populist concepts have been furthered by Likud, Netanyahu and other right-wing political actors in Israel, years prior to Netanyahu's legal issues (Filc 2009; Walton 2019; Leslie 2017: 76, 78). However, it has also been claimed that there was no significant presence of populism in Israeli political rhetoric prior to the April 2019 election and that it first appeared as a major phenomenon in connection to Netanyahu's legal issues starting in December 2016 (Shany 2019; The Economist 2019; Galson 2019).

## 1.1 Research question and aim

**The research question that this thesis aims to answer is:** *How has populist rhetoric in Israeli right-wing political discourse been manifested from January 2015 until May 2020?*

This thesis aims to provide an increased understanding of the character of the political discourse in Israel by examining the rhetoric of right-wing actors both by approaching populism as an ideology and as a political strategy in order to provide a broader and deeper analysis. The thesis aims to contribute to populist research with regard to Israel, as well as to the general usefulness and theoretical consistency of the theories that provide the basis for the two theoretical frameworks utilized in this thesis.

The emergence of populism within Israeli right-wing political discourse, can be placed within the context of a rise in the influence and power of right-wing populism in Europe and America, a development that has been ongoing from the 1990s up until today. Many multi-party democracies in Europe are facing increased challenges with regard to successful government formation, in large part due to the rise of populist right-wing parties that often have pariah statuses within domestic political environments (Henley 2018; Sierakowski 2018; Galston 2018).

Research concerning Israel, Palestine and the surrounding region typically focuses on the Israeli-Arab conflict and the Israeli domestic political scene has often only been examined as a secondary or tertiary issue. This thesis may provide a unique perspective for populist research as Israel differentiates itself on a number of issues from most states in Europe and America – the usual focal point for contemporary research of populism. Israel is considered to be the most democratic state in the Middle East according to the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index, while also being characterized as a "flawed democracy", mainly due to the religious authorities having hegemony over a range of issues and because of discrimination of minorities (Parmeter 2020; Pfeffer 2018). Israel is also a democracy that has been in near-constant military conflict with its neighbors during its existence, albeit a low-level conflict a majority of the time.

## 2 Literature Review

While the history of populism and research of populism goes as far back as the late 1800s, the research of populism has gained significantly more ground and developed with the rise in popularity and prevalence of populism as a phenomenon in Europe, North America and South America from the 1990s and onwards. The term “populism”, however, is usually provided by observers rather than politicians or political parties themselves and therefore it can be difficult to provide a clear-cut definition of populism as a phenomenon (Kaltwasser et al. 2017: 2-3, 10-11; Kyle 2018: 39-42).

Cas Mudde argues that four main “schools of thought” regarding how to define and approach populism within political research can be identified. The *ideational* approach views populism as a thin ideological construct, excludes socio-economic aspects and focuses upon three core populist concepts – the people, the elite and the general will. The *organizational* approach views populism not as an ideology, but as a strategy used by a political leader to gather support from a large number of unorganized followers in the pursuit of power. This is achieved through popular mobilization through unmediated contact between the leader and followers. The *performative* approach views populism as a socio-cultural and political-cultural phenomenon in which a leader utilizes a certain personal and political style in order to connect to a subset of society. The *discursive* approach views populism as a strategy of political elites to provide meaning to the term “the people” and “the elite” in order to maximize popular support. The main distinction with regard to the ideational approach is that the approach is more abstract and universal in which “the people” as a concept and as a group does not necessarily have any specific innate meaning or characteristic (Mudde 2017: 3-5, 14-15).

Cas Mudde has contrasted populism with pluralism and treats populism as an ideology centered on the view of society as separated into two antagonistic groups – the “pure people” and the “corrupt elite” and that the “general will of the people” should be the priority of political expression and action. Many other ideologies emphasize a distinction between the people and the elite, such as socialism based on the concept of class and nationalism on the concept of nationhood. However, for populism, the opposition between the two groups is based on the concept of morality, creating a division within a given nation between its people and its elite. The pure people are seen as “authentic” while the elite is corrupt. The elite may originate from the same identity group as the people but have chosen to “betray” them, by putting special interests and an “inauthentic” morality over the interests

and values of the real people. Thus, it is possible within populist thought for both millionaires and members of ethnic minorities to be possible representatives of the people. That is, if they are seen as working towards the will of the people, which is in stark contrast with socialism and ethnic nationalism (Mudde 2017: 3-4).

Jordan Kyle has argued that at its core, populism as an ideology can be described as having two main perceptions, that the “true people” of a country are in conflict with “outsiders”, with the “outsider”-group also including “establishment elites” and that nothing should constrain the will of the people (Kyle 2018: 3). In broad strokes, populist politics can be said to be anti-elitist, claim to represent the will of the people, draw an insider-outsider divide and dramatize social divisions by using crisis rhetoric (Kyle 2018: 11-12).

Jordan Kyle has conceptualized three different types of populism, divorced from the classical right-left scale, especially with regard to economic policy. *Cultural populism*, which defines the true people as the “natives” of the country, and often identifies immigrants, minorities, criminals and cosmopolitan elites as the outsiders. *Socio-economic populism*, which identifies the “true people” as members of the working class and outsiders as big businesses and the capitalist elite. *Anti-establishment populism*, which identifies the true people as the “regular” citizens of a country, while generally being fairly inclusive regarding its definition of the true people. Anti-establishment populism refrains from drawing up an excessive amount of intra-societal divisions and portrays outsiders as political elites and the rulers of the state which are said to be run by special interests (Kyle 2018: 3-4).

Margaret Canovan bases her understanding of populism on the tension between two opposing but interdependent styles of politics within multi-party democracies, an idealistic and utopian “redemptive” style and a more minimalist and somewhat cynical “pragmatic” style. The tension between these two styles of politics are then said to create a constant possibility or risk for the growth and popularity of populism (Canovan 1999: 9-10).

Within political science research, there is a tendency to connect populism to nationalism and right-wing ideology. Similar to right-wing nationalism, populist rhetoric often makes a distinction between “the people” and “the others”, which may explain this connection. Populists also tend to see themselves as the true democrats and the “saviors of democracy” and claim they speak directly for the people. Like right-wing movements, they use the rhetoric of speaking for the “silent majority” of “ordinary” and “decent” people whose interests and opinions are said to be marginalized by corrupt elites and politicians as well as minorities. They also place emphasis on national identity, claim a home or a heartland, and emphasize the centrality of specific cultural norms and values (Canovan 1999: 4-6).

The concept of “new nationalism” is also relevant with regard to the connection between populism and nationalism. New nationalism, as a concept, is used to describe a type of nationalism that through its rhetoric focuses on the “enemy within” rather than an external enemy outside the state, which is a characteristic found in more traditional nationalist rhetoric. Mary Kaldor has presented the concept of new nationalism as a conceptualization that describes a regressive nationalism on the rise, as a result of the increased globalization in the world. Kaldor describes nationalism as the principle that the cultural and political aspects of a state are congruent. New nationalism has grown out of the post-Cold War world and appears in areas characterized by insecurity and violence and similar to religious fundamentalism, it excludes all who are not considered to belong to the real people. It grows both from “above” and from “below”, as a popular ideology that is used to rally support in times of upheaval (Kaldor 2004: 162-163, 168).

National narratives and large-population identities, as conceptualized by Yehudit Auerbach and Vamik Volkan, are also relevant with regard to populist ideology. Narratives in general, and particularly national narratives can carry distinct ideological and political meaning, especially in the context of contentious issues regarding identity. By dividing individuals into “us”- and “them”-groups, between those that belong to and can be expected to be loyal to the nation and those who cannot. The manner in which the concept of a nation is defined and promoted, strongly affects the wider worldview of individuals in a society. A strong common denominator for an identity is a shared language, as well as metanarratives which conceptualize the history and the identity of a nation and affects individual identity significantly. They can also be a strong force for mobilization as well as for division of society with references to the past, to glorious victories, historical traumas, as well as the concepts of “home” and national territory (Auerbach 2009: 294-299; Volkan 2001: 83-89).

Connected to populism is also the issue of democratic legitimacy, which has been fiercely debated within contemporary political science academia. Democratic legitimacy is of significant relevance with regard to the friction between nationalist and cosmopolitanist narratives, with these narratives representing different visions of the values society ought to pursue and embody in policy, in Europe and North America in particular. Membership in supranational entities, such as the European Union, and closer transnational cooperation in general in various forms are issues where these ideologies are at odds. Nationalism and the concept of popular sovereignty have traditionally been highly intertwined and arguments for the nation-state being the most fitting environment for Enlightenment values to flourish is a common defense of liberal nationalism, through the application of the Enlightenment doctrine of popular sovereignty upon a national community. There are few political theorists today that don’t take the issue of popular legitimacy into account when discussing the legitimacy of governments, parties and policies. Both nationalists and cosmopolitans refer to the people as a source of legitimacy.



However, while populist ideology makes clear claims regarding who the “real people” are considered to be, within democratic theory, the legitimacy of the people as an entity in itself – who it is that legitimately constitute “the people” is a matter that has been largely neglected (Yack 2001: 517; Näsström 2007: 624-625).

This is known as the so-called “boundary problem”, the issue concerning how to identify who it is that legitimately constitute “the people” in line with democratic theory. The issue is of special significance since no “pre-political” democratic process can be said to have preceded the creation of any democratic system to decide on its membership. These issues are also especially relevant with regard to the issue of refugees, and to what extent non-citizens have a right to be heard in a democratic society. While leading democratic theorists argue for the right to a democratic say for those coercively subjected to or affected by the decisions of a democratic state, this is far from current global practice (Abizadeh 2008: 37-39, 45-46, 54-56).

Most contemporary democrats, including those considering themselves as nationalists and cosmopolitanists can be said to define “the people” according to territorial jurisdictions in some manner. According to the statist-nationalist position with regard to the “boundary problem”, the “demos” – who it is that constitute “the people”, should be defined in line with the borders of the state or the nation, according to civil or national boundaries. The differing cosmopolitanist position emphasizes that true democratic peoples have “no boundaries”, that the demos should include all of humanity, promoting the idea of universal freedom of movement as the ideal to strive towards (Espejo 2014: 466-467, 472). It has been argued that leaving the question regarding who constitutes “the people” open for debate, might weaken democratic theory in favor of cultural and ethnic nationalist arguments that argue for legitimizing the exercise of political power through the often powerful and mobilizing concept of national or cultural self-determination (Abizadeh 2012: 867-868). This is an argument with many real-world parallels, especially in the 21st century where nationalism time and time again has proved its draw as both an ideology and as a social movement or phenomenon (Espejo 2014: 466).

## 2.1 Populism and Israel

Numerous research papers, books and articles regarding Israeli domestic politics have been published since Israeli independence in 1948. Extensive in-depth analyses of the domestic political scene have been made such as the work of Ehud Sprinzak regarding domestic extremism and violence in Israel (Sprinzak 1999), as well as extensive presentations of the regional political landscape and how the

various ethnoreligious groups in the country are represented on the domestic political scene (Yorke 1988; Freedman 2008), and how Israeli domestic politics relate to regional actors and mobilization in times of war (Barnett 1990). A lack of national consensus in Israel regarding foreign policy issues after the Six-Day War in 1967 has been attributed to a development of an increased polarization of the Israeli political scene into “Doves” vs. “Hawks” with regard to these issues and has been said to have resulted in the lack of a clear, long-lasting and decisive Israeli foreign policy (Shlaim & Yaniv 1980: 248).

The amount of research that has been done focusing on populism within domestic Israeli politics is somewhat limited in scope, however. There has been some political science research published regarding a potential connection between Israeli foreign policy and a populist ideology of Netanyahu – with a focus on Netanyahu’s claim to “moral superiority” in defending the country against threats and undermining the legitimacy of any real domestic opposition (Leslie 2017: 76). The presence of the constant crisis-aspect has also been pointed out with regard to Netanyahu’s focus on the perceived constant existential threat that Israel faces from hostile neighbors and from Iran (Leslie 2017: 78). Dani Filc claims that from 1977, the Likud and right-wing parties in Israel have adopted populist policies, in order to carve out an identity and win support in the polls and that populism in Israel has become a hugely significant factor in shaping Israeli politics and society (Filc 2009).

It has been argued that the comparison between contemporary Israeli populism and European and North American populist movements is problematic due to important differences in context. The new wave of populism seen on the rise in Europe and America has been said to be a relatively new phenomenon in Israel and to be constrained by Israel’s multi-party system in which governments typically consist of coalitions of a large number of parties (Weinglass 2019), and that Israeli populism is a phenomenon that is complicated and problematic to describe, with the Israeli centrist parties reportedly also having become more populist, as traditional right-wing and left-wing divisions are significantly different in Israel than in Europe and America (Cohen 2019).

Much of the contemporary writing on Israeli populism is limited to coverage of the subject in news articles and opinion pieces which generally depict Israeli populism as a relatively new phenomenon connected to the rise of Netanyahu as prime minister in Israel (Shany 2019). It has also been argued that Netanyahu can be described as a “parable of modern populism” (The Economist 2019), that the hollow election promises and outbursts that are made each election to his base are typical of populists and populist rhetoric (Walton 2019), that many other populists have drawn their inspiration from Netanyahu (Saakashvili 2019), and that the new wave of populism in Israel is inextricably linked to Netanyahu’s legal issues (Galson 2019).

# 3 Theoretical Framework

To examine the manifestation of populism within the political discourse of Israeli right-wing political actors, this thesis will examine populism both as an ideology and as a political strategy. The ideational approach of Cas Mudde, combined with Jordan Kyle's conceptualization of cultural populism, investigates populism as a right-wing ideology. The organizational approach of Kurt Weyland investigates populism as a political strategy, as a strategic tool utilized by leaders to gain and hold on to power through various means, such as mobilization.

Other approaches to populist research such as the discursive and the performative approaches are based on more abstract views with regard to politics and are somewhat more adapted to and relevant for the European context, viewing politics as a cyclical phenomenon, putting emphasis on political style rather than substance and portraying political situations with a sense of urgency. The ideational and organizational approaches offer flexible and useful tools for the purpose of this thesis, by providing clear definitions regarding ideological positions as well the strategic aspects of populism with regard to real-world actions and statements of Israeli right-wing political actors.

## 3.1 Ideational approach

The theoretical framework for the ideational approach is based on Cas Mudde's ideational model outlined in his article "Populism: An Ideational Approach", that views the core ideas of populism as a perception of a struggle between the "good" or the "real" people and the "corrupt elite", as well as that politics should be an expression of the "general will of the people" (Mudde 2017: 3).

Four "core concepts" are considered central to populist rhetoric: ideology, the people, the elite and general will. In contrast to ideologies such as nationalism and socialism, populism can be said to base its anti-elitism on moral grounds and only secondarily relying on concepts such as class struggle, or the nation, as rallying points against the elite. The moral opposition to the elite is based on viewing the good people as "pure" and "authentic" while the elite is seen as corrupt and "inauthentic" (Mudde 2017: 3-4).

Populism is a so-called “thin” ideology – with a more limited scope and ambition, that does not offer a clear solution-solving model for major socio-economic issues and without containing the consistency and refinement of “thick” ideologies such as socialism and liberalism (Mudde 2017: 4). A prominent feature among populists is that while they employ populist rhetoric, their populist ideological convictions are often regarded as more insincere and questionable, in contrast to right-wing extremists whom are often regarded as presenting themselves as more moderate in public than what they actually are (Mudde 2017: 5). Thin-centered populist ideology rarely exists on its own and is typically combined with another ideology that provides a socio-economic agenda, and positions regarding issues such as egalitarianism, nativism and individualism (Mudde 2017: 10-11).

Cultural populism is a conceptualization that defines the “native” members of the nation-state as “the real people” and “non-natives” such as minorities and immigrants as well as cosmopolitan elites as “the others”. Key themes for cultural populism are religious traditionalism, law and order, national sovereignty and viewing immigrants as potential enemies. The outsider-group is expanded to include the cosmopolitan elites that open the borders and culture of the nation to outsiders and their influence. Outsiders can also include members of political parties that have contributed to removing immigration as an important and urgent political question in the domestic political arena. Central for the crisis of cultural populism is a cultural crisis, that outsiders and cosmopolitan elites are considered to constitute a threat towards the cultural continuity of the state (Kyle 2018: 22-23).

## 3.2 Organizational approach

The theoretical framework for the organizational approach is based on Kurt Weyland’s organizational model outlined in his 2017 article “Populism: A Political-Strategic Approach”. This strategy is conceptualized as a way for a singular leader to build popularity among the population by using direct and unorganized tools to build up electoral numbers in democracies (Weyland 2017: 9).

As a political strategy, populism can be said to comprise a series of approaches and mechanisms for winning and exercising power by managing political participation of voters, support building and governmental authority. These approaches and mechanisms are dependent upon the character of the political actor seeking and exercising power – if it is an individual person, an informal grouping or a formal organization such as political parties and military establishments (Weyland 2017: 8-12).

They are also dependent upon the “principal power capacity” – which refers to the tools this political actor has at his disposal to mobilize support. The two main types of tools that can be utilized are “numbers” and “special weight”. Special weight refers to the privileged position of the political preferences of certain groups and sectors that are able to utilize tools such as economic clout, military coercion and hunger strikes. However, the main tool of populist politicians in democracies with “one person, one vote”-systems is generally “numbers”. “Numbers” can be said to refer to the norm of political equality that criticizes elitism and the privileges that are derived from special weight. This can be placed in contrast with the practice of liberal and pluralist democratic systems that are generally open to the advancement of weighty preferences through consultation with businesses, the lobbying of interest groups and non-violent protests in the streets (Weyland 2017: 10-12).

As a political strategy, populism revolves around an individual politician. This politician rests on personalistic leadership, a drive to boost his own autonomy and power while contesting, pushing aside or dominating other political actors. For a populist politician the focus is on marginalizing the established “political class”. While populists have to deal with business figures after coming to power, they generally try to affirm their autonomy from the elite and seek to marginalize organized civil society and the political influence of the military. Populists make “numbers” count in politics through the ability to mobilize and win over a majority of the voters, through rallying support among “the people” as well as emphasizing their role as the vessels of the “will of the people” by utilizing surveys and popularity ratings in order to overwhelm adversaries in the electoral arena through massive victories in the polls. A typical feature of populists is to hold frequent elections and plebiscites, advertise popularity ratings and to rally their base for demonstrations during times of political trials (Weyland 2017: 10-12).

The importance of mass rallies as a way to mobilize has decreased with the rise, development and changes to the media, with opinion polls, surveys, popularity ratings having risen in importance as a way to demonstrate that the political leaders embody “the will of the people”. These do not require organization in the same manner as mass rallies do on the part of the political leader, while being even more centered on the leader, enhancing their autonomy in the political sphere (Weyland 2017: 10-12).

## 4 Research Design

This thesis takes a foundationalist and positivist position with regard to ontology and epistemology, meaning that the analysis takes its starting point from an objectivist view regarding external reality and observation of it (Marsh & Stoker 2018: 185-188). This approach enables an analysis that can describe and examine the issue at hand without casting too wide a net, since a more anti-foundationalist interpretivist ontology and epistemology might include subjective perceptions to a degree that would deviate from the core purpose of the research question of the thesis. Of course, a more positivist position limits the scope and depth of the examination of the subject matter as well, especially regarding how far the researcher may go in the analysis, with it being more difficult to provide a deeper understanding and interpretation of the social processes that are contextually relevant. Nevertheless, though the aim is that this is to be a positivist study, it's also important to emphasize how it is still inevitably subject to a degree of interpretation on the part of the author.

This thesis is a qualitative single-case study, using content analysis as well as historical events research to examine an overall descriptive research question. A single case-study is an appropriate and common design for descriptive research questions since it can provide an in-depth understanding of the issues at hand (Halperin & Heath 2017: 156).

Content analysis is a method that generates data by the analysis of written, oral or visual materials of various sorts, such as documents, party programmes, speeches, press reports, statistical figures or manuscripts. Content analysis has the benefit of allowing the “coding” of preferences, beliefs and attitudes of otherwise hard-to-reach subjects and thereby increase the subject sample size beyond what would be possible through first-hand means (Halperin & Heath 2017: 160-161).

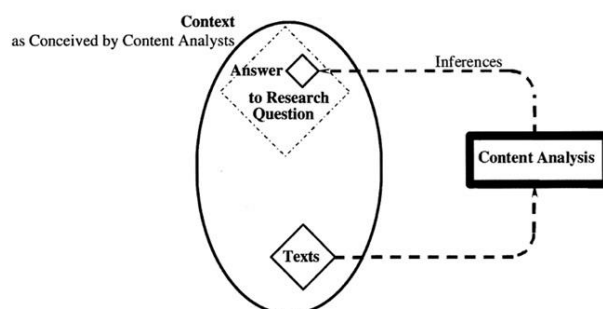


Figure 1: A conceptualization of content analysis research design (Krippendorff 2013: 83).

As a research technique, content analysis can be used to make replicable and valid conclusions from texts or other materials with regard to the context that they are used in. The object of analysis for content analysis is, of course, the content of the material that

is examined. Texts and other materials that are analyzed are written by a person or several people, has a meaning to its author(s) and is produced to have meaning for its readers. This social context must be taken into account. Three different types of content that can be found using content analysis can be identified: content contained within texts, content describing properties of the source that authored the text and content that emerges when analysis of the text is made by the researcher relative to a particular context (Krippendorff 2013: 24-25). The content that is sought after in this thesis touches upon all three definitions but is mainly content that emerges through the analysis itself, since populist content as defined by the theoretical frameworks is rarely described as such by the authors of the material themselves. Through using content analysis in this manner, it will be possible to identify potential populist perceptions, attitudes and strategies as defined by the two theoretical frameworks within the empirical material that is analyzed, by utilizing the concepts derived from the theoretical frameworks that are presented in the operationalization.

While the analysis will mainly be utilizing content analysis, the concepts in the operationalization can also be said to examine the events that have taken place in the time period around the elections rather than just examine the rhetoric by political actors, in order to examine the potential populist character of the political ideology and strategy of these actors. This analysis is closer to historical events research, which looks at one case in a certain time period and examines the impact and implication of certain events for a general theory (Halperin & Heath 2017, pp. 155).

Descriptive questions are connected to the nature of past and current events, phenomena and behavioral patterns and can describe the characteristics, behavior and workings of the object of research. Answers to some descriptive questions can be ascertained relatively easily if it is possible to reach a clear and uncontested factual answer to the question. Other descriptive questions, however, may be the subject to a lack of clarity and controversy. However, if they are researchable and capable of providing significant depth, they may be suitable as research questions and may provide a wide scope for theoretical and empirical investigation (Halperin & Heath 2017: 96-97; 156).

The research question of this thesis mainly aims to be descriptive in nature, however, there is not always an absolute delimitation between descriptive and explanatory questions. The description of the manifestation of populism among Israeli right-wing political actors goes beyond providing a straight-forward descriptive answer to the research question of this thesis. It is also theory testing, which is fitting for the purpose of this thesis, by contributing to the advancement of the given research field through situating itself within existing research on populism and populism in Israel specifically. It therefore tests the strength of the theoretical frameworks for the given empirical case and probes the connection between

underlying theoretical expectations that may be inherent to the theory and the conclusion of the thesis (Halperin & Heath 2017: 114-117).

## 4.1 Case selection

Reasons for choosing a specific case to research may be its potential contribution to general theories, as well as its capacity to serve as a good learning example. The choice of cases can be helped by selection strategies. One selection strategy is a diagnostic case study which furthers understanding of the theories that are used. This is achieved by the utilization of real-world phenomena to broaden the scope of the theoretical models and to make them more relevant and applicable rather than just relying on general models. A deviant case study provides very useful examples for theories by delving deeper into exceptions and known contradictory cases for the theories and may provide clues on how to modify the theories for potential improvement (Marsh & Stoker 2018: 284-285).

As mentioned in the introduction, the manifestation of populist rhetoric among the right-wing in Israel is a phenomenon that can be placed within the context of a rise of the influence and power of right-wing populist parties and politicians in Europe and North America since the 1990s until today. Israel represents a non-typical case for populist research, since Israel is situated outside of the usual focal point for the research of populism, Europe as well as North and South America, and may therefore provide a unique perspective for contemporary populist research. As a state, Israel, within its internationally recognized borders, is considered to be a democracy according to Democracy Index on par with many Western European countries. However, Israel is not considered to be fully liberal or secular in its law and has been in near-constant military conflict with many of its neighbors during its existence, albeit conflicts at a low-level intensity for a majority of the time. Therefore, examining the manifestation of populist rhetoric among the right-wing in Israel may deliver insight into the theoretical consistency and plausibility of the two theories in general and may be beneficial to the research field at large.

For case studies, outliers or so-called “deviant” cases, which don’t fit with existing theory or deviate from established generalizations, can be useful to research in order to examine the reasons for this discrepancy (Halperin & Heath 2017: 207). While the political science research that has been done on populism in Israel has been quite limited, the description of the rise of populism in Israel in the media and by some researchers, has been one that emphasizes a reported increase of populist rhetoric among the right-wing in Israel despite the lack of significant economic problems, or general issues with and opposition towards increasing immigration, which have been identified as main reasons behind a growth of populism in Europe



and America. In Israel, opposition to immigration has mainly been limited to the issue of the arrival of African asylum seekers that numbered in the tens of thousands. Coverage of the matter has been decreasing since the completion of the Israel-Egypt border fence in 2013 which led to the stop of large-scale border-crossing of African asylum seekers through this route (Ben-Zvi 2013). While the main purpose of this thesis is not to identify the specific underlying reasons that are responsible for the appearance of populism in Israel, the choice of Israel for a case study examining the manifestation of populist rhetoric in Israel, would be potentially beneficial to the research field, by helping to advance further research of populism in Israel and by examining the consistency and validity of the various theoretical frameworks and conceptualizations of populism that exists today.

## 4.2 Reliability and validity

Research techniques such as content analysis are expected to yield reliable and valid results, the most important part of reliability being replicability and with regard to validity, its conclusion is required to be valid enough to hold in the face of independently available evidence (Krippendorff 2013: 24-25).

The concept of reliability for content analysis refers to the trustworthiness of the study. The data used in the analysis needs to have been gathered while accounting for potential biases and that it will be understood in the same manner for all that will use the material of the study. Reliability can be operationalized in different manners. Two general ways include the “measurement of reliability”, which rests on the requirement that the research procedure functions in the same manner when applied to the same material regardless of the circumstances around the gathering of the data. The “interpretivist” conception of reliability acknowledges that what is measured is often transitory and needs to be recorded in some manner to provide material to be analyzed. The reliability then, is based on peer review, that the opinions within the research community can be said to be at a consensus with regard to the relevant work (Krippendorff 2013: 267-268).

In order to corroborate the gathered data and thereby improve the overall reliability of the empirical material, it has been triangulated as much as possible. This is particularly useful for theses utilizing content analysis and when a large amount of the data is based on secondary sources which is the case for this thesis (Halperin & Heath 2017: 160-161). In line with the overall positivist direction that this thesis takes regarding ontology and epistemology mentioned earlier, the aim is to provide a high degree of replicability by utilizing references clearly, so that other researchers may indeed be able to reach similar conclusions when examining the same data.

The concept of validity for content analysis refers to the quality of the research. The quality of the research is required to be at a level that it can be confirmed that the analysis is referring to material gathered about phenomena, events and objects that exist in the real world. The content analysis is considered to be valid when that which is claimed to be analyzed is in fact being analyzed, if the conclusions that are arrived at in the analysis of the material can withstand new observations that are made if additional independently available evidence is presented, and if it can be tested against competing theories and interpretations successfully, or if the analysis proves to be sufficiently useful by informing successful actions. The “validity problem” for theses utilizing content analysis refers to the requirement that the research needs to be as truthful as possible and be available to as many people as possible (Krippendorff 2013: 329).

Regarding the requirement of availability, distinction is made between face validity, social validity, and empirical validity. Face validity is the validity that can be ascertained by looking at the most obvious aspects of the analysis to determine if it makes sense with regard to logical consistency. Social validity refers to the ability of the research to contribute to the public discussion regarding important and relevant topics of interest and concern to the public. Empirical validity refers to the quality of the research in relation to its ability to withstand the challenge of additional relevant data being presented, other research efforts made within the same field, and criticism that has been made based on empirical observations relevant to the research question (Krippendorff 2013: 329-331).

### 4.3 Material

The research question of this thesis relates to a recent phenomenon and there is ongoing political and military tension in Israel and the region, however, Israel/Palestine is a region that is extensively researched and covered within academia and in the media. It is therefore rare for material regarding political developments which is first written in Hebrew or Arabic not to be translated into English at some point. So relevant and reliable data such as opinion polls and in-depth international journalistic coverage is abundant. Even so, as the author of this thesis is a Hebrew speaker, material in Hebrew have been examined as well when needed.

For the empirical material, this thesis uses articles, protocols, reports and papers from various journalistic sources, NGO's, IGO's, political actors and governmental agencies. In order to analyze statements from Israeli political actors and groups, this thesis utilizes both direct media outlets of political actors and organizations, as well as secondary journalistic sources, since many statements are not always published

by these actors themselves, often due to their controversial nature, sometimes being withdrawn at a later time. Both international and Israeli news agencies are used. Examples of some of the Israeli journalistic sources that are utilized are Ynet (Yediot Ahronot), The Times of Israel, The Jerusalem Post and Haaretz, which represent various centrist, left- and right-wing points of view within the Israeli political spectrum, which has been kept in mind when gathering material and once again, when needed and possible, the material is triangulated as extensively as possible.

Regarding the delimitation in time, this thesis is mainly focused on the four parliamentary elections between 2015 and 2020. The reasoning behind this delimitation is that the three elections between April 2019 and March 2020 were characterized by having the criminal investigation of Netanyahu as a prominent issue. Therefore, it is interesting to contrast the rhetoric used during these election campaigns with the rhetoric used during the election in March 2015. This may provide a clearer picture of the different manifestations of populist rhetoric utilized by right-wing political actors during the entire time period. Another reason is to place this thesis' research of Israeli populism within the context of the contemporary research of right-wing populism in other multi-party democracies. However, some material from outside of the main time period is utilized as well.

## 4.4 Operationalization

This thesis examines the events regarding the four Israeli elections in succession and applies the two theoretical frameworks – the ideational approach, and the organizational approach, to the empirical material for each election. The theoretical frameworks have been broken down into a number of concepts that are used in order to examine the empirical material that has been collected. The timeline of the elections provides the basic structure of the analysis, beginning with a contextual background relevant to the specific election and then an examination of the time period around the election. The elections that will be examined are the 17 March 2015 election, the 9 April 2019 election, the 17 September 2019 election, and the 2 March 2020 election.

### 4.4.1 Ideational approach – Populism as an ideology

Populist ideologies are conceptualized as containing a “thin” populist ideological construct complemented by an ideological component, in this case, the cultural populist conceptualization that incorporates right-wing nativist and nationalist ideology.

*The “real people” and the “outsiders”* – A portrayal of the “native” members of the nation-state as the real people, a portrayal of the “inauthentic” and corrupt elite, minorities and political opponents as outsiders, the demonization and marginalization of “non-natives” such as ethnoreligious minorities and migrants as well as cosmopolitan elites as enemies and as a threat to the nation. The depiction of members of political parties that have contributed to removing immigration as an important political question as outsiders, and the depiction of an ongoing cultural crisis: that outsiders and cosmopolitan elites are depicted as a threat to the cultural continuity of the state by opening the borders and culture of the nation to outsiders.

*Traditional conservative viewpoints* – Religious traditionalism, law and order and national sovereignty.

*Economic problems of the state are attributed to outsiders.*

*General will* – Placing emphasis on the need for politics to be an expression of the “general will of the people” - the will of the majority or the “silent” majority.

*Rhetoric vs policy - Backtracking and evasion* – Populist ideological convictions are often presented as insincere and questionable and election promises fail to be realized when the election campaign is over.

#### 4.4.2 Organizational approach – Populism as a strategy

Populism is conceptualized as a strategy for a political leader to build popularity among the population using a series of direct and unorganized approaches and mechanisms in order to build up electoral numbers in democracies. The approaches and mechanisms are dependent upon the character of the political actor seeking and exercising power.

*Numbers: Mobilizing and winning over a majority of the voters* – Emphasizing the norm of political equality which criticizes elitism and the privileges that are derived from special weight, emphasizing the leader’s role as a vessel of the “will of the people”, typically by pointing to opinion polls, surveys and popularity ratings, as well as rhetoric emphasizing the leader’s goal of overwhelming adversaries in the electoral arena through massive victories in the polls.

*The delegitimization or marginalization of organized civil society and the political influence of the military.*

*Rallying the political base of the leader for demonstrations and manifestations during times of political trial.*

*Holding frequent elections and plebiscites.*

*Personalistic leadership* – A leader’s attempt to increase his own autonomy and power while contesting, pushing aside or dominating other political actors by the marginalization of the established “political class” through the exchange of political favors and encouraging defections of individual politicians as well as subgroups within political parties.

## 5 Analysis

The analysis examines the four elections that were held in Israel from March 2015 to March 2020 and their respective campaigns and aftermaths. The examined Israeli right-wing parties are all political parties with nationalist and conservative political ideologies with regard to Israeli-Palestinian relations, foreign policy and national sovereignty issues. These parties include Likud, Yisrael Beiteinu, the varying constellations of religious Zionist parties (The Jewish Home in 2015, Union of Right-Wing Parties (URWP) and New Right in April 2019, Yamina in September 2019 and March 2020) and Otzma Yehudit (Jewish Telegraphic Agency 2020).

The two Israeli Haredi (Ultra-Orthodox) parties in the Knesset (United Torah Judaism and Shas) have not been included in the analysis. While the parties are generally socially conservative and have been aligned with Likud and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu during all of the four elections, the parties are more difficult to place on the traditional left–right political spectrum, since the parties mainly position themselves as representing and working for their respective Haredi constituents within Israeli society and have been part of left-wing governments in the past (Jewish Telegraphic Agency 2020).

### 5.1 17 March 2015 election

Between March 2013 and December 2014, the right-wing parties Likud, Jewish Home and Yisrael Beiteinu were part of a government coalition with the centrist parties Yesh Atid headed by Yair Lapid, and Hatnua headed by Tzipi Livni. Tensions arose within the coalition with regard to a number of issues, but particularly the Likud-sponsored so-called “Jewish State”-law, formally known as “Basic Law: Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People”. These tensions eventually led to Netanyahu firing his ministers from the centrist parties, and for fresh elections to be announced (CBC News 2014).

The election results gave the pro-Likud right-wing and the Haredi parties a majority of seats in the Knesset (the Israeli parliament), and Netanyahu was able to form a government after receiving the mandate from the President, albeit after long negotiations which concluded just hours before the mandate’s deadline (Staff 2015).

### 5.1.1 Ideational analysis

#### *The “real people” and the “outsiders”*

The proposed “Jewish State”-law became a contentious issue within Israel before and during the elections. Its supporters have claimed that the law upholds Israel’s Jewish character without infringing upon its democratic character or the civil rights of any Israeli citizen, including its large Arab minority. However, the law has been criticized for reserving the right of national self-determination within Israel for the Jewish people, for defining Israeli settlements as a “national value” and for downgrading Arabic from a co-official language along with Hebrew to a language with a “special status” (CBC News 2014). The efforts by right-wing members of the Knesset to advance the “Jewish State”-law, to define into law who has “national rights” within the country can be seen as an effort to underline that the “native members” of the state constitute the “authentic” and “real” people for which there are special rights such as national self-determination, even though its supporters maintain that the law is largely symbolic, does not infringe upon Israel’s democratic character and does not affect the civil rights of minority groups in the country. It is important to note that the reason why the introduction of the law may be seen as controversial despite of its largely symbolic nature, is because it has been proposed in a political atmosphere already characterized by tensions and division with regard to rivalling narratives in relation to history and identity.

During the election campaign, Netanyahu stated that “I think that anyone who moves to establish a Palestinian state and evacuates territory, gives territory away to radical Islamist attacks against Israel”, “The left has buried its head in the sand time after time and ignores this, but we are realistic and understand”, “You can’t carry out the things that were laid out in the Bar Ilan speech ... when all you have on the other side is terror. There are no forces for peace, no partner for peace.” (Beaumont 2015a). Describing the peace process as futile and doomed to failure due to the hostility of “the others” as well as a characterization of leftist political actors in favor of negotiations with and concessions to the Palestinian Authority (PA), as also giving concessions to radical Islamist militants that will then attack Israel, can be interpreted as including the left into the “outsider” group, that is doing the state a grave disservice. This is not a new argument within Israeli politics, however. The Israeli withdrawal from Gaza in 2005 has frequently been characterized within the right-wing in Israel as the main reason behind the Hamas takeover of the territory in 2006 and has been used as an argument against any future territorial concessions.

One of Netanyahu’s more controversial statements during the election campaign was regarding Arab voters being “bussed in droves” to the polls. On the day of the election, he posted a video on his Facebook page, warning that the “right-wing rule” of the country “is in danger”, as left-wing NGO’s were bussing Arabs to vote “in droves”. The statement was criticized for delegitimizing the status of Arab citizens

of Israel and their right to participate in the elections (Zonszein 2015; BBC News 2015; Netanyahu 2015; Beaumont 2015b). This remark can be said to be a rather clear marginalization and demonization of a minority group through populist rhetoric, that their right to participate in the election is seen as less legitimate than that of the majority group and that it poses a threat, albeit formulated as a threat to the “right-wing rule” of the state rather than the state itself, but clearly identifying the Arab group as part of “the others” as opposed to being a part of “the real people”. Pointing out left-wing organizations as responsible can be seen as a characterization of these political opponents as constituting a threat, as well as being regarded as being part of “the others” as well.

During an election rally, Netanyahu also stated that there was a conspiracy of foreign governments and Israel’s left-wing to unseat him, that a “massive fortune” of foreign funds had poured into the country and because of this, the right-wing did not have enough votes to create a formidable governing coalition (Beaumont & Zonszein 2015). This is a rather clear accusation towards left-wing political opponents of undermining the Israeli democracy with foreign funds.

Yisrael Beiteinu continued to promote its leader Avigdor Lieberman’s peace plan for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that has become widely known as “The Lieberman Plan”, first proposed in 2004. It has attracted controversy due to the plan’s proposal to transfer some Arab-populated towns in Israel along the border to the West Bank to a future Palestinian state and the demand that all citizens would have to pledge an oath of allegiance to the state in order to keep their citizenship (Hoffman 2019a). By redrawing the borders according to ethnic division within the state between citizens, this proposal plays upon the “real people” and “outsider” paradigm with a proposal to exclude some Arab towns from the state and with all likelihood, eventually also Israeli citizenship from the residents of these towns. The oath of allegiance can be argued to directly call the loyalty of the Arab minority into question as well, by arguing that this loyalty needs to be checked and verified in order to safeguard the security of the state.

#### *Traditional conservative viewpoints*

During the election campaign, Netanyahu largely focused on national security issues and Likud’s foreign policy platform focused on working towards preventing a nuclear-armed Iran, guaranteeing no further land concessions to the Palestinians, no release of Palestinians convicted of terrorism and that Jerusalem would remain the undivided capital of Israel (Hoffman 2019a). Netanyahu also promised to expand construction of Israeli settlements in East Jerusalem, the section of the city claimed by the Palestinians as their capital, stating that “As long as Likud is in power, there will be no concessions or withdrawals.”, “We are building in Jerusalem, in all Jerusalem. This isn’t the way of the left, this isn’t the way of Tzipi [Livni] and Bougie [Herzog]”, referring to the leaders of Likud’s main rival in the election, the Zionist Union (Beaumont & Zonszein 2015; Staff, Toi & AP 2015).



Likud's center-left rival, the Zionist Union, focused largely on socio-economic issues such as the lack of housing and the high cost of living in Israel. As this focus saw the Zionist Union's prospective numbers increase in the polls, Netanyahu made a number of statements described as a further move to the right, pledging to maintain building in Israeli settlements, that there would be no Palestinian state and no further concessions to the Palestinians if he was re-elected, as well as warning of the danger of the spread of Islamist groups and growing support for Arab-Israeli parties (CNBC 2015; Diamond 2015). The prioritization of the Iranian nuclear issue and the opposition towards the release of Palestinian prisoners, land concessions with the Palestinians, establishment of a Palestinian state and dividing Jerusalem are typical contemporary conservative stances within Israeli politics.

The Jewish Home party positioned itself during the election campaign as "the only incumbent party in Israel that opposes any type of Palestinian state west of the Jordan River", as well as opposing a one-state solution as an "infeasible and dangerous" idea. The party instead supported the annexation of Area C in the West Bank, which contains all Israeli settlements and retaining the status quo with regard to Palestinian-administered Area A and B (Hoffman 2019a). The party's leader, Naftali Bennett stated that Israel would never cede "a centimeter of land" to the Palestinians and that "A people cannot be an occupier in its own land" (Beaumont & Zonszein 2015). The Jewish Home positioned themselves clearly as a conservative and nationalist force with regard to the annexation of the settlements, and opposing a one-state solution, referring to this being a danger to national security. While the Jewish Home has been considered to have positioned itself to the right of Likud, with it previously being the main faction to openly oppose any type of Palestinian statehood after the Oslo Accords, however, now the Jewish Home to a large extent shared this stance with the larger and more mainstream Likud party which can be seen as a general hardening of the positions of the Israeli right-wing.

### *General will*

Netanyahu's "shift to the right", in particular his remark regarding the bussing of Arab voters to the polls by left-wing NGO's (Zonszein 2015; BBC News 2015; Netanyahu 2015; Beaumont 2015b), can be interpreted as a rallying cry towards the Likud base to come out and vote for Likud in order to maintain the will of the people. That the real people, the silent majority, corresponding largely to the Likud base, embodies the general will that must be heard and not be compromised by the actions of the left-wing and the Arab minority.

During the rally when Netanyahu stated that foreign governments and the Israeli left-wing were conspiring to unseat him with massive foreign funds, he also stated that "If we don't close the gap, there is a danger that a left-wing government will come into power, despite the fact that most of the public wants me as prime minister", "Those sending the money, they don't think about our problems here in

Israel,” “They want one thing. They want to make sure the left rises to power.” (Beaumont & Zonszein 2015). This is a rather clear accusation towards Netanyahu’s left-wing political opponents, that they are undermining the will of the people together with foreigners who do not take the problems of the Israeli public into consideration, only wanting to bring down the right-wing government which the statement clearly projects is representing the true will of the people.

*Rhetoric vs policy - Backtracking and evasion*

Following the election, Netanyahu stated that he regretted his statement about Arab voters, with the mainly Arab Joint List rejecting the apology. Netanyahu stated that "I know the things I said a few days ago hurt some Israeli citizens", "My actions as prime minister, including massive investment in minority sectors, prove the exact opposite.", "I think, similarly, that no element outside the state of Israel should intervene in our democratic processes.", "I wasn't trying to suppress the vote ... I was calling on our voters to come out.", "I'm very proud to be the prime minister of all Israel's citizens." (BBC News 2015; CNN 2015). It is of note that Netanyahu apologized for the remark regarding Arab voters after the election, when he openly used the idea of the Arab voters representing a threat in order to rally support among the right-wing Likud base. However, it can also be said that Netanyahu did not fully retract the statement or question its factual validity.

Netanyahu seemingly disavowed a two-state solution during the election campaign by stating that there would be no Palestinian state established while he is prime minister. However, a few days after the election, Netanyahu stated that "I don't want a one-state solution. I want a sustainable, peaceful two-state solution", "I haven't changed my policy". Netanyahu stated that his statement was a reflection of the situation on the Palestinian side, pointing to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas's pact with Hamas to create a unity government. "I'm talking about what is achievable and what is not achievable", "If you want to get peace, you've got to get the Palestinian leadership to abandon their pact with Hamas and engage in genuine negotiations with Israel." He stated that the same conditions for a sustainable peace that he staked out in 2009 during his Bar Ilan Speech still holds, based on a demilitarized Palestine and the demand that the Palestinians recognize Israel as a Jewish state (Diamond 2015). Without elaborating when making the original statement, Netanyahu managed to position himself to the right and thereby attract potential voters from the right-wing base and then later offer a clarification of his position, in order to realign himself with the international consensus regarding the issue to regain legitimacy with the international community.

The concept *Economic problems of the state are attributed to outsiders* was not prominent in the rhetoric of right-wing political actors during the time of this election.

### 5.1.2 Organizational analysis

#### *Numbers: Mobilizing and winning over a majority of the voters*

Netanyahu's remark regarding the bussing of Arab voters by left-wing organizations constituting a threat against the right-wing rule of the country (Zonszein 2015; BBC News 2015; Netanyahu 2015; Beaumont 2015b), can be interpreted as a step in rallying his supporters in order to overwhelm his political adversaries, both on the left and right. By making this statement, he positioned Likud further to the right in order to rally the right-wing base behind Likud and to take votes from the Jewish Home party, while also delegitimizing and demonizing the Israeli left-wing.

After the election and government formation process, and after the start of the criminal investigation of Netanyahu in December 2016, Likud politicians lashed out at state institutions and actors. The Shin Bet internal security service was called "cowardly and delusional" and security chiefs critical of the government were characterized as "leftists". Netanyahu also targeted the conduct of the Israeli police in a Facebook post, accusing them of leaking details of the investigation of Netanyahu to the press (Kershner 2017). These remarks, made in 2017, targeting state institutions such as the police and the Supreme Court directly, can be interpreted as a form of anti-elitist political strategy – that the prime minister is carrying out the will of the people and the persecution of the leader therefore amounts to going against the wishes and legitimate demands of the people.

However, it is important to note that former security officials, members of the Justice Department, and members of the right-wing, including Likud veterans have criticized Netanyahu and the Israeli government for practices targeting the democratic institutions of the state, including efforts to control the media, limiting the power and influence of the Supreme Court and undermining the military. The Attorney General of Israel criticized efforts in the Knesset to obstruct the investigations against Netanyahu. President Rivlin also stated that "statesmanship has come to an end" and that the country was "witnessing the winds of a second revolution or coup" (Kershner 2017).

#### *The delegitimization or marginalization of organized civil society and the political influence of the military.*

The aforementioned remark about the bussing of Arab voters to polling stations (Zonszein 2015; BBC News 2015; Netanyahu 2015; Beaumont 2015b), can also be seen as a delegitimization of civil society organizations as the remark specifically identified left-wing NGO's as responsible and that aiding Arab voters to get to polling stations is a threatening and illegitimate action.

As mentioned previously, Netanyahu stated that anyone working towards establishing a Palestinian state would be giving up territory to radical Islamists for

attacks against Israel, that the Israeli left ignores this, and that all there is on the other side is terror (Beaumont 2015a). This can be seen as a marginalization of left-wing civil society and accusing it of collaboration with an enemy, bringing terror to the country by “burying its head in the sand” and ignoring the consequences of its actions.

*Rallying the political base of the leader for demonstrations and manifestations during times of political trial.*

The coalition government led by Netanyahu was dissolved before the end of its expiration date. Noteworthy during the election was the rise of the new center-left opposition alliance Zionist Union that was decidedly positioning itself as unwilling to govern alongside Netanyahu in contrast to the position of the centrist parties in the previous election which were willing to be part of a coalition with Likud and the Jewish Home (Kershner 2014).

During the election campaign, Netanyahu stated that “We will go street by street, neighborhood by neighborhood to gather the people to vote to bring a nationalist government.” (Beaumont & Zonszein 2015).

*Holding frequent elections and plebiscites.*

The election was a snap election, as the last election was held in January 2013, a little more than two years earlier, and the next election was originally scheduled for 2017. The bill that dissolved the Knesset was initiated by the Likud party after Netanyahu fired Livni and Lapid from the cabinet (CBC News 2014). However, it is also important to note that snap elections a year or two before the original election date is a relatively common phenomenon in Israel historically.

*Personalistic leadership*

When Reuven Rivlin was running for the Israeli presidency in 2014, Netanyahu tried to recruit Elie Wiesel, a Holocaust survivor and Nobel Laureate for the job, even though he was not an Israeli citizen at the time, and later Netanyahu explored the idea of abolishing the presidency altogether. Rivlin has positioned himself against attempts by the government to marginalize and reduce the independence of the courts and the media and has accused Netanyahu for having a lack of “statesmanship” (The New York Times 2019b).

Netanyahu delivered a speech to the US Congress in March 2015, just before the election, criticizing an emerging nuclear deal with Iran. The speech was arranged with US Republican leaders and was not coordinated with the White House ahead of time (Staff, Toi & AP 2015). This can be seen as a very clear effort by Netanyahu to get his message across as an autonomous leader who is able to deliver, having political clout abroad as well as domestically.

The government formation after the election was not characterized by the breaking up of political parties in order to build a coalition. While this is something Netanyahu has managed to do earlier, after this election he managed to gather a majority in the Knesset, albeit a slim one, and was able to form a government before his mandate ended.

The aforementioned targeting of civil servants and state institutions by Netanyahu and other members of the right-wing (Kershner 2017), can be seen as a way to marginalize voices of criticism against the government, both within the right-wing sphere and outside of it.

## 5.2 9 April 2019 election

A new centrist alliance, Blue and White, was formed before the elections, consisting of Yair Lapid's Yesh Atid and the newly founded parties of the former Israeli chiefs of staff, Benny Gantz, Moshe Ya'alon and Gabi Ashkenazi. In these elections, Blue and White managed to achieve a tie with Likud (Zilber 2019).

After the election, center-right Kulanu, Religious Zionist URWP, and the ultra-Orthodox parties publicly pledged to support Netanyahu to form Israel's next governing coalition (The New York Times 2019b).

The right-wing and Haredi parties gained an overall parliamentary majority in the election as they did in 2015 and Netanyahu received the mandate to form a government. However, the coalition talks between Likud and Avigdor Lieberman's right-wing Yisrael Beiteinu party, broke down shortly before the deadline for Netanyahu's mandate to form a government and Netanyahu was left short of a parliamentary majority. With the mandate likely to pass to Gantz, Netanyahu instead opted for holding fresh elections, which the Knesset approved (The New York Times 2019c; Kirby 2019).

On 28 February 2019, the Attorney General of Israel, Avichai Mandelblit, announced his intent to indict Prime Minister Netanyahu on three charges which included bribery, fraud, and breach of trust (BBC News 2019c).

### 5.2.1 Ideational analysis

*The “real people” and the “outsiders”*

Netanyahu publicly stated during the election campaign that if the smaller right-wing parties would fail to unite it before the election, it could lead to some of them

not crossing the electoral threshold and thereby making way for the rise of a coalition of the left. Netanyahu actively worked towards incorporating Otzma Yehudit together with the other religious Zionist parties in order to prevent right-wing votes being “wasted”. Some of the policies of Otzma Yehudit do not differ significantly from some of the more hardline elements within the other right-wing parties in Israel, such as a proposed annexation of the West Bank, unrestricted settlement construction, opposition to a Palestinian state, punitive responses to terror attacks and advancement of Israel’s Jewish character in the educational, social, and judicial systems. However, Otzma Yehudit stands out for calling for the emigration of non-Jews from Israel and the expulsion of Palestinians and Israeli Arabs who refuse to declare loyalty to the state and for the termination of the status quo on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem in order to apply Israeli sovereignty over the site (Staff 2019a). That these views were allowed into the mainstream through their acceptance both into the established Religious Zionist political alliance, which the prime minister actively worked towards, as well as into a potential Likud-led government can be said to constitute a “lowering of the bar” regarding acceptable policy and ideology within the Israeli right-wing.

During the election campaign, Netanyahu stated with regard to the recently passed “Jewish State”-law that “Israel is not a state of all its citizens”, “According to the basic nationality law we passed, Israel is the nation state of the Jewish people – and only it.”, “...there is no problem with the Arab citizens of Israel. They have equal rights like all of us and the Likud government has invested more in the Arab sector than any other government”. As the comments caused significant attention and criticism in Israel, Netanyahu made a new statement regarding the issue in which he stated that Israel is a “Jewish, democratic state” with equal rights, but “the nation state not of all its citizens but only of the Jewish people” (The Guardian 2019). This statement is somewhat contradictory, describing a state as “not a state of all its citizens” strongly hints that the state is providing special rights for some of its citizens. While the law refers to the right of self-determination and national rights in the sense of the profile and character of the state, spelling out that some citizens have certain rights and some do not, seems to be taking another step towards implying that the state is not inclusive of all of its citizens and will not have the same role for all of them in the same manner.

During the election, the Likud party dispatched election-day observers equipped with cameras to polling stations in Arab towns. Justice Hanan Melcer, chairman of the Israeli Central Elections Committee, stated that Israeli law only allowed for filming at polling stations during “extraordinary circumstances” and Likud was ordered to remove the equipment. Likud party officials stated its actions were meant to counter “widespread voter irregularities” in areas that were at high risk of voter fraud. Netanyahu defended the surveillance, saying the measure was necessary to prevent voter fraud and to “ensure a fair vote”. Likud lawyer Kobi Matza stated that “The cameras were not hidden, they were out in the open, and were in places where

there is a high suspicion of fraud”, “The problem is with those people in the Arab sector” and that “The cameras were intended to preserve the purity of the vote.” (Lis 2019; Pileggi 2019). These statements target the Arab minority directly for alleged voting fraud, that their loyalty and commitment to the state needs to be checked, lest a threat towards the democratic process be allowed to remain undeterred. This can be said to constitute a demonization and marginalization of the Arab minority, as in the earlier election, where these communities were specifically targeted and blamed for voting irregularities.

Netanyahu criticized the presence of Palestinian flags during a protest against the Nation-State Law in Tel Aviv, organized by the Higher Arab Monitoring Committee, a non-governmental umbrella organization that represents Israel’s Arab community in the political sphere. In relation to the event, Netanyahu stated that “there is no greater testament to the necessity of this law”, “We will continue to wave the Israeli flag and sing Hatikvah with great pride”. The committee had submitted a formal petition to the High Court, claiming that the Nation-State Law discriminates against non-Jews. Netanyahu called protests against the Nation-State Law "absurd" and that “There are suggestions that we should change the flag and the anthem in the name of ‘equality’, that there is opposition to the “nation-state” idea abroad, but first of all in the State of Israel – [it is] something that undermines the foundation of our existence. For this reason, the attacks from leftist circles that define themselves as Zionists are absurd and reveal the depths to which the Left has fallen.” (The Jerusalem Post 2018). These statements can be seen as stating that expressing national sentiment that does not align with that of the state, is considered a potential threat and that the waving of the Palestinian flags shows a need for the law can be seen as referring to a cultural crisis, that diversity regarding national and ethnic belonging is a threat to the cultural continuity of the state, undermining the very “existence” of the state.

#### *Traditional conservative viewpoints*

During the campaign, Netanyahu vowed to extend Israeli sovereignty to the settlements in the West Bank, to not dismantle a single settlement and once again to prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state. The stated intention to annex parts of the West Bank was criticized by Blue and White leader Benny Gantz as “irresponsible” and as a ploy by Netanyahu to win votes for the Likud, however, Blue and White did not express outright opposition to the idea per se (Holmes 2019; BBC News 2019a).

Lieberman resigned from the government in November, complaining of a soft policy toward Hamas and the party’s subsequent campaign message was that it would only join a coalition that would allow a proper “fight against terrorism in the south” and enact a law to draft ultra-Orthodox males into the military (The New York Times 2019b). These positions can be seen as traditional conservative and

right-wing stances within the Israeli political sphere, while still positioning the party outside of the immediate Likud-led bloc.

Netanyahu also called voting a “sacred act” when he voted in Jerusalem. “You need to choose well, but I can't tell you for whom,” he said. “Or I can, but I'm not going to. God willing, Israel will win.” He told Likud supporters not to be “complacent”, urging them to vote, stating that his “leftist” rivals could still win (BBC News 2019a). While Netanyahu and the Likud party are secular, this statement can be seen as playing on religious concepts in order to rally the traditionalist and conservative constituency of the right-wing.

During the election campaign, Naftali Bennett of the New Right criticized Netanyahu for not being hard enough on Hamas in Gaza in response to their rocket attacks on Israel. Bennett vowed to "defeat" Hamas if the New Right would win the election. He unveiled a five-point plan that included "pounding Hamas from the air", "targeted assassinations" of the group's leaders, and the "permanent demilitarization" of Gaza. He also accused Netanyahu for working with Trump on his peace plan as Bennett opposes any type of Palestinian state, describing it as a threat to Israel's existence. Ayelet Shaked of the New Right argued that the Supreme Court has a liberal bias and intervenes too much in the decisions of the government and promised to work for the Knesset to have the power to reinstate laws struck down by the Supreme Court (Greenberg 2019).

#### *General will*

After the election, Netanyahu claimed an “incredible victory” and “a fantastic achievement, an enormous achievement, which is almost unfathomable”. However, after his failure to form a government and fresh elections were called, Netanyahu stated that “the public in Israel made a clear decision. It decided that I will be prime minister, that Likud will lead the government, a right-wing government. The public voted for me to lead the State of Israel” (Wootliff 2019a). This can be interpreted as an attempt to characterize the new elections as unnecessary, being forced on him because of inauthentic political actors going against the will of the people. That the new elections were not for the sake of the Likud-led government or Netanyahu’s political survival, but the elections were for the sake of the voters that elected him in the first place, whose will now runs the risk of being marginalized.

As mentioned earlier, the equipping of Likud observers with cameras at polling stations in Arab towns, can be seen as a way to call into question the ability of the election to produce the will of the majority and the real people, unless intervention is taken by the representatives of the silent majority.

The concepts *Economic problems of the state are attributed to outsiders and Rhetoric vs policy - Backtracking and evasion* were not prominent in the rhetoric during the time of this election.



## 5.2.2 Organizational analysis

### *Numbers: Mobilizing and winning over a majority of the voters*

As mentioned earlier, Netanyahu made a statement after his failure to form a government and fresh elections were called, that “the public in Israel made a clear decision. It decided that I will be prime minister, that Likud will lead the government, a right-wing government. The public voted for me to lead the State of Israel” (Wootliff 2019a). These remarks were clearly indicating that Netanyahu was the embodiment of the will of the people and the choice of the people to lead the government.

The Israeli state attorney recommended to indict Netanyahu on charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust. Netanyahu denied all charges and accused police, prosecutors and the media of orchestrating a political witch hunt aimed at influencing the election and to topple him (Voice of America 2019a; BBC News 2019a). Aiming his criticism against state institutions and state actors can be seen as a way to differentiate himself as a leader with support of the people, against the established elite and governmental actors able to utilize special weight, who would aim to disrupt the elections from carrying out the will of the people.

### *The delegitimization or marginalization of organized civil society and the political influence of the military.*

During the election campaign, Netanyahu described Gantz and the other former generals within Blue and White as “leftist” and “weak”, “What determines security isn’t the chiefs of staff, but the policies of politicians”, “These chiefs of staff had a policy that was wrong. If they become politicians, we’re sunk. They have almost no understanding, I would say less than zero, of these issues.” (Zilber 2019).

### *Rallying the political base of the leader for demonstrations and manifestations during times of political trial.*

Netanyahu’s response to the Israeli Arab protests where Palestinian flags were flown, that patriotic actions and demonstrations needed to be held in response to the event (The Jerusalem Post 2018), can be seen as a rallying cry towards his supporters, which would be particularly useful as the progression of the criminal investigations against him was being covered increasingly in the Israeli media.

### *Holding frequent elections and plebiscites.*

After Netanyahu’s failure to form a government, Netanyahu successfully dissolved the parliament and announced fresh elections. Netanyahu’s statement that the Israeli public had clearly decided that Likud should lead a right-wing government and that he should be prime minister (Wootliff 2019a), can be interpreted as a way to justify the new elections as an action taken by Netanyahu in order to serve the people and fulfill their will which wasn’t being heard, instead of portraying it as an action taken to improve his position and political standing and that of the Likud party.

### *Personalistic leadership*

The breakdown in negotiations between the Likud and Yisrael Beiteinu was publicly ascribed to Lieberman's insistence on the passage of the Haredi conscription bill. Netanyahu turned to the center-left Labor party two days before the deadline of his mandate with the hopes of recruiting it into a Likud-led government, offering prominent minister positions. However, Labor refused the offer (Kirby 2019). Netanyahu stated that Lieberman's "anti-Haredi stance" was a "gimmick" meant to increase the popularity of the Yisrael Beiteinu party. It has been suggested that Lieberman's political move specifically targeted Netanyahu, because of a complicated and problematic history between the two politicians (Avishai 2019a). Lieberman's stance, demanding concessions that Likud's Haredi partners would not have accepted, can be interpreted as both way to distinguish the party ideologically and himself as a leader, standing firm in his convictions, and as a way to take advantage of Netanyahu's weak position, as he was facing an imminent indictment and being unlikely to form a government without Lieberman's party.

That Netanyahu preferred to dissolve the Knesset and announce fresh elections, even though the other right-wing and Haredi parties having publicly pledged to support Netanyahu in forming Israel's next government (The New York Times 2019b), can be seen as a political maneuver intended to marginalize other potential candidates for prime minister, namely Gantz and other prominent members of Likud in order to lessen their chances to be able to form a government.

The Likud candidates that were nominated in the party's primaries in February 2019 have been characterized as being mainly non-populists, with many having been at odds with Netanyahu in the past scoring high places on the list (Harkov 2019). The prospect of another Likud politician rising to the challenge of the prime minister spot would have been very problematic for Netanyahu as well, as his imminent indictment would legally disqualify him to serve as any other minister in the government apart from prime minister.

The political campaign run by Likud and Netanyahu has been described as polarizing, while Netanyahu retains broad support and his governance has been described as improving the Israeli economy, security and foreign relations, having received unprecedented support by a U.S. president during his rule (The New York Times 2019a). During the election campaign, U.S. president Donald Trump recognized Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights, considered by some to be a paradigm-shifting event for US policy in the Middle East and an "election gift" to Netanyahu (Holmes 2019).

Likud's and Netanyahu's campaign centered around Netanyahu being the only candidate for prime minister able to protect Israel from Iranian aggression, maintain and improve Israel's global standing, including being able to make progress with

leaders in the Arab World (Voice of America 2019a). This personalistic focus can be seen as a clear populist strategy for the election, by emphasizing the autonomy, capacity and power of Netanyahu as a single leader.

The far-right “Otzma Yehudit” party allied itself with two of the constituent parties of the Jewish Home coalition, which caused the prominent politicians Naftali Bennett and Ayelet Shaked to break off from the political alliance and create the “New Right” party. The inclusion of Otzma Yehudit was met with strong criticism both domestically and internationally, particularly from American Jewish groups, because of the Kahanist roots of Otzma Yehudit (Sharon 2019). Netanyahu’s campaign for the inclusion of Otzma Yehudit within the established religious Zionist coalition can be seen as a way to dominate the right-wing political scene to a degree that there would be no major right-wing factions running the chance of not getting into the Knesset as well as including all major right-wing factions within the Likud-led bloc.

### 5.3 17 September 2019 election

This election campaign was widely considered to have been even more polarizing than that of the previous election. However, the result was largely similar to the previous election and the Likud-led bloc did not manage to gain a majority of seats in the Knesset (The Israel Democracy Institute 2019; Kenig 2019; Verter 2019).

Lieberman called for a "liberal" unity government composed of Yisrael Beiteinu, Likud and Blue and White and rejected the Likud-led bloc that included the Religious Zionist and Haredi factions as well as any compromise on the Haredi draft issue. However, he did not openly position himself against Netanyahu leading the government. Netanyahu and Gantz had difficulty in agreeing over the terms of a unity government. Netanyahu urged Gantz to start negotiations on a joint administration, while insisting that this government would include the entire Likud-led bloc. Gantz also dismissed the inclusion of the entire Likud-led bloc into a potential government and rejected the notion of Netanyahu remaining prime minister because of the criminal investigation that was being conducted against him (BBC News 2019b; Reuters 2019).

#### 5.3.1 Ideational analysis

*The “real people” and the “outsiders”*

As it did during the previous vote in April, Likud equipped its representatives outside polling stations in Arab towns with hidden cameras to monitor the vote.

However, the Israeli Central Elections Committee ruled that Likud activists were prohibited from doing this. Netanyahu attempted to push a bill through the Knesset to override the decision, but the bill failed to garner broad enough support in order to pass. Likud claimed the action was aimed at tackling voter fraud, which it has alleged is rampant in Arab communities (Staff 2019c; Kershner 2019b; Estrin 2019). The Likud's continued efforts to monitor Arab polling stations can be seen as a form of voter intimidation to discourage the Arab minority from participating in the elections.

Netanyahu has urged Likud supporters to boycott the Israeli TV-channel "Channel 12", accusing it of being a producer of "fake news" and of anti-Semitism for co-producing the HBO series "Our Boys" depicting the murder of a Palestinian boy by Israeli extremists, seen as a revenge attack for the previous kidnapping and murder of three Israeli boys in the West Bank by Palestinian extremists (Avishai 2019b).

During the election campaign, Netanyahu made many appearances in the media to encourage right-wing voters to vote for Likud in the elections and stated that a left-wing government would endanger the country's security (Politico 2019). Netanyahu's official Facebook account published a message urging supporters to come out to the polls to prevent "a dangerous left-wing government" whose leaders, the message said, would rely on the support of Arab politicians "who want to destroy us all — women, children and men — and enable a nuclear Iran that would wipe us out". Netanyahu blamed a campaign staffer for the phrasing, saying he had not seen the message before it was published and had immediately ordered it removed. "This mistake was immediately fixed — I didn't write it," Netanyahu stated, "Do you think I really would write such a thing and then deny it? I'm a serious person. Not everything on my campaign page is edited by me." (Kershner 2019b). While Netanyahu refuted that he had approved the message, apart from the allegation that Israeli Arab politicians "want to destroy us all", the content of the message can generally be said to be in line with his previous statements regarding the negative ramifications of the electoral win of a left-wing government. Although during this election campaign, the language has become more inflammatory, by describing leftists as not just irresponsible, but dangerous, directly and indirectly, to the very safety and continued existence of the state.

During a rally in Tel Aviv, Netanyahu stated that he planned to enter negotiations to establish "a strong Zionist government and prevent a dangerous anti-Zionist government", "There won't be, there can't be a government that relies on the anti-Zionist Arab parties, parties that deny Israel's very existence as a Jewish and democratic state", he said. "Parties that glorify and praise bloodthirsty terrorists who murder our soldiers, our citizens and our children. That simply cannot be." (Halbfinger & Kershner 2019).

### *Traditional conservative viewpoints*

Netanyahu positioned himself further to the right during the election campaign, by pledging to extend Israeli sovereignty over the West Bank territory of the Jordan Valley if the Likud-led coalition won the election, something Netanyahu has refrained from doing in the past as prime minister. Later he also pledged to eventually extend Israeli sovereignty to all Israeli settlements and settlement blocs throughout the West Bank but said such a move would not be made before the publication of the Trump peace plan and after consultations with the U.S. president (Al Jazeera 2019; Politico 2019; Estrin 2019).

Netanyahu visited the contested West Bank city of Hebron during the election campaign, the first time in Israeli history that a sitting prime minister made a public address in the city. "Jews will remain in Hebron forever", "Hebron will not be devoid of Jews. It will not be 'judenrein'" Netanyahu stated in front of the Cave of the Patriarchs at a ceremony which marked 90 years since the 1929 Hebron massacre against the Jewish community in the city. Knesset speaker Yuli Edelstein and Minister Miri Regev, both members of Likud, called on Netanyahu to take the opportunity to announce the application of Israeli sovereignty over Hebron. "Ninety years after 1929, we have to say in a clear voice, 'It's time, Hebron. It's time for sovereignty in Hebron. It's time for the Jewish community to grow by the thousands in Hebron. It's time that visiting the Tomb of the Patriarchs will become the easiest and most natural thing to do'", Edelstein stated (Lazaroff 2019). These statements all represent typical conservative positions within Israeli politics. However, while Netanyahu made further moves to the right during the election campaign, making promises for the future annexation of the West Bank settlements, these statements by the other Likud politicians display how there are prominent calls within the party for a less moderate and more direct and radical approach with regard to applying sovereignty over the settlements.

Several Likud members joined a legal bid initiated by Otzma Yehudit to ban the mainly Arab Joint List from running in the elections. The appeal accused the Joint List of incitement to terrorism, denying Israel's existence as a Jewish state and for supporting a terror group (Staff 2019b).

### *General will*

After the results of the election came in, Netanyahu said that, "to his regret", he would be unable to establish a right-wing government. "There is no choice but to establish a broad government, as broad as possible, composed of all those elements to whom the state of Israel is dear", he stated. "Benny [Gantz], we must set up a unity government today. The people expect the two of us to show responsibility and work for co-operation. That is why I call on you, Benny. Let's meet today, at any hour, at any time, to put this in motion." (BBC News 2019b). Netanyahu opened up for a "broad" government, stating that it needs to be as broad as possible and include those to which "the state of Israel is dear", which can be interpreted as those who

are nationalist or at least strongly patriotic in some fashion, which going by Netanyahu's statement, would at least include Blue and White. By emphasizing that this is what the people expects, this can be seen as a way to shape the narrative, to show that his proposal would be in line with the will of the people, and thus if it is refused, it is Gantz that bears the responsibility for not fulfilling the general will.

The concepts *Economic problems of the state are attributed to outsiders* and *Rhetoric vs policy - Backtracking and evasion* were not prominent in the rhetoric during the time of this election.

### 5.3.2 Organizational analysis

#### *Numbers: Mobilizing and winning over a majority of the voters*

After the failure of the bill proposed by Netanyahu that would have permitted the presence of cameras at polling stations, Netanyahu stated that "I only have one answer to all those who want to rig and steal the elections", "Come in droves to the ballot box and vote with one slip only — there's no privilege to act otherwise. Vote Likud." (Kershner 2019a). This statement can be interpreted as depicting both the purported voters committing fraud and those that did not vote for the bill as trying to rig and steal the election. The statement can also be seen as a spin on Netanyahu's statement about the bussing of Arab voters in droves during the 2015 election campaign, that was criticized and which he later apologized for, now turning towards the Likud base to come out and vote in droves.

#### *Holding frequent elections and plebiscites.*

This election was the second snap election after the government fell apart in late 2014 and after Netanyahu called for fresh elections, seemingly to prevent other candidates such as Gantz from gaining the mandate to form a government.

#### *Personalistic leadership*

Prior to the September 2019 elections, many changes occurred among the Israeli political parties. The center-right party "Kulanu" was incorporated into Likud and Moshe Feiglin, the leader of the Zehut party, was offered a position in Netanyahu's government if his party withdrew from the election, which it eventually did (Newman 2019; Bachner 2019b; Estrin 2019). The Religious Zionist factions and the New Right united in the "Yamina" list without the far right-wing "Otzma Yehudit", which contested the election on its own, despite Netanyahu's attempts to get them to unite with Yamina. As this did not come to fruition, Netanyahu then went on to describe a vote for them and other minor right-wing parties as "wasted votes" that would benefit the Israeli left (Hoffman 2019b; Estrin 2019). Once again, Netanyahu's general strategy during the election can be described as trying to ensure that as many votes as possible were cast for right-wing parties that were expected to enter the Knesset and to gather them within the Likud-led bloc.

After the election, Netanyahu stated that he wanted to form a broad government that included Blue and White. Gantz announced his intention to form a unity government, however that government would then be under his leadership as prime minister, with him rejecting Netanyahu retaining the prime minister post and a coalition that would include the entire pro-Netanyahu bloc, which he argued would not be a true unity government, but merely another Netanyahu-led government (Haaretz 2019; Wootliff 2019b).

Likud's campaign emphasized Netanyahu's close ties with Trump and giant billboards across the country showed him shaking hands with Trump and Putin, with the words "Netanyahu: Another League" (Sales 2019; Politico 2019; Estrin 2019). Just days before the elections, President Trump tweeted that he and Netanyahu were discussing a possible defense treaty between the U.S. and Israel. Netanyahu said such a treaty would boost Israel's security while also retaining Israel's freedom of military action (Estrin 2019).

After the defeat of the New Right in the previous election in April, one of its leaders, Ayelet Shaked, tried to join Likud, but Netanyahu blocked her admittance. This action has been attributed both to his personal dislike of her as well as his fear of her as a rival. However, she stated that should the Likud-led bloc get a majority, Yamina would join the government in order to protect Netanyahu from prosecution (Avishai 2019b).

After the election, the mandate was given to Netanyahu to form a government. However, he was unable to form a majority coalition and with the mandate passing to Gantz, Netanyahu extracted a public pledge from the top forty Likud election candidates not to try to replace him. The statement from the Likud regarding the pledge was signed by all of Likud's Knesset members, and said that Likud would only accept Netanyahu as the party's candidate for prime minister, that Netanyahu "is the only Likud candidate for prime minister – and there will be no other candidate", "regardless of the election results" (Avishai 2019b; Voice of America 2019b). Netanyahu's actions can be said to have been an attempt to try to block any potential prominent challenger within the right-wing in order to ensure his autonomy as the only obvious Likud candidate for prime minister.

During the negotiations to form a government after Gantz had been given the mandate, Netanyahu appointed Naftali Bennett as defense minister to his caretaker government. Netanyahu was reported to have briefed ministers from Likud stating that as Bennett was reportedly exploring options of joining forces with Gantz, this action was meant to thwart that move. Netanyahu had refused the demand to give the defense portfolio to Bennett in 2018 (Staff 2019d).

The concepts *The delegitimization or marginalization of organized civil society and the political influence of the military* and *Rallying the political base of the leader*

*for demonstrations and manifestations during times of political trial* were not prominent in the rhetoric during the time of this election.

## 5.4 2 March 2020 Israeli election

This election was Israel's third consecutive election after the elections in April and September 2019 failed to bring about a successful government formation. As was the case after the two previous elections, the Likud-led bloc did not manage to get a majority of seats in the Knesset (Haaretz 2020b).

Gantz announced that he had dropped the demand that Netanyahu step down as prime minister due to the Covid-19 pandemic and opened for the formation of a unity government which was to be headed by Netanyahu at first (Karni 2020). An "emergency" unity government agreement between Likud and Blue and White was then announced on April 20, with the agreement stipulating that Netanyahu first serve as prime minister for 18 months with Gantz taking over afterwards. The deal states that the government will work "in full agreement with the U.S." with regard to the peace plan presented by Trump and Netanyahu. Israel will also "engage in dialogue" with the international community regarding any potential annexation, "with the aim of preserving the security and strategic interests of Israel including maintaining regional stability, preserving existing peace agreements and working towards future peace agreements". The deal stipulates that the process of annexing parts of the West Bank may start from July 1 based on "understandings with the Trump administration" (Ravid 2020). After securing a majority supporting the deal in the Knesset, Netanyahu was once again given the mandate by President Rivlin to form the next Israeli government (Azulay 2020). The unity government was then finally sworn in on May 17 (Heller 2020).

### 5.4.1 Ideational analysis

#### *The "real people" and the "outsiders"*

Likud held a leadership election in December 2019 at the request of the Likud lawmaker Gideon Sa'ar. During the lead-up to this leadership election, Likud members reported receiving text messages accusing Sa'ar voters of being traitors. "A vote for anyone other than Netanyahu ... is a vote for the left, and anyone who votes for the left must be kicked out of the Likud" (Staff 2019e). While it is unclear whether this rhetoric had any official sanction within the Likud party, that it targeted Likud members not supporting Netanyahu, associating them with the left-wing and thereby not being true Likud-members can be described as a further escalation in the general rhetoric, as this type of vilification has been largely reserved for



centrist and left-wing political actors outside of the party during the previous elections. It may also be described as a type of voter intimidation.

The Yamina party stated it would not join the “left-wing” unity government being put together by Netanyahu and Gantz and would instead join the opposition. The party released a statement, stating that “In light of the government's emerging composition and its policy as a left-wing government led by Netanyahu, and in light of the prime minister's blatant contempt for Yamina and its voters, we've decided to serve the public from the opposition in the upcoming term and fight for the nationalist camp”. Yamina stated that the party would now be preparing for “the day after Netanyahu” and would focus on producing “a true right-wing option that will not sell out the justice system for its personal survival while being unprepared to take on Hamas and [Palestinian President Mahmoud] Abbas.” (Azulay 2020). This is another example of an Israeli right-wing party utilizing rhetoric in which the term “left-wing” is used as a derogatory term for political adversaries that are described as unable or unwilling to defend the state militarily, thereby representing a potential danger to the country.

#### *Traditional conservative viewpoints*

Naftali Bennett was appointed defense minister by Netanyahu in November 2019 and shortly thereafter he announced his approval of the planning of a new Jewish neighborhood in the West Bank city of Hebron. Ayelet Shaked called it “a historic and important decision”, “As justice minister I worked for two years to free the land from a legal entanglement in which it was for many years, and the neighborhood had waited about a year for the defense minister’s approval. Bennett’s courageous decision will boost the Jewish community and develop the city” (Bachner 2019a). This is an action that, because of Hebron’s symbolic and historic role as a holy city within Judaism, can be described as a conservative initiative aimed towards appealing to right-wing and religious voters, by distinguishing Bennett as capable of getting something done that wasn’t acted upon during earlier Likud-led governments.

While critical of the unity government agreement, Yamina stated that it would be “a pugnacious but responsible opposition, which will give external support to positive government decisions like applying sovereignty [over the West Bank settlements and Jordan Valley], provided it does not explicitly or implicitly lead to the establishment of a Palestinian state.” (Azulay 2020). Yamina thereby expressed the party’s commitment to one of the most important issues of the Israeli right-wing, and the Religious Zionist constituency especially, to apply Israeli sovereignty over the West Bank settlements. While using harsh language to describe the unity deal between Likud and Blue and White, the party made it clear that despite inter-party disagreements within the right-wing, it still remained committed to follow through on its core ideology.

During the election campaign, Netanyahu stated that he was confident that Israel would apply its sovereignty over Israeli settlements in the West Bank and the Jordan Valley “a few months from now”. “For decades I have been fighting those who sought to deny the millennial connection of the Jewish people to our homeland. I’m proud to say that the decades-long struggle has borne fruit. Three months ago, the Trump peace plan recognized Israel’s rights in all of Judea and Samaria [the West Bank]. And President Trump pledged to recognize Israel’s sovereignty over the Jewish communities there and in the Jordan Valley”, “A couple of months from now, I’m confident that that pledge will be honored. That we will be able to celebrate another historic moment in the history of Zionism. A century after San Remo, the promise of Zionism is being realized” Netanyahu said. “The law will be passed as quickly as possible... and will not be disrupted or delayed by the chairmen of either the House or the Foreign Affairs and Defense committees” (Eichner 2020). Netanyahu's statement plays heavily on nationalist sentiment, by portraying himself as the first prime minister that, after a long struggle, is able to realize the “promise of Zionism” and secure recognition for the Jewish presence in the West Bank.

#### *Rhetoric vs policy - Backtracking and evasion*

Since Netanyahu’s deal with Blue & White came to light, Yamina has repeatedly accused the prime minister of sacrificing the right-wing to guarantee his personal legal fate, despite consistent previous loyalty towards Netanyahu throughout the three election campaigns (Azulay 2020). While being committed to Netanyahu’s narrative of a political witch hunt being behind the investigation and indictment of him earlier, Yamina now changed their rhetoric drastically after not being included in the unity government. Their new rhetoric expressed skepticism of the prime minister’s actions, describing the government as “leftist” and Netanyahu’s main motivation being personal security against a potential conviction.

The concepts *Economic problems of the state are attributed to outsiders* and *General will* were not prominent in the rhetoric during the time of this election.

## 5.4.2 Organizational analysis

#### *Numbers: Mobilizing and winning over a majority of the voters*

After winning the Likud leadership election, Netanyahu vowed to “lead Likud to a great victory in the upcoming elections and continue to lead the State of Israel to unprecedented achievements” (Staff 2019e). While originally raising the idea of a Likud leadership election himself, he backed down when Sa’ar showed an interest in running. As Sa’ar had Likud hold an election anyway, Netanyahu used his victory to his advantage by emphasizing the large popularity he held within the party and promising to deliver a massive victory for the Likud in the upcoming national election.

*Rallying the political base of the leader for demonstrations and manifestations during times of political trial.*

Several thousand Israelis rallied in support of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Tel Aviv after he was indicted. The message of the protest that was organized by Likud was “Stop the Coup”. Addressing the crowd, Likud lawmaker Miki Zohar said the justice system was taking part in a leftist conspiracy (Amichai 2019).

*Holding frequent elections and plebiscites.*

This was the third consecutive election held in Israel after the past two elections failed to bring about a successful government formation. While Netanyahu initiated the Knesset vote to dissolve itself after the elections in April, the reasons behind the failed government formation process after the September elections were more complex. However, as Netanyahu managed to get a loyalty pledge both from the other parties in the Likud-led bloc and from the top 40 Likud candidates as mentioned earlier (Avishai 2019b), his actions can be seen as a major factor to alternative government coalitions being left unexplored. As mentioned earlier, Netanyahu also won the Likud leadership election with Gideon Sa’ar with a large majority (Staff 2019e).

*Personalistic leadership*

Netanyahu's statement regarding the potential application of Israeli sovereignty on Israeli settlements in the West Bank (Eichner 2020), portraying himself as the first prime minister able to deliver on recognition towards the Jewish people in the West Bank, emphasizing his ability to garner support from president Trump, plays heavily on his image as an autonomous leader that is able to deliver on nationalist issues, and having a functional and fruitful relationship with a prominent world leader such as Trump.

U.S. president Donald Trump revealed his peace plan together with Netanyahu on January 28. The plan stipulates that all of Jerusalem and the Jordan Valley bordering Jordan would be allotted to Israel and that almost all Israeli settlements would remain within the borders of Israel. Netanyahu called Trump “the greatest friend that Israel has ever had in the White House” and that Israel owes Trump as well as Jared Kushner, who worked on the plan, “an eternal debt of gratitude” (Lynch 2020). This is a very clear utilization by Netanyahu of his good relationship with the Trump administration, being able to secure a joint presentation of the peace plan that favors the Likud position and to present himself as a prominent leader, capable of securing the interests of his constituency.

In the last days before the election, Likud had an upswing in the polls. This was attributed in large part to center and center-right voters abandoning Blue and White after a leaked tape of an advisor of Gantz lambasting his ability to face Iran and thereby discrediting his ability as a potential prime minister (Levinson & Shezaf 2020; Haaretz 2020a; Staff 2020).

The prospect of a Likud leadership election was raised by Netanyahu after two elections in which he was unable to form a government. However, he backed down after Sa'ar posted the message "I'm ready" on Twitter, seemingly challenging Netanyahu. Netanyahu and Sa'ar have a history of rivalry and Netanyahu has previously claimed that Saar was out to topple him, accusing Sa'ar of orchestrating a "putsch" together with Rivlin to unseat him. Sa'ar has previously opposed Netanyahu's line within Likud and resisted calls to legislate immunity for the prime minister. He also attended a media conference Netanyahu had called to boycott. Limor Livnat, a former Likud lawmaker, criticized Netanyahu's handling of Sa'ar's candidacy in the leadership election and said that "instead of cultivating potential successors, Netanyahu has neutralized every Likud member who has shown any independence and has surrounded himself with yes-men", "Since when is announcing one's candidacy in a party primary construed as a plot against the incumbent party chairman?" (Heller 2019).

The Attorney General of Israel indicted Netanyahu on November 21 for bribery, fraud, and breach of trust. This was the first time a sitting Israeli prime minister has been charged with a crime. The prime minister has previously denied all the allegations, saying they are part of a politically orchestrated "witch-hunt" to oust him from office. Responding to the indictment, Netanyahu stated that the "false" and "politically motivated" charges amounted to an "attempted coup" against him. "The public has lost trust in the legal system," he said. Netanyahu has previously stated he would not resign if indicted and is not legally required to do so unless convicted. The criminal case is also potentially tied to him remaining the head of the government, as some of his parliamentary allies have suggested they would back laws to grant him immunity (Holmes 2019).

Netanyahu stated that "I've given my life for this country, I fought for this country, was wounded for this country", "I deeply respect the justice system in Israel. But you have to be blind not to see that something bad is happening to police investigators and the prosecution. We're seeing an attempted coup by the police with false accusations", "These facts emphasize how much this process is tainted. It's meant to topple a right-wing prime minister, me. I, who unlike the left and the slanted media, want to institute a free market, not only in the economy but also a free market of ideas, who wants to see a strong country, not a weak, shrunken, bowed country". He stated that the "tainted investigation process, including inventing new crimes, has reached its apex today. It horrifies not only me, but masses of citizens in Israel, and not only on the right... This tainted process raises questions among the public about the police's investigations and the prosecution. The public has lost trust in these institutions. It's a process that's taken place over many years. This is selective enforcement on steroids. It's enforcement just for me." (Woolliff & Staff 2019).

Netanyahu called for the establishment of an independent commission to investigate the conduct of the investigators of his cases. “It’s time to investigate the investigators, to investigate the prosecution that approves these tainted investigations. I respect the police, I respect the prosecutors. There are hundreds of them. But we have to understand that they’re not above criticism. This isn’t just about transparency, it’s about accountability.”, “My sense of justice burns within me. I cannot believe that the country I fought for and was wounded for, that I’ve brought to such achievements, that in this country, in its democracy, there will be this kind of tainted justice, of selective enforcement. I won’t let the lie win. I will continue to lead this country with devotion. For this country, for the rule of law, for justice, we have to do one thing: to finally investigate the investigators.” (Wootliff & Staff 2019).

As mentioned earlier, the rally organized by Likud in support of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu after his indictment had the message to “Stop the Coup” and Likud lawmaker Miki Zohar said the justice system was playing a part in a leftist conspiracy (Amichai 2019). The message of the demonstration played on the rhetoric that Netanyahu had previously used regarding a political witch hunt. However, the language used in the rally and in Netanyahu’s own response to his indictment went further this time, describing an imminent coup and a leftist conspiracy that was occurring through institutions of the state.

The concept *The delegitimization or marginalization of organized civil society and the political influence of the military* was not prominent in the rhetoric during the time of this election.

## 6 Conclusion

The question that this thesis aimed to answer was: *How has populist rhetoric in Israeli right-wing political discourse been manifested from January 2015 until May 2020?*

Looking back at the four Israeli elections that this thesis has examined, the statements of right-wing political actors has been characterized by significant populist rhetoric throughout the period, both when viewing populism as an ideology and as a political strategy. However, some concepts conceptualized in the operationalization of this thesis were not very prominent in the rhetoric, such as the ideational concept *Economic problems of the state are attributed to outsiders*, which was not significantly present within the rhetoric of any of the election campaigns.

While the two theoretical frameworks were chosen due to their potential fit with regard to the Israeli case, the frameworks still stem from contemporary populist research with a focus on the European and American context, where immigration and economic issues have been central within the populist rhetoric of right-wing political actors. Israel, however, is a state with a markedly different domestic and regional context than any other state in Europe and America, where these issues have taken a backseat to issues of national sovereignty and security within the examined time period.

For the ideational analyses, the concept *The “real people” and the “outsiders”* was the most prominent and it was striking how the range of the demonization and marginalization of political opponents through the description of them as left-wing escalated as the election campaigns became more contested and polarized. For the organizational analyses, *Personalistic leadership* was the most prominent concept. The emphasis on a leader’s diplomatic and personal prowess within the international arena as well as the numerous attempts to control individual politicians and to forge, as well as to break up political alliances through a combination of threats and promise of favors was striking.

What can be observed across the examined time period, is a tendency of prominent right-wing political actors, with Netanyahu in particular, to make strong ideologically-laden statements and initiating controversial actions within the immediate period before the elections. These include the statement about the bussing of Arab voters during the election campaign in 2015, the equipping of

Likud activists with cameras during the election in April 2019, the proposal to annex the Jordan Valley before the elections in September 2019 and the joint presentation with Trump of the peace plan as well as the characterization of Netanyahu's indictment as equivalent to a "coup" before the elections in March 2020. As the political pressure against Netanyahu increased, in particular with regard to his indictment and potential future conviction, these efforts can be said to have intensified.

However, after each election, Likud and Netanyahu tended to water down or moderate some of their statements and promises. After the election in 2015, Netanyahu apologized for the statement regarding Arab voters and clarified that he was not totally opposed to the idea of a Palestinian state which he had stated earlier, but that a two-state solution would be problematic due to the current political situation. After the establishment of the unity government in May 2020, a backtracking on Netanyahu's promise during the September 2019 and March 2020 election campaigns with regard to the application of Israeli sovereignty on parts of the West Bank also seems to be likely. This can be said to be likely due to the numerous conditions placed into the unity government agreement upon such a process, in that it cannot endanger regional relations such as the peace treaty with Jordan. A situation where it would not endanger such relations seems unlikely and any such move would also have to be made with the approval of the United States under the terms of the agreement.

However, despite this backtracking of the positions taken during the election campaign, the escalation of the rhetoric's ideological intensity can be said to have contributed to a gradual "lowering of the bar" with regard to what is considered to be politically correct within Israeli politics and can also be argued to have contributed to the general "turn to the right" of Israeli political discourse.

This thesis has focused on examining right-wing political actors. It is important to point out that a broader perspective that examines political rhetoric from centrist and left-wing actors, as well as utilizing other conceptualizations of populist ideology and strategy may yield a more complete picture of the state of populism within Israel. Also useful for future research of Israeli populism may be the utilization of a more novel or hybrid approach to populist research, one that is even more tailored to the Israeli context, which may help to shed further light on the topic and advance the knowledge within the research field.

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