



## Comparative Policy Agendas: Theory, Tools, Data

Frank R. Baumgartner, Christian Breunig, and Emiliano Grossman

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## From Public to Publics

### Assessing Group Variation in Issue Priorities in the United States and Israel

Amnon Cavari

Guy Freedman

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#### Abstract and Keywords

A rich body of work examines the public agenda in democratic countries. These studies rely on aggregate responses to survey questions that ask respondents to report their issue priorities—commonly using topline data of the most important problem survey series (MIP). This research design, however, is not sensitive to differences in issue priorities between individuals and groups and, therefore, fails to account for the possible variation within the general public. To overcome this neglect in existing literature, we examine individual-level responses to the most important problem question in two countries—the United States and Israel—focusing specifically on economic and foreign policy priorities. We reveal that beyond aggregate trends in the public agenda, socio-demographic factors in both countries explain some of the variation in issue dynamics.

*Keywords:* public agenda, issue priorities, most important problem, United States, Israel, Comparative Agendas Project

A rich body of work examines trends in the salience of issues among people in democratic regimes. The focus of most of this work is on aggregate measures of issues and the causes and effects of its dynamics (see, for example, Bevan, Jennings, and Wlezien, 2016; Jennings and Wlezien 2015; Jones, 1994; Jones and Baumgartner, 2004; MacKuen and Coombs, 1981; McCombs, 1999; McCombs and Shaw, 1972; McCombs and Zhu, 1995; Reher, 2015; Soroka, 2002; Soroka and Wlezien, 2010). For the most part, these studies treat the public as a

homogenous whole, with collective issue interests—commonly referred to as the public agenda—that move as a unit in response to new information and events. Despite the common use of this measure in existing research and the rich analysis of individual-level responses to attitudinal measures, very little attention has been given to the causes of issue priorities of individuals and groups. Why do some people prioritize one issue over the other? How do different demographic and political groups differ in their priorities? In this chapter, we address these questions by testing the effect of conventional demographic factors on issue priorities in two countries—the United States and Israel. The two countries differ in the issue that dominates their public agenda—macroeconomics in the United States and foreign affairs and defense in Israel. Yet, demographic groups in each country demonstrate varying issue priorities that are compatible with existing theories about public interest. This variation reveals the importance of turning our attention from an overall, average public agenda, to an individual and group priorities. That is, from public agenda to public agendas.

**(p.244)** 26.1 The Public Agenda and Issue Priorities

The issues that are most important to people are first and foremost affected by events, the political environment, and the way they are presented by the media and political elites. Therefore, similar to the parallel change of issue preferences among most demographic groups (Page and Shapiro, 1992), issue priorities are usually shared by most people and most groups. And yet, issue priorities are more dynamic than issue positions and are less affected by predispositions and ideological commitments (Jones, 1994). This dynamic may depend on an individual's characteristics such as income, education, and race. For example, a person with a permanent, high-paying job, may prioritize the economy during economic downturns but shift her attention to other issues such as the environment or foreign policy during more stable economic times. In contrast, a person with no permanent job is more likely to consistently prioritize economic issues. Similar contrasts can be made about other demographic differences and for other issues.

Several, relatively dated, studies examine group differences and generally point to similarities between demographic groups rather than differences (Douglass, Cleveland, and Maddox, 1974; Jones, 1994; Smith, 1980, 1985). A more recent study examined individual-level responses to the MIP question and demonstrates significant differences in focus on foreign vs. domestic issues among partisan and ideological groups (Heffington, Beomseob Park, and Williams, 2017). To what extent, however, can we identify differences between demographic groups? Do people vary in their issue priorities based on their own life experiences? And, can we identify differences between more defined issues rather than overall, rough comparisons of domestic vs. foreign issues?

There are several reasons to expect variation among people and groups. First, people have different motivations for naming what is their biggest concern and these motivations vary across demographic groups (McCombs, 1999). For instance, some people may be motivated to choose a problem out of self-interest, while for others, the motivation may be peer influence or a sense of civic duty (see McCombs, 1999 for a full analysis of these and other motivations). If motivations are different, we should expect that priorities will vary as well.

Second, demographic groups vary in their attention and response to media coverage of different issues (Berinsky and Karpowitz, 2005; Cavari, 2017). Mainly, groups with most at stake in a given issue are more sensitive than others to changes in that area. While problems do not usually affect a single sector, some sectors may be more sensitive than others to the effect of certain problems. For instance, we may expect crime to be a greater problem for people with lower income, lower levels of education, or minorities, who may be subject to greater crime rates compared to the entire population.

**(p.245)** Third, the variation in attention and response is consistent with the notion of issue publics. According to this notion, the public is not monolithic in its interest and attention. Rather, the public is divided into issue publics—groups of individuals that have specialized interests and patterns of attentiveness (Converse, 1964; Krosnick, 1990; Popkin, 1991). While problems may affect multiple sectors and concerns may rise and fall in parallel for multiple sectors, we can expect differences in the relative concern of various groups. For example, when crime rates are high, people from most sectors may report crime as the most important problem. But, some—for instance people who live in poorer neighborhoods—may tend to report this more than others, because their exposure to the consequences of higher crime rates is greater.

In focusing on variation in the public agenda, we are therefore interested in assessing issue priorities of individuals and in identifying group variations. We examine this with two case studies—the United States and Israel. The two countries differ considerably in the main issues that are on the political agenda. In the United States, a majority of Americans focus on economics followed by defense and foreign affairs (Cavari, 2017). In Israel, a clear first among a majority of the Israeli public is defense and foreign affairs (Galnoor and Blander, 2018). Still, in each country, we should expect that the relative importance people attribute to an issue is affected by individual and group characteristics that shape public opinion and interest. Furthermore, while the overall public interest may vary between countries, we may find similarities in the relative prioritization of comparable demographic groups. That is, while Americans are overall more concerned with economics and Israelis are concerned with foreign affairs, variation in issue focus among demographic groups may present more similarities than differences. For example, people from lower economic status in both countries may focus more on economics than people from higher economic

status—regardless of their respective political environment. This most-different comparison (Tarrow, 2010) is therefore used to illustrate our main argument: that researchers should turn their attention from the public agenda to public *agendas*.

## 26.2 MIP Data

To assess the issue priorities of Americans and Israelis, we rely on a series of surveys in each country that ask respondents what is the most important problem facing the country.<sup>1</sup> This question, commonly referred to as the MIP question, is one of the few attitudinal survey questions to have been asked consistently since the beginning of public opinion polling. While the scope and quality of data vary between the United States and Israel, the MIP **(p.246)** series offer a dynamic measure of issue priorities for longitudinal studies in both countries (Soroka, 2002; Cavari, Rinker, and Freedman, 2017).

The MIP question is an open-ended question. Each respondent is asked to name the problem she thinks is most important. Following the survey, interviewers ascribed the responses to several issue categories.<sup>2</sup> These issue categories are usually detailed yet not consistent across surveys. For example, problems relating to high taxes may be grouped into a “taxes” category or together with “inflation” or “high cost of living.” Problems with the environment are sometimes grouped into one category, but in other surveys, they are separated to several more specific environmental issues such as “water pollution,” “air pollution,” and “litter and garbage.” Similarly, foreign events and defense priorities are grouped into regions—“South-East Asia,” “Middle East,” and so forth—or are categorized by the priorities that respondents mention—“war,” “defense,” “foreign aid.” We, therefore, coded all responses into the major topics of the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP).<sup>3</sup>

For the US series, we collected from the Roper iPoll archive all surveys between 1947 and 2015 that ask Americans the most important problem (MIP) facing the nation question and which offer individual-level data.<sup>4</sup> The wording of the MIP question in all surveys is relatively similar: “In your opinion, what do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?” The dataset includes 815,680 responses to the MIP question from 580 surveys (including only samples of US national adults). Most surveys were conducted by Gallup (47 percent) and CBS/NYT (32 percent). Nearly all of the remaining 20 percent are evenly divided between ABC News (7 percent), Princeton Survey Research Associates (6 percent), and LA Times (5 percent).

Viewed together, the responses to all surveys amount to 1,739 unique responses, which we coded using the CAP codebook. The US data are relatively detailed and rich, and hence allow for coding of subcategories—especially macroeconomics. We combine defense (category 16) and international affairs

(category 19) into one category—foreign affairs—because of strong similarities between them in public responses (Baumgartner and Jones, 2002).

Data on the Israeli public agenda are not as rich or readily available as in the United States. The question is not asked in most commercial surveys and most of them are not publicly available or have sufficient academic supervision. We, therefore, rely on the Israel National Election Studies (INES), administered every election cycle since 1969 and are considered the best and most extensive time series data in Israel (15 surveys, on average every 3.29 years). Each survey asks the MIP question, yet with some variation. Several surveys ask a question similar to the US one, whereas others ask respondents to mention the most important problem the *government* must take care of.<sup>5</sup> Finally, surveys extend to Israeli Arabs only from 1996 forward and therefore we focus on Israeli Jews only.

**(p.247)** We code all responses according to the CAP codebook.<sup>6</sup> The data are less detailed making it very difficult to differentiate between categories and impossible to code for subtopics. This may be because of poor coding of the open-ended responses by the interviewers or because of the characteristically unspecific responses of the Israeli interviewee. Unlike the US data, there are clearer differences between defense and security and foreign affairs. In the interest of comparable design, we treat the two as subcategories of an overall issue on the public agenda—defense and foreign affairs.

Despite the limitations of the Israeli data, they offer the most detailed time series of the public agenda. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first analysis of the Israeli public agenda—aggregate or individual—over time.<sup>7</sup>

### 26.3 Issue Priorities in the United States

Figure 26.1 illustrates trends in the aggregated public agenda of seven major categories (rounded share of overall agenda) in the United States: macroeconomics (36 percent), defense and international affairs (25 percent), crime, law, and family (9 percent), civil rights (6 percent), government operation **(p.248)** (6 percent), social welfare (5 percent), and health (4 percent).

Together, these topics amount to more than 90 percent of the public agenda. The figure is a stacked area plot. The area each category occupies stands for the relative percent of respondents who indicated an issue that is grouped under the respective category. Plotted together, the issue map in Figure 26.1 summarizes dynamic changes in the public agenda in over sixty years of data.

During the first two decades following World War II, the majority of Americans prioritized foreign affairs, replacing their immediate post-war focus on economic and domestic issues. Civil rights issues emerged as a dominant priority during the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, slowly decaying by mid-1970s. Starting in the early 1970s, the deteriorating economy and the energy crisis shifted the priorities of Americans to the economy. This period of economic instability was followed by renewed public interest in foreign affairs during the Reagan presidency.

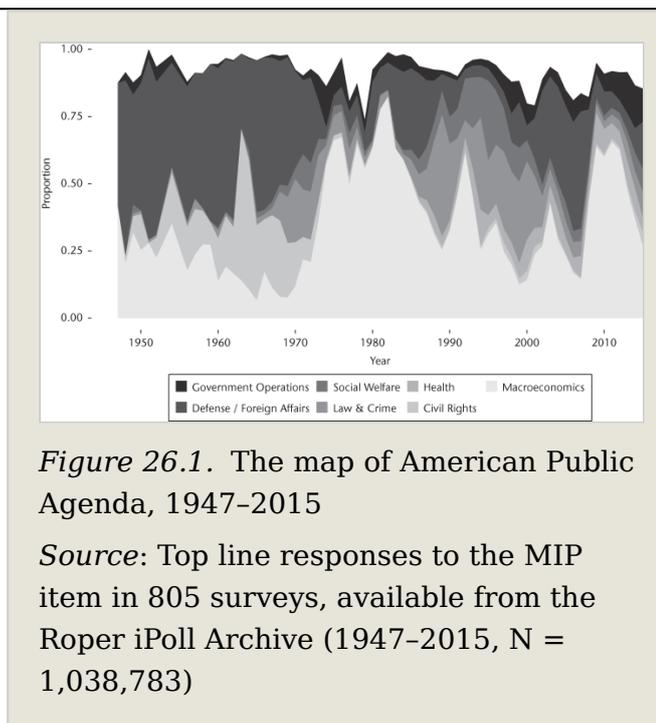


Figure 26.1. The map of American Public Agenda, 1947-2015

Source: Top line responses to the MIP item in 805 surveys, available from the Roper iPoll Archive (1947-2015, N = 1,038,783)

Starting from the 1980s, social welfare issues have begun to occupy an increasing share of the public agenda, and, especially in the 1990s, more Americans were concerned about problems relating to other domestic issues such as law, crime, and family, health, and, a decade later, to immigration. The 9/11 terrorist attacks and subsequent US involvement in two large-scale wars—Afghanistan and Iraq—resulted in a temporary burst of public interest in foreign policy issues. Following the economic meltdown in 2008, public attention shifted again away from foreign policy and back to the economy. During this shift in focus on the economy and foreign affairs, a substantial share of Americans remained concerned with social welfare, law, crime, and family issues, health, and immigration.

Going beyond the general “map” of public agenda, we examine individual-level data and test the effect of demographic factors on issue priorities. We, therefore, collected conventional demographic variables—sex, race, age, education, and income—from all surveys and examine the relative effect of each one of them on issue priorities of Americans. We examine two models: macroeconomic priorities among all issues, and a more specific analysis of prioritizing unemployment within macroeconomics, the largest category on the public agenda.

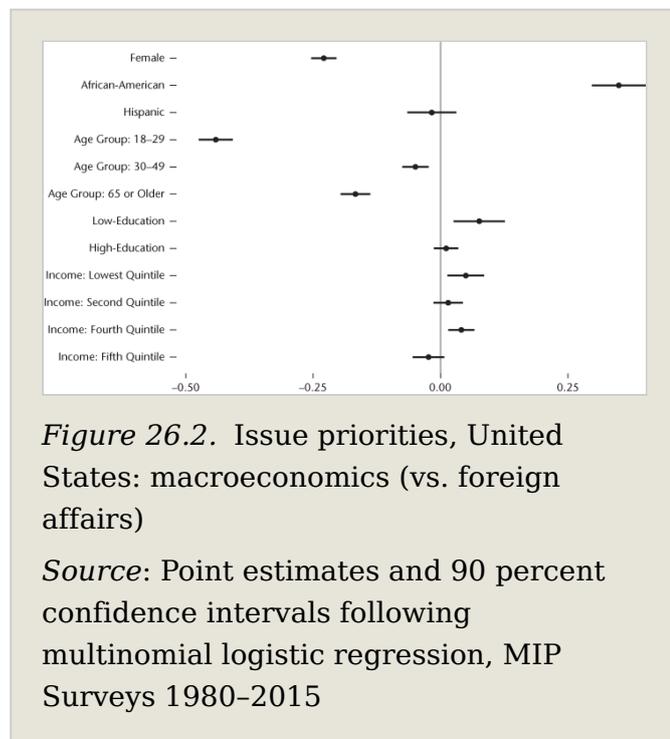
### 26.3.1 Macroeconomics

Figure 26.1 demonstrates that trends between macroeconomics and foreign affairs are dramatic and hence are likely to be shared by large groups in American society. Yet these general trends may still conceal offsetting changes among particular subgroups and individuals. To test this, we estimate individual

issue priorities. Because several categories are relatively small—under **(p.249)** 2 percent—we combine these topics into one catch-all category (7 percent of the total agenda). We include indicators for sex, race, age, levels of education, and income levels. Given the categorical nature of the dependent variable, we estimate a multinomial logistic regression. Our base outcome is the second most voluminous issue on the public agenda: foreign affairs (including defense and international affairs). Because of quality and consistency of the independent variables we limit our analyses to data from 1960 forward. To account for issue salience, we include a covariate of the share of each category in each survey. By including this covariate of overall share, our estimates account for variation from the general trend rather than overall attention to an issue. We also account for time by clustering the standard errors by survey.

In this chapter, we focus only on the effect of these factors on prioritizing macroeconomics (in comparison to the base outcome: foreign affairs). We present the results graphically (complete tables can be requested from authors). Figure 26.2 graphically summarizes the results of the main comparison. A positive coefficient indicates a positive relationship between the factor or covariate and macroeconomic priorities, compared to foreign priorities. A negative coefficient indicates a negative relationship, in this case meaning prioritizing foreign issues over macroeconomics. The horizontal lines indicate the 90 percent confidence intervals. If these cross zero, the effect is statistically zero.

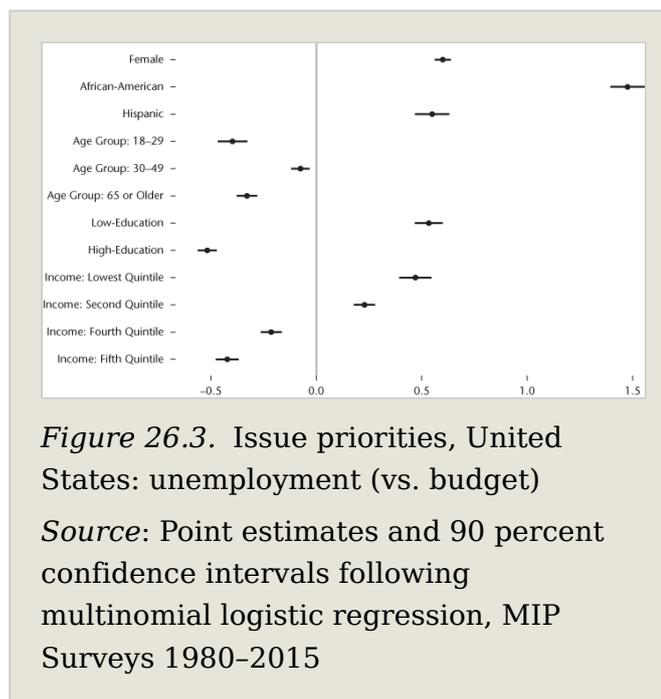
**(p.250)** The results indicate that sex, race, age, education, and income are all associated with issue priorities. Females are less likely than men (reference group) to prioritize macroeconomics over foreign issues. African Americans are more likely to prioritize macroeconomic issues than whites (reference group). Youngest and oldest are less likely to prioritize macroeconomic issues compared to people in middle age. And lowest education and income levels focus on macroeconomics more than foreign issues.



### 26.3.2 Macroeconomics—Minor Topics

Further to test differences between groups, we break macroeconomics into its subcategories and examine individual priorities on these issues. Our independent variables and model specifications are the same as the general model discussed above. In the interests of this chapter, we focus here only on the comparison of unemployment and budget, the two most voluminous subcategories. These subcategories also represent the most dominant tension in economic policy, pitting Keynesian and Monetarist, balanced budget policies (see, for example, Hall, 1993). The results of our main comparison are summarized in Figure 26.3.

**(p.251)** The results demonstrate substantial differences among most demographic groups. Mainly, people who are disadvantaged in the labor force, tend to prioritize unemployment—females, African Americans and Hispanics, uneducated (without High School diploma) and first and second income quintiles. People who are stronger economically tend to prioritize the budget—males, whites, people with a college degree, and top income quintiles.



To illustrate the magnitude of the effect, Figure 26.4 plots the predicted probabilities of each income group. The range is from 0.36 to 0.26, that is, the predicted probability that a person earning within the lowest income quintile will prioritize unemployment as the economic issue is 0.36. The predicted probability for the highest income quintile is 0.26. Considering that this difference is after controlling for race, gender, education, and age, it is substantial.

The model accounts for time and hence reflects the average advantage over time. And yet, the differences are consistent over time. We illustrate this in Figure 26.5, which plots the coefficients of the four income groups (except middle quintile, used as reference) for each year since 1980. Throughout the thirty-five years of data, the lowest two income quintiles were more likely to prioritize unemployment. While the trends are less clear regarding the fourth quintile, the top 20 percent of earners have been almost consistently less focused on unemployment (and hence on budget, the base category).

**(p.252)** The results are consistent with mounting evidence and interest in recent years about the growing inequality in the United States, its sources and its effect on the political system. A series of articles and books on this topic points to the fact that elected officials and public policy are largely unresponsive to the policy preferences of millions of low-income Americans, leaving their political interests to the ideological whims of what incumbent elites may dictate (Achen and Bartels, 2016; Bartels, 2016; Carnes, 2013; Gilens, 2012; Hacker and Pierson, 2010). We add to this debate by demonstrating that people from different social status differ in their policy agenda. Mainly, racial minorities, people with no formal education, and lowest income quintiles tend to focus on the economy and employment considerations.

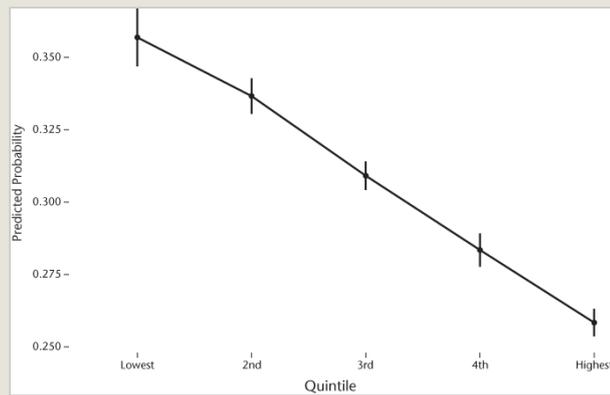


Figure 26.4. Predicted probability, unemployment (of macroeconomics)

Source: Predicted probabilities and 95 percent confidence intervals following multinomial logistic regression, holding all other variables constant at their mean, MIP Surveys, 1980–2015

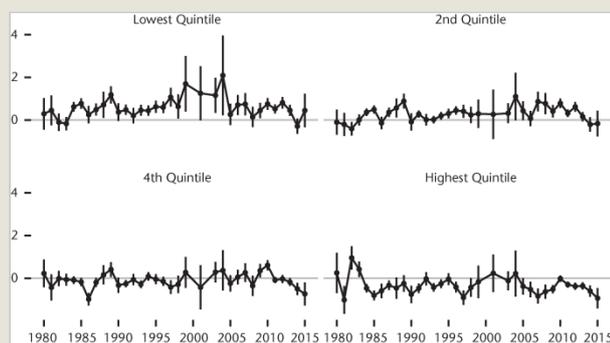


Figure 26.5. Predicted probability, unemployment (of macroeconomics)

Source: Markers represent coefficients of income group following separate year regressions, spikes represent 90 percent confidence intervals, MIP surveys, 1980–2015

## 26.4 Issue Priorities in Israel

Figure 26.6 illustrates the relative share of the seven most voluminous categories on the public agenda—macroeconomics, civil rights, education, immigration, welfare, foreign/defense,<sup>8</sup> and government. The Israeli data are based on election surveys, and therefore cannot be interpreted as a continuous measure of the public agenda. We therefore plot the data over time using a stacked bar chart instead of a stacked area plot used for the US data.

As can be expected in a country that is in a constant military conflict, the category of defense/foreign affairs occupies a substantial share of the public agenda (48.6 percent). Macroeconomics follows with a quarter of the public agenda (26 percent). The other major issues include civil rights (8.4 percent), education (4.2 percent), immigration (1.6 percent), welfare (3.8 percent), and government operations (2.1 percent). Health and law and crime that are more dominant in the United States are replaced here by education and

immigration. Israel has a public healthcare system that is paid by social security income tax and provides health services to every citizen. Law and crime has traditionally been a less prominent issue in Israel and is only recently becoming a concern. In contrast, education in Israel is centralized and massive waves of immigration challenges social order and government services.

The shifts between macroeconomics and defense/foreign affairs confirm the conventional wisdom about the public agenda in Israel. During the 1960s and early 1970s, Israelis were mostly concerned about defense and foreign issues. During that time, Israel was fighting two wars—in 1967 and 1973—and was in a military conflict between them (The War of Attrition, 1968–70). In the second half of the 1970s, Israelis responded to the struggling economy—like in other places in the world—by focusing on the economy. With the break-out of the first Intifada (in 1987), Israelis turned back to foreign and security issues.

From the late 1990s until today, the dominance of the two issues has slightly subdued by a more diversified issue attention that includes issues like welfare,

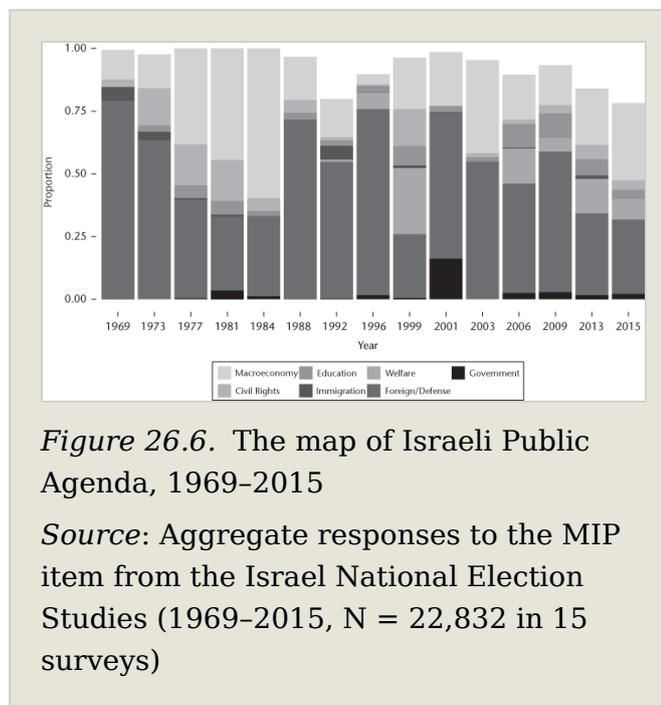


Figure 26.6. The map of Israeli Public Agenda, 1969–2015

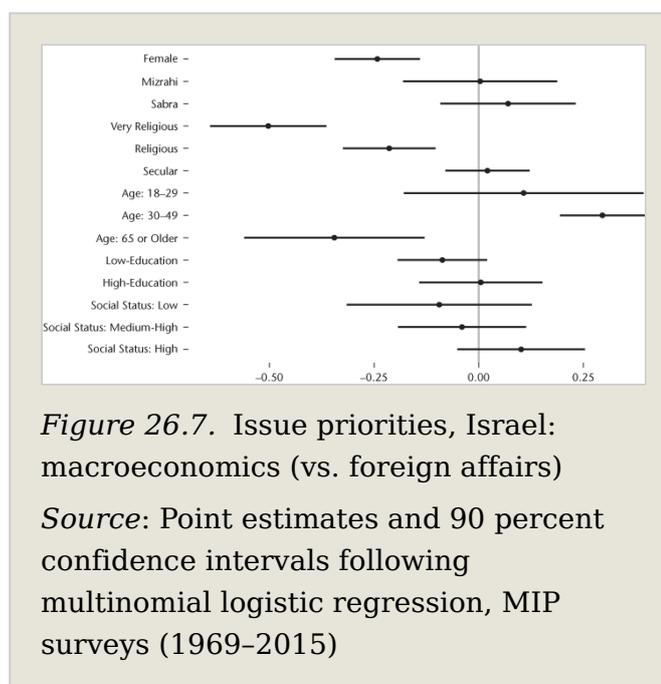
Source: Aggregate responses to the MIP item from the Israel National Election Studies (1969–2015, N = 22,832 in 15 surveys)

civil rights, and education. This trend in public attention is aligned with the decline of the large parties and decreasing stability of governing coalitions.<sup>9</sup>

**(p.254)** To assess variation in individual priorities, we collected conventional demographics and political variables used in research on Israeli public opinion. This includes sex, ethnicity (Mizrahi refers to Jewish people who come from families that immigrated from Arab countries; Sabra refers to people who were born in Israel; the reference category is Ashkenazi Jews who immigrated to Israel from Western, primarily European countries), religious sentiment, age, education, and social status (Arian and Shamir, 2008; Hirsch-Hoefler, Canetti, and Pedhazur, 2010; Shamir and Arian, 1999).<sup>10</sup>

Similar to our model of US issue priorities, we estimate a multinomial logistic regression to explain the likelihood of prioritizing each issue. Our base outcome is defense and foreign affairs. We examine here only the first part of the multinomial equation: macroeconomics. The results of this analysis are illustrated in Figure 26.7.

The results suggest limited differences between groups. Mainly, women, religious respondents, and older people are less likely to prioritize economic issues over foreign (defense and security). Younger respondents (aged 30–49) are more concerned about foreign affairs than the economy. Sex and age behave similarly to the US model—women and older people are more concerned with foreign affairs than with the economy. We find no significant differences between ethnic groups, education groups, and social status.



The limited findings are consistent with the conventional knowledge about Israeli politics—that the concern about security and foreign affairs is wide **(p. 255)** (nearly half of Israelis report this as their primary concern) and cuts across most demographic (and political) divisions (Galnoor and Blander, 2018).

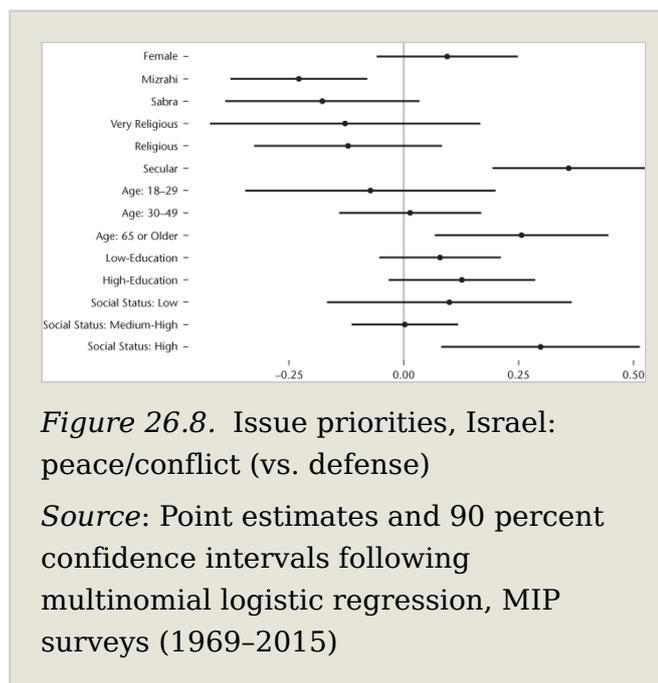
Further to assess the public agenda and variation among demographic groups on this issue, we follow the CAP coding and recode this unified category into its two original categories: defense (16) and foreign affairs (19). Defense refers to

Israel's physical security and includes responses such as defense, security, terrorism, war, as well as the IDF budget and soldier's rights (33 percent of total agenda). Given the Israeli geopolitical environment, the overwhelming majority of the foreign affairs category includes mentions of peace or the Arab-Israeli conflict (specific mentions of war/security are included in defense and security), and some mentions of relations with other countries and Israel's standing in the world (16 percent of total agenda). Focusing only on these two topics, we estimate a binary logistic regression to predict the choice between foreign affairs (primarily peace and conflict related), over mentions of defense and immediate security issues.

Results, displayed in Figure 26.8, reveal several important differences between demographic groups, differences that are consistent with the conventional wisdom about political divides in Israel. Secular people, older people, and those of high social status tend to prioritize the conflict over questions of physical security and defense. This is aligned with electoral trends demonstrating that secular, older Ashkenazi people from higher income levels tend to vote for left-leaning parties. These parties focus their campaign and party platform on the conflict and its solution rather than on the immediate security issues (p.256) that the conflict produces (Arian and Shamir, 2008; Shamir, Dvir-Gvirsman, and Ventura 2017).

## 26.5 Conclusion

A rich body of work has established that the public agenda is affected by events and how they are presented to the public. When political elites or the media focus on an issue, citizens, and especially those who are tuned to the political process, focus on that issue, voice their concern about the issue, and as a consequence may adjust their voting preferences. And yet, overall trends conceal offsetting variations within the public. People who share similar life experiences are affected by the same events and actions but respond differently as a function of their own interests and daily experiences. In this chapter we reveal this variation in two very different countries—Israel and the United States. In both, we find significant differences between some of the most dominant demographic divides. Despite significant differences in the overall agenda focus in these countries,



some of the group differences are similar in both countries, demonstrating the comparable interests people have based on their own life experiences and problems.

The findings affect our understanding of the political process. Electoral and legislative theories often focus on the problems most salient to the public, and issue ownership posits that when a problem becomes salient, a party may benefit from it electorally if it is perceived better equipped to solve it or more concerned in solving it (Egan, 2013). Therefore, understanding the variation in issue priorities raises new questions about the electoral benefits of focusing on these issues. A party may gain electorally not only if it is associated with the problem most salient, but also if the relevant constituencies of the party find the issue to be most important.

These variations offer a more accurate picture of the public agenda. They open new opportunities for scholars interested in understanding what influences the agenda of a specific public, and, in turn, how that agenda may influence other actors. We demonstrate our analysis of two countries. But, given the comparative nature of the CAP codebook, replicating this method to additional countries is straightforward, allowing for new comparative perspectives on the public agenda(s).

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Notes:

(1.) For a discussion of the differences between issues and problems see Jennings and Wlezien (2011). For a discussion of “problems” as a measure of public agenda, see Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake (2011: 99-100).

(2.) Because all MIPs are not recorded verbatim but into categories defined and sorted by the pollster and interviews, the data are not primary data. This, however, is a problem shared by all studies and datasets that rely on the MIP data from commercial surveys commonly used in existing research. It may also be a larger concern in earlier surveys in which pollsters tended to code responses into a small number of categories. As time progressed, coding became more detailed and includes a larger number of categories, allowing greater distinction between responses.

(3.) Available online at <http://www.policyagendas.org/codebooks/topicindex.html>. Categorization of responses results in inevitable data loss, and further analysis is limited by the definition and classification of the categories used. A significant problem is the wide definition of macroeconomics under the Policy Agendas Project, which joins together unemployment with national budget, price control, and taxation. As a result, the welfare policy category is smaller and encompasses significantly different policy issues than is generally included in a social welfare issue ownership category. Despite these limitations, categorization is important for allowing a unified content code across time and the advantage of using the Policy Agendas Project codebook is that it is publicly available and used by studies examining changes in policy agendas and sharing similar interests with the current project.

(4.) The MIP question is one of the few attitudinal survey questions to have been asked consistently since the beginning of public opinion polling. Thus, the MIP series offers a dynamic measure of issue priorities for longitudinal studies and is a common source of the public agenda (Soroka, 2002). It is an open-ended question, where each respondent is asked to name the problem she thinks is most important. For a discussion of “problems” as a measure of public agenda, see Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake (2011: 99-100).

(5.) In 1969 and 1973 interviewers recorded more than one response. We use only the first mention from these two surveys.

(6.) Adapted for Israel by David Levi-Faor, Ilana Shpaizman, Hila Bar-Nir, Nir Kosti, Roi ben-David, Natan Milkowski, and Hana Dar-Hershkowitz.

(7.) We thank Ran Rinker for his work on gathering the Israel dataset.

(8.) As in the United States, we combine categories 16 (defense) and 19 (international affairs). We also include in this category all issues connected to the occupied territories.

(9.) For a more developed discussion of the public agenda and issue diversity over time see Cavari, Rinker, and Freedman, 2017.

(10.) We use subjective report of social status because this question was asked consistently. Income was asked in only four surveys.

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