

The Welfare State, Social Capital and Alternative Politics: First Findings from Israel

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Introduction

This paper reports the main findings of an explorative study that attempts to connect three variables: attitudes towards the welfare state, social capital and attitudes towards illegal channels for providing services (called here 'alternative politics'). It is part of an ongoing project that has already produced a report, based on an earlier survey, concerning the attitudes of the Israeli public towards the welfare state (Cohen, Mizrahi and Yuval, forthcoming). The current study is based on a survey conducted during Spring 2010 among 507 Israeli citizens representative of the Jewish portion of the Israeli population. This paper will not explore the relationships between the variables mentioned above, but rather will describe the main descriptive statistics and also outline possible theoretical hypotheses.

Theoretical Background

Public Opinion about the Welfare State

The role of public opinion in the development of the modern welfare state has been studied from various angles. Brooks and Manza (2004) show the influence of public opinion in the United States on public policy in general and welfare policy in particular, and Manza and Cook (2002) demonstrate the relationship between public opinion and welfare policy in other countries. Bartels (1991) and Wlezien (1996) concentrate on attitudes towards defense expenses and foreign policy, while Jacobs (1992) explores the impact of public preferences and understandings on policy discussions among interest groups, bureaucrats, and politicians. Focusing on the formation of health services in Britain and America, Jacobs (1992) concludes that the general public exerts a powerful influence on detailed policy making. Burstein (2003) reviews publications published in major journals and systematically codes them to record the impact of public opinion on policy. He notes that the impact of public opinion is substantial and that salience enhances the impact of public opinion. This impact remains strong even when the activities of political organizations and elites are taken into account. Furthermore, Burstein notes that responsiveness appears not to have changed significantly over time, but cautions that the extent to which the conclusions can be generalized is limited.

Social Capital

The concept of social capital first arose in the literature during the 1960s, and since then, numerous scholars have written about its importance. Bourdieu (1986) argues that social capital is composed of a variety of accumulated resources, which can be transmitted to the next generation and which require deliberate economic and cultural investments. According to Coleman (1988), social capital is a feature of the structure of society, a kind of social good that emerges from reciprocal obligations and expectations, and expands to the group at large (Lin, 2001). Putnam defines social capital as the “connections among individuals-social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (2000: 19), “the features of social organization, such as networks, norms and social trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putnam, 1995: 67).

Hence, social capital is an inherent collective attribute of social life that enables people to co-operate (Daly and Silver, 2008) and to improve the efficiency of the collective community or organizational actions (Putnam, 2000). In the absence of these features, the individual's qualities cannot be translated into the collective added value of social capital. The various definitions share three common components: the structural factor of organizations and social networks; the behavioral aspect of the amount of participation and involvement members invest in these networks; and the emotional or cognitive factor of the level of solidarity and reciprocal social trust among members of the networks, as well as the level of trust between them and social institutions (Laor and Shapiro, 2007: 151). The current research concentrates on social capital as it pertains to individuals, focusing on the ways in which social capital is converted into other forms of capital (especially economic or cultural capital). Individuals who have similar material capital but differ in terms of their social and cultural capital can use the latter in various ways for their own benefit (Svendsen and Svendsen, 2003; Pichler and Wallace, 2009).

Alternative Politics

The concept of alternative politics refers to specific strategies adopted by citizens and interest groups in response to their dissatisfaction with the declining availability of governmental services (Mizrahi and Meydani, 2003; Cohen and Mizrahi, forthcoming). More specifically, alternative politics is based on a "do-it-yourself" approach where citizens on their own adopt extra-legal, and often illegal, strategies to improve the services provided by the government. In many cases such strategies are adopted by individuals who want to solve their immediate problems such as obtaining more responsive and better quality governmental services, rather than by organizations seeking to resolve these issues (Lehman-Wilzig, 1992). Alternative politics is also characterized by a sophisticated amalgamation of public resources and private financing. Under certain conditions such a mode of behavior is diffused to all sectors and levels of society through a process of collective learning (Ben Porat and Mizrahi, 2005; Levy and Mizrahi, 2007). Given such diffusion, players on the policy scene are guided by short-term considerations and tend to apply unilateral strategies that bypass formal rules either through illegal activity or by marginalizing formal rules. The concept of alternative politics can help explain many processes that involve consumers and providers of governmental services, particularly those that lead to alternative channels for providing such services. Furthermore, the evolution and diffusion of alternative politics has many implications for the nature of the welfare state and may be closely related to the level of social capital. Hence, the current paper will suggest a possible theoretical framework that ties these concepts together.

Sample and Procedure

The research is based on data collected during the spring of 2010 using questionnaires distributed to a sample of 507 adults from the Jewish portion of the Israeli population. Interviewers met the participants in various locations such as public venues, governmental institutions, and private homes. We used random quota sampling and sampled various cities and other communities based on geographic location and the size and structure of the population. Response rate was approximately 60% due to our sampling method. The response rate was calculated as the ratio between those participants who ultimately took part in the study and those who agreed to listen to our explanation of the study and reviewed the questions.

Of the respondents, 54.3% were men and 45.3% were women (compared to 50.58% of women in the overall population according to the Central Bureau of Statistics). The average age in this sample was 32.27 years ($SD = 15.68$). With regard to education, 41.9% of the interviewees in the sample reported a high-school education, another 39.4% were undergraduates or had graduated, and 10.2% had a second or third degree. With regard to income, 45.8% earned a gross monthly wage of 4,000 NIS or less, 26.8% earned between 4,001 and 8,000 NIS per month, while 15.4% had a monthly income of between 8,001 and 14,000 NIS, and 10.6% of respondents earned 14,001 NIS or more. The average wage in Israel in July 2010 was 8,602 NIS (Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, 2010a). With regard to religiosity, 22% of respondents were secular, 37.4% were religiously traditional, 25.8% were religiously observant, and 24% were ultra-Orthodox. Even though the demographic characteristics of the sample do not completely match the population distribution, (i.e. women are over-represented in the sample, and the sample has a higher level of education than the general public), the demographics of the sample are relatively representative of the general Israeli population (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2010b).

Measures

The survey questionnaire included 89 questions scored on a Likert scale of 1-5, which represented a low and high level, respectively, of agreement with a given statement (see Appendix 1). Fifty-six of these questions were used to assess three main measures that were constructed based on the theoretical foundations outlined above and were verified as reliable measures using reliability tests (Cronbach's α).

The three measures included: *attitudes toward welfare policy*, *alternative politics*, and *social trust*. *Attitudes toward welfare policy* was measured by a 28-item scale composed of two sub-indexes: (a) *state intervention*: a 17-item scale that indicated the desired level of state intervention in the economy and in an individual's life ($\alpha=.781$); and (b) *extra taxes*: an 11-item scale indicating the willingness to pay for the welfare state ($\alpha=.919$).

Alternative politics was measured by 15 items and was broken down into three sub-indexes representing three different aspects of the complicated phenomenon of alternative politics. The first and second aspects of this concept referred to the willingness of subjects to *make extra payments* or to *use personal connections* to have better access to public services or to improve the quality of these services for themselves. We used a 6-item scale to measure the first sub-category and a 2-item scale to measure the second. Reliabilities were $\alpha=.636$, and $\alpha=.643$ respectively. The third sub-category dealt with the *legality of the actions* citizens can take to provide better services for themselves when public authorities fail to do so. This sub-category was measured using respondents' agreements with seven items ($\alpha=.710$).

Social capital was measured using four separate indicators of social networking: (a) *participating in political activities* - the intensity of political participation was measured by 10 items, each of which referred to a different way of being involved in political activity ($\alpha=.787$); (b) *social involvement* and meetings with friends - two separate items asking participants to report the number of social meetings they had with friends, relatives and colleagues during the past year, and the number of times they attended religious based meetings during the past year. These items were scored on a scale that ranged from 0 to 10; (c) *volunteering* in social organizations - respondents were asked, "How many hours do you dedicate to volunteer activities per month?" (d) *social trust* -- the last measure reflects the level of trust our respondents had in the social environment and their level of confidence in their close social circles ($\alpha=.769$). We used a scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 10 (very much) to measure the three items used to assess this sub-category.

Findings

Attitudes toward welfare policy

State intervention

Figure 1 illustrates the level of intervention that subjects expected from the state in the economic sphere. The statements on the X-axis are ordered from left to right. The statement at the far left represents the most radical view favoring the liberal or the private market economic approach, while the statement at the far right of the axis represents the most extreme view favoring extensive government intervention and the universal welfare state. The figure clearly demonstrates that there is little support for the private market approach (ranging on average from 1.47; std. 0.93 to 2.45; std. 1.17) and very strong support for the welfare state (ranging on average from 3.23; std. 1.17 to 4.24; std. 1.04).

Insert Figure 1 about here

Moreover, participants in the survey clearly prefer less government intervention in areas such as supplying jobs for every citizen (mean: 3.23) compared to governmental support for the underprivileged or weaker sectors of society (the disadvantaged, poor, disabled, unemployed, the elderly - items 10-12, 15-16; means: 3.67, 3.67, 3.72, 4.14, 4.19 respectively). Participants consistently express strong support for values that reflect the ideology underlying the welfare state, such as social responsibility, mutual aid, and the importance of solidarity between citizens (items 6, 7, and 14 means: 3.55, 3.56 and 3.93 respectively). Although our subjects express minor impatience with regard to the responsibility of the government to supply employment for everyone (item 5 mean 3.23), and strongly support the idea that everyone should be responsible for himself or herself and not rely on others (item 9 mean 3.65), they still believe overwhelmingly that it is the government's responsibility to ensure a minimum basic wage for every citizen (item 17 mean 4.24). This attitude can be easily explained by the unique situation in Israeli society in which almost 20% of the society is ultra-Orthodox and does not participate in the work force or pay taxes, relying instead on government stipends and charitable donations.

Extra taxes

On average, respondents expressed a willingness (mean: 3.47 on a scale of 1-5; std.: 0.95) to reassign taxes in order to increase the budget for welfare services. Figure 2 presents the results about the willingness to pay more taxes for specific public welfare services. It demonstrates the consistent, positive attitude of respondents towards the welfare policy. The only service that enjoyed little support was the unemployment allowance (2.80; std. 1.27).

Insert Figure 2 about here

Social Capital

Four indicators of social networking were used to measure *social capital*: (a) participating in political activities, (b) social involvement and meetings with friends, (c) volunteering in social organizations, and (d) social trust.

Political Participation

As shown in Figure 3, Israeli citizens are not strong players in the political arena (for these activities the average is 2.19; std. 0.73). Almost half of the participants--46.8%--reported that they never or only rarely take part in any of the 10 most popular forms of participatory political activity.

Insert Figure 3 about here

Social Involvement

As Figures 4 and 5 demonstrate, respondents reported a moderate amount of social life. On a scale of 0 to 10, they averaged 4.46 (std. 1.25) meetings a month with friends, relatives or workplace colleagues. Similarly, they reported attending an average of 4.65 (std. 2.0) religious based group meetings a month.

Insert Figure 4 and 5 about here

Volunteering in Social Organizations

Although the majority of participants-- 51.2%-- did not volunteer at all, those who did reported spending 31.19 hours each month on average on volunteer activities.

Social Trust

How would we characterize the social environment of this population? The answer, illustrated in Figure 6 below, shows that Israeli Jews tend to trust others, but not too strongly (average 5.67 between 0-10; std. 2.27). Another aspect of that social environment is what we termed earlier alternative politics.

Insert Figure 6 about here

Alternative politics

Alternative politics is a complicated phenomenon to measure. Nevertheless, we tried to estimate its scope in Israeli society using three sub-measures dealing with the willingness of respondents to *make extra payments* in order to have easier and friendlier access to services and/or to ensure the quality of these services; *to use personal connections* for the same purposes; and the extent to which respondents would agree to take *illegal actions* in order to achieve these goals. The results are depicted in Figure 7. While using personal connections is regarded as a legitimate activity (3.31; std.1.23), extra payments and illegal actions are considered less legitimate activities (2.67; std. 0.80 and 2.39; std. 0.80 respectively). Thus, while many have contended that in recent years alternative politics has become a widespread phenomenon in Israel, respondents were reluctant to state their willingness to use this strategy.

Insert Figure 7 about here

Discussion

This research attempts to bring to the forefront three aspects of the welfare state that are very difficult to measure and are usually studied separately. The goal of the study is to establish measures for these aspects and test the relations between them using an initial theoretical model. The phenomenon of alternative politics has been studied in the context of trust in governmental institutions. It has been argued that low levels of trust are likely to encourage the evolution of alternative politics (Mizrahi, Vigoda-Gadot and Cohen, 2009; Mizrahi, Vigoda-Gadot and Cohen, 2010; Cohen and Mizrahi, in press). In addition, there are strong relationships between socio-economic status and the willingness to adopt strategies of alternative politics (Cohen, in press).

In this research we suggest a further elaboration of this argument by hypothesizing that social capital serves as a mediating variable between socio-economic status and alternative politics. Based on the logic of Bourdieu's argument, we suggest that people of high socio-economic status create social capital as a tool to further their own interests. These people will find it more legitimate and easy to apply strategies of alternative politics such as using personal connections, making extra payments and engaging in illegal activities to promote their interests. As for the relationship between social capital and attitudes towards the welfare state, the literature shows that here too socio-economic status plays a significant role (Sears et al., 1980; Hasenfeld and Rafferty, 1989; Andress and Heien, 2001; Blekesaune, 2006). People of low socio-economic status will tend to support the universal welfare state, and we hypothesize that strong social capital will strengthen this relationship.

Similarly, people of high socio-economic status will tend to oppose the universal welfare state, and we hypothesize that strong social capital will strengthen this relationship.

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Appendix 1

1. It is the state's responsibility, not that of the citizens or private or voluntary organizations, to reduce the number of poor people.
2. Every citizen in Israeli society should be responsible for himself or herself and not rely on others.
3. It is the government's responsibility to ensure and provide a minimum basic wage for every citizen.
4. In my opinion, it is not the government's responsibility to provide public services such as health, education and welfare to the public. These services would be better supplied by private or volunteer organizations that would be supervised by the state.
5. The government should emphasize the social considerations of equality and fairness more than economic efficiency when providing services to the public.
6. In my opinion, it is not the state's responsibility to ensure citizens' welfare. Everyone is responsible for his or her own fate.
7. The government should supply employment for everyone who is interested, and not pass this responsibility on to the citizen himself or on to the private market.
8. In my opinion, the government is justified in caring more for the weaker groups in society than for the rest of the citizens in the state.
9. In my opinion, cutting the social services' budget is justified in order to increase the security budget.
10. The government should be responsible for narrowing the economic gap in Israeli society and not to leave this responsibility in the hands of the citizens or to private or volunteer organizations.
11. It is the state's responsibility to provide healthcare services to citizens who are ill. These services must not be left in the hands of private or volunteer organizations.
12. The state is the one who is responsible for ensuring that the elderly and the unemployed have a reasonable quality of life.
13. In my opinion, society in Israel attaches too much importance to money and the accumulation of private wealth.
14. In my opinion, it is very desirable that society in Israel emphasizes the values of social responsibility such as the importance of mutual aid and solidarity between citizens rather than the values of individual success.
15. I support reducing the wage gap in society.
16. In my opinion, the state should collect more taxes from citizens in order to reduce inequality in society.
17. It is the government's responsibility rather than individuals themselves or private or volunteer organizations to ensure the wellbeing of weaker groups in society.

To what extent would you agree or not agree to pay more taxes for the following subjects:

18. National health insurance that guarantees suitable healthcare services for all citizens.
19. Pensions that ensure a minimum basic income to every citizen.
20. Welfare stipends to senior citizens.
21. Unemployment allowances.
22. Help in housing for young couples or in purchasing a house for the first time.
23. Child welfare stipends.
24. Free education.
25. Welfare aid to disabled citizens.
26. Reducing the number of poor in Israel.
27. Reducing gaps in Israeli society.
28. National social insurance.
29. An open question: If you would like to add anything in your own words, please use the following rows to write your comments.
30. When government fails to provide good quality public services such as education, healthcare, and law enforcement for members of my family or myself, and if I could afford it, I would pay privately or approach other sources for better quality services of this kind. I would do so even if such actions were not entirely legal.
31. If I or a member of my family needed medical treatment, and the treatment offered by the public healthcare system was not adequate, if I could afford it, I would definitely consider making a special payment to the doctor so that he or she would offer us preferable treatment.
32. If I or a member of my family was not getting satisfactory educational services at school, if I could afford it, I would definitely consider making a special payment to the teacher or the school manager so that they would offer us preferable treatment.
33. Most Israelis are not willing to pay for better services and are satisfied with the services offered by the government.
34. I would definitely consider using personal connections if I thought it would help my children get a better job during their military service that might help them later on in civilian life.
35. When the government fails to provide an important service to the public, it is their right to pay another source that can successfully provide this service.
36. When citizens come across an important problem in the central or local government authorities and cannot solve it in conventional ways, they should pay an official to solve the problem.
37. When it is necessary and I am able to, I would use my personal connections to provide a member of my family or myself with preferable healthcare or educational services.
38. In Israel, if people believe that the police are failing to provide them with satisfactory security services, and they can afford it, they should pay for a private security company to protect them and not rely on the police.
39. In my opinion, we must insist on forcing the government to provide quality public services to citizens in every field (education, healthcare, personal security etc.) and not give in to obtaining these services from another source.
40. In Israel there is no other choice, one must bypass the in order to solve problem.
41. In my opinion, in order to get along in Israel there is no other choice than to ignore the rules or the laws from time to time when they stand in the way of providing satisfactory answers to problems that plague citizens.
42. Bribing a doctor or making illegal payments for medical services is absolutely opposed to my values and my moral code.
43. When I am not satisfied with the services provided by the government and there is an option to obtain this service in the private sector or on the grey market, I will choose the less expensive alternative regardless of its legal status.
44. If I needed to hire a foreign worker for one of my family members or for myself, and the authorities would not allow it, I would definitely consider hiring the worker without legal permission.
45. If I were dissatisfied with public services such as healthcare, education or policing, I would be willing to pay extra money to a private organization in order to get fast and qualitative treatment.
46. Illegal activity can never be justified. One always has to obey the law.
47. If the government fails to take care of a particular issue, everyone has the right to take care of his or her own needs in his or her own way.

48. If the state does not allow citizens to do things they consider important (such as expanding their house, transferring their children from one school to another, building fences, or enclosing a porch or patio to create a conventional room), citizens have to create facts on the ground and force the government to accept it retroactively.

Please try to estimate the level of your involvement in each one of the following activities during the last year:

- 49. Be up to date about political news
- 50. Write letters to a public personality or to newspapers
- 51. Be up to date about my local authority
- 52. Be a member of a local or community organization
- 53. Participate in demonstrations, political meetings
- 54. Take part in political talks or debates
- 55. Be a candidate for public office
- 56. Sign petitions
- 57. Be a member of a volunteer organization dedicated to the community (work with elderly people, immigrants, animals, parents' committee, co-op board, neighborhood committee)
- 58. Participate in cultural activities in the community
- 59. In general, do you think that one can trust most people, or do you always have a certain amount of suspicion about people?
- 60. Do you think that the majority of people will try to take advantage of you if they have the chance, or will they try to be fair to you?
- 61. Do you think that most people are worthy of your dealing with them fairly, or do only a few of them

Figure 1: the supportive level of intervention of the state in the economic sphere

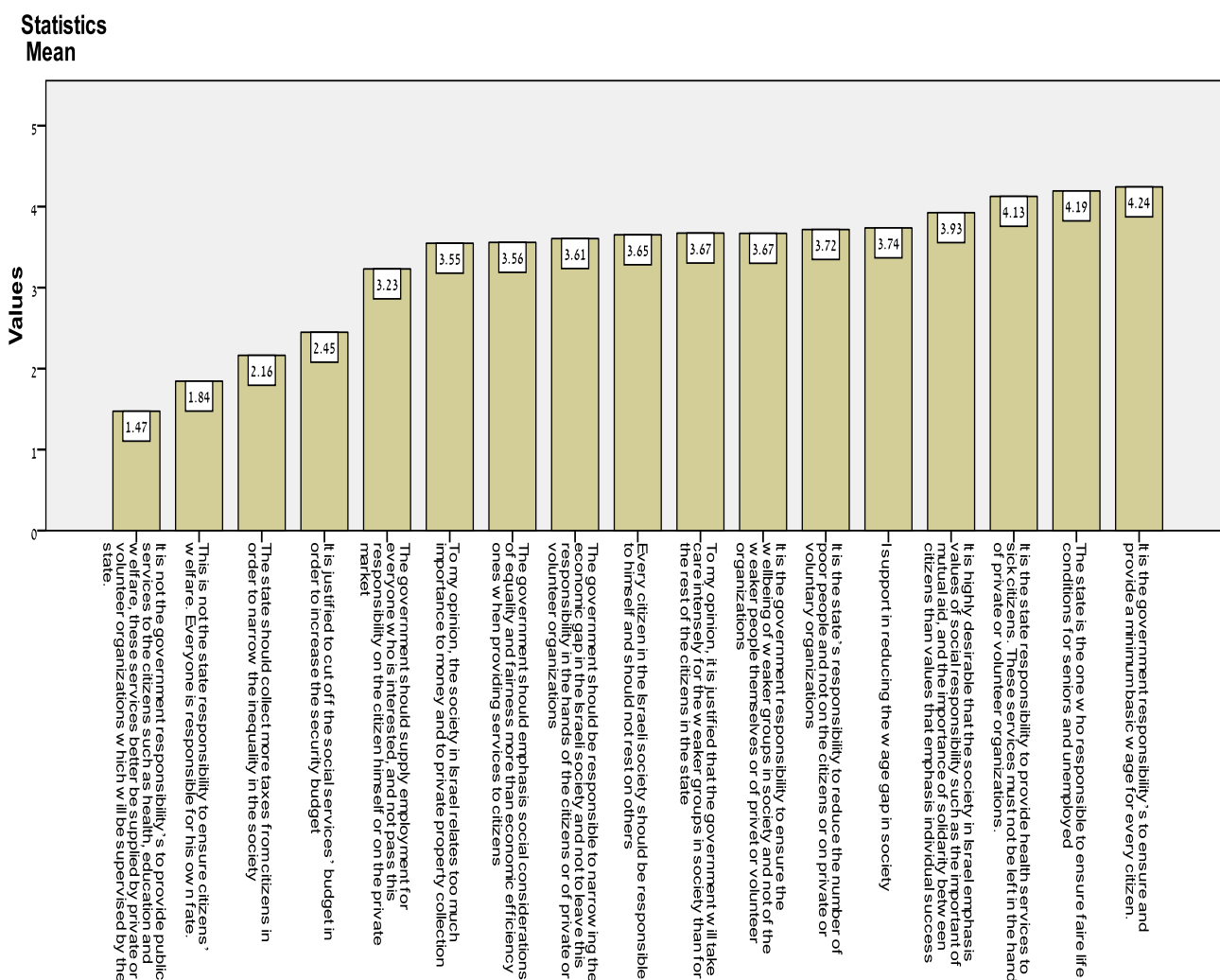


Figure 2: willingness to reassign taxes to increase the budget of specific welfare services

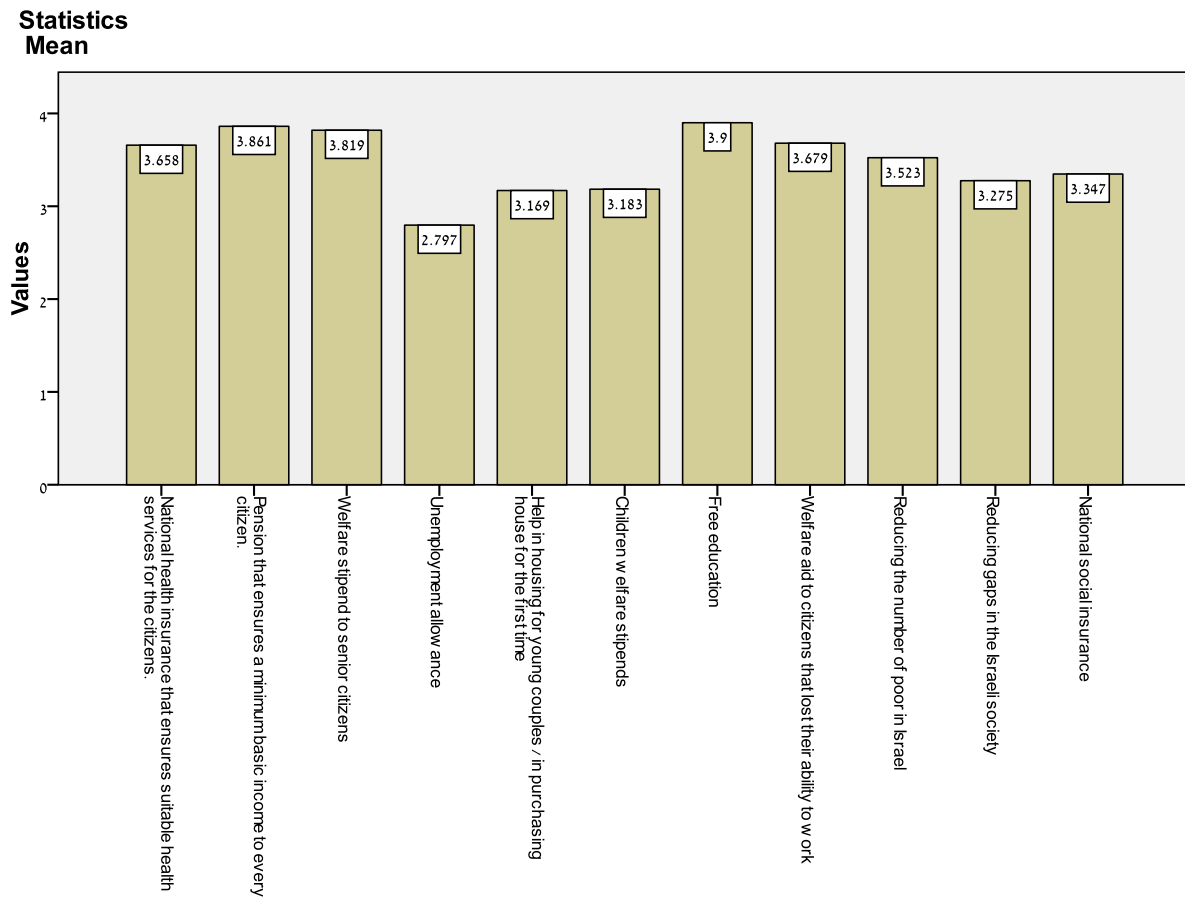


Figure 3: The level of political participation

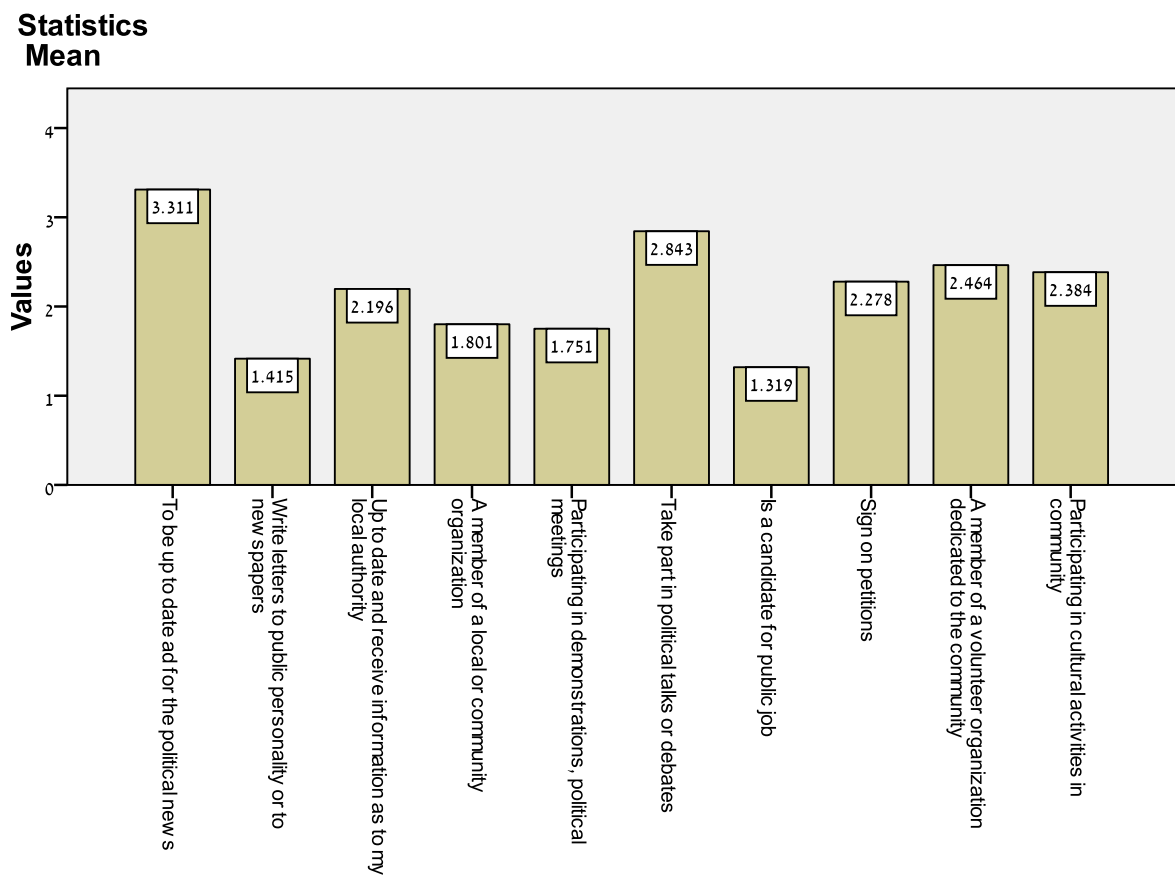


Figure 4: Frequent of social meetings

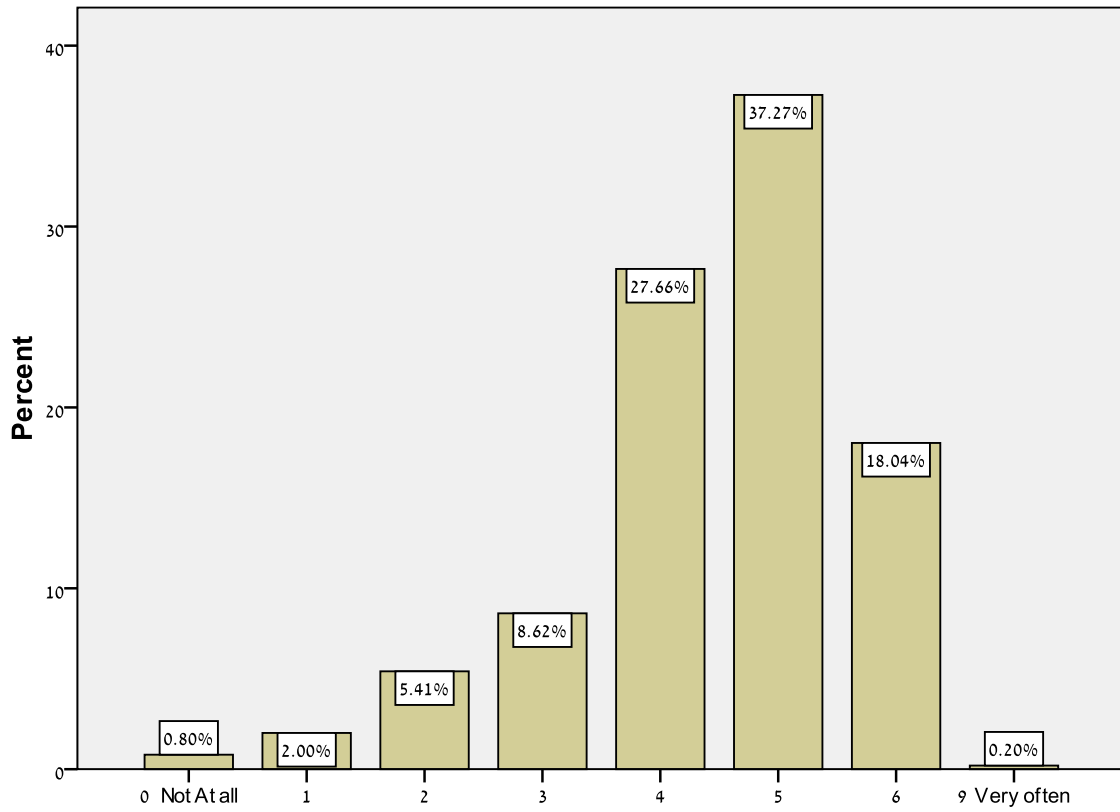


Figure 5: Religious meetings

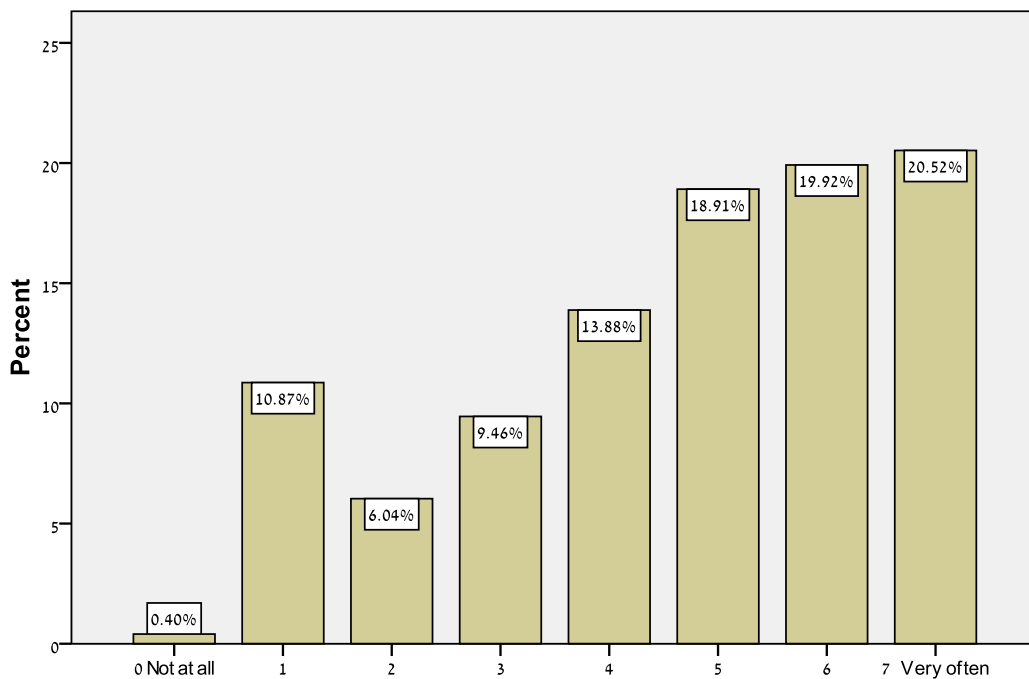


Figure 6: Level of Social Trust

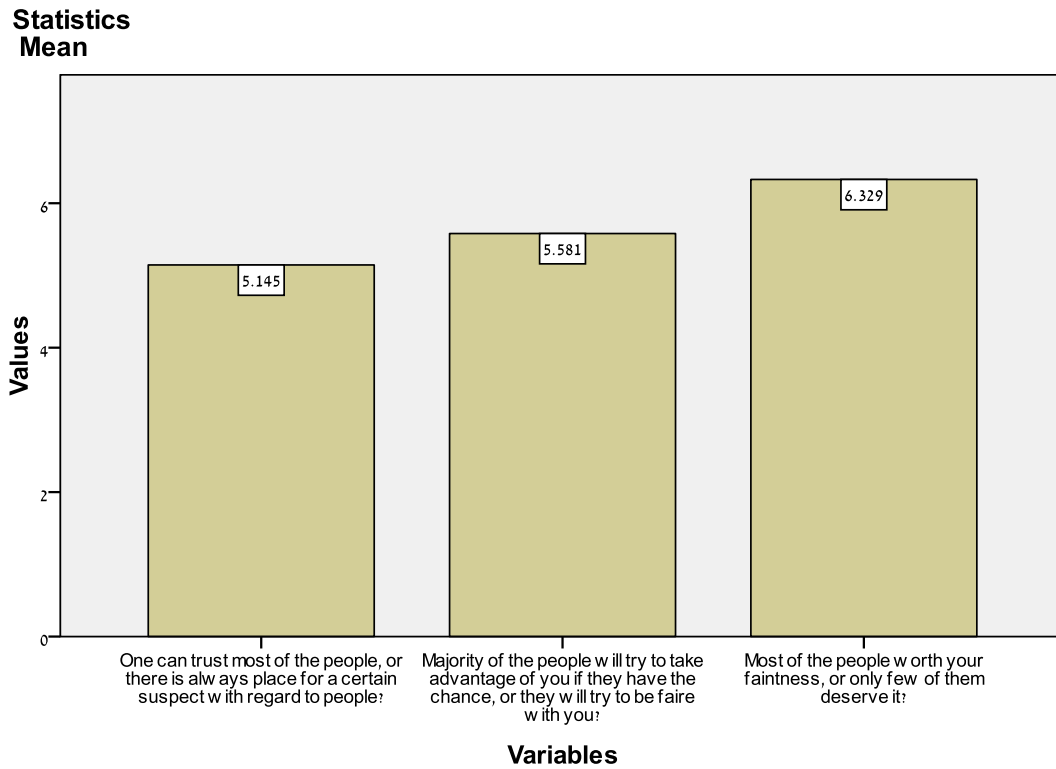


Figure 7: Three indicators of Alternative Politics

