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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Perceptions of Jewish and Israelis in Italy: Evidence from a Survey Experiment on Political Orientation

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**ABSTRACT:** Following the Hamas attacks of October 7, 2023, and the subsequent outbreak of another phase of the Israel-Palestine conflict, the debate on whether criticism of Israel can mask antisemitic prejudice in Western countries has intensified. This study investigates how ideology shapes perceptions of Jews and Israelis in Italy, a context historically marked by right-wing antisemitism and left-wing anti-imperialist critiques. We employ a survey experiment ( $n=1,119$ ) to measure attitudes toward Jews and Israelis/Israel, to test the pop-theory that posits a “horseshoe” pattern of antisemitism – that is, antisemitic attitudes should be most prevalent at the extremes of the political spectrum and attenuated at more central positions. Contrary to expectations, our findings show no significant convergence of antisemitic attitudes at the ideological extremes. Instead, left-leaning respondents distinguish more clearly between Jews and Israelis, whereas right-leaning respondents conflate the two identities. These results highlight the mechanism that disentangles prejudice from political critique and underscore the moderating effect of ideology in shaping public opinion toward Jewish/Israeli communities.

**KEYWORDS:** Antisemitism, Political ideology, Survey experiment, Israel, Italy.

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## 1. Introduction

Following the October 7, 2023, Hamas attacks, which resulted in the deaths of over 1,200 Israeli civilians and soldiers, Israel launched a large-scale military response targeting the Gaza Strip. This response, marked by extensive civilian casualties and widespread destruction, has been widely criticized as disproportionate by international observers; several voices – ranging from humanitarian organizations to political commentators – explicitly frame it as a genocide against the Palestinians. This intensification of violence by the Israeli military has not only reignited the long-standing debate over the legitimacy and limits of criticizing Israel’s actions but has also raised concerns about a potential resurgence of antisemitic sentiment, as negative feelings toward Israel may spill over into broader negative perceptions of Jewish communities. In this context, questions about how criticism of Israel is framed, and whether it is differentiated from antisemitic prejudice, have taken on renewed urgency. On the one hand, pro-Israel advocates argue that hostility toward Israel often serves as a socially acceptable guise for antisemitism (Becker et al., 2024; Zacher and Shemla, 2024). According to this perspective, antisemitism can manifest in several ways: by disproportionately focusing global attention on Israel, holding it to higher standards than other states, exaggerating its faults, rejecting its legitimacy as a state, or dismissing its security concerns. Israel advocacy groups assert that anti-Israel activists often employ language and tropes rooted in traditional antisemitism, blurring the line between political critique and racial prejudice (ADL, 2023; AJC, 2023). On the other hand, critics of Israel emphasize the importance of distinguishing between antisemitic attitudes and legitimate opposition to the policies of the Israeli government (e.g., Kempf, 2015). They contend that accusations of antisemitism are sometimes employed as a strategy to stifle valid criticism of Israel’s actions, both domestically and internationally.

The debate, which has recently had considerable relevance in the public arena, has been evident in cases such as the wave of student-led demonstrations across U.S. campuses, controversies over faculty speech, and administrative crackdowns on pro-Palestinian activism<sup>1</sup>. A similar controversy arose in Italy around Francesca Albanese, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Occupied Palestinian Territories, who faced accusations of antisemitism following her public statements on the conflict and calls for her removal by advocacy groups<sup>2</sup>. This debate has also sparked significant academic discussions.

The literature has focused its theoretical efforts in the assessment of two key aspects. First, the measurement of anti-Semitic attitudes, which are generally defined as the tendency to view Jewish people not as individuals but as a collective that places its own group interests above all other commitments; in this respect, Jewish people are thus seen as essentially alien within the societies they live in, often portrayed as a kind of ‘enemy within’ and accused of secretly bringing disaster to their host communities or even the world (Bergmann, 2008; Troschke, 2024). Part of this literature measured anti-Semitism as a construct that encompasses both direct anti-Semitism – hostility toward Jewish individuals – and indirect anti-Semitism – hostility toward Israel (e.g., Kaplan and Small, 2006; Cohen et al., 2011). However, a concurrent body of scholarship regarding prejudice against both Jews and Israel underscores significant differences in the perception of these two identities, influenced by cultural and political factors (Beattie, 2017; Klug, 2005). The cognitive conflation in public discourse between opposition to Israel and antisemitism has led to an academic redefinition of antisemitism, shifting from what is traditionally known as classical antisemitism to what is referred to as “new antisemitism” – that is, a form of antisemitism that expresses itself through hostility toward the State of Israel, often framing anti-Israel sentiment as a proxy for prejudice against Jews as a group (Judaken, 2008). This redefinition has laid the groundwork for academic debates about a possible “horseshoe pattern”, suggesting that antisemitic attitudes converge at the ideological extremes – right and left – while remaining less prevalent at the political center. Although the “horseshoe” theory remains more of a popular narrative than a robust theoretical framework, it has nonetheless been repeatedly subjected to empirical testing. While this framework has been empirically tested in the United States and, to a lesser extent, in other European contexts, no studies to date

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, <https://urlsnipper.com/k685mBL>

<sup>2</sup> See <https://urlsnipper.com/CQ60V8c>

have systematically examined these dynamics in Italy. This absence is particularly significant given Italy's unique historical background, where the authoritarian past has not been fully reckoned with at the political level, allowing ambivalent or even nostalgic attitudes toward fascism to persist in the public sphere (Colombo, 2022).

Antisemitism in Europe has deep historical roots (Bergmann, 2013; Sarfatti, 2006), with Italy representing one of the most extreme cases, especially on the right side of the political spectrum. Under fascism, the regime institutionalized state-sponsored antisemitism through the 1938 Racial Laws, which systematically marginalized Jews from public and professional life (Cassata, 2018; Sarfatti, 2006) and played an active role in the implementation of the Holocaust. Even after World War II, the radical right in Italy remained a fertile ground for strongly negative attitudes toward Jews and Israelis, with such biases persisting in more covert forms and often intersecting with critiques of Israeli policy (Campani, 2016). On the left, in contrast, critiques of Israel have frequently been framed within a broader anti-imperialist and anti-colonial discourse (Antoniou and Moses, 2017), further complicating the distinction between legitimate criticism of Israeli state actions and antisemitic sentiment. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, particularly in the wake of events such as the October 7 attacks, has amplified these tensions and made Italy a salient context in which to examine how antisemitic attitudes are structured along the ideological spectrum and whether they conform to the hypothesized “horseshoe pattern” of convergence at the extremes.

This research is situated within this debate and it unpacks these attitudes' cultural and political underpinnings in Italy. The aim is to assess whether the Jewish community and Israel are evaluated as distinct entities within individual-level social representations, and whether this distinction is shaped by political ideology. Using an experimental approach on a representative sample of about 1,100 Italian adults, we test two expectations derived from part of existing literature. First, we engage with the “horseshoe theory” by examining whether antisemitic and anti-Israel attitudes converge at the ideological extremes while being less prevalent at the political center. Second, we interrogate a key assumption of the concept of new antisemitism – namely, that critiques of Israel may serve as a proxy for prejudice toward Jews. While this perspective would suggest little distinction between evaluations of Jews and Israel across both extremes, we hypothesize that attitudinal patterns differ by ideology. On the right, we expect a conflation of Jews and Israel, reflecting a categorical essentialist view; on the left, we anticipate a clearer differentiation between the evaluation of Israel and that of Jews, with the former being more negative than the latter. In doing so, we not only test the empirical validity of the horseshoe pattern but also critically examine whether contemporary left-wing critiques of Israel necessarily imply underlying antisemitic bias.

Our experimental results offer a complex picture. First, we find no empirical support for the hypothesized horseshoe pattern across the political spectrum. However, we observe a clear asymmetry in how attitudes toward Jews and Israel are structured across ideological positions: as we move rightward, the distinction between evaluations of Jews and Israel progressively diminishes, effectively disappearing at the far right, where attitudes toward both are strongly conflated. In contrast, on the left this distinction is sharp and statistically significant, with respondents differentiating clearly between Israel's political actions and Jewish identity. This asymmetry challenges both the horseshoe theory and one of the core assumptions of the new antisemitism concept. On the left, critiques of Israel do not serve as a proxy for antisemitic attitudes but rather reflect broader anti-imperialist/anti-colonial stands.

## 2. Background

Recent research on antisemitism has marked two significant departures from earlier studies. The first shift lies in the growing focus on the relationship between harsh or extreme criticism of Israel and antisemitic attitudes, moving beyond more traditional analyses of antisemitism as a standalone phenomenon (Kaplan and Small, 2006; Cohen et al., 2011). The second shift involves a transition from examining demographic groups, such as age, ethnicity, religion, or educational level, to exploring how both antisemitism and opposition toward Israel intersect with ideological affiliations (Binstock et al., 2024; Kempf, 2015; Hersh and Royden, 2023). As a

result, these strands of research have opened space within the scholarly debate on new antisemitism for a pop-theory like the “horseshoe pattern” to gain scientific legitimacy and become part of academic discussions on the various manifestations of contemporary antisemitism. In this study, the framework examines how antisemitic prejudice manifests itself in contemporary contexts and how it may - or may not - interact with different political ideologies.

## ***2.1 Casting the "other(s)": New Antisemitism, Ideological Extremes and the Horseshoe Theory***

The concept of new antisemitism, though not new in terminology, has acquired a specific meaning in contemporary debates, particularly since the aftermath of the 1967 Six-Day War. It refers to a form of hostility toward Jews that manifests primarily through the criticism and delegitimization of the State of Israel and Zionism (Judaken, 2008; Klug, 2013). Unlike traditional antisemitism – which was rooted in racial doctrines, religious prejudice, and biological essentialism targeting Jews as individuals – new antisemitism shifts this hostility to Israel, conceived as a collective embodiment of Jewish identity (Klug, 2003). This contemporary form often employs cultural and political arguments, sometimes articulated in an ostensibly anti-racist language (Kantor, 2022), allowing stereotypes historically directed at Jews to be redirected at Israel as a surrogate target.

As debates around the multidimensionality of new antisemitism have evolved, scholarly attention has increasingly turned to the relationship between attitudes toward Jews and attitudes toward Israel. Early research tended to treat these domains as distinct, focusing primarily on prejudice toward Jewish individuals while relegating criticism of Israel to a separate analytical category (e.g., Cohen et al., 2011; Kaplan and Small, 2006). More recent studies, however, have emphasized their intersection, exploring how political ideologies shape both types of attitudes. One prominent hypothesis to emerge from this literature is the so-called “horseshoe” effect, which suggests that antisemitic and anti-Israel attitudes converge at the ideological extremes, both left and right, while being less pronounced at the political center (Cohen, 2024; Lipstadt, 2019). This pop theory stemmed from the writings of authors who saw a behavioral and values continuity among adherents of political ideologies at the extremes (Bell, 1964; Faye, 2002; Lipset & Rabb, 1971); this framework has since been adopted in the study of antisemitism. It suggests that hostility toward Israel today may reflect a common underlying logic at both ideological extremes – a logic in which political critiques and prejudice become intertwined through narratives such as accusations of colonialism, apartheid, or comparisons to oppressive regimes (Klaff, 2023; Klug, 2013). The horseshoe theory posits that political extremes may converge in antisemitic attitudes (broadly understood to include both anti-Jewish and anti-Israel sentiments), even though such attitudes might be driven by distinct ideological motivations. From a scientific perspective, however, the horseshoe theory functions more as a heuristic or descriptive metaphor than a fully developed theoretical framework (Ostrowski, 2023). As a result, it has been primarily employed in empirical analyses without deeper theoretical elaboration.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Notable exceptions can be found in studies of economic policy preferences, which have shown apparent convergence between far-left and far-right positions on issues such as Euroscepticism, globalization, and skepticism toward elite-driven economic integration (e.g., Elsas et al., 2016). Importantly, these studies demonstrate that while both radical left- and right-wing citizens may oppose globalization or European integration, their underlying motivations differ — rooted in economic concerns on the left and cultural or nationalist concerns on the right.

Although new antisemitism has been used to question whether criticism of Israel may conceal antisemitic sentiment, and the horseshoe theory suggests convergence at the political extremes, scholars emphasize that antisemitism on the far right and far left stems from fundamentally different political narratives (Bindman, 2019; Roy, 2010; Sunshine, 2019).

On the far right, critiques of Israel are frequently linked to nationalist and xenophobic ideologies. Anti-Semitism in this context often stems from ethnic and cultural prejudices, perpetuating long-standing stereotypes about Jewish communities, such as allegations of economic control or the so-called “dual loyalty” – the claim that Jews prioritize their ethnic or religious allegiance over their national commitment (Bergmann, 2013; Young, 1988). These narratives exhibit historical continuity with the exclusionary nationalism of right-wing ideology. Anti-Semitism is conceptualized as arising from perceived status threats and rivalries over victimhood claims (Antoniou, et al., 2020). Moreover, the literature argues that mainly white low-income citizens feel marginalized by immigration, diversity, and globalization, frequently directing their grievances toward Jews, portraying them as disloyal members of the white racial group and prominent supporters of globalism and multiculturalism (Weiss, 2019; Lipstadt, 2019). Such perspectives frequently fails to differentiate between Jewish ethnicity and Israeli political identity, treating them as indistinguishable. Additionally, this conflation has been reinforced by the Israeli right, which in recent years has actively sought to consolidate the overlap between Jewish identity and the Israeli state, particularly through measures such as the 2018 Nation-State Law (Adalah, 2018).

Conversely, the far left’s critique of Israel is often framed within anti-imperialist and anti-colonial discourses, targeting Israeli policies as part of a broader opposition to perceived Western hegemony (Klug, 2014). Moreover, the left, typically sympathetic to oppressed minorities, may see Jews not as an oppressed religious group but instead as oppressors due to stereotypes of Jews’ involvement in capitalism or solidarity with Palestinians in the Israeli Palestinian conflict (Lerner, 1992). Some scholars suggest that leftist criticism of Israel reflects broader patterns where socially unacceptable prejudices manifest in more coded forms. Particularly after the Holocaust, explicit anti-Semitism became taboo in Western societies, particularly within the left, leading to a “communication latency” phenomenon (Beyer and Krumpal, 2013). In this framework, harsh criticism of Israel may function as a socially acceptable conduit for expressing sentiments often linked to anti-Semitic stereotypes. According to these perspectives, criticism of Israel can sometimes escalate into demonization, portraying it as a uniquely oppressive or evil state, thereby echoing historical anti-Semitic tropes such as the blood libel (Sunshine, 2019). Supporters of Israel highlight the disproportionate focus on Israel compared to other states with documented human rights abuses and argue that the entire Israeli nation, its citizens, or even Jewish people globally are held accountable for the actions of Israel’s government (Arnold and Taylor, 2019). While a legitimate critique of Israel’s policies is a valid and essential component of political discourse, scholars caution that conflating such criticism with harmful stereotypes risks reinforcing anti-Semitism under the guise of political opposition (Cohen, 2009). This conflation is particularly problematic when Israel is equated with Jewish identity, obscuring the distinction between Jewish ethnicity and Israeli political identity.

Although acknowledging that the far right and far left are rooted in distinct ideological traditions, this research tends to examine anti-Israel and anti-Jewish attitudes as a unified phenomenon, based on the premise that Israel has come to serve as a symbolic proxy for the Jewish people (Klug, 2013). However, this conflation risks obscuring the distinction between legitimate criticism of Israeli state policies and antisemitic sentiment (Klug, 2014).

## **2.2 Untangling (politically) imagined communities: an alternative explanation**

Not all scholars agree on the coherence of the new antisemitism concept as a framework applicable across all political categories (Klug, 2014; Judaken, 2008). Similarly, the horseshoe theory has been questioned for being overly reductionist, as it tends to collapse distinct ideological traditions and historical legacies into a single explanatory model, potentially obscuring important differences in how antisemitic and anti-Israel attitudes manifest across the political spectrum (Hersh and Royden, 2022; Staetsky, 2020).

Building on this, we argue that while the horseshoe theory often treats critiques of Jewish people and Israelis as two sides of the same coin, other underlying mechanisms may be at work. For instance, Italian history is marked by a strong left-right differentiation in the way events, issues and political and social groups are perceived. Indeed, evaluative mechanisms may be less about direct historical or emotional linkages and more about socially constructed perceptions (Wlezien and Miller, 1997). Research on stereotyping (e.g., Fiske et al., 2002; Tajfel, 1981) elucidates the cognitive processes by which individuals simplify social categories, often merging unrelated traits into coherent yet biased perceptions of “the other”. This mechanism is especially pronounced in the case of Jews and Israelis, where criticism of Israeli policies can conflate with ethnic or religious prejudices. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for disentangling political ideologies from underlying prejudices, thereby fostering a more discerning discourse on anti-Semitism and critiques of Israel within contemporary political landscapes.

The perceptual mechanism by which individuals evaluate a social group, such as Jewish people, or a nation-state, such as Israel, essentially involves rendering a judgment about an imagined community. According to Anderson (1991), imagined communities are social groups that share a cognitive perception of belonging to a common entity. These communities are “imagined” insofar as their members do not necessarily maintain direct relationships; they are “limited” in that they possess clearly defined boundaries relative to other imagined communities; and they are “sovereign” in that the community’s own will is recognized by its members as the highest authority. Yet, imagined communities can take multiple forms. They may emerge around the perception of shared primordial elements – such as language, traditions, or religion. In the nineteenth century, nationalist movements that challenged European empires – such as Polish, Hungarian, and Irish nationalist movements – were bound by a historical-cultural heritage that underpinned their political claims (Hobsbawm, 2010). In the second half of the twentieth century, attempts to articulate Pan-Arabism and Pan-Islamism as imagined communities relied on linguistic and religious commonalities (Tibi, 1997). Conversely, an imagined community can be built on the sharing of political-civic elements, such as citizenship, adherence to specific principles, or commitment to a political project. The advocacy of libertarian ideals in the United States and post-revolutionary France, or the espousal of global socialism throughout the twentieth century, are examples of imagined communities based on political rather than primordial or ascriptive criteria (Steger, 2008).

Drawing on these conceptual distinctions, the way an individual perceives the imagined Jewish community or Israel may differ substantially. Belonging to the Jewish faith can serve as an associational element with the imagined Jewish community, yet it does not necessarily foster support for the political actions of Israel. Conversely, individuals who do not identify with the imagined Jewish community may enthusiastically back one of the several strands of Zionism – sometimes in its more extreme iterations. A clear-cut example is the significant segment of evangelical Christians who support the Zionist project (Inbari, 2021; Ziv, 2022). Even when examining anti-Semitism or anti-Israel critiques from the inside, different ways in which criticism is articulated emerge. On the one hand, right-wing discourses on anti-Semitism often align overtly with ethno-nationalist narratives, while on the left it tends to appear more indirectly, often through implicit language or disproportionate criticism (Arnold and Taylor, 2019; Hirsh, 2017). On the other hand, left-wing critiques of

Israel focus predominantly on human rights concerns and solidarity with marginalized groups, while the right remains far less critical at the political level (Beattie, 2017).

Recent experimental studies on the association between criticism of Israel and anti-Semitism in the United States and Germany further reinforce the distinctions between the right and the left regarding the nexus of anti-Semitism and criticism of Israel. When controlling for political orientation, there is a markedly higher propensity for anti-Semitism on the right than on the left (Binstock et al., 2024; Hersh & Royden, 2022). Moreover, Kempf (2015) highlights how in Germany, critiques of Israel can take multiple forms: the right and far-right often advance anti-Semitic criticism – often reinforced by other racist attitudes such as anti-Palestinian sentiment – whereas the left typically expresses a non-anti-Semitic critique centered on human rights and pacifism.

In the Italian context, we test whether a similar mechanism is at play, starting from the standpoint that the historical legacy of early twentieth-century fascism and subsequent republican anti-fascism might have shaped how the right and the left relate to both Jewish and Israeli imagined communities. In the postwar period, the Italian right has maintained an ambivalent relationship with the Jewish population and the State of Israel. Various factions within the institutional and extra-institutional far right remained staunchly anti-Semitic and opposed to Israel's very existence, in alignment with their fascist origins (Chiarini, 2008). However, especially from the 1980s onward, most of the Italian right abandoned overt references to anti-Semitism and adopted a pro-Israeli stance informed by pro-Western and anti-communist orientations (Rigano, 2009). In contrast, the Italian left, shaped by its antifascist legacy, generally rejected overt ethnic prejudice, maintaining more favorable attitudes toward Jewish communities while framing its critiques of Israel within a broader anti-militarist and human rights narrative, often positioning itself in solidarity with marginalized groups such as Palestinians (De Martino, 2015).

### **2.3 Research questions and hypotheses**

Much of the literature tends to aggregate criticism of Jews and Israel and treats them as interchangeable along the political spectrum and we explicitly tests this assumption. In contrast to many scholars, our hypotheses posit that the right and the left perceive the imagined communities of Jews and Israel in fundamentally different ways. We argue that this asymmetry challenges the generalizability of the new antisemitism framework across the ideological spectrum and, as a result, calls into question the empirical and theoretical foundations of the horseshoe theory. More precisely, we expect that disaggregating evaluations of Jews and Israel will reveal a substantial distinction in attitudes on the left, with attitudes toward Israel being significantly less favorable than those toward the Jewish community - reflecting a predominantly (geo)political critique. Conversely, as one moves further to the right, evaluations of Jews and Israel are anticipated to converge, reflecting a reductionist view that collapses ethnic and political identities into a single undifferentiated category. Thus, it is possible to formulate two related research questions, along with corresponding hypotheses. The first, and more general, concerns the applicability of the horseshoe pattern in the Italian context. The second, more specific, question investigates whether individuals with different political orientations perceive Israel and the Jewish people as two distinct entities.

**RQ1:** Is there empirical evidence supporting the horseshoe theory in relation to antisemitic attitudes (toward Jews and Israel) in the Italian political context?

- **H1:** Individuals on the far-right and far-left exhibit significantly higher levels of anti-Semitic criticism compared to those in the political center.

**RQ2:** To what extent do the left and the right differ in their evaluations of the Jewish community and Israel in Italy?

- **H2:** Left-wing individuals will present stronger differences in the evaluations of Israel and Jewish people, while right-wing individuals will present smaller differences.

### 3. Experimental design, data, and models

#### *Experimental design*

This study uses a factorial survey experiment conducted on a representative sample of approximately 1,100 Italian adults (see below) to explore perceptions of Jews and Israelis, while also investigating the role of historical priming related to the Holocaust. While this variable is not used as a full experimental factor, it is nevertheless included as a predictor in the regression models.<sup>4</sup>

The treatment randomly assigns participants to two distinct groups. Both groups are presented with a set of five negative statements, but with a key variation. The first group receives statements targeting “Jews”, while the second group is exposed to the same statements with the target replaced by “Israel/Israelis”. This allows us to isolate differences in perceptions while keeping the content of the criticisms constant. The set of five questions used was drawn from various sources. The wording was adapted to align with the Italian context and to accommodate the dual category (“Israelis/Jews”). The Istituto Cattaneo’s report on anti-Semitism in Italy (Colombo et al., 2023), one of the few surveys on this subject in the country, served as the basis for Q1, Q4, and Q5. These questions originate from two distinct clusters designed to measure the perceived association of Jews with conspiracy theories and allegations of oppressive behavior. Q2, by contrast, was sourced from the German Social Survey (Gesis, 2018), which has been employed in previous studies on anti-Semitism in Europe (Binstok et al., 2024; Zacher and Shemla, 2024) and assesses the purported influence of Jews on international politics. Finally, Q3 examines the extent to which the Jewish population is perceived as collectively responsible for Israel’s actions and is derived from a study conducted in the United States by Hersh and Small (2023).

Specifically, the statements are shown (and randomly manipulated) as follows:

- 1 - “[Jews]/[Israelis] talk too much about their tragedies and neglect those of others”
- 2 - “[Jews]/[Israel] exert/s too much influence over Western politics”
- 3 - “[Jews]/[Israelis] living in my country share part of the responsibility for what is happening in the Middle East”
- 4 - “Media coverage tends to portray [Jews]/[Israelis] as perpetual victims, ignoring other perspectives”
- 5 - “[Jews]/[Israelis] have transformed from a [people]/[State] [of victims]/[being attacked] into a [people]/[state] of aggressors.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Although the experiment consists of two distinct factors – a randomized treatment across five questions and a randomized priming treatment concerning the Holocaust – this article presents and discusses results only for the first factor. This choice is due to the fact that the second factor proved to be analytically irrelevant, as it had no substantive effect on the results or their interpretation. Full details regarding the logic, implementation, and findings of the second factor are provided in Supplemental Material 3.

<sup>5</sup> The Italian wording of the battery can be seen Supplemental Material 1.



The two sets of randomized questions were tested for reliability, demonstrating more than acceptable internal consistency (the Jewish-people-related scale has a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.87, while the Israel-related scale has an Alpha of 0.80). Based on these results, we constructed an additive index that includes all the items in the respective batteries. The variable was reverse-coded to ensure that higher values correspond to positive attitudes, facilitating a more intuitive interpretation of the results in the analyses that follow. The variable was thus normalized in a 0-10 scale (mean = 5.01, s.d. = 2.35).

*Data.* The data were collected between September 19 and 24, 2024, through a computer-assisted web interview (CAWI) conducted via the academic platform Pollstar<sup>6</sup>. The survey was administered to a sample of 1,119 Italian adults, obtained from a total of 2,235 invitations. The sample was constructed using quota sampling to ensure representativeness of the Italian population in terms of gender, age, educational attainment, and geographical area.

In addition to the experiment described above, the dataset includes socio-demographic variables such as gender, age, educational attainment, two knowledge questions on the Middle East conflicts (where respondents were asked to identify the Gaza Strip and the West Bank on a map), and ideological positioning measured through a classic self-placement on the left-right political spectrum. Moreover, a question about beliefs regarding the Holocaust is used as a predictor of attitudes toward Jews and Israel. Specifically, respondents were asked: “*Some people believe the Holocaust never happened. What is your opinion on this?*” with the following response options: (1) *The Holocaust happened as officially reported*; (2) *The Holocaust happened, but there are exaggerations about some aspects*; (3) *I do not believe the Holocaust ever happened*.<sup>7</sup>

*Models and variables.* To test our hypotheses, we use three models based on multivariate Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regressions with a linear dependent variable, namely, the dependent scale described above<sup>8</sup>. Both models incorporate a comprehensive set of control variables, including gender (male/female), age (continuous), educational attainment (low, medium, high), knowledge of specific locations in the Middle East conflict (recoded as “Missed both/only one” vs. “Correctly identified both”), and ideological positioning on the left-right spectrum (recoded as follows: 0, 1, 2 = Left; 3, 4 = Centre-left; 5 = Centre; 6, 7 = Centre-right; 8, 9, 10 = Right, with a separate category for those who did not position themselves). An additional set of models included robustness checks for this recode, producing substantially equivalent results<sup>9</sup>.

The first model includes the experimental factor (target group: Jews vs. Israelis) and estimates the effect of ideological positioning on the dependent variable. This model enables us to test Hypothesis 1, by assessing whether respondents at the ideological extremes express more negative attitudes toward Jews and Israelis. In addition, although not explicitly formulated as a hypothesis, the model allows us to assess overall differences in evaluations between Jewish and Israeli communities.

The second model extends the analysis by incorporating a two-way interaction between the experimental factor and ideological positioning. This enables us to examine whether differences in attitudes toward Jews and Israelis vary across the ideological spectrum, thereby testing Hypothesis 2.

To enhance the clarity of the findings, we include linear predictions that help visualize the effects of the experimental manipulations and their interaction with ideological positioning.

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<sup>6</sup> Pollstar.it is an academic initiative developed at the University of Turin with the aim of facilitating low-cost data collection for survey-based research in the Italian academic community.

<sup>7</sup> For the purposes of the analysis, we include a binary variable labeled “Holocaust denialism” as a control in the regression models, coded as 1 for respondents who endorsed either explicit denial (option 3) or revisionist views (option 2).

<sup>8</sup> For detailed descriptive statistics and model coefficients, see Supplemental Material 2 and 4.

<sup>9</sup> See Supplemental Material 5 for more details.

## 4. Results

Table 1 reports the coefficients for the two OLS models.<sup>10</sup>

**Table 1 - Coefficients for the two models studying attitudes toward Israeli/jews**

Indep. variables	Model 1		Model 2	
	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.
Treatment: Israelis (ref. Jews)	-1.16***	(0.14)	-1.58***	(0.28)
Left-right self-placement (ref. Left)				
Center-left	0.23	(0.23)	0.02	(0.30)
Center	0.47*	(0.24)	0.28	(0.33)
Center-right	0.39*	(0.23)	-0.09	(0.33)
Right	0.12	(0.21)	-0.25	(0.28)
Not located	0.52**	(0.23)	0.50*	(0.30)
Treatment * Center-left			0.47	(0.45)
Treatment * Center			0.42	(0.49)
Treatment * Center-right			0.94**	(0.45)
Treatment * Right			0.78*	(0.40)
Treatment * Not located			0.02	(0.45)
Knowledge (ref. No knowledge)	-0.27*	(0.14)	-0.29**	(0.14)
Sex: Female (ref. Male)	0.28**	(0.14)	0.29**	(0.14)
Age (Continuous)	0.01	(0.01)	0.01	(0.01)
Education (ref. Primary)				
Secondary	-0.38	(0.27)	-0.38	(0.27)
Tertiary	-0.39	(0.28)	-0.39	(0.28)
Holocaust denialism	-1.50***	(0.19)	-1.51***	(0.19)
Constant	5.60***	(0.44)	5.76***	(0.45)
Observations	1,059		1,059	
R-squared	0.14		0.14	

Standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

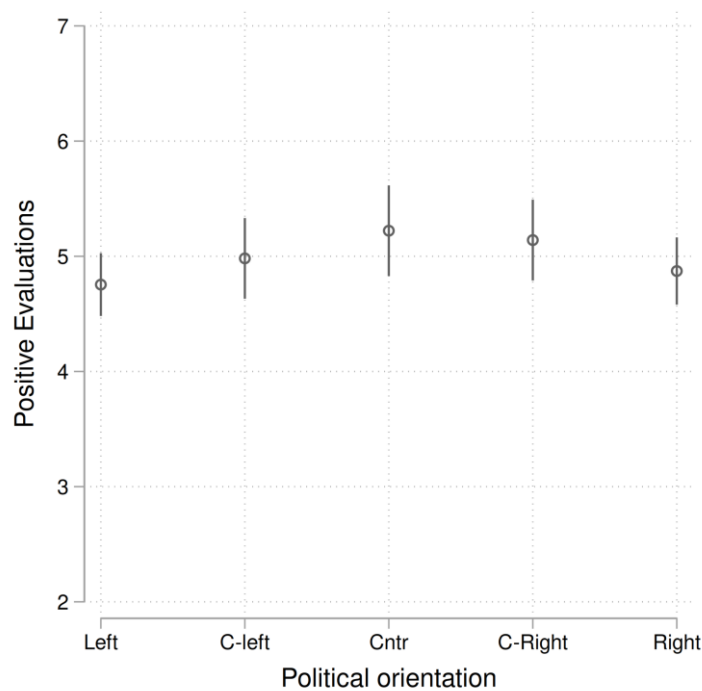
<sup>10</sup> OLS diagnostics for the models can be found in Supplemental Material 5.

For readability, we complement these results with linear predictions, which visually illustrate the effect of the experimental treatments and their interaction with respondents' ideological orientation.

The results presented in Figures 1 and 2 offer insights into the effects of left-right self-placement on the dependent variable, as well as the effect of the experimental manipulations, namely, the randomization of the target group (Jews vs. Israelis).

As *per* Figure 1, ideology does not show a particularly pronounced horseshoe effect in our dataset. The graph suggests that centrists are slightly more favorable overall, but ideological extremes are not significantly divergent in their attitudes when compared to the center. Accordingly, the results do not support the hypothesis that criticism of Israelis or Jews is more pronounced at the ideological extremes than at the political center (H1).

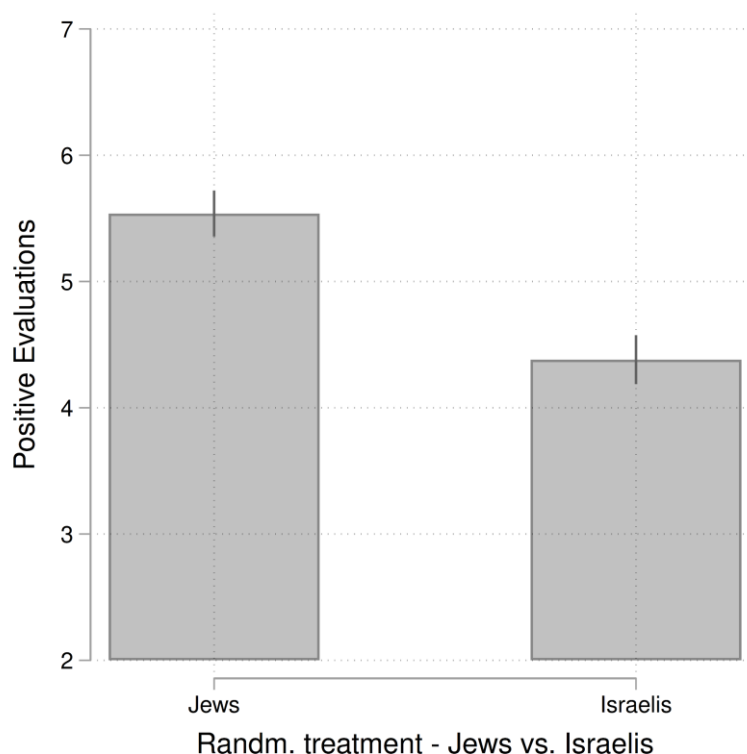
**Figure 1 - Positive evaluations by political orientation (Model 1 estimates)**



**Source:** authors own elaboration.

Figure 2 shows the effects of the randomization of the experimental factor, namely the target group (whether Jewish people/Israelis). The Italian public demonstrates significantly higher levels of positive evaluations when the target of the statements is “Jews” compared to “Israelis/Israel”. This descriptive finding suggests a distinction in attitudes driven by the nature of the group identity being evaluated, with respondents generally expressing more favorable views toward the “ethnic imagined community” compared to the “political” one. This reinforces the notion that (geo)political contexts and associations – particularly those related to state policies and international conflicts – may activate more critical evaluations, as seen in attitudes toward Israelis/Israel.

Figure 2 - Evaluations of Jewish people vs. Israelis.



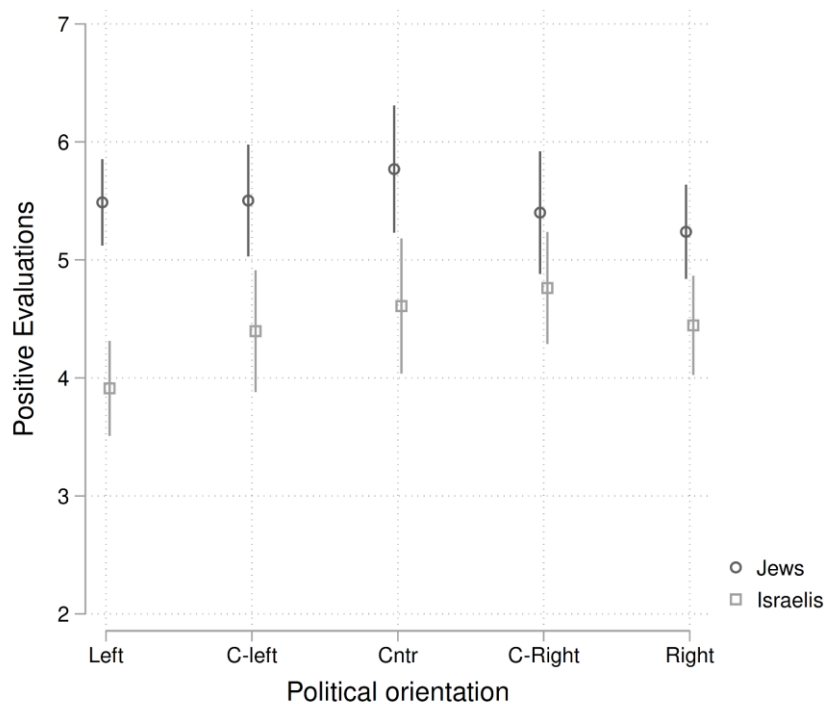
Source: authors own elaboration.

How does ideology moderate the effect of the experimental factors? Figure 3 shows the moderating effect of left-right self-placement on both the target group.

Figure 3 allows to test H2.<sup>11</sup> Here, we observe a significant and substantial difference in the evaluations of Jews and Israelis/Israel among left-leaning respondents. For radical-left respondents, the difference in favor of Jewish people is significant, with a magnitude of approximately one and a half points, while for center-left respondents, it is around one point. This difference gradually diminishes moving toward the ideological right, becoming non-significant for center-right respondents and only marginally significant for those on the far right. In this case, ideology largely moderates evaluations of Israelis. However, it does not have the same effect on evaluations of Jews, as the coefficients for the evaluations of Jewish people (represented in black) remain stable across the ideological spectrum. This indicates that left-leaning respondents are much more likely to differentiate between the political/state identity of Israelis and the ethnic/religious identity of Jews, while respondents on the right show weaker distinction in their evaluations.

<sup>11</sup> The marginal effects for this hypothesis, which show the difference between exposure to the two treatments broken down by ideology, are shown in Figure SM5.1 of SM5 and produce substantially equal results.

**Figure 3 - Ideological moderation of evaluations of Jews and Israelis.**



**Source:** authors own elaboration.

### *Left, Right, and the Veil of Desirability: Another Perspective*

As an additional robustness check, we examine whether left-leaning respondents - who, according to our main results, show a greater distinction between attitudes toward Jews and Israel - also reject historical revisionism, which is widely regarded as an overt marker of antisemitic sentiment. This analysis allows us to check whether critiques of Israel on the left reflect a genuine political disagreement rather than serving as a disguised expression of antisemitic attitudes. Specifically, we analyze responses to the Holocaust-related question included in our survey<sup>12</sup>.

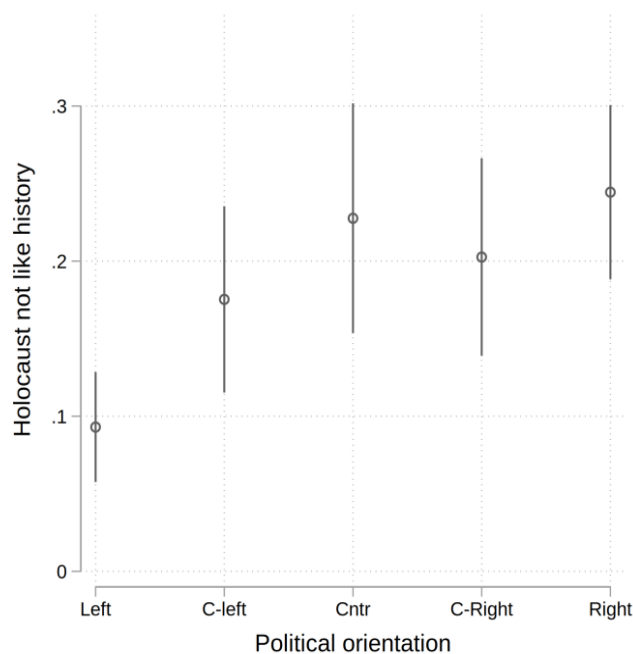
Figure 4 plots the proportion of Holocaust skepticism or denial across self-reported left-right ideological positions. The results show that extreme-left and left-leaning respondents are the least likely to express revisionist or denialist beliefs, while skepticism increases significantly toward the right end of the political spectrum.

This finding reinforces our interpretation of the main results: not only do left-wing respondents differentiate more sharply between Jews and Israel, but they are also substantially less inclined to endorse antisemitic worldviews as reflected in Holocaust denial or relativization. The markedly lower levels of Holocaust skepticism or denial on the left suggest that its criticism of Israel does not serve as a disguised outlet for antisemitic attitudes, but instead reflects a substantive and principled political stance. Moreover, this pattern may also point to the role of primary socialization processes within left-wing political cultures, which tend to

<sup>12</sup> see Supplemental Material 4 for details.

internalize norms rejecting discrimination and racialization — especially when these forms of prejudice escalate into extremist politics.

**Figure 4 - Holocaust skepticism or denial by political orientation.**



*Source: authors own elaboration.*

## 5. Results

The relationship between antisemitism and criticism of Israel has long been a contentious issue in both public and academic debates. However, the events following the October 7, 2023, Hamas attacks – and the massive Israeli military retaliation in Gaza – have brought this debate to a new level of intensity. As the humanitarian toll of the conflict escalated, many observers began to characterize Israel’s actions as genocidal, framing them not merely as a military response but as a systematic campaign of annihilation against the Palestinian population. This framing, which has circulated widely in public discourse, may have influenced perceptions of Israel and, by extension, Jewish communities more broadly. At the heart of the debate lies the question of whether strong opposition to Israel’s policies is inherently tied to antisemitic prejudice or whether it can be meaningfully distinguished as a form of legitimate political critique (Beattie, 2017). Scholars remain divided on this issue, particularly regarding how ideological positioning interacts with these attitudes. Some argue that both the far left and far right exhibit high levels of antisemitism, suggesting a “horseshoe” pattern in which ideological extremes converge in their hostility toward both Jews and Israel (Hersh and Royden, 2023). Others maintain that while both ends of the spectrum may engage in critiques of Israel, their motivations and underlying biases differ significantly, with the right often framing opposition through ethno-nationalist narratives and the left through anti-colonial and anti-imperialist perspectives. It is important to notice that both the (hypothesized) dynamics reflect broader patterns of political identity construction, in which group boundaries and perceived affiliations – such as those between the “Jewishness” and the Israeli state – are

moderated by specific ideological narratives and by wider social structures, including media frames, institutional cues, and the historical stratification of moral categories.

In this article, we investigated the perceptions of Jewish people and Israelis within the Italian population, leveraging a factorial survey experiment to disentangle attitudes rooted in ethnic or religious prejudice from those grounded in political or geopolitical critique. The findings underscore several elements that aim at shedding light on broader implications for understanding the interplay between historical memory, political orientation, and social prejudice.

First, our results provide no clear evidence for the horseshoe theory in the Italian case. Whether we consider general attitudinal patterns (as shown in Figure 1) or examine the distinction introduced by the experimental manipulation (Jews vs. Israelis), we find no significant increase in either antisemitic attitudes or negative evaluations of Israel at the ideological extremes. In fact, the levels of negative evaluations toward both groups appear relatively stable across the left-right spectrum, including the center. However, this overall stability may conceal underlying perceptual differences: individuals on different sides of the ideological spectrum may interpret or justify their evaluations through different frames of reference – geopolitical, moral, or identity-based. While the expressed attitudes may be similar in magnitude, the meanings and rationales attributed to them may diverge substantially.

This brings us to our main findings. In contrast to the general pattern of attitudinal stability across the political spectrum, a notable divergence emerges in how respondents evaluate Jewish people and Israelis. Respondents consistently express more favorable attitudes toward Jewish people than toward Israelis/Israel (Figure 2). This differentiation indicates that respondents do not treat these identities as interchangeable. Instead, it likely reflects broader societal norms in which overt antisemitism is more widely stigmatized than criticism of Israel, and where the two domains may be governed by distinct interpretive and normative frameworks. Political ideology, crucially, emerges as a key moderator of these evaluations – especially regarding Israel (Figure 3). Left-leaning respondents tend to differentiate between Jews and Israelis, possibly framing their critique of the latter through a (geo)political lens tied to anti-imperialist narratives. Conversely, right-leaning respondents are more likely to conflate the two identities.

These findings are reinforced by the evidence of markedly lower levels of Holocaust skepticism or denial on the left. This further suggests that critiques toward Israel do not serve as a disguised outlet for antisemitic attitudes, but instead are more likely to reflect a substantive and principled political stance.

## 6. Conclusion

This study contributes to a growing body of research exploring the intersection between antisemitism and political ideology, offering new empirical evidence from Italy – a context with a complex historical legacy and persistent ideological cleavages. Our findings challenge two narratives in contemporary scholarship: the idea that critiques of Israel uniformly serve as a proxy for antisemitism and the pop horseshoe theory, which posits a convergence of antisemitic attitudes at the ideological extremes.

Using a survey experiment, we show that attitudes toward Jews and Israelis diverge significantly along the political spectrum. While right-wing respondents tend to conflate the two categories left-wing respondents display a clear and statistically significant distinction in the evaluation of Israel and the Jews. This asymmetry calls into question the generalized applicability of the new antisemitism framework, which often assumes that criticism of Israel is a proxy of antisemitic sentiments, regardless of ideological context.

Importantly, our results indicate that the horseshoe pattern - where antisemitic attitudes would converge at the ideological extremes – is not supported in the Italian case. The absence of this pattern suggests that ideological positions are associated with distinct cognitive and cultural mechanisms through which attitudes

toward Jews and Israel are formed. Specifically, our analysis supports the view that contemporary left-wing critiques of Israel in Italy are more likely to reflect (geo)political and humanitarian concerns, whereas right-wing perceptions tends to align with broader essentialist views of identity that conflate ethnicity, religion, and politics.

This study has, however, some limitations. While our analysis offers important insights into the Italian context, caution is warranted in generalizing these findings to other countries, given Italy's unique political culture and historical legacies. Moreover, although our factorial survey experiment allows us to identify ideological asymmetries in attitudes toward Jews and Israel, it is not designed to directly measure latent antisemitic attitudes. As a result, it cannot adequately account for potential social desirability bias.

Future research could further develop this line of inquiry in different ways. First, it would be valuable to deploy indirect questioning techniques, such as list experiments, to better estimate latent antisemitic attitudes that may not be captured by direct survey questions. Second, future work could examine how major geopolitical events - for example, escalations in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict - affect attitudes toward Jews and Israel across the ideological spectrum. Longitudinal designs or repeated survey experiments would enable scholars to track potential shifts over time, while continuing to disaggregate evaluations of Jews and Israel, thereby providing a more dynamic understanding of how ideological positions shape and reshape these attitudes in response to changing political contexts.

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## **Supplemental Material 1 - Original dependent variable wording**

Versions (a) relate to Jewish people, versions (b) to Israel and Israelis

*1a) Gli Ebrei si sono trasformati da un popolo di vittime in un popolo di aggressori*

*1b) Israele si è trasformato da uno stato aggredito a uno stato aggressore*

*2a) Gli Ebrei influenzano troppo la politica dei paesi Occidentali*

*2b) Israele influenza troppo la politica dei paesi Occidentali*

*3a) Gli Ebrei parlano troppo delle loro tragedie e trascurano quelle degli altri*

*3b) Gli Israeliani parlano troppo delle loro tragedie e trascurano quelle degli altri*

*4a) La copertura mediatica tende a dipingere gli Ebrei come sempre vittime, ignorando altre prospettive*

*4b) La copertura mediatica tende a dipingere gli Israeliani come sempre vittime, ignorando altre prospettive*

*5a) Gli Ebrei che vivono nel mio paese condividono parte della responsabilità di quello che sta succedendo in Medio Oriente*

*5b) Gli Israeliani che vivono nel mio paese condividono parte della responsabilità di quello che sta succedendo in Medio Oriente*

## Supplemental Material 2 - Descriptive statistics

**Table SM2.1 - Descriptive statistics for the variables in the models**

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max	N
Attitudes	5.01	2.35	0	10	115
Jews/Israeli	0.47	0.50	0	1	119
Holocaust priming	0.52	0.50	0	1	119
<i>Left-right self-placement</i>					
Left	0.23	0.42	0	1	1117
C-left	0.14	0.35	0	1	1117
Cntr	0.11	0.31	0	1	1117
C-Right	0.14	0.35	0	1	1117
Right	0.21	0.41	0	1	1117
Not located	0.16	0.37	0	1	1117
Knowledge	0.48	0.50	0	1	1099
Sex	0.48	0.50	0	1	1114
Age	50.22	12.98	19	85	1113
<i>Education</i>					
Primary	0.08	0.28	1	1	1115
Secondary	0.48	0.50	1	1	1115
Tertiary	0.43	0.50	1	1	1115
Holocaust negationism	0.17	0.37	1	1	1068

### Supplemental Material 3 - Second Experimental Factor (Social Desirability)

In the original experiment, we incorporated a Holocaust priming mechanism to explore whether social desirability bias might affect respondents' evaluations of Jews and Israel. Prior literature suggests that overt expressions of antisemitism are widely stigmatized, particularly in European post-Holocaust societies (e.g., Beyer & Krumpal, 2013; Cohen, 2021). In this context, it has been argued that individuals—especially those on the political left—might mask antisemitic prejudice by framing their views as political critiques of Israel. This raises the possibility that part of the observed asymmetry in evaluations across the political spectrum may reflect differential sensitivity to social desirability pressures.

From this perspective, the Holocaust serves as a powerful historical referent, shaping moral norms that stigmatize antisemitism and foster strong cultural expectations regarding anti-prejudice attitudes (Antoniou & Moses, 2017; Young, 1988). We originally hypothesized that priming respondents with a reminder of the Holocaust would trigger such normative constraints, leading to more positive evaluations of Jews and Israel.

#### *Implementation*

The priming manipulation consisted of varying the placement of a Holocaust-related question in the survey. Respondents were randomly assigned to two conditions:

- In the primed condition, the Holocaust question appeared before the batteries of evaluative statements about Jews or Israelis.
- In the non-primed condition, the Holocaust question appeared after the batteries.

The question wording was as follows:

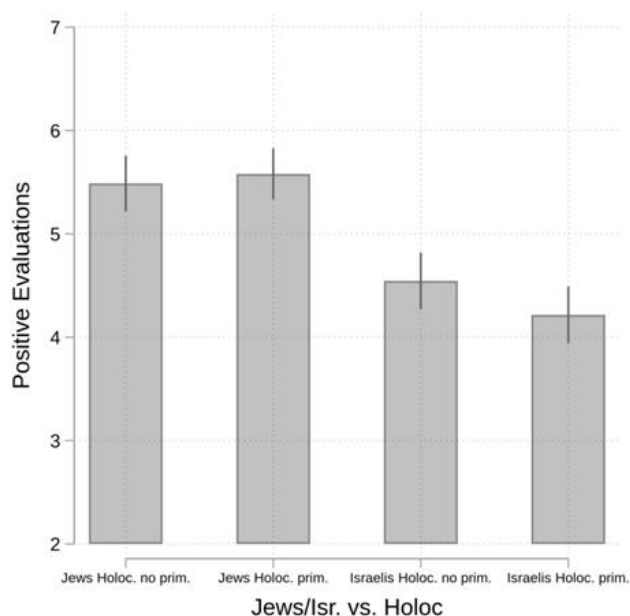
*“Some people believe the Holocaust never happened. What is your opinion on this?”*

- 1) *“The Holocaust happened as officially reported”*
- 2) *“The Holocaust happened, but there are exaggerations about some aspects”*
- 3) *“I do not believe the Holocaust ever happened”*

We also originally hypothesized that participants exposed to the Holocaust prime would show more positive attitudes toward Jews and Israelis compared to the non-primed group, with a stronger effect expected for Jews.

#### *Results*

**Figure SM3.1 - Combined effects of group target and Holocaust priming.**



**Source:** authors own elaboration.

The results show that the priming manipulation had no significant effect on respondents' evaluations. Whether the Holocaust question appeared before or after the evaluative statements did not substantially change the expressed attitudes toward either Jews or Israelis.

As illustrated in Figure 1, a slight and marginally significant negative effect was observed for Israel: respondents exposed to the Holocaust prime evaluated Israelis slightly less favorably than the control group. This suggests a possible backfire effect, where the reminder of the Holocaust may have inadvertently heightened critical sentiments toward Israel, possibly reflecting public sensitivity to recent Israeli policies and international criticism of its actions toward Palestinians.

Importantly, this effect was opposite to our expectations and small in magnitude. No meaningful interaction between priming and respondents' ideological positioning was detected: the priming did not significantly moderate the relationship between political orientation and evaluations of either Jews or Israelis.

## Supplemental Material 4 - Models' coefficients - factorial design

**Table SM2.1 - Descriptive statistics for the variables in the models**

Indep. variables	Model1		Model2	
	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.
Factor1: Israelis (ref. Jews)	-0.94***	(0.20)	-1.35***	(0.40)
Factor2: Holocaust primed (ref. not primed)	0.09	(0.19)	0.26	(0.37)
Factor1*Factor2	-0.42	(0.27)	-0.43	(0.55)
Left-right self-placement (ref. Left)				
Center-left	0.23	(0.22)	0.13	(0.44)
Center	0.45*	(0.24)	0.88*	(0.47)
Center-right	0.37	(0.23)	-0.88*	(0.49)
Right	0.12	(0.21)	-0.05	(0.42)
Not located	0.51**	(0.23)	0.69	(0.44)
Factor1*Center-left			0.61	(0.66)
Factor1*Center			-0.33	(0.67)
Factor1*Center-right			1.74***	(0.65)
Factor1*Right			0.67	(0.60)
Factor1*Not located			0.08	(0.64)
Factor2*Center-left			-0.23	(0.61)
Factor2*Center			-1.22*	(0.66)
Factor2*Center-right			1.32**	(0.65)
Factor2*Right			-0.38	(0.55)
Factor2*Not located			-0.37	(0.60)
Factor1*Factor2*Center-left			-0.23	(0.90)
Factor1*Factor2*Center			1.48	(0.98)
Factor1*Factor2*Center-right			-1.41	(0.91)
Factor1*Factor2*Right			0.21	(0.81)

Factor1*Factor2*Not located			-0.26	(0.91)
Knowledge (ref. No knowledge)	-0.26*	(0.14)	-0.31**	(0.14)
Sex: Female (ref. Male)	0.29**	(0.14)	0.30**	(0.14)
Age (Continuous)	0.01	(0.01)	0.01	(0.01)
Education (ref. Primary)				
Secondary	-0.35	(0.27)	-0.33	(0.27)
Tertiary	-0.37	(0.28)	-0.37	(0.28)
Holocaust denialism	-1.50***	(0.19)	-1.47***	(0.19)
Constant	5.53***	(0.46)	5.69***	(0.49)
Observations	1,059		1,059	
R-squared	0.14		0.16	

Standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\*p<0.01, \*\*p<0.05, \*p<0.1

*Figures*

**Figure SM4.1**

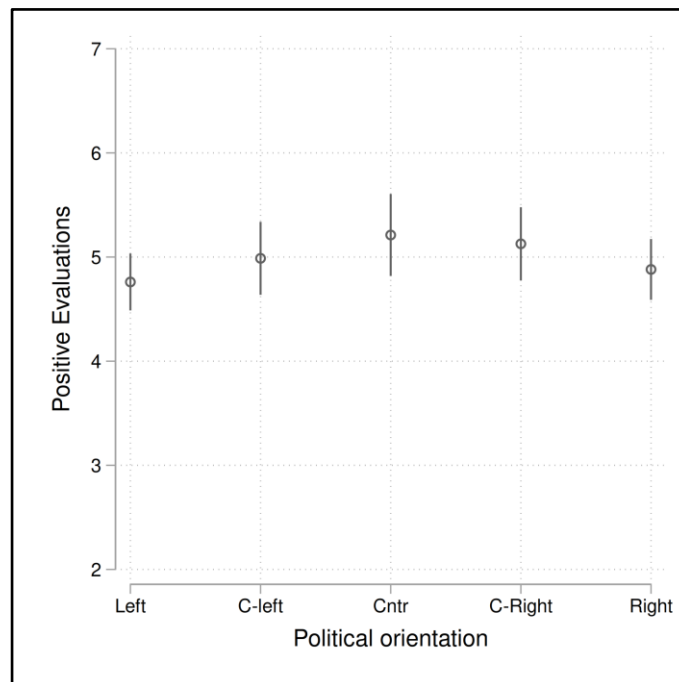




Figure SM4.2

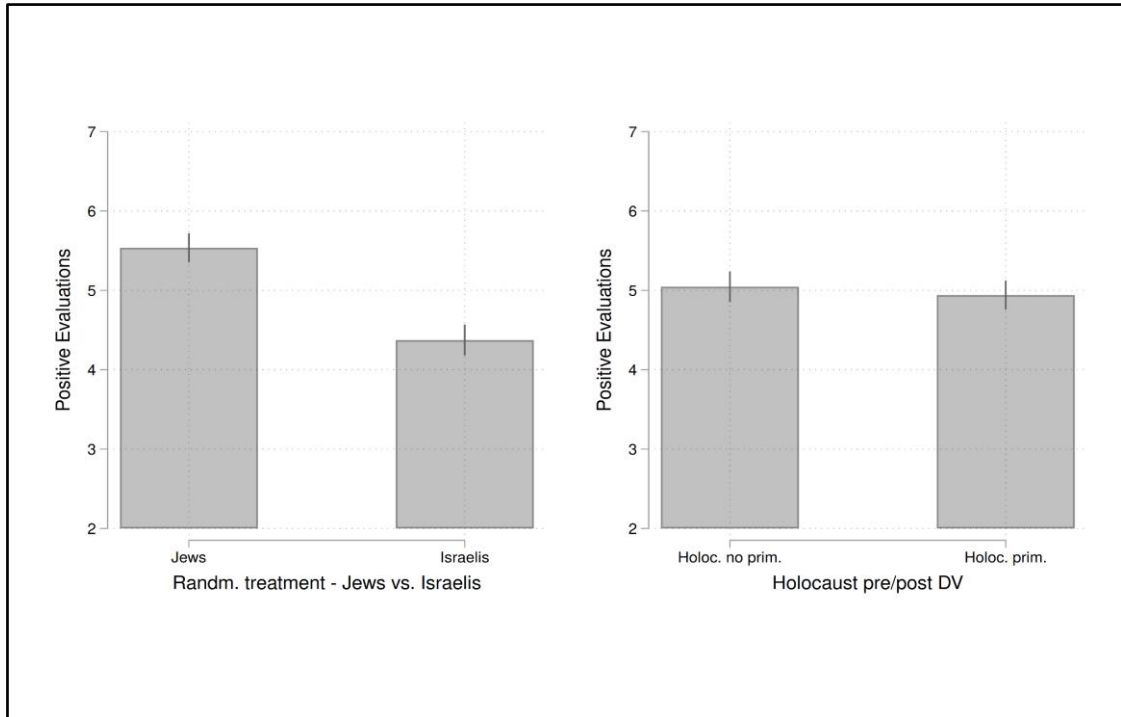


Figure SM4.3

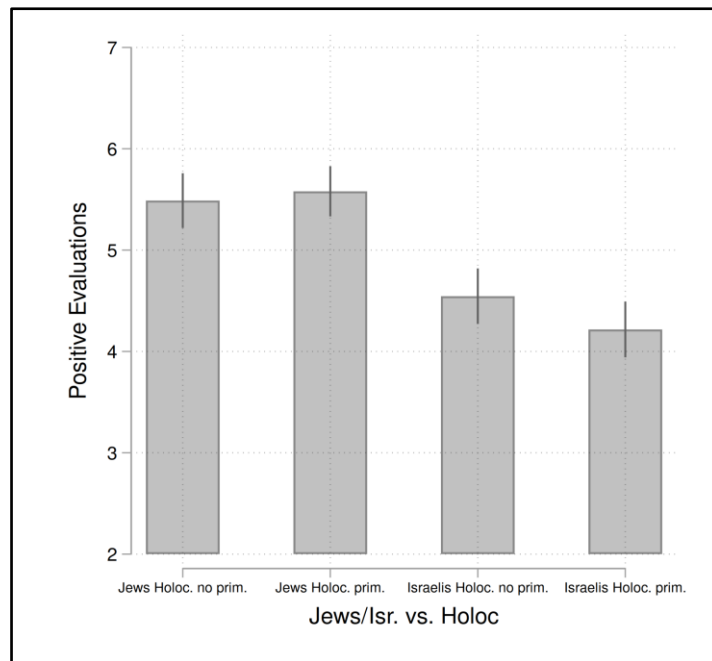
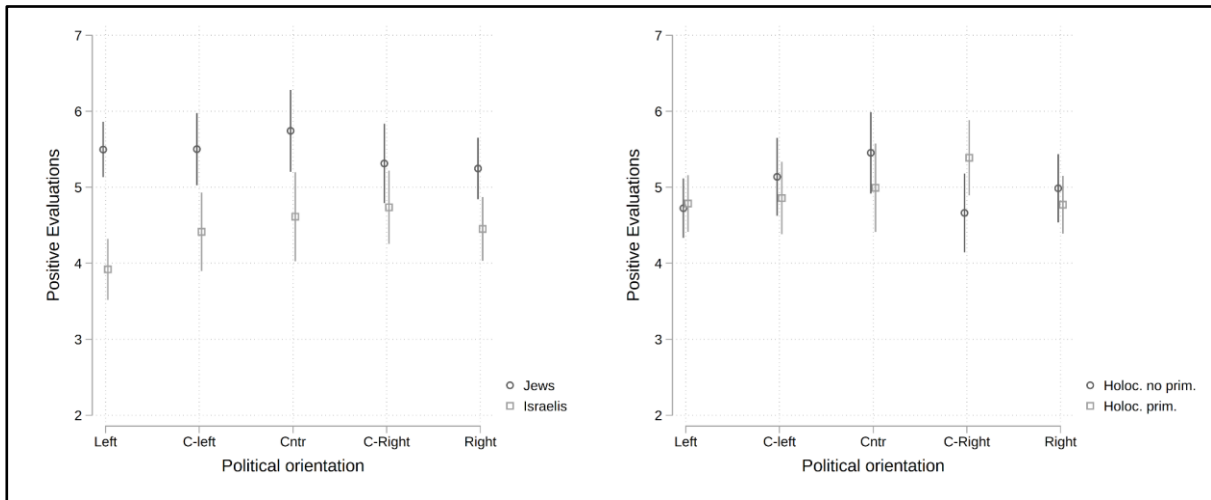


Figure SM4.4



## Supplemental Material 5 - Robustness check

Figure SM5.1 - Left-right continuum analysis of evaluations by ideology (Figure 1 robustness check).

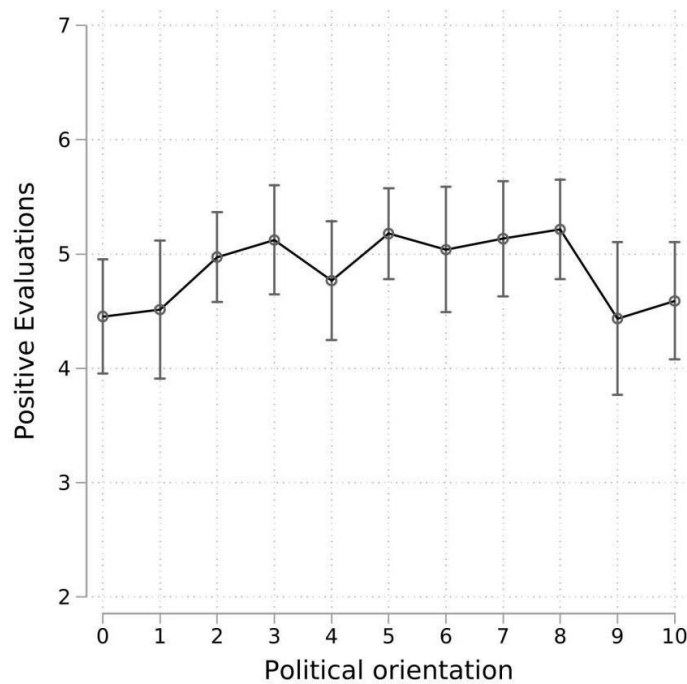
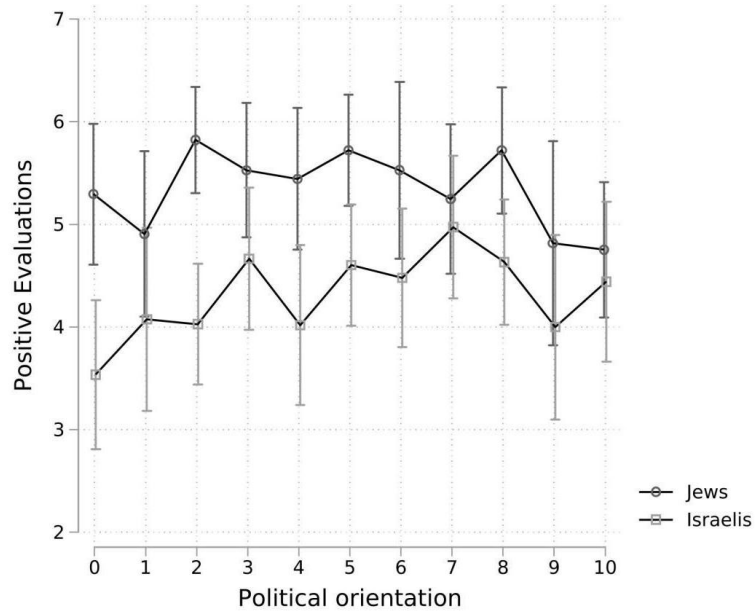
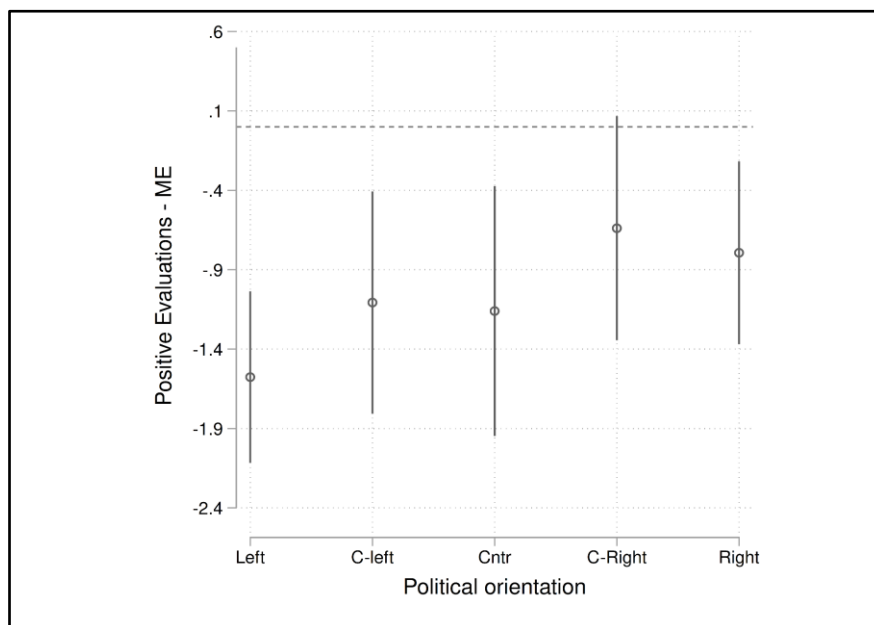


Figure SM5.2 - Evaluations of Jews vs. Israelis across political continuum (Figure 4 - Left panel robustness check)



## Supplemental Material 6 - marginal effects of the interaction and OLS diagnostics

Figure SM6.1 - Marginal effects for the interaction (Table 2 - Model 2 coefficients).



### OLS diagnostics

To assess the adequacy of our regression models, we conducted standard OLS diagnostics on both specifications. Specifically, we tested for multicollinearity using Variance Inflation Factors (VIF), for normality of residuals using the Skewness/Kurtosis test, and for model specification using the Ramsey RESET test. In all cases, diagnostic values fell within acceptable thresholds, suggesting that multicollinearity is not a concern, residuals are approximately normally distributed, and model specification is adequate. Detailed outputs are reported in Table SM6.1.

Table SM6.1 - OLS models diagnostics

Test	Value / Chi2 / F	p-value
Model 1 (AIC = 4684.9, BIC = 4749.4)		
VIF (mean)	1.72	—
Skewness/Kurtosis Test (Chi-square)	0.53	0.77
Ramsey RESET (F-value)	2.23	0.08
Model 2 (AIC = 4687.6, BIC = 4777.0)		
VIF (mean)	2.61	—
Skewness/Kurtosis Test (Chi-square)	0.74	0.69
Ramsey RESET (F-value)	1.76	0.15

## **AUTHORS' INFORMATION**

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