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Gone too far? The paradoxical effect of political elite radicalization

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Abstract

How does the rise of ideologically extreme leaders affect attitudes and beliefs among their supporters? Previous research on paradoxical thinking suggests that when individuals are exposed to a radicalized version of their held beliefs, they moderate them in response. However, it is yet unknown whether, how, and among whom, such moderation occurs in response to radicalization of individuals' favored leaders. The proposed study examines how an unfolding real-world manifestation of a paradoxical thinking intervention—that is, the radical and extreme policies carried out by the newly elected Israeli government—affects the political attitudes of the government's supporters. Using a longitudinal design, we examined how pre-election attitudes ($N = 589$ government supporters) moderate, radicalize, or remain unchanged following the announcement and implementation of radical policies. Over four time points, we also examine the psychological mechanisms mediating the policies' moderating impact, to disentangle the reciprocal or paradoxical effects of radicalization among leaders on the public.

KEYWORDS

elite radicalization, identity threat longitudinal study, paradoxical thinking, political attitudes

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INTRODUCTION

Political radicalization among political elites has recently been rising in many democratic countries (Rooduijn et al., 2017), for example, Poland (Kinowska-Mazaraki, 2021), Israel (Filc, 2018), and the United States (Hetherington, 2009). Accordingly, politicians and parties elected to govern endorse more extreme policies than they had previously voiced, widening existing ideological gaps (Layman et al., 2006), and potentially leading to an increase in antagonism between the political groups (Rogowski & Sutherland, 2016) and destabilizing democracy (Axelrod et al., 2021). Such a governmental shift toward extremism can have significant implications, including effects on public attitudes. Supporters of the opposition—who to begin with voted against these parties—naturally oppose these more extreme policies (Collingwood et al., 2018), but how this affects supporters of the elected leaders is less obvious.

Previous work suggests two possible reactions from government voters to their representatives' radicalization: radicalization or moderation. Voters might adopt the policy view of the politicians they support (Cohen, 2003; Druckman et al., 2013; Lenz, 2013; Moral & Best, 2023). This alignment is rooted in the representation theory, where voters perceive elected officials as mirroring their preferences (Bøggild, 2020), a tendency that is particularly pronounced when these voters perceive radicalization as a response to policy challenges or perceived threats (Kerr et al., 2021). It is therefore highly likely that many government supporters will also embrace more extreme political attitudes, in alignment with their representatives' radicalization.

Alternatively, in the face of such elite radicalization, government supporters might reactively moderate their policy positions. Indications for such a moderating shift in public opinion appears in the work of Collingwood et al. (2018), who studied public reactions to Trump's "Muslim Ban" and found that highly identified Americans–including Republicans who initially supported the ban–shifted against it once the executive order was signed. What might explain this trend?

In the current study, we seized a unique opportunity to explore the psychological mechanism underlying the moderation of public political attitudes and positions following elite radicalization. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first attempt to understand this process as real-world events unfold. To do so, we conducted a multi-time points study examining shifts—particularly moderation—in the political attitudes of rightists in 2023 (pre-war) Israel in response to radical steps undertaken by the then-newly elected right-wing government. Specifically, we focus on one potential mechanism that has recently captured the attention of scholars studying interventions to improve intergroup relations: paradoxical thinking (Hebel-Sela et al., 2023).

Paradoxical thinking and its moderating effect on individuals' attitudes

Paradoxical thinking refers to a possible reaction to a situation in which individuals are exposed to an exaggerated representation of their attitudes. This leads to a sense of identity threat, prompting individuals to reconsider their initial views. By presenting individuals with an intense and tangible scenario, paradoxical thinking challenges them to reassess their beliefs (Bar-Tal et al., 2021; Hameiri et al., 2018; also see Swann et al., 1988). Evidence for paradoxical thinking effects were found in various settings, for example, debating technique known as reductio ad absurdum (Rescher, 2005), clinical psychological treatment (e.g., Frankl, 2004; Miller & Rollnick, 2002; Watzlawick et al., 1974), and in recent years as an intervention technique in the field of social psychology (e.g., Hameiri et al., 2014, 2018; Knab & Steffens, 2022).

The effectiveness of paradoxical thinking interventions to moderate participants' previously held attitudes has been demonstrated in both the laboratory and the field (e.g., Hameiri et al., 2014, 2018; Knab & Steffens, 2022; Swann et al., 1988). For example, videos from a

contrived "The Conflict" campaign containing absurd "pro-conflict" messages led Israelis holding extreme views to report more moderate views in an online sample—while also reporting more moderate voting following a subsequent election (Hameiri et al., 2014). In a follow-up field study employing a large-scale "The Conflict" intervention through multiple channels in a small city in the center of Israel, Hameiri et al. (2016) found that Israeli participants in the paradoxical thinking condition (vs. not) expressed greater support for compromise with the Palestinians. This effect remained even 1 year after the intervention.

Considering consistent findings (e.g., Hameiri et al., 2018; Knab & Steffens, 2022) from recent years, Bar-Tal et al. (2021) created an integrative model explaining the psychological mechanism behind paradoxical thinking. According to the model, the paradoxical thinking message surprises the individuals and subsequently stimulates a reflective examination of their held beliefs and attitudes. As a result of this deliberation, individuals may realize the stark contrast between their deeply ingrained societal beliefs and the presented extreme beliefs, resulting in identity threat. In turn, this can lead to greater openness and readiness to embrace change and even moderation of previously held views.

However, to this day, the full model has yet to be examined in an empirical study, leaving us with several open questions. One question revolves around the antecedents of identity threat. In addition to surprise (Bar-Tal et al., 2021; Hameiri et al., 2018), other psychological mechanisms could be at play. For example, guilt may also explain the identity threat involved in paradoxical thinking. While surprise elicits cognitive dissonance by challenging existing beliefs and expectations (Hameiri et al., 2018), guilt taps into the emotional dimension of the individual's self-perception and moral compass (Wenzel et al., 2020). When individuals encounter paradoxical thinking messages, they may feel like their own attitudes and behaviors have helped support the message (Hameiri et al., 2018). As a result, the threat to identity arises from the emotional weight of guilt that can lead to the moderation of their previously held beliefs (Iyer et al., 2003; Wenzel et al., 2020).

The present study: A real-life (unintended) paradoxical thinking intervention

While paradoxical thinking mechanisms and effects have been demonstrated in controlled experiments, both in the laboratory and the field (e.g., Hameiri et al., 2014; Knab et al., 2021), it is still unclear what happens when individuals encounter a "paradoxical reality." For instance, what happens when individuals witness the extreme manifestations of the very ideologies they just endorsed through their votes in an election? In other words, how would supporters of an elected government react to their own representatives' radicalization? This question serves as the central focus of the current study.

In this study, we focus on the effects of elite radicalization on individuals who voted for the elected right-wing government in Israel, where the political right has been in power—and getting stronger—for the past 20 years. Currently, 62% of the Jewish population in Israel identify as right-wing (see Hermann et al., 2023, p. 25). The right-wing government formed following the November 1, 2022 elections has been particularly extreme. While previously right-wing leaders had to cooperate with center or even center-left parties to form governing coalitions, this election resulted in a "full-on right-wing government" (Magid, 2022), including the most radically right representatives to serve in a governing coalition in Israel's history, along with both Ultra-Orthodox religious parties and excluding any moderates (i.e., center or center-right parties) to serve as a counterweight.

Unlike situations in which politicians, once elected, moderate their stance on key issues (Kriesi & Schulte-Cloos, 2020), the newly elected government took steps that were seen as more extreme than the parties' election promises and as threatening the basic pillars of Israeli democracy. This radicalization initially became apparent in two main spheres. First, the

religious-Jewish character of the coalition translated into policies and statements meant to bolster the state's religious-Jewish identity, overstepping more pluralistic, liberal and democratic values, and reversing some of the progress achieved for women as well as gender and sexual minorities in the country. Second, the inclusion of the radical HaTzionut HaDatit ('Religious Zionism') list resulted in extreme political measures prioritizing Jewish dominance in the West Bank and inside Israel. It soon also became clear that in addition to promoting radical policies in these two areas, the government would also advance a significant judicial reform that would severely weaken the country's legal system, giving greater power to the legislative and executive branches—both controlled by the coalition.

These extreme measures have prompted mass protests, eventually leading to negotiations between the coalition and opposition, the conclusion of which is yet to be determined at the time of writing. For most leftists and centrists, opposition to the new steps and proposed policies by the government were a given, with values and group identity pulling in the same direction. But public reactions on the right were less clear—with broadly held liberal and democratic values potentially conflicting with political allegiance. This conflict was reflected in public opinion polls showing decreasing support for the leadership among rightists (i24NEWS & ILH Staff, 2023).

These developments present a unique opportunity to study the effects of extreme government policies on government's voters' attitudes. Having access to data from prior to the last election provides us with a "before" measurement, and the events that unfolded following the election present settings that share similarities with a paradoxical thinking intervention in two notable aspects. On the one hand, it involved the implementation of significant measures by the most radical right-wing government in Israel's history. Many of these measures were not part of their election platform, and the most radical right-wing party in the government did not receive direct mandates from the majority of government voters. On the other hand, the government's endorsement of these extreme policies and the alignment of the radical right with the more mainstream right (i.e., the parties elected by most rightist voters) signifies the newfound legitimacy granted to the former by the latter. Essentially, the combination of these two contextual factors creates the appropriate preconditions for paradoxical thinking interventions.

The alignment between the mainstream and radical right and their promotion of extreme policies mirrors the core principle of paradoxical thinking. In this scenario, individuals are confronted with actions or statements that initially appear to align with their existing beliefs but are, in fact, exaggerations that take them by surprise and challenge their sense of identity. Following the election, the process by which new policies were introduced and promoted was rapid but at the same time gradual, resembling the manner in which paradoxical thinking interventions occur in a laboratory setting.

Moreover, the contextual elements we have presented share similarities with the approach employed in studies conducted by Hameiri et al. (2014, 2016, 2018). In these studies, right-leaning individuals were presumed to endorse particular stances, relying on prior research (in our case, this is inferred from our sample's voting choices). They were then exposed to extreme manifestations of these presumed positions (as in current paradoxical reality is expressed by the extreme policies promoted by the extreme-right coalition).

Research hypotheses

Based on the literature, we consider two competing hypotheses regarding the main effect of our sample, which consists of government voters. In line with previous work in political science, **H1a** suggests that overall, our sample will radicalize in their attitudes (Druckman et al., 2013; Moral & Best, 2023). According to paradoxical thinking theory, **H1b** suggests that our sample will become more moderate in their political attitudes.

As the focus of our study is on examining the process of paradoxical thinking in the real world, we consider two additional hypotheses concerning the psychological mechanisms underlying moderation in individuals' attitudes following elite radicalization. We suggest that following elite radicalization, their voters will experience identity threat. The increased identity threat will motivate these individuals to disassociate themselves from radical policies and leaders by moderating their attitudes away from those of the radical leaders. Accordingly, Hypothesis 2 (**H2**) suggests that, in line with previous research, the moderation of political attitudes in light of a "paradoxical reality" could be explained by the rise in threat to participants' identity.

To further illuminate the mechanism, we want to understand the processes underlying the identity threat. As mentioned above, previous research has argued that a threat may stem from the sense of surprise that accompanies the paradoxical process (Hameiri et al., 2018). In our case study, surprise may indeed be at play, as many of the policy measures being promoted were not discussed before the election. The surprise may intensify the dissonance between the participants' attitudes and the politicians' policy measures, thus increasing the identity threat (Figure 1).

However, it is also possible that the "paradoxical reality" will arouse another emotion: a sense of guilt. If participants perceive these policy measures as dangerous, having voted for the government promoting them may make them feel responsible, thus prompting (group-based) guilt. Group-based guilt is threatening to the individual (Čehajić-Clancy et al., 2011), and the ensuing identity threat may thus motivate them to distance themselves from the elites (Goldenberg et al., 2016). Accordingly, Hypothesis 3 (**H3**) suggests two possible mechanisms underlying the identity threat experienced by those whose views moderate: a sense of surprise (**H3a**) and a sense of felt responsibility and guilt (**H3b**).[1]

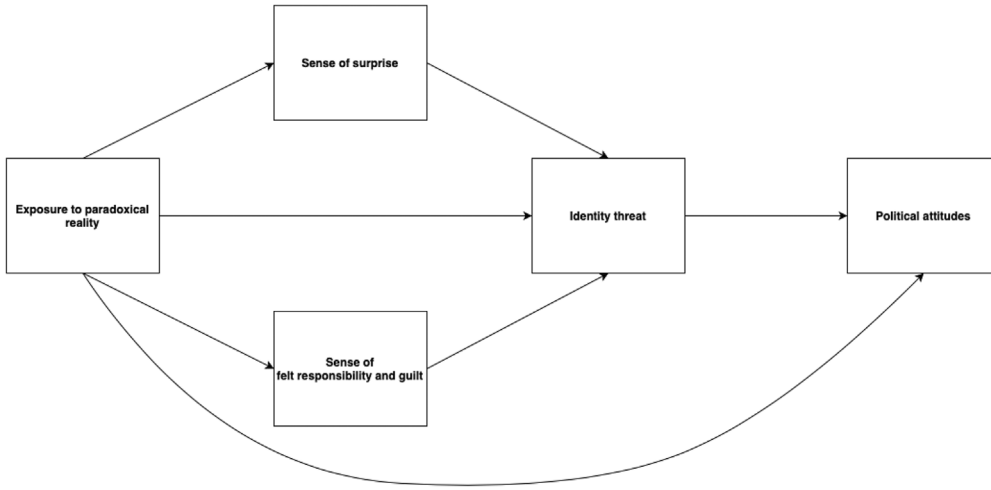

FIGURE 1 Illustrative model of full theoretical model.

[1]In addition to the main hypotheses, our registered report included exploratory hypotheses regarding potential moderators of the link between elite radicalization and changes in political attitudes. We included these to explore who might be most susceptible to paradoxical effects when encountering extreme manifestations of their held beliefs. However, analyses of the moderators did not reveal a systematic pattern. Therefore, we report all relevant information about the moderators, including the theoretical rationale behind their selection and the results of the analyses, in the Supplementary Materials (see section S2).

METHOD

We preregistered the study on OSF prior to the second time point (T2) of data collection. It can be accessed at: https://osf.io/q6wzh/?view_only=552d0138b1144ad797f491b391dbca88. Stage 1 of the registered report can be accessed at: https://osf.io/x2ruf/?view_only=108c9e10688341ecb260bade1e713031. We generally followed the preregistration in handling the sample, procedure and measures, and note where we deviated from it.

Sample

The original pre-election sample consisted of 1596 Jewish Israelis of voting age collected for another research project, of whom 589 were relevant to our study as they completed all relevant DV items in T1 and indicated an intention to vote for a party supporting right-wing leader Netanyahu to lead the next government (44% women; ages 18–79, $M = 42.89$, $SD = 14.72$).[2] They were reached through iPanel, an online Israeli panel, about 2 months prior to the 2022 election (T1). Most of the participants (66%, $n = 388$) reported their intention to vote for the largest party representing the right, Likud; 21% ($n = 124$) reported intending to vote for the radical right-wing list HaTzionut HaDatit, and another 1% ($n = 7$) reported intention to vote for one of two Ultra-Orthodox parties. The remaining 12% of the sample ($n = 70$) were intended voters of another right wing list, HaRuach HaTzionit ("The Zionist Spirit"), which was seen as a potential coalition partner but disbanded before the election.

Four months after the election and the announcement of radical proposed legislation, we reached out to the 589 participants from the baseline sample. In T2, we collected 501 unique (no duplicate username or IP address) responses in 7 days. After keeping only participants who reported voting for parties included in the coalition (i.e., Likud, HaTzionut HaDatit, and the Ultra-Orthodox parties), we remained with a T2 sample of 391.

About 3 weeks following T2, with the signing of several bills into law and the announcement of additional radical steps, we returned to T1 participants again for the T3 measurement ($n = 365$ unique responses in 7 days who voted for coalition parties).[3] Shortly after T3, the Knesset went into recess. After it readjourned, and following dramatic political developments associated with the judicial reform (i.e., after the first law associated with the reform officially passed), we carried out an additional measurement (T4) in late July ($n = 350$ unique responses in 7 days who voted for coalition parties).

We included one attention check question at each time point. In T3, we deviated from the preregistration and included two attention checks because the questionnaire was longer than in other time points. We intended to exclude participants who failed two or more attention checks from all analyses, but had no such cases.[4] We did not define or identify outliers. Lastly,

[2]The research from which we draw our T1 sample targeted primarily secular and moderate right-wing individuals. Therefore, compared to the public that voted for the parties included in the ruling coalition, there is an overrepresentation in our sample of more secular and less extreme voters.

[3]T3 coincided with major political turmoil in Israel: the survey was launched on March 26th, hours before PM Netanyahu fired his Minister of Defense, Yo'av. Galant, for publicly criticizing the proposed judicial reform. This act prompted unprecedented mass protests, condemnations from major societal institutions, and a general labor strike the next day. On March 27th, Netayahu announced a temporary suspension of all legislation related to the reform and the launch of negotiations with opposition over its contents. The potential influence of these events on the DVs will be considered, as detailed under the Preprocessing section.

[4]We also intended to exclude participants who failed an attention check on a time point-by-time point basis ($n = 13$) and perform all analyses both with and without attention-based exclusions. However, as we followed Newman's decision tree for missing data (2014) and applied imputations to our data, it eliminated the option of empty cases, and therefore, excluding participants from a single time point was not applicable.

we excluded participants who completed fewer than three time points, leaving us with a sample of 366 participants for analyses.

Procedure and measures

The preexisting T1 data were collected as part of another project.[5] We use it as the baseline for this project due to the inclusion of relevant measures and participants, as well as the proximity of data collection to the Israeli election. We use only the specific T1 data that we mention here and follow the preregistered analysis plan, as detailed below.

At the beginning of the T2 survey, we asked participants to report who they voted for in the last election. To ensure that participants were exposed to the governments' extreme steps, each post-election measurement began with a neutrally worded paragraph describing recent major political developments (with an emphasis on policies promoted and statements made by the government; see S1 in Supplementary Materials for exact wording of the text in each measurement). Participants then completed measures of the dependent variables, as detailed below.

In all measurements, we used a primary DV that measures relevant political attitudes on two axes representing two major aspects of Israeli politics: the tension between state and organized religion, and the tension between nationalism and equality. From T2 onward, we measured additional DVs that tap into specific attitudes on democracy and judicial reform, as well as the mediators of interest: identity threat, surprise, and guilt.

Dependent variables

Political Attitudes were measured using four items. Two items were included in all time points, measuring political attitudes on a scale of 1–7, with each end of the axis presenting the opposite extreme view of the other on a key issue. Participants were instructed as follows: "*The following axes deal with central issues to Israel's character. We are interested in knowing your personal preference on issues related to relations between state and religion. Place your position on the following axes*." They were then presented with the a scale about relations between state and organized religion (anchored at 1 = "*state governed by a religious law*," 4 = "*in the middle*," and 7 = "*complete separation between state and religion*") and attitudes about the tension between inclusive democracy and Jewish nationalism (anchored at 1 = "*multi-national state and the abolishment of all symbols of Jewish nationality [such as the national anthem and the flag]*," 4 = "*in the middle*," and 7 = "*A Jewish state with citizenship for Jews only*" [R]).

Two additional items employed across time points tapped into specific attitudes on civil rights. Participants were asked to what extent they agree with the following statements on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) scale: "*Same sex marriage should not be legal*" (R) and "*Every woman should have the choice to have an abortion*."

As noted, the four main DV items measured somewhat different constructs and used different scales (two of them used a bipolar 1–7 Likert scale and the other two a unipolar 1–7 scale). Two general items measuring opposite extreme political views on the key issues—separation between state and organized religion and the tension between inclusive

[5]T1 includes data from two separate measurements. The first measurement (T1a) was a correlational study and the second one (T1b), returning to the same pool of participants, was an experimental study that included interventions. These interventions, tested against a control condition in predicting another DV (voting intention), yielded no effects on either the intended DV nor the four relevant political attitudes measures we use in this project.

democracy and Jewish nationalism—represent two different axes along which much of Israeli politics was divided at the time of data collection. While these issues are ideologically loaded, they are fundamentally unrelated (as reflected in the low correlation between them with T2 $r = .067$), for example, individuals can highly support the separation of state and religion while also supporting Jewish nationalism. Accordingly, we report these items separately from each other. The other two items focused on policy-related attitudes, namely support for women's and LGBTQ rights. The two policy-related items were not highly intercorrelated (with T2 $r = .319$) and were therefore also reported separately from each other. Finally, correlations between these latter items and both bipolar axes was also relatively low (highest T2 $r = .319$).

From T2 onward, we also measured support for democratic values on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) scale. First, we included six items taken from Canetti-Nisim's (2004) measure of Support for Democratic Values: "*The State of Israel must provide equal social and political rights to all citizens, regardless of religion, race or gender*"; "*Open and public criticism of the government is permissible even in states if emergency*"; "*The slightest threat to the security of the state is enough to justify serious restrictions on democracy*" (R); "*I prefer a democratic government whose actions and views are opposed to mine over a non-democratic government with whose views I agree*"; "*Every citizen has the right to take his convictions to the street if necessary*"; and "*Public participation of the people is not necessary if decision making is left in the hands of a few trusted leaders*" (R). Second, we added four items pertaining to support for democratic values that specifically reflect adherence to democratic values in the face of the current government's policies: "*In the event of a conflict between the principles of democracy and Jewish law, preference must be given to the observance of Jewish law*" (R); "*The supreme court should have the authority to annul laws enacted by the Knesset, which are contrary to the fundamental laws of the State of Israel*"; "*Separation of powers is one of the most important basic principles in democracy, and therefore everything must be done to maintain its existence*"; and "*Elected officials should not be allowed to hold senior positions (prime minister, minister) if they have previously been convicted of crimes*." All these items were included in one scale of democratic values ($\alpha_{t2} = .69$; $\alpha_{t3} = .68$; $\alpha_{t4} = .71$). We use this scale despite its reliability being lower than desired since these values are all close to the widely acceptable. 7 point, with none being lower than .68 (DeVellis, 2017; Straub et al., 2004).

Finally, we included four items measuring specific attitudes on current policies on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) scale: *"I support the superseding clause [a law that allows the Knesset to re-enact laws that were invalidated by the High Court of Justice] with a majority of 61 Members of Knesset*"; "*I support the ban on bringing chametz (non-kosher food) into hospitals on Passover*"; "*The High Court of Justice should not interfere at all in the selection of the members of the Knesset and the ministers of the government, therefore it should be possible for Aryeh Deri [a politician previously convicted of crimes] to serve as a minister"*; and "*The Department for Police Investigations should be separated from the Prosecutor's Office and transferred to be under the direct authority of the Minister of Justice*" ($\alpha_{t2} = .77$; $\alpha_{t3} = .77$; $\alpha_{t4} = .73$).

Mediators

We measured the following mediators in T2–T4 on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree) scale:

Identity Threat was measured using three items adapted from Shuman et al. (2018): "*I feel that the policies the current government is promoting make right-wing supporters look bad*"; "*I feel that the policies that the current government is promoting make people perceive right-wing*

supporters negatively"; and "*The policies the current government is promoting make me feel uncomfortable with my right-wing identity*" (α_{t2} = .83; α_{t3} = .87; α_{t4} = .86).

Surprise was measured using four items adapted from Hameiri et al. (2018): "*As someone who voted for the current government, I expected the government to lead policy changes of this kind*" (R); "*As someone who voted for the current government, I expected the elected government to be more concerned with other things*"; "*I am surprised by the current policy of the government*"; and "*The current policy of the government confuses me*" (α_{t2} = .83; α_{t3} = .86; α_{t4} = .86).

Guilt was measured both by its appraisal, that is, felt responsibility (Berndsen & Manstead, 2007), and the emotion itself. Felt responsibility was measured using three items adapted from Bateman and O'Connor (2016): "*As someone who voted for the current government, I feel a personal responsibility for the policies currently promoted by the government*"; "*My vote in the last election allowed the government to promote the current policies*"; and "*I voted for the current government but I don't feel that I have responsibility for the policies that the government is promoting*" (R) (α_{t2} = .58; α_{t3} = .54; α_{t4} = .58). Despite its low reliability, we retained this scale as it captures the construct better than a single-item measure. This low reliability may have contributed to the observed low correlation with the DV. Notably, the scale was not used in further analyses, minimizing its impact on the overall findings. Guilt was measured using three items, adapted from Čehajić-Clancy et al. (2011): "*When I think about the current government policies, I sometimes feel guilty*"; "*I sometimes feel guilty when I think about the possible consequences of the policies that the government is currently leading*"; and "*I do not feel any guilt about the policies that the current government is leading*" (R) (α_{t2} = .87; α_{t3} = .81; α_{t4} = .83).

We also added the following four items, one tapping into each proposed mediator, referring to statements that participants read in the beginning of each survey: "*Such statements by the coalition members make the supporters of the right look bad*"; "*As someone who voted for the current government, I was surprised to hear such statements from the members of the coalition*"; "*As someone who voted for the current government, I feel responsible for such statements by the members of the coalition*"; and "*As someone who voted for the current government, I feel guilty about such statements by the members of the coalition*." These items—referring separately to the idea of examining identity threat, surprise, felt responsibility, and guilt in relations to specific actions taken by the government—were external to the validated measures that we used to test the paradoxical thinking mechanisms, and we therefore treated them separately.

Control variables

Finally, T2–T4 also included control items pertaining to exposure to and attitudes regarding the ongoing protests against the government's policies, to rule out a reasonable alternative route to moderation (See S3 for full scales and reliabilities) (Table 1).

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

As we mentioned above, our analyses were preregistered on OSF prior to T2 data collection. All codes and data used for the analyses can be found on OSF (see https://osf.io/x2ruf/?view_only=108c9e10688341ecb260bade1e713031).

TABLE 1 List of measures collected at each time point. Full description of all measures can be found in S2 and S3.

	Time 1	Time 2	Time 3	Time 4
DV	Political attitudes	Political attitudes	Political attitudes	Political attitudes
	–	Support for democratic values	Support for democratic values	Support for democratic values
	–	Attitudes on current policies	Attitudes on current policies	Attitudes on current policies
Mediators	–	Identity threat	Identity threat	Identity threat
	–	Surprise	Surprise	Surprise
	–	Guilt	Guilt	Guilt
Control variables	–	Norm perception (Israelis)	Norm perception (Israelis)	Norm perception (Israelis)
	–	Norm perception (rightists)	Norm perception (rightists)	Norm perception (rightists)
	–	Exposure to protests	Exposure to protests	Exposure to protests
	–	Participation in protests	Participation in protests	Participation in protests
	–	News consumption	News consumption	News consumption

Preprocessing

Missing data

As we preregistered, we followed the decision tree suggested by Newman (2014) for dealing with missing data. Of 366 participants, 98 individuals lacked data for one or more timepoints (i.e., over 10% at the construct level). As such, we employed multiple imputations using the mice package in R (Van Buuren & Groothuis-Oudshoorn, 2011), specifically employing the *Predictive Mean Matching (PMM)* method.

Sensitivity analysis

Despite having a preexisting limitation with the baseline sample size, we conducted a sensitivity analysis using G*Power for a within factors repeated measures ANOVA for four measurements. We found that with the achieved sample size of 366, and an alpha level of .05, we have 80% power to detect an effect size as small as Cohen's $f = .06$.

Scale construction and reliability testing

We calculated means for measures that included more than one item and tested their reliability using Cronbach's alpha tests. We conducted this analysis for each time point. Results can be found in the Measures' description above.

Mean centering

All variables were centered before analyses. For hypotheses H2 and H3, in the absence of a baseline measurement of the mediators, we used between-subjects centering and

within-subject centering procedures (Bolger & Laurenceau, 2013; Jebb et al., 2015; Wang & Maxwell, 2015). Between-subjects centering involved computing for each variable a participant-level variable as the mean across all time points, capturing the variance between participants. For instance, an individual consistently low on identity threat received a low value, while one consistently high received a high value, termed "general identity threat." This variable was created for both mediators (i.e., identity threat) and the dependent variables (i.e., political attitudes).

Additionally, we created a within-subject variable for each variable, by subtracting this participant-level mean (i.e., general identity threat) from each time measurement (i.e., the raw identity threat value), thus generating the change in identity threat variable, providing a unique value per time point. This variable represents changes or fluctuations around the general tendency, reflecting within-subject variance. Similar to the previous variable, this was created for both the mediator and the dependent variable. We repeated this process also for the mediators in Hypothesis 3 (H3), that is, surprise and felt responsibility and guilt.

Correction for multiple comparisons

As the longitudinal data requires multiple comparisons, and since we have multiple hypotheses, we used an alpha correction: the False Discovery Rate (FDR) (Benjamini & Hochberg, 1995).

Other preprocessing procedures

Since T3 data were collected during a period of significant political turmoil (see Footnote 2), we first examined, using a simple *t*-test, whether there were significant differences in the focal DVs (i.e., political attitudes, support for democratic values, and support for current policies) before and after Netanyahu fired the Minister of Defense, as well as before and after Netanyahu's announcement suspending the legislation. As we found no significant differences (see full *t*-test results in S3, Tables S1 and S2, in the Supplementary Materials), we followed the original analysis plan.

Hypothesis testing

We first assessed the relationships between the main study variables separately at each time point. This preliminary examination was intended to help us determine if there are any variables (such as exposure to and attitudes toward the protests) that might influence our main analyses. In other words, we checked whether these variables are related to our key variables (i.e., our IV, DVs, and mediators). We followed the guidelines for interpreting practical significance indicators, and checked for variables that are highly correlated ($r > .60$) (Alwahaibi et al., 2020) with our main outcome variables. No variable was highly correlated with our key variables, so we did not need to control for any variables (see full results in S5, Tables S3–S6, in the Supplementary Materials).

Hypothesis 1

In order to determine which of our two competing hypotheses prevailed, we conducted a linear mixed-effect model, with time as a fixed effect and a random intercept for subjects to account for individual differences. Following imputation, we utilized the lmerTest package (Kuznetsova

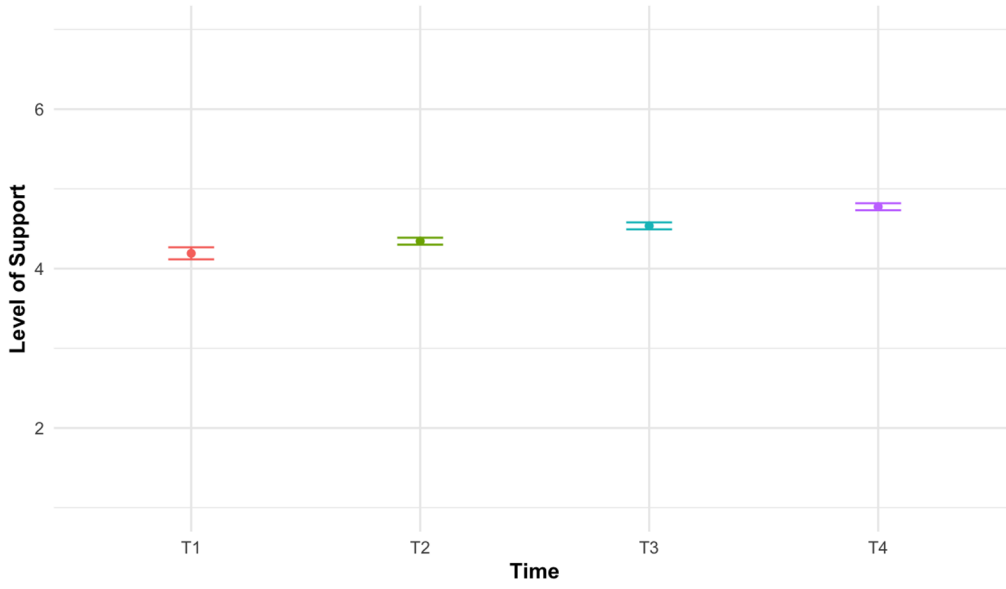

FIGURE 2 The effect of time on the support for separation between religion and state. Error bars represent standard errors.

et al., 2017) to fit linear mixed-effects models to each imputed dataset (*N*Datasets = 10). Subsequently, we pooled the results from these models to obtain a combined estimate, effectively accommodating missing data and leveraging available information from participants with incomplete data across the four time points.[6] We first examined the four-component measure of *Political Attitudes*. Our first model examined the effect of time on the first component, that is, the relations between organized religion and state. The model revealed a significant effect of time on attitudes regarding separation between the state and organized religion ($p < .001$). As time progressed (from pre-elections to 9 months post-elections), participants showed increased support for such separation (see Figure 2). Specifically, the estimated fixed effects indicated that each additional time point (*T2*: $b = .15$, $SE = .04$, $t(2451.72) = 3.46$, $p < .001$; *T3*: $b = .19$, $SE = .04$, $t(2452.10) = 4.25$, $p < .001$; *T4*: $b = .24$, $SE = .04$, $t(2452.08) = 5.45$, $p < .001$) was associated with a corresponding increase in support for the separation between state and religion.

Our second model examined the effect of time on the second component of *Political Attitudes*, that is, attitudes regarding the tension between inclusive democracy and Jewish nationalism. The model revealed a significant effect of time on support for an inclusively democratic state ($p < .001$). Over time, participants displayed increased support for more inclusive democracy (see Figure 3). Specifically, the estimated fixed effects revealed that each additional time point (*T2*: $b = .08$, $SE = .05$, $t(2450.74) = 1.41$, $p = .135$; *T3*: $b = .16$, $SE = .05$, $t(2451.81) = 2.99$, $p = .003$; *T4*: $b = .33$, SE = .05, $t(2451.66) = 6.32$, $p < .001$) was corresponding to an elevation in support for state for all, although only became significant in T3.

Our third model examined the effect of time on the third component of *Political Attitudes*, that is, support for same sex marriage. The results revealed a significant effect of time on attitudes toward same-sex marriage, ($p < .001$). As time progressed, participants became increasingly supportive of same-sex marriage (see Figure 4). Specifically, the estimated fixed effects indicated that each additional time point (*T2*: $b = .07$, $SE = .06$, $t = .75$, $p = .237$; *T3*: $b = .10$,

[6]We report in S6 in the Supplementary Materials the results of the analysis without imputations.

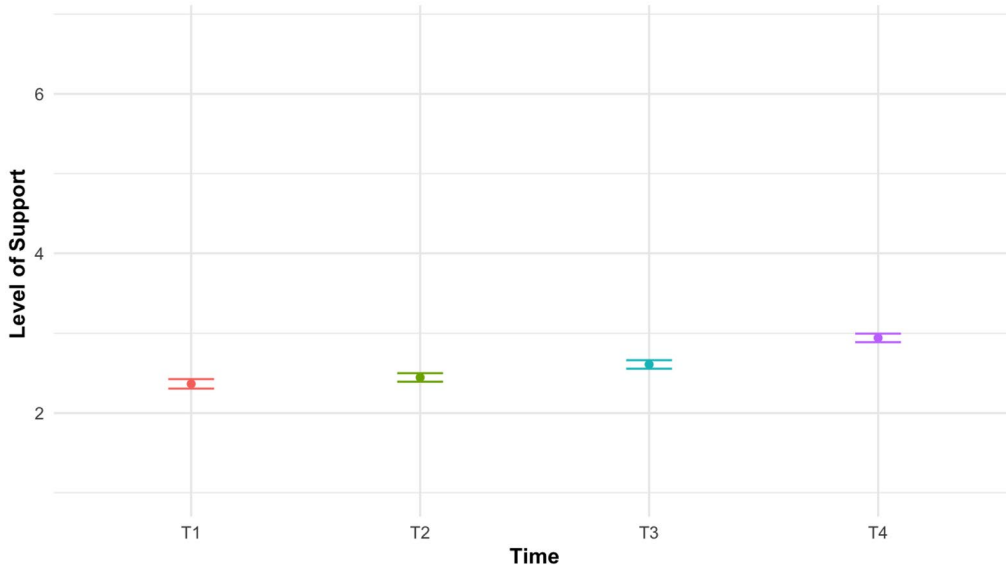

FIGURE 3 The effect of time on support for an inclusively democratic state. Error bars represent standard errors.

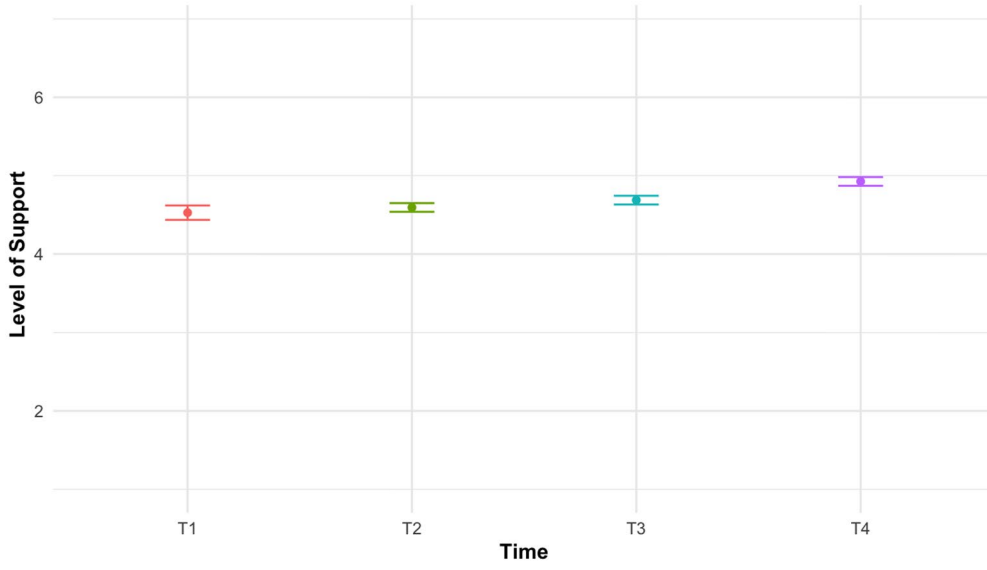

FIGURE 4 The effect of time on support for same sex marriage. Error bars represent standard errors.

SE = .06, $t = 1.03$, $p = .094$; *T4*: $b = .24$, *SE* = .06, $t = 2.79$, $p < .001$) was associated with a corresponding increase in support for same-sex marriage, although the change only became significant in T4.

Our fourth model examined the effect of time on the fourth component of *Political Attitudes*, that is, support for women's right to abortion. The results revealed a significant effect of time on support for abortion rights ($p < .001$). Specifically, the estimated fixed effects indicated that

each additional time point (*T2*: $b = .18$, $SE = .04$, $t(2449.78) = 4.25$, $p < .001$; *T3*: $b = .10$, $SE = .04$, $t(2450.13) = 3.52$, $p < .001$; *T4*: $b = .17$, $SE = .04$, $t(2450.08) = 2.79$, $p < .001$) was associated with a corresponding increase in support for women's rights to abortion (see Figure 5).

We then moved on to examine the effect of time on the measures we added starting at T2; *Support for Democratic Values* and *Attitudes on Current Policies*. The LMER model indicated no significant effect of time on support for democratic values ($p = .270$). However, we did find an effect of time on attitudes on current policies ($p < .001$). As time progressed (from 4 months post-elections to 9 months post-elections), participants became less supportive of current governmental policies (see Figure 6). The estimated fixed effects indicated that there was no effect of time between T2 and T3 (*T3*: $b = .02$, $SE = .03$, $t(1719.05) = .34$, $p = .697$); but there was a significant decrease in support between T3 and T4 (*T4*: $b = -.07$, $SE = .03$, $t(1719) = -3.05$, $p = .006$).

After applying False Discovery Rate (FDR) correction for multiple comparisons, the significance of the results of the four models testing H1 remained unchanged. We also conducted the analysis without multiple imputations, and the results remained generally consistent, highlighting the effect of time on the moderation of political attitudes. Furthermore, when demographic variables were controlled for, we observed the same pattern of results, further supporting the robustness of our findings. The full analyses results can be found in the Supplementary Materials.

Hypotheses 2 and 3

After examining H1, we moved on to examine H2 and H3. Before proceeding with a full mediation model analysis, we conducted preliminary assessments to ascertain the presence of significant relationships between the independent variable (IV), time, and the mediator (identity threat for H2, and felt responsibility and guilt for H3), as well as between the mediator and the dependent variable (DV), political attitudes. Upon examination, we found that the relationship between time and identity threat was significant. Specifically, there was a significant increase in identity threat at T3 ($p < .001$), followed by a subsequent decrease at T4 ($p = .011$) (see Supplementary Materials for full analysis results). However, the relationship

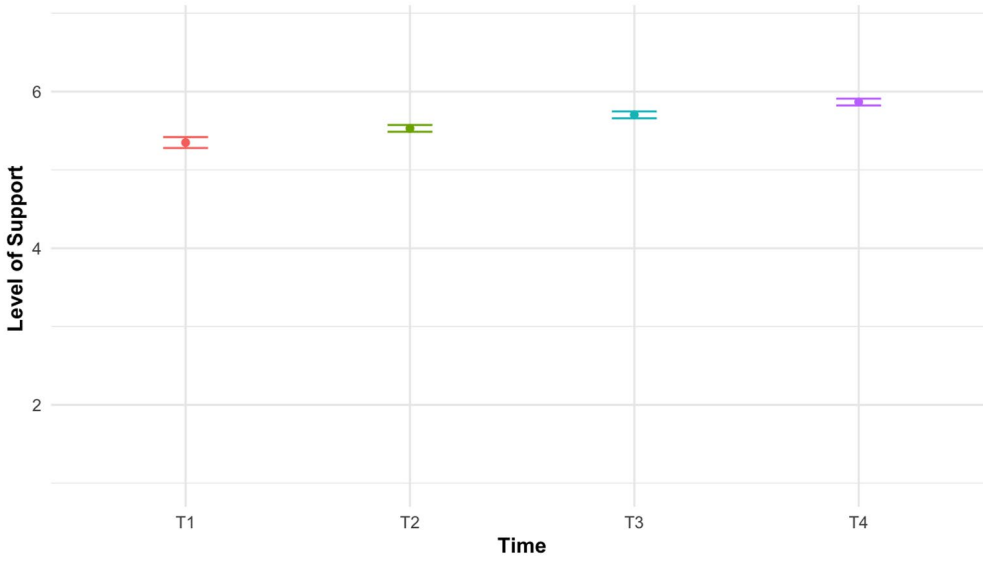

FIGURE 5 The effect of time on support for the right for abortion. Error bars represent standard errors.

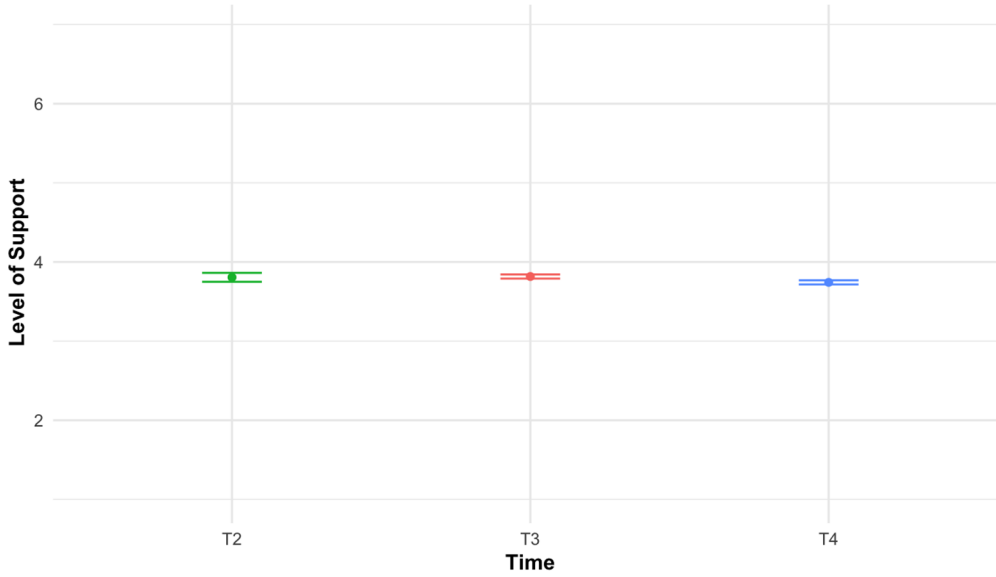

FIGURE 6 The effect of time on support for current governmental policies. Error bars represent standard errors.

between identity threat and political attitudes was nonsignificant (see S6, Tables S7 and S8, in the Supplementary Materials for full analysis results). As a result, we did not proceed with the full mediation model, as the foundational conditions for mediation were not met (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

DISCUSSION

Opportunities to test complex psychological models in a real-world setting are rare. However, witnessing the (unfortunate) circumstances in Israel in 2023, prior to the eruption of the Israel-Gaza war, we hypothesized that they might lead to a backlash effect among government voters. The newly elected government swiftly implemented policies that, while rooted in rightist ideology, represented an extreme version far beyond mainstream conservative positions in Israel. Notably, many of these measures, such as the proposed judicial reforms, were not explicitly promised during the election campaign and were promoted with unexpected rapidity after taking office. Some of these policies had previously been considered radical in public discourse, with critics arguing they could fundamentally alter Israel's democratic identity (Roznai & Cohen, 2023). This sudden intensification of rightist principles created a "paradoxical reality," ideal for examining how paradoxical thinking unfolds when individuals see in their leadership exaggerated and surprising versions of their own ideological leanings. To capitalize on this unique opportunity, we employed a longitudinal research design to examine the effects of the Israeli government's radicalization (i.e., its extreme statements and policies) on the political positions of its voters, relying on pre-election data and three post-election time points.

The research results demonstrate a main effect aligned with paradoxical thinking theory (Hebel-Sela et al., 2023). While we had a competing hypothesis suggesting that government voters will radicalize in their political positions following the radicalization of their elected officials (e.g., Druckman et al., 2013), the results show a liberal shift in all attitudes that were measured before and after the election. These included positions about the religious and nationalistic nature of the state, as well as support for women and LGBTQ rights—with the

latter two less central in the protests against the government's judicial reform, and thus less expected to change in reaction to these protests. This finding is among the first to account for a possible moderation effect of elite radicalization. We found that rightists who voted for the ruling government were not quick to align with the attitudes reflected in the extreme measures pursued by their leaders. Instead, over time, they shifted in the opposite direction, drawn to more moderate positions on key issues.

As the threat of political radicalization is spreading rapidly in the democratic world (Rooduijn et al., 2017), these findings can be seen as encouraging. They indicate that alongside the destructive consequences of extreme governmental statements, policies, and actions (e.g., Axelrod et al., 2021; Layman et al., 2006; Rogowski & Sutherland, 2016), under some circumstances, the extremity of the political elite can lead to a backfire effect, reflected in the moderation of public attitudes among individuals who ideologically align with the elite but perceive its policies as too extreme. To paraphrase this paper's title, it seems that through shifting attitudes, citizens signal to the radical leaders they voted into power that they have, indeed, gone too far.

It is important to note that moderation of public attitudes in response to elite radicalization is not a guaranteed trend, as other recent findings demonstrate (e.g., Moral & Best, 2023), but certain conditions make it more likely. While the current research lacks the information needed to definitively establish these conditions, we suspect that two key factors may contribute to moderation instead of radicalization: the pace and the extent of the elite's radical actions. In this case study, we speculate that the attempts of the Israeli "full-on right-wing government" to promote a comprehensive package of very radical policies at an accelerated pace prevented the gradual adaptation of the public to the extreme reality, leading to the observed moderation. To employ the frog-in-boiling-water metaphor, instead of cooking the frog patiently on a low flame, the Israeli public was thrown suddenly into the boiling water and immediately attempted to jump out. If this is indeed the case, swift and sweeping radicalization might be less dangerous for democracy than more slowly crumbling democratic infrastructures.

On a practical level, this finding can be harnessed to hinder public radicalization and to develop interventions to reduce support for extreme policies. Primarily, it indicates that extreme steps taken by political elites should be constantly scrutinized and challenged to raise public awareness of the ongoing radicalization and enhance the sense of the immediate threat to democracy. Extreme leaders should not have the privilege of working under the radar in a way that will leverage the potential success of their actions. Rather, individuals and institutions wishing to safeguard democracy should ensure that radical steps by leaders are revealed and properly portrayed as deviations from acceptable political procedures, which is more likely to lead to a backfire effect.

Unfortunately, based on the study's results, we cannot explain what led to the liberal shift we consistently observed, that is, whether the mechanism of paradoxical thinking did play out, as we did not find support for mediation by threat to identity. This is partially due to the lack of correlation between the change in political attitudes, which continued to moderate as time passed, and the change in the mediators that halted after T3 (e.g., identity threat increased between T2 and T3, but then decreased at T4). However, this descriptive finding can be understood intuitively when recalling the full process suggested by paradoxical thinking. Initially, extreme policies evoke a sense of surprise, triggering an identity threat. With time, these policies become normalized, diminishing their initial impact. In response to this threat, individuals may adapt by adjusting their views, thereby reducing the perceived threat level (Hameiri et al., 2018). Consequently, while the sense of surprise and threat diminishes over time, the shift in attitudes may endure longer.

The lack of support for paradoxical thinking mechanisms could also be explained by alternative mediators being responsible for the attitude moderation observed in our study. One possibility is that counter-arguing, as part of motivated reasoning (Taber et al., 2009), drives

this shift. In this scenario, individuals exposed to radicalized versions of their views might respond by generating counter-arguments that reinforce their own, more moderate stances. This process could potentially result in a "backlash" effect, leading to even more moderate views. Another compelling possibility is that individuals' moderation following the government's extreme policies was more connected to other social identities than to the right-wing identity. Namely, in line with social identity theory, the changing context could have led to a moderate, secular, and/or democratic identity to become more salient (Reicher, 2004; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Future research should explore these potential explanations by mapping individuals' argumentative processes and identity shifts, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of the underlying mechanisms at work.

Along with this speculated interpretation of the lack of association between the variables across different time points, it is important to acknowledge a key limitation in the research design that affected our ability to detect the full effects. Notably, we did not have values for the mediators from the T1 (as they could only be collected after the extreme policies were announced), and thus, we were unable to identify whether the significant change in attitudes after the elections was accompanied by a similar change in the mediators. If, in fact, levels of (one of) the mediators changed between T1 and T2, having this data could have further facilitated our test of potential mediators.

Accordingly, given the nature of our data and research question, we recommend that future studies try to overcome this challenge by extending the longitudinal design and implementing a control group. Collecting data at more frequent intervals over a longer period after the event could reveal more nuanced patterns of mutual fluctuations between attitudes and mediators, potentially uncovering relationships that our current design missed. Additionally, including a comparable group not exposed to the extreme policies could better isolate the effects of the political shift on both attitudes and mediators, providing a crucial baseline for comparison. These approaches could collectively enhance our understanding of the dynamic processes at play in such political contexts, even in the absence of pre-event data.

While the research has valuable implications, several additional limitations should be considered. First, we were limited by the available pre-election sample and measures available for our research. If we could have gone back in time and run the pre-election study again with the goals of the current research in mind, we would have probably chosen to obtain a more heterogeneous sample and include more diverse attitudes to be used as DVs. Additionally, as in all longitudinal studies, there is the risk of attrition bias and selective survival bias (Salthouse, 2014) which could have led to differences between the participants retained across time points and those who dropped out between time points. Our exploratory analyses of potential moderators did not reveal consistent patterns, opening the door for future research in more controlled settings to further investigate individual characteristics that affect susceptibility to attitude moderation following paradoxical thinking. Finally, as we rely on a case study that holds unique attributes—for example, it is a case in which the sudden radicalization of the government elicited a fierce public resistance that included prolonged and partially successful protest—the external validity of the findings is limited.

In conclusion, our research illustrates how attitudes moderate within real-world contexts in response to exposure to radicalized manifestations of entrenched beliefs. Through a longitudinal design with four waves, our findings revealed a gradual and significant shift in the political attitudes of right-wing voters in Israel, whose views became more moderate as their elected government became more radical. While we were unable to establish support for the full paradoxical thinking mechanism or identify novel moderators in this real-world scenario, our findings regarding the main moderating effect of a "paradoxical reality" on the political attitudes of government voters carry powerful implications. Namely, they indicate that, contrary to expectations for a normative influence of leaders over public attitudes, extreme steps taken by political elites might actually backfire, thus leaving a little more room for optimism about the future of democracy.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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