

# The Enemy from the Inside: Measurement and Analysis of Delegitimization Discourse in the Political Sphere <sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper investigates the manifestations and dynamics of delegitimization discourse within the political sphere. Focusing on the Israeli political context, the study employs a novel computational algorithm to identify and measure political delegitimization from over two million Hebrew mass-media articles and politicians' social media posts. The research addresses the measurement and manifestation of political delegitimization, as well as the actors involved in its occurrence. The findings reveal the presence of political delegitimization discourse across the entire political spectrum, with increased occurrences preceding elections and events related to Netanyahu's trial events. The study highlights the involvement of party leaders in such discourse and identifies the act of joining a national-unity coalition as a significant factor influencing its decline. The paper contributes to the literature by expanding our understanding of delegitimization discourse within the political sphere, providing a methodological framework for its empirical investigation, and raising important questions about its implications for politics and society. The paper concludes with suggestions for further research and emphasizes the fundamental danger that delegitimization discourse poses to democratic debate.

**Keywords:** Delegitimization, Political Communication, Elite Discourse, Text Analysis, Israel

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## 1. Introduction

Political delegitimization, defined as discourse aimed at undermining the legitimacy of political groups or actors through emotional attacks and negative characterizations, is an important phenomenon in the political sphere. This paper aims to explore the prevalence and patterns of political delegitimization discourse in the Israeli political arena. By analyzing data from both mass media articles and politicians' social media posts, we examine the distribution, temporal dynamics, and the actors generating political delegitimization.

Over the past few decades, studies have provided important information on discursive delegitimization and its influences on society. However, the research on the subject has been mostly restricted to relationships between social groups, and the existing accounts fail to illuminate its manifestation among political groups. This paper seeks to address the following questions: How can the measurement of political delegitimization be approached? In what specific circumstances does this phenomenon manifest? And who are the key actors involved in its implementation?

To specify and better understand the mechanisms through which political delegitimization operates, we examine the context of the Israeli political government crises of 2019-2022. We employ a supervised machine learning (SML) tool that analyzes over two million Hebrew mass-media articles and politicians' social media posts. This represents a novel approach to identifying and quantifying discourse involving delegitimization discourse, and to the best of our knowledge, this is a first attempt to perform a computerized text analysis that identifies a discourse of delegitimization.

The study reveals that political delegitimization constitutes a small proportion (6%) of the overall discourse, with variations across the different media. This phenomenon is observed across the political spectrum and is politically motivated: it increases towards elections and events related to Netanyahu's trial and then declines, and it declines when political parties join the coalition. An additional noteworthy finding is an elevated likelihood of encountering such discourse among party leaders.

Taken together, these findings yield various noteworthy contributions to the broad literature concerning discursive delegitimization. First, the study expands our understanding of the phenomenon of delegitimization, particularly concerning its manifestation within the political sphere. Second, it provides a methodological framework for empirically investigating a discourse category that is infrequently encountered, thereby substantiating its existence within the political discourse. Third, it offers an initial exploration of the mechanisms that contribute to the proliferation of such discourse, and elicits queries concerning its probable ramifications for the realm of politics and society within the nation.

The paper proceeds with a theoretical background regarding discursive delegitimization. Then, proffers an exposition of the empirical methodology and the data, followed by the analysis of the results. The paper culminates with several key takeaways and suggestions for further research and discussed what can be the outcomes of this discourse, and why does it pose a fundamental danger to democratic debate?

## **2. Theoretical Background**

### **2.1 Discursive Delegitimization: Overview**

Legitimacy and justification are crucial factors of any entity that aspires to rule, to use force, and to make demands from its surroundings. Thus, since Plato and Aristotle the notion of legitimacy has always had primary importance and has been a question of great interest in a wide range of fields and is a crucial aspect of politics (Kelman, 2001; Stillman, 1974; van Leeuwen, 2007; Weber, 1958). While there is a varies among researchers, there appears to be general agreement that the term *legitimacy* refers to “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definition” (Suchman, 1995: 574).

Legitimacy is not a constant; it is dynamic, forming and reforming constantly. *Legitimization* thus is the process where an action, policy, or claim that was previously perceived as illegitimate is reclassified as legitimate. On the other hand, *delegitimization* refers to an opposite reclassification process, wherein what was once legitimate turns illegitimate (Kelman, 2001). Delegitimization is the nullification of rights or authority that were previously recognized or the withdrawal of such rights or authority from claimers who enjoyed them in the past.

Legitimization and delegitimization are social phenomena caused by agents operating throughout society and displayed in various communication and influence channels. These processes can be manifested in different practices: discursive, institutional, and behavioral (Bäckstrand & Söderbaum, 2018). We will focus on the discursive realm. The definition of (de)legitimization discursive processes provided by van Dijk (1998) is a social and political act that is accomplished by text or talk. This approach assumes that these processes are communicative actions that do not occur in a single instance, but are an ongoing process of negotiations over legitimacy. These processes do not start independently; they are instigated by actions or declarations of various authorities be they political, religious, judicial, medical, or scientific authority (Suchman, 1995). Even though the two concepts of legitimization and delegitimization are closely related, this paper focuses on delegitimization rather than legitimization.<sup>4</sup>

The literature on delegitimization as a discursive practice is enormous and convoluted and we know a lot about its influences on society. However, the existing accounts are mostly limited to relationships between social groups and fail to illuminate their implications for other types of groups. However, with the understanding that political identities are essentially a type of social identity (Green et al., 2002), there are compelling grounds to posit the presence of such discourse not only targeting social identities but also directed toward political identities.

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<sup>4</sup> For more information about the political discourse of legitimization strategies, see Reyes' work: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926511419927>.

## 2.2 Delegitimization Discourse Toward Sociological Groups

A substantial body of scholarly investigation on delegitimization discourse has primarily concentrated on the interrelations among sociological groups. In his preliminary work on discursive delegitimization, Bar-Tal (1989) defined delegitimization as a socio-psychological process that serves as an extreme case of social classification based on stereotypes and prejudice. This type of research multiplied over the past three decades as ethnonational tensions and conflicts, racism, multiculturalism, and immigration have captured the public agenda, and sparked an academic interest concerning the use of discursive delegitimization to revoke certain groups' legitimacy in society (Tileaga, 2007).

These investigations focus on delegitimization towards specific groups based on their social identities, such as race, ethnicity, gender, religion, or sexual orientation. While the goals of this discourse are to exclude the targeted group from the sphere of acceptable groups acting within society to maintain or reinforce existing power structures and social hierarchies.

In this process, a social group is classified into a radically negative category so as to make the group not measure up to acceptable values or norms (Bar-Tal, 1989, 1990; Bar-Tal & Hammack, 2012). According to this approach, delegitimization aims to differentiate the in-group members and elevate them and/or to allow the exploitation of the out-group and/or to justify a violent conflict (Bar-Tal, 1990). Volpato and colleagues (2010) noted that the delegitimization process serves other ends as well, such as justifying the in-group's hostile behavior towards other groups, strengthening and reaffirming intergroup boundaries, experiencing supremacy, and maintaining in-group cohesion. The process outcome is the exclusion of a specific group from the social legitimacy circle. This exclusion is neither temporary nor dependent on context but is enacted permanently (Bar-Tal, 1989, 2000).

In the past thirty years, extensive research has been done on Jews in Europe, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Black and Latin-American minorities in the United States,

and more (Bar-Tal, 1990; Bar-Tal et al., 2009; Oren & Bar-Tal, 2007; Rinnawi, 2007; Volpato et al., 2010; Volpato & Durante, 2003; Winter, 2011). Other studies have examined delegitimization between people from different countries (Bar-Tal, 1990; White, 1970; Wilner, 2011). Nevertheless, sociological delegitimization does not have to occur between different ethnic and national groups, and other sociological characteristics can be used for delegitimization, such as sex or economic status (Baryla et al., 2015; Holland & Wright, 2017).

Collectively, these studies offer valuable insights regarding the characteristics of delegitimization discourse and its implementations within society. However, their scope is limited to sociological identities, thus neglecting the examination of political identities.

### 2.3. Delegitimization Discourse Toward Political Groups

Since delegitimization in the political realm has been barely studied, we begin with a comprehensive definition of the notion of political delegitimization. We define the term political delegitimization in reference to delegitimization discourse that targets certain political identities and their symbolic aspects (Rivlin-Angert, 2023). This discourse aims to label political groups with extremely negative meanings, to the point where they become unacceptable within the realm of public discourse. Political delegitimization goals are to create ideological superiority and eliminate competing narratives by narrowing the acceptable discourse and removing certain ideas and ideologies from the legitimate arena. These processes are carried out in order to win in the democratic competition over power and prevent pluralistic competition (ibid, 2023).

As Arian and Shamir emphasize, political labels are politically “invented, not discovered, by political analysts for the political establishment. They are used to label and to identify the good or the bad, the right and the wrong, the desirable and the despicable” (Arian & Shamir, 1983: 142). In this light, the political labeling processes and methods are extremely important, as they lay the basis of political identities. Political

delegitimization discourse aims to stigmatize political identities with labels that are rejected and shameful in society.

Unlike persuasive or negative messages designed to change attitudes through cognitive considerations and rational deliberation, political delegitimization messages address the symbolic and affective aspects of political identification - to feelings and emotions. These attacks influence the expressive dimension of the individual's political identity and his/her willingness to identify with a particular group, even when s/he holds attitudes that resemble that group in terms of the instrumental dimension.

In order to define the operationalization of this phenomenon, we follow Rivlin-Angert's (2023) definition of political delegitimization. It argues that the methods involved in political delegitimization processes are based on Huddy's (2001) four key factors for identity formation. Accordingly, the mechanisms of political delegitimization are identical to those of identity development - but work in precisely the opposite direction. Political delegitimization of political groups can be categorized into four strategies corresponding to Huddy's four elements: creating negative valence of a group, tattooing a group's prototype(s), manipulating a group's core values, and attaching or coupling the out-group to other, already illegitimate, out-groups (Rivlin-Angert, 2023).

Just as these four factors, proposed by Huddy for identity formation, can be used to create a group identity, they may be used to destroy such an identity, especially when the group boundaries are highly permeable, and the membership in the group is vague and difficult to discern. Notably, all the four methods of political delegitimization carry the same goal: deconstruction of existing political identity in order to win political combat. Each can be operated on its own, in a combination of several, or all together.

It is important to note, that previous research on political delegitimization has been mostly restricted to the second method (tattooing a group's prototype). However, we argue that any of the four methods can be used to create delegitimization of political identities and thereby dismantle the attachment of its holders.

## 4. Operationalization, Method, and Data

### 4.1. Method

After we define the concept of political delegitimization, we will refer now to discuss the operationalization of this concept. In order to measure political delegitimization discourse over time, we used a supervised machine learning (SML) tool, that analyzes data at the sentence level. To the best of our knowledge, this constitutes the first attempt to employ computerized text analysis to identify a discourse involving delegitimization.

The method involves three stages:

Since political delegitimization is a relatively rare phenomenon in the discourse, in the first stage we annotated a sample of 760 sentences from politicians' Facebook posts and news articles. Of these, about a third were labeled positive (political delegitimization) and the rest are not. The annotated process was according to the following coding book:

Discourse directed towards political groups (left or right) or political actors (politicians or parties) [hereinafter - the object] and based on an attack on the emotional identification with those groups and/or actors. The discourse is intended to produce negative feelings towards the object **when there are no remarks at all to policy or rational arguments**<sup>5</sup> (any "persuasive" discourse that seeks to change a position or any ideological arguments do not fall within the definition of delegitimization). This type of discourse is based on an extremely negative characterization of the identity groups according to the following parameters:

- Expressing feelings of disgust and hatred towards the group, ridicule (for example, "smollamin"), swearing words, or profanity.

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<sup>5</sup> The emphasis was in the original scheme.



- Arguments that challenge the group's right to exist, designed to muzzle them.
- Characterizing the group as deliberately harming the common good, in a way that constitutes a danger to society / the state.
- Denial of humanity, demonization of group members.
- Comparison and connection to other groups with a negative connotation - for example, Nazis, Fascists, Arabs, Hilltop Youth.

To better understand the appearance of political delegitimization discourse, we will now present several illustrations from real-world examples. On March 6, 2021, MK Itamar Ben-Gvir published a Facebook post in which he “call to investigate Nitzan Horowitz [MK from the left party] on suspicion of betrayal against the State of Israel” (Ben-Gvir, 2021). In other case, MK Oren Hazan notes on his Facebook account that “the truth must be told, [the left-wingers] may be part of us, but they never stop destroying us from the inside” (Hazan, 2019). Another example for delegitimization discourse from the left towards the right came from MK Yair Golan, that posted on Facebook: “In order to satisfy the hatred of their supporters and to fuel the false theory of the [discrimination against the Mizrahi people], Berashi and Destiel [both KMs from the Likud] are willing to trample upon those who survived the Holocaust” (Golan, 2020).

In the second step, after the sample was extracted, three independent human coders received random samples from the annotated data (without seeing the expert's coding) and labeled them by themselves. The three coders achieved a statistically significant correlation of .91 ( $p < .001$ ), with high inter-coder reliability, as Cohen's Kappa of  $=.82$  represents 91.7 percent agreement between coders.

In the final step, we used the standard approach to automated text classification with supervised machine learning (SML) (Barberá et al., 2021; Gilardi et al., 2022). First, we split the annotated dataset into a training set (85%) and a small held-out test set comprising (15%). To train the model, we utilized transfer learning by fine-tuning the AlephBERT model, a BERT-architecture language model trained on a large corpus of

the Hebrew text. We incorporated positive weights into the training to give additional weight to the minority positive samples in the loss calculation. Our trained model reached an F1 score of 0.84 on the held-out test set.

Our main dependent variable final score is based on the probability that the specific sentence will be labeled as political delegitimization or not and ranges from 0 (no) to 1 (yes). To set a strict threshold, we determined that a sentence will be recognized as political delegitimization if the probability of its being recognized by the computer is higher than a probability of 0.95.

#### 4.2. Corpora

To measure political delegitimization, we focus on Israel as a case study, which offers a particularly fitting case study for my purposes. The political discourse in Israel is often defined as “polemical” or “forcible” to describe an aggressive discourse, which contains the presence of hurling insults at the opponent, blatantly challenging his authority and attacking his personality, or denying his right to speak (Perry, 2006; Orkibi, 2014). Although to the best of my knowledge, there is no comparative study on political discourse styles, Israel can be seen as an extreme case in the “polemical discourse scale”, and therefore we can expect to find political delegitimization discourse in the Israeli political arena.

Moreover, in the past four years, Israel held five elections. This environment offers another advantage to this particular research hence it allows us to examine the elections themselves are the only thing that was changed (and no other explanations that could arise if five election systems were held for over 15 years, on average).

To identify political delegitimization over time, we draw the data for this study from two sources: online mass media articles and politicians’ Facebook posts. The corpus examined in this study encompasses Hebrew texts exclusively, with the exclusion of any texts written in English or Arabic from the analysis.

#### *4.2.1 Mass Media Corpus*

The mass media corpus gathers documents published between 30 October 2018 and 06 November 2022, covering 38 different websites from the entire political spectrum. The news articles were gathered on a daily cadence, resulting in the accumulation of a total of 1,719,247 articles. The corpus includes the main news websites in Israel (namely Mako, Walla, and Ynet), as well as the online platforms of print newspapers (such as Israel Hayom and Ma'ariv). Additionally, it includes the websites of prominent television channels (such as channels 10, 12, 13, and 20), and websites that represent specific sectors (Channel 7, Kikar HaShabbat, and Srugim). Table A1 in the Appendix presents the average number of articles each website published on a given day over the full period along with the maximum and minimum number of articles.

#### *4.2.1 Social Media Corpus*

This corpus is based on politicians' social media posts on Facebook, created by candidates for the Israeli parliament (the Knesset) and incumbent members of the parliament (MKs). We compiled a list of the accounts of all incumbent MKs and viable candidates from all competing parties in Israel. To build this corpus, we relied on a rule of thumb, taking all elected candidates per party plus an additional 15% of the list (this includes only politicians that have a verified badge on their Facebook accounts).<sup>6</sup> Following each election, we downloaded all the posts from each of these accounts using the CrowdTangle Platform. This corpus duration is three and a half years, between 24 December 2018 to 30 April 2021, and does not contain the 2022 election. It covers two hundred politicians from twenty parties and contains a total number of 322,216 sentences. The number of posts for each candidate is summarized in Table A2 in the Appendix.

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<sup>6</sup> For more information about the verified badge on Facebook: [facebook.com/help/1288173394636262](https://facebook.com/help/1288173394636262)

## 5. Results

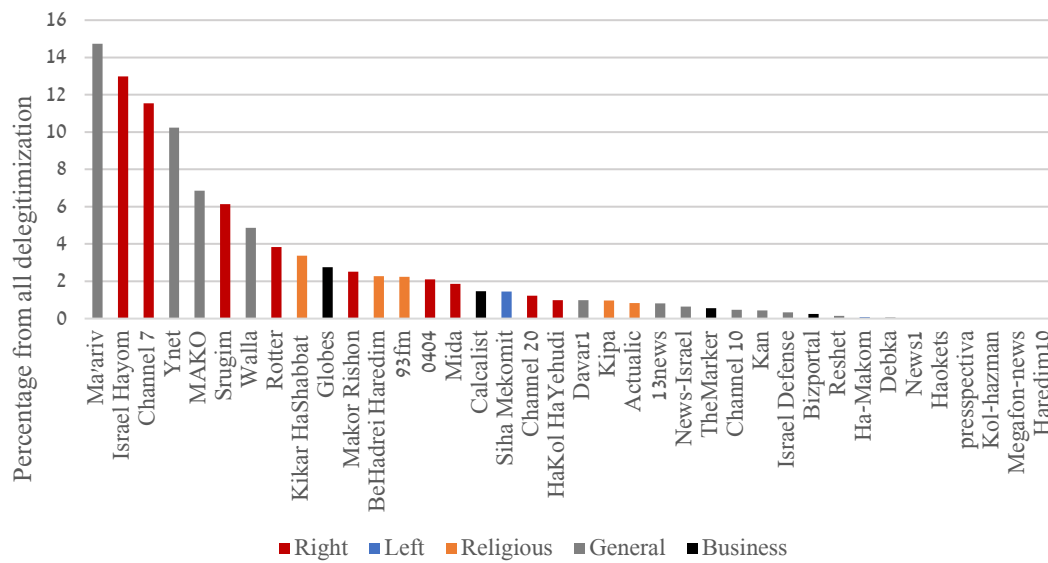
The key substantive question this paper wishes to answer is whether political delegitimization discourse appears in the political arena. And if so, to what extent and under which circumstances? To answer this, first, we describe the distribution of political delegitimization discourse over time for the two datasets. Second, we analyze the actors who operate this discourse both on social media and in mass media. Lastly, we examine the factors that enhance the prevalence of discursive political delegitimization, both systemically and individually, using logistic and Difference-in-Differences (DiD) regressions.

### 5.1. Mass Media Corpus

The analysis of the corpus of the mass media revealed that out of 35 million sentences published throughout the course of the investigation, only one percent of the sentences (365,842) were classified as political delegitimization. It is worth noting that this paper utilized a stringent criterion when determining a sentence as political delegitimization, with a threshold of probability above 0.95 of the sentences to be so classified. The aggregated summarized data for each website page is presented in detail in Table A3 in the Appendix.

As can be seen from Figure 1, it is evident that the dominant portion of the political delegitimization discourse manifested on websites categorized as general and right-wing in nature. This figure presents the variance of political delegitimization discourse across the diverse websites under examination. Ma'ariv, Israel Hayom, Channel 7, and Ynet emerge as the prominent sources generating political delegitimization discourse, accounting for 15%, 13%, 12%, and 10% respectively.

Figure 1: The Division of Political Delegitimization Discourse by Websites



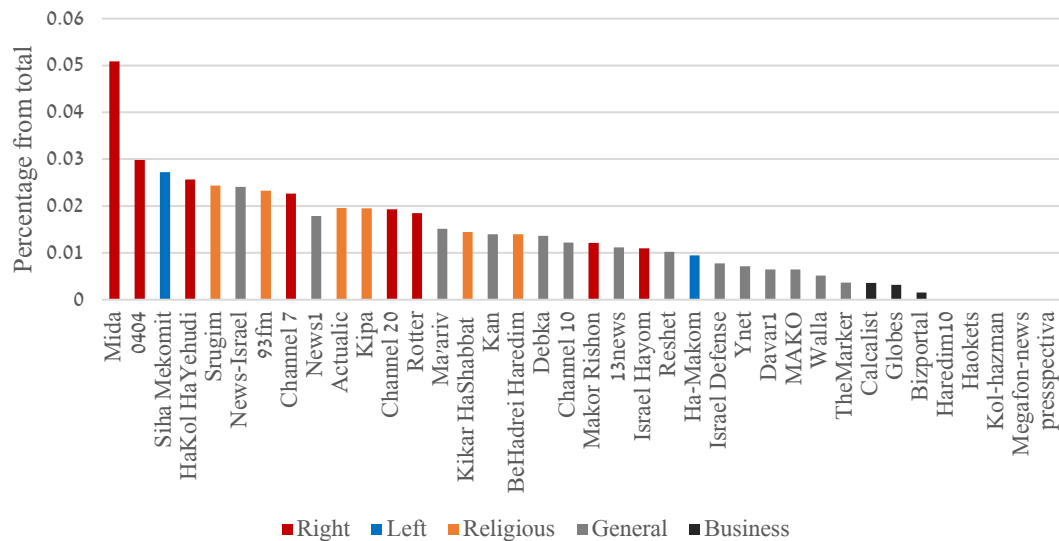
However, general websites also characterized by having the highest number of publications as well. Therefore, it is important to analyze the relative amount of political delegitimization discourse as a function of the total number of articles published on the website pages. It appears that the Mida website published the largest percentages of political delegitimization sentences when considering the total number of sentences published, with 5.1% of political delegitimization. Following him, 0404 with 3%, Siha Mekomit with 2.7%, and HaKol HaYehudi with 2.6% (see Figure 2).

When we look into the nature of sites, it is evident that the general and “neutral” websites are situated at the lower echelons of the ranking (examples of such include economy-focused websites like Globes, TheMarker, and Calcalist, alongside news websites approaching a diverse and extensive audience such as Ynet, MAKO, and Walla)<sup>7</sup> whereas those that exhibit a clear political stance, particularly right-wing and religious websites, are positioned prominently at the summit of the list (four out of the

<sup>7</sup> The newspapers that appear at the end of the list (Haredim10, Haokets, Kol-hazman, Megafon-news, and Presspectiva) are opinion sites, and published less than 500 articles throughout the examined period (including 0% of delegitimization).

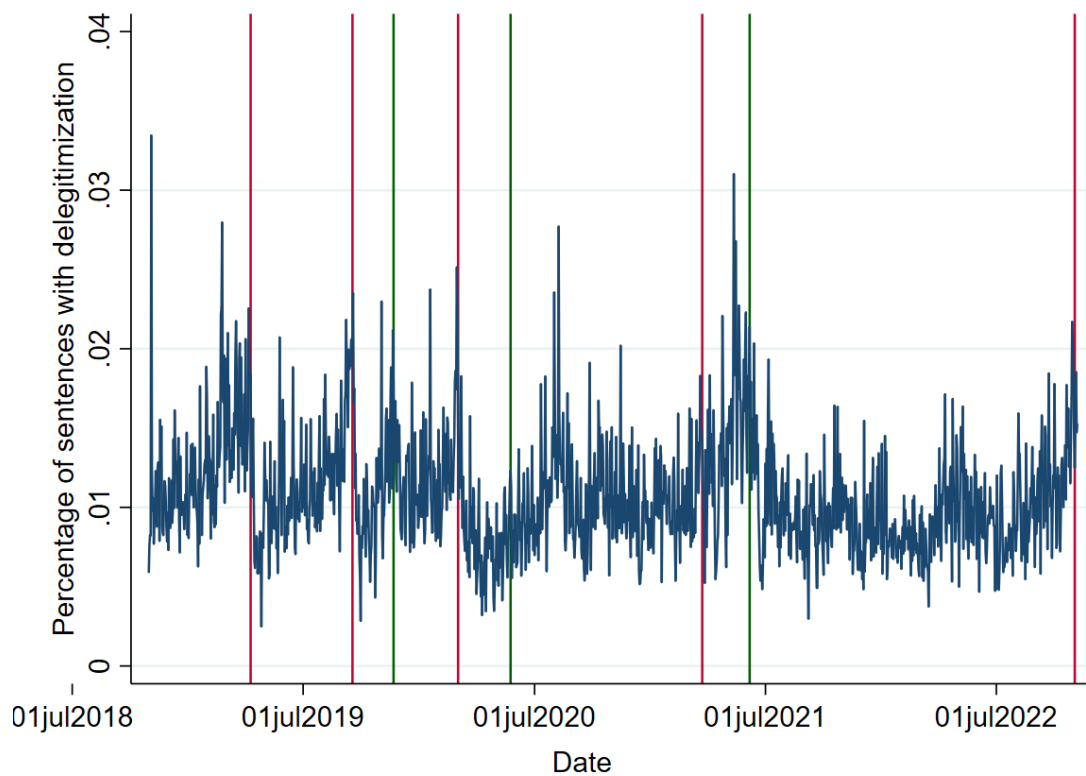
initial five positions in the table espousing a religious right-wing ideological stance: Mida, 0404, HaKol HaYehudi, and Srugim).

Figure 2: Percentages of Political Delegitimization from All Sentences Per Website



When examining the daily frequency of sentences that embody political delegitimization on mass-media websites throughout the investigation, several important findings arise. In Figure 3, the vertical red lines symbolize the five elections that were held in Israel, while the green lines denote PM Netanyahu's trial events. First, it appears that the patterns demonstrate a consistent ascending trend in the rate of political delegitimization percentages before each election and previous to Netanyahu's trial event, followed by a sharp decrease in the post- periods. Second, despite being accounted for as modest proportions of the overall discourse (ranging from 1% to 5%), this phenomenon's occurrences are nonetheless significant and have substantial magnitude within the discourse.

Figure 3: Mass-Media Daily Frequency of Sentences with Political Delegitimization,  
30 Oct 2018 – 06 Nov 2022

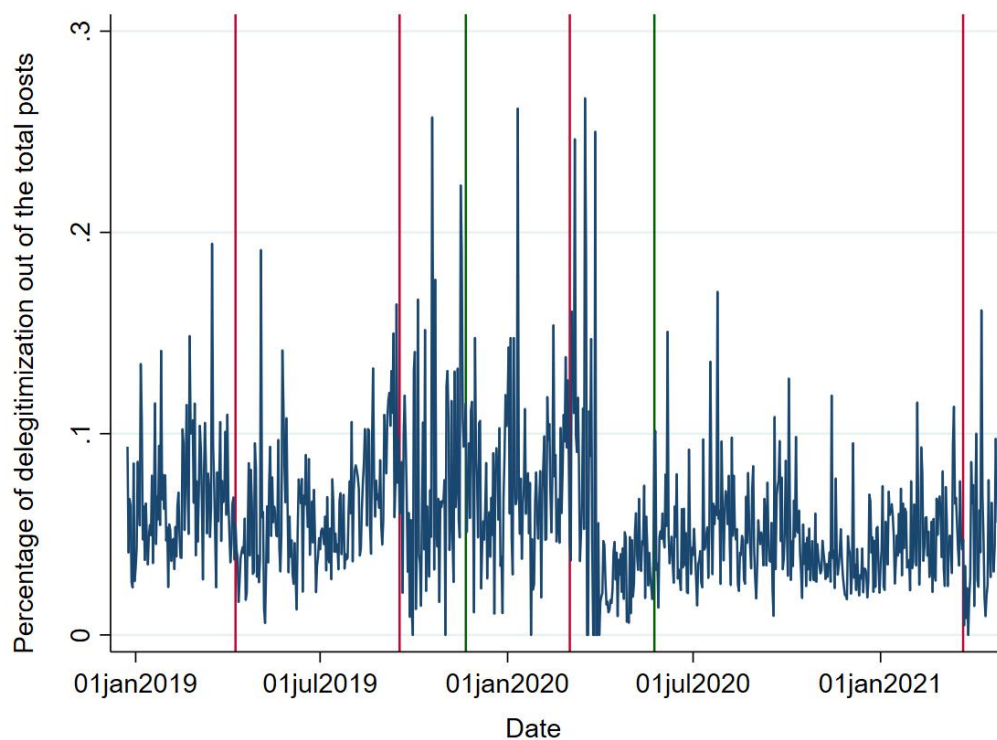


## 5.2. Facebook Corpus

When referring to the Facebook data,<sup>8</sup> the prevalence of political delegitimization rises to 5.28% (17,029 sentences were classified as political delegitimization out of 322,216 sentences published). However, similar patterns to those observed in the mass-media dataset are evident, with a rise in frequency preceding elections and Netanyahu's trial events, followed by a sharp decline in the subsequent period. The findings indicate in Figure 4 below depict the frequency distribution of the percentages of sentences containing political delegitimization across all sentences published each day.

<sup>8</sup> As noted in the method section, the duration of the Facebook dataset is a little bit shorter compared to the mass-media dataset and does not contain the last elections.

Figure 4: Daily Percentages of Sentences with Political Delegitimization on Facebook  
Political Accounts, 24 Dec 2018 – 30 Apr 2021



The utilization of the Facebook dataset enables the identification of the specific speakers who engage in political delegitimization, as well as their political affiliation. Figures 5 and 6 illustrate the small amount of the phenomenon across the entire political spectrum, as well as its higher prevalence among the left. ANOVA test ( $N=322,216$ ) indicates a significant effect [ $F(2, 322,213)=505.5, p=.000$ ] in the use of political delegitimization among the blocs. However, the effect is very weak ( $\eta^2=.003$ ).



Figure 5: Percentages of Political Delegitimization from the Total Discourse in Facebook Accounts, Divided into Political Blocs

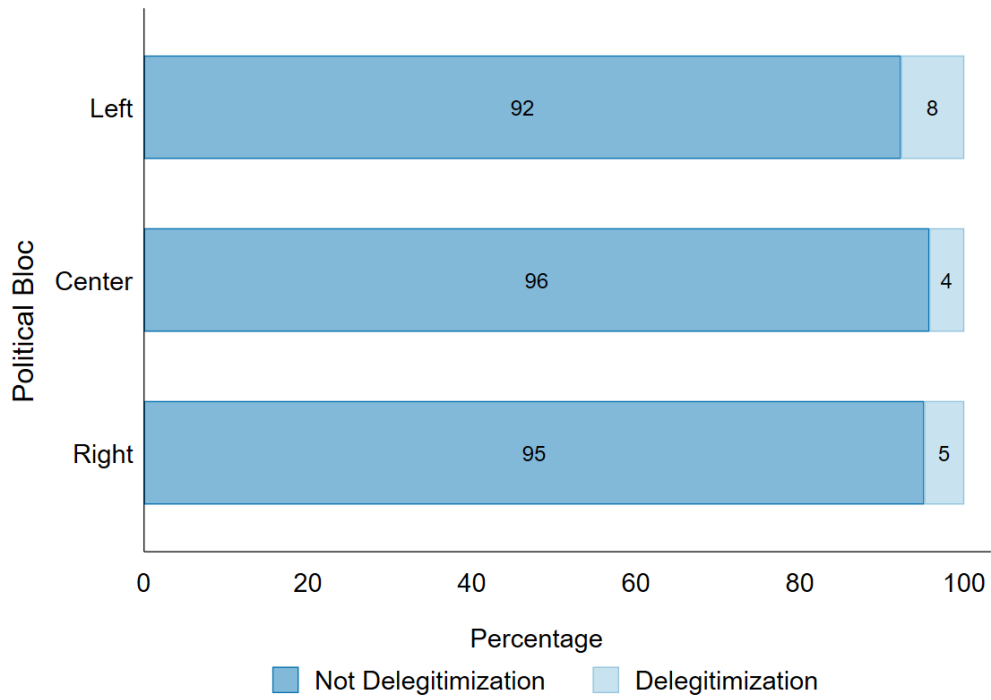
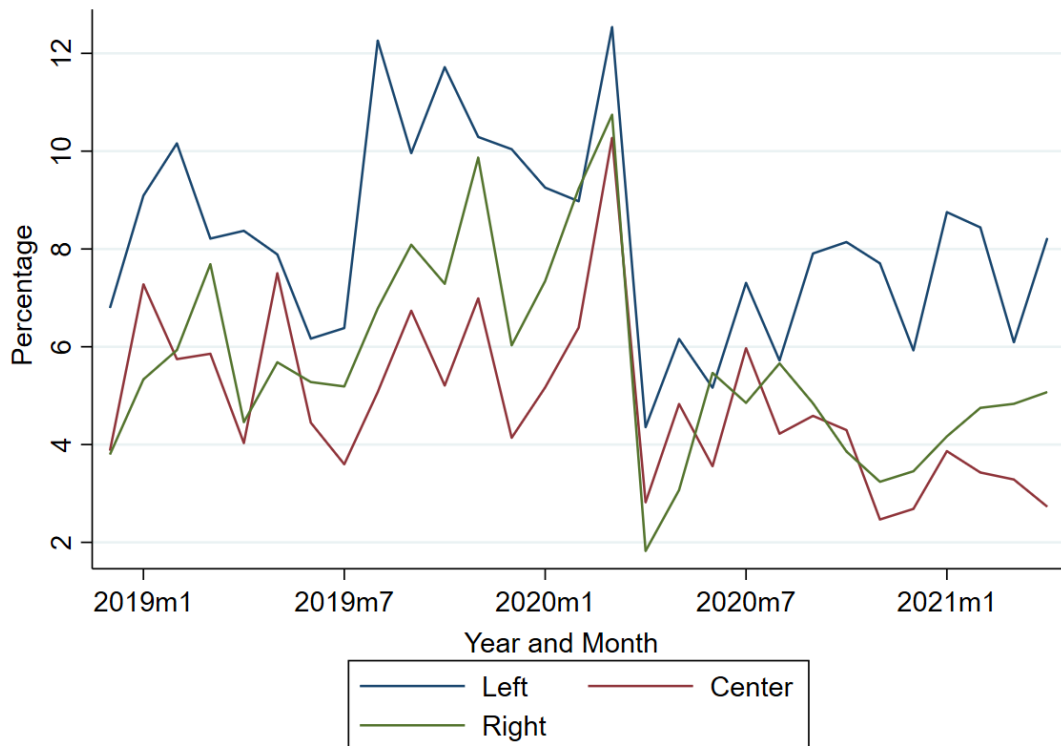
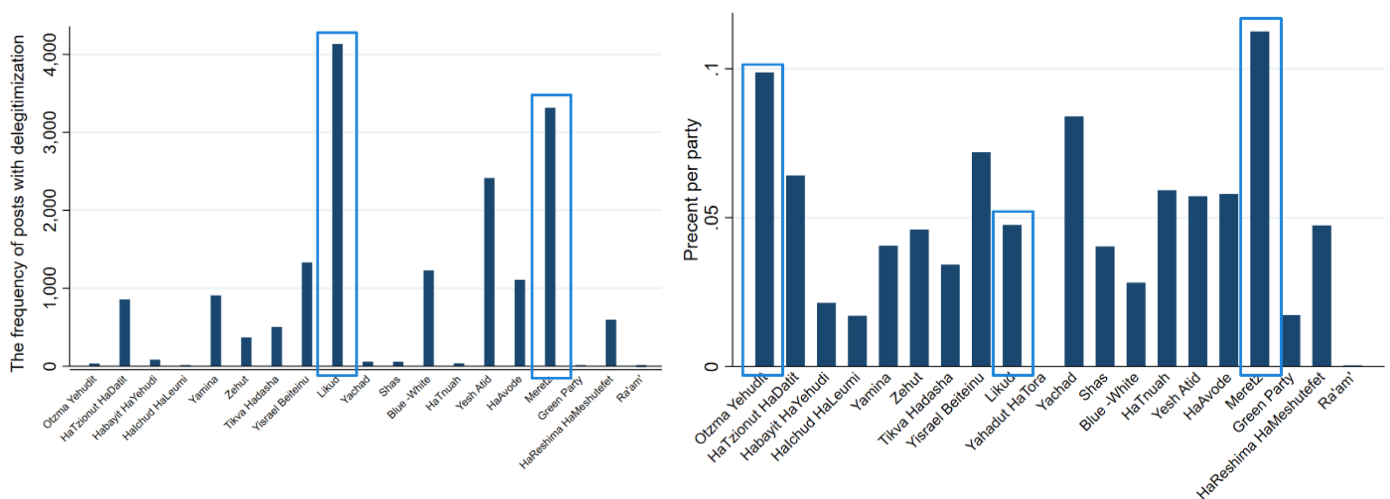


Figure 6: Monthly Average of Political Delegitimization Percentage by Blocks



However, an examination of the parties responsible for producing this discourse reveals a differentiation between the left and right factions: the discourse on the left is shaped by a marginal party (Meretz), whereas the discourse on the right is primarily molded by the largest political party, namely the Likud, that harnesses this form of discourse (see Figure 6). When contrasting the two panels, it becomes evident that certain parties manifest a constrained scope of discourse but demonstrate a notable degree of delegitimization. An example of this is exemplified in the case of the Otzma Yehudit party.

Figure 6: Posts with Political Delegitimization per Party (absolute numbers on the left panel and percentages on the right panel)



When analyzing the identity of the speaker, we are witnessing that the party's leaders produced political delegitimization at higher rates compared to non-leaders. Independent sample t-test ( $N=322,216$ ) indicates a statistically significant difference [ $t(137,218)=-14.3411$ ,  $p=.000$ ] between leaders (mean= .063) and non-leaders (mean= .050). These differences also appear in Table 1a below, which represents a crosstab between political delegitimization discourse and leaders. However, this trend is mostly driven by the parties (and parties' leaders) on the left, in which leaders produce higher levels of delegitimization compared to the other two blocs (see Table 1b).

Table 1a: Differences Between the Party's Leaders and Non-leaders

		Political Delegitimization		
		No	Yes	Total
Leader	No	225,216 (74%)	11,672 (69%)	236,888 (74%)
	Yes	79,971 (26%)	5,357 (31%)	85,328 (26%)
	Total	305,187 (100%)	17,029 (100%)	322,216 (100%)

Table 1b: Differences Between the Party's Leaders and Non-leaders, Divided by Political Bloc, Political Delegitimization Discourse Only

		Left	Bloc Center	Right	Total
Leader	No	2,987 (59%)	2,634 (72%)	6,051 (73%)	11,672 (69%)
	Yes	2,043 (41%)	1,039 (28%)	2,275 (27%)	5,357 (31%)
	Total	5,030 (100%)	3,673 (100%)	8,326 (100%)	17,029 (100%)

Table 2 presents the results of a logistic regression model with the dependent dichotomous variable distinguishing between sentences recognized as political delegitimization and sentences that are not. The independent variables include a dichotomous time variable (0 if it is the month before the election and 1 for the month after the election), a political bloc variable (1=left, 3=right), and a leader dichotomous variable. We find that all the variables have significant effects on the occurrence of political delegitimization.<sup>9</sup> The correlations presented in the table validate the preceding results. The data reveal a significant reduction of 30% in the likelihood of political delegitimization discourse occurring in the period subsequent to the election. Furthermore, an increase of 37% in the probability of such discourse is observed with regard to political party leaders.

<sup>9</sup> The present analysis contains only the observations that were obtained during a time window spanning one month preceding and one month succeeding each election.

Table 2: When Does Political Delegitimization Occur?

	Political Delegitimization
Time (1=after)	-0.304*** (0.035)
Political bloc	-0.092*** (0.019)
Leader (1=Yes)	0.370*** (0.033)
Constant	-2.499*** (0.049)
N	69,271
Standard errors in parentheses	
*** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05	

### 5.3. The Influence of the Joining the Coalition

Finally, I estimate a Difference-in-Differences (DiD) analysis to measure the effect of the coalition establishment following the third election (Netanyahu and Gantz coalition) on political delegitimization discourse amongst both coalition and opposition members. The equation employed for this purpose is as follows:

$$Y_{ist} = A_s + B_t + cX_{ist} + \beta I_{st} + \epsilon_{ist}$$

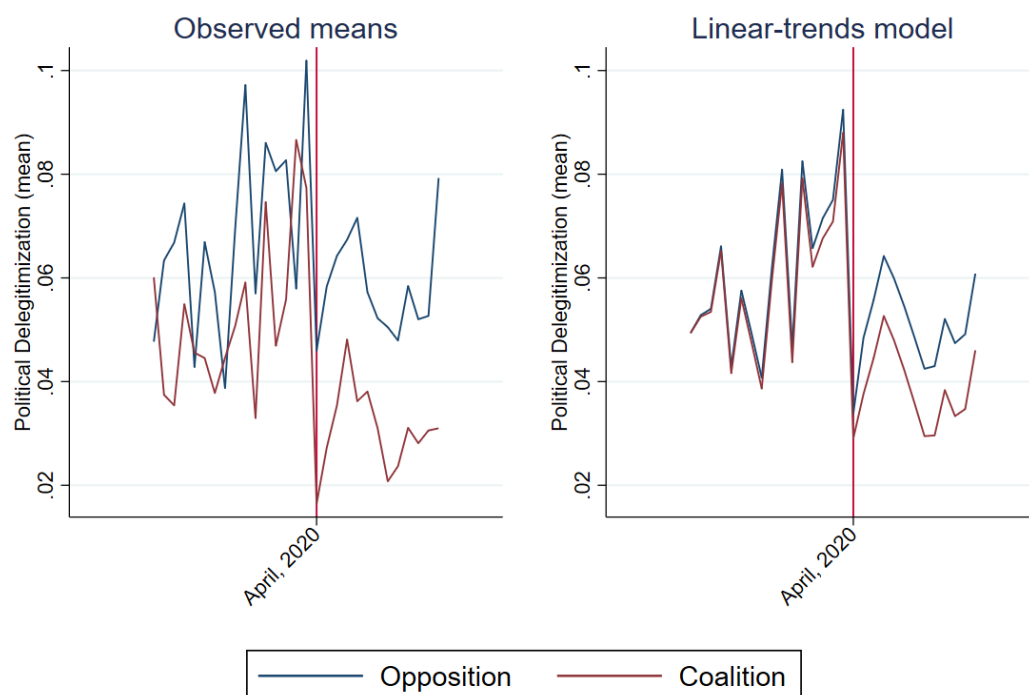
$Y_{ist}$  is the outcome of political delegitimization discourse for individual  $i$  in group  $s$  (whether coalition or opposition) by time  $t$  (measured in months) and  $I_{st}$  is a dummy for whether entering the coalition has affected group  $s$  at time  $t$ .  $A_s$  and  $B_t$  are fixed effects for individuals and months, respectively,  $X_{ist}$  are relevant individual controls, and  $\epsilon_{ist}$  is an error term.

The graphical diagnostics for parallel trends resulting from the DiD analysis are displayed in Figure 7, which illustrates the trend of the average political delegitimization discourse in both the coalition and opposition groups throughout the study period. The x-axis denotes the time period, whereas the y-axis represents the average political

delegitimization discourse per candidate. The treatment group (coalition) consists of the candidates that entered the coalition, while the control group (opposition) comprises candidates who did not receive the intervention.

As can be seen, the results of the DiD analysis indicate a noteworthy reduction in political delegitimization discourse among candidates who entered the coalition compared to those who did not, with an estimated treatment effect of 10% ( $p < 0.05$ ). It is important to note that the coalition which emerged in May 2020, commonly referred to as the “National Unity Government,” was comprised of parties spanning the entirety of Israel’s political spectrum. Within this coalition, the right-wing Likud party joined forces with other right-leaning parties such as the Jewish Home, and partnered with center-left parties such as Blue and White and the Labor, to establish a broad unity government. Correspondingly, the opposition was also composed of parties from the three political blocs. This suggests that the decline in political delegitimization discourse was influenced not by the political standpoint per se, but rather a result of the mere act of joining the coalition.

Figure 7: Difference-in-Differences (DiD) analysis of entering the coalition effect on political delegitimization discourse, Dec 2018-Apr 2021



## 6. Discussion

This paper aimed to investigate the manifestations and dynamics of delegitimization discourse within the political sphere. By analyzing a large corpus of Hebrew-language mass-media articles and politicians' social media posts using a novel computational algorithm, the study identified and measured instances of political delegitimization within the political discourse. The findings provide valuable insights into the presence and patterns of this discourse, highlighting its prevalence, distribution, and key actors involved.

The analysis of politicians' Facebook posts and mass-media articles revealed that political delegitimization discourse constituted a relatively small proportion of the overall discourse, accounting for only six percent of the sentences published during the study period. This suggests that while political delegitimization exists within the Israeli political discourse, its occurrence is relatively limited. However, it is important to note that the study employed a stringent criterion for identifying political delegitimization, with a threshold probability above 0.95 for classification. This conservative approach ensures the accuracy and reliability of the results.

The temporal analysis revealed interesting patterns in the occurrence of political delegitimization discourse. The discourse exhibited an increase preceding election periods and events related to Prime Minister Netanyahu's trial events, followed by a subsequent decline. This suggests that political delegitimization discourse is strategically employed during politically charged times, potentially as a means to sway public opinion or undermine opponents. Party leaders were found to be more likely to engage in political delegitimization discourse, indicating their influential role in shaping and perpetuating such rhetoric.

The results also shed light on the factors that contribute to the prevalence of political delegitimization discourse. The findings derived from the Difference-in-Differences (DiD) analysis suggest that the reduction in political delegitimization discourse was not primarily driven by political ideology, but rather by the mere act of

joining the coalition. This may imply that in the national-unity government, the pursuit of political power and participation in the ruling coalition may moderate the use of delegitimization rhetoric, as parties aim to maintain stability and legitimacy within the political system. Further study should be employed to justify this suggestion.

The findings of this study contribute to the broader understanding of discursive delegitimization within the political sphere. By employing a computational text analysis approach, the study offers a novel methodological framework for identifying and measuring a discourse category that is relatively rare. This substantiates the existence of political delegitimization within the Israeli political discourse and highlights its potential ramifications for politics and society.

The major limitation of this study is its scope, which is confined to the Israeli context solely. While Israel is akin to other advanced developed democratic countries, the generalizability of these results to other cases may be circumscribed. Thus, additional work should be done to evaluate the existence of this phenomenon in other settings, including a cross-national examination.

The present study lays the groundwork for future investigations into the consequences of political delegitimization in society, and its different effects compared to other types of delegitimization discourses. A thorough empirical analysis is needed to examine the intercorrelations between these discourses and their varied outcomes. A possible conjecture is that when a delegitimization discourse targets social identities that possess rigid boundaries, it has the potential to stimulate cohesiveness and solidarity among members of the group. In contrast, when a discourse of political delegitimization is employed, it could result in the suppression and repression of the identity in question.

The identification and analysis of political delegitimization discourse have important implications for democratic debate. Notwithstanding the relatively limited context of this study, the existence of this discourse in the political sphere may pose a severe challenge to established democracies, as well as non-democratic regimes. It may impede and restrict democratic deliberation by excluding certain political identities from

the legitimate boundaries of society and promoting the deconstruction of political identity. Delegitimization undermines the fundamental principles of democratic systems, such as free speech and equal rights, by targeting political groups or actors and seeking to generate negative feelings toward them. Such processes may ultimately result in the eradication of certain ideas from the democratic discourse and the prevention of any ideological dissent. This means the end of the pluralistic discourse, which is an absolute necessity for a functional democracy.



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