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# Political activism and wellbeing among older adults in Israel

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## ABSTRACT

**Background and Objectives:** The aging process is characterized by encountering challenging situations and losses that may influence the subjective wellbeing of older adults. This study investigates the influence of the political-social crisis that unfolded in Israel in 2023 on the wellbeing of senior citizens. Additionally, it explores whether their participation in protests has contributed to their wellbeing.

**Research Design and Methods:** We conducted interviews with 30 older adults who were actively engaged in the protest movement against the judicial overhaul. Our sampling approach was designed to encompass a diverse range of factors, including various age groups beyond 65 years, prior involvement in protest activities, geographical distribution, religious involvement, professional backgrounds, and differing political viewpoints.

**Results:** Thematic analysis of the interviews revealed three key findings: (1) The participants reported feeling fear and anxiety due to the conflict, leading to a decrease in their wellbeing. (2) Participating in protests uplifted their spirits and provided social support, resulting in improved emotional and social wellbeing. (3) When asked about their perception of the crisis in the future, the participants expressed mixed views: Some were cautiously optimistic and others profoundly pessimistic, while the sentiments of some participants fluctuated.

**Discussion and Implications:** This qualitative study indicates the negative impact of political-social crisis on older adults' wellbeing, as well as the limited contribution of political activism to its improvement. Equally important, the research highlights the need for stakeholders in aging and gerontology to prioritize promoting older adults' mental health regularly and during political crises.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

Activism; ageism; older adults; politics; wellbeing

## Introduction

In December 2022, the 37th government of the State of Israel was formed. Immediately upon its establishment (in January 2023), the elected officials began promoting a 'judicial reform' or overhaul, claiming that these changes will be instrumental in shaping the legal system, will ensure the fair administration of justice, will uphold the rule of law and will be necessary to confirm the government's ability to govern effectively (Gupta & Raj, 2023). Concurrently, opponents of the overhaul launched a widespread political protest, alleging that it actually constitutes a 'coup' aimed at centralizing all governmental power in the hands of the executive branch and diminishing the authority of the judiciary (Roznai et al., 2023). This political-social conflict has been defined by Israeli researchers as a 'national crisis' (Ginzburg et al., 2023). Although citizens of all ages are emotionally affected by the national crisis (Efrati, 2023; Ginzburg et al., 2023), this study specifically focuses on the wellbeing of the older adult population, a group that has been identified as dominant, influential, and deeply involved in the current protest (Authors, 2023; Israeli Democracy Institute, 2023). We believe that it is important to examine the impact of the conflict and protest specifically on the wellbeing of older adults because they are considered a particularly vulnerable group in terms of mental distress (Lai et al., 2022). Concerns about the severe impact on their wellbeing stem from the depth of the political-social conflict in which the State of Israel is immersed (Ginzburg et al., 2023), as well as from

physiological, psychological, and social losses associated with age that may make them more susceptible (Lifshitz et al., 2023).

Like many other older Israelis, the 30 individuals interviewed for this study chose to be involved in the protest demonstrations against the judicial overhaul for the sake of democracy in Israel. Focusing on this population has enabled us to examine both the extent of the impact of this conflict on their wellbeing and the extent of the impact of their involvement in the protest as a strategy for improving their wellbeing in a time of crisis.

## Wellbeing in old age

Wellbeing is a complex concept that encompasses various dimensions and constructs. Definitions and measurements of wellbeing can vary, but they generally include objective aspects like quality of life and depressive symptoms, as well as subjective elements such as life satisfaction (Lee et al., 2019; Lifshitz et al., 2023; Poon & Cohen-Mansfield, 2011). Researchers have identified coping resources that contribute to wellbeing. These may include personality traits, emotions, and social support, which help individuals effectively manage stressors (Galana et al., 2020; Ryan & Deci, 2001). Coping involves both cognitive and behavioral efforts to deal with demands that exceed one's available resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The Conservation of Resource Theory highlights the role of resource loss in experiences of stress (Hobfoll & Wells, 1998;

Jopp & Lampraki, 2018). The study of wellbeing in older age is particularly important because of the increasing proportion of older adults in the population. With longer life expectancy and declining birth rates, there is a growing number of older individuals facing challenges such as retirement, spousal loss, declining health, and social isolation (Lee et al., 2019; Lifshitz et al., 2023; Piumatti et al., 2018). Understanding how older adults cope with these stressors is crucial for promoting their wellbeing.

### **Governance types and wellbeing**

Numerous studies have explored the impact of governance type on citizen wellbeing, with a focus on the relationship between democratic governance and health indicators. Franco et al. (2004) found a significant association between freedom provided by democratic governments and public health outcomes. Dorn et al. (2007) linked democratic governance to citizens' happiness, especially in countries with established democratic traditions. Helliwell and Huang (2008) discovered a complex relationship between life satisfaction and governance type, influenced by economic conditions. Orviska et al. (2014) demonstrated governance type's nuanced influence on wellbeing at national and regional levels. Studies also highlight the negative impact of dictatorial regimes on population health, including civil society suppression and limited access to healthcare (Mann et al., 1999; Rechel & McKee, 2007). Recently, Gerring and colleagues (2021) have argued that democratic processes and the social conditions associated with them result in improved wellbeing, because in democratic countries, citizens are better able to organize and make demands. In general, the above studies agree that governance's emphasis on freedom, social capital, and human rights positively affects wellbeing, while dictatorial governance poses mental health risks. These findings have relevance to the current protest movement in Israel, where concerns about legal reforms and democracy's future may have implications for citizens' mental health.

### **Political activism**

Citizens' participation in politics is vital for a democratic state. Democratic regimes generally see higher political engagement due to less fear of repression and an encouraging environment (Mohd & Grasso, 2020). Political involvement is multifaceted, encompassing conventional (e.g. voting and party membership) and unconventional activities (e.g. demonstrations and protests) (Teorell et al., 2007). Factors influencing political participation include education, professional status, political interest, and satisfaction with democracy (Norris, 2002; Quintelier, 2007). Dissatisfaction with democracy may either reduce or increase political participation, challenging the conventional/unconventional distinction (Mohd & Grasso, 2020).

### **Political activism and the wellbeing of older adults**

Research on the involvement of older adults in extra-parliamentary actions, campaigns, and direct democracy is limited, despite its increasing prevalence (Fox & Quinn, 2012). The motivations, experiences, and rewards of such participation from the older adults' perspective have not been extensively studied (Serrat et al., 2023). The existing research on older adults' unique

motivations for political participation suggests several factors. Some older adults view political activism as a means of adapting to retirement successfully, requiring creativity and a desire to set an example for future generations (Adler & Goggin, 2005; Hardill & Baines, 2009). Others are motivated by a sense of disillusionment with the mainstream political process or solidarity with a perceived disadvantaged group (Klandermans, 1997; Postle et al., 2005). Additionally, some older adults participate in politics in order to utilize their experience, skills, and knowledge for the community and social transformation (Narushima, 2004). Limited research has been conducted on the rewards older adults derive from political participation. However, existing studies indicate that political activism holds significant meaning for older adults, empowering them and enhancing their self-efficacy (Hutchinson & Wexler, 2007). Older women participating in social activism reported benefits such as self-care, a sense of purpose or value in life, self-confidence, and personal control over their social and personal environment (Hutchinson & Wexler, 2007). Despite the potential risks and challenges, engaging in political and social activism has been shown to enhance older adults' physical and mental health, occupational functioning, and life satisfaction (Fox & Quinn, 2012).

### **The current study**

In this study, we aimed to examine the impact of politics on wellbeing in old age through a specific case study that examines the influence of a political crisis on older Israelis in 2023. We believe this perspective to be important in light of the vulnerabilities that older adults face in times of crisis (Lai et al., 2022), as well as the dominance of politics in the lives of citizens in Israel (Israeli Democracy Institute, 2023) and worldwide (Brannen et al., 2020). Unlike previous studies in the field, this research is based on a qualitative approach that aims to reap a deep understanding of the experiences of older adults during periods of political or social upheaval. Furthermore, the study is based on the belief that individuals of all ages may exercise resistance in situations of disruption and challenges, including times of conflict and crisis (Eggerman & Panter-Brick, 2010). More specifically, we seek to examine whether and how political activism contributes to the resilience and wellbeing of older adults in times of crisis. Therefore, the study will focus on two central questions:

1. How does the political crisis affect the wellbeing of older adults in Israel?
2. How does their participation in political activism contribute to the improvement or deterioration of their wellbeing during this period?

## **Methods**

### **The current sample**

For this study, we interviewed 30 older citizens (ranging from 65 to 91) residing in Israel who belonged to the group opposing the current government and the judicial overhaul. The average age of the interviewees was 72, and they were diverse in terms of gender (17 women and 13 men). As summarized in the sample characteristics (Table 1), we aimed to maximize diversity in

**Table 1.** Respondents demographic data ( $n = 30$ ; 17 women, 13 men).

Interviewee number	Gender	Age	Number of children	Number of grandchildren and great-grandchild	Family status	Religious status	Economic status	Education	Profession	Employment status	Residential area	Political agenda	Past involvement in protests	Current protest group	Degrees of involvement of this protest movement
1.	Women	70	4	7	Married	I don't define myself	Very good	Academic	Fundraising	Pensioner	North	I don't define myself	No	Grandmothers for democracy. Municipal-general protest (in her city)	Leader of protest group
2.	Women	66	4	5	Married	National religious	Good	Academic	Teacher	Pensioner	Center	Center	No	The protest of the national religious sector regional-general protest (near her city)	Very involved in the protest
3.	Women	79	4	8	Married	Secular	Average	Academic	Teacher	Pensioner	Center	Center-left	Started participating in political protests 3 years ago	The grandmothers' protest Municipal-general protest (near her city)	Very involved in the protest
4.	Women	75	3	1	Married	Secular	Good	Academic	Biology teacher	Works partially	South	Left	Participated in a few demonstrations in her youth	The main protest on Kalpan Street (Tel-Aviv)	Very involved in the protest
5.	Women	66	5	4	Married	National religious	Good	Academic	Optics	Works partially	Center	Center	No	The protest of the national religious sector regional-general protest (near her city)	Very involved in the protest
6.	women	65	1	0	Married	Secular	Good	Academic	Occupational Therapy	Pensioner	North	Center	No	Municipal-general protest (in her city)	Very involved in the protest
7.	Women	71	3	3	Married	Secular	Good	Academic	Education	Volunteer	North	Center	No	Municipal-general protest (in the north)	Very involved in the protest
8.	Women	70	2	0	Divorced	Secular	Very good	Academic	Lawyer	Pensioner	Center	Left	Started participating in political protests 3 years ago	The grandmothers' protest. The main protest on Kalpan Street (Tel-Aviv)	leader of protest group
9.	Women	76	3	8+1	Divorced	Secular	Very good	Academic	Lawyer	Pensioner	South	Left	She has already participated in political protests	The grandmothers' protest The women's protest	Very involved in the protest
10.	Women	70	2	6	Married	Secular	Good	Academic	Nanny	Pensioner	North	Center	No	The main protest on Kalpan Street (Tel-Aviv) The grandmothers' protest	Very involved in the protest
11.	Women	69	4	13	Married	National religious	Good	Academic	Academic advisor	Pensioner	North	Center	She has already participated in political protests	Municipal-general protest (in the north) Municipal-general protests (in the north)	Very involved in the protest
12.	Women	76	3	Married	Married	National religious	Average	Academic	Rabbi and educator	Works partially	South	Left	Activist, with extensive experience in political protests	Israeli-occupied territories Municipal-general protests (in the south) The main protest on Kalpan Street (Tel-Aviv)	leader of protest group

*(Continued)*

Table 1. Continued.

Interviewee number	Gender	Age	Number of children	Number of grandchildren and great grandchild	Family status	Religious status	Economic status	Education	Profession	Employment status	Residential area	Political agenda	Past involvement in protests	Current protest group	Degrees of involvement of this protest movement
13.	Women	66	2	0	Divorced	Secular	Very good	Academic	English teacher	Works partially	Center	Left	Activist, with extensive experience in political protests	Israeli-occupied territories	leader of protest group
14.	Women	71	?	?	Married	Secular	Very good	Academic	Academic secretary	Works partially	Center	Center-left	Participated in an economic protest in 2011	The main protest on Kalpan Street (Tel-Aviv)	Very involved in the protest
15.	Women	91	?	?	Widow	National religious	Good	Academic	Clinical psychology	Pensioner	Center	Left	Participated in demonstrations in her youth in the USA	Municipal-general protests (in her city)	Very involved in the protest
16.	Women	69	3	13	Married	National religious	Very good	Academic	Researcher	Pensioner	Center	Center	No	Municipal-general protests (in her city)	Very involved in the protest
17.	Women	72	3	2	Married	Secular	Good	Academic	Computing	Pensioner	Center	Left	Started participating in political protests 3 years ago	Municipal-general protests (near her city)	Very involved in the protest
18.	Men	72	4	8	Divorced	Secular	Good	Academic	Jewish National Fund, JNF	Works partially	South	Center	Started participating in political protests 3 years ago	The Fighters of 1973 For Democracy	Very involved in the protest
19.	Men	72	4	6	Married	Secular	Very good	Academic	Architect Ministry of the Environment	Works partially	North	Center	No	Municipal-general protests (in the south)	Very involved in the protest
20.	Men	84			Married	Secular	Very good	Academic	Israel Aerospace Industries, IAI	Pensioner	Center	Center-left	No	Municipal-general protests (in the north)	Very involved in the protest
21.	Men	65	4	0	Married	Secular	Average	Academic	Hi-Tech	Working full time	Center	Left	Started participating in political protests 3 years ago	"Brothers in Arms" protest	Very involved in the protest
22.	men	78	4	6	Married	Secular	Very good	Academic	Agriculture	Pensioner	South	Center	Activist, active Started participating in political protests 3 years ago	The protest of the reservists	Very involved in the protest
23.	Men	70			Married	Secular		Academic	A senior commander in the IDF	Pensioner	Center	Left	No	The "Paratroopers for Democracy" protest	Very involved in the protest
24.	Men	68	2	4	Married	Secular		Academic	Pilot	Works partially	Center	Left	Activist, started participating in political protests in 2016	protest "no way" The protest of the reservists	leader of protest group
25.	Men	73	5	25	Married	Secular	Very good	Academic	Farmer	Pensioner-volunteer	South	Right	Started participating in political protests 3 years ago	Goes between protests The pilots' protest The main protest on Kalpan Street (Tel-Aviv)	Very involved in the protest
26.	Men	88	2	9+2	Married	National religious	Good	Academic	International Bank	Pensioner	Center	Left	No	National religious protest for democracy	Very involved in the protest
27.	Men	85	4	10+2	Married	Secular	Very good	Academic	Physicist	Pensioner	Omer	Left	activist, active for many years in the protest	Israeli-occupied territories The main protest on Kalpan Street (Tel-Aviv)	Very involved in the protest

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Interviewee number	Gender	Age	Number of children	Number of grandchildren and great grandchild	Family status	Religious status	Economic status	Education	Profession	Employment status	Residential area	Political agenda	Past involvement in protests	Current protest group	Degrees of involvement of this protest movement
28.	Men	66	3	13	Married	Secular	Very good	Academic	Social Worker	Works partially	Center	Center	Activist, active for many years in the protest	Municipal-general protests (in his city) The protest of the reservists (IDF)	Very involved in the protest
29.	Men	74	2	1	Married	Secular	Very good	Academic	Farmer/Driver	Pensioner	North	Center	Few demonstrations in the past	Municipal-general protests (in his city)	Very involved in the protest
30.	Men	76	5	18	Married	Secular	Average	Academic	Academic director	Works part time	Center	Center	Few demonstrations in the past	National religious protest for democracy	Very involved in the protest

terms of age, past experience in protests, geographical location, profession, religious involvement, and political views. Additionally, six interviewees were prominent leaders of the protest movement, while the rest participated in the protest to varying degrees of involvement.

### Data collection and analysis

After receiving approval from the ethics committee of the academic institution to which the researchers belong, we started the process of recruiting the sample. We used several ways to recruit individuals aged 65 and above, who identified themselves as active and involved in the current protest: At first, we reached out to people we knew and asked for their help in identifying older adults who were interested in participating in the research. Additionally, we disseminated information about the study in various WhatsApp groups, inviting older adults to take part. Another method involved locating older adults on social networks, primarily Facebook. Through their profiles and posts, we identified individuals suitable for the study. Two participants were identified during our participation in demonstrations; we contacted them at the event and recruited them for the study. Some older adults who participated in interviews also recommended others, turning the sample into a snowball sample. However, we maintained our criteria: over the age of 65 and actively participating in the protests. In addition, we aimed for maximum variations and therefore, selected individuals to ensure diversity as outlined above.

The interviews were conducted between March and April 2023, either *via* telephone or online (using Zoom) and lasted between 45 and 90 min. All the interviews were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriber. Both authors read the individual interview transcripts in-depth. Each researcher conducted a thematic analysis separately (Clarke et al., 2015) in order to identify the main components, expressions, and aspects that emerged from the interviews. After a joint discussion between the researchers regarding the main aspects emerging from the interviews, they noted and documented recurring themes in both analyzes and proceeded to a joint analysis. The joint coding included categorizing and filtering all the data into theoretical and interpretive categories, identifying and selecting relevant quotes for each category or theme, and ultimately formulating the main findings of the research.

Three methods were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings (Shenton, 2004). Firstly, in addition to personal interviews, the authors followed the online activities of the interviewees on social networks, including posts they wrote or shared. This was done only if approved by the interviewees. Some participants even chose to send the authors posts and photos related to the research topic. This method was intended both for triangulation and for locating important quotes. Secondly, as both authors were actively involved in the protests, they also relied on field observations to confirm or challenge thematic analysis. The observations were used for the initial identification of the research topic and its importance, since the authors recognized in the demonstrations the dominant involvement of older adults. The observations also helped to identify participants for the study. The authors made sure not to interview people they personally new in order to minimize bias. In addition, they carefully discussed their views in order to reduce possible bias. Last, the authors provided a detailed description of quotes and findings to confirm their interpretation (Denham & Onwuegbuzie, 2013).

## Results

Based on thematic analysis of in-depth interviews with 30 older Israelis who participated in the protests against the judicial overhaul in Israel, three key findings emerged: (1) The participants reported feeling fear and anxiety due to the conflict, leading to a decrease in their wellbeing. (2) Participating in protests uplifted their spirits and provided social support, resulting in improved emotional and social wellbeing. (3) When asked about their perception of the crisis in the future, the participants expressed mixed views: Some were cautiously optimistic and others profoundly pessimistic, while the sentiments of some participants fluctuated. These findings, which are detailed below, provide a comprehensive answer to the two central questions of this research, in terms of how older adults perceive the negative influence of the political crisis in Israel on their subjective wellbeing and the partial effectiveness of their involvement in protests as a means of improving their wellbeing.

### Finding 1: 'I feel fear and anxiety'

All the older adults reported that the political-social conflict in Israel significantly impacts their mental wellbeing, and described these difficult emotions as a central motivator that led them to actively participate in protests. This finding was based on the fact that, during the interviews, the participants repeatedly mentioned terms such as pain, frustration, despair, depression, suffering, stress, anger, wrath, disappointment, sleep disturbance, its 'deeply upsetting' (#23, man, 70 years-old), 'fear of an approaching disaster' (#7, woman, 71 years-old) and expressed a sense of 'a burning house' (#2, woman, 66 years-old). #17 (woman, 72 years-old), for example, explained it as follows:

It [the political situation] meets my inner place... I wake up with it and go to sleep with it... It has an impact on my whole life; I fear and dread the situation... the current situation in the country is shaking the mood and functioning of so many people.

#20 (man, 84 years-old) even referred to the political crisis as a reality that impairs the ability and desire to live:

I am very disturbed... I feel that my country is being destroyed. Before, the country was as I was used to and as I was educated, and now it is increasingly becoming something I cannot live with.

#11 (woman, 69 years-old) expressed the severity of the situation in a similar way: 'The situation in the country is simply killing me... It's strikes to the depth of my soul, really... and the current situation is killing me... I can't sleep at night.'

An example that illustrates the severity of the impact of the political crisis on the physical and mental wellbeing is #9 (woman, 76 years-old) statements:

In recent months, I have been getting very angry, very, very angry. I feel [like I'm] in a war, a war on my life. I feel it very strongly, and it's getting worse from moment to moment. I get angry, wow, wow. It's really endangering my heart.

It is evident that the impact on the older adults' mental wellbeing also stems from their concern about the influence of the political conflict on their families, and especially their children and grandchildren. #22 (man, 78 years-old) explained this as follows:

Each one of us is also concerned about the fate of his children and grandchildren. We are disturbed when we see the younger

generation. This generation is confused; they don't know their way, they don't know where it's heading, they are looking for their way out of the country...

Similarly, #24 (man, 68 years-old) explained it as follows:

...we worry about our grandchildren. My thought is, where will my granddaughters grow up? In the end, it's beyond the national matters. In the end, that's the bottom line, not us.

### Finding 2: 'Moments of hope'

All the participants reported the significant, positive contribution of their involvement in protests and demonstrations to their wellbeing. This was observed in two main dimensions: *contribution to their mental wellbeing* and *contribution to their social wellbeing*.

#### Contribution to mental wellbeing

All the interviewees reported that their involvement in protests encourages them, provides a sense of security, uplifts their spirits, gives them meaning, empowers them, and brings them moments of hope and optimism. Many of the older participants mentioned this psychological contribution. For example, #3 (woman, 79 years-old) explained that, despite her difficult feelings about the political and social situation in Israel, participating in protests generates hope for her. In her words:

Look, it hurts me a lot, the internal pain within us, the difficult struggle, the hatred, the severing of friendships... but the protest ignites a spark of hope in me.

Another psychological contribution that emerged in the interviews relates to the consistency and perseverance of the ongoing protests. #30 (man, 76 years-old), for example, argued that what encourages him is seeing that the protest is ongoing, or in his words: 'I'm glad to see that the protest is still alive and kicking.'

Additional evidence of the psychological contribution of the protests comes from 26# (man, 66 years-old) words:

...When I attend protests, I receive encouragement and inspiration. There is an incredible positive energy in protests that is dedicated to preserving democracy. I am still afraid of the reform, but when I attend protests, I gain strength. In the protest, there is an overwhelming determination, and I am so excited, so scared, and so excited.

#### Contribution to social wellbeing

In addition to contributing to their mental wellbeing, the interviewees referred to participation in protests as a social focal point that provides support. #19 (man, 72 years-old), for instance, explained it:

Participation in the protest encourages us. The power of unity strengthens us. We arrive at the protests with at least 10–15 people each time, and then everyone gathers, turning it into an extraordinary social club. Anyone looking for a sense of belonging joins us... It's a gathering that gives people a lot of strength.

It is evident from the interviews that the WhatsApp groups established during the protest had a great social contribution, as explained by #24 (man, 68 years-old):

There is an infinite flow of information in this network; people write in an insane manner. You can't keep up with everything that goes

on there every day because otherwise, you won't do anything else. What's good is that there's a lot of reinforcement and mutual encouragement within the group, many initiatives for activities are born there.

Many interviewees emphasized that the social benefit derived from involvement in protests stems from a sense of social solidarity with like-minded individuals, as #9 (woman, 76 years-old) describes:

In demonstrations, I'm happy to discover that there are other people I can live with. Once I joined to a protest group from Tel Aviv University...it made me feel good to be with them.....The word that comes to mind is a sense of relief...But it's not a spa...

While some interviewees chose to focus solely on the emotional or social contribution of their involvement in protests, most of them mentioned both contributions together. #17 (woman, 72 years-old), for instance, expressed it clearly:

Participating in protests helps me because I feel that I'm not alone... To be in a group of people who think like me gives me strength, gives me comfort that I'm not alone. Both physically and in terms of being with people who share my values.

#20 (man, 84 years-old) also emphasized the dual contribution of participating in protests at an older age:

Participating in a protest gives me a good feeling... In a protest, I understand that it's not just my private insanity... that it's not just things I imagine for myself. That there are other people who think the same way...

### **Finding 3: 'What will the future hold?'**

The last finding was called 'What will the future hold?' to reflect the ambivalent perceptions expressed by the interviewees regarding the future of the political and social conflict in Israel. Some of them expressed cautious optimism about the future, but most were completely pessimistic about finding a solution to the crisis.

The interviewees who expressed positive thoughts about the future situation in Israel were individuals who claimed that optimism is part of their personal nature or belonged to the religious-national sector. These people may have internal resources—religious or spiritual—that help them cope with crises and hardships over time. An example of this can be found in an interview with #14 (woman, 71 years-old):

At my core, I am an optimistic person, which means that I am practical and can see what is happening—but deep in my soul, I believe that there can be dialogue. Deep within me, I believe that, through dialogue, we can reach insights and solve problems...

#30 (man, 76 years-old) presented a similar perception:

We are currently in a very bad situation, really bad... [But] I am inherently optimistic and believe that things will get better. It's the nature of processes that they are quite cyclical, fluctuating. They tend to move towards a certain extreme, triggering a reaction, and then they align themselves, sometimes aligning too much, and then it swings back. It resembles a pendulum-like movement.

A degree of optimism was also demonstrated in the conclusion of the interview with #2 (woman, 66 years-old), who chose to end with a positive message:

With all my heart, I believe that if we persist in resolute and nonviolent struggle and remain united, we will have an opportunity to open a new, improved chapter in the history of Israel.

However, the majority of the interviewees in this study was very skeptical about the future of the political and social crisis in Israel, and expressed a great deal of pessimism, stemming from their realism, practicality, or a complete loss of trust in the government. For example, #20 (man, 84 years-old) stated at the end of the interview: 'In the past, I was sure that our country would continue to thrive. Today, I think that the end is near...'

#3 (woman, 79 years-old) expressed similar feelings:

I feel very bad about our future, very bad. I am very afraid because I do not understand the thinking of the public here, including the leaders. I cannot comprehend certain things, I am incapable. I have a dreadful feeling, a dreadful feeling. I cannot explain it...

#23 (man, 70 years-old), a well-known political activist in Israel, expressed pessimism due to his doubts about the effectiveness of the protests:

Only the convinced come to the protests. People who think like you, but that's not the entire nation... Only when you stand alone [as a single protester] do you encounter the whole nation and all the different reactions. The tear in Israeli society is terrible. If you ask me, it is irreparable. That's it.

The quotations presented above demonstrate that, despite the pessimism of many interviewees, they still remain involved in the protests and demonstrations. This ambivalence appears to be rooted in the internal conflict that many of the interviewees have experienced, between their heavy concern about the future image of the country and their deep love for their homeland, or as #9 (woman, 76 years-old) described it:

I have conflicting thoughts, and I fluctuate between them. On one hand, when I hear people on the other side of the political spectrum speaking, it is very frustrating for me. I cannot see how I can have a partnership with them. Where is the shared ground for all of us? How can we bridge this? How? On the other hand, I still go to protests, and when I see the protesting people, I have a lot of optimism that we will prevail, that the moderate line will prevail... But you understand from my words that I am thrown from here to there... It depends on the main event of that day

The words of #19 (man, 72 years-old) also reflect this ambivalence:

In my nature, I am an optimistic person... but the horizon does not look good right now, not good in any aspect. Therefore, I fight for it every day, and I don't engage in my other occupations, I only focus on this [the protest]. I invest most of my hours in it. I'm in this business 24/7. Unfortunately.

Further evidence of the deep ambivalence the veterans feel regarding the future of the country emerges from #24 (man, 68 years-old) complex statements:

I live in deep fear. I truly experience fear. There are very difficult days, very oppressive, where you think: Wait, is there a chance? Will it hold? The hardest part for me is when the children come and say, 'Wait, this thing is falling apart, where are we going to live?' And I always used to have good answers. And today, I don't have good answers... [But] if I were not optimistic that eventually we could live here, then I wouldn't be in the streets, and maybe I wouldn't be here.

In conclusion, one can summarize the three main findings of the study with the words of #15 (woman, 91 years-old), the oldest interviewee in the study. When asked how she feels about the legal reform in Israel, she said she is deeply troubled ('When



I think about the reasons why I came to Israel and where we are today, I am amazed. Truly amazed. I am very troubled.’). She states that this is the reason why she made and continues to make a great effort to participate in protests, even though it is not easy for her (‘I have no other way to express myself’). When asked about the feeling she gets from participating in the protests, she said:

It encourages me when I am there [in the protests]; when I leave, the encouragement is gone. I return to reality. Beautiful people come [to the protests] who want to change important things and do not want to accept the dictatorship. But when I go home, it doesn’t help at all, the negotiations [for a compromise] are not progressing.

## Discussion

The findings provide a comprehensive answer to the two central questions of this research, in terms of how older adults testify to the negative influence of the political crisis in Israel on their lives and the partial effectiveness of their involvement in protests as a means of improving their wellbeing.

Firstly, regarding the importance and contribution of the first finding: ‘I feel fear and dread’. To date, there have been few studies worldwide on the emotional, psychological, and functional implications of national crises among citizens (Ginzburg et al., 2023), especially in the context of older adults (Lai et al., 2022). Our research thickens the body of research in the field by providing firsthand testimony about the profound impact of the political-social conflict, particularly among older adults. All the interviewees in this study reported negative feelings, distress, and significant frustration resulting from the political-social crisis in Israel. They claimed that the current situation severely affects their mental health and, in some cases, even their physical wellbeing. This finding aligns with previous studies showing that older adults become more sensitive and vulnerable to political issues during times of political ferment or social unrest (Hou & Bonanno, 2018), and tend to experience more depression (e.g. Lai et al., 2022; Lai & Guo, 2011.; Ni et al., 2020b).

However, to some extent, the findings contradict the research of Lai et al. (2022). In their research they found that the reason why older adults’ mental health is particularly affected during political and social unrest is their limited functional capacity and physiological vulnerability, and their greater reliance on social support and public services. In contrast, the interviewees in this study seem to feel that their wellbeing is affected by the worry about future generations and loss of what appeared to them as a more ideal past, that is, they almost did not mention physiological difficulties or reliance on formal services. Either way, research has shown that when older adults face health problems related to political or social ferment, they are less likely to seek professional help (Ni et al., 2020b). According to Cogan (2023), the problem is compounded because, even when people seek mental health assistance due to the political situation, there is no prompt professional response available. Cogan (2023) states that budgets in the mental health field have been neglected in recent years, resulting in a significant shortage of professional personnel and regulations. The number of individuals seeking mental health treatment is increasing, but the healthcare system cannot keep up with the demand, and the main groups affected are vulnerable populations, including older adults. It is important to note

that during the protests in Israel, civil society volunteers also offered brief mental health support during the protests. This, however, was not geared specifically towards older adults.

Second, regarding to the importance and contribution of the second finding: ‘moments of hope.’ Strategies for coping with national crises are diverse and numerous, and this study did not aim to examine them all. We focused on older adults who choose to be political activists and engage in protest activities (such as participating in demonstrations, discussing political topics on social media, contributing funds to political causes, and so on), aiming to understand the impact of the extent of their contribution—or lack thereof—to their wellbeing.

It emerges from interviews with these older adults that, for this sector that is negatively affected by the political conflict and chooses to be involved in protest activities, this strategy brings some relief. All the interviewees shared that their presence and involvement in protests not only provided them with emotional support and encouragement but also expanded their social circle. This finding strengthens previous research that reported the psychological rewards (Ryan and Deci, *op. cit.*; Klar & Kasser, 2009) and social rewards (Klar & Kasser, 2009; Serrat et al., 2017; Vestergren et al., 2019) that politically active citizens experience, and specifically the contribution of activism to older adults (Vestergren et al., 2023).

The improvement in the older adults’ psychological wellbeing can be explained by the mechanism of self-efficacy. It is possible that participating in protests enhanced their sense of self-efficacy, i.e. their perceived ability to influence and create change. According to self-efficacy theory, individuals who are aware of their ability to effect change tend to feel good and often take initiative, while those who perceive themselves as powerless are less happy and lack motivation for action (Farmer et al., 2021). The sense of self-efficacy motivates individuals to set challenging goals, stick to them, and be more resilient in the face of failure, thus restoring their motivation (Sculd et al., 2015). If indeed there is an increase in the sense of self-efficacy among the older adults involved in the protests, it is likely contributing to their wellbeing.

Furthermore, we assume that the improvement in the older adults’ social wellbeing stems from the existing social and communal advantages of engaging in protests (Serrat et al., 2017). According to Dwyer et al. (2019), individuals are happier and more satisfied with life when they connect with others and larger groups, especially when they work together to improve society. Similarly, according to Vestergren et al. (2019), the social interaction that occurs during protests and activism provides demonstrators with a sense of support and reduces their feelings of loneliness.

Whether the involvement of the older adults in protests contributes to their psychological wellbeing or primarily improves their social wellbeing, one thing that undoubtedly emerges from this finding is that people, in general, and older adults, in particular, are equipped to cope with difficulties even during political conflicts (e.g. Eggerman & Panter-Brick, 2010; Lai et al., 2022). This finding can contribute significantly to the global struggle against ageism and the societal underestimation of the capacities and self-efficacy of older adults (Levy, 2009; World Health Organization, 2021). Instead, we should recognize the ability of older adults to act and cope with conflicts, boosting their wellbeing even in times of crisis.

Third, regarding the importance and contribution of the third finding: ‘What will the future hold?’. This finding reveals

that the temporary increase in older adults' wellbeing during or after their participation in protests does not have a lasting impact, and its effect is not uniform across all protesters. While the research showed that involvement in protests contributed positively to their emotional and social strength, the older adults' perception of Israel's future political and social situation remains largely pessimistic. Only a few interviewees expressed partial or cautious optimism, while the majority expressed pessimism. This raises an important question: How can older adults report being encouraged and strengthened by their protest involvement, yet maintain a predominantly pessimistic outlook on the political conflict's future?

We can offer two explanations. The first relates to the level of success of protest actions until the time of the study. Most of the interviewees reported that feelings of despair and frustration motivate them to participate in the protest and acknowledged the existence of moments of hope regarding the success of the struggle. However, maybe the study participants did not feel—at the time of the interviews—that the set goals were actually achieved, thereby causing them to experience a dissonance between the desire and motivation to protest and influence, and their concern about the possibility of real change. This explanation is based on previous studies which showed the positive contribution to their wellbeing perceived by older activists who maintain involvement over time (e.g. Mears, 2015; Mohd & Grasso, 2020). The second explanation relates to the personal characteristics and resources of each individual, which have an additional, if not greater, influence on their sense of wellbeing in the present and future. According to Farmer et al. (2021), older adults' ability to cope with conflict situations is more effective when it is dependent on the person's internal resources (psychological powers), which enable or limit their ability to respond to personal and family needs.

### Limitations and further research

This research has some limitations that require attention. The relatively small sample of older Israeli protesters, against the judicial overhaul, prevents generalizing the findings to the entire older population in Israel or the world. Additionally, individuals with severe mental problems or no political concerns might not have participated, potentially affecting the study's representation. The choice of online or telephone interviews limited the observation of participants' nonverbal cues. The authors' involvement as researchers in the ongoing protest could have influenced data interpretation despite efforts to avoid bias. To address these limitations, further research should include larger and more diverse samples of older adults from various social groups and countries. Conducting additional face-to-face interviews with interviewers and coders holding different political views would enhance the study's comprehensiveness.

### Conclusions

The findings reveal a gloomy reality where older adults in Israel are adversely affected by the political and social crisis that emerged in 2022. All participants, who are activists involved in protests, reported this strategy contributing to their wellbeing, possibly due to increased self-efficacy. However, the

effectiveness of involvement in protests varies among protesters, with many having complex and ambivalent perceptions of the future.

Hence, this study implies that political engagement during old age could serve as a mechanism to enhance subjective well-being. However, based on previous research (e.g. Fox & Quinn, 2012; Pillemer et al., 2022), we propose the necessity for heightened support from social workers and mental health professionals for older adults, particularly those facing psychological distress amid periods of political and social turmoil. Developing effective proactive strategies to help older adults cope with political and social stressors is imperative.

### Authors' contributions

'SO', the first author, contributed to the conceptualization of the study, methodology design, conducting the interviews, data analysis, original draft preparation, and utilization of software tools. LA', the second author, played a role in participant recruitment, data analysis, supervisory activities, validation processes, and contributed to the writing, review, and editing of the manuscript. Both authors have thoroughly reviewed and endorsed the final manuscript.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### Ethics approval and consent to participate

All study protocols were approved by the authors' institutional ethics committee (The Ethics Committee of the School of Social Work at Bar Ilan University, certificate number: 032305), and all interviewees provided an informed consent.

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### Data availability statement

Most of the data generated or analyzed in this study are incorporated within the published article [and its [supplementary information files](#)]. Additional datasets resulting from the current study, such as recorded interviews and interview transcripts, along with photographs of older individuals at demonstrations, are not publicly accessible due to ethical considerations and the need to safeguard the privacy of the interviewees. However, these data can be made available by the authors upon reasonable request.

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