

## RESEARCH NOTE

STRATEGIES UNDER A NEW ELECTORAL  
SYSTEM

The Labor Party in the 1996 Israeli elections

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## ABSTRACT

Structural systemic factors, including a tie between the two major political blocs in Israel and the change to direct election of the prime minister, generated an on-line personal campaign, making memory-based retrospective assessment of the positive past performance of Labor and its candidate, Shimon Peres, a lesser electoral issue. The direct elections for the prime minister overshadowed the party and its campaign. Concerns for personal security, raised during the campaign by terrorism, enhanced the electoral chances of the opposition Likud party and its candidate, Binyamin Netanyahu. Emotions became dominant in such symbolic-normative electoral dimensions as religious nationalism and fear. This was apparent in the success of the opposition candidate, Netanyahu, who was against the Oslo peace process, in entering the peace space by calling for a safe peace; he made peace a derivative of security. This undermined the key campaign position issue of incumbent Prime Minister Peres, which made security a derivative of peace. Emotions and terrorism contributed to a negative prospective voter assessment of the peace process and overshadowed retrospective dimensions of performance, state of the economy and leadership. Analysis of campaign-generated issues indicates that election campaigns do make a difference.

KEY WORDS ■ campaign strategies ■ electoral systems ■ Israel

The 1996 Israeli national elections were held under a new and unique electoral rule: the prime minister was elected through personal elections in one

national constituency while the parties ran in a national proportional representation system. Such a mix of electoral systems requires special research underpinning regarding the effect of a personal campaign and party electoral strategies on election results. This paper mainly follows the campaigns of the premiership candidates, the issues that were made salient, and the structural, normative and symbolic features that dominated the campaign. Of the two modes of candidate assessment, on-line and memory-based, the former were expected to dominate. The paper offers an analysis of the campaign strategies, concentrating in particular on the key policy issue – the unfinished Oslo peace process negotiations – which was made salient by the incumbent Labor Party and its prime minister candidate, Shimon Peres. A campaign centered on a policy issue is likely to trigger both retrospective and prospective issue voting. A prosperous economy and a widespread sense of personal well-being supported a positive retrospective assessment of the incumbent Labor Party. Nevertheless, bad omens for Labor were a lack of consensus over the peace accords, a growing gap between the haves and the have-nots, the formation of new political parties around ethnic and policy banners, and the sense of threat among the country's religious population, created under the Labor Party and its anti-clerical coalition partner, Meretz.

### **Background: Structural, Normative and Symbolic Features**

The change to a dual electoral system is related to a structural feature of Israeli politics: since 1981 there has been a political tie between the two major political blocs – the center-left Labor Party and the center-right Likud. Both emerged as fused parties hosting factions and former parties. A third bloc included three religious parties – usually tilting the balance and consistently being members of ruling coalitions. The new executive reform, which was passed during Rabin's term in office before the 1996 elections, reflected his authoritarian inclination and deep dislike for party machinations. The reform movement for direct elections also called for direct elections to the Knesset, a written constitution and a bill of rights. Direct election of the premier was expected to eliminate lengthy designation procedures due to coalition-formation bargaining. Rabin, in power under the old party system, opted for direct election only.

It is very likely that the separate elections for parties and for the premiership diverted all attention to the prime minister, who is protected from being removed except by the votes of two-thirds of the Knesset. The change to direct personal elections made the premiership – and not the parties – a center of policy-making. Labor was severely beaten in the elections and so was the Likud. To ensure the support of the 'right bloc', Netanyahu convinced Raphael Eitan, head of the Tsomet Party (which had eight seats in the outgoing Knesset), to join the Likud and neither compete for the

premiership nor as a separate party. Tsomet received seven places on the Likud slate; only five entered the Knesset following the elections (Table 1). It is very likely that following the vote for the prime minister (i.e. Netanyahu) as head of the Likud, party loyalty was weakened. Shas and the National Religious Party most likely gained some of the traditional Likud votes.

The election campaign involved heated normative debates over, for instance, the nature of the Jewish state and the principle of democratic inclusion (i.e. should Israeli Arab Knesset members determine the peace policy of the Jewish state?). Although Labor's economic achievements conceivably had an electoral appeal (Madsen, 1980), we argue here that a retrospective assessment of Labor's achievements in office was marred by emotionally charged symbolic issues generated during the campaign, such as the nature of peace and its risks, territorial concessions, trust in the enemy, the implied transformation in the nature of the closed ethnic democracy, terrorism, personal security, and the fate of Jerusalem. Such issues should have merited a prospective policy assessment; a process involving symbolic and normative features that were likely to blur Labor's plans for single-issue voting on peace.

A major symbolic political feature that emerged during the campaign

Table 1. Party and prime minister voting (1996, 1992)

Party/Candidate	Votes <sup>a</sup>	%	Knesset seats	
			1996	1992
Likud	767,401	25.81	32	32
Labor	818,741	27.53	34	44
Meretz	226,275	7.61	9	12
Religious	240,271	8.08	9	6
Aguda	98,657	3.32	4	4
Shas	259,796	8.74	10	6
Third Way <sup>b</sup>	96,474	3.24	4	–
Immigrants	174,994	5.88	7	–
Hadash <sup>c</sup>	129,455	4.35	5	3
Mada <sup>c</sup>	89,514	3.01	4	2
Moledet <sup>d</sup>	72,002	2.42	2	3
Tsomet <sup>e</sup>			–	8 <sup>e</sup>
Netanyahu	1,501,023	50.49 <sup>f</sup>	–	– <sup>g</sup>
Peres	1,471,566	49.51	–	–

<sup>a</sup>Includes those who actually voted. Participation rate was 79.3%. There were 3,933,250 eligible voters, of whom 3,119,832 actually voted. 68,636 votes were not valid.

<sup>b</sup>The Third Way and Immigrants emerged only in 1996.

<sup>c</sup>Hadash is the former communist party of predominantly Arab voters. Mada is an Arab list.

<sup>d</sup>Moledet is an extreme rightist list.

<sup>e</sup>Tsomet joined the Likud as a faction in 1996 and received 7 seats on the Likud slate.

<sup>f</sup>The number of voters was 3,121,270. 148,681 votes were not valid in the direct elections for prime minister.

<sup>g</sup>Instituted in the 1996 elections.

Source: Central Statistical Bureau Report No. 1054 (1996), pp. 23–4.

involved questions of national identity, which were especially sensitive among religious-nationalist groups. Their view on nationalism is close to Barrington's definition of the 'territorial boundaries that the nation has a right to control' (1997: 714). Religious nationalism in its simplest sense can be described as an aggressive position regarding Jewish rights over land, including the occupied West Bank territories. It provided a powerful mobilization against Peres in 1996. For example, the national Dahaf survey of 1159 people showed that 75.4 percent of those who follow religious traditions and 63.1 percent of those who follow most religious traditions voted for Netanyahu. Of those who follow tradition only slightly, 39.8 percent voted for Netanyahu and 47.1 percent for Peres. Peres received 74.9 percent of the votes of those who do not follow traditional practices, 15.6 percent of this group choosing Netanyahu.

Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated after addressing a mass rally in support of his peace plan. The assassin, a radical religious-nationalist, made salient an issue that western democracies assumed had been resolved: is there a higher law that overrides democratic politics? Although Labor's campaign did not deal directly with Israel's rising religious-nationalism, its major campaign issue, the peace policy, was effectively challenged by it. It contributed to the religious-secular division (Deshen et al., 1995), which was exacerbated by the country's separate religious education system and separate religious neighborhoods. Aggregate data from 1996 indicate that up to 90 percent of religious communities chose the center-right candidate, Netanyahu (Pedut, 1996).

In the following section, electoral survey data are analyzed as a backdrop to the campaign strategies in the light of past research on social divisions and campaign-generated divisions over peace.<sup>1</sup>

### Labor's Campaign for Peace

The 1996 elections were dominated by specific policy issues: peace and territorial concessions. Personal security became a salient issue because of terrorist attacks by Palestinian religious fundamentalists in major Israeli cities. These triggered a stronger prospective assessment of the peace policy, a fierce debate between the two candidates, a divided electorate, and a radicalization of the public debate. It is very likely that the same issues would have been part of a party competition campaign, but the new direct personal competition of two candidates sharpened the confrontation in which the media played a strong role. Table 2 shows the extent of support for the Oslo peace accords by party grouping.<sup>2</sup>

Concern for personal security was another indication of Labor's electoral chances (Table 3). The survey question asked whether the respondent's feelings of personal security had improved or worsened after the Oslo accords. The data indicate concern among voters, including Labor-identifiers.

**Table 2.** Support for the Oslo peace accords by party vote (%)<sup>a</sup>

	Strongly support	Support	Oppose	Strongly oppose	Total (n = 1136)
Likud	1.3	32.7	45.6	20.5	395
Labor	26.6	68.6	3.8	1.0	417
Meretz	45.5	54.5	0	0	55
Mafdal (National Religious)	2.1	25.0	52.1	20.8	48
Aguda (Religious)	0	25.0	25.0	50.0	16
Shas	–	46.7	33.3	20.0	15
Third Way	4.8	57.1	19.0	19.0	21
Immigrants	20.0	40.0	40.0	0	5

<sup>a</sup>Party grouping is based on a question: 'Had the election been held today, which party would you vote for?' The Oslo issue question was: 'Do you support or oppose the Oslo agreement between Israel and the PLO?'

Source: National Survey of the Dahaf Institute, May 1996. Does not include parties which did not win Knesset seats and respondents who refuse to answer and will not vote.

Given these data on voter attitudes, one could hardly expect a winning proportion of the public to go with Labor's single-policy campaign issue. Among the total population, the vote difference in favor of Netanyahu was 29,457 (0.98 percent), but among the Jewish population he was short by 11 percent. Imminent concerns for personal safety negated the effect of the change toward peace and its expected positive consequences, which was essential for a Labor triumph. Directional theory supports this conclusion (Rabinowitz and MacDonald, 1989). The Likud and Netanyahu made salient the negative consequences of the peace and they effectively accused Peres of wanting to divide Jerusalem and of aiming low, for a peace without security – two normatively and symbolically loaded issues. Peres and his

**Table 3.** Personal security after the Oslo peace accords by party vote (%)<sup>a</sup>

	Much better	Better	Worse	Much Worse	Total (n = 1152)
Likud	1.0	11.9	61.4	25.8	396
Labor	8.3	57.6	32.8	1.8	400
Meretz	6.0	75.0	17.0	2.0	53
Mafdal (National Religious)	0.0	8.2	63.3	28.6	49
Aguda (Religious)	0.0	6.7	53.3	40.0	15
Shas	0.0	29.4	58.8	11.8	17
Third Way	0.0	20.0	60.0	20.0	20
Immigrants	0.0	33.3	50.0	16.7	6

<sup>a</sup>Party grouping as noted in Table 2. The personal security question was: 'In your opinion, is the personal security of the people of Israel today better or worse than in the period before the current peace process began?'

Source: National Survey of the Dahaf Institute, May 1996. Does not include parties that did not win Knesset seats and respondents who refuse to answer and will not vote.

direction of change did not mobilize support beyond the political tie between the two political camps. According to Rabinowitz et al. (1982), salient policies and issues are likely to be weighted heavily by voters: Labor's peace policy was made salient by Peres, but at the same time the threat to personal security and related issues were made salient by Netanyahu.

### Campaign Strategies

The new method for selecting a prime minister created a direct link between voter and a specific candidate. The parties applied the lion's share of their resources to promoting their candidates. The changed electoral rule created strong on-line candidate and issue evaluation.<sup>3</sup> It is very likely that when parties are at the center of an election, there is stronger memory-based evaluation. Here lies the key difference in the direct election of a prime minister and his or her election via a party. Although on-line candidate and issue evaluation has progressively been the pattern of election campaigns, in Israel this tendency is augmented by a formal structural change which negates the importance, for example, of a shadow cabinet or other party personalities. Surveys of memory-based leadership qualities indicated a clear advantage for Peres, but this clashed with the on-line emotional campaign of Netanyahu, and turned out to be enough for a victory.

Research on electoral politics recognizes the array of factors that are likely to affect voter choice and the outcome of elections (Stokes, 1966). For example, studies show that the candidate's appearance is significant (Sullivan, 1988). Peres was 73 years old and Netanyahu was aged 48. In England (Thatcher) and Australia (Hawke), studies have found that a strong leadership image could account for a vote gain of nearly 7 percent (Bean and Mughan, 1989). Other factors that can affect election outcomes include the management of the campaign, the candidate, emotions, and campaign-generated issues, such as, in our case, the matter of personal security and the brandished prospective threat to it.

### *Campaign Management*

The traditional strength of parties in general, and in the case of Israel's Labor Party in particular, has been their numerous branches and activists who help the party sell itself and its candidates. In 1992, Rabin used this organizational base and his tough image in security matters to capture much of the Russian immigrant vote, secure some Likud voters, and the votes of Israeli Arabs, the latter *despite* his hardline security image. A post-election fact-finding committee blamed inadequate campaign management as a key factor in Labor's 1996 loss, noting the less than coherent management of both the personal and party campaigns (Weiss, 1966). Peres had set up his own personal campaign with almost all his key party figures. This was in

line with previous, old-style party campaigns. The operational division of the campaign machine was filled with his ministers, less than 2 months after an exhausting party primary had determined their political fates. The head of the party's campaign was Haim Ramon, who wanted to succeed Peres as party leader. The head of Peres's personal campaign was Ehud Barak, another future leadership candidate. Ramon and Barak barely pretended to cooperate and bickering became public.

Peres, an old party activist, opposed the change to direct election while Netanyahu supported the reform. The new electoral rule suited Netanyahu's preference for personal rather than party appeal to the voters. Peres emphasized internal party peace. In comparison, Netanyahu ignored his party and ran a personal, American-style campaign on clear nationalistic issues. Peres had been elevated to the party's leadership by Labor activists; Netanyahu was elected to the leadership of the Likud in a nationwide personal party primary. Labor's managerial flaws reflected Peres's habitual dependence on the party.

*The Peres Candidacy and Campaign-generated Concerns*

From the outset, the emphasis was on position issue voting, and this is not always a winning strategy (Carmines and Stimson, 1993). The contenders faced two alternative methods of candidate evaluation: on-line and memory-based. Peres, as a candidate, relied on memory-based assessment of his qualities. Indeed, he scored high in comparison with Netanyahu (Table 4). He encouraged this pattern. In reacting on line to imminent concerns and fears over terrorism, Peres referred to terrorists as enemies of peace. Netanyahu, a relative newcomer to politics, was better assessed on an on-line model. The issues he raised (Jerusalem, a safe peace, terrorism, personal

**Table 4.** Candidates' qualities (%)<sup>a</sup>

	Peres	Netanyahu	Both	Neither	<i>n</i>
Leadership	51	27	18	5	1152
Strong	44	32	19	5	1149
Reliable	44	31	12	12	1148
Ability to make decisions	48	28	18	5	1146
Prefers good of the state to the party	38	32	19	10	1147
Experience	74	14	10	2	1151
Initiative	51	27	17	4	1140
Negotiating skills	49	29	18	3	1147
Stands up well under pressure	45	28	20	7	1149

<sup>a</sup>The question was 'Concerning the following list of qualities of leaders, designate which one fits better Shimon Peres or Binyamin (Bibi) Netanyahu; both or neither?'

Source: National Survey of the Dahaf Institute, May 1996.

security) became the key to the election. Memory-based assessment of Peres was unable to overcome the on-line fear that Netanyahu raised.

Labor's TV election broadcasts showed Peres surrounded by young people. 'Children of tears' sat with candles in their hands on the spot where Rabin had been assassinated. The clips were actually aimed at the key campaign issue: the peace policy. Thus Peres further removed himself from on-line concerns. Others in his staff did not help to improve the situation: Barak, for example, wanted to re-focus the campaign on an issue of competence. He – in line with the literature – assessed the importance of the candidate factor in direct personal elections, but he too overlooked campaign-generated concerns (Neubach, 1966: 205–8). What all this indicates is that the Labor campaign was not focused. Labor had to contend with Netanyahu's accusation that Peres would divide Jerusalem and the Likud's promise of a safe peace. The Likud's call for security was especially harmful to Labor when entire towns in the Galilee were being evacuated during a Peres-initiated military mopping-up operation in Lebanon, and when buses were being blown up in Israel's major cities by suicide bombers.

### *Emotions and Peace Policy*

It appears that Peres's major campaign issue was more central to him than the emotions it generated. In contrast to Netanyahu's opposition to the Oslo peace plan, more than 50 percent of the public supported it, so he was expected to have an uphill struggle. He had to penetrate the peace space in order to capture some of the peace votes, and woo the floating vote which tended to question the peace policy. Netanyahu promoted a 'safe peace' in lieu of a 'Labor peace'; when terrorist attacks occurred 2 months before the elections, the slogan became highly effective, shifting attention from peace to fears and to security, and allowing Netanyahu to operate in the peace space.

In response to terrorism and an agitated public, Peres delayed the withdrawal from Hebron, the last major city with an Arab population and an Israeli enclave of settlers to be handed over to the Palestinian authorities under the Oslo accords. The delay raised questions regarding security and how much the Palestinians could be trusted. Thus Peres rendered legitimate Netanyahu's advocacy of a different, safe peace.

Street propaganda also made emotional appeals. Religious supporters of Netanyahu advertised, on their own initiative, that he was 'good for the Jews'. Television election broadcasts picked up the slogan, warning that the vote of Israeli Arabs could decide the elections. In an atmosphere of fear of terrorist bombings, the Likud's slogans, by underlining security, Jewishness and the nature of the Jewish state, reached the receptive ears of traditionally anti-Labor groups, such as low-income voters.

Clinching it all emotionally was Netanyahu's success in making the status of Jerusalem a very salient issue. Peres denied any intention of dividing the

city, opening his televised debate with Netanyahu by denying that there had been negotiations on Jerusalem. But during the election campaign it was leaked to the press that some talks had actually been held with the Palestinians about the status of the city (*Ha'aretz*, 14 August 1996), rumors that were later confirmed.

### *Emotions in the Campaign*

Feelings of anger and helplessness in the face of urban terror during the campaign slowly eroded the value of the peace policy as Labor's key issue. Many voters did not trust the Palestinian police to protect Israelis in ceded territory, or to help fight the terrorists. It was clear that emotions had taken over the campaign. New issues became salient, such as personal security. When issue saliency changes, several important support variables are likely to change as well – such as the candidates' perceived leadership ability, competence and integrity – and the candidates are appraised prospectively on the basis of current events, not retrospectively on their proven ability. Netanyahu gained an even footing with Peres as a result of such processes. The emotional effect went beyond changing the salience of issues; it increased the effectiveness of organized minorities in making salient the threats to the Jewish state by the Oslo peace process.

Once Netanyahu succeeded in making a safe peace an alternative to Peres's peace, the latter had little chance of attracting undecided Likud voters. The right's accusation that the Oslo accords had been approved by a narrow Knesset majority with the votes of Israeli Arab MKs was undemocratic agitation, but it raised powerful emotions concerning national identity and the fate of Israeli ethnic democracy.

### *Public Attitudes*

Labor was captive to its single issue to such a degree that it overlooked traditional social divisions. Surveys showed that Peres lacked strong support in socio-economic categories such as the less educated, the young and those on low incomes, and the campaign did little to change that.<sup>4</sup> A few examples will suffice. Among very-low-income voters, 33 percent chose Peres and 50 percent went with Netanyahu. Peres did well with those who had above-average incomes and higher education. In an ethnic breakdown, 55 percent of eastern voters chose Netanyahu and 55 percent of western voters chose Peres. All this continued the previous party voting pattern which had led to the political tie in Israeli politics.

A campaign based on a single policy issue tends to lack flexibility and is vulnerable to emerging events such as terrorism or campaign-generated threats to normative and symbolic features. The effect of special events on voters was seen in the surveys. When asked what effect the issue of Jerusalem would have on their vote, 55 percent said a great deal and 24

percent said a considerable amount. On the question of terrorism affecting their vote, 68 percent said it affected it a great deal and 16 percent said a considerable amount. Eighty percent of eastern voters, 55 percent of western voters and 60 percent of Israeli-born voters said that terrorism would affect their vote a great deal. Memory-based assessment of the Likud party registered a high score on its ability to be tough in negotiations with the Palestinians (50 percent compared to 32 percent for Labor, while 43 percent felt the Likud would best handle terrorist attacks, compared with 27 percent for Labor).

### Concluding Remarks

It appears that Labor and Peres did not fully internalize the implications of Israel's transition to dual electoral rule: proportional voting for the Knesset and direct election of the prime minister. Labor's campaign (1) suffered from disorganized management and conflict among its leading figures; (2) failed to shift the emphasis of the campaign after major terrorist attacks; (3) confused the voters with its mini-war in Lebanon and its delay in withdrawing from Hebron, which suggested to the electorate that Labor's key campaign issue – the Oslo peace accords – involved security risks; and (4) gave credibility to Netanyahu's safe-peace issue. New salient issues were generated during the campaign. The division of Jerusalem entered the election agenda, and Labor and Peres stood accused. The new issues that emerged due to Labor's peace position and the political tie which had plagued Israeli politics since 1981 left only narrow margins for Labor in 1996.

The theoretical implications of this study are as follows. First, we note the difficulty in dealing with policy changes in general and on the eve of elections in particular. Legitimizing major new policies requires the mobilization of public support far beyond what is possible during an election period. During a campaign, policy changes tend to overload the political discourse by campaign-generated issues and special events, such as terrorism, preventing an effective prospective campaign. The national security issue has always permeated electoral politics in Israel and cut across party lines, gaining relative consensus. But in 1996, personal security dominated the electoral debate and the candidates did not expose the difference between imminent terrorism and national security. Peres made security a derivative of peace; Netanyahu made peace a derivative of security. In the past, the security issue in Israel had covered both national and personal security; in 1996, personal security was singled out.

Second, religious nationalism emerged strongly and became a divisive force in response to Labor's prospective peace policy. Labor's expectation for single-issue voting, even when the issue is prospective peace, can be perilous. Third, election issues generated by, and made salient in, a campaign, and imminent and prospective threats to personal security, tend to

overshadow even an overwhelmingly positive memory-based assessment of leadership qualities. The Labor Party's campaign for the Knesset, and its candidate for the premiership, underscored the lack of an on-line response dimension to campaign-generated issues. This confirms the finding of Lodge et al. (1995) that people are more responsive to campaign messages than recall models suggest.

Fourth, more research is needed on structural societal features such as the prolonged political tie between Israel's right and left, and the new direct election of the prime minister. The direct election of the prime minister had theoretical ramifications. It sharpened the traditional divisions of the party system and contributed to the on-line issues. It re-legitimized and fostered ethnic and group politics and weakened the power of the major parties; public attention focused on the prime minister, and the parties were left to compete with few resources under the proportional representation system.

Fifth, a campaign based on a major policy change makes the agreement with a candidate's policy particularly relevant. Labor's expected issue voting (peace) was an appeal for approval, which theoretically required positive mastery in election campaigns. This was not available to Labor. Finally, the emergence of religious nationalism has future policy implications. When political issues come to be seen in terms of a nation's symbolic religious-historical rights, governments are likely to lose their freedom of action in policy-making.

### Notes

- 1 Survey data cited in this paper were provided by Professor Michal Shamir. The surveys were conducted by the Dahaf Survey Institute. I am indebted to my colleague for making the survey data available to the research community and to me in particular.
- 2 Party grouping is ascertained via direct questions relating to voters' party choice in the elections.
- 3 By on-line I refer to an immediate dimension of voter concerns and issues which emerged in the campaign and required immediate response by candidates. Candidate evaluation by voters is also likely to be immediate. It stands in contrast to what the literature refers to as recall or memory-based evaluation of candidates (Lodge et al., 1995).
- 4 Data in this section are based on the national survey of the Dahaf Institute, May 1996.

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