# Israel Affairs

## The media campaign: The negative effects of positive campaigning

Sam Lehman-Wilzig [ab]
[a] Associate Professor of Political Studies, Bar-Ilan University,
[b] Chairman of Israel's Political Science Association,

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## SAM LEHMAN-WILZIG

The title of this essay involves a conundrum while constituting a play on words as well. In addition, it hints at several paradoxes and ironies which lie at the heart of Israel's media campaign in the 1996 elections to the Knesset and for the position of prime minister.

The conundrum can be summed up thus: why is it that the candidate/party which carried out the more negative campaign eventually succeeded in "winning" the election? (The term "winning" is in quotation marks for two reasons: Binyamin Netanyahu won by the slimmest of margins and the Likud garnered less seats than Labor). Under normal electoral circumstances, of course, such a question would not constitute much of a conundrum, as negative advertising has become almost a de rigueur practice in Western democracies, and especially the U.S. (where it has proven to be more effective than a positive campaign),[1] from which Israeli campaign strategists draw sustenance.[2] Given the fact that Netanyahu learned and continues to practice American-style "media politics", there should be even less surprise at the Likud's use of a negative campaign. Why, then, is there a conundrum?

For the simple reason that the entire campaign was run – by all parties – in the shadow of Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin's assassination. Beyond the fact that the assassination itself was at times a substantive issue in the campaign, indirectly used by both major camps as a weapon as we will see below, more than anything else it served as an extremely powerful background factor repressing the natural urge of all parties to attack the opposing camp. This was doubly the case due to the rancorous debate following the assassination as to which political camp was "at fault", and the succeeding public hand-wringing about Israeli society's becoming too aggressive, too violent – indeed, in danger of descending

Sam Lehman-Wilzig is Associate Professor of Political Studies at Bar-Ilan University, and Chairman of Israel's Political Science Association.

into "civil war" (the oblique term generally used was "the end of the Third Temple", connoting the reborn State of Israel). As a result of public revulsion and fear of a real societal cleavage, a general consensus arose among virtually all politicians and electoral pundits that a negative campaign would only boomerang against its users. And indeed, while certainly not an "angelic" campaign, the 1996 elections took a higher road and tone than many if not all which preceded it.

So the conundrum – one of the central questions which this essay will try to answer – stands: how did the Likud get away with it against the tide of public opinion which wanted a clean campaign? Of course, we shall first have to show that the Likud's campaign was indeed more "negative" than Labor's.

As mentioned, the title is also a pun on several levels. On the one hand, it can be taken at face value: the candidate (Peres) whose campaign was mostly positive in tone, suffered the negative consequence of losing the election. A closer investigation of why his campaign emphasized the positive, however, reveals that it was not merely a function of the party's respect for the memory of former Prime Minister Rabin or due to the trauma of his death, but perhaps more important due to the fact that almost everyone involved within the party and outside of it (media and the public itself) were positive that Labor and PM Peres would win the election. Thus, a "don't-rock-the-boat" philosophy prevailed in the Labor camp, involving a strategy of not egging on the other side with under-the-belt mudslinging.[3]

A second pun involves the word "media". While the campaign's overt election propaganda was produced by the parties and then published/broadcast through the mass media, there was another – covert – campaign going on: that of the mass media themselves. Here the paradox was present at its fullest, for while the personal political identification of most Israeli journalists is left of center and there is some evidence that quantitatively the campaign coverage was slightly skewed to the left,[4] the mass media's qualitative coverage of events throughout the period under discussion in fact constituted an (unintentional) campaign strengthening of the Likud's and Netanyahu's message. From much of the media's perspective, then, its behavior – while perhaps positive from a professional perspective – had a decidedly "negative" outcome.

There were other "paradoxes" and "ironies", which will be fleshed out in the course of the essay.

## NEGATIVE CAMPAIGNING IN ISRAEL'S PAST

Unlike other "new" democratic countries receiving their independence after World War II (for example, India, Pakistan) which have suffered from the start from a high level of political violence in general and during election campaigns in particular, Israel has stood apart as a young

democracy without significant political bloodshed. There is not a single politically-motivated recorded fatality during an Israeli election campaign in its 48 years of existence. In fact, within the dominant Jewish sector only two Jews have been known to die in the course of a political demonstration, while the number of attempted political assassinations from 1948 onwards can be counted on one hand – in marked contradistinction to the situation prior to 1948.[5]

However, perhaps as an alternative outlet for real existing political hostility, the level of verbal violence in Israel has been very high throughout, with terms such as "traitor", "terrorist" (and worse) being bandied about from the early 1950s onwards. This was due in part to the wide ideological gap between the two major camps (Labor and Herut) as well as the deeply existential issues being debated and voted upon: foremost being war and peace, and national territorial boundaries. That gap has been closing since the late 1970s (after all, the Likud gave back all of Sinai and uprooted settlements; both camps have signed peace treaties with former Arab enemies), but as a final settlement moves into view – with its potential high price in territorial concessions and uncertainty regarding ultimate security and the sincerity of the other side – the shrill tone of national debate has not abated. Indeed, one of the paradoxes worth mentioning in this context is that the closer the two camps become in principle, the more strident the tone needed to mask their respective ideological "treasonous" inconsistency as well as the greater the need to distinguish themselves from the opposition through voice and not substance. This last point can be seen especially clearly in the 1996 campaign with the complete blurring of substantive differences in both camps' election slogans: Labor's "A Strong Israel with Peres" and the Likud's "Netanyahu: Making a Secure [Sure] Peace".

In short, bombs do not go off in Israeli election campaigns (at least not set by Israeli citizens), but verbal pyrotechnics are certainly de riguer (as they are during non-campaign periods).

## THE NEGATIVE ATMOSPHERE IN 1996

As noted above, the country was in a sour spirit from November 1995 onwards as a result of the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin. The Palestinian terrorist bus bombings of February and March 1996 merely turned the public's mood into something akin to national fear and mourning. And here we arrive at our next paradox: simply put, the formal election campaign of ads and slogans did not need to be negative, as the news environment which enveloped the campaign was highly negative in its own right.

That the media covered the bombings in depth was not at all surprising; nor was the "sensationalist" style of their coverage. Isolated bus bombings over the previous two years had raised the "gore threshold" to new heights (depths) for Israel, although the deadly series

in February–March 1996 led to an even higher level of intensive media coverage, what Liebes (in press) calls "Disaster Marathons": full cover-page pictures of the mangled buses and especially television's preempting hours and hours of programming to bring non-stop, live coverage of the deadly events. In short, even before the "formal" campaign commenced (usually considered to be two months before election day), the media – in the wake of the situation in the field – had already set the public agenda which can be summed up in one word: "Security".

This is an extremely important point which bears elaboration. As virtually all research in the field of communications acknowledges, the media are not capable of significantly changing the public's opinion, i.e. what to think, but they are very influential in determining the public's news agenda, i.e. what to think about.[6] The overwhelming (highly frightening) media coverage of the bus bombings determined from the start that the central item on the election agenda would not be the accomplishments and failures of the Labor government or the lack of clearly enunciated alternative policy on the part of the inexperienced Netanyahu, but rather a (non)issue of the highest importance but one which was not completely (or even largely) in the hands of any Israeli government – Arab terrorism which had struck in the past at Labor and Likud-led coalitions alike.

This does not mean that both camps were at an equal disadvantage. The bombings were particularly disadvantageous to Labor, not merely because they occurred under its watch. Rather, it did not enable Peres and his party to play up their strongest points: the successes of the peace process (Oslo Accords, peace treaty with Jordan, a distinct thawing of the Arab world's animosity), in addition to significant accomplishments on the domestic front (improvement of the educational system, national health insurance program, massive highway construction, etc.). In short, when Prime Minister Peres decided on new elections in the beginning of the year, he planned to run on the Rabin/Peres government's successful record – a clear advantage over Netanyahu, who played mostly to the public's inchoate fear. By the time the campaign actually began, however, the public's fear was real and palpable as a result of the media's news coverage (itself, of course, a reflection of reality). Subsequent media election coverage would pall by comparison, in the shadow of the security agenda "monster" which the media played upon incessantly. Indeed, the formal ad campaigns of the parties and candidates would pall as well. By all accounts, the 1996 elections to the Knesset were the "quietest" and "dullest" in a long time – at least until the drama of election night and the final results.

## THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN STRATEGY

Overall, the two main parties and candidates for prime minister faced a situation far more complex than usual in approaching the campaign and

in devising a general strategy. Not only did they have to take into account as usual the possible campaign of their rival and prepare proper responses, but unlike previous campaigns (except for 1973) they also had to very carefully take into account the "public mood" as a result of the traumas over the previous half year. Moreover, the two-vote campaign complicated matters considerably as it meant that two campaigns had to be waged: for the Knesset list and for the prime minister.

Given that this was Israel's first national campaign in which each citizen had two votes (a similar system existed on the municipal level since 1978, but little could be learned from that vastly different situation in which many independent, non-ideological party lists ran and won), the campaign strategists were groping in the dark. The basic decision made by both camps was not to devise two separate campaigns but to mesh the two, with the campaign for prime minister given priority. This last point was a result of the new constitutional fact that the winning candidate for prime minister would automatically form the government, regardless of whether his party was the top vote-getter on the Knesset list election (as indeed occurred in the end; Likud ended up with two seats less than Labor). It should be noted, however, that while tactically correct, the ultimate result proved this strategy to be a disastrous one for both Labor and Likud. By concentrating most of their advertising on Netanyahu and Peres, the two parties together ended with the lowest combined Knesset seat total since 1965, barely constituting more than half the Knesset (66 of 120 seats). While some ticket-splitting was to be expected, there is little doubt that the fact that the two major parties did not do much (in the way of election propaganda) to minimize the phenomenon, contributed significantly to the steep decline in their Knesset support. The next elections will almost certainly not see a repeat of such a weak party campaign.

The major question for Labor and Likud was whether to run a positive or negative campaign. Between the two, it was Labor which actually had the more difficult choice, given its (and Peres') early lead in the polls. Why, then, a difficult choice? Because the temptation and the wherewithal for Labor to run a negative campaign were many and varied. Indeed, a list of possible Netanyahu/Likud weak points which could have been potentially attacked as a strategic campaign policy shows how potentially vulnerable the Likud was to a massive campaign attack.

First and perhaps foremost was Netanyahu's earlier fanning the flames of political hatred in several Likud demonstrations prior to the assassination – either overtly (using highly charged epithets) or covertly (not denouncing on the spot morphed pictures of Rabin in a Nazi uniform or a doll of Rabin being burned in effigy at demonstrations where Netanyahu appeared and did not immediately leave in protest when these protest paraphernalia appeared on the scene). While it was obvious to most Israelis that the Likud had absolutely no direct involvement in the assassination, the Likud certainly did its share in

supporting an environment in which violent opposition to the peace process could be concretely manifested by others. We shall return to this point below in the context of Labor's campaign strategy.

Second, Netanyahu's personal "immorality" as exemplified in the "hot videotape" incident a couple of years earlier when he appeared on television and admitted to having an extra-marital affair (he was already twice-divorced), indirectly but quite obviously accusing his Likud opponent David Levy of political blackmail through the threatened use of a videotape which purportedly filmed Netanyahu "in the act" (the tape was never found, and there are doubts that it even existed). While Israelis are not as puritanical as American society (former Chief of Staff and Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan was widely acknowledged as having many extra-marital affairs), such dirty linen was almost never washed in public. The fact that a politician would himself publicly divulge this was damaging in itself, but more important, it lent the opposition possible legitimacy to bring up the issue as a campaign topic.

Moreover, Netanyahu's extra-marital affairs also constituted a (potentially) significant substantive campaign issue. For the first time in Israel's political history the Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) sector faced the unpalatable situation of having to vote for a non-religious candidate, as a result of the new system of direct prime ministerial elections. While the natural tendency of the vast majority of Haredim was to support Netanyahu for his position on the Territories ("Holy Land"), the choice was not an easy one psychologically because of his confirmed adultery. The temptation for Labor was great to play up Mr. Netanyahu's dalliances (in comparison to Peres' longstanding marriage to Sonya, who preferred to stay out of the eye of the media) in the hope of denying him the Haredi vote – not in the television spots (which the Haredim do not watch) but in billboards and the general press, which a sizable proportion of the Haredi sector do read on occasion. In the end, though, the decision was made not to break the Israeli traditional taboo of campaigning on "bedroom" issues.

Third, as a result of the aforementioned innuendo by Netanyahu that Levy was behind the "blackmail", the latter ultimately left Likud to set up his own party (Gesher). This came after a couple of years in which the two former party colleagues were not on speaking terms, indeed had taken to denouncing one another (Levy more than Netanyahu). Thus, it came as somewhat of a shock when Levy announced at the start of the campaign that he would not run for prime minister, and would coalesce his party into the Likud Knesset list. It was clear to all that Likud now was being led by two politicians who palpably could not stomach each other – an extremely ripe, almost necessary, opportunity for Labor barbs during the campaign, which again did not in fact appear.

Why not? Among other considerations, Peres and the Labor Party strategists were mindful of the possible boomerang effect of focussing on the Netanyahu–Levy animosity, for the same situation held in the earlier

relationship between Rabin and Peres himself – an association which was highly acrimonious (serious allegations were leveled by each against the other in their respective "memoirs"). However, they ultimately settled into a very fruitful working relationship under the previous Rabin-led government and such a precedent could have easily suggested to the public that Levy and Netanyahu could also as easily work together.

Nevertheless, the major reason for Labor's avoidance of a heavily negative campaign was strategic: a conscious decision on the part of the campaign staff – especially Haim Ramon at its head – to take the high road, certainly a legitimate approach given Labor's lead at the time in the polls. Indeed, an article appearing two days after the elections spelled out the various campaign television spots and newspaper ads that Labor had produced – almost all of them negative – which were not televised/published. As Avner Barel, the leading advertising strategist of the Labor campaign noted:

> Haim had many temptations which were hard to avoid, but he stood firm... For example, to deal with Bibi [Netanyahu] below the belt. Take the vilification which preceded Rabin's assassination. We have incredible footage of Bibi standing on a platform [during a demonstration] with a gigantic sign on the bottom 'Death to Arafat' [this well after the signing of the Oslo accords]. Bibi is orating and yelling while in front of him, indeed right in front of him, people are using a knife to slice up a picture of Rabin. And Bibi doesn't stop it and doesn't do a thing. We were dying to show this but Haim...prevented it.[7]

Nor was such a decision based on gut feeling alone, as Barel notes. When showing "attack ads" to focus groups comprising the "floating voters", undecided between Peres and Netanyahu, the response was unenthusiastic to say the least because of their aversion to tying the Likud to Rabin's assassination. As Ramon explained in making his strategic decision not to run a negative campaign:

> I would like to remind you to whom we're advertising. To Likud, as well as SHAS [Sephardi Haredim] and NRP [National Religious Party], supporters who are considering splitting their vote [between their own party list and Peres]. They are just waiting for a reason which would enable them to return home, to Bibi, and the only reason that they are still with us is that even in their eyes Bibi is not fit to be Prime Minister... Anything we do which will turn into a conflict between two camps... might well send them back.[8]

This is not to say that Labor's campaign was totally positive. On one issue it did use negative advertising: "Bibi Is Not Fit" (to be prime minister). This was a "legitimate" issue because of Mr. Netanyahu's lack of experience at the highest levels of government (he never even served as a Minister, only as Deputy Minister). The use of the nickname "Bibi",

instead of using "Netanyahu" (after all, neither Labor nor Likud used the name "Shimoleh" or even "Shimon" in describing Peres) also added to the attempted portrayal of the candidate as "childish". In a sense, this was ironic and dangerous for Labor for the reason that the country was interested in having new faces in the government, not to mention the fact that Peres had already run (and "lost") as the head of the party in four previous Knesset elections, so that "Not Fit" was a pejorative which the public had already defined the Labor leader in the past. Nevertheless, given the highly sensitive situation of peace negotiations it was clear that most of the public preferred to have the government in experienced hands.

The Likud along with Netanyahu, on the other hand, had a less difficult choice regarding its campaign strategy precisely because it was well behind in the polls through most of the campaign. This does not mean that the strategy was clearcut from the start, but only that its choices were more limited.

The problem facing the Likud could be summed up as follows: in order to close the gap it had to have a forceful, vigorous campaign, which in Israeli terms (as in most Western countries these days) meant some measure of negative-attack campaign advertising. On the other hand, as the political climate for such a campaign was not propitious to say the least – in part because of the Rabin assassination as well as the fact that many former Likud supporters were wavering and would be further turned off by a nasty campaign initiated by Likud – the question of finding the right "balance" was a critical one.

The solution which the campaign strategists hit upon was to have Netanyahu appear "statesmanlike" while concentrating in "neutral" fashion on the one topic which not only was the weakest part of the Labor (otherwise impressive) armor, but which ipso facto was negative in its very essence: National (and Personal) Security.

This worked on two separate but interrelated levels. On the higher national plane, a large segment of the population – while supporting the overall direction of the peace process – was extremely wary of the speed and the price of the Oslo Accords. The problem was less objective than psychological, but as the late Anwar Sadat noted it was precisely the psychological barrier (of mutual mistrust) which constituted the greatest obstacle to peace in the Middle East. By hammering again and again on the security side of the "Peace with Security" slogan, Netanyahu and Likud were playing to the public's deepest fears without appearing overly (and overtly) negative.

A prime example of this was the way in which Likud managed to undermine the Labor government's "accomplishment" in forcing the PLO to declare that it was changing its Charter (calling for Israel's destruction). Instead of a frontal attack against Peres and Arafat on the issue, they brought out Professor Yehoshua Porat – one of Israel's top Arabists, and a supporter of Meretz (!) – who publicly declared that the

Charter was not canceled by the PLO leadership and was probably not going to be rewritten in light of the "promises" made by Arafat to Peres.

Whether this was true or not is irrelevant to the discussion here; what is relevant and highly illustrative is that the Likud managed to attack the trustworthiness of the government, of the PLO and of the entire peace process by getting someone else – an academic expert from the Left of the political spectrum! – to do the dirty work. As Iyengar and Kinder have noted: "according to countless persuasion experiments, the influence exercised by a message does depend significantly on the credibility of its source: expert and trustworthy sources exert more influence than inexpert, untrustworthy sources."[9] And indeed, Labor's highly interesting post-election report authored by Shadmon and Geyer (entitled the "Post-Mortem" which had an obvious internal Labor political bias, but was quite objective in analyzing the Opposition's campaign) concluded that the Likud succeeded in raising serious doubts in the minds of many voters through Professor Porat regarding the PLO Charter controversy. Labor's subsequent publication of campaign ads signed by other academicians who argued the reverse were pale and ineffective by comparison.[10]

Second, as noted above, the Israeli public was feeling decidedly unsure of its security on a personal level as a result of the bus bombings in February–March. Here very little needed to be done during the campaign as the horrific pictures and accompanying public hysteria were emblazoned in the public's mind for the entire period of the campaign.[11] The mere mention of the bombings or anything suggesting Arab terrorism was enough to bring back the recent traumatic memories and further reinforce the "security" message of the Likud. This was not merely done to "hold" the Likud's traditional supporters but to garner new support, given the first-time ballot for prime minister which forced each of the two major parties to address voters who had never voted for the party.[12] As Iyengar and Kinder further note: "Merely feeling anger, sadness, or fear may cause viewers to alter their political judgments."[13]

In a sense, then, we find here a curious symbiosis between the Likud's campaign and the mass media's coverage during this period. Studies issued soon after the election came to the conclusion that the press's quantitative reportage of the campaign was relatively balanced (naturally, the incumbent prime minister Peres and his governing party Labor received somewhat more ink, given that they were still running the country), with coverage between the two candidates and the two leading parties almost equal in the final weeks of the campaign.[14] While empirically this was true, it does not take into account the damage done to the Labor cause (or inversely, the unintended background "friendly" environment laid for the Likud) by the media's bus bombing reportage immediately prior to the official two month campaign. Statistical analysis can be enlightening, but should not be taken as the final word – especially when dealing with such subjective and psychological matters

as campaign advertising and the "national election agenda". The same holds true, of course, for the data which will be provided in this essay. It is to be understood as a basis for understanding the election campaign, and not as the objective campaign itself.

METHODOLOGY

Israel's three major Hebrew-language daily newspapers – *Yediot Aharonot*, *Ma'ariv*, and *Ha-aretz* – were analyzed over the two month period prior to Election Day, from the perspective of the parties' paid political advertisements. This study does not include the televised campaign spots of the campaign's last month, in part because of the aforementioned low level of viewership (as compared to newspaper readership which reaches the 85 per cent level among adults). In any case, as both major parties ran a strategic campaign overall, with much the same messages being sent through all the media, it is highly doubtful that the data would in any significant way be different had television ads been included.

All of the paid ads by all the parties were analyzed for the two month period (see Table 1). Among other things, we discovered that a not insignificant number of ads were placed by ideological movements not formally affiliated (if at all) with any of the parties. These are included in Table 1, but not in the tables thereafter. Indeed, in order not to complicate matters unduly, the rest of the tables will focus on five of the six parties which advertised most heavily: Labor (83 ads), Likud (82), Meretz (67), Third Way (39), and the National Religious Party – NRP (21). The sixth, which we shall not analyze in depth, was Moledet which placed 50 ads – an astounding number given that it had only three seats in the outgoing Knesset and won only two seats in the 1996 elections. One other party – far more significant (it garnered 10 seats in these elections) – was the haredi-Sephardi party SHAS, but it only advertised twice (once in Yediot, once in Ma'ariv, on election day!), a result of an "alternative media" campaign strategy (see below).

A sliding scale was established – from 1 to 5 – which enabled us to assess the degree of "negativity" or "positivity" in each print ad. A score of 1 indicated that the ad was all negative, i.e. focussed on attacking one or more opponents or opposing ideological positions (e.g. "Peres Will Divide Jerusalem"; "Bibi Isn't Fit"). A score of 5 indicated that the ad dealt only with promoting the position of the advertising party/ candidate. Scores of 2 or 4 indicated that the brunt of the ad was negative or positive with a minor focus on the reverse, while a score of 3 meant that there was an equal amount of negative and positive elements. All neutral party ads such as the official Election Commission overseeing the campaign, were not included in this study.

There was no problem of inter-coder variability as only one person did the scoring, under the guidance and supervision of the author. This

is not to say that there were not problems of subjective evaluation and of precise scoring. Regarding the former, the scorer was given explicit instructions to discount her own political tendencies and view the ads through the eyes of a "neutral" observer, although one who understood code words and symbols of Israel's political culture (see below). For what it's worth, she is a right-wing supporter, so that the overall finding that the Likud's campaign was more negative than Labor's cannot be a function of any scoring subjectivity based on ideological bias.

Regarding the second problem – precision of scoring – many times it was hard to determine whether to provide a score of 2 or of 3, or of 4 or 3, given that we did not base our judgment on the quantity of words, but rather the ad's overall "impression". Such an overall impression included the use of pictures which could be "positive" or "negative" in their own way. To be sure, there are two ways of "perceiving" campaign ads. One is to stick to the ad's textual and pictorial denotation, i.e. what the words and pictures "mean" in a purely "objective"/dictionary sense. The other is to score the ad in its connotative sense, i.e. the way the average Israeli – with all his/her "cultural baggage" – understands the words/pictures. While the second approach obviously is more "subjective" and thence more open to interpretation, it is still the preferred one because what we are attempting to measure here is not the campaign in and of itself but rather the interplay between the election propaganda and the public, i.e. the influence of the former over the latter. In any case, it is universally understood that advertising of all sorts (and certainly political advertising) works on several levels, the simple semantic one usually being less important than the "sub-text".

The only element not taken into account in the scoring was the party's/candidate's ongoing campaign slogan. Here the problem was not of interpretation but of conscious ambiguity: at times a slogan could be highly positive and negative at one and the same time, making it extremely difficult and problematic to score it in any meaningful manner. We shall return, though, to the phenomena of ambiguous slogans in our extended discussion a bit later.

FINDINGS

As can be seen from Table 1, the overall tone of the 1996 election campaign tended to the positive side: 3.58. This reinforces and corroborates our introductory point regarding the fact that after the Rabin assassination the general public (and as a consequence, the parties in its wake) was in no mood for attack politics. Indeed, if one removes the Likud's score (2.45), the overall average approaches 4.0 – a very positive campaign indeed!

Moreover, against common sense it turns out that the smaller parties waged a much more positive campaign (averaging 3.78) than the two major parties together (3.25). If one were to believe conventional

wisdom that negative campaign advertising is the way to get the public's attention and support, this election totally undercuts this thesis given the election results in which Labor and Likud together were weakened relative to the smaller parties.

TABLE 1

POSITIVE/NEGATIVE SCORERS – ALL PARTIES

| Party/movement | Positive/ negative total | Numbers of ads | Overall average score |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 Labor | 336 | 83 | 4.05 |
| 2 Likud | 201 | 82 | 2.45 |
| 3 Meretz | 225 | 67 | 3.35 |
| 4 Moledet | 187 | 50 | 3.37 |
| 5 Third Way | 171 | 39 | 4.38 |
| 6 Dor Shalom/Peace and Security Council | 115 | 28 | 4.11 |
| 7 NRP | 89 | 21 | 4.24 |
| 8 "Pikuach Nefesh" (Against Ceding Territory) | 28 | 12 | 2.3 |
| 9 Security and National Strength Forum | 40 | 8 | 5.0 |
| 10 Future of Israel | 7 | 7 | 1.0 |
| 11 Israel's Right | 30 | 7 | 4.28 |
| 12 Meimad | 25 | 5 | 5.0 |
| 13 Communist Party | 10 | 2 | 5.0 |
| 14 SHAS | 10 | 2 | 5.0 |
| 15 Chabbad | 8 | 2 | 4.0 |
| 16 Golan Settlers | 5 | 1 | 5.0 |
| 17 Fathers' Heritage | 5 | 1 | 5.0 |
| 18 Joint Committee of Organized Struggle | 2 | 1 | 2.0 |
| 19 Gil (Pensioners) | 4 | 1 | 4.0 |
| TOTAL | 1498 | 419 | 3.58 |

Further breakdowns of the data are revealing in other ways. To begin with, the evolution of the campaign shows a relatively clear trend of moving towards negative/positive equilibrium. In other words, in the second and last month of the race, each of the four central parties moved in a direction away from its initial ("month 1") approach and towards the overall campaign "norm" (see Table 2). This meant that the Likud trended toward a somewhat more positive campaign over the course of the race, while Labor, Meretz and the NRP became somewhat more negative.

TABLE 2

CAMPAIGN NEGATIVITY OVER THE COURSE OF THE CAMPAIGN

| Political Party | Month 1 (29/3–4/28) | Month 2 (29/4–29/5) | Last Week (23/5–29) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Likud | 2.27 | 2.53 | 3.8 |
| Labor | 4.23 | 3.75 | 4.1 |
| Meretz | 3.60 | 3.20 | 4.00 |
| NRP | 4.60 | 4.16 | 4.20 |

Of no less interest in this regard is the last column of Table 2. All four parties took a more positive propaganda stance in the last week of the campaign compared to the rest of the final month (as the election week score is included in the final month tally, the difference is even starker than it seems at first glance). As the final week of the campaign is critical – and in this election that was obviously the case to everyone involved at that time – it becomes obvious that in the crunch, the parties moved in a very positive direction within the format of the paid-for advertisements. The reason for emphasizing this last phrase shall be discussed in the next section.

Another interesting finding relates to the specific newspaper in which the ads appeared. Table 3 clearly shows that the parties' propaganda strategies had a differential element to them. Briefly and succinctly put, with the exception of the NRP which placed but one ad in *Ha-aretz* (thus, the following point is not really relevant in the case of this party), all three major parties ran a far more negative campaign in the two mass circulation dailies Yediot and Ma'ariv than they did in the elite paper Ha-aretz.

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TABLE 3

NEGATIVE/POSITIVE PROPAGANDA BY NEWSPAPER

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|          | Labor | Likud | Meretz | NRP  |
|----------|-------|-------|--------|------|
| Yediot   | 3.89  | 2.34  | 2.90   | 4.20 |
| Ma'ariv  | 3.97  | 2.35  | 3.10   | 4.27 |
| Ha-aretz | 4.35  | 2.88  | 4.00   | 4.00 |

This indicates a couple of things. First, that the parties do not run a scattershot campaign but rather phrase their messages in the language that specific target audiences will most be amenable to. In our case here, it is obvious that all the parties view the less educated public as being more susceptible (or amenable) to attack advertising than their more higher educated compatriots. One could also offer that the latter type of public is less swayed by emotional/negative propaganda and is more open to (or seeks) cognitive/ positive messages and/or information.

## DISCUSSION

The data seem to be rather clearcut: the Likud ran a more negative campaign than Labor (and the other middle-sized parties). However, even the scores which the Likud garnered on the negative-positive spectrum were not indicative of an extremely negative campaign. This is especially true when one considers the political science truism that elections are usually lost by the incumbents and not won by the opposition, thus necessitating a campaign by the party out of power to be more critical of the governing party than vice versa, in order to win the election.

However, the matter is not as simple as it seems, for as already suggested earlier, one cannot merely focus exclusively on the advertising campaigns of the parties to determine the degree of constructive/negative messages sent. There exists another player in this game – the journalists themselves and the news "product" which they publish/broadcast.

It had become clear by the 1992 elections to the Knesset – when cable television was already in operation (Channel 2 was still televising "experimentally") – that the general public was becoming jaded with campaign advertising – as could be seen from the very low percentage of viewers who watched the aggregated TV ad segments over the last month of the 1992 campaign. In the final analysis, the viewership in 1996 dropped even further: a mere 21 per cent (vs. 25 per cent in 1992) watched "almost all" the TV campaign spots, while the number who did not view them at all rose from 40 per cent to 46 per cent.[15] As Israeli election law allots to each party free air time (based on the number of seats in the outgoing Knesset), the parties were hardly going to bypass this medium. However, their strategy changed. Instead of a "frontal assault" on the voter, the thrust would be indirect and perhaps all the more effective because the public would not be aware of the "interests" behind it. As Avraham Burg, Labor's chief of liaison with the press, admitted right after the election:

> We made a strategic decision that the campaign would be of "news" and not of explanation through the papers. From the moment we decided that, it was clear that the print and electronic media would play a dominant role in our field. The way we worked was to transfer information on our candidate's activities and pronouncements in a constant flow, while at the same time transferring juicy investigative files (on the opposing candidate...) so that the journalists would use them if they so wished.[16]

The Likud, as well, used the strategy of feeding the press with "news" on numerous occasions but the tactic had another dimension, with the disinformation working on two different levels.[17] On the one hand, strategic "high-level" politics, e.g. the anonymous leak to Ma'ariv that Netanyahu was considering Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert as Defense Minister, while Yediot Aharonot received the "scoop" that it was actually Dan Meridor who was under consideration – all this to reassure the undecided voters that more hawkish senior Likud members such as Ariel Sharon were not going to be in control of defense/foreign policy. On the other hand, the Likud campaign also worked feverishly to feed "low level" news, which demanded an instant decision on the part of the journalists whether to publish or withhold: for example, false reports of Labor supporters attacking Likud campaign workers (probably to "balance out" the true incident of some Labor supporters being attacked by Likud workers).

The two parties' media strategists not only worked overtime on such

"news" initiatives, but also ran a very sophisticated "reaction" press campaign whereby every negative news report (from each party's perspective) was met by pressure on the journalist to "balance out" the picture (with, of course, information fed by the party) or outright threats on the journalist as to "closing the news flow" in the future if the critical reporting did not cease (ibid).

One could list at great length the numerous examples of attempted manipulation of the media's campaign reporting, most of it to present the other side in negative light. However, the key point here is that the real electoral battleground for the hearts and minds of the voters took place where the voters could not see it! Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to argue that the 1996 Israeli election campaign was carried out on two different levels: the overt and the covert, the ads and the news. While the public's nominal attention was turned to the official and formal newspaper ads and radio/television spots, it was more influenced in the final analysis by the "news campaign" working on the national psyche in an indirect – and at times subliminal – fashion.

The 1996 election had three central (and according to many observers, the most critical) campaign initiatives which most probably determined the outcome of the prime minister ballot, and in which we can see several of the points made in this essay: "negative" campaigning in a non-overtly negative fashion; using the news to "trigger" subterranean issues and feelings; the importance of the "news campaign", especially as it tied in with the formal ad campaign. The three examples are: the SHAS "amulet campaign"; the TV debate; and the election slogan "Netanyahu: Good for the Jews".

The SHAS party's campaign to distribute magical amulets blessed by mystic Rabbi Kedouri (as well as his picture, a memorial candle and a series of blessings) was perceived/portrayed by the media as one of the more bizarre election ploys in Israel's history, albeit with very significant effect (this certainly was not the first time that items such as amulets were used in an Israeli election campaign, but it was the first time that they received such widespread media coverage). The effect resulted from two factors. First, being portrayed as bizarre – as well as probably illegal by Israeli election law standards (no physical gifts may be distributed nor can blessings be offered) – the Israeli press had a field day with the whole operation, obviously highly critical. However, for the average potential SHAS supporter the wide media coverage only reinforced the "importance" of the amulet/blessing, thereby providing SHAS with a huge amount of free "positive" publicity. It must be noted that SHAS is unusual in the Israeli context in that it is a "crossover" party, garnering support among Haredi Jews (many of whom do not read the mainstream press and have no television sets in their houses) as well as sizable support from "traditional", albeit non-religious, Jews in the underprivileged neighborhoods and development towns who do consume media as other Israelis. The unexpected increase of SHAS from six to ten Knesset seats,

strengthening Netanyahu's hand once the government was formed, can be traced in significant part to the unintended "symbiosis" between the national media and the SHAS campaign – the former portraying the phenomenon in negative terms, the latter's supporters filtering these reports through their own perceptual screen and looking upon the amulet campaign as a meritorious act.

Perhaps even more to the point was the "negative" side of the positive amulet campaign. While distributing amulets is in no way a negative act (except insofar as it may reinforce superstitions at the cost of rational electoral behavior), once again we find here a situation where one thing "triggers" another. In this case, the amulets and blessings were distributed and understood by their recipients as protecting them (as long as they kept their written promise to vote for the party) from evil people and bad events. Indeed, Rabbi Kedouri promised them: "Blessing, Security, and Success". In the Israeli context, the "security" element meant but one thing – terrorism. As the "Post-Mortem" report noted, the SHAS amulet campaign fed off the media's incessant discussion of possible terror activity during the election campaign:

> One of the unintended consequences of the large amount of information in the media regarding the Iranians' desire to influence the Israeli elections through Hamas terror, was the successful marketing of the amulets... The high level of public fear of terror stood in the campaign background and the voters' decision until the last day. The astounding success of the amulet campaign by SHAS-Kaduri was a result of this fear level.[18]

The second example of major consequence was the single TV debate between Peres and Netanyahu. The latter suffered from an image among the public of being inexperienced, especially compared to Peres – Israel's lone ruling elder statesman.

The result of the debate was instructive in the context of our discussion. In the eyes of most "objective" (academic) observers, including this writer, Netanyahu's performance was clearly superior (even Peres' media advisers admitted as much after the campaign). However, the general public did not view it that way, at least initially: telephone polls taken immediately after the conclusion of the debate did not indicate any clear victory for either side.[19] However, the newspaper headlines the next day told a different story: "Netanyahu Wins! [the Debate]", for example, was plastered across the front page of Israel's largest daily *Yediot Aharonot*, and the snowball effect commenced on the undecided voters until the elections three days later (for every voter who changed his/her mind and voted for Peres as a result of the debate, six voters did the reverse). Again, the main point bears repeating: "The debate's influence was not felt the night of broadcast on both TV channels, but rather only over the course of the next day... [as a result of] the newspaper headlines which appeared the following day [after the

debate]" (ibid). Thus, just as with the bus bombings, we see here another quite clear case of the media "enlarging" the effect of the subject being reported on, to the extent that the more significant effect is media-induced and not reality-induced – again, unintentionally, but for "professional" (that is, marketing) journalistic reasons.

The third and final campaign initiative proved to be the most controversial of all. Early on in the race, several Likud stickers appeared with a decidedly "negative" (anti-Labor) message: "Bibi or Tibi" (Ahmed Tibi, an Arab–Israeli physician who serves unofficially as Arafat's adviser) and "A Strong Palestine with Peres" (removed quite quickly). However, the most important and effective sticker ironically (but not coincidentally) was phrased in very "positive" language: "Netanyahu – Good for the Jews". Indeed, the term "Good for the Jews" is part and parcel of Jewish culture (whenever something happens around the world, unrelated to the Jewish people, the standard Jewish line has been: "Yes, but is it good for the Jews?").

What could be offensive or negative about that? In a country such as Israel, with a sizable Arab minority which is considered by many Jewish Israelis to be a potential fifth column (there is virtually no evidence to support such a contention), the use of "Jews" instead of "Israelis" was a clear code that only with Netanyahu in power could the country's most basic "national" (in both senses of the word) interests be safeguarded. Moreover, for some time the extreme right wing had been arguing that a referendum on ceding the Golan to Syria must receive a majority of the Jewish vote, and throughout the campaign it was also noted that Peres might win with only a minority of the Jewish vote.

It must be pointed out that the campaign sticker (and ad campaign) was initiated and paid for by the haredi Lubavitcher HABAD movement, and that there is no evidence that the Likud was behind this initiative, which after all did very indirectly suggest some form of racism. On the other hand, the Likud did not disavow the slogan. But more to the point within the general thesis of this essay is the fact that once again it was media coverage of the slogan and the ensuing public debate which lent it a high level of campaign resonance and possibly its decisive influence on the outcome of the prime minister race.

This is not in any way to suggest that the media were wrong in reporting on the debate regarding the slogan (and, indeed, most press commentators criticized it strongly), but rather that once again the media's behavior led to the opposite effect of what it (perhaps) intended. The more coverage provided of the controversy, the more stickers appeared, and the more stickers that appeared, the greater the impact (unconscious or otherwise) on precisely those undecided voters, most of whom were former Likud supporters who were probably seeking (certainly subconsciously) a trigger to enable them to "go home" despite their misgivings as to Netanyahu's candidacy.

One final ironic aspect of the campaign must be noted, fitting in well

with the general paradoxical environment of the 1996 election campaign – the Meretz election propaganda and its effect. Early indications were that Meretz was in danger of losing several Knesset seats, with only about five seats predicted for it in the polls. This was probably due to the fact that Labor's peace process was continuing apace, thereby preempting Meretz's chief campaign issue. As a result, Meretz turned to its second line of assault: bashing the religious camp, in order to bring back its traditionally secular (and in part strongly anti-religious) supporters. This is not the place to delve into the complex issue of religion and state in Israel (discussed elsewhere in this volume), but the closer Election Day loomed, the more strident and blatant Meretz's campaign.

Did it succeed? Tactically yes, strategically no. Meretz did indeed return to its approximate "natural" strength (nine seats; still a decline from the previous Knesset total of 12), so that in the strict party sense its campaign worked. However, viewed from the perspective of the overall results – especially the race for prime minister – its propaganda was disastrous (from Meretz's perspective), as it drove a significant number of traditional (not necessarily Orthodox) Jewish voters back into the Netanyahu camp on the basis of religious and state ("Jewish identity") concerns, despite their political misgivings about Netanyahu's peace process policy. Put another way, by succeeding in getting across its religion and state platform (of secondary importance) to its supporters, Meretz also "succeeded" in pushing enough general undecided voters into voting for Netanyahu, thereby undermining Meretz's own position on its primary issue.

Yossi Sarid's highly acerbic (and effective) anti-Peres performance in Meretz's TV propaganda immediately following the Peres–Netanyahu debate merely added to the influence of the "Netanyahu – Good for the Jews" campaign in the last days of the election. In the final irony, everyone was publicly talking about which of the two candidates was better for the peace process, but the sub-text (especially in the closing stages) was the Jewish character of the State. On this issue, obviously, Netanyahu had the advantage (mainly because of his natural coalition partners). The media's critique of this aspect ("Netanyahu – Good for the Jews"), as well as Meretz's harping on the issue, boomeranged in the end.

CONCLUSION

Israel's 1996 election campaign was more subterranean than above ground. From several different perspectives, what one saw was not what one got (indeed, another entirely different dimension of some importance is the functioning of the "alternative" media[20]). The Labor Party's formal election propaganda was quite positive in tone, while the Likud's (perhaps of necessity) tended to be negative, but not nastily so.

However, all this was quite secondary to the real campaign which was carried out (in large part unwittingly) by the media – both as reflector of reality and, especially, as a magnifier of precisely those elements which tended to highlight the negative aspects of the Peres-Labor/Meretz government (such as terrorism and public insecurity, and not enough sensitivity to "Jewish" elements).

As argued throughout this essay, this occurred not because the media consciously wished to undermine Peres/Labor (if anything, most of the press supported the Left, as did most of the business community), but rather unconsciously and indirectly as a result of its "natural" inclination to seek out the sensational, the bizarre (by its lights), and the negative.

The most significant methodological conclusion emanating from the above analysis – and one which has important implications for future election campaign strategy – is that given an increasingly sophisticated public well versed in, or at least strongly inured to, the superficialities of the parties' formal election propaganda, the role of media coverage of the news (both campaign and non-campaign related) becomes of prime importance. The instincts of Likud and Labor strategists in 1996 were correct: the real battlefield is not the advertising spots after the television news program but rather the news itself; the best campaign strategy is not frontal advertising but behind-the-scenes public relations; the most effective tactic is not to address the public directly but rather to manipulate the public through indirection. If this continues to be the case, it will make future post-election media campaign analysis not only much more interesting, but also methodologically that much more complex and difficult. For the researcher, that would be the ultimate "negative" effect of any positively smart campaign.

## NOTES

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