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2006 elections in Israel: Marking the end of an era for the controlled televised election campaign broadcast

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This article examines the influence of the new ratings culture and multi-channelled reality on the 2006 Knesset elections in Israel. Prior to 2006, the tightly controlled one hour prime time campaign commercial on major television stations was one of the most important factors in Israeli national elections, if not the most important one. The 2006 campaign demonstrated that these commercials no longer have this effect. The increase in talk shows, varied programming during non prime time hours and informal interview styles has made the campaign commercials obsolete.

Key words: Israel, elections, propaganda, television broadcasts, law, campaign commercial.

INTRODUCTION

Until the 2006 Knesset elections the Elections Law (Propaganda¹ Methods) of 1959 governed campaign management in Israel². Until 1999, the Elections Law prohibited political candidates from appearing on television 30 days prior to Knesset elections Knesset³. The only televised forum on which prime minister, cabinet and Knesset members were allowed to appear was the official election campaign broadcast, thereby making the election

commercial an all powerful tool. Today, the law has been relaxed, allowing candidates to appear on television but not for propaganda purposes.⁴

The election campaign laws were originally to ensure equality among the contending parties, a basic principle in any democratic elections. Each party is allocated time to air their campaign commercials during primetime public TV. Slots are allocated in accordance with parties' relative representation in the outgoing Knesset. The parties bear sole responsibility for the content of the broadcasts. In the past, issues around this official broadcasting allocation caused serious conflict among the parties to the point of requiring Supreme Court intervention.⁵ In an important ruling, the Supreme Court overturned a law which changed the allocation of airtime: The basic airtime of each party was to have been slashed from 10 to 18 min and the airtime for each member serving in the outgoing Knesset to be increased from 3 to 6 min. The Supreme Court decided that this law contradicted the principle of essential equality among the parties to the advantage of the bigger parties. Even today, political parties are prohibited from buying any additional airtime on commercial television channels.

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¹ The term "election propaganda" is a literal translation of the Hebrew as it appears in the Election Law of 1959 (paragraph 5); we henceforth refer to this law as "the propaganda law".

² "The "propaganda law" deals with the limitations placed on the lists in terms of the propaganda they are allowed to publicize during the 60 days prior to elections. The limitations include all types of promotions, including advertising and the use of public places. The law prohibits any type of advertisement on the television or radio for 60 days before the elections EXCEPT for within the framework established by law specifically for that purpose. These media carry very limited advertisements starting from 21 days before the elections at specified times". as described and copied from the Knesset website - http://www.knesset.gov.il/elections16/eng/laws/summary_eng.htm

³This led to several absurd situations such as the signing of the peace treaty between Anwar Sadat, Jimmy Carter and Menachem Begin. The actual handshaking ceremony could not be broadcast on public television during regular hours since the Prime Minister at the time, Menachem Begin was running for office. The ceremony was only viewed on the official election broadcast for the Likud party as prescribed by law. Another time, a candidate with a low chance of winning a seat was a soccer player: the games in which he appeared could not be shown on television as they would be violating the law.

⁴ Article 5(a)2 of the Elections Law (Propaganda Methods) 1959 provided that "No screening or broadcasting shall be held of events in which candidates to the Knesset take part, for a period of 30 days prior to the elections". This law was amended in 1996 but did not become effective until the 1999 elections.

⁵ High Court of Justice 246/81 Derekh Eretz Association v. Broadcast Authority P.D. 35 (4) 1.

The prohibition on candidates' appearances on television is intended to maintain the principle of equality and prevent the leading party from exploiting its privileged access to the media. This law was enacted at a time when the state-run public broadcasting network enjoyed a monopoly and was meant to prevent the government from using its power to turn the public channel into its own propaganda tool. The law remained in effect even after the public channel became just another channel in a multi-channel environment. Formal campaigning through the election campaign broadcasts was, for a long time, the only method of public advertising for candidates and their parties. Only in 1996 this law was amended and today's political candidates are permitted to appear on television programs of all genres prior to an election. The prohibition against "election advertising", however, remains in force - that is, candidates may appear on all types of television programs but are forbidden to campaign during them.

The Election Law still includes many restrictions concerning the permitted means content and message (Rubinstein and Medina, 2006). As a result, Israelis are currently exposed to both formal and informal campaigning: the former takes the shape of the traditional campaign broadcasts while the latter is constituted by implied campaigning - unlawful but extremely effective and essential - such as on current affairs and entertainment programs.

This article examines the influence of the new ratings culture and multiple channeled realities on Israel's most recent elections. The campaign style of the 2006 elections significantly differed from that of past elections in that the traditional campaign commercials had far less public impact. While prior to 2006 the designated one hour prime-time election broadcast on major channels was arguably the most important factor in election campaigns, 2006 saw the emergence of a new election reality. The prohibition against broadcasting election commercials during non primetime hours has in fact become obsolete and this article contends that the law should be amended to permit a more open television campaign schedule; a new format for the management of future campaigns in Israel, moreover, seems to be required.

Features typical of the U.S. trickled through into Israel's 2006 elections, on several levels: first, there was a change in the electoral system, leading to direct elections in 1996, 1999 and 2001. This change led to the "personalization" of the campaigns: party leaders became the focus of attention. Even though the electoral method was subsequently reversed to the older model, this change in style persisted into the 2003 and 2006 election campaigns. Now the party platforms took second place to party leaders' personality, their lives and lifestyles. The intensely "American" talk shows, which gained strong in local popularity, further entrenched this tendency to zoom on the personal, allowing party leaders to base their

standing on how well they did in interviews more than on their political abilities (this may even have been a factor in why none of them managed to complete a full, four-year term during this period). Then there is the celebrity phenomenon, also originating in the US, which has been on the increase in the world of entertainment but has also left its marks on politics, including recent Israeli election campaigns. And in addition there is the impact of US style campaign management and marketing methods which favor media "spins" and accentuate the visual aspect over the verbal message, going for image in favor of content.

This article posits that election campaign broadcasts are an archaic format that was suited to a country with a single public channel, whose task, among others things, was to serve the public and democratically enable each party to present its positions according to its relative size. This format jars with a multi-channel reality and commercial entertainment programming, which garners higher viewer ratings than any other type of broadcast.

ELECTION PROPAGANDA: THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Election propaganda is way for the public to get to know candidates, parties, platforms and differences between the various contenders. For the voters, media coverage is the most significant source of information about the election campaign as well as of comment and analysis. Another major source comes in the form of election propaganda and propaganda broadcasts. These broadcasts are likely to raise the public's involvement in the election process, create public interest and offer a public stage for various issues. In the past, the fact that such a large part of the viewers were exposed to these election broadcasts even raised the voting percentage (Weiman and Wolfsfeld, 2002).

In spite of changes over time in form and content, the pre-election propaganda period was the main time for politicians to woo the public. The change in recent years has been from election propaganda to political advertising - and the latter involves political advisers and pollsters. It is hard to tell whether it is the changes in electoral system that caused the accelerated Americanization of the electoral campaign or vice versa. The increasingly personal dimension of the election campaign does run parallel to changes in the electoral system - but we could also see this as part of a universal tendency towards standardization of electoral systems across cultures (Caspi and Leshem, 2007).

End of high cost television campaign advertisements

Since the annulment of the all-out prohibition of candidates' appearances on television programs, the value and importance of the formal election campaign-

broadcasts have dropped. Their viewer ratings are low, but their cost remains high. Parties hire professionals, who in an election period demand the highest pay (Doron, 1996). However, the effectiveness in terms of votes of this form of advertising is very limited. Advertising's marginal efficiency is decreasing and therefore the large sums invested by the parties are not justified by the returns. This was highlighted in 2006 when the election campaign broadcasts appeared to have lost almost all their importance and influence.

Supreme Court Judge Dorit Beinisch, who served as Chairperson of the Central Elections Committee, in her summary report to the Knesset Chairperson acknowledged the trend as follows:⁶

Furthermore note should be taken of a feeling that there is no longer any justification today for the existence of the election campaign broadcasts. The expropriation of public broadcasting airtime, in the course of trampling on the rights of the commercial franchisees of Channels 2 and 10, for the benefit of election campaign broadcasts, has its foundation in an approach that no longer has a place in our system. The public's lack of interest in the broadcasts was clearly evident in the current election campaign and it appears that the contending parties' large monetary investment in this field bears no fruit. It should be noted that these contentions, which were apt regarding previous election campaigns, are all the more apt today and there is no doubt that the time of the election campaign broadcasts in their present framework has come and they must now pass from the world.

Data from the 2006 elections indicate that the Likud party which, with 91 min, received most airtime for its election campaign broadcasts substantially lost strength dropping to 12 seats, whereas the Pensioners party, which as a new party was allocated only the basic 10 min, won 7 seats.⁷ Airtime data show that there is no connection between exposure time and campaign success, or vice versa.⁸ Figures 1 and 2 show that the viewer ratings for the election campaign broadcasts were low. On a daily basis, the broadcasts achieved only single-digit viewer ratings and some experts claim that this too was only because they rode on the tails of more popular television shows. Viewer ratings for the broadcasts correspond to the general viewer ratings for the mainline channels and do not reflect focused viewing or viewers' choice of pro-

gram. Even if the figures for watching election campaign broadcasts on all the channels (with a certain amount of overlap) are computed, this still doesn't come close to the viewer ratings for popular entertainment programs. The graphs given are a good example of the viewer ratings of the campaign broadcasts in 2003 and 2006 (Figures 1 and 2).

The election campaign broadcasts' importance and reputation have diminished, as can be seen in the tables. In an era where commercials are no longer than 30 s, continuous viewing of successive broadcasts, each several min long, is a burden to the viewer. Even though the broadcasts are imposed on all the central channels three times daily during all primetime viewing hours, viewer ratings are still relatively low, steeply lower than the regular average viewer ratings for these channels.

True and really effective campaigning, which is actually influential and relevant to a wide audience, has relocated to entertainment programming. In these genres political candidates appear every evening selling themselves and their parties. Despite the legal prohibition against direct campaigning, their appearance in the media is all about campaigning. It is not really possible to enforce the Elections Law that bans such campaigning. Neither the Central Election Committee nor its chairperson, a sitting Supreme Court judge, has the ability to supervise what is said in the various entertainment programs or halt a broadcast in real-time. There is, therefore, a need to update the law in accordance with the changes in Israel's multi-channel media reality.

In the 2006 elections, Israelis watched as the informal campaigning focused on generating headlines and media spins. The closer the campaign came to the finish line, the greater became the spins. The media became a tool in the advisers' hands and their deliberate leaks were given front-page headlines. The campaign and the advisers' interests came to dominate the news items and the public agenda. No longer defined by the election campaign broadcasts, the campaign agenda was influenced by candidates' statements in entertainment and current affairs programming. The media dedicated attention to the campaign broadcasts on their first evening and then shifted their focus from platforms and issues to behind-the-scenes stories, advisers' strategies and techniques and parties' and candidates publicity gimmicks.

THE 2006 ELECTION CAMPAIGN

Israel's 2006 election campaign was exceptional; Prime Minister Ariel Sharon suffered a stroke shortly after boldly leaving the ruling Likud party and forming the new "Kadima" party together with other Likud members and prominent Labor members. The new party was established after Israel's dramatic disengagement from the Gaza Strip, a move that raised strong public opposition.

The subsequent elections presented the Israeli public

⁶ Beinisch, D., "Summary and Lessons of the Elections to the 17th Knesset," report to the Knesset Chairperson, 29 May 2006, p. 11.

⁷ There are a total of 120 seats in the Knesset.

⁸ The calculation for the airtime allocated to each party is as follows: basic 10 min for each party, with established parties receiving another 3 min for each Knesset member. On the basis of this calculation, the airtime allocated to the major parties was 91 minutes to Likud (which won only 12 seats), 52 min to Kadima (29 seats), 73 min. to Labor (19 seats), 43 min to Shas (9 seats), 28 min to Meretz (5 seats) and 10 min to Pensioners (7 seats!).

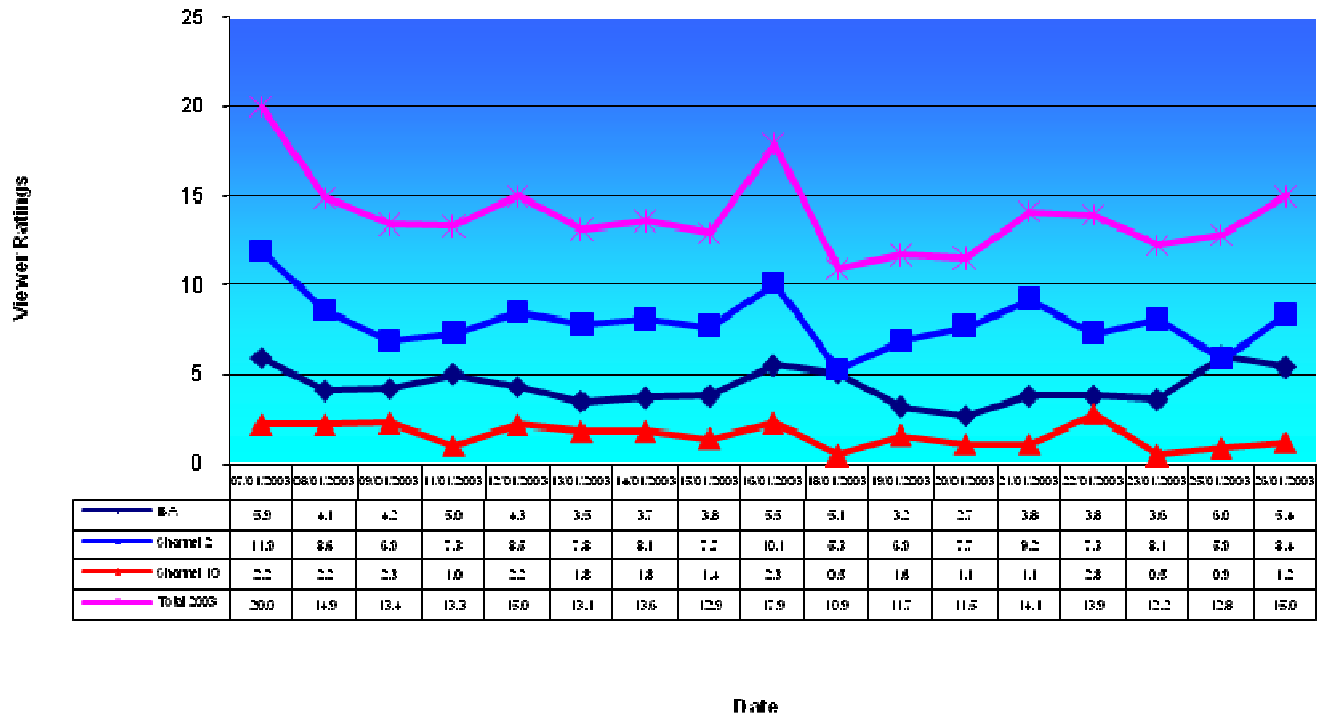


Figure 1. Television viewer ratings of election campaign broadcast 2003 general population households.

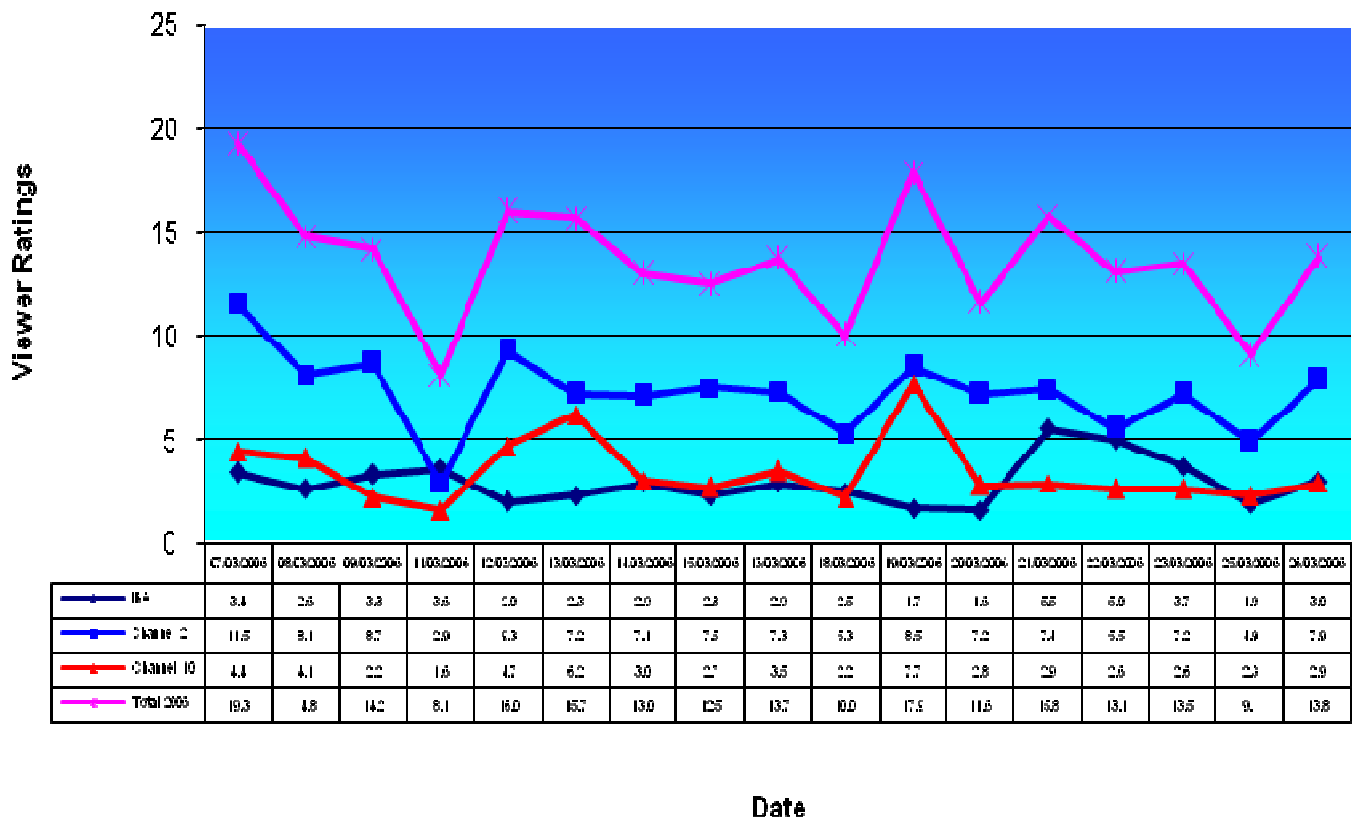


Figure 2. Television viewer ratings of election campaign broadcast 2006 general population households.

with a new political reality. Ehud Olmert, next in line to head the fledgling Kadima party and supported by former Labor Prime Minister Shimon Peres, ran as the party's new candidate for prime minister. He was challenged by Labor's Amir Peretz, who ran on a platform of social reform and Likud's Binyamin Netanyahu, a former prime minister and head of the Likud party which had been opposed to the withdrawal from Gaza viewing it as a national calamity.

The 2006 election was the first to be conducted through approximately 100 television and satellite channels, including the major public stations, such as the state-run Channel 1, the commercial Channels 2 and 10, a commercial channel in Russian, entertainment channels and a large number of movie and sports channels. The Internet to which 70% of the population is connected also played a marginal role. This proliferation of mass media in Israel (Shenar, 2000) occurs on several dimensions: technological, organizational, channels and content. Technological growth and diversification and the abundance of channels have created something like an "open ether" This media reality has been influential in the rise of a ratings culture, itself more dominant over the years and currently permeating many areas of life (Yuren, 2001).

THE INCREASING PERSONALIZATION OF POLITICAL CANDIDATES IN ISRAEL

The year 2006 also saw a notable increase in the portrayal and appearance of political candidates in the entertainment and talk show arena. With the introduction of commercial television in Israel in late 1993 and subsequently in the 1996 elections, the public became accustomed to seeing politicians on talk shows, in front of hidden cameras, on reality shows and similar forums. Politicians no longer appear on news and current affairs programs only: they are now regulars on entertainment shows with high viewer ratings. Politicians, according to Perry (2004), encounter a phenomenon in which television producers have replaced professional reporters with interviewers who are celebrities, singers, models and actors. This situation, which began in the mid 1990s, has shifted the once incisive and demanding interview to a more entertaining format, one which is more amenable to the politician. The celebrity culture has blurred the line between entertainers and journalists and between journalistic and commercial considerations. This affects political figures that benefit from the light and bantering interview atmosphere and who understand that exposure on popular programs has great campaign value, equivalent to the previous election campaign broadcasts.

This trend intensified in the 2006 elections, where the campaign trail headed towards entertainment and talk shows and left the traditional television campaigning lingering behind. Traditional campaigns, based on ads, posters, jingles, billboards and the above television

broadcasts floundered. A more informal type of campaigning, with a less explicit objective, took their place. This can be seen by the increasingly frequent appearances of politicians on entertainment shows, raising the level of their personal exposure to viewers.

Now that viewers have come to expect extreme personal exposure on talk shows and reality programming (Karniel and Dinur, 2006), politicians are forced to follow suit and become more intimate. Television interviewers are no longer satisfied with a candidate's public positions, but strive to disclose more of the candidate's private life. The shows now focus more on the candidate's personality, character and habits rather than their ideology, political positions and values. This process of personalization came to a head in 1996 when the Israeli public was first faced with direct elections for the prime-ministership. And despite the return in 2003 to proportional representation, the popularity of this trend has not diminished. A candidate's personality and image remain a major factor in elections.

THE DECADE OF DIRECT PRIME-MINISTERIAL ELECTIONS

In 1996 voters were able to ballot for the prime minister for the first time. Previously, the head of the winning party would automatically become prime minister. The process of Americanization has begun early in the decade.⁹ First signs of this process could be seen already in the 1992 elections, when the Labor party put Yitzhak Rabin at the center of its campaign, with the slogan: "Israel is waiting for Rabin." The prominence accorded to Rabin at the expense of the party was aimed at traditional at disappointed Likud voters. The new slogan hinted that a vote for Labor was a vote for Rabin as prime minister. Rabin was perceived as possessing a rich military past and someone who would keep the land of Israel intact.¹⁰ In 1996 the two major parties, Labor and Likud, put factor in the decision to return to the old electoral system.

Although Israel reverted to voting strictly by party line in the 2003 and 2006 elections, the power and standing of the party as a political institution diminished over the years and there has been a gradual attenuation of the party system (Arian and Shamir, 2003). The relationship between voters and parties has undergone dramatic

⁹ The law was amended before the 1992 elections but came into effect only in 1996.

¹⁰ The personification of politics, contends Lisek (1998), has become more and more characteristic of Israel's political culture: "No more sectorial solidarity, no connection and commitment to symbols and myths, but [only] the leader's measure of charisma. Ben-Gurion was the first to abandon the institutional party canvassing patterns and become 'one in a generation' to his followers. Begin followed in his wake and refined the tactic to a level of virtuosity. It has been personal charisma that decides election campaigns. Where charisma shines, formal institutions and parties turn into secondary players" (p. 135).

change. Voter support, which in the past was based on party loyalty, has changed and new considerations have entered the public's voting behavior (Kaspi, 1996). In effect, Arian and Shamir (2003) argue, now that long term factors such as identification with a party have declined, there is a rise in short-term factors such as issues and candidates. Electoral politics has been personalized and now focuses on the actual candidates (Arian and Shamir, 1999).

Everything indicates and this was also demonstrated by the 2006 elections, that this trend continues, in spite of the return to the old electoral system. The insertion of the personal dimension into campaigns, which already started in the early 90s, continues and the return to party - based elections in 2003, as mandated by law, has had no impact. In 2006 the focus of public and media debate still revolved around the figure of the leader rather than the character of the party. The 2006 campaign concentrated on the personality, experience and qualifications of each of the three candidates: Ehud Olmert (Kadima), Amir Peretz (Labor) and Binyamin Netanyahu (Likud). The platform, positions and ideology of the parties were marginalized. The media presented profiles of the candidates and almost entirely ignored the strength or significance of the parties in the elections. The emphasis was on the personal ability of the party leader to lead and manage the affairs of state and less on the team that was supposed to manage the affairs together with him.

This process was intensified due to the dramatic circumstances surrounding the elections, specifically, the illness of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. In 2001 and in the subsequent 2003 elections, Israelis voted for Sharon as the most authoritative and experienced figure in Israeli politics. In 2006, in the wake of the August 2005 disengagement process, support for Sharon increased and public perception of him as a strong, brave and experienced prime minister, capable of withstanding political pressures and able to take difficult, dramatic measures to ensure the security of the state was reinforced. Sharon's leadership and authority were unchallenged. When he formed the Kadima party at the end of 2005, it immediately won about 30 Knesset seats in the opinion polls.¹¹ This support for the party in effect constituted support for his leadership and a vote for Kadima meant a vote for the man who stood at its head. Sharon's stroke left his deputy Ehud Olmert with the daunting duty of acting prime minister

The election campaign now focused on Olmert. A public vacuum was created, as well as a need to continue the process Sharon had begun. The media examined whether

Olmert would be capable of carrying on "Sharon's legacy." Preoccupation with the man and whether he was suited to succeed Sharon dominated the 2006 elections. These circumstances underscored the personalization trend but this time the selling of the leader took place in a more diversified and wider reaching media reality, which intensified exposure and extended it to a variety of genres and technologies that impact the way candidates are represented.

"AMERICAN STYLE" CAMPAIGNING

Adoption of the American method of choosing a candidate rather than a party also included its "sales" methods, which emphasize packaging over product and raise the emotional pitch of the marketing (Gurevitch and Blumler, 1990). Binyamin Netanyahu's campaign for prime minister in 1996 was notably conducted in this style. [Netanyahu ran a media campaign based on the principles of the American model] (Lehman-Wilzig, 1997). In 1999, again, both the candidates for prime minister, Binyamin Netanyahu and Ehud Barak, employed American advisers and used typical "American style" electioneering tactics.

Professional campaign managers were already in evidence by the start of the current decade. Emphasis shifted from the politicians themselves to experts, from platforms to gimmicks and media spin. Visual messages were favored at the expense of verbal messages and campaign ads focused on catchy jingles rather than political messages (Caspi, 1996). Political campaigns abandoned content and ideology and instead focused on marketing and selling the candidate himself. Campaign broadcasts dealt with images as opposed to issues and emphasized the candidate's personality and character, (Kaid and Johnston, 1991). Some even highlighted external appearances (Shyles, 1986). Modern studies, contends Marmor (2002), indicate that image-oriented broadcasts containing an emotional rather than rational appeal are becoming more and more prevalent and are the preferred advertising philosophy for campaign managers. Media preoccupation with campaign topics at the expense of substantive issues is a continuing trend, as Weiman and Shefer (2004) have demonstrated in their study of four election campaigns. The media clearly prefer to deal with secondary topics which they call "campaign topics" such as polls, forecasts, speculation as to allocations of ministerial and other posts, "deals" between parties, internal squabbles and campaigns.

METHODOLOGY

This study is based on a collection of all publicly available relevant data. We analyze a number of test cases by means of which we illustrate and prove the existence of the phenomenon - rather than its dimensions. It seems that election propaganda appears in the context of entertainment TV. This goes against the law which for-

¹¹Sharon left the Likud party and together with others established the Kadima party under his leadership on November 21, 2005. A poll conducted by a leading daily, *Yediot Acharonot*, on 22 November predicted that Kadima would win 33 seats. A poll conducted by another leading daily, *Maariv*, on the same day predicted that Sharon's party would win 30 seats.

bids election propaganda on television, limiting it to the official propaganda broadcasts. We took a sample of talk shows and entertainment programs in the run up to the 2006 elections and we analyzed appearances of senior politicians who were at the center of public attention. We also collected data about viewing rates of these broadcasts, which showed that while the rates for the official propaganda broadcasts were relatively low, the shows which unlawfully inserted propaganda enjoyed much higher rates. The aim was to prove our hypothesis that election propaganda actually also occurs in the TV shows and is not only limited to the official slots allotted for it, which have, hence, become irrelevant.

RESULTS

Alternative campaigning in 2006

The changing marketing aspect that became prominent in the 2006 elections serves as an indication of how deeply the previously discussed trend became entrenched in Israeli society. In 2006 candidates were no longer marketed merely by their appearances on the customary TV election broadcasts and newspaper ads but popped up frequently on talk shows and other entertainment programs.

Candidates, who needed media exposure in both the primaries and national elections, appeared on all the current affairs and entertainment programs. The most popular mainstream program during the election period was "Yair Lapid", an Israeli version of Jay Leno's late night show. Lapid is a handsome charismatic host in his early forties with great appeal to the hip Israeli crowd. He is the son of Yosef (Tommy) Lapid, who served as Justice Minister in Ariel's Sharon's government. His show deals with current affairs, day to day Israeli life and hosts guests from all sectors of society. In the two months before start of the election campaign, Lapid began systematically hosting senior members of the three major parties, Labor, Likud and Kadima. Each week political figures appeared as guests on Lapid's show and used the opportunity to display their more personal, emotional side to the public. Even the seasoned Shimon Peres, who had just relocated from Labor to the new Kadima party, attempted to create an intimate atmosphere with his host and viewers. Peres, however, could not help but project a remote persona, in contrast to the ease displayed by Likud leader Binyamin Netanyahu who flirted unabashedly with camera and audience. Netanyahu was in natural control of his posturing, profiles and facial expressions, performing like an experienced actor and openly enjoyed it.

Other political figures also appeared in intimate interviews disclosing heartrending stories of impoverished backgrounds, a childhood in immigrant camps or deprived neighborhoods and introducing family members to the public. They exposed themselves in front of the camera, often for the first time, creating an emotional intimacy between themselves and the viewer-voter. In such settings, the line between interviewer and interviewee, public and private, becomes blurred. Interviewer and

guest often become emotionally involved during the interview leading to physical embraces and/or a show of tears on live TV.

A striking example was an interview conducted by Yair Lapid with then Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz¹² who was a leading candidate in the new Kadima party. During the interview Mofaz discussed how much he missed his late father: as he spoke, he began to cry and his face showed pain and profound emotional distress. The interview created a public stir and sparked a media debate over the authenticity of the tears and their timing, which was significant as the interview took place during the run-up to elections. This type of personal exposure which some have deemed an attempt to foster a manipulative intimacy between the political figure and his or her audience created a new norm in which the boundaries of acceptable private exposure are not just blurred but disappear. During the same period Israeli television broadcast a satirical television show called Eretz Nehederet ("Wonderful Country") which enjoyed high ratings. One of the regular characters on the program was a spoof on Mofaz, who was portrayed as an Israeli militarist macho whose favorite expression was "You're the man!" Given Mofaz's strongly masculine public image as defense minister, something that was further underlined by his macho character on Eretz Nehederet, his tears on live television were not interpreted as weak, feminine or emasculating. On the contrary, they reinforced his image as a personable, emotional and warm individual. Mofaz managed to convey an image of a strong and able fighter, a former IDF Chief of Staff yet one with a sensitive and personable side through the images he and the media chose to project about him on television. His appearances took place during the primaries when candidates were vying to capture their intended audiences and be placed high on the party's electoral list. Mofaz's decision to publicly display his softer side paid off.

Ehud Olmert was also interviewed by Yair Lapid¹³ marketing himself as a candidate on behalf of the Kadima party and as Prime Minister Sharon's number two: he revealed for the first time that he had an adopted daughter. Olmert seemingly took advantage of this convenient forum to convey messages regarding his character and actions as a warm and humane person and a loving and beloved family man, in contrast to his public image as a slick, cold lawyer. It was clear to his advisers that it was such snippets of information that would influence public support, their power being greater than the routine election campaign slogans.

After Sharon's hospitalization and Olmert's appointment as his successor it was published that his advisers asked him to lower his profile and limit his appearances on entertainment and current affairs programs. Each of his

¹² The interview was conducted live on Yair Lapid's show on November 7, 2005.

¹³ The interview took place while Sharon was awaiting surgery and it appeared that Olmert would be replacing him for only 24 h.

appearances in the media was calculated and staged and as a result he maintained a significant lead in the polls throughout the campaign. A high level of media exposure could have undermined his popularity. The advisers worked on the assumption that Olmert had slipped naturally into the role of the "acting prime minister" that his media appearances should be restricted to his performance in that role and kept few and far between. Appearances in other contexts could only have undermined the seeming naturalness of the transition.

Appearances in election campaign broadcasts, by contrast, were staged performances in which the advisers could maintain full control over delivery and stated content and so it was preferable to expose the leading Kadima candidate in that forum. Indeed, on one of the rare occasions when Olmert delivered a speech to an audience and allowed the media to be present, he declared that "the question of who will win these elections has already been decided."¹⁴ The declaration immediately made headlines; it was continuously replayed on the news, had direct negative impact on Olmert's public support and cost his party precious seats.

The leader as a brand-name and as a character on a satirical program

As noted previously, the most popular satirical television show broadcast on commercial television during the election period was *Eretz Nehederet*, which garnered high ratings from the start (26%).¹⁵ The program includes satirical and humorous references to current events, mainly through impersonations, sketches, jokes and witticisms concerning the week's headlines in the form of a fictitious newscast. The program's cast includes regular participants occasionally augmented with guest appearances by other actors. Except for the show's anchorman, Eyal Kitzis, who regularly appears under his own name in the role of the newscast's anchorman, all of the program's other participants play a variety of changing characters. The caricatured characters include Israeli political figures, celebrities and familiar media personalities, while others are fictitious and represent Israeli stereotypes. Over the years the program has had an influence on and contributed to Hebrew language and slang. Most

¹⁴ In the course of an election rally of Kadima's immigrants' caucus, held in Rishon Lezion on March 8, 2006, Acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said: "The question of who will win these elections has already been decided. Now our test is whether we will be strong enough to do what we want and carry out our policy. For that we need all the more seats."

¹⁵ According to data provided by the Israeli Ratings Committee, during the month prior to the elections the programs "*Eretz Nehederet*" and "*Yair Lapid*" garnered viewer ratings in excess of 20% for each and every show. With its central portion opening the show and dealing with the election campaign and candidates, "*Eretz Nehederet*" won especially high ratings: 24% on March 3rd, 2006, 26.1% on March 10th, 2006, 27.3% on March 17th, 2006, 24.8% on March 24th, 2006 and 26.2% on March 31st, 2006. For "*Yair Lapid*," the ratings were 20.4% on March 6th, 2006, 22.6% on March 20th, 2006 and 20.7% on March 27th, 2006.

of the characters on the program have a favorite phrase that is repeated several times during that character's appearance and these phrases have come to be identified with the characters and have become widely used by viewers in their daily lives as well.

In addition to being Israel's most popular television program, this show also influences the way young people are formulating their public opinions. A survey on Ynet (March 9, 2006) reported that 19% of young people aged 18-32 drew their knowledge of current affairs from "*Eretz Nehederet*". Another survey conducted by the One Voice movement on March 20, 2006 (NRG) reported that only 44% of young people intended to vote on Election Day and many of those who intended to abstain from voting explained that one of their primary reasons for abstaining was the image of politicians shown on "*Eretz Nehederet*." In the wake of the survey's publication, Tal Friedman and Eyal Kitzis, two of the show's stars, decided to participate in a campaign on behalf of One Voice to encourage voting among young people.

These findings demonstrate that popular television programs exert a more powerful influence than election campaign broadcasts whose purpose is to convey information about the parties and candidates. Much influence is wielded by entertainment content that is not perceived as campaigning. What also matters greatly is the show's choice in itself whether or not to feature certain characters. Many are convinced that the standing of such figures as Shelly Yehimovitch (a journalist who became a politician and Knesset member), Uzi Cohen (a member of the Likud Center and deputy mayor of Ra'anana) or Judy Nir-Moses-Shalom (wife of Sylvan Shalom, Foreign Minister in Sharon's government) was greatly enhanced because of the frequent satirical portrayal of their characters.

Campaigning in entertainment programs

Both the "*Yair Lapid*" talk show and the "*Eretz Nehederet*" satirical television show dealt with the election campaign and got high ratings during the weeks leading up to the elections. Likewise, they were frequently quoted in the media and public discourse. The political figures that appeared on them received widespread exposure and made headlines in the days following, as happened to Defense Minister Mofaz after the aforementioned interview. This interview was greeted with a range of contradictory responses, from derisive criticism to emotional identification and empathy-but either way, it definitely put Mofaz on the media map.

DISCUSSION

In an election period the various mass media serve as the primary stage on which the contenders appear, present their political positions and the image they want to project (Wolfsfeld, 1997). The competition is fierce,

especially during election campaigns when each candidate or party is trying to gain maximum media coverage. But the mass media sometimes generate an agenda of their own, which has nothing to do with the topics promoted by the candidates. This phenomenon is especially glaring where the media, at election time, cynically focuses on electioneering strategies, scandals, internal dissension and polls instead of substantive issues (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999). Wolfsfeld and Weiman (1999) contended that in an election period the primary factor influencing the agenda is the journalist's professional considerations, which are often dictated by the dramatic component of his or her story. They called this approach "the drama first model" according to which the best way to forecast the media's agenda in any election campaign is the dramatic interest of the competing news stories. There is always a preference for drama that is moving, exciting and familiar. This explains why so much news regarding elections is negative. Manheim (1991) called this phenomenon a "multiple effect": the candidates receive widespread free publicity when attacks on them appear in the media. The most dramatic news regarding elections generally is concerned with scandals, candidates' major blunders, or aggressive appearances in confrontation. In order to survive, politicians sometimes prefer to employ negative contexts, especially an opponent's defamations, as long as they can get on the news and influence the media agenda. Cappella and Jamieson (1997) have called this phenomenon the "spiral of cynicism": politicians who wish to survive are forced to present the "negativity" which the media prefers.

To these categories we would like to add that the best way to influence the media agenda is specifically to appear in entertainment contexts and to present personal-emotional contents, sometimes extreme, thus becoming worthy of being portrayed on shows like "Eretz Nehederet." While politicians in the past may well have realized that negative electioneering has news value, now and in our case, their vista widens to include the understanding that public impact is obtained in the realm of satire. The characters of leaders, as shaped by impersonators and entertainers on "Eretz Nehederet," were impressed on Israeli public consciousness no less and perhaps more than as they appeared on the news and current affairs programs.

CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY

The Israeli Elections Law, while tremendously relevant during the era of one-channel TV, when there was no choice but to watch carefully controlled and lengthy campaign commercials, has become obsolete. Today, with the bulk of campaigning taking place on current affairs and entertainment programs and on talk shows, this archaic arrangement and the old televised campaigning methods need to be updated. The need to appropriate airtime from the primary broadcasting channels – over forty

minutes daily of sparsely watched unbroken election broadcasts - has been superseded. Also, the existing legal ban on conducting any campaign-ing on other types of programs should be cancelled because it cannot be enforced.

Awareness and anticipation of the parties' gimmicks, the mutual mud-slinging and simplistic solutions, lowers the level of reliability of the messages they are trying to convey and heightens the public consciousness of these messages as propaganda.

The rise in cynicism and the audience's lack of trust in politicians also has an impact on the reliability of the broadcasts, which offer blunt and direct campaigning. Because of this the broadcasts are an outdated and inefficient alternative to the developing new campaigning on the commercial channels. While they once constituted parties' only option for presenting their candidates and positions on television, the election broadcasts have become a marginal, inefficient and expensive format that serves neither the parties nor the viewer audience, but only their creators, the advertising agencies.

The new media, with its multiple regular, satellite and cable channels, must be allowed to provide a forum for the open political debate that should be encouraged during election time. The Israeli public is no longer satisfied with dry infomercial types of political advertising carefully staged by media consultants, but expects and relies on various, more informal types of acquaintance with the individual politician.

Candidates must be able to appear on any television program of their choice, whether in a frivolous format or a more serious round table discussion, to discuss their candidacy in frank and open terms. This could only encourage a more open democratic and varied forum for voters to be able to judge and consider the candidates' personal skills, ability and fitness to hold office. We hope that with a cancellation of the current election law the role of the Israeli media will be restored to that for which it was intended, as an open forum for meaningful public discussion.

There is no point either to a legal prohibition of campaign electioneering in other broadcasts. We rather believe there is a need to change the existing law, to allow campaign electioneering in programs and commercials and to devise a new format for managing campaign electioneering in Israel in the near future.

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