JERUSALEM LETTER / VIEWPOINTS

Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

VP:83 9 Shevat 5749 / 15 January 1989

# THE 1988 ISRAELI ELECTIONS - QUESTIONS OF IDENTITY

Asher Arian

**Outcome 80% Predictable / A Window on Israeli Society / No Longer a Country of Immigrants / No Referendum on the Territories / Religion and the State / National Unity Means Legitimation of the Right / Party Loyalty and Voter Shifts / Who Voted For Whom? / Sabras More Extreme**

## Outcome 80% Predictable

The social science community deserves a grade of 80 for predicting the outcome of the 1988 Israeli elections. This means that we simply did not know in advance about 20 percent of what happened. We did not know because the sampling frames used in this country are simply not sensitive enough to at least 20 percent of the population, including much of the religious community, especially the enclaves of ultra-Orthodox haredim, on the one hand, and many of the Arabs, on the other. There is simply no scientifically acceptable way yet to get these figures.

This is not the first time that social science has tripped up and it surely will not be the last time. It occurs by getting caught up in preconceptions about what is to happen based on what has happened before. Yet the standard formula in Israeli politics of "that which was, will be," still held true to a significant degree. So while the election results came as somewhat of a surprise, there was also a great deal of continuity.

## A Window on Israeli Society

In introductory political science, they talk about the functions of elections. One function of elections is to vote, to select; another function is to be elected; yet another is to set policy; another function is to identify with the community. Yet there is a fifth function of elections which is to give us an insight into what is happening in the community and in the society. The 1988 elections were excellent in providing that kind of window, revealing things that the surveys, the experts, the

Daniel J. Elazar, Editor and Publisher; Zvi R. Marom, Associate Editor; Mark Ami-El, Managing Editor
21 Arlozorov St. Jerusalem, 92181, Israel; Tel. 02-639281.  ISSN:0334–4096

politicians, and even the journalists could not identify beforehand.

To understand these elections we must assess the conflicting identities that found expression in the election results. Three kinds of conflicting identities played themselves out in these elections. The first had to do with national identity, facing such questions as: What is the definition of the national entity? How do we see the issue of boundaries? How do we see relations with the Arab population? How do we see relations with the Arab states? These are all part of formulating the definition of what it means to be an Israeli, a question that each of us has talked about every Friday evening for at least the last ten years, the issue of the 1980s. What is going to happen with the territories? What is going to happen with the Arabs? What is going to happen with the intifada? A second question of identity, one that has cooled off for the last 10-15 years, is religious identity. What does it mean to be a Jew living in a Jewish state? A third issue of identity, which has been reflected in moments of turbulence in Israeli history, is ethnic identity -- Ashkenazi and Sephardi. The recent elections served as a point in which these three concepts of identity were seen to interact in new and yet familiar ways.

**No Longer a Country of Immigrants**

The election results yield some interesting data in terms of the Sephardi-Ashkenazi split. The voters are almost evenly divided 46-46, excluding second-generation Israelis. A look at the demographic distribution of the Jewish voting age population in Israel reveals that 25.3 percent were born in Asia-Africa, 30.2 percent were born in Europe and America, 21.4 percent were born in Israel of Asian-African fathers, and 15.5 percent were Israeli-born of European fathers. (The Central Bureau of Statistics only gives data according to father's place of birth.) The remaining 7.5 percent were second-generation Israelis, most of whom are Ashkenazi because of the time of arrival of their parents.

Most important, about 45 percent of the voters are Israeli-born. By the next election the majority of voters will be Israeli-born, meaning that Israel, while still a country of immigration, is no longer a country of immigrants. Today in Jewish elementary schools in Israel, 90 percent of the students are Israeli-born. There is no melting pot of immigrants anymore, but rather a blending of natives. While in the late 1970s and early 1980s the Sephardi-Ashkenazi issue was a key issue in Israeli politics, by 1988 it was somehow incorporated and integrated into the political party system.

This can be seen by looking at the parties today. The Labor party made an extraordinary effort in 1988 to change its old, establishment, Ashkenazi image and increased the number of Afro-Asian-origin candidates in the first forty Labor slots to eleven, compared with only six in the Likud. Yet while the Labor party made this enormous effort to be part of what is going on in the country, it is also clear from the voting results that it had no effect. The Labor party actually received about 50,000 fewer votes than last time, while the total number of voters increased and a natural increment for all parties would be expected.

**No Referendum on the Territories**

On the key question of the final disposition of the administered territories, there has been an even division for the last ten years between those who advocate a more conciliatory policy and those who advocate a more hard-line approach. This division was fully reflected in the elections as the parties of the Left which favor territorial compromise received 49 mandates and the parties of the Right received 47 out of 120, with 24 seats -- 20 percent -- going to the religious and Arab lists.

Nevertheless, these elections were not a referendum on the territories. Not only was the vote for the two major blocs split down the middle, but it also must be emphasized that Labor and Likud had their power considerably condensed as compared to earlier periods. The height of the

competition between the two parties was in 1981 when the Likud received 48 seats and Labor 47 for a total of 95 seats. In 1984 the total fell to 85 (Labor 44 and Likud 41), and in 1988 dropped even lower to 79 (Likud 40 and Labor 39). This outcome guaranteed that it would be harder to form a coalition, since Shamir had fewer resources and was still even with his competitor.

On one issue there is a clear lack of congruence between public opinion and the major political parties, the likes of which is very unusual in Israeli politics. Time after time, about a third of the population report that they are willing to enter into negotiations with the PLO immediately; yet neither of the two big political parties has picked up this issue. Peres has tried to back into it a few times but then gets scared and backs off. We also know that when the two-thirds who say we should not enter into negotiations with the PLO are asked, "what if the PLO would recognize Israel and renounce terror?," then half of those say, "yes, under those circumstnces negotiations would be acceptable." This means that a third are ready to negotiate with the PLO today, another third would be ready someday, and the remaining third say in effect that under no conditions should Israel negotiate with the PLO. This is a good indication of that dead-end split, but also hints at possibilities of change.

**Religion and the State**

Another set of identities at work in Israeli politics are those of religion. What it means to be a Jew in a political entity called a Jewish state has been a central theme of Israeli politics since the very beginning of the state. There have been two distinct periods in the relationship between religion and state. In the pre-1967 period the religious parties were almost single-issue participants in the governing coalition; they were willing to go along with the foreign policy and security decisions of the Labor establishment as long as enough of their religious needs were met.

After 1967 there was a shift which saw the Gush Emunim bloc within the National Religious Party become much more vocal and active in security and foreign policy issues. Paradoxically, along with an enormous upsurge in support and activity among those people, there was a weakening of their electoral position. Just as they began to succeed in educating the population as to the importance of settlement, the Likud and Tehiya became the principal bearers of their message. Many religious voters strayed from supporting a religious party to find suitable expression of their political interests in the parties of the Right.

The 1988 elections mark the beginning of a third phase in the Israeli political process with the reemergence of the former strength of the religious camp as it focuses on religious issues and legislation. What is fascinating is that their strength, while causing shock waves in the secular community, has brought great elation to many religious people. The strength of their parliamentary delegation is exactly the same as three times in the past -- 18 Knesset seats or 15 percent. To date this has proved to be the upper limit of the electoral abilities of the religious parties.

However, this time there was an internal shift within the religious camp. Whereas in the past, the National Religious Party (NRP) controlled about two-thirds of the religious bloc and the other third was composed of what were called the non-Zionist parties, in 1988 the non-Zionist religious parties won two-thirds of the Knesset seats of the religious camp, while the NRP was reduced to one-third.

The earliest stage of politics in Israel from 1948 until 1977 was marked by the dominance of Mapai, Labor, the party of the founders, of Golda and Ben-Gurion. The NRP was a full partner in the benefits of this dominance, which is evident from the religious legislation of the period and the structures that were developed. They were not only religious structures, they were also structures that fed into a particular nationalist understanding of the

role of religion in the community.

The National Religious Party slipped over the last ten years just as much as Labor did. The period of Labor-NRP dominance ended, but no Likud-led dominant bloc emerged in their place. Why did Likud, with its leadership, its ideology, its electoral support, and, perhaps most important, its grasp of the spirit of the moment, not become the dominant party?

**National Unity Means Legitimation of the Right**

There are a number of reasons. The first is the obvious movement to the Right of the political system as a whole. As noted earlier, the Likud absorbed many of the religious voters, many of whom preferred a rightist connotation. It must also be noted that about half of the voters of the Labor party could also be described as rightist and are uncomfortable with Peres' newly-found dovish position. Many of them supported it but, as noted earlier, at lower levels than in the past.

The second period in Israeli politics, one of extreme competition between Labor and the Likud, began in 1977. It was triggered by the formation of the Democratic Movement for Change (DMC) which sapped votes from the Labor party. By 1981 many of these voters had already gone back to Labor, but by then it was almost too late because the impression of Labor as being the dominant party, the only legitimate party that could lead the country, was already gone. While the first turnabout was in 1977, it is fair to say that the first contested elections in Israel were in 1981. The result was a split down the middle. In 1984 it was again split down the middle. In 1988 the same split happened again but with a new wrinkle, a renewed expression of religious identity.

There is another important factor that is crucial in understanding what has been happening in Israel for the last twenty years. No other country in the world has been ruled for seven out of the last twenty-one years by a national unity government. I believe that in fifty years, with the perspective of time, the national unity government will be shown to have played an important role in the movement to the Right because of the legitimation that this inevitably gives to the moderate rightist position of the Likud.

It is also important to mention the unexciting quality of the leadership of the two parties. The most popular politicians according to the public opinion surveys -- Rabin, Sharon, and Levy -- were rarely shown in the campaign and instead Peres and Shamir were brought forward.

It is also important to note the relative weakness of the political party organizations. In a sense it may now be said that 80 percent of the election campaign was Americanized to the extent that it was focused on television.

One final factor affecting the election outcome was the fear, anxiety, and confusion that the ongoing stalemate and the intifada introduced into the election. In a situation of uncertainty, there is an inevitable movement to look for something more certain, something eternal, something beyond the promises of the familiar politicians.

**Party Loyalty and Voter Shifts**

To gain a closer perspective on the election results, let us look at some of the results of a national survey based on a representative sample of 1,166 Jews taken a week before the election.

Loyalists are those who continue to vote as they voted in the past, who are faithful to their party. The most loyal group by far are the religious voters who continue to vote for their party time after time. The second two most loyal groups are both Labor and Likud voters -- 80 percent who voted for one of those parties in 1984 continued to vote for that party in 1988. The Left had a 61 percent loyalty rate, but only 54 percent of those who voted for the Right in 1984 voted for them in 1988. This is part of the explanation as to where the religious parties got some of their votes.

Loyalists From 1984 to 1988

| | |
|---|---|
| Religious | 91% |
| Labor | 80 |
| Likud | 80 |
| Left | 61 |
| Right | 54 |

Where did the shifts actually occur? People who voted Labor in 1984 and moved to the Likud in 1988 totalled 4 percent of the sample, as compared to 5 percent who went the other way, from Likud to Labor. This is fascinating because these were supposedly the two groups on whom the campaign was focused, which provides clear evidence of the real failure of Labor's campaign. Those people who supported Peres in the past were pretty convinced, but he seems to have added few new supporters. What can be seen is a strong shift toward the extremes -- 10 percent left Labor and voted for parties of the Left, while 6 percent moved from the Likud to the Right.

Transfers From 1984 to 1988

| | |
|---|---|
| Labor ---> Likud | 4% |
| Likud ---> Labor | 5 |
| Labor ---> Left | 10 |
| Likud ---> Right | 6 |

**Who Voted For Whom?**

The Left got 25 percent of its vote from Afro-Asians, more than half from European-Americans (including sabras whose fathers are of the various groups), and 20 percent from second-generation Israelis. Labor is still an Ashkenazi party (61 percent) and the Likud is still a Sephardi party (68 percent). The religious parties are mixed (50 percent Afro-Asian; 41 percent European-American); with the parties of the Right about half Afro-Asian and one-quarter European-American.

Support for Major Blocs by Place of Birth

| | Asia-Africa | Europe-America | 2nd Generation Israeli |
|---|---|---|---|
| Left | 25% | 55% | 20% |
| Labor | 27 | 61 | 12 |
| Likud | 68 | 25 | 7 |
| Religious | 51 | 41 | 8 |
| Right | 49 | 27 | 24 |

Persons of Afro-Asian background voted 57 percent Likud, 22 percent Labor. Those of European-American background voted 55 percent Labor, 25 percent Likud. These figures show that even the Likud, which does have a strong Sephardi base, is not all Sephardim, and Labor is not all Ashkenazim. Israeli-born voters of Afro-Asian background voted 54 percent Likud, 21 percent Labor. Israeli-born voters of European-American background voted 48 percent Labor, but the second most popular choice for this group was not the Likud but the leftist parties -- the Citizens Rights Movement and Mapam. The last Israeli-born group, the second-generation Israelis, chose Labor and Likud in a division much closer than other groups -- 37 percent Labor, 22 percent Likud. These data all point to a developing polarization of the voting population.

1988 Election Results by Place of Birth and Ethnic Background

| | First Choice | Second Choice |
|---|---|---|
| Asia-Africa | Likud - 57% | Labor - 22% |
| Europe-America | Labor - 55 | Likud - 25 |
| Israeli-born: | | |
| - Father from Asia-Africa: | Likud - 54 | Labor - 21 |
| - Father from Europe-America: | Labor - 48 | Left - 20 |
| - Father from Israel: | Labor - 37 | Likud - 22 |

This picture is slightly different from that of 1984 when the real "ethnic party" was Labor because about 70 percent of its votes came from Ashkenazim. This time the ethnic spread of its supporters was wider, but the total number of its votes was lower.

**Sabras More Extreme**

It is the second-generation Israelis, the group that is going to be ruling in the future, who are the most extreme on both the Left and the Right, comprising 20 percent of the voters of the Left and 24 percent of the Right. By simply comparing native-born with those born abroad, we see that about half of the Labor and Likud voters are native-born, while a huge 76 percent of the Right and 68 percent of

the Left are home-grown, an indication of what is likely to happen in the future.

Israel-Born Versus Foreign-Born Support for Major Blocs

| | Israel-born | Foreign-born |
|---|---|---|
| Left | 68% | 32% |
| Labor | 51 | 49 |
| Likud | 53 | 47 |
| Religious | 59 | 41 |
| Right | 76 | 24 |

All these data seem to indicate that Israel is still a country that has not yet jelled, has not yet sorted out for itself these different focuses of identification and integration -- nationality, religion, and ethnic background. It is the shifting of these focuses which gives us an appropriate background with which to understand the election results of 1988.

* * *

Asher Arian holds a dual appointment as Professor of Political Science at Tel Aviv University and the City University of New York. He is a leading expert in Israeli electoral behavior and has published studies of each Israeli election for the past twenty years.