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THE 1983 ISRAELI MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS:

MIXED TRENDS AND MINOR UPSETS

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Local issues and personalities influenced the voters. The major surprises. Who won and who lost in the municipal elections? Results of the elections to the municipal councils. Conclusion.

~~Most election analysts in Israel today are grappling with the question of what conclusions can be drawn from the results of the municipal elections, which were held on 25 October 1983, with run-off elections on 8 November in thirty-four communities where no mayoral candidate won the requisite 40 percent of the votes cast in the first round. For those who would like to draw conclusions about the next elections to the Knesset from the vote, the question of who won and who lost is considered in terms of Likud versus Labor. In fact the results of the balloting in the 120 local authorities in the Jewish and Arab sectors do not provide answers to that question because they reflected local issues first and foremost.~~

~~The recent elections were characterized by upsets and by mixed trends. Each of the major parties--the Labor Alignment and the Likud--can boast of achievements and turnovers in a number of important localities. Not only is the overall picture far from being uniform, but it does not indicate any clear trends in state politics. Even if it were possible to project the local voting results forward to the Knesset elections, the fact that in both rounds of the municipal elections the actual voter turnout in the Jewish sector was about 50 percent, in contrast to the traditional 80 percent turnout in elections to the Knesset, means that the preferences of 25 to 30 percent of the voters remain unknown.~~

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LOCAL ISSUES AND PERSONALITIES INFLUENCED THE VOTERS

~~The proper conclusion to be drawn from the election results is that,~~ In casting their ballots, the voters focused primarily on local issues and were not distracted by such vital statewide issues as the formation of a new government headed by Yitzhak Shamir; an acute economic crisis, leading to the resignation of Finance Minister Yoram Aridor and the collapse of the stock market and the capital market; and growing tension in the relations between Syria and Israel following the fatal attack on the Israeli soldiers in Tyre. From the point of view of the Likud, the timing could not have been worse. However, the election returns showed that those issues did not play a significant role, and there was no tendency on the part of the voters to punish local Likud candidates for the difficulties of the government.

The increased importance of personality at the expense of traditional party affiliation testifies to a further decline in ideology as a factor in determining voter behavior. Until the 1969 elections, there was a close correlation between voting for the Knesset and for the local authorities. In 1973, change could be discerned in the behavior of the Israeli voters, who began to differentiate between the various levels of political activity. There is no doubt that the law providing for direct personal election of the mayor, first put into operation in the 1978 elections, has accelerated this process.

THE MAJOR SURPRISES

Parallel to the increased importance of personality in local politics, there has been a decline in the relative importance of length of time in office for incumbents standing for reelection. True, in the three major cities--Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and Haifa--the incumbents Shlomo Lahat (58.4 percent), Teddy Kollek (63 percent), and Arye Gurel (65.5 percent) were reelected by impressive majorities. However, the real drama of the recent municipal elections can be found in Herzliya, Ramat Gan, Rishon LeZion, Ashdod and Kiryat Shmona. The defeat of incumbent mayors--Yosef Nevo (Labor), Dr. Israel Peled (Likud), Hanania Gibstein (local list), Zvi Zilker (Likud), and Avraham Aloni (Labor)--by political rivals, some of them relative unknowns, serves as a welcome indication that the mayor's seat is not in the pocket of any particular candidate.

Yosef Nevo, mayor of Herzliya for the last fifteen years and a former Major General in the Israeli Defense Forces, lost to his rival Eli Landau, a dynamic and controversial figure who served in the past as military correspondent for *Ma'ariv* and as aide to former Defense Minister Ariel Sharon. In contrast to the prevailing atmosphere of indifference throughout the country, the election campaign in Herzliya was particularly animated, accompanied by an exchange of personal accusations between the candidates, leading the supporters of the rival candidates to demonstrations of physical and verbal violence. Landau surprised everyone by winning 57 percent of the votes cast, as opposed to 43 percent for his rival, despite the fact that all the Labor leaders--Peres, Rabin, Mota Gur, and Barlev--came out in support of Nevo.

In Rishon LeZion, the incumbent mayor Hanania Gibstein was defeated (32.9 percent) by the Labor Alignment candidate Brigadier General Meir Nitzan (52.8 percent), a new figure on the political scene. Gibstein places the blame for his failure to win reelection on his obstinate and unpopular campaign against the parents committees and school principals in the city, who strongly opposed the implementation of the Ministry of Education's educational reform program establishing middle schools to foster the integration of children from disadvantaged neighborhoods with middle class pupils.

Zvi Zilker, the incumbent mayor of Ashdod, led in the first round of elections. Were it not for the split within the Likud faction, which ran three separate lists, Zilker might have succeeded in winning the 40 percent necessary for election in the first round. In the second round, the Labor candidate Azulai was elected by a narrow margin of 2 percent, thanks to the support of the more recent immigrants, especially the Georgian community, who backed him solidly.

A particularly interesting contest was waged in Ramat Gan, a Liberal Party bastion since its founding, where the Labor Alignment candidate Uri Amit, chairman of the Ramat Gan Workers' Council, succeeded in forcing Dr. Israel Peled to another election. In the first round, both candidates were only one percent short of victory. Prior to the second round, Dr. Peled formed a coalition with a local faction identified with the Likud. In addition, he mobilized huge sums of money--there are those who quote a sum of \$700,000. He also employed hundreds of volunteers and a fleet of eight hundred private cars and taxis. He hired public relations firms to stage a showy publicity campaign. On election day, Likud workers telephoned the voters to persuade them to go to the polls and vote for Dr. Peled. Amit, on the other hand, had the backing of the Jews from Iraq (he is of Iraqi background), a large minority in Ramat Gan, who united behind him in the second round once they perceived that he had a chance to win. Peled's intensive efforts were in vain, and ultimately Amit, the Labor Alignment candidate, won by a slender margin of 465 votes to become the first Labor mayor in Ramat Gan's history. Perhaps even more important, he is the first Sephardi to hold an important municipal office in that city, a bastion of the Ashkenazi establishment.

In Kiryat Shmona, both parties--the Likud and the Labor Alignment--brought in their heavy artillery in support of their local candidates. The Likud sent to Kiryat Shmona a large number of government ministers and Members of Knesset, among them Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir. For the Likud, victory in Kiryat Shmona transcended the purely local dimension and became a national issue: Kiryat Shmona symbolizes the motive for launching the war in Lebanon, called "Operation Peace for Galilee." A defeat in Kiryat Shmona would have constituted a defeat for government policy. The Labor Alignment understood the significance of this electoral contest, and sent its leading spokesmen to Kiryat Shmona, headed by former prime minister Yitzhak Rabin. The results of the second round of balloting showed a sweeping victory for the Likud candidate Prosper Azran.

WHO WON AND WHO LOST IN THE MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS?

An analysis of the election results in the fifty-four cities and local councils in the Jewish sector indicates that, on the whole, there were no dramatic changes in the balance of power, as can be seen from the figure in Table 1. In comparison to the 1978 elections, the Likud succeeded in adding to its roster only two local authorities, while the Labor Alignment lost two. This change is not significant. On the contrary, as can be seen from the figures in Table 1, the Labor Alignment did well precisely in the large and established cities. According to some election analysts, this may be of great electoral significance, since 75 percent of the Israeli population is concentrated in the thirty larger and older cities. Moreover, in several of the suburban cities, such as Bat Yam, Holon, Givatayim, Hadera and Kfar Saba, the Labor Alignment candidates won sweeping victories over their Likud rivals. To this should be added Labor's achievement in winning the office of mayor in Ramat Gan and Rishon LeZion. Ramat Gan has always been an impregnable bastion of the "civil camp," whose representatives (General Zionists, Liberals, Likud) ruled the city uninterruptedly for fifty-eight years. However, it should be stressed that even in this sector there is no consistent trend, and the Likud can point to achievements and upsets in Netanya, Herzliya and Safed.

TABLE 1: BREAKDOWN OF MAYORALTIES IN THE 1983 MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS

	LARGER AND OLDER CITIES	DEVELOPMENT TOWNS AND SMALLER CITIES	TOTAL
Labor Alignment	21	6	27
Likud	4	11	15
NRP	1	2	3
Agudat Yisrael	1	1	2
Tami	1	1	2
Local Lists	2	3	5
TOTAL	30	24	54

The Likud scored several important victories in the development towns and smaller cities, including several upsets seizing the mayoralty from the Labor Alignment, the NRP, and Agudat Yisrael in a number of localities. The outstanding examples were Dimona, Kiryat Shmona, Beit Shean, Hatzor, and Shlomi. In these communities, the Likud seems to have succeeded in translating the electoral success and massive support it received in the elections to the Tenth Knesset to the local plane. On the other hand, the Labor Alignment can point to achievements of its own in several development towns, including Sderot, Ofakim, Yeruham, Ramle and Ashdod.

The leaders of the Labor Alignment accorded special importance to the election returns in the development towns. In the last general election, the Labor Alignment suffered a heavy blow in this sector, losing by significant margins. Moreover, in many of the development towns, a rift had developed between the voters and the Labor Alignment. The voters, most of whom are of Sephardic origin, felt alienated from the Labor Party, which they perceived as representing the Ashkenazim. The results of the recent municipal elections indicate a certain rapprochement and the reestablishment of confidence in the representative of Labor, even if this was not always directly expressed in the choice of a mayor. The question that remains is whether these achievements are only on the local plane, where Sephardic candidates ran under the Labor banner; or whether they reflect increased strength of the Labor Alignment within those segments of the population whose political support is vital if it wishes to regain control of the government.

RESULTS OF THE ELECTIONS TO THE MUNICIPAL COUNCILS

There are those who argue that in order to obtain a more accurate picture of the results of the elections, we should use as an indicator the balloting for the municipal councils. The mayoral

law, first implemented in the 1978 elections, clearly differentiates between direct election of the mayor and the election of the municipal councils through a party list, according to their relative strengths.

Indeed, in many places we find a distinction between the ballots cast for the mayor and for the party list he represented. In general, support for the party list is less than support for the mayoral candidate. It is on this level of the competition between party lists for election to the councils that election analysts find a more authentic link to the country's political moods. The point is further reinforced by the results in those cities where the candidate of one party was elected mayor, while the other party won a majority in the council--for example, Herzliya and Rehovot.

TABLE 2: DISTRIBUTION OF SEATS IN THE MUNICIPAL COUNCILS BY PARTY AFFILIATION

	NUMBER OF SEATS	CHANGE FROM 1978 MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS
Labor Alignment	400	+24
Likud	273	-16
NRP	199	-12
Others*	278	+44
TOTAL	1150	-

*Includes representatives of Agudat Yisrael, Tami, Shinui, local lists

Table 2 shows that the NRP suffered the heaviest blow, losing twelve seats and declining by almost 6 percent. In the mayoralty races, the NRP won only a single significant victory, in Tiberias, where its candidate Yigal Bibi won reelection. NRP representatives have tried to show that the number of seats the party received in these elections was proportionately no less than the number it received in the elections to the Tenth Knesset. However, in comparison to the 1978 municipal elections, the NRP took a serious beating. ~~Perhaps~~ The disappointing results will accelerate the trend towards a split within the NRP between the veteran faction headed by Interior Minister Dr. Yosef Burg and the Young Guard, headed by Education Minister Zevulun Hammer and Deputy Foreign Minister Yehuda Ben-Meir. ~~The recent elections showed signs of the impending split.~~ In a number of localities, two parallel lists appeared both claiming to represent the NRP.

Tami ~~can draw~~ ^{draw} encouragement from the election results. Its success, which rests primarily on support among Sephardic Jews, is apparently not a one-time phenomenon in Israeli politics. In many localities, not only in the development towns, Tami succeeded in ~~sinking roots~~. Its most impressive achievement was in Ashkelon, where its mayoral candidate, Eli Dayan, was elected by a decisive majority, principally because of his personal popularity ~~which made him the favorite of the party.~~ ^{winning support.}

CONCLUSION

An analysis of the election results shows that there was no uniform countrywide trend. While Labor did succeed in somewhat increasing its strength, reflected particularly in its increased representation on the municipal councils and in its acquisition of several "safe" Likud and NRP bastions, there were no far-reaching changes. The Likud declined slightly, but considering the poor timing of the elections from its point of view and the presence of breakaway lists identified with the Likud in many communities, such as Ashdod, Ramat Gan and Ramle, it would seem that the Likud can take comfort from the fact that it did not suffer a more serious blow.

The elections to the Tenth Knesset revealed a tendency towards near parity in the number of mandates received by each of the two major political blocs—the Likud and the Labor Alignment. The 1983 municipal elections did not indicate a real change in this trend. What was demonstrated in these elections is that many voters attribute greater importance to the candidate's image and personality and less to his party affiliation. Most of all, they cast their votes from a local perspective, not to express their opinions on state affairs. Hence, ~~it is doubtful whether, on the basis of these results, we can draw any conclusions with regard to the anticipated behavior of the voters in the elections to the next Knesset.~~

Avraham Lantzman has completed a study of Israel's local press and its influence on Israeli society which the Center will be publishing this year. He is also the author of "A Surfeit of Democracy: The Multiplicity of Candidates and Party Lists in the Israeli Municipal Elections" — a Jerusalem Letter published October 14, 1983.