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SPECIAL
ELECTION REPORT

THE ISRAELI ELECTIONS: SOME QUESTIONS

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On November 1, 1988, Israel will go to the polls to elect its Twelfth Knesset. Election days in Israel are not fixed. Under Israel's parliamentary system the Knesset has to be elected at least every four years, but each election must be specially called by an act of the Knesset that also determines its date. Under the law the elections must take place no more than four years and six months beyond the date of the prior election. Thus it is possible to stretch the life of a Knesset beyond four years, just as sometimes elections are held sooner if a government falls and no new government can be formed or if the government in power seeks an early election for political advantage. The November 1st date means that the election is

being held four years and four months after the 1984 elections.

How Fared the National Unity Government?

The 1988 elections come after four years of a national unity government that many pundits thought would collapse at almost any time after its installation in September 1984, but, as some of us predicted, survived the full term because the two major parties around whom the grand coalition was built -- Labor and Likud -- had nowhere to go.

Despite the constant bickering and at times appalling internecine conflict, the national unity government has many accomplishments to its credit including Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon and

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the establishment of a workable system for securing Israel's northern border, and the reining in of Israel's runaway inflation and restoration of credibility to the Israeli economy. Both of these and other important acts were truly bipartisan efforts. Where bipartisanship could not work was in connection with the peace process, whether in relations with Egypt over Taba or negotiations with Jordan's King Hussein or the Palestinians over the future of the territories. There both parties and especially their leaders worked at cross-purposes, in the last two years so blatantly so as to drastically reduce the credibility of both in the eyes of Israelis and outsiders alike.

Thus the two parties go into the elections with tarnished images, leadership perceived to be less than satisfactory, and uncertain programs for the future in the crucial area of peace-making. At the same time, the parties are also victims of a key division in Israeli society. In an atmosphere of uncertainty over what can or should be done to achieve peace with the Palestinian Arabs, the Israeli population is almost equally divided among those who think there is a possibility of conceding territory for peace and are willing to do so, and those who think there is no such possibility and that therefore a hard line is necessary.

In fact, Israeli public opinion is more sophisticated than this summary would suggest. It is just that Israel continues to be faced with Hobson's choices, a situation exacerbated by Shimon Peres' misplaying of the Jordanian option which he had so patiently built in his two years as prime minister and Yitzhak Shamir's refusal or inability to present himself to his public as more than a stand-patter, even when in private he has made significant proposals for breaking the deadlock. The tragedy of these two intelligent and patriotic men who have done so much for their country in other situations has very sad public consequences. Most immediately, it seems to be contributing to a perpetuation of the deadlock.

Two Parties or Two Blocs?

The two major parties are the centers of a two-bloc system with virtually all of the smaller Zionist parties (that is to say, those other than the Communists and the Progressive List for Peace) lining up with either Labor or Likud. Indeed there is every sign that those voters who cast their votes for one of the smaller parties will do so explicitly in order to influence the direction of the larger party in the same bloc once a government is formed. At this writing the two blocs are effectively deadlocked. There has been movement toward the Likud bloc consistently since last February or March, principally as a result of the Palestinian Arabs' intifada and King Hussein's withdrawal from active involvement in the West Bank. But this only means that if the election were held today, the Likud would be slightly ahead of Labor in reverse of the 1984 results, but neither bloc would be able to form a government with a Knesset majority on its own. This may change in the volatile Israeli context, but if so, the change will be for reasons not at the moment foreseeable.

The two blocs consist of the following parties:

Labor	Likud (including
Citizens' Rights	Herut, the
Movement (Ratz)	Liberals, and
Mapam	Rafi-Ometz)
Shinui	Tehiya
Meimad	Tzomet
	National Religious
	Party (Mafdal)
	Agudat Israel
	Shas

The Citizens' Rights Movement, known in Israel by its Hebrew acronym Ratz, began as a liberal, human rights-oriented, centrist party, but has now shifted far to the left to become a new left party in some respects similar to the Greens in Europe. It won 3 seats in 1984 and will probably do better this year. The CRM has stolen the thunder of Mapam, the Hebrew acronym for the United Workers'

Party. Mapam is the party of the old left, strongly Marxist in its earlier days but now ambivalently so. Its base was the Kibbutz Artzi and Hashomer Hatzair, the most left-wing of the kibbutz movements. For nearly twenty years, from 1965 until the establishment of the national unity government, Mapam was part of the Labor Alignment, but ideologically it could not agree to go into a coalition with Likud, so broke away and now is running independently. While it was guaranteed 6 safe seats within the Labor Alignment, it is not likely to get more than 2 seats, if that. There is just not that much of the old left left anymore.

Shinui is the remnant of the Democratic Movement for Change. Basically a centrist, liberal party, its leader Amnon Rubenstein actually entered the national unity government in 1984, fracturing his party in the process. However its position with regard to the territories is closer to that of Labor so that it is now firmly in the Labor bloc. It is likely to continue to get a seat or two.

The small parties in the Likud bloc are all to the right of Likud. Tehiya, which means renewal, is the largest of those parties. It is an amalgam of secular and religious Jews committed to holding onto the territories and settling them. It believes that Israel has an historic and strategic obligation to do so. Many of its members were originally from the Labor camp who shifted to the right as part of the Complete Land of Israel movement. In 1984 Tehiya included a small party established by the former chief of staff Rafael Eitan, called Tzomet (crossroads), which holds the same views. Personality conflicts between Eitan and the leaders of Tehiya have led to the secession of Tzomet, which is presenting an independent list in the 1988 elections. Tehiya is likely to do very well, indeed will probably do better than any other small party, perhaps winning as many as 9 seats. Tzomet is likely to win 1 or 2 seats at most.

A third party in the Likud bloc is Rafi-Ometz. At the moment part of the Likud

proper along with Herut and the Liberals, it is likely to break away in a struggle over the placement of its second candidate on the Likud list. Basically a centrist party, it will likely remain in the Likud bloc but is not likely to win any seats on November 1st.

Where there were once two or three religious parties -- the National Religious Party (Mafdal), Agudat Israel, and Poalei Agudat Israel (the workers of Agudat Israel) -- in recent years there have been as many as six and at this writing there are four. The NRP, the party of the religious Zionists, was once the largest. Today it is no larger than any of the others, if that. In the process of trying to rebuild itself, it brought its right wing back into the fold after the latter had run separately and won two seats in the 1984 elections, and also conciliated its Sephardic majority. As a consequence, its leadership moved to the right, leading to a break-away of its left wing who have established a new party of their own -- Meimad. NRP may possibly win 4 seats and Meimad 2, but those are probably the upper limits for both.

Agudat Israel retained a basic 4 seats for several elections, but in 1984 it split, with its Sephardic voters breaking away to form the Sephardic Torah Guardians or Shas. Agudat Israel dropped to 2 seats while Shas won 4, bringing in many Sephardic voters who did not particularly plan to vote for an ultra-religious party but wanted one that would represent them as Sephardim. Both parties are running again and they may fragment further. If not, they are likely to keep their previous strength but no more.

Of the four religious parties, the National Religious Party, Agudat Israel, and Shas should be counted with the Likud bloc and Meimad, the new left centrist breakaway from the NRP, with Labor.

On the non-Zionist left there are two parties. The old Communist party is now Hadash, a popular front-type organization which, while officially a joint Jewish-Arab party, has mostly Arab supporters who vote Communist because they do not want

to vote for a Zionist party. They regularly win 4 seats in the Knesset. The other is the Progressive List for Peace, essentially a PLO front. Nominally it too is a mixed Jewish-Arab party with almost entirely Arab voters. It appeared for the first time in the 1984 elections and won 2 seats, and is likely to repeat that success as it gives expression to Arab nationalist feeling inside Israel.

Finally there is Kach, Meir Kahana's party. Kahana after several tries finally won 1 seat in 1984, capitalizing on the anger of a minuscule number of voters, hardly more than the 1.1 percent needed, over the government's response to Palestinian Arab terrorism. It was placed beyond the pale by all the other parties in the Knesset because of its anti-Arab views. By consensus the other parties leave the Knesset when Kahana speaks, with each of the two major parties leaving a single member in the chamber to meet the legal requirements and everyone else going out. Kach is referred to as a racist party, although that is not the right term for its anti-Arab stand which advocates the transfer of Arabs living within greater Israel or confining them to second-class citizenship. In this election Kach stands to win some additional seats depending on the situation in the country and with the intifada on election day. This would be deplorable but is a reflection of the growing frustration among certain segments of the Jewish population. Kach sees itself in the Likud bloc but is still being rejected by both blocs as "racist." Should it receive 3 or more seats as is quite possible, it will no longer be possible to ignore it as easily.

There are perhaps two dozen other party lists that will participate in the elections. It is very easy to form a party list in Israel. Under the law a deposit of approximately \$7,700 and 1,500 signatures of registered voters are enough to qualify. Israeli democracy is based upon a wide-open system of access to the polls which, with strict proportional representation, is in a sense the fairest possible way to

measure support among the voters, even if not the best way to organize a stable, decisive government. We can expect several radical free enterprise parties who want to dismantle Israel's semi-socialist system, two or three senior citizens parties, a handful of ethnic parties, and even a party for the handicapped. None of them are likely to win any seats in 1988.

In the end, the two big parties together will win between 85 and 90 seats while the other 30-35 seats will be spread among perhaps twelve smaller parties.

What about the Issues?

This is not a simple question because Israel is one of those polities in which the major issues confronting the country often are not the issues around which elections are fought, either because there is a national consensus surrounding them because they are so explosive that they could "rip the country apart," or because they are so stalemated that neither side can find a way to use them as campaign issues. So campaigns tend to fall back on secondary issues, sometimes even on trivial ones, for lack of anything better. It does seem that one major issue, peace with the Palestinians, will be a feature of this campaign, but unless someone offers some options, it will be somewhat mooted by the reality of the present stalemate. The economy remains a major concern, but both parties continue to be more in agreement than in disagreement as to what needs to be done to improve it. Hence it is not likely to be much of an issue, although the future of the Histadrut may be. The religious issue is also a serious one, but neither major party wants to touch it since both hope to attract religious parties to their coalition.

Where are the Two Big Parties Today?

More to the point is the issue of the parties themselves. Will the opening of the ranks that has taken place within the two major parties and also within some of the small parties, particularly the NRP, affect the election results and the

subsequent formation of the government? Israel's parties think of themselves as being ideological, whereas in fact the two major parties have become more like American parties -- large catch-all groupings of office-seekers leaning in different ideological directions. This is not to say that each does not have its position on issues, but there is more overlap than ever before and a stronger tendency on the part of both to seek the middle ground in election campaigns so as not to alienate moderate voters.

This is not a question of left and right. The Labor party has become a social democratic party and the Likud remains populist in character. For historical reasons the Likud, the populist party, is more likely to advocate nationalization and state involvement than Labor, the social democratic party. In economics, both parties pursue a moderate mixed-economy approach that presently is moderately emphasizing privatization. Their major differences are that Labor seeks to protect the Histadrut and its economic empire while Likud would like to dismantle the Histadrut to break its political power. Labor reflects the liberal individualism of the upper middle class while Likud reflects the populist nationalism of the lower middle class who see the state as a "nursing father."

What will be the Impact of Party Reform?

For years these parties were both quite centralized and the party leadership dictated who would get on the Knesset list. Since Israel's proportional representation system is based on choosing the Knesset from party lists submitted for one country-wide electoral district, getting on a list in a sufficiently high position is crucial to one's chances of being elected. A candidate has to get what Israelis call "a realistic place." In making up its list, each party assesses how many seats it is more or less certain to win and assigns those to the favored candidates. A second

group are assigned next those seats which the party might win if things go well for it. A third group of candidates are included on the list but no one expects them to be elected.

In the past, the party leadership not only awarded places on the list but determined the rankings as well. Demands for electoral and party reform have now substantially changed this arrangement in both of the major parties. In Herut, the dominant party in the Likud, Menachem Begin once made the choice almost single-handedly, but at least two elections ago (1981) Herut changed the system to have open elections in its now 2,000-member central committee. There the party factions and individual candidates campaign to win the support of central committee members. That system determines most of the Likud candidates, excepting those set aside for the Liberal party, Herut's partner, and any small parties that happen to be its partners for any particular election.

In the Labor party, the oligarchy, representing the kibbutz movement, the urban party organizations, the various political factions within the party, and the Histadrut, held on through the 1984 elections. This time Labor held regional caucuses at which party members could choose candidates for a share of the list and then an overall election in its 1,000-member central committee.

In both major parties, elections were hotly contested this time around and many new faces appeared. Abba Eban, for example, was dropped by the Labor party because his weak position in Israeli domestic politics coupled with his age left him bereft of support as people sought younger and newer faces to try to revitalize a party which is still combatting the image of being old and tired. Eban, who could never translate his reputation abroad into domestic political capital, was a casualty of this changeover. Since Likud had undergone its revolution two elections earlier, the changes in its ranks were less dramatic.

What about Electoral Reform?

In this connection, we can ask why have the parties continued to oppose electoral reform and will they continue to do so? Since Israel was established there have been demands for changing the proportional representation system to introduce district elections in some form. Periodically, efforts at electoral reform have actually reached the legislative stage but they always have been buried in the Knesset.

This year there was another such effort. An electoral reform bill that did not specify any particular system, except that it had to include some form of district election for at least half of the Knesset members, passed its first reading in June. It was left to a Knesset committee to come up with the exact plan. Not surprisingly, in the month and a half left before the effective end of the present Knesset, no agreement was reached. The big parties buried the issue if for no other reason than by that time no change could take effect for these elections. Hence if either of the large parties backed the reform, to be effective for the next elections, it would alienate the small parties hurt by it and have trouble forming a coalition with them come November.

Officially, both parties are for electoral reform, but in fact they have opposed it at every turn. Why have the large parties opposed electoral reform when it would seem as if it would be in their interest to combine to change the system and thereby eliminate or sharply reduce the number of seats going to small parties? I would suggest that this is because any change to district elections would weaken the control of the party leadership over advancement within the party, the key to controlling the party organization. The real change that electoral reform would bring would be to create independent power centers from which more independent candidates could enter the Knesset, no longer giving the party leadership the monopoly they now enjoy. On the other hand, as the old oligarchies lose their power to the party

central committees, this reason is diminishing in importance. Hence the possibilities for electoral reform in the future are likely to be better.

How will the Election Affect the Intifada and Chances for Israeli-Palestinian Peace?

If the electoral stalemate continues with the same leadership in the two major parties, then Israel will be stalemated in dealing with the Palestinians. If the Labor bloc should somehow win and put together a government, it would try hard to make peace but with doubtful success because its control would be too tenuous. In Israel, as elsewhere, only the hawks can make peace and only the doves can make war. It is important to remember that the only peace treaty Israel has signed with an Arab state was engineered and negotiated by Likud's Menachem Begin, while the Likud's war in Lebanon led to great dissension in the country as much of the Labor opposition opposed it.

If the Likud should be able to put together a winning coalition, then we can expect some dramatic steps toward peace, not only under that theory but also in light of what Shamir has said in various public forums regarding his openness to new initiatives. Whether his initiatives will be sufficient to move the Palestinians is hard to say. While Shamir is less opposed to making certain concessions than is commonly believed, it is not likely that he will be the person to initiate any major trade-off.

Sad to say, Ariel Sharon is probably the Likud leader who would be the most flexible because he has the self-confidence to take risks once he has focused on a goal, and if he decides that peace with the Palestinians is his goal, then he can do most anything. For that very same reason, he is the person that almost all Israelis would least like to have as prime minister. He has no restraints about anything, hence whatever his other qualities, he is considered to be potentially dangerous in that office.

What about the Histadrut?

The Labor party remains the dominant party in the Histadrut to the point where the Histadrut is essentially an instrument of the Labor camp. ("Camp" is the term that Israelis apply to all parties identified with a particular ideology -- in this case Labor, as distinct from the Labor party alone.) In the past the Histadrut has been a powerful influence on behalf of Labor, not only in terms of those who share its ideology but in very practical ways. Many people are beholden to the Histadrut and feel that they must respond to its lead in elections. The Histadrut can provide the buses and workers to bring out the voters on election day. In general, the Histadrut has an infrastructure that it unabashedly puts at the Labor party's disposal.

The Histadrut's influence stops, however, when it comes to influencing its rank-and-file membership. The truth is that the blue collar workers do not vote for the Labor party anymore. The party has become the party of the upper middle class, the academic and managerial segments of society, heavily Ashkenazic, who were raised within the Labor camp and retain ties of political culture and outlook with it. The kibbutzim also belong to Israel's upper middle class. They too vote Labor. The workers, heavily Sephardic, vote Likud. Thus in the 1977 and 1981 elections the only voting districts to be solidly carried by Labor were those where the richest Israelis live, while the development towns went solidly for Likud. This was repeated with somewhat less intensity in 1984, so it can now be considered a fact of life in Israeli politics, at least for this generation.

What about the Role of the Small Parties?

The shift from a system in which one party was dominant to one with two large competitive parties has increased the opportunities for small parties and the incentive to establish new parties. When the Labor party or its predecessor, Mapai, was the dominant party and no other party was considered to have a chance to win

control of the government, only a handful of long-lasting small parties could win seats. The only one which really counted was the National Religious Party, which in those days was essentially a Labor party with a commitment to traditional religious principles and observance. Its leadership shared Labor party views on most things and the coalition between them was a natural and continuing alliance.

The NRP existed as a separate party primarily to ensure that its institutions would get their share of the Labor-controlled pie. On larger policy issues they went along with Labor as a matter of course. Since Mapai and its sister Labor parties, plus the National Religious Party, generally had a sufficient majority between them to form a government, new small parties were effectively discouraged.

When the rise of Likud changed the situation, new incentives for small parties were created. Once neither major party could easily form a coalition, any small party that won even a seat or two could count on being wooed by one of the large parties out of necessity, since one or two votes could make the difference between forming a government or not. Matters were even worse than that since the two-party stalemate led to further fragmentation of the small parties as ambitious politicians saw opportunities for their own advancement through forming separate parties of their own. Thus fragmentation was actually increased. The number of parties winning seats in the Knesset rose with each winning fewer seats.

Take, for example, the National Religious Party which used to get 10 or 12 seats in the old days. Once it dropped to 6 seats in the 1981 election, it had fewer safe seats to offer party leaders. Not only that but the NRP itself was taken over by its Young Guard who found itself more at home with Likud than Labor, further complicating the issue since those of a Labor or dovish persuasion who were unhappy with the shift would always be tempted to break away to form a party to the left, while those of more hawkish

persuasion were tempted to break away to form a party to the right. Thus a party leader who might reach the sixth or seventh place on the NRP list but who had a following of his own could calculate that with his own list, he at least would be number one. If his list got only one seat, not only would he be assured of being in the Knesset, but would likely become a minister in the government as the price for supporting one of the large parties in the formation of a governing coalition.

Since the minimum share of the total vote needed to get into the Knesset is approximately 1.1 percent, almost anyone can get in. Were the percentage raised to only 2.5 percent, one and two seat parties would disappear. If it were raised to 3 percent, all small parties would either disappear or would have to unite into at least medium-sized parties, probably leaving one united religious party, one united Arab party of the left, a united Jewish party of the left, and a united party of the right. The only way to change that would be to introduce district elections.

How Does the Israeli Voter Cast His or Her Vote?

As already indicated, Israelis do not vote for individual candidates but for party lists. In other words they cast one vote for the party of their choice. In doing so they do not mark a ballot. In the voting booth there are trays for each party running in the election. Each tray has a pile of slips in it with the name of the party and letters of the Hebrew alphabet used to identify it. (For example, Mapai was always Aleph, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Mapam used Mem and Achdut Ha'avoda, the third member of the founding triumvirate of the Labor party, used Taf and Vav. When the three parties united as the Labor party, its symbol became Aleph-Mem-Taf, forming the Hebrew word Emet meaning truth.) The voter chooses the slip of the party he or she wants to support, puts it in an envelope, seals it, and drops it into a ballot box.

The votes are counted by opening the envelopes and stacking the slips in each polling station. Totals are then compiled countrywide and whatever percentage of the vote a party receives above 1.1 percent determines the number of seats it receives in the Knesset. So if a party gets 30 percent of the vote, it gets 36 Knesset seats. If it gets 10 percent, it will get 12 seats. There is a complicated formula established by law to deal with fractions and parties of similar outlook make agreements among themselves to transfer their fractions to one another to gain maximum support for their bloc.

How are the Actual Members of the Knesset Determined?

Once the number of seats a party is to receive is established, say 36 seats in the case of the party that receives 30 percent of the vote, the first 36 names on the list the party submitted to qualify for the election automatically become members of the Knesset. For the party that won 10 percent of the vote, the first 12 names on its list become members. The lists remain for the life of the Knesset so that if a party member dies or resigns, the next person on his party's list automatically enters the chamber. Thus there never are vacancies nor are there by-elections, since vacancies are filled automatically.

How is a Government Formed?

On November 2nd we should know generally what the division of seats will be in the Twelfth Knesset. However since the soldiers' vote will be counted a little later, giving soldiers in the field time to cast their ballots beyond the time allotted on election day itself, it may be another week before the final division of seats is determined. (Israel does not provide for absentee ballots except for soldiers and members of Israel's merchant marine.) Since it is unlikely that any party will receive a majority -- it has never happened in an Israeli election, even in the days when one party was dominant -- it

will be necessary to form a coalition government.

The new Knesset is seated immediately. At that point Chaim Herzog as President of Israel will call upon the head of the party with the largest number of seats in the Knesset to form a government. He has 21 days to do so, a period which can be extended once for another 21 days. If the designee is in a position to organize a coalition immediately, the new government could be sworn in the next day. If he cannot negotiate a coalition during the period designated, he will return his mandate to the President who will then ask the head of the next largest party to make a similar effort, and so on until a coalition is formed. If no coalition can be formed, a new election would have to be called, but that has never happened. There have been fairly long stretches of time before a new governing coalition was established, but one always has been established in the end. In the interim the previous government continues to sit as the caretaker government with full powers, indeed greater powers than it has when it is a regular government because it cannot be dismissed by a Knesset vote of no confidence, so there is no time when Israel is without a government.

When a governing coalition is established, it is on the basis of a formal agreement negotiated by the parties involved. That agreement, which all sign, becomes a kind of constitutional contract for the new government as long as it sits.

Then the government must get down to the hard business of governing the Jewish state and negotiating peace with its neighbors.

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For further reading, see:

- Daniel J. Elazar, "A Time of Constitutional Milestones in the History of Israel," Viewpoints 34 (June 12, 1984).
David Clayman, "Israel's Eleventh Knesset," Jerusalem Letter 76 (September 19, 1984).
Daniel J. Elazar, "Politics in a Quasi-Two-Party System," Viewpoints 37 (December 21, 1984).
David Clayman, "Israel's National Unity Government: The First Hundred Days," Viewpoints 38 (December 30, 1984).
Shmuel Sandler, "Whither the NRP?," Viewpoints 55 (December 5, 1986).
Nathan Yanai, "Unity Government: The Second Phase," Viewpoints 56 (December 12, 1986).
Daniel J. Elazar, "Electoral Reform for Israel," Viewpoints 65 (September 15, 1987).
Michal Shamir, "Kach and the Limits to Political Tolerance in Israel," Viewpoints 67 (October 27, 1987).

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