

Agenda Building, Agenda Setting, Priming, Individual Voting Intentions, and the Aggregate Results: An Analysis of Four Israeli Elections

By Tamir Sheafer and Gabriel Weimann

This article reports the findings of the multistage agenda-setting process of four Israeli elections. In the first stage, agenda building, it is demonstrated that there is a close association between real-world indicators and media agenda. In the second stage, agenda setting, it was found that the level of television coverage of issues influences the proportion of surveys' respondents naming these issues as the nation's most important problems. In the third stage, priming, the analysis focused on electoral voting behavior in multiparty parliamentary elections rather than on the usual evaluations of the president's performance. At the individual level, there is evidence for a priming effect. At the aggregate level, the findings suggest that there may be a priming effect on the actual electoral success of various political parties.

According to the agenda-setting hypothesis, the media influence public opinion by emphasizing certain issues over others. The amount of media attention, or the media salience, devoted to certain issues influences the degree of public concern for these issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The roots of this approach can be found in Lippman's (1922) argument that the world around us is too complicated and out of reach, and that consequently we must rely on the media to understand it. Not all the world is out of reach, however, and agenda-setting studies too often ignore instances where people do have direct experiences with real-world events (Behr & Iyengar, 1985). Therefore, Behr and Iyengar argued that "it is imperative that indicators of national conditions be brought to bear on the relationship between news coverage and issue salience" (1985, p. 40).

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The priming effect hypothesis, an extension of agenda setting (Iyengar & Simon, 1993; Scheufele, 2000),¹ states that by making some issues more salient than others, the media influence “the standards by which governments, presidents, policies, and candidates for public office are judged” (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987, p. 63). Most priming studies concentrate on evaluations of presidents’ performances. Few studies go one step further and investigate the impact of priming on voting intentions for political candidates (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Johnston et al., 1992; Roberts, 1992).

This article uses Israel as a case study. Its goal is to contribute to the agenda-setting and priming research by analyzing the complete agenda-setting process, from real-world indicators with which citizens are likely to have a rather direct experience, through media coverage of these indicators, to public opinion, and finally, individuals’ voting intentions and aggregate voting behavior. The last two are rather new in agenda-setting and priming research, especially in research concentrating on political parties that is conducted in a natural setting, free from the limitations of an experimental laboratory.

Four national election campaigns are included in the analyses (1996, 1999, 2001, and 2003). This was a dramatic period in Israel, in which, among many other events, a prime minister was assassinated, the peace process with the Palestinians collapsed, the second Intifada, the Palestinian uprising, erupted and the national economy was, and still is, tottering on the verge of collapsing. Although they rely heavily on the media, most Israelis have direct experience with the worsening security and economic real-world conditions. For example, almost 4,000 Israeli civilians and soldiers (out of about 6.6 million Israelis) were killed or injured in numerous terrorist attacks within Israel and in fighting against the Palestinians in the year preceding the 2003 election. In addition, tens of thousands of Israelis participate in the fight against the Palestinians, hundreds of thousands are stuck in traffic jams caused by police barricades in search of terrorists, and virtually every Israeli has to go through daily body searches when entering public places. Almost no one, including those who hypothetically were never exposed to the news, could live in Israel without being exposed to the worsening security conditions. It is interesting and important to find, therefore, whether agenda setting and priming “work” in such a situation.

Agenda Building and Agenda Setting

McCombs and Show’s (1972) research on the agenda-setting powers of the media included an analysis only of the influence of the media agenda (i.e., the hierarchy of issues in the media, which is the independent variable) on the public agenda (i.e., the hierarchy of importance the public attributes to issues, which is the dependent variable). Funkhouser’s study, published a year later (1973), added an analysis of an earlier stage in the process, the influence of real-world events (as the independent variable) on media agenda (as the dependent variable). Agenda setting, therefore, “needs to be examined across levels of analysis; that is, both as

¹ There is no general agreement that priming is an extension of agenda setting. Price and Tewksbury (1997, p. 176), for example, argued that agenda setting is a variant of priming.

media agendas and as audience agendas” (Scheufele, 2000, p. 302). The first level of analysis, the process of forming a media agenda, is termed here “agenda building” (Cobb & Elder, 1971; Scheufele, 2000), and the second, the process of forming a public agenda, is termed “agenda setting.”

Agenda Building

Agenda building may actually include all studies that offer “explanation of why information about certain issues, and not other issues, is available to the public in a democracy” (Dearing & Rogers, 1996, p. 2). Empirical agenda-building studies usually concentrate on two major independent variables affecting media agenda: real-world conditions and events, and the activities of political actors. The first include analyses of the correlation between changes in real-world indicators and events and the hierarchy of issues on the media agenda. As the environment sends signals of worsening conditions in a certain area, it is expected that the media would accord greater attention to that certain area. The second include the correlations between the agendas or strategies of certain political actors like parties or candidates, and the media agenda.

Most agenda-building studies belong to the first group, and many of those studies find a rather low correlation between real-world indicators and media agenda (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Funkhouser, 1973). Yet, Behr and Iyengar (1985) did find that media coverage is “affected significantly by national economic conditions” (p. 45).

Agenda Setting

When studying the public’s agenda, most agenda-setting studies are either cross-sectional hierarchy studies, “in which all of the main issues on the public agenda at a certain point in time are investigated” or “longitudinal studies, in which an agenda-setting scholar investigates the rise and fall of one or a few issues over time” (Dearing & Rogers, 1996, pp. 41–42). Dearing and Rogers (1996, p. 49) reviewed 92 empirical agenda-setting studies of the two types and found that about two thirds of them “confirmed this media agenda-public agenda relationship.”

Two major criticisms of agenda setting, however, are relevant to this alleged confirmation of the influence of the media agenda on the public agenda. First, cross-sectional designs, in which data on the public agenda are collected at a single point in time, are not powerful enough to prove causality (Behr & Iyengar, 1985; Scheufele, 2000). Second, agenda-setting studies too often ignore instances in which people do have direct experiences with real-world indicators and events. Some scholars argue that agenda setting would be weaker when people have direct experience with a given issue, although the empirical results are mixed (Watt, Mazza, & Snyder, 1993). Behr and Iyengar (1985), who did find that real-world conditions influence the public’s agenda, have warned that “analyses of media agendas-setting that ignore real world conditions will arrive at severely inflated estimates of media influence” (p. 53).

In the present study, we tried as much as possible to take these criticisms into consideration. Although the Israeli data, as detailed below, do not allow for a longitudinal design, we included in the analyses cross-sectional data from four

consecutive election campaigns, therefore achieving a design that may be termed a multiple cross-sectional design. This indeed is not as good as a longitudinal design, but it enables analyzing mutual long-term changes in real-world indicators and media and public agendas. As for the second criticism, we included major real-world conditions in our analyses.

Priming

The priming hypothesis is based on empirical findings outside the area of mass communication, according to which people rely on the most accessible information in their memory when making judgments (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973, 1981). Imported to communication studies, the priming hypothesis states that the media agenda affects the criteria people use to evaluate the performance of political actors (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). The hypothesis describes a process that is an extension of agenda setting. First, by emphasizing certain issues over others, the media influence the hierarchies of issues that the public recognizes as important. This is done by making these certain salient issues more accessible in an individual's memory (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Krosnick & Kinder, 1990; Price & Tewksbury, 1997). This is the agenda-setting part. Second, individuals use those issues, which are most salient and accessible in their memory, to evaluate the performance of political actors. That is, by priming a certain issue the media affect the criteria people use to evaluate political actors (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Krosnick & Kinder, 1990). If, for example, the issue of foreign affairs was primed, then people would judge the president's performance by mostly evaluating his performance in the area of foreign affairs; whereas if economy were primed, it would become the basis for evaluating the president's performance (Iyengar & Simon, 1993; Krosnick & Kinder, 1990; Pan & Kosicki, 1997).

Until now, most media priming research has focused on evaluations of the president's performance (Price & Tewksbury, 1997). However, there is no reason to limit research on priming effects only to presidents and the influences on the evaluations of their performance. The effects of priming on other political actors, such as political parties, are expected to be similar to the effects on the evaluations of presidents (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Price & Tewksbury, 1997). Moreover, there is no reason to limit the research on priming effects in natural settings mostly to evaluation of performance and not to extend it also to voters' electoral behavior. After all, "it is widely accepted that cognitive knowledge structures or schemata that are frequently or recently activated become more readily accessible for application to attitude objects" (Domke, 2001, p. 775). Indeed, the electoral impact of priming was proved to be rather powerful in experimental tests conducted by Iyengar and Kinder (1987, chap. 11).

There are at least two reasons for extending priming effects to electoral voting behavior. According to the first, which is also discussed by Iyengar and Kinder (1987, pp. 102–103; see also Brosius & Kepplinger, 1992), there is a high positive correlation between evaluations of presidents' performances (the dependent variable in most priming effect studies) and voting for or against them. Second, politi-

cal parties “own” certain issues. For example, in the U.S., the Republican Party “owns” the issues of crime and foreign affairs, whereas the Democratic Party “owns” the issue of poverty (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Petrocik, 1997). “When the media elevate one or the other issue to higher saliency, they are inadvertently helping the political party that ‘owns’ that issue” (Dearing & Rogers, 1996, p. 63). This is the major argument of the issue-ownership hypothesis (Petrocik, 1997). Political parties are therefore expected to enjoy an electoral gain when the media are emphasizing “their” issues.

A few natural setting agenda-setting and priming studies did analyze the influence of media salience and priming on the voting intentions of individuals and found some evidence for such an effect (Brosius & Kepplinger, 1992; Johnston, Blais, Brady, & Crete, 1992; Roberts, 1992). These studies are based on public surveys, and the dependent variable is often the “voting intentions if elections were held today” question. We used the same technique, as explained below. However, we also attempted to analyze the aggregate actual vote, as represented by the election results. The actual vote may be quite different from the aggregation of individual voting intentions (Gelman & King, 1993). If all voters are exposed to the same salient issues in the media, then individual priming effects and aggregate priming effects should behave in a similar way. Most major media in Israel, including the two major television channels, are national, and studies found a high correlation between their agendas (Sheafer, 2001; Sheafer & Weimann, 2005). Even the major news websites, for example, are owned by the largest newspapers or at least get most of their news from the major newspapers. Therefore, Israel should serve as a good case study for such an analysis.

Research Premises and Hypotheses

Five major variables are included in this study: real-world conditions; the media agenda; the public agenda; individual voting intentions; and the elections’ aggregate results. Each variable is divided into two groups of domains, either “security and peace process” or “domestic issues and the economy.” Such a dichotomy is common in agenda-setting and priming research and sufficiently represents the electoral competition (see, for example, Iyengar & Simon, 1993; Pan & Kosicki, 1997; Sherman, MacKie, & Driscoll, 1990).

The agenda-setting process was regarded as a zero-sum game. That is, “If an issue is to climb the . . . agenda, it must push other issues down the agenda” (Dearing & Rogers, 1996, p. 66; see also Zhu, 1992). Practically, the zero-sum game is analyzed here by calculating the relative proportion (in percentage points) of each of the two domains, security-peace and domestic-economic, within the agenda (which is 100%).

Before discussing the various analyses, we shall state the premises and hypotheses relevant to the full, multistage process of agenda setting. Below, we present two premises and two hypotheses. Because this is an exploratory study, some variables do not have enough data points to allow statistical inferences. In these cases we present our research expectations as premises and not as hypoth-

eses. When the data permit statistical inference, we present our expectation as hypotheses.

It should be noted that when we discuss changes in agendas and their influences, we compare each election to the previous one, in a manner similar to a longitudinal design. This might be termed a multiple cross-sectional design.

Premise 1 (Agenda Building). Worsening conditions in the security indicator will be associated with increased media coverage of this domain and in a relative decrease in the media coverage of the economic domain, and vice versa. (We cannot assume, however, what will happen in a situation in which both indicators face worsening conditions at the same time.)

Hypothesis 2 (Agenda Setting). Increase in the level of media coverage of the security-peace domain will be associated with an increase in the proportion of survey respondents naming this issue as the country's most important problem, and with a proportional decrease in the proportion of respondents naming the domestic-economic domain as the most important problem, and vice versa.

Hypothesis 3 and premise 4 require elaboration. According to the priming hypothesis, the evaluations of a president's performance are based on how good or bad he or she was in solving or dealing with the problem that is primed by the media and in the public's memory. This is a retrospective approach, similar to Fiorina's (1981) retrospective voting approach. The rationale of both is that people base their present political evaluations and decision making on judgments of the past performance of the leader.

The analysis of retrospective performance evaluations and voting behavior in multiparty parliamentary systems, such as that of Israeli, might be more complicated than the American case. One reason is the existence in Israel of multiparty coalition governments. There are other reasons, however. Let us take, for example, a situation in which two voters consider the peace process the most important problem, one holding a right-wing ideology and the other holding a left-wing ideology. When evaluating the past performance of the various parties regarding this problem, the first is likely to give a high performance ranking to the party perceived as most active in opposing any compromise with the Palestinians, and a low performance ranking to the party perceived as most active in calling for a compromise. The other is expected to do exactly the opposite. The same issue domain can cause voters to make opposite evaluations and consequently to behave differently in the voting booth. Both of them, however, would vote for parties that are most identified, from their viewpoint, with the domain of the peace process.

Not all voting behavior, though, is based on retrospective analysis. Voters' decisions are also based on expectations of future performances (Arian & Shamir, 2001; Fiorina, 1981; Lewis-Beck & Tien, 2000; Miller & Shanks, 1996). We believe that this prospective approach to voting behavior is also relevant to a priming effect research. Consider the two voters from the example above. After the issue of the peace problem was primed, it became most important for both of them. According to the prospective approach, they would vote for the parties that present the best solutions for this problem. These are not necessarily those that present various new policies, but mainly those that are identified most with the domain—that "own" the issue. In the U.S., "parties 'own' issues because Americans perceive

differences between them in their ability to ‘handle’—to resolve—the problems represented by the issue” (Petrocik, 1997, p. 184). This issue-ownership approach is prospective. Its rationale is similar to the agenda-setting-priming process, but with a prospective “twist” at the end. Its logic runs as follows: (a) Parties make an effort to put the issues owned by them on the media agenda; (b) the media emphasize certain issues and not others; (c) the issue emphasized most in the media affects voters’ evaluations of the parties, and their voting behavior. Voters are likely to vote for parties that can be trusted to handle the problem, and these are the parties that own the issue-problem. Petrocik (1997) showed that “Democrats do better when the issue agenda favors the Democrats,” and vice versa (p. 190).

Therefore, the two voters from the example above are likely to vote for parties that “own,” or are identified with, the issue of the peace process. In a multiparty parliamentary system, however, they have more options than in the American system and are likely to vote for different parties (one from the Right, one from the Left). On the other hand, two other voters who are more concerned with the economic problem would be more likely to vote for parties that “own” the economic problem.

These are the major rationalizations of hypothesis 3 and premise 4:

Hypothesis 3 (Priming—Individual Vote): Survey respondents naming the security-peace problem as the most important one would be more likely than those naming the domestic-economic problem as most important to state that if the elections were held today, they would vote for one of the security-peace parties, and vice versa.

Premise 4 (Priming—Aggregate Results): An increase in the proportion of the security-peace domain as the most important problem in the survey will be associated with an increase in the proportion of the actual votes for the security-peace parties in the elections and with proportional decreases in the proportion of the actual votes for the domestic-economy parties, and vice versa.

Methods

Real-World Conditions

The security-peace domain is represented here by the number of civilians and IDF (Israeli Defense Forces) soldiers who were killed 6 months prior to each election. We believe that this is a good indicator of both the security problem in Israel and of the condition of the peace process with the Palestinians. The other variable, “domestic issues and the economy,” is represented by the annual change in GDP (Gross Domestic Product) per capita prior to the elections.² This is an acceptable index for the state of the economy (Abramowitz, 2000; Fair, 2002).

² We chose the latest known annual GDP per capita data before each election, knowing that an economic variable such as this is not very representative of other domestic conditions. Eco-

Media Agenda

"The media agenda is usually indexed by a content analysis of the news media to determine the number of news stories about an issue" (Dearing & Rogers, 1996, p. 18). In this research we included in the content analysis election-related news items that appeared in the major newscasts of the two major national television channels in Israel (Channel One and Channel Two)³ during the election campaigns. All items that mentioned the campaign, parties, or candidates were coded.⁴ The coding team for each election included 5–7 students, interns in the Israeli Democracy Institute, and workers of Ifat, a company that conducts content analyses for the commercial market. All teams of coders were given instructions and intensive training by the same research team. Coders were instructed, among other things, to mark the three (or fewer) main substantive issues appearing in each news item, from a list provided in the codebook. Because the coding of this category is rather straightforward, the intercoder agreements achieved were high (Scott's $\pi = .85$).

Later, the researchers collapsed the various issues into two categories of "security and peace process" or "domestic issues and the economy." For example, items about terrorist attacks or the negotiations with the Palestinians were considered as belonging to the "security-peace" category. Items about the economy and social welfare were assigned to "domestic-economy" category. All items were assigned to one of these two categories. The researchers themselves conducted this coding because it was not included in the original studies. The intercoder agreement achieved was perfect.

The Public Agenda

"The public agenda is usually measured by public opinion surveys in which a sample of individuals is asked . . . 'what is the most important problem facing this country today?'" (Dearing & Rogers, 1996, p. 17). Such a question is regularly asked in Israel, in a single survey conducted during the last month of each campaign. All surveys were conducted for the Israel Democracy Institute. The data are only for the Jewish population of Israel, which is the target population of our exploration of agenda setting and priming.⁵ The researchers divided the various issues raised by the public into the categories of "security and peace process" or "domestic issues and the economy," in a similar manner to the one described above.

conomic issues, nevertheless, usually receive much more media attention than other issues in the domestic-economy domain.

³ The rank-order correlations between the two channels in each campaign, before narrowing down the issues into two groups, were .82 ($p < .001$) in 1996, .83 ($p < .001$) in 1999, .87 ($p < .001$) in 2001, and .93 ($p < .001$) in 2003. After the original classification was recoded, the agendas of both channels were identical.

⁴ The content analyses included 627 items over a period of about 60 days in 1996; 1,285 items in a period of 60 days in 1999; 570 items over a period of 50 days in 2001; 286 items over a period of 27 days in 2003. The different time periods analyzed represent different campaign lengths. We found no theoretical or practical reasons to believe that these differences had any impact on our conclusions.

⁵ The sample sizes were 1,168 in 1996; 1,225 in 1999; 1,417 in 2001; and 1,234 in 2003. The surveys are available through the Israel Social Science Data Archive, Hebrew University (studies # 643-646; <http://ssda.huji.ac.il>).

Individual Voting Intentions and Elections Aggregate Results

Individual voting intentions are measured by public opinion surveys in which a sample of individuals is asked, "Which party you would vote for if elections for the Knesset were held today?" This question is asked in the same surveys described above. Aggregate results are each party's share (in percentage) of the total vote. As for the 2001 special elections for prime minister, we aggregated the respondents' answers about voting intentions for parties. We did not want to exclude this election from the analysis and therefore relied on the best available data.

The researchers then divided the parties into two groups, "security-peace parties" (or "general parties") and "domestic-economy parties" (or "sectarian parties"). The division was based on the main issue with which the party was identified. It is based on a theoretically generated categorization that is used quite often by Israeli scholars (Diskin, 1999; Kenig, Rahat, & Hazan, 2005). To test the validity of this categorization, we conducted a simple content analysis of party platforms. We divided the parties into two groups according to the first topic that appeared on their platform. For example, the first topic on Labor's platform was "peace and security," and on Shas's platform it was religious issues. Therefore, Labor was assigned to the "security-peace" group and Shas to the "domestic-economy" group. The content analysis resulted in two groups completely identical to the groups suggested in the literature. One researcher and a student conducted this analysis. The agreement between them was perfect.⁶

The analysis of individual voting intentions required adding party identification as a control variable, to show that political agenda, represented by the most important problem facing the country, influences voting intentions even when taking into consideration the party identification of the respondents. Because the Israeli surveys do not include questions of party identification, we used instead the respondent's party vote in the previous elections. We also added other control variables in the analyses: a few major SES variables (i.e., gender, age, education, and income) and two major issue variables, agreement to return territories for peace (i.e., being a dove or a hawk on the Israeli-Palestinian issue) and support for a capitalist or socialist approach (or being a liberal or a conservative on the economic issue; see Shamir & Arian, 1999, for analyses that include the same control variables).

Results

Agenda Building

According to the first premise, worsening conditions in the security indicator will be associated with increased media coverage of this domain and in a relative decrease in the media coverage of the economic domain, and vice versa. Figure 1

⁶ The security-peace parties were Labor/One Israel, Likud, Meretz, Hadash, Third Way, Center, Moledet, National Union, Balad. The domestic-economic parties were Shas, Shinui, One Nation, Yahdut Hatora, Israel Be'aliya, Israel Betenu, Mafdal, Mada, Raam.

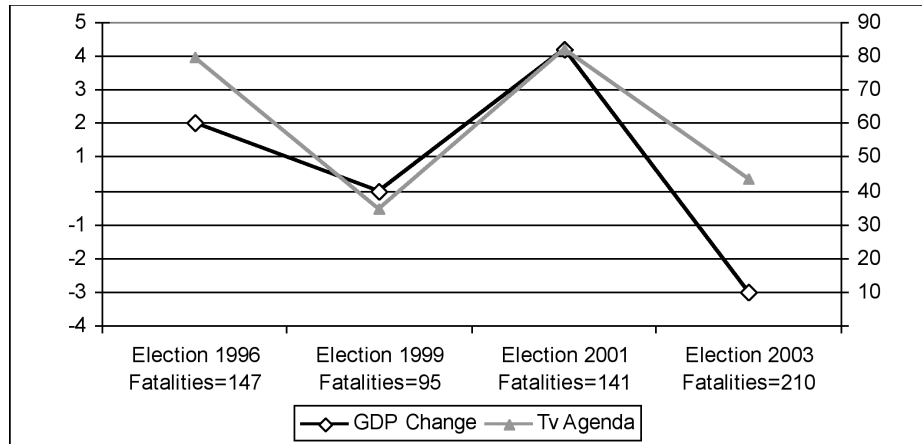


Figure 1. The X-axis represents the election year and the election year's number of civilians and IDF fatalities during a period of 6 months prior to the elections. The left Y-axis represents the annual change in the GDP per capita, and the right Y-axis the proportion of the security issue/problem within the total agenda of security and domestic-economy combined (100%). The lines are added for graphical representation; that is, we do not have any figures for the periods between elections.

reveals an association between real-world indicators and the television agenda, but the association becomes more complicated when both security-peace and domestic-economic domains suffer simultaneously from worsening conditions and consequently “pull” the media agenda in opposite directions.

The 1996 elections took place in a period of renewed terrorist attacks against Israelis and an Israeli military operation in Lebanon, but also in a period of economic growth. In other words, there were worsening conditions in the security domain and improved conditions in the domestic-economic domain. The media agenda, accordingly, concentrated mostly on the bad news of the security problem (79.5%). In the 1999 elections, compared with 1996, we could see improving conditions in the security domain (fewer fatalities), but worsening conditions in the domestic-economic domain. Once again, the media agenda concentrated on the bad news, this time of the domestic-economic domain, allocating only 34.5% of its attention to the security domain (and therefore 65.5% to the domestic-economic domain). The 2001 elections were quite similar to those of 1996, with worsening conditions in the security domain (the beginning of the Intifada), but a big surge in the economy. The security domain, accordingly, completely dominated the media agenda (81.9%).

In the 2003 elections, however, both domains faced worsening conditions of about the same magnitude, and therefore were equally newsworthy. In a zero-sum game the media had to make a choice between these two qualitative contenders, and they chose the domestic-economic domain over the security-peace domain. Indeed, the agenda is almost equally split between the domains (43.5%

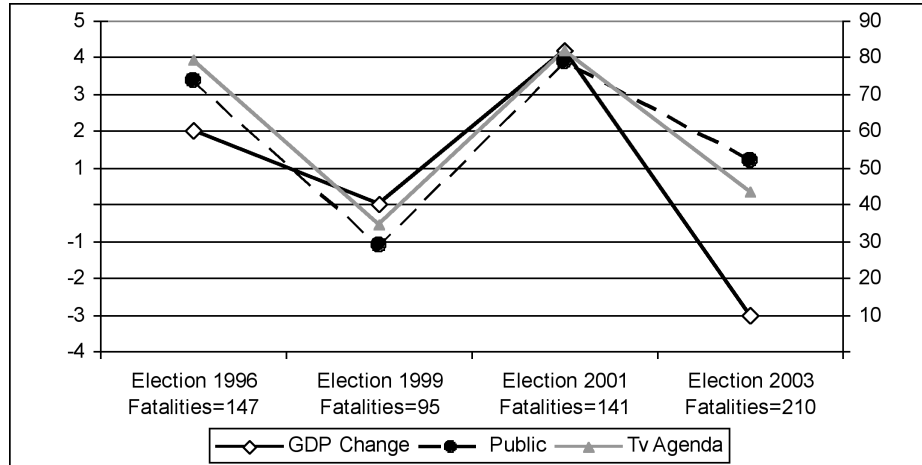


Figure 2. The X-axis represents the election year and the election year's number of civilians and IDF fatalities during a period of 6 months prior to the elections. The left Y-axis represents the annual change in the GDP per capita, and the right Y-axis the proportion of the security issue/problem within the total media agenda and the public agenda (separately) of security and domestic-economy combines (100%).

for the security problem), but Figure 1 reveals that compared with previous years, the media chose to follow the economic issue and not the security issue.

It is important to note, however, that such a figure is not sufficient as evidence of a relationship between variables that “move” together, such as real-world indicators and media agenda. The data, however, do not allow here a statistical analysis.

Agenda Setting

According to the second hypothesis, increases in the level of media coverage of the security-peace domain will be associated with increases in the proportion of survey respondents naming this issue as the country's most important problem, and with proportional decreases in the proportion of respondents naming the domestic-economic domain as the most important problem, and vice versa. The Israeli public has good direct experience of the real-world domains of security-peace and domestic-economy, as discussed above. Would they be influenced by real-world conditions or by the media agenda? In Figure 2, we added the public agenda to the data appearing in Figure 1.

As can be seen, the political agenda of Israelis “moves” together with the media agenda, and both agenda percentages are almost identical. The association between the agendas was most impressive in 2003. Although in previous elections the public agenda was associated with both media agenda and real-world indicators, in 2003 the public was apparently following the media agenda and economic conditions, while relatively ignoring the security problem.

Table 1. Logistic Regression Analysis of the Most Important Problem Facing the Country as a Function of Television Agenda, Real-World Events, and the Control Variables

	β	SE	Statistical significance
Television agenda	3.68	.33	$p < .001$
IDF and civilian fatalities	.003	.002	$p = .160$
GDP change	.45	.07	$p < .001$
Party identification	.09	.10	$p = .356$
Territories issue	.05	.03	$p = .06$
Socioeconomic issue	.001	.03	$p = .981$
Gender	-.19	.08	$p = .017$
Age	.002	.002	$p = .365$
Education	.02	.01	$p = .114$
Income	.06	.03	$p = .064$
Cases included in the analysis: 3,953			
Cox & Snell $R^2 = .17$			
Total percentage of correct predictions: 68.5%			

Note: This is a single database that includes respondents from the four different surveys in each of the election years.

In order to conduct a statistical analysis of this apparent association, we first built a single data set of all four election surveys, and then conducted a binary logistic regression analysis of public agenda as a function of television agenda, the real-world indicators, and the control variables. A logistic regression analysis is appropriate here because the dependent variable is a dichotomous variable (security/domestic issue). It should be noted that the real-world indicators and television agenda are not “true” individual-level variables. Taking television agenda as an example, all respondents in each survey received the same television agenda values taken from the content analyses (as in Figures 1 and 2). As discussed above, however, the agenda of major Israeli media is quite similar. We therefore assume that the more the media are focused on a certain domain, there would be more individuals that would use this criteria when deciding about the most important problem. The main comparison is therefore between different media environments. As such, the main comparison is not between individuals in a single election, but among elections (a multiple cross-sectional design). This rationale is quite similar to the one employed by Krosnick and Kinder (1990).

As can be seen in Table 1, media agenda has a significant influence on the most important problem ($\beta = 3.68$; $p < .001$). The meaning is that respondents exposed to security-peace media environment were more likely to mention this issue as the most important problem than were respondents exposed to domestic-economic media environment, and vice versa. Note also that in agreement with the associations in Figure 2, the influence of GDP change is significant ($\beta = .45$; $p < .001$) while the influence of the security indicator is not at the level of $p < .05$ ($\beta = .003$; $p = .160$). These findings somewhat strengthen our confidence in the association found in Figure 1 as well, because they are showing GDP change to be more associated with media and public agenda compared with the security indicator.

Table 2. Logistic Regression Analysis of Individuals' Voting Intentions as a Function of the Most Important Problem Facing the Country and the Control Variables

	β	SE	Statistical significance
Most important problem	.27	.12	$p = .028$
Party identification	2.81	.12	$p < .001$
Territories issue	-.06	.04	$p = .112$
Socioeconomic issue	-.30	.05	$p < .001$
Gender	-.02	.12	$p = .888$
Age	-.01	.004	$p = .130$
Education	.07	.02	$p < .001$
Income	.14	.05	$p = .003$
Cases included in the analysis: 2,721			
Cox & Snell $R^2 = .24$			
Total percentage of correct predictions: 85.2%			

Note: This is a single data base that includes respondents from the four different surveys in each of the election years.

Priming: The Voting Intentions of Individuals

Our assumption that priming would influence attitudes leads us to hypothesize (hypothesis 3) that there would be an association between opinions about the most important problem facing the nation and voting intentions for parties that are closely identified with this domain. To test this hypothesis we used again the single data set of all four surveys, and then conducted a binary logistic regression analysis of individuals' voting intentions as a function of the most important problem facing the country and the control variables (see Table 2).

As can be seen, in support of the third hypothesis, the influence of the most important problem is significant ($\beta = .27$; $p = .028$), while holding party identification and the other control variables constant.

Priming: Aggregate Election Results

According to premise 4, increases in the proportion of the security-peace domain in the public agenda will be associated with increases in the proportion of the actual votes received by the security-peace parties, and vice versa. Note that the lines of the variables move together (Figure 3). The relative success of security-peace parties, and hence of domestic-economy parties as well, varies quite similarly to the changes in the public (and the media) agenda, as might be expected according to the priming hypothesis. As stated above, however, such a figure is not sufficient as evidence of a relationship between variables that move together. In this case we do not have better data to support these findings.

Discussion

Most agenda-setting and priming research do not analyze the whole agenda-setting and priming process, and most natural setting priming effects research to date

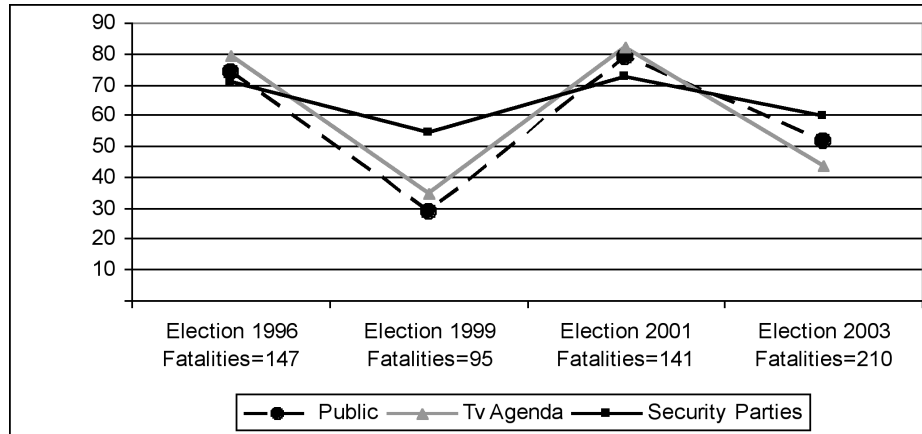


Figure 3. The X-axis represents the election year and the election year's number of civilians and IDF fatalities during a period of 6 months prior to the elections. The Y-axis represents the proportion of the security-peace problem within the total media agenda and the public agenda (separately) of security-peace and domestic-economy combines (100%), and the proportion of the vote received by the security-peace parties within the total (100%) received by security-peace and domestic-economic parties.

has focused on retrospective evaluations of a president's performance. The main contributions of this article are the analysis of the whole agenda-setting process, the analysis of priming effects on political parties instead of on the president, and the analysis of priming effects on electoral *behavior*. It has been demonstrated here that priming effect might have an influence on an individual's decision for which party to vote. By emphasizing certain issues and not others, the media may thus influence electoral results, because it appears that people tend to vote for parties that own the issues primed by the media.

This is an exploratory study. Because we have information concerning only four elections, the data sometimes prohibited us from conducting statistical testing of hypotheses. Nevertheless, the patterns of the results, as represented by the graphical evidence provided in these analyses, are encouraging, and they suggest that there might be a relationship among the variables, a relationship that is in the expected direction. When the data allow statistical inferences as well (hypotheses 2 and 3 and in an indirect way, and only partially, also premise 1), the analysis supports the hypothesis. This strengthens our confidence in the other results as well. We now shall discuss the meanings of the empirical findings presented above.

Agenda Building

The analysis shows that in three elections, worsening conditions in the security indicator were associated with increased media coverage of this domain and in a relative decrease in the media coverage of the economic domain, and vice versa.

The 2003 elections were more interesting because both domains faced worsening conditions. The media chose to follow the economic issue and not the security issue (Figure 1). How can this choice be explained in an arena that behaves according to the rule that “when it bleeds it leads”?

There might be at least two plausible explanations. First, entering its third year in 2003, the Intifada, the suicide bombing, and the deaths were by then a familiar occurrence and therefore not as big a story as might be expected. The deaths and the blood became somewhat banal. This explanation is strongly supported by a senior Israeli journalist from one of the leading electronic media, who was interviewed a few months after the 2003 elections. “We constantly have to be excited,” he explains, “and therefore the never-ending stories about the peace process, as well as about terrorist attacks, are not exciting us any more. These stories have become non-stories” (personal communication, May 6, 2003).

Second, the activities and strategies of political actors also have an influence on the media agenda. The political actors had different incentives in 2003 compared with 1996 and 2001, two elections that took place with a background of worsening security conditions. The incumbent prime minister and party in the two earlier elections were the left-wing Labor party, and the right-wing parties benefited from a strategy that emphasized the failure of the government to ensure security and that stressed the need to escalate the war against terrorism. In 2003, on the other hand, the right-wing Likud party was at the helm. The Likud and its allies had no incentive to discuss their inability to improve security, whereas the Left, as usual, would hardly benefit at all from raising this problem. When both sides turn this issue into a relatively secondary issue, the attention it attracts is expected to decrease accordingly.

To sum, the graphical analysis suggests that the media respond to real-world indicators. This finding is not very common in agenda-setting studies (see, for example, Dearing & Rogers, 1996). Media agenda, however, is clearly not solely determined by the environment and by activities of political actors. When two major issue domains (security and economy, in this case) are simultaneously sending cues of worsening conditions, cues marking an increased newsworthiness, the media are forced to make a choice between them. Such a decision has political ramifications, as was demonstrated in the next stage.

Agenda Setting

It appears that there is a high association between media and public agendas, as is demonstrated by both lines moving together (Figure 2) and by the supporting statistical analysis (Table 1). When the media chose to focus on the economy at the expense of security in 2003, the public followed suit. But how could Israelis in 2003 ignore, relatively speaking, their direct experience with suicide bombing, the dead and the injured, and the reluctance many of them felt to go to malls and public places because of their fear of terrorism? Several explanations come to mind. First and foremost, the analyses reveal evidence for a possible strong agenda-setting influence of the media on the public. When the media decided to turn their focus away from the security domain, the public followed suit.

The two other possible explanations are based on models that describe and explain the rise and fall of social problems (Blumer, 1971; Downs, 1972; Henry & Gordon, 2001; Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988; Kingdon, 1995). According to the first of these, Hilgartner and Bosk's (1988) "public arenas model," the ability of the public to remain focused on a single issue is limited due to boredom (see also Kingdon, 1995). Therefore, after more than 2 years of Intifada, and despite the severe security conditions, the public became somewhat apathetic to the issue. It should be noted that, although both agenda setting and the public arenas model are logical and even complementary explanations for the findings, the public arenas explanation lowers the hypothesized influence of agenda setting. It suggests that the public would lose interest in the security problem regardless of the amount of attention the media would give it. Yet, one may ask why Israelis did not lose interest in the domestic-economic problem, which, by the beginning of 2003, had also lasted for almost 2 years?

A closely related explanation is Downs's (1972) "issue-attention cycle" model. According to it, public interest in a certain problem would decline as proposed solutions for the problem encountered difficulties. Israelis may have not become bored by the security problem, but they may have paid less attention to it because by the 2003 elections there seemed to be no viable diplomatic or military solutions to it. Indeed, the Left, which was usually "responsible" for providing diplomatic initiations, seemed confused in 2003 by the level of violence, did not provide any clear plan and ended by being thoroughly beaten in the election. Although the data do not allow for deciding which of these explanations influenced the outcome, if at all, we believe that all of the factors included within these explanations may have had an effect, thus diminishing, but certainly not terminating, the impact of agenda setting.

As mentioned, some scholars argue that the effect of agenda setting might be weaker when people have direct experience with a given issue. Although the empirical results are mixed, when empirical studies do compare between issues, many times they find supporting evidence for this argument (Watt, Mazza, & Snyder, 1993). This makes the evidence of the influence of agenda setting in this study, where Israelis have direct and strong experience with the security and economy domains, even more impressive (in Table 1 both GDP change and television agenda have a significant influence over public agenda).

Priming

Above, we presented a few reasons for studying the association between priming and voting behavior in parliamentary systems. These are based on different explanations of the voters' rationale. The first is a retrospective approach, according to which evaluations of performance (as in most priming studies) and the behavior of voters (as in many voter behavior studies) are based on evaluations of past performances of leaders and parties. This was the major rationale of the priming research to date. The second reason is based on a prospective approach, according to which voters' behavior is influenced by expectations of the future performance of candidates and parties. This rationale is present, side-by-side with the previous one, in most current models of voters' behavior. We also believe that

both rationales are complementary, and therefore should be part of the priming effect hypothesis. We believe that voting intentions for security-peace or domestic-economy parties, as well as the aggregate vote for each group, are based both on the perceived past activity of the party in the issue area and on expectations about the dedication and ability of the party to solve the problem in the future.

In the individual-level analysis of priming we found statistical evidence for possible priming effects on individuals' voting intentions. We also found supporting evidence for possible priming effects on the aggregate vote. A graphical association was found between priming a certain problem and the total success of the parties identified with that issue, although such data are only suggestive and cannot support a hypothesis. As far as we know, this is the first research that provides such evidence in a multiparty parliamentary system.

Future Research

As mentioned, this is an exploratory study. Because we have information concerning only four elections, the data sometimes prohibited us from conducting statistical testing of hypotheses. Future research should therefore rely on data from more elections. The data required in each election include various real-world indicators, media content analyses, and rich individual information, including media use and exposure, evaluation of the most important problem facing the nation, voting intentions, and after-the-vote information. Indeed, it is very difficult to find such rich data on many election campaigns, even in the U.S., where long-term election data are more available than in many other countries. One solution might be to carefully use cross-national data in the same analyses.

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