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# FROM INTER-PARTY DEBATE TO INTER-PERSONAL POLEMIC

## Media Coverage of Internal and External Party Disputes in Israel, 1949–2003

*Shaul R. Shenhav and Tamir Sheafer*

### ABSTRACT

In this article, we analyse the media coverage of party disputes during the first 16 Israeli election campaigns, i.e. in the period 1949 to 2003. Based on a content analysis of newspaper coverage of the two main parties (Labor and Likud) and a qualitative discourse analysis, we maintain that the media coverage of party disputes has undergone major change. From 1949 to 1959 the vast majority of reported disputes reflected external, inter-party debates. From 1961 the level of external debates decreased, while the level of internal, intra-party debates sharply increased. These findings reflect a significant change in the role of ‘the party’ as a category in the Israeli media’s political discourse. The party ceased to be a unitary actor in the political arena and became an arena for political disputes. The dynamic change in party coverage has gone through three main phases: an ideological and collective phase of an external-partisan era during the first decade; an interim phase led by a combination of disputes by persons and factions affiliated with former parties; and, finally, the phase of personal polemics. The dynamic is closely related to historical changes in the Israeli party system and in the political communication climate.

**KEY WORDS** ■ discourse analysis ■ Israel ■ media coverage ■ party disputes ■ political parties

### Introduction

Ever since Israel was regarded as an ‘Etat partitaire’, in which the party system’s influence was ‘more pervasive than in any other state’ (Akzin, 1955: 509), the Israeli party system has gone through tremendous change.

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The changes in the functions, structures, status and behaviour of Israeli parties have been studied by numerous scholars (e.g. Arian, 2005; Diskin, 2003; Galnoor, 1996; Hazan, 1998; Horowitz and Lissak, 1989; Mendilow, 2003). The present article contributes to this literature by focusing on inter-party and intra-party relations in Israel, and especially on an important aspect of these relations that has never been studied before: party disputes as represented by the news media.

We study the media coverage of party disputes in Israel, from the first elections in 1949 through the elections of 2003, seeking to understand the main trends and changes in the coverage of disputes either between parties (i.e. external disputes) or within parties (i.e. internal disputes). Our theoretical framework follows Wolfsfeld's (2004) Politics–Media–Politics (PMP) model, according to which political and institutional changes cause changes in media performance, which in turn lead to changes in the behaviour of politicians. Therefore, we expect to find that political changes are a major cause of changes in the media coverage of party disputes.

Our main finding points to a complex process in which the parties that, in the early years of Israel's existence, were presented by the media as key actors in the political domain became a playground, first for ideological and power-sharing disputes among factions within the party and later for personal disputes. This dramatic change from inter-party debate to inter-personal polemic in the media coverage of party disputes reflects rather accurately the structural transformations in the Israeli party system.

Three major processes that took place in the Israeli political arena have affected this change. The first is a deep transformation in the Israeli political system in general, and the party system in particular, during the 1960s. This transformation is part of an international phenomenon in which traditional 'mass parties' have been replaced by 'catch-all parties'. The second process, a change in political communication, concerns changes in the mode and tone of the media coverage of political parties. Like the first process, this one too is an international phenomenon. The third is the political consequence of a specific major political scandal, known as the 'Lavon Affair'. This scandal had a strong effect on political parties, party discourse and political communication in Israel. The effect of these processes appears to be stronger than the effect of yet another major change in the Israeli party system – the transition from a dominant party system to two-bloc competition during the 1980s and the intensification of party competition. Despite the expectation that this change would increase the level of coverage of inter-party debate, our findings show that the level of coverage of external disputes remained low.

### The Political Role of Partisan Disputes

It has only been a decade or so since 'many "political scientists" have moved toward the view that both the terms of political debate and the *political*

*processes themselves* are constituted and communicated through text and talk' (Chilton and Schaffner, 1997: 208; italics added). In fact, the act of policy-making in its macro- and micro-levels is always engaged with the usage of language (Chilton, 2004). The nature of politics as 'the activity by which groups reach binding collective decisions through attempting to reconcile differences among their members' (Hague and Harrop, 2007: 3) led scholars to apply methods of discourse analysis that reveal explicit and implicit meanings behind the texts.

Being a major agency for interest aggregation, the discourse of political parties has been the focus of several studies. Especially prominent in this area are several discourse studies on party debates in the British Parliament (Chilton, 2004: 92–109; Fairclough, 2000; Ilie, 2003).

In recent years, several studies of Israeli politics have employed discourse analysis approaches. For example, discourse analysis and linguistic approaches have been applied to the study of parliamentary and cabinet debates (Shenhav, 2004, 2005), televised election debates (Benoit and Sheaffer, 2006) and the media (Blum Kulka et al., 2002). Nevertheless, we are not familiar with any study that is dedicated to the media discourse about political parties *per se*, and which is focused on the representation of parties in the press.

Studies in political discourse usually take for granted the presence of political disputes, seeing it as an immanent part of the political process. However, the public manifestation of disputes, directly by open statements or through the media, is far from trivial. Obviously, in the context of campaigns or parliamentary debates, inter-party disputes arise. However, the general trend of inter-party disputes is strongly affected by the ideological atmosphere surrounding the political arena. For example, the polemic style of the discourse of Thatcher (Fairclough, 2000: 109) and Thatcherism derived from an ideological point of view that theorizes 'social and international relationships in terms of conflict' (Fowler, 1991: 6). In contrast, the ideology of New Labour was a main factor in Tony Blair's 'avoidance of polemic' either with other parties or within the Labour Party itself (Fairclough, 2000). This style 'accords with the claim that the "new politics" of the "Third Way" transcends "old" divisions between left and right' (Fairclough, 2000: 110).

The ideological atmosphere seems to be much less important in the manifestation of intra-party disputes. In this case, factors such as the method of candidate selection (Barnea and Rahat, 2007; Rahat, 2007; Rahat and Hazan, 2001), the strength of leadership and the existence of serious challengers within the party (Courtney, 1995: 46) are crucial to assessment of the functions of disputes. Norms or 'rules of the game' in the party are also important factors that affect the manifestation of party disputes. For example, Fairclough notes the 'strongly authoritarian tendencies' that were 'mitigated and disguised by the search for consensus, which is manifested in this feature of Blair's style' (Fairclough, 2000: 110). These factors and others pretty much set the trade-off in which, on the one hand, there is compliance with the ideal of conducting public debates and transparent

procedures while, on the other, there is an attempt to avoid the risk of exposing the rifts, conflicts and personal resentments within the party. It is from this trade-off that we can evaluate the role of intra-party disputes, whether it is an instrument in an internal challenge for the leadership or a means for igniting public discussion.

### Political Institutional Changes and Party Discourse

Discourse studies are very often concerned with relationships between the text and the context. The discourse of political disputes by its nature is closely related to the context which often provokes the disputes, sets the parameters of their dynamics and provides the main arguments. Major changes in the Israeli political and party system are, therefore, crucial to comprehension of the dynamics of partisan disputes.

It is widely accepted among scholars of Israeli politics that the 1960s was a turning point in the Israeli party system, mainly due to the following events: the split in the dominant party Mapai and the establishment of Rafi, headed by former Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, the 'Lavon Affair' and the 1967 war (Diskin, 2003; Galnoor, 1996, 1998; Hazan, 1998; Sheffer, 1999). The changes in the party system were part of a deeper structural and functional transformation in the Israeli political system and elsewhere. This system, as noted by Galnoor (1996, 1998) had moved from an excellent 'steering capability', which characterized the pre-1967 era, to a period characterized by a lack of 'steering capability' and instability. In the transition from the first period to the second, there had been a decrease in the parties' dominance of the political domain and in their legitimacy (e.g. Sheffer, 1999). The mid-1960s also signals the beginning of a 'trend toward consolidation of large parties' (Arian, 2005: 121), sometimes known as 'cluster parties' (Mendilow, 2003), with the emergence of the Mapai–Ahdut Ha'avoda Alignment on the centre-left and the Herut–Liberal Bloc on the centre-right of the political spectrum.

Most trends and changes in the party system described above are not unique to the Israeli case. The process of 'dealignment' of parties is a well-known phenomenon that has taken place in recent decades among Western parliamentary democracies (Flanagan and Dalton, 1984; Wattenberg, 1998). This process is also influenced by changes in electoral laws or practices that focused more heavily on individual candidates (e.g. Poguntke and Webb, 2005; Rahat and Sheaffer, 2007; Wattenberg, 1995). Replacement of the traditional 'mass parties' with 'catch-all parties' that attempt to appeal to a wider pragmatic audience is another prominent example of an international phenomenon (e.g. Katz and Mair, 1995; Kirchheimer, 1966). In Israel, this transition has been boosted by a transformation from a dominant party system to a two-bloc system that began in the 1981 elections (Arian, 2005).

The decline in ideological clashes between the two big parties neutralized a major element that fuelled inter-party disputes. The incorporation of groups and parties in the two big parties during the 1960s and the decrease in the power of parties removed some of the barriers that prevented the manifestation of intra-party disputes. In addition, the adoption of inclusive methods for candidate selection (Barnea and Rahat, 2007) and the focus on individual candidates encouraged persons and groups within the parties to express intra-party disputes.

### Political Communication Changes and Media Coverage of Party Discourse

Media coverage of political parties in Western democracies has faced major changes since the end of WWII (Israel became independent shortly after, in 1948). Political communication scholars characterize the period until the 1960s as 'the "golden age" of political parties' (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999: 211). According to Blumler and Kavanagh, 'one main feature of this period is that many political messages were substantive. Political leaders tended to talk about . . . the principles and policies that distinguish[ed] them from their opponents' (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999: 212). The media coverage of politics in this period was therefore dominated by an 'issue frame', which is a media focus on candidates' positions on the issues (Patterson, 1994). Since the 1960s, however, scholars recognized a shift in the nature of media coverage of politics, from a 'party logic' form of coverage as described above (Mazzoleni, 1987) toward a 'media logic' form of coverage (Altheide and Snow, 1979; Mazzoleni, 1987). This shift is characterized by the increased power of the media vis-à-vis the parties and consequently by the increased intrusion of media values (Sheafer, 2001) into the coverage of politics.

One central feature of this 'media logic' is political personalization. Political personalization in the media refers to a change in media coverage of politics in general, and of political campaigns in particular; it is manifested by an increase in journalists' focus on the activities of individual politicians at the expense of abstract collective entities such as parties, organizations and institutions (Rahat and Sheafer, 2007). Rahat and Sheafer (2007) recognized a clear media personalization in Israel beginning in the 1981 elections (see also Peri, 2004; Sheffer, 1999). Another central feature of 'media logic' is the increased attention to political strategy and intrigue (Patterson, 1994). This feature occurred in Israel as well (Peri, 2004; Sheafer, 2001).

Several structural processes brought about this change in the media coverage of politics and of political parties (it is beyond the scope of this article to list all of these, however). First, the introduction of television in the 1960s led to an increase in the power of journalists vis-à-vis politicians (e.g. Patterson, 1994). Second, party-owned newspapers, in large, have disappeared from

the media market since the 1960s, in Israel and elsewhere (e.g. Caspi and Limor, 1999; Peri, 2004). Third, and probably most importantly, this change was strongly influenced by deeply rooted political processes discussed in the previous section, such as replacement of the mass parties with 'catch-all parties' or, in the two main parties in Israel, with larger alignments, and changes in electoral laws or practices that focused more heavily on individual candidates. Nevertheless, there is evidence that political discourse in parliamentary systems, and especially in multiparty systems, is still tilted more toward a 'party logic' compared with presidential systems (e.g. Hallin and Mancini, 2004; Sheaffer and Wolfsfeld, 2006).

### **Political Scandal Effects: The Lavon Affair**

New political issues and events are also expected to play a major role in the process of changes in the party system and its media coverage. For example, it is logical to expect that new political issues that appear in the political arena will create internal disputes within parties. Consequently, such new political issues result in party realignment (e.g. Sundquist, 1973). In addition, studies have shown that major political events such as the Vietnam War have an influence on the power game between journalists and politicians, contributing to the discussed shift from a party toward a media logic (Gans, 1979; Wolfsfeld, 2004).

The 'Lavon Affair' in the 1960s falls into that category. It was the first major open and long-running political scandal in Israel with a long-term effect on broad issues in Israeli politics (Diskin, 2003; Galnoor, 1998; Peri, 2004). The affair, which was a result of a failed covert operation in Egypt in the mid-1950s, caused the first cracks in the apparent unity of the dominant party, Mapai. According to Peri (2004), this affair 'constituted a milestone in the history of political communication [in Israel]. . . . From a political communication perspective it was the first time that politicians from the same governing party had used the press as a battleground for their jousting' (Peri, 2004: 78). This internal struggle helped strengthen the media (Horowitz and Lissak, 1989), since for the first time journalists realized that they could play a significant critical role in party politics (Peri, 2004). Internal party disputes suddenly became the main focus of the media.

### **Methodology**

Our main hypothesis, that media coverage of party disputes is affected by political changes, demands an applicable methodology to analysing such a complicated effect. The methodology is based on a rather unique combination of a quantitative content analysis and a discourse analysis of newspaper coverage of party disputes in 16 election campaigns for the Knesset (the

Israeli parliament), from 1949 (the first elections) to 2003. We analysed the two historically big parties in Israel (Labor and Likud, or their components prior to the establishment of electoral alliances and later unified parties). These two major parties dominated over half of the seats in the Knesset for most of the time since the first elections in Israel's extreme multiparty system. Their domination peaked in the 1981 elections, when they took almost 80 percent of the seats in the Knesset, but since these elections their electoral power has been decreasing.

Election campaigns are about parties, especially in Israel, where voters do not vote for individual constituency candidates but only for fixed national party lists. Thus, during the campaign, parties try to present themselves to the public as unified and cohesive, and the focus on parties is greatest. In order to study the entire tone of the campaigns as represented in the newspapers we widened the time lens as far as six months prior to each election. First, we sampled every third day, and then selected for analysis all election-related articles that covered the two largest parties in two of the leading Israeli daily newspapers, *Yedioth Aharonoth* and *Ha'aretz*. These two newspapers were established before independence and always enjoyed a significant share of the Israeli readership. Central to our study is the fact that neither was a newspaper controlled by a political party (Peri, 2004).<sup>1</sup> Overall, 4,711 items were analysed in the quantitative content analysis.

A simple coding system was devised to measure party disputes: (1) does the news item focus on external party disputes (i.e. between a party and another party; 1 = no, 2 = yes)? (2) Does the news item focus on internal party disputes (i.e. between members or sections of a single party; 1 = no, 2 = yes)? Two trained graduate students conducted the content analysis. The inter-coder reliability (using Scott's pi), tested in a session in which the two coders analysed 100 coding items, was no lower than 0.81 (for the coding category with the lowest reliability).

Following the complex nature of political concepts (Connolly, 1983), we supplemented the content analysis by a qualitative examination. Applying a discourse analysis of typical articles representing the main trends found in the examination, we tried to understand the changes over time in the newspapers' perception of the concept of a party, using internal and external party disputes as a framework. For this purpose, we focused our attention on the 'macrostructure' of the news items, based on Van Dijk's theory of global structures in discourse. In general, 'macrostructures were designed to capture the intuitive notion of the "gist" of a discourse' (Van Dijk and Kintsch, 1983: 52). These are well manifested in the headlines and leads of the news items that are 'expedient signals to make effective guesses about the most important information of the text' in the eyes of journalists and editors (Van Dijk, 1985: 77).

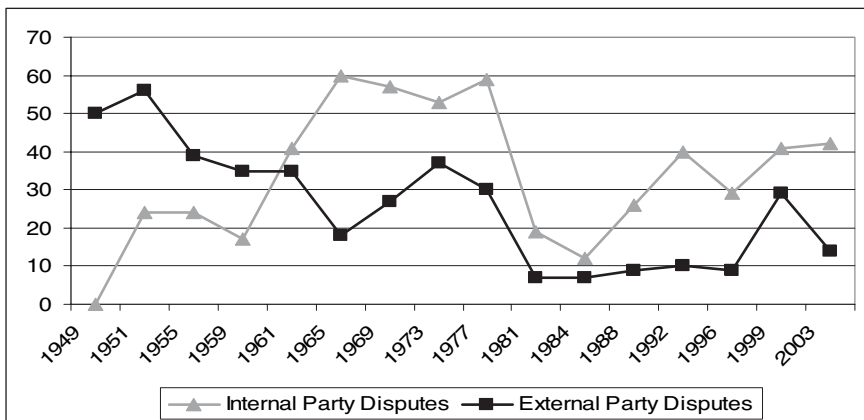


## Findings

In order to analyse the media's coverage of party disputes, we examined the level of disputes within the parties (i.e. internal disputes) and between one party (Likud or Labor) and another party (i.e. external disputes). Figure 1 presents the average percent of internal and external disputes for each election between 1949 and 2003.

An overall view of the internal and external distribution (Figure 1) shows that the elections of 1961 were an important turning point. In four campaigns prior to the 1961 elections the level of external disputes was higher than the level of internal disputes. Since the elections of 1961, this ratio has reversed. This finding indicates that the most crucial aspect which we believe determines the nature of a dispute, that is whether it is internal or external, has been transformed. Broadly speaking, this finding shows that the arena in which the parties operate, as represented by the newspaper coverage, has shifted from an arena centred on the disputes between parties to an arena centred on disputes within parties.

Taking the internal party disputes as our foothold for further examination, we divided the coverage of disputes into three main periods: the first begins in 1949 and ends in 1959; the second begins in 1961 and ends in 1977; the third begins in 1981 and lasts until the elections of 2003. We elaborate on these three periods below, but it is important to note here that the transformation from one period to the next is strongly related to the political changes in Israeli politics and in the media as discussed above. Thus, the consolidation of large parties and the 'Lavon Affair' were major key factors in the transition from the first period to the second. The transformation to a two-bloc competitive party system, the structure of 'catch-all parties'



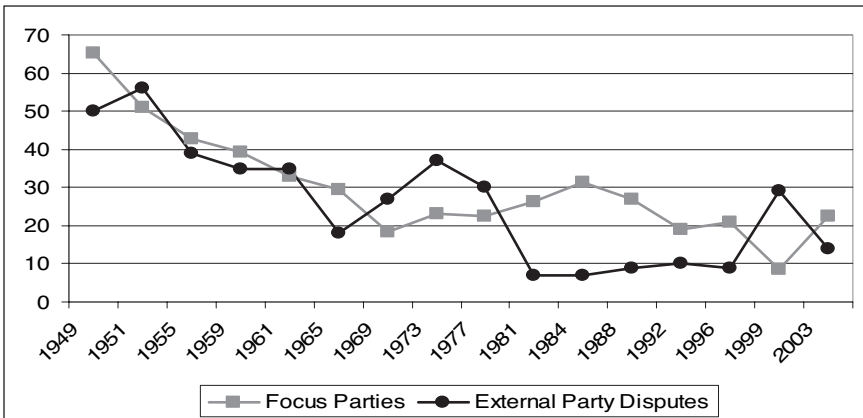
**Figure 1.** Internal and external party disputes, 1949–2003

The figures represent the percentage of internal and external party disputes in the media coverage of the campaign during a period of six months prior to election day.

adopted by the two big parties, the increased power of the media, the processes of personalization and changes in candidate selection methods were all major factors in the transition from the second period to the third. We calculated the mean ratio of internal to external disputes in each period,<sup>2</sup> because it is this ratio that is really telling. In support of our hypothesis, there is a continuous decline in this ratio, from 2.01 in the first period through 0.57 in the second to 0.41 in the third. This decline shows a relative increase in the coverage of internal disputes over the three periods.

A further examination of Figure 1 shows additional important findings. There is a general trend of decline in inter-party disputes. It seems that journalists responded to the ongoing decrease in the power of parties, discussed above, by expressing a lack of interest in the inter-party disputes. Moreover, the decrease of interest in disputes between parties was accompanied by a decrease in the number of articles that focus on 'parties' (see Figure 2). In this last category of content analysis we asked the coders whether the focus of the news item was mostly on the party, the candidate, or equally on both. Interestingly, the decrease in the newspapers' focus on parties and on external party disputes begins almost immediately from the first elections. This precedes the actual decrease in the political power of parties, which started in the 1960s. Media discourse, then, may function as a signal for latent political changes, similar to the role played by the canary in a coal mine.

While external party disputes decrease rather linearly, as seen in Figures 1 and 2, the dynamics of the inner party disputes are more complicated (Figure 1). It is through this indicator that the complex changes in the newspapers' presentation of political parties can best be understood. Note that, above,



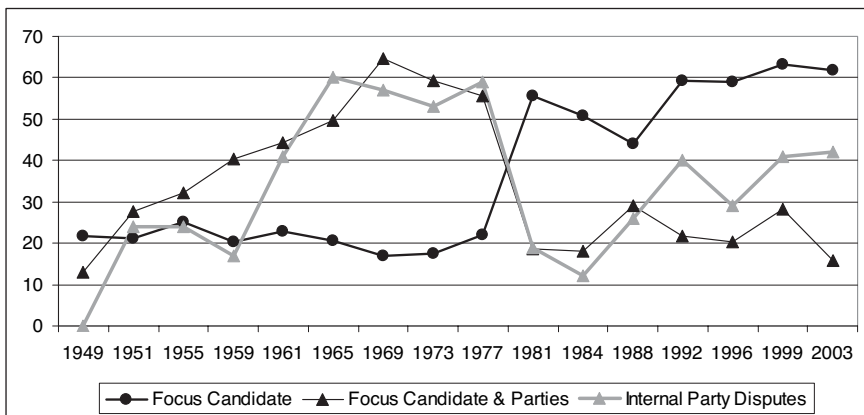
**Figure 2.** External party disputes and a focus on political parties, 1949–2003

'External party disputes' is the percentage of inter-party disputes in the media coverage of the campaign during a period of six months prior to election day. 'Focus parties' is the percentage of news items focusing on the political parties during the same period rather than on the candidates or equally on both.

we have identified three periods in this graph: 1949–59, 1961–77 and 1981–2003. Figure 3 helps our understanding of these changes in internal party disputes by comparing this graph with two others: a focus of the news items mainly on candidates and a focus of the news items equally on candidates and parties.

Figure 3 shows that in the first period (1949–59), when the level of internal party disputes was relatively low, so was the focus of the news items on candidates. However, during the second period (1961–77) the level of internal disputes converged with the focus on candidates and parties alike, which gradually increased during the first period. The combined category of ‘candidates and parties’, on which we elaborate below, has similar values to those of internal disputes during the second period and even further, despite a sharp decline in both. From the 1988 elections on, we can see that the level of internal disputes correlates slightly better with the focus of the news items on the candidates, which has undergone a significant increase from the elections of 1981, as part of a general trend of personalization (Rahat and Sheaffer, 2007).

In sum, it seems that the dynamics of the newspapers’ coverage of internal and external disputes are closely related to a change of focus undertaken by the newspapers. It is part of the three-phase transition from a ‘party logic’ to a ‘media logic’, in which the focus on the ‘party’ changed to a focus on ‘parties and candidates’ and ultimately to a focus on ‘candidates’ only.



**Figure 3.** Internal party disputes and a focus on candidates versus candidates and parties, 1949–2003

‘Internal party disputes’ is the percentage of internal party disputes in the media coverage of the campaign during a period of six months prior to election day. ‘Focus candidates’ is the percentage of news items focusing mainly on the political candidates, and ‘Focus candidates and parties’ is the percentage of news items focusing equally on political parties and candidates during the same period.

This external change in the focus of the news items represents the deeper changes in media values according to which journalists have been analysing and decoding politics in general and political parties and candidates in particular. The different logics also provided different atmospheres or contexts for the coverage of conflicts and disputes. Thus, until the elections of 1959, when a 'party logic' was prominent and the focus on parties was high, the coverage of external disputes was generally high and converged with a media focus on parties (see Figure 2), while coverage of internal disputes pretty much converged with the focus on candidates (both were relatively low; see Figure 3). The shift from a 'party logic' to a 'media logic' began in the second period (1961–77), when the presence of the combined category of 'candidates and parties' took over and converged, almost perfectly, with the increased level of internal party disputes. This trend continued during the beginning of the third period, where the two categories, the internal disputes and the focus on 'parties and candidates', converged. Finally, following the elections of 1988, the level of internal disputes mirrored the dramatic increase in the focus on candidates only, an increase that has taken place since the 1981 elections.

What were the causes of these shifts? We now explain these periods and trends more thoroughly, relying on our theoretical framework and empirically on discourse analysis, focusing on the macrostructures of newspaper articles. Owing to space limitations, we provide only a few examples for each period.

### **From Player to Playground: The Changing Concept of a Party in the Media Discourse**

The empirical analysis that shows three main periods in the coverage of party disputes reflects rather accurately not only significant changes in the discourse of newspaper articles, but also structural changes in the Israeli party system.

#### *First Period: Parties as Unified Actors in an Ideological Domain – 1949–59*

As noted before, the most drastic change seen in our analysis was the one that occurred in the early 1960s, when the coverage of internal disputes exceeded that of the external disputes. An examination of newspaper articles before the 1960s clearly shows the ideological atmosphere that characterized the party system of that time. The macrostructures of articles for this period very often presented the parties as main actors in the political field. For example, the following headline appeared on the front page of *Ha'aretz* in 1951, two days after a government defeat in a Knesset vote led to a decision to call for early elections: 'All parties are preparing themselves

for the election campaign' (16 February 1951: 1). The sub-headline that followed says: 'Mapai's platform – solely against the Religious Front'. The text says: "Political blackmailing in the disguise of religion" . . . these are the main accusations expressed by Mapai against the Religious Front.'

The transition from the macrostructure, as represented by the headline and sub-headline, to the microstructure, as represented by the text, summarizes the gist of the first period. The macrostructure is the newspaper's presentation of the parties as the main actors during elections, as expressed in the headline. The sub-headline adds the nature of the party dispute. The focus of the sub-headline is on the leading dominant party, Mapai, and the nature of the conflict is an inter-party dispute, in this case Mapai versus the Religious Front (i.e. the alignment of religious parties). The issues oriented macrostructure is designated by the sub-headline's reference to the platform of Mapai. The focus on disputes between parties over an issue is also evident in the text itself, which gives details of the allegations made by Mapai against the religious parties. All together, the entire strata of microstructures and macrostructure provide a clear picture of the coverage of party disputes. This is the picture of an ideological atmosphere where the parties serve as the key actors in the political arena.

The 'golden age' of political parties in Israel was characterized by the newspapers' focus on external disputes between the parties. Though one can find commentary that criticized the campaigns, the general tone portrayed the arena of political disputes as a playground in which the parties engage with each other. The newspapers were assigned to describe the positions of the parties and the debates over issues. A special section published by *Ha'aretz* before the 1955 elections symbolizes the general logic of the first period. The section, headlined 'Ha'aretz asks, the parties answer', was presented as an impersonal question and answer dialogue covering a wide range of policy-related issues. All the big parties took part in this special section. Thus the parties' agreements and disagreements on a very wide range of questions, such as the desirable electoral system, the international orientation of Israel, and the curricula in schools, were all discussed. The answers given by the parties and the questions that were asked in this section perhaps best characterize the nature of the interrelations between the newspapers and parties during the first decade of the state of Israel. This is a relation between two institutions, each with a formal voice and a clear role in the dialogue – the newspapers pose questions and the parties give answers.

### *Second Period: Parties as an Arena for Disputes – 1961–77*

The elections of 1961 mark a significant change in the newspapers' coverage of party politics, and a change in the perception of the concept of the party. This change emerged mainly from political processes within the party system itself, but was probably also influenced by changes within the political communication arena, as discussed above. The Lavon Affair and its ramifications,

which brought about early elections, was the first and probably most important factor that boosted the transition to inner-party disputes in the dominant Mapai party. This political scandal exposed the inner tensions within Mapai. Headlines such as: “I will not allow my name to be on the party’s list”, writes Lavon in a letter to *Mapai*’ (*Yedioth Aharonoth*, 3 March 1961: 3) or ‘Lavon: even without the “scandal” I would have been dismissed’ (*Yedioth Aharonoth*, 20 February 1961: 1) show the change in the macrostructure of the media coverage. Disagreements and personal rifts were not new in Mapai (Medding, 1972), though perhaps not with such harsh and personal resentments. However, once the party system gave the media the possibility of covering ‘domestic quarrels’ the media grabbed this opportunity with both hands. The point of view, as seen in the above example, had changed. The newspapers became interested more in the exciting, sometimes unexpected, rifts within parties and less in the obviously less exciting debates between parties.

While the atmosphere around the Lavon Affair raised the curtain and exposed the bitter personal rifts within Mapai, the parties’ alignments of 1965 and onward seem to have had a longer effect on the coverage of party disputes.

The establishment of the first and second alignment (led by Mapai) and Gahal (a bloc led by the main opposition party, Herut) did not put an end to the parties’ old personal and ideological rivalries and disputes, but rather fuelled an already existing trend of focusing on internal disputes. Thus, for example, the personal disputes between the two promising leaders of the Alignment party – Moshe Dayan, a former member of Mapai and Rafi, and Yigal Alon, a former member of Ahdut Ha’avoda – were covered extensively by both *Ha’aretz* and *Yedioth*. Commentary and reports on the conflict between the two, and between other leaders and their factions, usually combined personal rifts with factional disagreements.

The new sources for conflicts within the parties served well the ‘media logic’ of the newspapers. It allowed journalists to dramatize the new rifts by in-process reports, allegedly in real time, rather than reporting on processes and decisions already made by the parties. Headlines such as: ‘*Ahdut Ha’avoda* demands to take [Shimon] Peres’ place. Housing Ministry would be given temporarily to Abba Eban?’ (*Ha’aretz*, 26 May 1965: 3) and ‘A meeting between the majority and minority in *Mapai* to be held today’ (*Ha’aretz*, 28 May 1965: 1) exhibit the leading tone in this period. The macrostructures that were reflected in this kind of headline positioned the journalists as witnesses to politics in action. Speculations and scenarios fuelled the ‘media logic’ of the newspapers, as they added new excitement to the political domain. As a result, the presentation of the party in the media discourse changed. The party was no longer a distinct actor in political disputes, but rather a playground for political disputes.

The media coverage of groups and persons, while reporting on the disputes within the parties, also changed. For example, in a report on a conversation

between leaders of Mapai regarding the party's candidate for prime minister, the article pointed out clearly the particular group each leader was affiliated with (*Ha'aretz*, 30 May 1965: 1). Similarly, the following headline appeared in *Yedioth Aharonoth*: "A dialogue of the deaf" in Mapai between the majority and the minority' (30 June 1965: 2).

Another example can be seen in a political column in *Ha'aretz* (18 July 1969), focusing on the situation in the Labor party. The text of the commentary shows very clearly the combination of persons and factions when discussing internal conflicts. It opens with the following question: 'While everybody is asking what is the justification for a split [within the party], perhaps the question should be posed the other way around: what is the justification for Dayan's group to stay within the Labor Party?' (*Ha'aretz*, 18 July 1969: 9). Then it discusses the fabric of personae and different groups in the Alignment. For example, when analysing the position of Golda Meir, Prime Minister and chairperson of the party:

Her sympathy for that group [i.e. members of Mapai] just like her rivalry with Dayan's group, is basically emotional . . . this is the reality that Dayan's group has not been able to change . . . the only way left [for Dayan's group] is to create an independent separate list.

(*Ha'aretz*, 18 July 1969: 9)

The focus on persons and party factions reflects the emergence of the combined focus on 'candidates and parties' (see Figure 3), which characterizes the party in this period as a playground for internal disputes.

### *Third Period: Parties as an Arena for Inter-Personal Polemics – 1981–2003*

There were two forces that pulled in different directions in this period. On the one hand, the adoption of more inclusive candidate selection methods used by the parties led to a process of personalization (Rahat and Sheaffer, 2007), which should have increased the internal disputes within the parties. On the other, the transition from a dominant party system to two-bloc competition and the increase in party competition during the 1980s (Hazan, 1997, 1998) should have resulted in an increase in external disputes.

Contrary to both expectations, our findings (Figures 1–3) show that the level of external disputes remained low, while there was a decline in internal disputes during the 1981 and 1984 elections. There are a few possible explanations for the findings regarding these two election years. For example, the low level of internal disputes may be the result of strong leadership in both parties. The leadership of Menachem Begin was not challenged by his Likud party, and the competition for the leadership of the Alignment was decided at the Labor party convention on 17 December 1980, as early as six months prior to the elections. The attention to the economic crisis in 1984 and the growing similarity between the two parties following the adoption of a

'catch-all party' structure can also explain the decline in the attention on either internal or external coverage of the parties' disputes during the first half of the 1980s. During the early 1980s, political spots on TV became the main forum of political competition and the parties may have focused their attention on this new forum and not on the newspapers.<sup>3</sup> These explanations do not suffice, though, and further research is required.

It does seem that from the end of the 1980s the process of personalization was one of the main reasons for the recurring increase in inter-personal polemics within parties (Figure 3). To get a notion of the extent of the change in media coverage following the introduction of inclusive candidate selection methods and the development of the process of personalization, one can compare these with the reports on candidate selection in the days of more exclusive methods, when a small committee selected the list of candidates. For example, on 21 June 1951 the following short item appeared in *Ha'aretz*:

A meeting of *Mapai's* Central Committee will be held tonight in Tel-Aviv in which a decision on the party's list of candidates for the election for the second Knesset will be made. Proposals for the list would be submitted to the 'committee of three', that was elected a week ago for that purpose.

(*Ha'aretz*, 21 June 1951: 2)

In contrast, the inclusive methods of candidate selection produced a new genre of covering intra-party disputes, characterized by a polemic atmosphere of a horse race and emotional personal politics. This new genre of articles, which focused on inter-personal polemics, can be seen in headlines such as: 'the tension in *Herut* grows: Sharon to Shamir: you must intervene' (*Yedioth Aharonoth*, 4 July 1988: 1). The sub-headline reports that:

Levi and Sharon did not come to *Herut's* 'unity conference' yesterday. A 'deal' between their camps has not been agreed yet; they are blaming Arens for pushing their people out of the list.

The focus on the personal horse race was accelerated especially in reports on primaries, with headlines such as: 'Ramon lags behind Barak' (*Yedioth Aharonoth*, 26 March 1996: 2), a day after the primaries in the Labor party.

The macrostructure of such articles – all accompanied by photographs of the candidates – put the personae in the forefront as the main actors in the internal disputes. The political 'camps' and the 'deals' between candidates can be seen as a modification of the former more ideological factions that existed in the parties (in the second period). While in the second period the groups were strongly related to historical parties with shared ideological frameworks, the camps in the third period were centred round certain individual leaders; ideology and former political membership were all but ignored.



## Conclusions

This analysis of the changes in the newspaper coverage of party disputes in the Israeli party system from 1949 until 2003 shows that from the early 1960s the newspapers shifted their focus from external to internal party disputes. This transition reflects deep changes in the newspapers' perception of the party as a key element in the political domain, changes analysed by combining content analysis, discourse analysis and a discussion of the structural changes in the Israeli party system and political communication. This combined perspective allows a better understanding of a complex process in which the parties that in the early years of Israel's existence were presented by the media as key actors in the political domain became more of a playground, first for ideological and power-sharing disputes among factions within the party, and later for personal disputes.

These analyses tell us a great deal about party politics in Israel. First and most obviously, they show the decline in the power of the parties. This is a well-known fact, though, but our analyses add to this knowledge by revealing the dynamics of deterioration. In the first period the political party was the centre, and it was presented, at least to the public, as a unified body with shared interests and goals. Its main disputes were therefore with rival parties. Cracks in this image began to appear in the second period, when the media's spotlights shifted to internal disputes within the party. The party became a playground for power games. Therefore, while creating alignments in order to catch all voters, the two big parties in Israel began to dismantle their cohesion from inside. But these power games were still only between political and ideological factions and groups. This process accelerated in the third period, during which the party became, at least in political discourse, an arena of interpersonal polemics for the competing interests of individual politicians.

The analysis shows that the media coverage of party politics depicts deep changes in party politics, which are a consequence of changes in the party system and in political communication. But, as discussed above, it seems that political discourse analysis can sometimes reveal the winds of change before the structural and cultural changes actually occur. This could be seen best in the constant decrease in the news items' focus only on the parties, a process occurring right from the first elections (Figure 2), long before the structural decrease in the power of parties. As we have argued, this political discourse may function as an early warning sign for latent political changes, like the canary in a coal mine.

Nevertheless, parties are still a key concept in the media coverage of Israeli politics. In fact, we have found a tendency to extend the reports on external disputes between different parties at the expense of internal disputes during the last month before each election (analysis not shown). In a way one can say that parties retained at least their 'brand names' as well-known categories in the political sphere. In this sense we believe that parties still preserve their

capability of representing real rifts in Israeli society. It is possible that the high price paid by the parties following the intensive focus of the media on internal personal disputes will eventually lead to a backlash. This sequence is in line with Wolfsfeld's (2004) Politics–Media–Politics (PMP) model. In fact, primary signs for such a backlash by the politicians might already be seen with the establishment of the Kadima party prior to the 2006 elections, following the inability of the Likud party to overcome internal rifts during Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's attempts to 'move Likud toward the middle' (Hazan, 2007: 282).

Criticism of the party discourse and the attempt to change it was manifested very clearly in a speech given by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert at the 2007 Kadima Council:

In recent years party discourse has been pushed into a corner and has become primarily an arena for personal fighting either within the party or between parties. We [Kadima] are taking a different path, trying to bring back the party debate to the center of the political domain, as it should be in a state like ours.<sup>4</sup>

## Notes

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- 1 The first is a popular tabloid newspaper while the second is a broadsheet.
- 2 The ratio is simply the percentage of external disputes in each election divided by the percentage of internal disputes. The mean ratio represents the mean of all the election years in each period.
- 3 The direct election for prime minister in 1996 and 1999 continued the trend toward candidate-centred politics (Figure 3), a trend that is not unique to the Israeli party system (Dalton et al., 2000; Wattenberg, 1995). Nevertheless, in that period we do not see a change of pattern in the coverage of internal and external disputes (an outlier is the external debate during the 1999 elections).
- 4 Available at: <http://www.pmo.gov.il/PMO/Communication/PMSpeaks/speechkadima200907.htm> (accessed 9 October 2007) (Hebrew).

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