



The Media Campaign: The Shift to Alternative Media+

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The author argues that the media played a more important role in Israel's 1999 election than ever before. He describes the different candidates and parties, and their strategies, and the challenges they faced in targeting a diverse array of interest groups, including Russian immigrants and Israeli Arabs. He also discusses the use of new types of media and record expenditures associated with the campaigns.

Modern election campaigns are fought in the media, particularly on television.(1) American-style "video-politics" have emerged as a dominant model for these campaigns because of their perceived effectiveness and the widespread adoption of ideologies and practices of American political communications in the world. (2) In Europe this process was delayed because most countries did not introduce commercial television stations until the 1980s. (3) A similar delay occurred in Israel where commercial television and radio stations were introduced only in the 1990s. Israel adopted American-style campaigning, a process known as "Americanization," like other American social and cultural fashions. (4)

American-style campaigning is closely associated with heavy emphasis on the personality and character of candidates at the expense of parties and political ideologies, giving priority to images over issues, extensive use of television, sound-bites and sloganeering, effective political commercials, negative campaigning, television debates among the main candidates, and the entire carnival atmosphere preceding election day.(5) American-style media campaigns also include development and implementation of campaign strategies by media professionals based on research and analysis of voter concerns, interests, and reactions to

messages through polls, focus groups, and other measurement and evaluation techniques. Political advertising on television is the essence of the American model of media campaigns, and is based on the assumption that "selling" candidates and ideas is similar to "selling" products or services. (6)

The prospects for greater adaptation of the American model in Israel have increased following a fundamental reform in the electoral system that was used for the first time in the 1996 elections. This reform introduced an American element: direct election of the prime minister by the entire electorate, like the election of the president of the United States. The reform created a double vote system, one for prime minister and the other for a party in the Knesset (the Parliament). The architects of the electoral reform wanted to free the prime minister's position from coalition bargaining that gave small parties disproportionate power and sectarian benefits. They expected the double vote system and the direct election to shape a political system similar to the American one with large blocs competing primarily to win the number one political position in the country. Winning under this system requires moderating extreme positions and successfully appealing to voters in the center. The best and the most effective vehicle to accomplish these goals would be

the national media system that reaches the entire electorate.

It would have been extremely difficult or even impossible to conduct an American-style media campaign if the media system was not sufficiently developed. Until the beginning of this decade, the national media in Israel were extremely limited. Only one public television channel and two public radio stations were available with hardly any competition, with advertising allowed only on one radio station. In the last decade, however, Israel has experienced a revolution in the broadcasting sector with the addition of a large number of new channels, including a national television channel, regional radio stations, and a cable television system which offers more than three dozen channels, several in Hebrew and many in foreign languages. The availability of new channels and new communications technologies, and the rising competition among them, provided the necessary infrastructure to conduct campaigns based on television and political advertising.

The electoral reform and the revolution in Israel's broadcast media were expected to substantially advance the "Americanization" of media campaigns in Israel. This is primarily why the two leading candidates for prime minister, incumbent Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and the main challenger, Labor Party Chairman Ehud Barak, hired well known American experts in media campaigns with an impressive successful record in recent campaigns in Britain and Germany.(7) Yet despite the presence of several features of American elections and media campaigns in the last two elections in Israel, voter behavior and the media campaign failed to follow the main elements of the American model. Indeed, the media campaign focused on the race for prime minister and the character and personality of the candidates, but, contrary to earlier expectations, the

double vote reform has substantially reduced the parliamentary strength of the two main parties, Labor and Likud, and has increased the strength of sectarian parties, particularly those representing Orthodox and traditional Sephardic Jews, Israeli Arabs, and Russian immigrants. Furthermore, the votes of these minorities, who make up almost half of the Israeli electorate, particularly of the "Russians," were also critical for the prime ministerial race. This was probably the reason for calling the 1999 election the most "tribal voting" in Israeli history.(8)

This study suggests that the second election campaign in Israel conducted under the new rules of the double vote has strengthened trends in the media campaign already observed in the first elections of this format held in 1996.(9) Critical decisive elements of the campaign have further moved from the public sphere and the mainstream media to multi-cultural "sphericules" and the alternative media.(10) Several factors combined to produce this trend: the new double vote system, the ethnic and religious makeup of the electorate, limitations of the mainstream media, availability of new communication technologies and alternative media, lessons learned from the previous elections, and unique characteristics of the 1999 elections.

The "Americanization" framework that has been useful in explaining and understanding recent campaigns in Western democracies has not been as useful in explaining and understanding the 1999 elections and media campaigns in Israel. An alternative framework focusing on minorities alienated from the establishment and the mainstream media, and on alternative media that they have established or used to satisfy their cultural and social needs, is more appropriate to media campaigns in Israel, and has been used to conduct research for this study. Alternative media refer to print and electronic media established for specific ethnic, cultural, or

religious groups outside the mainstream media. In Israel, alternative media include newspapers, television and radio stations, and other means of communication such as videocassettes, telemarketing, and direct mail that are directed toward groups such as Orthodox Jews, Israeli Arabs, and Russian immigrants. The literature on alternative media is not yet sufficiently developed, but it is clear that these media provide campaigning options not available in the mainstream media, and can be used to reach targeted groups in ways that better fit their cultural and social contexts, and thus be more effective. This study systematically explains the limits of campaigning via the national media, particularly for candidates for prime minister and for ethnic and religious minorities, and the new and traditional alternative media that they have used instead to achieve their electoral goals. These include satellite technology, the Internet, radio, videocassettes, telemarketing, and direct mail.

LIMITS OF THE NATIONAL MEDIA

Many dramatic changes in the Israeli political system that occurred in anticipation of and during the 1999 elections should have strengthened the national media's role and influence. These changes included defections of prominent leaders to other parties, sometimes all the way to the other side of the political map, as in the case of David Levy, a former prominent Likud leader who served as Netanyahu's foreign minister. Levy joined Barak and a movement of moderate Orthodox Jews to form a new list under the name of One Israel. Several new parties were established including the Center party, initiated by a popular former chief of staff, Amnon Lipkin-Shahak, with tendencies to the left, and two former Likud leaders, Dan Meridor and Roni Milo. They were joined by the minister of defense, Yitzhak Mordechai,

who was fired by Netanyahu and became the party's leader and candidate for prime minister. Two new parties of mainly Russian immigrants were established. (11) Ahmed Tibi, a former adviser to Yasser Arafat, the chairman of the Palestinian Authority, became one of the leaders of an Arab party, the National Democratic Alliance. Five candidates initially ran for the prime ministerial position including an Arab candidate. Until the last minute, when three of them quit, it was not clear whether a second round would be required to choose the prime minister.

These changes occurred in a relatively short period of time and created considerable confusion among the voters, many of whom could not tell any longer which party was their natural political home. The developments challenged the candidates for prime minister, the parties, and the media to provide adequate information to the baffled voter. Partly because of this need and partly because of rating competition, the two national television channels added a 30-minute daily program in prime time on the elections. But television critiques, journalists, and politicians did not think these and other regular and special programs were sufficient in providing the necessary information to the voters. (12)

As a direct result of the electoral reform, the big parties and the national media concentrated on the race for prime minister at the expense of the campaign of parties to the Knesset. (13) This phenomenon occurs because the elected prime minister forms a government even if his own party does not win a majority in the Knesset, as was the case in the 1999 elections where Barak became the prime minister although his own party, One Israel, lost 30 percent of its force in the Knesset, and out of 120 seats won only 26. The media also focused attention on the race for prime minister and dealt much more with campaign strategy, tactics, and with "horse

race” questions such as “who is ahead” and “who is behind,” than with issues, programs, and policies. (14) This trend was also evident in the media’s own commission, publication, and analysis of public opinion polls. Those were carried out almost every week and published in newspapers in the Friday editions, when circulation is highest, and broadcast on television’s most popular talk show programs. Polls on the distribution of votes for the Knesset were commissioned and published less frequently. The concentration of the media on the race for prime minister left smaller parties and groups without adequate access to the mainstream media, and forced them to look for alternative ways to reach potential voters and targeted groups.

POLITICAL ADVERTISING ON THE NATIONAL BROADCAST MEDIA

Despite the considerable expansion of the broadcast media in recent years, campaigning on these media was very limited. There are three major newspapers in Hebrew, two television channels, and two major radio stations that carry news coverage. Israeli election laws do not allow candidates, including the prime minister and ministers, to use appearances on television and radio for political statements and unlike the United States where there are no limitations on political advertising in the broadcast media and the candidates themselves finance advertising on television, in Israel political advertising on television and radio is not permitted except during election time and under stiff regulations.

State laws allow for free political broadcasts on television and radio during the last three weeks of the campaign. All the political broadcasts must be reviewed and approved by the Central Election Committee prior to broadcasting. Despite the new double vote reform, the allocation of time for these broadcasts has not changed. The

formula was calculated to favor veteran and big parties. Each party, old and new, is allotted 10 minutes of broadcast time on television and 25 minutes on radio. But parties represented in the outgoing parliament received 3 more minutes on television and 6 more minutes on radio per each Knesset member. In the 1999 campaign, One Israel received a total of 106 minutes on television and 217 minutes on radio compared to Likud’s 67 minutes on television and 139 minutes on radio. The third largest party, Shas, received 40 minutes on television and 85 minutes on radio, while the two main parties of Russian immigrants received a total of 31 minutes on television and 67 minutes on radio.

Political broadcasts have secondary effects because they receive attention both in the regular television news programs and in the print media. In addition to reports on contents, slogans, visuals, and gimmicks, the papers provided information on activities that occurred behind the scenes, reactions and evaluations by commentators associated with the different camps and professional objective experts. Past experience, however, has demonstrated that conventional media campaigns have not been effective for most parties, since the impact of political broadcasts is generally limited. Televised election ads in Israel appear to serve a useful purpose only for a small segment of the population, as the majority of Israelis do not take them seriously, despite a high level of viewing. Thus we can make a distinction between exposure and influence. (15)

The viewing ratings of the broadcasts in the 1999 campaign were relatively high and very similar to those of the previous 1996 campaign. The average viewing rating was 29.3 percent. Forty-two percent of the public watched the ads on the first day of the campaign, while 25.8 percent watched them on the last day.(16) However, in a public opinion poll, only 15% of the respondents who watched the ads said the

advertising had an influence on their voting.(17) In another poll, 16% said the ads had an influence on their voting in the prime ministerial race, and 13% said the ads had an influence on their voting for the Knesset.(18) The highly discriminating allotment of time for political advertising to the different parties, the formal limitations imposed on contents, and the limited utility and effectiveness of this campaign have inspired candidates and parties to search for additional alternative media.

THE CANDIDATES AND THE MEDIA

It would have been extremely unusual for prime ministerial candidates in a personal election system to avoid the media. It would be even more unusual for a major contender to refuse and evade invitations from the prime minister to debate him. Usually it is exactly the opposite, the holder of the position is reluctant to debate a challenger simply because it puts the latter on a similar turf, making his candidacy more viable. But both Barak and Netanyahu limited their own appearances on the national media and Barak rejected Netanyahu's repeated calls for debates. (19)

Netanyahu was considered a media wizard who knew well how to manipulate the camera. His victory in the 1996 elections was attributed in part to his superior communication skills. He agreed to participate on April 13 in a three-way debate with Barak and Mordechai on *Hot Mishal*, a popular political talk show program on Channel Two.(20) For the first time in the history of debates between candidates for prime minister in Israeli elections, a commercial television channel offered to host the debate free of any conditions and restrictions. All past debates were broadcast by the public television channel and were severely restricted by a rigid format dictated by the candidates. They knew all the questions ahead of time and allowed the

moderator, whom they jointly selected, to ask only one or several limited questions of his own.

Barak refused to take part in the first ever, free format 1999 debate. Netanyahu hoped that his absence would benefit him and hurt Barak. He planned to have the producers of the program leave an empty seat next to his so that symbolically he would demonstrate Barak's fear to debate him, and at the same time drive home his messages. (21) Netanyahu despised Mordechai, who was not known to be particularly effective on television. But the plan did not work. Netanyahu got into a nasty argument with his former minister of defense, who revealed sensitive inside information about Netanyahu's performance as prime minister. The program's viewing rating stood at 44.4 percent, the highest recorded in 1999 until that date. (22) The debate was a political disaster for Netanyahu and a net gain for Barak. The media and the public declared Netanyahu as the clear loser of the debate, and following the encounter his standing in the race was weakened. For the first time in the campaign, the polls showed a victory for Barak over Netanyahu in both election rounds of the prime ministerial race.(23)

Netanyahu complained that from the beginning of the campaign he had to give up on the mainstream national media because they clearly favored his opponent and were committed to throwing him out of power. (24) Toward the end of the campaign he stepped up his attacks on the media: "almost all of the media, though not everyone, is mobilizing now, setting aside all professional ethics -- a simple, absolute mobilization for the victory of Barak and the Left."(25) One particular attack on the media drew an official complaint from the National Federation of Journalists to the attorney general and the Central Election Committee. The Federation accused Netanyahu of "incitement" after he accused

the media of conspiring against him and leading a crowd chanting “they’re afraid, they’re afraid,” referring to Israeli journalists. (26)

Barak severely limited his media appearances, particularly on television, initially because he recognized Netanyahu’s advantage in this area, and later because his poll numbers were steadily going up and he was afraid to make mistakes that sometimes candidates make in media appearances. At the beginning of February, Netanyahu, Barak, and Mordechai appeared separately one after the other on *Politics*, a popular talk show on Channel One. Barak did not do well and was also booed by Netanyahu’s supporters in the studio. (27) In polls taken after the show, two-thirds of the respondents said they did not change their attitudes toward the candidates, 16 percent and 19 percent respectively adopted more favorable views of Netanyahu and Barak, while 23 percent and 19 percent respectively adopted negative views of the two major contenders. (28) Barak and Netanyahu discovered that appearances on national television did not help their campaigns. Barak even noticed that his relative absence from the media was helping rather than hindering his popularity among voters.

Barak’s avoidance of the media, particularly of television, was calculated and planned. Avraham Burg, who led Barak’s campaign, said that “we did a media trick to Bibi (Netanyahu), and we turned his advantage into his soft underbelly. We say that we admit that Bibi is good on television, but in the real world he is stuck.” (29) The debate between Netanyahu and Mordechai was the first and the last of the 1999 campaign. Thus, one popular established feature of elections in the U.S. and Israel, which has been considered one of the decisive factors in the 1996 elections, a television debate between the two principal candidates for prime minister, Netanyahu

and Barak, was absent from the 1999 campaign.(30)

THE POLITICAL COMMUNICATION OF ETHNO-RELIGIOUS MINORITIES

Three ethno-religious minorities make up about half of the electorate: 20 percent Orthodox Jews (which includes both the Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox), 16 percent Israeli Arabs, and 14 percent Russian immigrants. These groups have felt discriminated against by the establishment, and they frequently complained about media coverage of their affairs. For most of them the mainstream media are not relevant and they use alternative media as their main source of information. Orthodox rabbis view television as a corrupting medium and do not allow their followers to watch any programs. Russian immigrants, especially those who have arrived in recent years, do not yet know sufficient Hebrew to comprehend Israeli electronic and print media, and they prefer local and foreign media in Russian. Although Israeli Arabs know Hebrew better than the Russian immigrants, they also use more local and foreign media in Arabic as their main source of information.

Voting patterns and participation in coalitions of the ethno-religious groups have not always been consistent. Although Orthodox and Sephardic Jews and Russian immigrants tended to identify themselves more with the attitudes and policies of the Israeli right, particularly toward Arab-Israeli negotiations, they have joined coalitions of both the right and the left. A majority of the Russian immigrants supported Labor in the 1992 elections and helped Yitzhak Rabin become prime minister, but in the 1996 elections a substantial majority voted for Netanyahu. Shas, the rapidly growing party of Orthodox and traditional Sephardi Jews, has drawn voters from both the National Religious Party and Likud, but has

participated in all recent coalition governments, including those established by Labor's Rabin and Barak. Parties of Israeli Arabs have never officially been part of any coalition. In the 1996 elections they overwhelmingly voted for Labors candidate Shimon Peres.

The elections in Israel of the last twenty years have been very close, and since the victory of Menachem Begin in the 1981 elections, no prime minister has been able to win reelection. The 1996 race for prime minister was extremely close. Netanyahu won by only 30,000 votes -- or by less than one percent of the electorate. Until the last-minute resignation of three of the five candidates for prime minister, the 1999 race for prime minister was also close. Barak and Netanyahu felt that every vote counted, including the votes of the three ethnic-religious groups. Netanyahu was expected to win an overwhelming vote among Orthodox Jews, but even the Council of Torah Stages of the ultra-Orthodox Agudat Yisrael and Degel Hatorah endorsed Netanyahu just a few days before election day and without actually naming him. A similar council of Shas decided to support Netanyahu only in the first round of the election for prime minister, leaving their options open for the second round.

Barak was likely to lose votes among Israeli Arabs because they had a candidate of their own for prime minister, and also had reservations about Barak stemming from his military career and the emphasis placed on his military achievements in his media campaign.(31) In a poll taken among Israeli Arabs in February 1999, 62 percent said they would vote for an Arab candidate, 20 percent were for Barak and 2 percent for Netanyahu. A few weeks before the elections, 55 percent said they would vote for Barak; 25 percent for Azmi Bishara, the Arab candidate for prime minister; 8 percent for Mordechai; and 7 percent for Netanyahu. (32) Two Arab parties, Hadash and the

United Arab List, endorsed Barak only a week before the elections.(33)

The Russian immigrant vote was particularly undecided and was considered a possible "tie breaker" in the long deadlock that characterized the balance of electoral power between left and right since the 1977 elections.(34) In 1996 Netanyahu won 68 percent of this vote, which was one of the principal reasons for his victory. Supporters of Avigdor Lieberman's new party were expected to also favor Netanyahu, but supporters of the other Russian party led by Natan Sharansky could have voted for either candidate. Sharansky endorsed Netanyahu in the 1996 elections but refused to repeat this stand in the 1999 race. The Russian vote for the Knesset was not clear until the end of the campaign. In one of the first published polls of likely Russian voters, less than half, 45 percent, said they would vote for the Russian parties, 37 percent said they would rather vote for other non-ethnic parties, and 18 percent said they were undecided. (35) In April, 43 percent of the Russian voters said they would vote for non-ethnic parties or were still undecided.

FEELINGS OF ALIENATION

The three main ethno-religious minorities have been alienated from the Israeli mainstream national media and have used alternative media as their main source of information. Their alienation has stemmed from different causes including lack of representation in the main media, lack of interest by those media in their life and culture, and cultural and linguistic gaps. Amnon Abramovich, a prominent Israeli journalist, said that the Israeli media "do not represent the periphery or the big minorities of Israel: residents of neighborhoods and developing towns, Orthodox Jews, Israeli Arabs or new immigrants." (36) He added that because parties such as Yisrael B'Aliya or Shas are not actively represented in the

media, the media failed to forecast their strength and success. Although Shas chairman, Aryeh Deri, had been a popular and frequent guest and commentator on Israeli national media, he complained about the media's treatment of Shas and Sephardic Jews, particularly during his long trial that ended a few months before the elections with a conviction and a prison sentence for bribery and corruption. On the day of his conviction, Deri held a special press conference at his home, and when a reporter for Channel One asked him a legitimate question during live prime-time coverage of the event, the religious and spiritual leader of Shas, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, instructed Deri to ignore the question. Calling the reporter "a hostile person," Yosef demanded that he leave the premises immediately. This incident revealed a deep rooted negative attitude toward the Israeli national media.

Israeli Arabs and Russians have embraced a similar attitude. (37) In a public opinion poll conducted in March 1998 among Russian immigrants, a majority of 58 percent said the Russian community has been discriminated against in Israel, 20 percent said it may have been discriminated against, and only 11 percent said it has not suffered discrimination.(38) Seventy-two percent of those who thought Russian immigrants have been discriminated against in Israel named the media as the worst offender. The media topped the list of those places where respondents felt most discriminated against, followed by "getting a job" (68 percent), "police" (54 percent), and other "government institutions" (49 percent).

The alienation from the mainstream media, which were believed to be part of and exclusively serving the interests of the establishment, inspired the three minorities to establish their own print and broadcast media. The print outlets include popular newspapers and magazines while the broadcast outlets include local radio and

cable television stations, many of them illegal. Israeli Arabs and Russian immigrants also use channels in Arabic and Russian that are available on the legal cable system. In the 1996 elections the political alignment of the ethno-religious groups was in flux and, therefore, the two leading candidates for prime minister and the parties had to fight for votes in each of the groups, particularly among Russian immigrants. As these groups were alienated from the mainstream media, it was necessary to reach them through a sophisticated campaign in the various alternative media used by these groups as their main source of information.

THE ALTERNATIVE MEDIA CAMPAIGN

Although television and radio were the most popular alternative media used in the campaign, new means were also employed, including the Internet, videocassettes, telemarketing, and direct mail. Uses of various alternative media demonstrated how new communications technologies can be employed to effectively reach specific audiences. It is possible and useful to distinguish between two uses of the ethno-religious alternative media: external and internal. External use refers to uses by the principal candidates for prime minister and the general parties. An internal use refers to the use of the alternative media by each of the ethno-religious parties competing for votes in each of their own groups. Thus, for example, Barak and Netanyahu used the Russian media to influence the voting of Russian immigrants in the prime ministerial race, while the three parties of Russian immigrants used the same media to influence the Russian immigrant vote in the elections to the Knesset. A similar pattern of external and internal uses existed in the alternative media campaigns among Orthodox Jews and Israeli Arabs. Both external and internal uses among the

ethno-religious groups are explored in the following analysis.

TELEVISION

Alternative television broadcasting is available mainly through satellite services. Satellite technology offers major benefits to both broadcasters and the public, by providing a wide variety of targeted and inexpensive services and a possible link between different groups within society. The use of satellites in Israel is widespread because the country is located at the center of the coverage area of many satellites, and many channels representing the variety of languages and cultures that make-up Israeli society can be picked up. Satellite broadcasting in Israel appeals mainly to Arabs and Russian immigrants, who use them to receive transmissions from their native countries, as in the case of Russians, or from countries where the dominant culture is Moslem and Arab, as in the case of Israeli Arabs.

Many parties and candidates used satellite transmissions, especially foreign satellite channels received via the cable television systems and pirate systems. The elections in Israel created considerable interest in the world and received worldwide coverage. Israeli politicians, candidates for prime minister, and leaders of parties were interviewed and were the subject of regular and special reports. Appearing on foreign channels brings benefits to the candidates such as exposure within Israel and abroad, gaining international status, and, in some cases, getting further coverage on the Israeli national media. Parties and candidates used the channels broadcasting in English, particularly the all-news channels including CNN, BBC World, and Sky, to reach wide audiences including native Israelis, new immigrants, and others who regularly follow foreign news programs. They used the channels broadcasting in Arabic and Russian

to reach Israeli Arabs and Russian immigrants.

About one million people immigrated to Israel from the former Soviet Union in the last decade. Many of them speak mainly Russian and maintain their native culture, and are keen to receive Russian-speaking programs and channels. Three Russian channels are available on the official Israeli cable systems, and it is estimated that about 70 percent of the Russian immigrants living in Israel are connected to them. Two of the channels are public and owned by the state, while NTV is privately operated and carries advertising. The national Israeli media are satisfied with the availability of the Russian channels, because otherwise they might have been required to transmit programs in Russian. From that perspective, the Russian channels exempt the Israeli public channels from their basic obligation to serve all parts of society. This is also clearly evident in the fact that the Russian community itself and its political leaders have not pressed the Israeli public channels to broadcast Russian programs according to their proportional place in society or their representation in the Knesset. The impact of the channels transmitting from Russia is so evident in Israel that these channels include many programs aimed at Russians living in Israel, and advertising for Israeli products is transmitted on the commercial channel.

Due to the significant weight of the "Russian vote," candidates for prime minister, general parties, and the parties of the immigrants themselves paid special attention to the channels broadcasting in Russian. In accordance with Israeli elections laws, no direct political advertising was transmitted on these channels. But campaign managers found ways to bypass the law, including interviews with ministers and leading politicians, coverage of events and visits, and advertisements for books related to the two candidates for prime minister.

The foreign Russian channels interviewed Netanyahu and Barak and leaders of the Russian parties, including Sharansky and Lieberman. NTV aired several interviews on its *Exclusive* program, while RTR included interviews and reports in its *Top Secret* program.

The official short visit of Netanyahu and Foreign Minister Ariel Sharon to Russia, Ukraine and Georgia, on March 22, 1999, was a good example of how official visits abroad were used to gain favorable coverage on Russian channels that was intended to persuade Russian immigrants to vote for Netanyahu. (39) Meetings between Netanyahu and the leaders of the three countries were shown on Russian channels as well as relatively long interviews with the prime minister. Netanyahu and Sharon were shown with the Kremlin in the background praising the great Russian nation, its culture, power and standing in the world, and its role in the Middle East. Netanyahu also leaked to the press a particular item from his conversation with Yevgeni Primakov, then Russian prime minister, who reportedly told his guest: "I do not really want to interfere in Israeli politics, but if I were an Israeli citizen, I would vote for Mr. Netanyahu in these coming elections." (40) In a poll of Russian voters taken after the visit, 91 percent said Israel should improve relations with Russia, and 26 percent said that the results of the visit may influence their decision on whether to vote for Netanyahu. (41) Following the media success of Netanyahu's trip, Barak planned a two-day visit in Russia about ten days before election day, but canceled the plan due to the improvement in his standing among Russian voters, and the use of other media such as videotapes and direct mail.(42)

Shas rents a satellite transponder on a regular basis to transmit a weekly session and a sermon by party founder and spiritual leader, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef. Each Saturday night this transmission from a synagogue in

Jerusalem is received in about 600 locations, including synagogues and social centers. Individual supporters of the party in Israel and abroad can also receive the transmission if they install a private reception dish. Rabbi Yosef's satellite sessions started in 1994 and have become very popular and influential. The number of watchers has been constantly growing. Shas's programs are often broadcast more than once a week, and include programs on special events and religious and national holidays. Many of the party's leaders and Knesset members also participate in the programs, which in many cases are turned into social and political events. The impact of the transmissions is much greater than the event itself at the reception centers, because they are also broadcast on the pirate radio stations linked to Shas, and are covered and advertised by the party's daily newspaper, *From Day to Day*.

In the 1999 campaign, Shas used its weekly satellite transmissions to motivate activists and supporters to vote on election day and to persuade friends, family members, co-workers, and neighbors to also vote for the party. During the campaign, Rabbi Yosef always ended his sessions and sermons by asking viewers and listeners to mobilize and help the party win more seats in the Knesset. A week before the elections, Yosef implied that voting for Shas was an important *mitzva* (commandment) and that those who voted for the party will go to the Garden of Eden (Paradise). (43) The satellite transmissions enabled the party to appeal directly to its potential voters, while bypassing the formal limitations on media coverage and restrictions on political advertising.

Although there are limited transmissions in Arabic on Israeli television and radio channels, these are not nearly enough to satisfy the needs of Israeli Arabs. A wide variety of foreign channels in Arabic help to meet these needs. Free reception of

Arab channels is provided through the European satellite service of Eutelsat, the Arab satellite service of Arabsat, and the Egyptian satellite service of Nilesat. Pay services include Orbit and Showtime. These services offer hundreds of government owned or privately owned channels from Arab countries. The main channels aimed at Israeli Arabs are MBC, which transmits from London, and Jazira, which transmits from Dubai. The Palestinian Authority also transmits television and radio broadcasts over the air and via satellite. In addition, there are many illegal local television and radio channels transmitting programs in Arabic.

In search of votes among Israeli Arabs, leaders of Arab parties appeared on the Arab local and foreign media, and while official Arab media refrained from direct intervention in the campaign, they urged Israeli voters in general, and Israeli Arabs in particular, to vote "for peace." This was a euphemism for a vote against Netanyahu, who had been viewed in the Arab world as a leader who would not implement the Israeli-Palestinian Oslo agreements.

RADIO

The use of alternative illegal ("pirate") radio stations was widespread during the 1999 elections. Since these stations did not comply with the restrictions imposed by election laws, they provided an important vehicle for aggressive political advertising among the ethno-religious groups, not permitted or available in any other media. In 1998 there were about 146 pirate radio stations operating in Israel, including 20 serving Orthodox Jews and another 20 operating in the Arab sector. (44) Others were associated with political and cultural groups such as right-wing factions and Sephardi Jews. The most politically active radio stations during the elections were those associated directly with Shas.

The founders of these illegal outlets have repeatedly argued that the mainstream stations could not meet their needs because they broadcast secular material and commercials that offend religious people.

During the elections, the stations linked to Shas presented numerous political programs and interviews with the spiritual and political leaders of the party and with rabbis and supporters. They also transmitted the weekly lectures and sermons of Rabbi Yosef, and information about the party's political, educational, and social activities. The use of illegal radio stations had become so widespread and acceptable that even Prime Minister Netanyahu felt free to talk on a number of them during election day, calling on listeners to go and vote and to cast their ballot for him. He stopped these illegal appeals only when asked to do so by the chairman of the Central Election Committee. (45)

Two pirate commercial radio stations, Channel Seven on the right and Radio Gal on the left, presented political advertising and pleas to vote for a specific candidate or party. Channel Seven was established in 1987 by right-wing factions associated with settlers in territories captured by Israel in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, and has been operating from a ship located off the Israeli coast and from several areas in the territories. The station has enjoyed considerable support among leaders and Knesset members from the right. During the elections, Channel Seven interviewed politicians primarily from the National Unity Party, a newly formed coalition of rightist parties, and from the National Religious Party. These parties also used the station to present information on their political activities. Channel 7 supported the reelection of Netanyahu.

Radio Gal, the liberal station, was recently established to serve the political platform of the left. It is much less popular and enjoys less support in political and

economic circles than Channel Seven. During the elections, the station supported Barak and three centrist and leftist parties: One Israel, Meretz, and the Green Party. The latter was established to protect the environment and natural resources. The station transmitted political advertising and coverage of the campaigns of the three parties and Barak.

Radio stations in the Arab sector and the radio station of the Palestinian Authority extensively covered the election. They ignored the restrictions on political advertising and called on Israeli Arabs to vote for Arab parties in the elections for the Knesset and for Barak in the prime ministerial race. The Arab stations were illegal, while the radio station of the Palestinian Authority was, of course, legal. However, the explicit call to Israeli citizens by an official organ of another political entity to vote in a particular way, might be regarded as "intervention" in the campaign.

VIDEOCASSETTES

One of the most interesting alternative means used in the 1999 campaign involved videocassettes. This was an attractive channel for parties of Orthodox Jews which wanted to show pictures and video films to their supporters who do not watch television or do not have television sets at home. Shas produced and distributed about 200,000 copies of a highly controversial 72-minute videocassette entitled *J'accuse*, where party chairman, Aryeh Deri, strongly criticized and attacked the court system and the Ashkenazi establishment and elite groups for framing him on charges of bribery and corruption. He implied that the injustice caused to him represents the continuing injustice caused to all Sephardic Jews. The main message of the video was that Deri was innocent and that a vote for Shas was a vote to exonerate Deri and to send a message to the opponents of

the party. (46) The video was distributed at intersections, shown on national television as part of the political advertising of the party, and presented at every public meeting of the party. The contents of the video were also distributed on audio tape and CD-ROM.

Shas supporters reacted with enthusiasm to the contents and conclusions of the video, but Deri and the video were severely criticized by the president of Israel, Ezer Weizman; leaders of several parties, including Michael Eitan of Likud and Yitzhak Mordechai of the Center party, the attorney general and the state attorney; the state comptroller; and political commentators. The attorney general even instructed the police to open an investigation against Deri for contempt of court, insulting public servants, and threatening them through the video, but in the end declined to press charges against Deri. (47)

The United Torah Judaism party showed and distributed a film entitled *The Day After*, portraying a scenario of Israel into a totally secular state following a victory of the left. (48) The message was that only a vote for the party would prevent that scenario and ensure the continued existence of Israel as a Jewish state. The video was shown in religious neighborhoods on giant mobile screens. The film's purpose was to energize party activists and supporters through a campaign of fear. The video ended with the rhetorical questions: "Is it scary? Were you frightened? Indeed, there is a lot to worry about!" The Barak campaign distributed a biographical videocassette in Russian that emphasized Barak's military achievements and daring operations including, for example, the 1976 Entebbe Operation. Another video presented selected political television ads of One Israel with subtitles in Russian. Its purpose was to reach Russian immigrants who did not watch the political advertising broadcast on the national channels because of their insufficient proficiency in Hebrew.

TELEMARKETING AND DIRECT MAIL

Effective telemarketing and direct mail in an election campaign depends to a large extent on credible data bases. Candidates for prime minister and parties used several methods, some of them innovative, to collect addresses and phone numbers of voters. One Israel and the leftist Meretz party included telephone numbers for interpersonal connection with voters in their television and printed ads. The parties asked supporters to contact the party and participate in the campaign. Shas used a highly innovative way to build a data base of potential supporters. The party offered people the opportunity to buy letters in a new Torah scroll for one Israeli hekel (about 25 cents) per letter. Each Torah scroll contains about 300,000 letters, and this method had the potential of registering the addresses and telephone numbers of hundreds of thousands of people.

One Israel, Shas, and Yisrael Beiteinu used computerized phone calls to identify and inform potential supporters. These included mainly messages from the leaders of the parties calling on voters to support the party, and information about the elections and the campaign. One Israel and the Barak campaign used recorded messages by Amram Mitzna, the Labor mayor of Haifa, who approached residents of his city and asked them to vote for Barak. On the eve of election day, Deri used the Shas computerized data base to send supporters a personal message of thanks for their support and a reminder to vote for Shas.

Many parties used direct mail to reach targeted groups and particular supporters. One Israel used this channel most effectively. The party advertised a phone number where people could call in and ask to receive the main ideas of the party and its policy plans for the future, such

as "Barak's Plan for Economic Security." The Barak campaign also used direct mail to reach Orthodox Jews and Russian voters. During the last Saturday of the campaign, Barak appealed to the religious community through a two page letter delivered to thousands of synagogues around the country. Referring to the Torah portion of that Saturday from the prophet Hosea, Barak appealed to religious nationalists and ultra-Orthodox to join in a dialogue with the rest of Israeli society based on "the marriage of justice and law, benevolence and charity." The tactic, the contents of the letter, and reactions from leaders of the religious parties made major front-page headlines in the newspapers. (49)

The Center party sent its main ideas through inserts in *Yediot Ahronot*, the most widely circulated newspaper in Israel. Shinui, a secular party, used direct mail as one of its principal campaign media. It sent letters by party leaders and distributed a magazine listing the reasons to vote for the party. The National Religious Party also used a variety of direct mail services to approach party members and supporters, including a letter listing the party's achievements in the government, a letter explaining the need to vote for the party, and a prayer for Jerusalem Day. They also disseminated synagogue bulletins. These are distributed by religious parties all year long, but were also distributed by secular parties during the election campaign. They primarily included religious and political messages designed to affect the voting of this group.

Reactions by focus groups to Barak's candidacy revealed that Russian immigrants knew very little about him, his military background, education, and views. They thought that Netanyahu was his commander in the army or was more educated. Many did not know that he had been chief of staff. Barak overcame this problem through frequent appearances on Russian-language

radio and television, granting long interviews that did not necessarily deal with politics and the election but rather with society, culture, science, and people. (50) Barak's most effective weapon was a favorable biography, *Soldier Number One*, written by two Israeli journalists that was translated into Russian and distributed through various outlets including direct mail. On the eve of Passover, for example, 25,000 copies of this biography were delivered to readers of *Globus*, a popular Russian weekly. (51) Parts of the biography were also published in *Vesti*, the most popular Russian daily. Following the success of this campaign, Netanyahu ordered his own book, *A Place Under the Sun*, translated and distributed it to Russian voters through direct mail and other means.

THE INTERNET

The Internet is gradually assuming a larger role in political campaigns because it entails several significant advantages. (52) It offers interested voters a wealth of information including the party's platform, speeches and biographies of candidates, and a list of achievements and promises, in a variety of visually attractive ways including animation, pictures, video, data files, and large amounts of text that users may simply download and observe at their own convenience.

In the 1999 elections in Israel there was some limited use of the Internet. (53) Candidates for prime minister, several parties, and interested groups and organizations built and maintained Internet sites. Four of the five candidates for prime minister -- Barak, Netanyahu, Mordechai, and Begin -- offered sites which provided biographical information and positions on the campaign issues. Many parties including One Israel, Likud, the Center party, the Israel Communist party, Meretz, the Third Way, and the Green party had sites which

provided information about the parties' platforms and positions on major issues, as well as biographical information about the parties' candidates to the Knesset. Organizations and groups associated with different parties also built sites.

Another interesting use of the Internet in the 1999 election was carried out by Keshet, an organization established in New York to arrange inexpensive flights to Israel for Israeli voters, supporters of the left, who live in the United States. Keshet asked the noted Israeli writer Amos Oz to send a letter to Israeli voters in the United States via e-mail urging them to travel to Israel to vote. In the letter, Oz explained the historical significance of the 1999 election.(54) In general, however, the use of the Internet and websites was limited, both because the total number of Internet subscribers in Israel is still relatively limited and because the candidates and the parties themselves did not consider this channel sufficiently attractive. The unofficial estimate of Internet subscribers in Israel stands at 250,000. However, the actual number of users is probably twice as many. This is potentially a large audience and in the next elections it will probably receive much more attention from the candidates and parties.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite the direct election of the prime minister and the use of American-style campaigning in Israel, the 1999 media campaign demonstrated the key role of alternative media used by the ethno-religious minorities for their main source of information. It seems that large-scale and effective use of alternative media helped candidates and parties to achieve victory. Alternative and new media technologies were widely used because of the restrictions imposed on political advertising and the mainstream media, and because of the need

to reach targeted groups. The alternative media allowed candidates and parties to bypass the national media and to reach groups in their own language and cultural environments.

Netanyahu won the 1996 elections partly because he was able to form a coalition of unsatisfied minorities including Sephardi Jews, Orthodox Jews, and Russian immigrants, and he lost the 1999 elections partly because he could not hold them together. Barak recognized the need to reach the ethno-religious groups that had traditionally voted for Likud candidates, and used alternative media to achieve this goal. (55) Barak invested more efforts and resources in the alternative media campaign than Netanyahu, and succeeded particularly among Russian Jews. In this key sector, he defeated Netanyahu by 55 percent to 45 percent, a remarkable achievement given the totally opposite ratio registered at the beginning of the campaign – 70 percent to 20 percent in favor of Netanyahu. The most spectacular success in the elections for the Knesset was the increase in the power of Shas by 70 percent -- from 10 to 17 members. Shas spent about \$5 million on the campaign, but not one cent on advertising in the mainstream press. The Russian parties also increased representation for Russian immigrants by about 40 percent -- from 7 to 10 members. Both Shas and the Russian parties pursued most of their campaign in the alternative media.

The electoral reform and the direct election of the prime minister further polarized Israeli society and the political system, resulting in an increase in the political power of sectarian parties which care mostly for their own groups. The reform has come under severe criticism, particularly within the traditional large blocs, Labor and Likud, which lost many seats in the Knesset to the sectarian parties. A law to abolish the direct election and the double vote system has been under

consideration in the Knesset. If direct election is eliminated or other new election reforms are introduced, such as the allocation of some Knesset seats according to regions, then the media campaign will have to adapt to new conditions and the emphasis on alternative media may be reduced. On the other hand, partial regional elections to the Knesset may increase the significance of local broadcast and print media.

The alternative media will continue to play a role in election campaigns, but the exact scope and impact of this role is not yet clear. Even in American presidential elections, campaign strategists and managers have begun to use alternative media and nontraditional news coverage to diversify and improve their techniques. Candidates appear not only in television ads and in regular news programs, but also on television and radio talks shows, late-night television programs, cable channels such as MTV, and on local programs that reach specific groups such as Latinos. (56)

Alternative media in Israel are likely to expand and grow. There are many efforts underway to legalize pirate radio stations and liberalize the broadcasting industry. A Direct Broadcasting Satellite (DBS) system is to be introduced, and has the potential to offer many channels for interested groups and movements, including the ethno-religious minorities. On the other hand, by the next elections the Russian immigrants, for example, may be better integrated into Israeli society and will have less need for links with Russian culture. Progress in Arab-Israeli peacemaking may produce a similar outcome for Israeli Arabs. The national media may also be more responsive to the needs of minorities, and may include programs that meet their aspirations. Possible changes in the electoral system, the broadcast media, and the interests of ethno-religious and other minorities may alter the media campaign in the next election, but the

alternative media will still provide unique options that undoubtedly will be utilized by candidates and parties.

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11) One of the new "Russian" parties, Yisrael Beiteinu, was created by Avigdor Lieberman, a close associate of Netanyahu and the former powerful director general of the Prime Minister's Office, who had helped Netanyahu win the 1996 elections, directly challenging Natan Sharansky, the leader of the more established Russian immigrants party, Yisrael B'Aliyah. See Ben Simon, *Disenchanted Tribes: Israel Goes to Elections*, pp. 275-276.

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16) *Yediot Ahronot*, April 28, 1999, p. 5, and May 17, 1999, p. 21.

17) *Ma'ariv*, April 30, 1999, p. 13.

18) *Yediot Ahronot*, April 30, 1999, p. 4.

19) Barak suggested conducting debates on national television only as part of the political advertising campaign, with time taken equally from the total allotted advertising time of One Israel and Likud. He knew, however, that Netanyahu could not accept this proposal because of the considerable imbalance in the allotted advertising time of the two parties. One

Israel had many more minutes (106) than did Likud (76).

20) Crystal and Kfir, *The Sixth Commendation, 1999 Elections*, pp. 178-187.

21) Yerah Tal, "An Empty Chair? Barak Doesn't Care -- But Will Anybody be There," *Ha'aretz*, English edition, April 13, 1999, p. 2.

22) In a poll conducted a day after the debate, 53 percent of the respondents thought Mordechai won, only 22 percent said that Netanyahu won, 18 percent thought that neither won, and 7 percent said both won equally. *Yediot Ahronot*, April 15, 1999, p. 7.

23) Sever Plotzker, "Barak Gained," *Yediot Ahronot*, April 16, 1999, p. 6.

24) In his first post-election interview on television, Netanyahu admitted that his media policy might have been wrong. *Yediot Ahronot*, July 15, 1999, p. 9.

25) Yerah Tal, "PM Blasts Media for Brainwash," *Ha'aretz*, English edition, May 13, 1999, p. 2.

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27) Crystal and Kfir, *The Sixth Commendation, 1999 Elections*, pp. 139-141.

28) Sever Plotzker, "The Week Barak Would Like to Forget," *Yediot Ahronot*, February 5, 1999, p. 6.

29) Akiva Eldar, "Barak did not Blink First," *Ha'aretz*, English edition, May 17, 1999, p. 5.

30) Yaron Katz, *It's a Sellers' Market: Mass Media and the Marketing of Politicians* (Tel Aviv: Poalim Publishing House, 1999), pp. 207-231 (Hebrew).

31) Ben Simon, *Disenchanted Tribes: Israel Goes to Elections*, pp.185-198.

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35) *Yediot Ahronot*, January 8, 1999, p. 15.

36) Eti Abramov, "The Seventh Power against the Rest of the World," *Jerusalem*, September 25, 1998, p. 20.

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43) *Yediot Ahronot*, May 10, 1999, p. 8.

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