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Disenchanted Love: The Emergence of Antipolitical Sentiment in Israel

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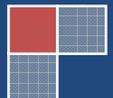


TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>INTRODUCTION.....</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>“ANTIPOLITICAL” SENTIMENT.....</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>ANTIPOLITICS IN ISRAEL.....</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>FORMAL AND INFORMAL INDICATORS OF ISRAELI ANTIPOLITICS.....</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>POSSIBLE SOURCES OF ANTIPOLITICS.....</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>DETRIMENTAL RAMIFICATIONS.....</i>	<i>18</i>

Disenchanted Love: The Emergence of Antipolitical Sentiment in Israel

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"Politics is dirty. It is something to work for, however, not to fear."¹

INTRODUCTION

Israeli society,² and in particular its Jewish element, has long been recognized for its high political awareness, knowledge and involvement.³ This salient "political quality" has manifested itself in many ways: high voter turnout, impressive party membership, strong party identification, and the general public's non-stop effort to keep abreast of the political news. Furthermore, compared to most other liberal democracies, the average Israeli held and apparently still holds strong political opinions, which, it should be noted, are quite stable, presumably because they closely correlate with individual socio-demographic and socio-political characteristics.⁴

This significant and multi-faceted civil political engagement can be explained by the relative youth of Israeli democracy (new democracies are known for being politically hyper-energetic,⁵ and by the existential security, economic, social and other strategic dilemmas it has faced. It could also be interpreted as a fundamental aspect of the "normalization" process of the Jewish people after two thousand years in the Diaspora, where they were

¹ Schudson, M., What's Unusual about Covering Politics as Usual. In Zelizer, B. & S. Allen (eds.) *Journalism after September 11*. London: Rutledge, 2002. p. 36.

² This article deals mainly with the Israeli Jewish sector. The Israeli Arab sector, as a national minority, whose loyalty to the state has always been questioned and whose claim for national self-determination rejected, exhibits political attitudes and modes of political involvement as well as attitudes towards politics which are basically different than those of the Jewish majority. It would do no justice to either sector if discussed together in a short paper such as this.

³ For the high level of politicization of the Israeli Jewish sector see e.g., Galnoor, I. *Steering the Polity: Communication and Politics in Israel*. Tel Aviv: Am Oved, (1985). p.330. [Hebrew].

⁴ For the strong correlation, for example, between the individual's socio-demographic and socio-economic characteristics and his or her position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, see, Yaar, E. and T. Hermann, Divided yet united: Israeli Jewish public opinion on the Oslo process. *Journal of Peace Research* (September 2002), pp. 597-613.

⁵ For an interesting account of the participation and knowledge levels in the new African democracies see, Afrobarometer Briefing Paper No. 70 May 2009. For similar information about Europe, see Social Capital, Special Eurobarometer, 2005.

Since the early 1990s, the hot "love story" between Israelis and their political establishment has soured.

often remote from state affairs and from the ruling circles, which was safer for Jewish communities.⁶ "Doing politics" was therefore a prime aim of the Zionist project. The proper functioning of the political system, including ongoing civil political participation, was also widely seen as an indication of Israel being in the right place: a member of the family of democratic regimes. Those who made politics their vocation were therefore respected as being engaged in a virtuous mission, namely, as trustees of the common good and as delegates of the common will.⁷

However, this remarkable "political state of mind" has gradually dissipated since the early 1990s and the hot "love story" between the Israelis and the political establishment has turned into disenchanting love. This change of heart is manifested in a continuous decrease in voter turnout and party membership, as well as in citizens' participation in all kinds of political gatherings and events. In addition, as will be shown, the public image of political structures and procedures has severely deteriorated, while that of the "professional politicians" is currently, in fact, appallingly negative. The level of political trust reported by the mainstream is disturbingly low and political news no longer serves as the "tribal bonfire"

around which the national collective gathers. Thus, antipolitical sentiments hold sway.

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This article presents and discusses these current developments in the Israeli socio-political arena and elaborates on their short and long term expected ramifications. The article is divided into three sections. In the first section the "antipolitical"

⁶ E.g., Yaar, E., and Z. Shavit, eds. *Trends in Israeli Society*. Tel Aviv: The Open University of Israel, 2000, vol. 1, p. 104. [Hebrew]

⁷ The Arab sector apparently has shared the democratic aspirations of Israel, yet resented its Zionist self-definition, which has always been a thorn in its side. Therefore, their political interest, involvement and engagement of Arab citizens of Israel has been primarily motivated by the effort to defend and expand their civil and national rights, as well as by the aspiration to transform Israel into a 'state of all its citizens'. Being only partially successful in achieving the first aim and totally failing, thus far, in promoting the latter, politics, and especially establishment-style politics has been of lesser interest to the Israeli Arab minority.

concept will be introduced and briefly contextualized in today's liberal democracies; in the second, empirical data regarding its prevalence and manifestations in Israel will be put forward; and in the third, some assertions regarding the potential effects of antipolitical sentiment on the future of the Israeli democracy will be suggested.

"ANTIPOLITICAL" SENTIMENT

Many liberal democracies seem to suffer at present from a noteworthy change for the worse in the attitudes and sentiments of the citizenry towards the political establishment – its institutions, procedures and agents – i.e., the professional politicians. Thus, although based upon the theoretical notion of a "social contract" between the sovereign people and the rulers, in many democratic contexts no such contractual relations actually exist: the citizens neither trust nor respect their representatives and the civil servants of the government, but consider them inattentive and inept at best and manipulative and corrupt

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at worst. Existing political procedures are often thought of as ineffective and arbitrary, while the political structures are widely perceived as cumbersome, overly bureaucratic, and much too expensive to sustain from the public treasury in the light of their poor performance.

These negative images are nourished by firsthand experience of the citizens but, even more so, they are fostered by investigative journalists as well as by the film industry, and publishing houses, which frantically disseminate biased and speculative information and theories about the politicians' mal-performance, unethical actions and continual failures in order to catch the attention of the potential viewers/readers. Far more words have been expended on political villains and strategic political oversights than on political "good guys" and astute decision-making. As a result:

Once something of a bon mot, conjuring a series of broadly positive connotations – typically associating politics with public scrutiny and accountability – 'politics', has

increasingly become a dirty word. Indeed, to attribute 'political' motivations to an actor's conduct is now invariably to question that actor's honesty, integrity or capacity to deliver an outcome that reflects anything other but his or her material self-interest— often, all three simultaneously.⁸

In many democratic contexts, citizens neither trust nor respect their representatives and civil servants but, rather, consider them inattentive and inept at best, and manipulative and corrupt at worst.

In his 2007 cross-national study, *Why We Hate Politics*, Colin Hay differentiated between formal (voter turnout, and party membership) and informal (defiant non-participation, mounting cynicism, decreased vertical political trust, and movement to extra-parliamentary civil participation modes) manifestations of this political disenchantment. This does not imply political disinterest in the basic sense of the word "political" because, as Hay proves empirically, while disengaging from establishment-style politics, citizens express their social concerns and political drives through extra-parliamentary channels.

A 1997 volume of articles edited by an Austrian scholar, Andreas Schedler, and entitled *The End of Politics – Explorations into Modern Antipolitics*, opens with the following statement, sustaining the argument that politics, in the conventional sense of the word, is no longer "in":

We live in antipolitical times. ... antipolitical discourses are nothing new in Western political history, but today, in the late twentieth century, they have gained renewed prominence. They now form an important, at times even hegemonic element of the ideological universe. And in all probability they have still not reached the peak of their global career.⁹

Naturally, the specific causes of trouble and the antipolitical manifestations vary somewhat from one political context to the other. Still, the basic features described above seem to be the same everywhere (with the verb 'hate' in reference to the political, playing a central

⁸ Hay, C., *Why We Hate Politics*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007, p. 1

⁹ Schedler, A. 1997. Introduction: Antipolitics – Closing and Colonizing the Public Sphere. In A. Schedler, ed., *The End of Politics – Explorations into Modern Antipolitics*. London: MacMillan Press, 1997, p. 1.

role). Thus, in 1992 E.J. Dionne, a political scientist and columnist published a book entitled *Why Americans Hate Politics*¹⁰. The author identifies the fundamental answer to this question in the fact that since the 1960s, American liberal and conservative ideologies have presented the public with false choices, preventing the framing of issues in ways that are conducive to their resolution. Politics has then failed in fulfilling its main function: taking care of the common basic practical and emotional needs of a society. Words have taken over the political scene instead of actions. Another reason why the Americans turned their back to politics was given by Robert Putnam in his famous, yet highly contested, essay and then book *Bowling Alone*.¹¹ Putnam indicated that American civil society was breaking down as Americans became more disconnected from their families, neighbors, communities, and the republic itself. He argues that the organizations that gave life to democracy were fraying. Thus, Americans have disengaged from political involvement, including decreased voter turnout, public meeting attendance, serving on committees and working with political parties. Putnam also cites Americans' growing distrust in their government. Although accepting the possibility that this lack of trust could be attributed to the long litany of political tragedies and scandals since the 1960s, he maintains that this explanation was limited when viewing it alongside other trends in civic engagement of a wider sort. Russell Dalton in his 2004 *Democratic Challenges, Democratic Choices*, however, claims that indeed such trends are a function of scandals, poor performance, and other government failures. His main answer to the question "Why?" is that the change in public opinion against political establishments in advanced post-industrialized societies is generated by the successful social modernization of these nations.¹²

The seminal work by Carl Boggs¹³ argues that most Americans are increasingly alienated from a political system that is commonly viewed as corrupt, authoritarian, and simply irrelevant to the most important challenges of our time. Citing ever-declining voter participation, Boggs said that Americans have retreated from political involvement out of

¹⁰ Dionne, E.J., *Why Americans Hate Politics*. NY: Simon & Schuster, 1992

¹¹ Putnam, R., *Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital*. *Journal of Democracy*, (January 2000), volume 6, number 1; Putnam, R. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. NY: Simon & Schuster, 1995.

¹² Dalton, R., *Democratic Challenges, Democratic Choices The Erosion of Political Support in Advanced Industrial Democracies*. 2004.

¹³ Boggs, C., *The End of Politics – Corporate Power and the Decline of Public Sphere*. NY: The Guilford Press, 2000.

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justifiable feelings of disgust and pessimism and bemoans the decline of American liberalism. He attempted to link this with global corporate capitalism, corporate downsizing, and "all consuming corporate agendas" which, in his analysis, together with the mass media, have created the unholy alliance which dominates today's American politics.

In his 2006 book, *Why Politics Matters*,¹⁴ Gerry Stoker, from Manchester University, England, suggested that in his country and most probably in other liberal democracies as well, politics was failing because politicians have been again and again exposed as being more incompetent in dealing with increasingly complicated problems they face, that the political disenchantment reflects the emergence of a more critical citizenry, and that politics is in trouble because more and more issues are moving beyond its control:

It is clear that in the eyes of many people politicians are not the best advertisement for politics. Politics is often viewed as a rather grubby and unpleasant feature of modern life. People who take up politics as a trade or a vocation tend to attract more derision than admiration. Politics is something you apologize for, rather than being proud about.¹⁵

Furthermore, with the self-empowering of the citizenry in many democracies following the increased levels of education, the wider variety of information channels and the inculcation of participatory ideals, their desire to have their voice constantly heard by the decision makers and their parallel disappointment at not being listened to, apparently feeds the antipolitical sentiments.¹⁶

¹⁴ Stoker, G., *Why Politics Matters – Making Democracy Work*. London: Palgrave, 2006.

¹⁵ op. cit. 47-48.

¹⁶ In a survey conducted in the USA in early 2008, 81% of the interviewees maintained that the administration should take into consideration public opinion polls when making important decisions because this may help them understand the people views. 94% rejected the argument that the citizens have their say only on election day. www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/governance_bt/461.php?lb=btgov&pnt=461&nid=&id=

Indications of similar developments in other old and new democracies (for example in central and Eastern Europe and in non-western democracies such as India¹⁷) are found in many other scholarly works.

However, it is important to note that the globally-prevalent antagonism towards democratic established political systems does not usually imply resentment towards the basic democratic ideas or ideals. In fact, the opposite is correct – it seems that almost everywhere the public support for democracy *per se* is getting higher in recent years.¹⁸

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ANTIPOLITICS IN ISRAEL

What are then the main manifestations of the antipolitical sentiments in Israel today? In order to answer this question the above-mentioned differentiation between formal and informal indicators will be employed. However, before presenting and analyzing the relevant data, it is important to insert a three-fold waiver. First, the rise of antipolitical sentiments has not been accompanied by a decline in the Israeli Jewish sector's patriotism. In fact, there are some empirical indications that patriotism has been increasing in recent years.¹⁹

Second, the emergence of antipolitical sentiment in Israel does not mean that Israeli society has become depoliticized, i.e., uninterested in politics. In fact, the present level of interest in politics is quite impressive. For example in the 2009 Democracy Index survey, over two

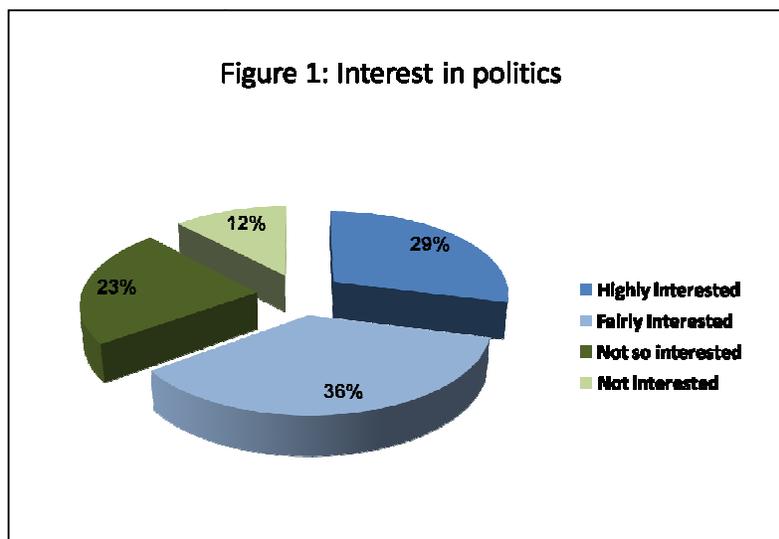
¹⁷ For antipolitical manifestations in Eastern Europe, see, e.g., Fairbanks, C., 1997. The Public Void: Antipolitics in the Former Soviet Union. In Schedler, *op. cit.*, pp. 91-114. For a highly interesting account of the Indian case and the increase in grassroots political violence as a result of their neglect by the political and money classes, see Arundhati, R., *Listening to Grasshoppers; Field Notes on Democracy*. Hamish Hamilton, Penguin, 2009.

¹⁸ Hay, *op. cit.*, pp. 31-32.

¹⁹ As indicated by the 2009 Patriotism Index <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3663323,00.html> [Hebrew]

The rise of antipolitical sentiments has not been accompanied by a decline in the Israeli Jewish sector's patriotism. In fact, there are indications patriotism has increased in recent years.

thirds of the respondents maintained that they were highly or fairly interested in politics (Figure 1).²⁰



It was found in the same survey that the younger cohorts were significantly less interested in politics than were the older ones: among the young, only 50% reported having high or some political interest, a decrease of 18% (!) compared to the 2003 democracy Index findings. Still, as will be discussed below, this reduced political interest has not yet been translated into a decrease in the voter turnout among the younger cohorts. Among Israeli Arabs, only 38% expressed interest in politics in this survey, most probably due to this sector's antagonism towards the Jewish/Zionist nature of the state, as clearly expressed, for example, in the Future Vision of the Palestinian Arabs in Israel.²¹

²⁰ Arian, A., M. Philipov, and A. Knafelman, *Auditing Israeli Democracy: Twenty Years of Immigration from the Soviet Union*. Jerusalem: The Israel Democracy Institute, 2009. p.117

²¹ See, <http://www.metzilah.org.il/webfiles/fck/future.pdf>

Third, in Israel apparently, as in other democracies, the rise of antipolitics does not imply resentment towards democracy *per se*.²²

FORMAL AND INFORMAL INDICATORS OF ISRAELI ANTIPOLITICS

The first and undisputed formal indication for Israelis' change of attitude regarding politics is the decreasing voter turnout. Until 1969 the average voter turnout was around 82%, putting Israel at the upper section of the democratic regimes voter turnout table, while in 1999 it stood somewhat lower but still in a "good" place, at around 78%. In the 2000's, however, it dropped dramatically to around 64%, thereby positioning Israel in 20th place out of 36 cases regularly followed by the IDEA (the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance).²³

By their nature, such statistical averages "hide" some critical information which is highly relevant to our discussion. A deeper inquiry reveals that the low averages of the 2000's elections bring together the significantly even lower turnout of the secular Israeli Jewish sector and the higher turnout of the ultra-orthodox one. This fact is important to the future of the Israeli democracy because the ultra-orthodox sector's commitment to liberal democratic values is uncertain at the very least. The aggregated data also smudges the ongoing low turnout of the Israeli Arab sector, which, again, reflects this sector's alienation from Israel as a Zionist-Jewish state.²⁴ Unlike in many other liberal democracies, where the decline in the voter turnout is much generally more visible among the younger cohorts (e.g., Stoker, 32), as already noted, the voter turnout decline in Israel seems not to be age-related, although before each of the last election campaigns the pollsters and the media maintained that the younger cohorts were less likely to vote than were the older groups.²⁵

²² Arian, Philipov and Knafelman, 11.

²³ op. cit., p. 28. However, the Israeli Central Statistics Bureau maintains that about 7% should be added to the above figures because of the eligible voters who do not live in Israel and therefore cannot vote.

²⁴ See e.g., Schafferman, K. T, Participation, Abstention and Boycott: Trends in Arab Voter Turnout in Israeli Elections, 2008

<http://www.idi.org.il/sites/english/ResearchAndPrograms/elections09/Pages/ArabVoterTurnout.aspx>

²⁵ See, e.g., www.ynet.co.il/Ext/Comp/ArticleLayout/CdaArticlePrintPreview/1,2506,L-3668577,00.html [Hebrew]

As for party membership –this has also dramatically declined, certainly since the early days of the state, but also in comparison to the 1980's and 1990's. Thus, in 1969, 18% of the

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interviewees in a national representative sample declared that they were members of a specific party. However, in the 2006 pre-elections survey the number of self-reporting party members was around

only 9%, and in the 2008 Democracy Index survey only about 4% of the interviewees confirmed that they were party members.²⁶ The numbers reported by the parties themselves are significantly higher,²⁷ but this is based on their lists of fee payers, which cannot be taken as a valid indication for actual membership, because of the intensive pre-election activity of the "vote contractors", who often register members and pay their party fees without even informing them. As Israeli parties, are by their own definition, mass, not skeleton, parties, this very low party membership rate is indeed bad news insofar as formal citizen political participation is concerned.

Not only are the formal indicators - voter turnout and party membership - in decline, but also the informal ones. Hence, the level of interest in the TV pre-election propaganda clips has critically diminished: while in the late 1960's-early 70's nearly half of Israelis reported that they watched them daily, in the last (2009) elections, the number of those so reporting dropped to a single digit figure.²⁸ The data also suggests that the internet alternative, i.e., the parties' websites, were not heavily used by the eligible voters either.²⁹ This rather unexpected finding, in the light of the huge success of internet campaigns in other countries, especially the USA, suggests that the citizens' disinterest in the TV clips is not just the "natural" outcome of the changes in the Israeli media scene, including the introduction

²⁶ Arian, A., T. Hermann, N. Atmor, Y. Hadar, Y. Lebel and H. Zaban., *Auditing Israeli Democracy: Between the State and Civil Society*. Jerusalem: The Israel Democracy Institute, 2008, p. 89.

²⁷ For a discussion of the party membership in Israel issue see, e.g., Rahat, G., and R. Hazan, Political Participation in Party primaries. In Zittel, T. and D. Fuchs, eds., *Participatory democracy and Political Participation – Can Participatory Engineering Bring Citizens Back in?* London: Routledge, 2006, pp. 57-72.

²⁸ For a discussion of the pre-elections party propaganda in the media see, e.g., Weiman, G., Media, Propaganda and Elections Campaigns in Israel.

<http://lib.cet.ac.il/pages/item.asp?item=17085&kwd=2363> [Hebrew]For the data on the rating in the 2009 elections see, <http://www.midrug-tv.org.il/sripts/publicq.asp>

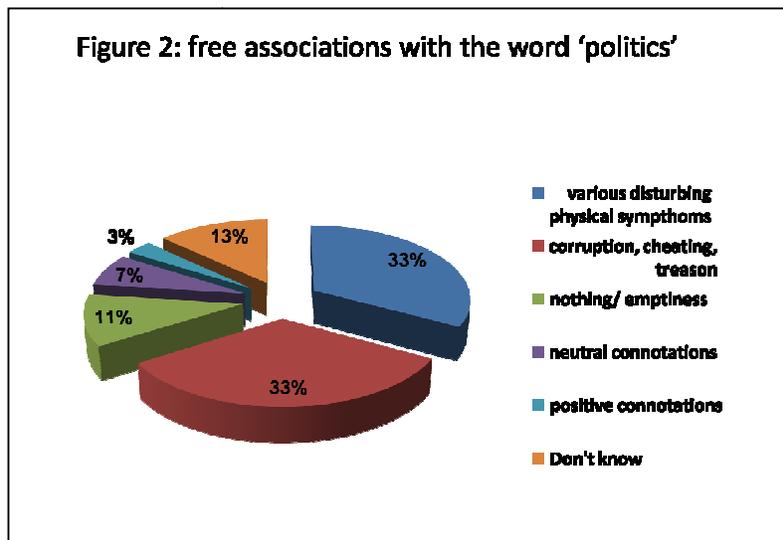
²⁹ Atmor, N., The Internet Race: Parties and the Online Campaign in the 2006 Elections. in Arian, A. and M. Shamir, eds., *The Elections in Israel 2006*. New Brunswick: Transaction, 2008. pp. 295—322.

of a wide variety of TV channels by the cable and satellite services, but rather a significant indication of the public's authentic decreased interest in the parties' messages.

More supporting informal evidences for the prevalence of antipolitical sentiments in today's Israel are available: in the 2008 Democracy Index survey, the interviewees – a national representative sample of 1201 adults (Jews and Arab) - were presented with an open-

"What is your free association with the word 'politics'?" Only 3%(!) had positive free associations with the term "politics".

ended question: "What is your free association with the word 'politics'?" Only 3%(!) had positive free associations with the term "politics". This tiny minority was heavily outnumbered by those who had negative associations; one-third of the respondents mentioned unpleasant physical symptoms (e.g., nausea, headache, stomach ache), another third reported connotations of negative modes of behavior (e.g., cheating, lying, corruption, even treason), 11% reported a sense of emptiness and blackness, and 7% mentioned neutral terms such as elections, parliament, law making, etc. 13% had no opinion.³⁰



Such negative views of politics are indeed unexpected in Israel, not only because of its history of vigorous citizen political engagement but also because, unlike certain other political cultures such as that of the U.S.,³¹ Israeli political culture had never previously presented

³⁰ Arian, Hermann, Atmor, Hadar, Lebel and Zaban, p. 78.

³¹ See, e.g., Rubin, E. L., *Beyond Camelot*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007. ch. 1.

a trace of suspicion towards politics in general and towards the executive branch in particular.

In the 2008 Democracy Index survey, the respondents were also asked what they would recommend to a family member or a close friend if he or she asks for their advice whether to become a politician. Only a quarter said that they would encourage their relative or friend to start a political career (out of whom only 7% would have strongly recommended such a move). Similar and even lesser enthusiasm for getting into politics was found in a set of focus groups conducted in late 2007. Here, the opposition by family members or friends to a political career was the strongest among settlers and the newcomers from the former Soviet Union, who emphasized the "dirty" character of the political arena as the major reason for their opposition to such a move by a family member or a friend.

A robust indication of antipolitical sentiment is found in the plethora of data on the sharply declining trust of Israelis in the main democratic institutions: the political parties and the Knesset (Israeli parliament). As found by the 2009 Democracy Index, less than a quarter (21%) expressed trust in the former and 38% in the latter.³² Half (50%!) of the respondents in this survey maintained that the politicians are in politics only for the sake of their personal gain.³³ Other surveys' findings were similarly disturbing. Thus, in the Peace Index survey of April 2009, only 23% of the respondents expressed trust in the political parties and 31.5% in the Knesset. In this survey, only about one third of the respondents reported that they trusted the government.³⁴ Previous surveys conducted had produced similar results.

Although apparently incapable of changing them, the Israeli politicians are not oblivious to the prevalence of such public sentiments, as reflected in an article written in 2007 by the then Minister of Education, Prof. Yuli Tamir of the Labor party, who actually admits to a failure:

The Israeli society is united by the shared sense that the political system cannot give answers to the problems which bother it. It looks at the government and the Knesset with trepidation and sees a divided, self-centered, aggressive and sectarian system ...

³² Arian, Philipov and Knfelman, pp. 70-72.

³³ *op. cit.*, p. 120.

³⁴ Yaar, E., and T. Hermann, Peace Index. The Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research, Tel Aviv University, <http://www.tau.ac.il/peace>.

Israelis think about their politicians as people who lost their ability to listen and to conduct a dialogue, who are 'glued' to their seats and defend parochial, unworthy interests. The elected are perceived then as part of the problem, not as part of the solution.³⁵

Paradoxical as it may seem, the term 'political' is used as a pejorative in Israel today not only by the man-in-the-street and in the media, but also by central figures in the political establishment. For instance, Ofer Eini, the Director General of the *Histadrut*, the largest labor union in Israel affiliated with the Labor party, when running for his second term in office in 2007, accredited himself as follow: "I am proud of myself for taking politics out of the *Histadrut*. When it was political we could reach no agreements whatsoever. Amir Peretz [Eini's predecessor] and Oded Tira [President of the Industrialists Association] could not even sit together and talk, exactly because they were political personae."³⁶

POSSIBLE SOURCES OF ANTIPOLITICS IN ISRAEL

The antipolitical sentiments expressed by Israelis, as by the citizens of other democracies, clearly have global as well as local motivations. Here we shall deal with the latter only.³⁷ The most immediate explanation that comes to mind is corruption, i.e., the use of one's public position in order to make personal profits or get personal benefits. The frequent exposure in recent years by the media, the police, the state comptroller, the state attorney, and others of a number of cases in which top Israeli politicians were found guilty or were involved in deals and schemes which at least "smelled" of corruption, obviously have contributed to the erosion of the citizens' political trust. Politics and corruption have therefore almost become synonymous in the eyes of the average Israeli citizen.³⁸ Thus, it was found that 89% (!) of the Israeli

A possible source of antipolitics is that politics is associated with corruption. 89% of the Israeli public believe that the system is profoundly corrupted.

³⁵ Tamir, Y., Instead of the government and the Knesset. *Haaretz*, January 2, 2007. 6 . [Hebrew]

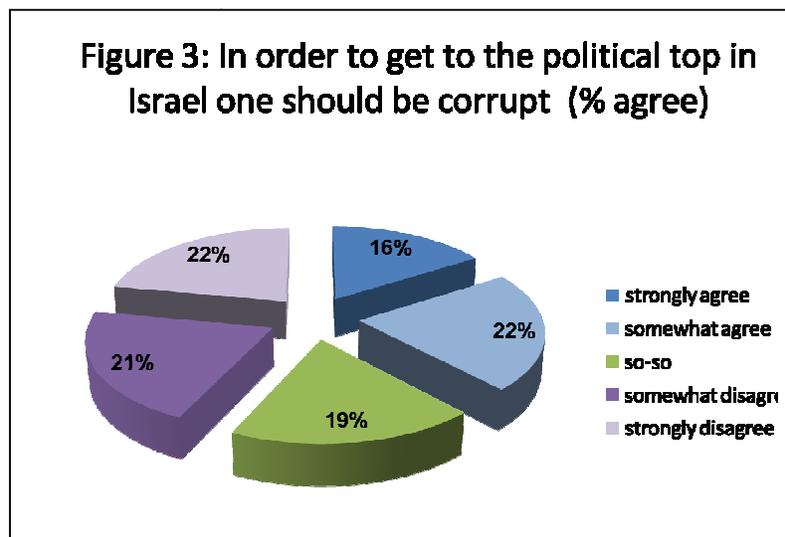
³⁶ <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0.7340.L-3395400.00.html>

³⁷ For the global reasons for see, e.g., Bauman, Z. , *Liquid Modernity*. Polity Press, 2000.

³⁸ This sense of the people was confirmed by external, and probably quite objective examination see www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi

public believe that the Israeli system is heavily corrupt while 37% assess that Israel is more corrupt than other democratic states.³⁹ And indeed, as indicated in figure 3 below, many Israelis believe and openly say that in order to get political visibility and significance one should be corrupt.⁴⁰ A mirror image of this perception is the quite amazing finding of the 2008 Democracy Index survey, that the main quality Israelis would like to see in a politician is neither a clear political worldview nor knowledge of the political system, but rather clean-handedness; the largest group, 44% of the respondents, pointed to this quality as the most important in their opinion.⁴¹

The main quality Israelis want in a politician is neither a clear political worldview nor knowledge of the political system but, rather, clean-hands.



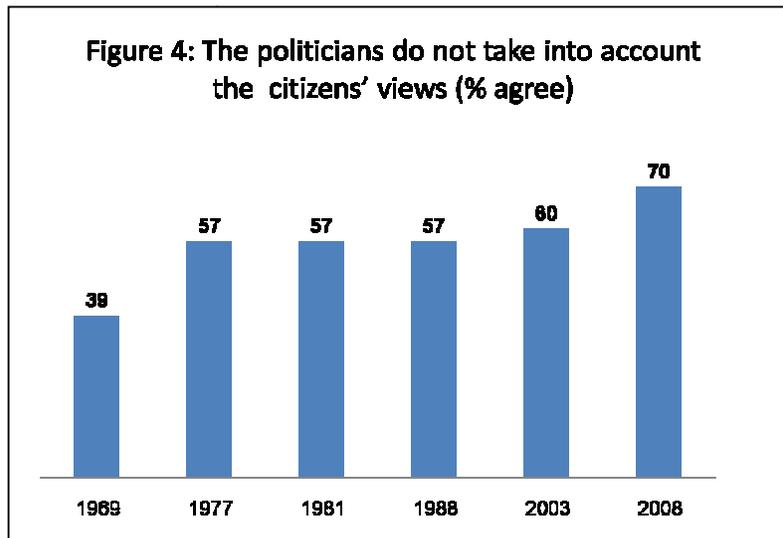
Yet, maintaining that the frequent exposures of corruption in the upper echelons make people dislike politics is a truism mixed with over-simplicity. The antipolitical sentiments have deeper roots than that, and the feeling that the politicians are inattentive to the people's preferences is one of them. Apparently, as mentioned in the first section of the article, in Israel too as in many other democracies, the citizens sense that the electorate

³⁹ Arian, Philipov and Kneflman, p. 119.

⁴⁰ Op. cit., p. 120.

⁴¹ Arian, Hermann, Atmor, Hadar, Lebel and Zaban, p. 89.

which, by the democratic creed is supposed to be the sovereign, is practically unheard by their representatives (Figure 4). In this rendition, no wonder that the prevalent civil self-perception is one of impotence. Thus, in the 2009 Democracy Index, only 18% feel that they can influence the government's policies in any way while 50% feel that they have no influence over it whatsoever.⁴² Such a low sense of efficacy is clearly detrimental to the proper functioning of a democratic regime, a topic which will be somewhat further elaborated on hereafter.



The problematic ideological ambiguity of the parties observed by Dionne in the American context is also to be detected in Israel. Unlike in the past when the parties' ideologies were clear and discernible, today the larger parties at least do not put forward clearly distinguishable socio-economic and even security-related worldviews and practices.⁴³ Thus, half of Israelis believe that it makes no difference for whom you vote - or do not vote; it does not change the situation.⁴⁴ If whoever wins the elections is politically insignificant, then voting also becomes insignificant.

⁴² Arian, Philipov and Kneflman, p. 55.

⁴³ See, e.g., Ben. A.. This is the right time for a Kadima and Labour Merger. *Haaretz*, February 10 2009. <http://www.haaretz.com/hasite/spages/1063125.html>

⁴⁴ Arian, Philipov and Knofelman, p.118.

Another substantial reason for the rise of antipolitics is the common sense is that the politicians in office do not provide the nation with real leadership. As observed by an Israeli academic who also sometime does political commentating: "As for the question of leadership, choosing between opposite standpoints, confronting ardently the opposition – on these matters the government just talks but does nothing. And these are the causes of the public's frustration: words that are not backed by actions."⁴⁵

A similar observation was made by a journalist of the daily *Ha'aretz*, who wrote as follows:

In defense of the State of Israel, it can only be said that for a long time now it has gotten its citizens used to expect very little of their government. Each and every sector has therefore disengaged itself from the state in its own way. There is the disengagement of the left, which is appalled for many years now by the occupation and by the aggressive-arrogant character of the state. There is the disengagement of the right, which feels betrayed because of its uprooting from Gaza and its fear of similar moves in the future. There is the disengagement of the destitute and the ailing who were abandoned by the liberal economy on the roadside, and that of the newcomers, who were invited to join the state based on an ethos which had collapsed long prior to their arrival.⁴⁶

However, the most severe attack on the skills of the Israeli leaders came from David Grossman, the well known author, in his 4 November, 2006 speech at the public rally commemorating the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin, in which he said:

Our military and political leadership is hollow. I am not even talking about the obvious blunders in running the war, of the collapse of the home front, nor of the large-scale and small-time corruption. I am talking about the fact that the people leading Israel today are unable to connect Israelis to their identity. Certainly not with the healthy, vitalizing and productive areas of this identity, with those areas of identity and memory and fundamental values that would give us hope and strength, that would be the antidote to the waning of mutual trust, of the bonds to the land,

⁴⁵ Kalderon, N. On Despair and Grievance. *Ynet*. July 20. 2008. <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3570330,00.html> [Hebrew],

⁴⁶ Galili, L. Keep Quite - the Guns Fire Isn't working Any Longer. *Haaretz*, 10 August 2006.

that would give some meaning to the exhausting and despairing struggle for existence. The fundamental characteristics of the current Israeli leadership are primarily anxiety and intimidation, of the charade of power, the wink of the dirty deal, of selling out our most prized possessions. In this sense they are not true leaders, certainly they are not the leaders of a people in such a complicated position that has lost the way it so desperately needs. Sometimes it seems that the sound box of their self-importance, of their memories of history, of their vision, of what they really care for, exist only in the minuscule space between two headlines of a newspaper or between two investigations by the attorney general. Look at those who lead us. Not all of them, of course, but many among them. Behold their petrified, suspicious, sweaty conduct, the conduct of advocates and scoundrels. It is preposterous to expect to hear wisdom emerge from them, that some vision or even just an original, truly creative, bold and ingenious idea would emanate from them...⁴⁷

DETRIMENTAL RAMIFICATIONS

The prevalent impression of the Israeli citizens that the political system is unprecedentedly and heavily corrupt, that the politicians are inattentive and incompetent and that there is no difference between the various parties and candidates as everyone "political" is self-centered and Machiavellian, is not of course inevitably empirically correct. Indeed, it was already suggested by certain scholars that this state of mind presents a 'moral panic' rather than a reality.⁴⁸ Yet, as the public operates under such impressions and is motivated by such sentiments, these are likely to have an impact on the political system in the years to come no less than, for example, structural or legal-procedural reforms. Actually, the antipolitical sentiments are likely bear a variety of undesirable,

The antipolitical phenomena is more dangerous than radical politics for proper democratic functioning and stability. This is because, like termites, it eats into the basic pillars on which the entire representative, liberal democratic system stands.

⁴⁷ http://www.paxchristi.org.uk/Documents/ME/Grossman_Rabin2006.pdf

⁴⁸ Jones, K., Professional Politicians as the Subjects of Moral Panic. *Australian Journal of Political Science*. Volume 43, no. 2, 2008. pp, 243 – 258.

dangerous effects. This is particularly true as far as Israel is concerned because of the country's unique existential conditions: unlike most other democracies, it is not located in the "democratic peace zone", but in an openly hostile environment. It is widely known that solid legitimization of the political establishment, and hence of its policies by the citizenry is critical where difficult strategic decisions on security, foreign, economic and social matters are to be made frequently and often under severe time constraints. While under relatively stable operational conditions, the withdrawal of the citizenry from politics and reservations about the authorized decision makers may be perhaps undesirable yet not severely detrimental, the hectic and unsafe setting in which Israel operates may make such withdrawal - if continuous and intensified - fatal for the future of its democratic system.

To start with, widespread low trust in the political personnel and procedures in reaction to recurring corruption scandals may shatter the entire system, as explained by the Israeli political scientist Ze'ev Sternhell: "When the political elite is no longer trusted – the collapse of democracy is only a matter of time and circumstances. [...] since the founding of the first European democracies in the 19th century, the question of ethics has always been the system's Achilles' heel. [...] in Israel as well, if we continue to ignore reality, the same claim will be made, and the day when our streets will be filled with the infamous battle cries that history remembers all too well – "they are all thieves" and "clean out the stables" – may be closer than we can imagine."⁴⁹

On the other hand, a nonstop corruption discourse may give rise to a "witch hunt" climate of opinion, which leads to extensive waste of highly needed resources in order to "expose" real or imagined villains. It may also create an operating environment in which the politicians will concentrate more on protecting themselves from such accusations than on their duties, which in its turn will most probably curtail even further their ability to deal effectively with the problems facing the nation and thus "justify" the arguments regarding their incompetence.

⁴⁹ Sternhell, Z. The Citizen Understands that everything is for sale. *Haaretz Online*, 25 May 2008. <http://www.haaretz.com/hasite/spages/986349.html>

The sense of a leadership deficiency may give rise to the idea of a "strong leader."

The sense of leadership deficiency may give rise to the idea of a "strong leader". The risks to the democratic stability that it

involves is self-evident, a phenomenon which is already quite visible in the Israeli political scene; by now 61% of the interviewees are of the opinion that a few strong leaders can be more useful to the country than all the discussions and the laws!⁵⁰

The lower political interest of the younger cohorts, which has not yet affected their participation in elections, may diminish in the years to come. The civil imperative to vote might well be eroded like other civil imperatives which are already less powerful among young Israelis such as, for example, the military service imperative, which is today significantly weaker than it used to be. Declining voter turnout of the mainstream in the future may well boost the political influence of small, yet highly mobilized minorities, whose commitment to democratic values is lesser than their commitment to other sets of values, for example, religious (e.g., Ultra-orthodox Jews or Islamic fundamentalists), national (e.g., Arab nationalists) or ideological (e.g., settlers, or radical environmentalists). Furthermore, with lessened political interest and participation by the general public, individuals and groups with specific interests, perhaps even organized crime, will find it much easier to get to the political top, either personally or by proxy.

Last but not least, disappointment with established politics may also drive people to find community and solidarity in other spheres rather than in national politics. This in its turn may increase the pressure on their representatives to work for the promotion of parochial, sectarian interests rather than promoting national interests. This may lead to the neglect of the weaker social groups and the poorer regions of the country.

In sum, the antipolitical phenomena, although allegedly more subtle and hence less alarming than, for example, radical politics, is in fact politically more dangerous for proper democratic functioning and stability. This is because, like termites, it eats into the basic pillars on which the entire representative, liberal democratic system stands. This is bad for every democracy, but is particularly dangerous, for Israel, which – as noted earlier – is constantly facing an overabundance of strategic challenges.

⁵⁰ Arian, Philipov and Knofelman, p. 58.