

The Elections in Israel – 1988

Edited by

Asher Arian and Michal Shamir



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*Asher Arian
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1

Introduction

Asher Arian and Michal Shamir

I

Forty years after becoming an independent state, Israel is still involved in deadly strife with many of its Arab neighbors and with the Palestinians under its military control. The protracted Arab-Israeli conflict is one of the most fundamental features of the Israeli experience; it overshadows economic and social decisions, and often sets the political agenda. Not surprisingly, the conflict is not only an outcome of the hostility between the protagonists, but also a major resource within the system; those who control the timing and extent of security actions, and those who influence the content and form of communication about this issue, are often advantaged. Using the Arab-Israeli conflict as the organizing concept of this volume, we focus on how reactions to the conflict are reflected in voting behavior and coalition negotiations.

Barzilai and Russett open this collection by showing that the incidence of armed violence closely follows the political calendar in Israel: military action increases during the year or so immediately before the elections. This finding replicates studies of other countries, especially the United States. It is also similar to the finding that as elections approach, the economy is usually rejuvenated by injections of government money. (After the elections, the politicians take it back—especially during the second year, which is far enough from the next election to encourage them to make the country live more within its means.)¹

The security issue clearly dominated Israel's 1988 campaign. National consensus is a valued goal, and division is indicated by discourse within generally accepted parameters. Former senior army officers became involved in the debate over the territories in an unprecedented manner. First, the Peace and Security Council, with some 200 reserve officers with the rank of colonel or higher, announced that the security of the country would be furthered by exchanging territories for peace. The reaction came promptly:

the smaller Security and Peace Council, also made up of senior reserve officers, stated that holding the territories was necessary for the security of the country.

Symbols have also been affected by the conflict. Herzog shows that the map of Israel has been widely used in political symbolism since before the establishment of the state. The symbol is constant, but the emotional and political content imparted to the map by different groups has varied greatly.

II

The 1988 elections were held on November 1, about a year after the beginning of the intifada (the Arab uprising in the territories which Israel had captured in the Six Day war). It was widely expected that the elections would be a referendum on the future of the territories. The country was more polarized than ever, and the platforms of the two major parties presented clear, opposing choices. While the forecast of a crucial election was not unreasonable, it turned out to be very wrong; those who had anticipated little change in Israel's political stalemate were closer to the mark.

The intifada forced most Israelis to think more realistically about the future of the territories and their inhabitants. It spotlighted obvious anomalies which had largely been ignored. International pressure increased for Israel to take a more conciliatory position toward the Palestinians. Much of the world's mass media gave negative treatment to Israel's attempted suppression of the intifada.

The two major parties offered clearly opposing views of the future. Labor came out in favor of offering territory for peace, and hinted at a form of confederation with the kingdom of Jordan—thus relinquishing control over the territories while avoiding the creation of a Palestinian state. The Likud spoke simultaneously of three apparently irreconcilable goals—achieving peace, retaining the territories, and preventing foreign sovereignty in them.

Four of the chapters (Barzilai, Shamir & Arian, Peled and Lustick) look into the effect of the protracted Israeli-Arab conflict on the Israeli electorate in 1988. Barzilai examines the responses of a national sample just after the elections. Shamir and Arian focus on change within a sample interviewed twice—just as the intifada began, and again on the eve of the elections. Peled studies support for the extreme right-wing parties, and links it to conflicts in the labor market.²

Rabbi Meir Kahane's Kach party did not run in 1988. On the basis of the amended election law, changed after the 1984 election, the Central Elections Committee disqualified the party because of its racist and anti-democratic stand. A new ultra-nationalist list, Moledet (Homeland), led by former General Rehavam "Gandhi" Ze'evi, won two seats. Moledet called

for the transfer of the Arabs from the territories to Arab countries—a concept that had been introduced into political discourse by Kahane.

Some of the votes which might have gone to Kach were probably won by other parties on the extreme right; however, it is certain that many did not. As Peled points out, pre-election polls indicated that Kahane would have won three seats—yet the extreme right gained only two, and there is no evidence of how much of this increase came from would-be Kahane voters. In development towns, which were Kahane's strongholds, reinterviews conducted by Peled revealed that the Likud and the religious parties were the major beneficiaries of Kach's disqualification.

The Jewish voters in the studies by Barzilai and Shamir/Arian said quite clearly that the intifada had affected their choices. Barzilai shows that Israel's use of force in the territories is the major explanatory variable in predicting vote choice. In the Shamir/Arian survey, 55 percent said that the intifada had changed their opinions regarding security and politics; about one-fourth said their views had become more moderate, while one-third said their positions had hardened. Fifty-nine percent thought that the national mood had become worse, and 41 percent reported that their own mood had soured. Only four percent thought that the intifada improved the national mood and their own mood. Thirteen percent said that the intifada had strengthened their desire to live in Israel, while nine percent said that the uprising had decreased it. About half thought that the intifada would have an impact on the coming elections; of these, two-thirds thought that the intifada would work in the Likud's favor.

The intifada also unleashed forces among the Arabs—both Israeli citizens and those in the territories. The Arab Israelis seemed to identify more fully than in the past with the nationalistic aspirations of the Palestine Liberation Organization; the Arabs in the territories were galvanized into believing that they could play a major role in determining their political future. The intifada also gave the PLO leaders living outside Israel's jurisdiction a new political opportunity, just when it seemed that the organization had been eclipsed. Lustick considers the effect of the uprising on the Israeli Arab electorate, and concludes that the Arabs participated in the elections in order to further their individual preferences; that they were divided among themselves explains the blurred effect of their vote.

III

The 1988 election results (see Table 1.1) were not markedly different from the outcome of the 1984 elections, even though, as Zuckerman shows, there was much fluidity at the individual level. The Likud and Labor remained the two largest parties in 1988. Of the 27 parties that competed, more than half (15) won representation in the Knesset by winning at least

Table 1.1: Results of the 1988 Knesset Elections

	Valid votes	% of valid votes	Number of seats
Likud	709,305	31.1	40
Labor	685,363	30.0	39
Shas	107,709	4.7	6
Agudat Israel	102,714	4.5	5
Civil Rights Movement	97,513	4.3	5
National Religious Party	89,720	3.9	5
DFPE (Rakah)	84,032	3.7	4
Tchiya	70,730	3.1	3
Mapam	56,345	2.6	3
Tzomet	45,489	2.0	2
Moledet	44,174	1.9	2
Shinui	39,538	1.7	2
Degel HaTorah	34,279	1.5	2
Progressive List	33,695	1.5	1
Daroushe	27,012	1.2	1
Pensioners	16,674	0.7	-
Meimad	15,783	0.7	-
Derech Eretz	4,253	0.1	-
Le'or	4,182	0.1	-
Rafi Suissa	3,222	*	-
Yishai	2,947	*	-
Maas	2,838	*	-
Tarshish	1,654	*	-
The Silent Force	1,579	*	-
Veterans List	1,018	*	-
Yemenite Union	909	*	-
Victor Tayar	446	*	-
Total	2,283,123	100.0	120

*Less than 0.1 percent each; together, they total less than 0.7 percent.

Source: *Yediot Aharonot*, November 6, 1988, p. 2.

The participation rate was 79.7 percent. There were 2,894,267 eligible voters; 2,305,576 actually voted. The discrepancy between the number of actual voters and the total number of votes was due to invalidated ballots. The quota for each seat was 18,563; the minimum (one percent) for the first seat was 22,831.

Special arrangements were made to allow participation of people serving with the Israel Defense Forces on election day, and for sailors working on Israeli flag-ships. No absentee voting is allowed, even for those working in Israel's diplomatic service. In 1988, for the first time, citizens in Israeli jails were allowed to vote.

one percent of the vote. Most of the blocs perpetuated their strength, and the four orthodox religious parties gained seats. Much that was familiar continued, but change was also evident.

Between the 1969 and 1988 elections, the number of people who voted increased by almost 900,000; however, Labor was relatively unsuccessful in attracting the support of the expanded electorate. In 1988, Mapam quit the Alignment (a joint list with Labor) and ran on its own for the first time in twenty years. The 1988 total Labor and Mapam vote ($685,363 + 56,345 = 741,708$) was approximately 110,000 more than the Alignment vote of 1969 (632,035); in contrast, the Likud added more than 370,000 votes, more than doubling its share from 338,948 in 1969 to 709,305 in 1988. The Labor Party's continuing decline and changing role in the system is evident.

The total seats won by the Likud and Labor dropped to 79—compared to 85 for the Likud and the Alignment in 1984, and 95 in 1981. The competition between the Likud and Labor was intense, but the shrinking share of the vote commanded by the two major parties made it harder for either of them to form a coalition which could control a majority of the 120-seat Knesset. Ultimately, a national unity government was formed when the Likud and Labor agreed to share power. This was the third national unity government since 1967; the first had lasted from 1967 to 1970; the second, from 1984 to 1988. Both Arian and Horowitz analyze this unusual phenomenon among democratic regimes.

Polarization characterized the campaign and the outcome. Political discourse expanded to extremes during the 1980s, covering the options of talking to the PLO and forming a Palestinian state, on one hand, and transferring the Arabs from the territories, on the other. The voters' attitudes became more extreme: many rightists moved further to the right, leftists further to the left. This trend was partly manifested in the strengthening of the smaller extremist parties, which then played a major role in the coalition calculations of the big parties. The policy attitudes of Likud and Labor supporters also became increasingly polarized.

Sometimes the major parties were closely linked with their more extreme satellite parties, both in the political sphere and in public opinion; sometimes they were not. On the establishment of a Palestinian state, for example, the left and Labor were further apart than were the right and the Likud. But on whether military strength or peace negotiation was more important, the supporters of the right and Likud were further apart than were the supporters of the Likud and Labor.³

IV

As usual in Israeli politics, negotiations for the coalition government revolved around the religious parties. Six religious parties ran in 1988—

the National Religious Party, Shas, Agudat Israel, Degel Hatorah, Meimad and Yishai (Religious Yemenites). The first four won Knesset seats; with 15 percent of the vote, they received a total of 18 seats. The religious parties had won 18 seats three times in the past (in 1959, 1961 and 1969), and on three other occasions they won 17 seats (in 1955, 1965 and 1977). Nonetheless, their 1988 display of strength was a turning point for two reasons. First, it reversed their relative weakness in the 1981 and 1984 elections, when they won only 10 and 12 seats, respectively. Second, it was the first time that non-Zionist religious parties won more seats than did Zionist religious parties. Until 1988, the Zionist religious parties held a 2-to-1 advantage in seats over the non-Zionist religious parties; in 1988, the NRP—the only Zionist religious party to win representation—won only five seats, while 13 seats went to three ultra-orthodox, non-Zionist parties: Shas, Agudat Israel, and Degel Hatorah lists.⁴

An understanding of the politics of the ultra-orthodox parties requires an understanding of the mindset of these deeply religious people. Their first loyalty is to their theology (not to the laws of any nation-state), and they try to live religious lives in a secular country which is strongly nationalist. Each group's ultimate decision-making authority for both religious and political issues is a Council of Torah Sages. The parties' senior rabbis decide what is to be done, while a secondary group of politicians (many of whom are also rabbis) execute the decisions.

The ultra-orthodox parties have two other dimensions: the ethnic tensions which characterize many Israeli parties, and the personal rivalries that are common to politics everywhere. The complicated story of these three parties begins with Agudat Israel, which has traditionally been led by Ashkenazi rabbis. In 1984, when the Aguda rabbis refused to place more Sephardi candidates on the list, a group of Sephardi rabbis (headed by Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, former Sephardi chief rabbi) broke off and set up a list called Shas (Guardians of the Torah). Shas won four seats in 1984—taking away many Sephardi voters from the Aguda, which won only two seats.

In 1988, Chabad (an ultra-orthodox group led by Rabbi Menachem Schneerson of Brooklyn, the Lubavitcher Rebbe) made its first appearance in Israeli electoral politics. Chabad had long been active in religious, educational and social welfare work. Now Chabad wanted to bolster the Aguda's share of the vote by providing experienced organizational cadres; in return, the Lubavitcher Rebbe would gain influence in the Israeli political system through the Aguda's Knesset delegation. The Aguda party, along with Poalei Aguda and the Chabad group, prepared a list.

Enter Rabbi Eliezer Schach, an old and venerable rabbi from Bnei Brak and an oldtime Aguda leader. The relations between Rabbi Schach and the Lubavitcher Rebbe (and between their followers) had been tense for many years on theological and other grounds. The followers of the Lu-

bavitcher Rebbe were convinced that their rabbi (who had never set foot in Israel) was the messiah and should be recognized as such; Rabbi Schach and his entourage characterized this position as blasphemy. The competition between them was for political turf and other-worldly stakes.

Rabbi Schach's relations with the Aguda became more tenuous over the years; at the same time, his relations with Rabbi Ovadia Yosef and Shas improved. Before the 1988 elections, Rabbi Schach and his court set up a new party, Degel Hatorah (Flag of the Torah), to appeal to his Ashkenazi supporters—but he continued to be the spiritual leader of Shas, which was predominantly Sephardi. Uri Zohar, a very popular comedian in his secular days before he became an ultra-orthodox rabbi, was an appealing Ashkenazi spokesman for Shas.

The competition among the three parties was fierce; it involved cajoling, threats, and mutual accusations of election fraud. In a remarkable television spot during the 1988 campaign, Shas presented the proceedings of a rabbinical court which released voters from their oaths to vote for the Aguda. The election results show just how effective the intense competition and the fervent organizational efforts were: Shas won six seats, Agudat Israel five, and Degel Hatorah two.

Heilman's article describes the social and theological bases of the haredi (ultra-orthodox) groups. The haredim are non-Zionist and do not participate in Zionist institutions, such as the World Zionist Organization. Obviously, however, their voters in Israel live in Israel. But through past coalition arrangements, they acquired unique patterns including their own autonomous school system and the exemption of their men from army service.

The historically strong religious party, the NRP, won five seats after an intense battle for the lead position between Zevulun Hammer and the victorious Avner Shaki (who represented the Sephardi hardliners).

After the inconclusive 1988 election, it seemed that the only way to set up a governing coalition would be to give the religious parties what they were demanding in return for their support: amendment of the "Who is a Jew?" definition in the Law of Return, and substantial additional funding for their schools. Even though the religious parties had won only 15 percent of the vote, the standoff between the Likud and Labor gave them a pivotal position over control of the Knesset. As a result, strong appeals for electoral reform of Israel's proportional representation system again rose to prevent a minority from holding exaggerated power over the majority.

As a matter of fact, electoral reform almost came about before the 1988 elections. By a wide margin, the Knesset approved the first reading of a bill to legislate electoral reform for the 1992 elections. Part of the Knesset would be elected by constituency districts, and part on a national list. The wording was no more specific than that, yet it sounded loud danger signals in the halls of the religious parties. The leaders of the religious parties

appealed to Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir to prevent further Knesset action on the bill, forcefully reminding him that he was likely to need their support in forming a coalition after the upcoming elections. Shamir gave in, and the bill was pigeonholed. After the elections, Shamir did appear to need the religious parties for a coalition—but, instead, he ultimately formed the 1988 National Unity Government with the Labor Party.

V

Processes were unfolding in 1988 which will determine the actors in Israeli politics for years to come. These included the introduction of a large number of new legislators, and a growing degree of democratization in the choosing of candidates.

In 1988, many of the candidates elected from the two major parties were new to the Knesset: one-third of the 39 elected from Labor, and eight of the 40 from the Likud. The Labor delegation's average age was a year younger than the Likud's (51 vs. 52). On the other hand—the higher Labor's MKs were on the list, the older they tended to be. The average age of the first ten Labor MKs was 60.7; the second, 50.7; then 46.7 and 44.1. For the Likud, the first group of ten was oldest (56.8), but the second group was youngest (47.7); the other two groups were 51 and 52.5. The introduction of younger members did not effect the one-sided gender distribution of Knesset members. Only seven women were elected to the Knesset in 1988—including four from Labor, and only one from the Likud.

Both Labor and the Likud, as well as many of the smaller lists, placed Sephardi candidates in prominent slots. Two new Labor MKs were Sephardi mayors—Amir Peretz of Sderot, and Eli Dayan of Ashkelon; however, there is no evidence that their places on the list improved Labor's success among Sephardim. In a major change from past lists, the first 40 candidates on Labor's list included 11 born in Asia or Africa; the corresponding figure for the Likud was six. Labor's first 40 included 20 born in Israel; the Likud had 29. Labor's Shimon Peres and the Likud's Yitzhak Shamir were both born in Poland, but the overall composition of the Knesset delegations was coming more into line with the demographic changes in the electorate—especially the growing numbers of Sephardim. Abramson's article examines the details and effects of these changes in the electorate.

There were important structural and procedural developments as well. As recently as 1984, Labor and Mapam had run under a joint list called the Alignment, while the Likud list had consisted of two autonomous parties, Herut and the Liberals. In 1988, Labor and Mapam ran separate lists; Herut and the Liberals merged into a single party called the Likud.

In 1988, Herut and the Liberals selected their own candidates separately. They agreed to exempt Shamir (like Menachem Begin before him) from

the rigors of competition; he was given first place on the list by acclamation. Herut selected its remaining candidates in a relatively open and democratic manner, although Yigael Hurwitz, Zalman Shoval and Aharon Abuhatzaira were put on the list by previous arrangement. The merger agreement between Herut and the Liberals provides for a united party center to select the Likud's candidates in the future.

Labor attempted to introduce a greater degree of democratization. In the past, a nominating committee controlled by the party leadership presented a list which was approved by the party center. In 1988, a complex system decentralized the system somewhat; however, its democratic nature was immediately tarnished by the fact that seven leaders were put at the head of the list without facing election within the party: Peres, Yitzhak Rabin, Yitzhak Navon, Shlomo Hillel (Speaker of the Knesset), Uzi Baram (Labor's secretary-general), and Israel Kesar (head of the Histadrut Labor Federation)—plus Ezer Weizman, as part of the deal that brought his Yahad list into the party. Doron and Goldberg's article expands on these flaws and others as Labor followed Herut into an era of greater (if not perfect) democracy in the selection process.

VI

The 1988 election was a curious mixture of business as usual plus the highly unusual features of the intifada and the surging strength of the non-Zionist ultra-orthodox parties. The system was struggling under the burden of antithetical forces. Going into the elections, a national unity government masked many of the fundamental differences between the parties—but during the campaign, the rhetoric made the differences stand out in stark contrast. The intifada was the latest expression of the protracted Arab-Israeli conflict which has characterized Israel's history, and posed unprecedented challenges to the maintenance of order.

Extreme multipartyism continued unabated. It thrived on ideological distance, and entrenched the polarized positions. With a large number of parties and large ideological distances between them, Israel's political system showed evidence of centrifugal dynamics. But as extremist anti-system parties emerged, centripetal mechanisms came into play. Ultimately, these centripetal mechanisms facilitated the renewal of the national unity government.

Notes

1. Uriel Ben-Hanan and Benny Temkin, "The 'Overloaded Juggler': The Electoral-Economic Cycle in Israel, 1951-1984," in Asher Arian and Michal Shamir (eds.),

The Elections in Israel—1984 (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction, 1986), pp. 15-35.

2. For background, see Gershon Shafir and Yoav Peled, “‘Thorns in your Eyes’: The Socioeconomic Basis of the Kahane Vote,” in *ibid.*

3. Asher Arian, Michal Shamir and Raphael Ventura, “Public Opinion and Political Change: Israel and the Intifada” (forthcoming).

4. For a geographical analysis of the competition among them, see Yoseph Shilhav, “Spatial Strategies of the ‘Haredi’ Population in Jerusalem,” *Socio-Economic Planning Science* 18(6), 1986, pp. 411-8.

PART ONE

**War and Symbols
in a Protracted Conflict**



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2

The Political Economy of Israeli Military Action¹

Gad Barzilai and Bruce Russett

Political leaders live precarious lives, because they are never able to satisfy all of the demands made on them. They are expected to take care of numerous and contradictory social problems, to achieve employment and prosperity without inflation, and to maintain peace without decreasing military strength.

To keep the voters from being dissatisfied, the officials can try to (a) deliver what the voters want, (b) persuade the voters that they are delivering even if they aren't, (c) persuade the voters not to want what the officials cannot or do not want to deliver, or (d) distract the voters' attention by creating or dealing with a new problem.

Several political-social-psychological theories assert that leaders try (often successfully) to divert hostility derived from internal frustrations into aggressive words or acts toward outsiders.² Faced with high levels of popular discontent, even a democratically-elected government may try to divert this hostility toward foreign adversaries. It may be so preoccupied with its domestic problems that it exaggerates the hostility of foreign adversaries, or wishfully exaggerates its chances of defeating them.³ In fact, democratic governments may be more tempted to use this tactic than would authoritarian regimes. While an authoritarian government may be able to handle even serious discontent by using its military and security forces against domestic opponents, a democratic government would be loath (or unable) to suppress dissent through such harsh action.

This chapter reviews short-term interactions among economic conditions, domestic politics, and the threat and use of military force against other nations. We begin with material on the United States, but put it into a broader context in order to test some hypotheses on conditions in Israel. We find that the proximity of elections helps explain the frequency and

timing of military actions, and that there is a complex relationship between the state of the economy and military action. We conclude that the Israeli experience is part of a wider phenomenon that affects democratic countries with intense security problems.

Electoral Politics, Economic Decline, and Rallying 'Round the Flag

In a democracy, the state of the economy is a major determinant of electoral success. Both inflation and recession are unpopular. Inflation might not be a political problem if the incomes of all citizens went up at the same time—but they don't. Inflation may impoverish those on fixed incomes (weak non-unionized workers, and holders of fixed-rate loans or pensions) while others are enriched (workers with cost-of-living contracts, debtors, and creditors with variable-rate loans). It is therefore necessary to analyze the political effects of recession and inflation separately.

For either situation, the recent rate of change (“What have you done for me lately?”) matters more than does some absolute state of the economy. Voters' memories are short enough for them to look favorably on a government that presided over a recent economic recovery, even if the recovery follows a recession induced by that same government. A good predictor of the governing party's electoral prospects is the direction and rate of change in real (inflation-adjusted) national product in the year preceding the election. Moderate inflation may be tolerated so long as average money incomes go up faster. But a decline in real income, or only a very small improvement, spells trouble.

Worse yet for politicians, hard times usually have more electoral impact than do good times. A government tends to get more blame from people whose living standards have declined than it gets credit from those whose conditions have improved. In the individualistic self-perception, I can make it by myself; if I don't, others are to blame.⁴

Voters react both to changes in their own conditions and to what they perceive is happening in the economy at large. They are not entirely self-interested; they also have some sense of what is good for the national interest. Some analysts even conclude that “citizens seem to pay principal attention to the nation's economic predicament, and comparatively little to their own.” They react strongly to information and images in the mass media—especially on television, where scenes of unemployment lines can make a powerful impact even on families who are not themselves directly affected.⁵

Knowing how sensitive voters are to the business cycle, governments try to manipulate the economy or the political calendar in order to generate popular support. In a parliamentary system, the prime minister may be

able to delay calling an election until after the economy has started expanding. Or, in anticipation of a coming election, leaders can try to stimulate the economy by cutting taxes, increasing spending, and speeding up government payments. On the other hand, it is best to postpone tax increases, spending cuts and recessions until after election day. The business cycle affects elections; in turn, the electoral cycle produces a policy cycle of vote-oriented action.

However, economic conditions often cannot be controlled sufficiently to insure electoral success. Fine-tuning of a complex modern economy is less than an exact science. Timing is difficult. Some instruments, such as interest rates, may be insulated from political controls. Major spending increases or tax cuts typically require months or even years to be put into effect. It may be impossible to stimulate the domestic economy without an unacceptable impact on the balance of payments. Government intervention will help some people but hurt others (for example, by creating shortages and inflation in particular sectors).

Even if the chief executive knows what he wants to do, the legislature will have other ideas.

Military spending may seem to be an especially attractive candidate for election-oriented timing—since the amounts are large, the purchases often attract support from conservatives who would not approve additional spending for civilian purposes, and equipment acquisition can be hastened or delayed without much obvious effect on security in peacetime. But military spending depends heavily on the international environment, and much of the military budget is not subject to short-term discretion. It can be easier to stretch out purchases than to speed them up for an election-year economic boost.

This is partly the case in Israel, where funds for military expenditures tend to rise before elections—especially on politically-useful pay raises for civilians in the defense establishment. In the United States, military procurement contracts tend to rise in the months immediately preceding elections, but the actual expenditure increases are not enough to have much macro-economic impact.⁶

Thus, the business cycle is substantially less controllable than the policy cycle, and less predictable than the electoral cycle. Even if the economy could be reliably heated up on command, that might not provide enough support. The political pressures are great at election time: the victory of the leader or ruling party can never be certain enough, and the margin of victory for the party or coalition can never be large enough. As Samuel Kernell says about the United States, “As election nears, a president will be tempted to husband even what he regards as surplus support. Accordingly, an unpopular president nearing election should come as close to resembling a single-minded popularity maximizer as one will find.”⁷

Yet the president or prime minister needs political support all the time; he is in a never-ending electoral campaign. Theodore Lowi talks about “the plebiscitary presidency,” in which the chief executive is constantly under pressure to solve problems. Popularity with the voters is a leader’s most important resource for accomplishing any of his goals; a leader who allows that popularity to atrophy will quickly find his legislative program a casualty. A leader “must gain and maintain the reputation for power, in hopes that the reputation for power will produce power itself;” he “must somehow mobilize the electorate in order to mobilize the elite.”⁸ Support for the American president in the polls is fairly highly correlated over time with support for the president in Congress, especially on foreign policy.⁹ Popularity ratings are the coin of the realm in legislative-executive wheeling and dealing.

If a leader’s foreign and domestic policies are mired in immobilism and he cannot control the economy enough to quiet the political opposition, then other instruments of political management must be found. Here is where the possibility of distracting attention or diverting anger can come in—and what better target is there than foreigners, who don’t vote in the country’s elections and may not be much liked by the people, anyway?

Diversions or scapegoating theories have a long history, with many examples that seem plausible.

One instance in which war was probably not expected but certainly risked was the Falklands/Malvinas conflict between Argentina and Britain in 1982. Economic difficulties in Argentina motivated the junta to choose that moment to rally public support; economic problems in Britain probably helped dissuade Margaret Thatcher from any willingness to compromise.¹⁰

Despite such examples, there is no unambiguous evidence of a general connection between conflict at home and conflict abroad. This may be due less to a lack of such phenomena than to the lack of a clear theoretical specification of the circumstances—when, how and by whom—in which international scapegoating is likely to occur.¹¹

Foreign policy is an arena in which the chief of state typically operates with the least immediate legislative constraint. “External constraints and conventional purposes have largely closed off the domestic scene as a field of great action. It is in foreign policy—with its inherent drama, its freedom of action, its momentous consequences—that presidential heroes are made. . . .”¹² Short, low-cost military actions to repel an attack are almost invariably popular, at least at their inception, as are many other kinds of assertive action or speech in foreign policy. This has come to be known as the “rally ‘round the flag’ effect.”¹³

According to the initial formulation of the rally phenomenon, almost anything that happens in foreign affairs—a tough action such as threatening or using force, a conciliatory action such as signing a treaty, or an external

shock such as the Iranian seizure of American hostages or the Soviet success in putting the first satellite into space—has an immediately favorable effect on the leader's popularity. This effect is short-term, typically not more than a month or two in duration; then the leader's popularity drops back to about where it was (or even below if, as in the case of the Iran hostage affair, he is unable to cope with it).

Similar reactions have been found in Israel. Public opinion of the government's handling of the situation went up very sharply for some events (the Six-Day and Yom Kippur Wars, the Entebbe hostage rescue, and Sadat's dramatic 1977 visit), and less so for other assertive or conciliatory actions. Subsequently, there was a very rapid fall-off.¹⁴

The increase in popularity probably results from the reluctance of political and media elites to criticize the leader immediately. On national security matters, there is always a substantial risk that the commander-in-chief has access to secret information which he can release selectively so as to make a critic look foolish or even disloyal.¹⁵ The countercharge of disloyalty is more likely to follow criticism of a leader who takes forceful action than it is to follow allegations of excessive passivity.

In one set of analyses, American presidential popularity ratings were boosted 4 to 6 percent in the short term by such manipulable elements of political drama as foreign policy speeches, conflictive behavior toward the Soviet Union, and the use of military force in Europe, the Middle East, Central America and the Caribbean.¹⁶ Since the president is often given the benefit of the doubt in the arcane arena of foreign affairs, his manipulation of foreign crises for domestic political purposes may be less visible, and hence more legitimate, than his manipulation of macro-economic policy.

Support for the use of military force nearly always becomes greater in concrete situations than in the abstract. When asked about the use of force in hypothetical occasions, most people disapprove. But their reaction to the actual use of military force is almost invariably favorable. Before the Gulf of Tonkin incident, only 42 percent of the American public supported the country's getting involved in Vietnam; shortly after President Johnson sent troops in response to the incident, 72 percent supported the action. Before the United States invaded Cambodia, only 7 percent endorsed the idea; after Nixon did it, 50 percent approved.¹⁷ In Israel, 88 percent of the population said it is essential "to support the government in a security crisis, like war, even when one does not always agree with what it is doing."¹⁸

How does the rally effect operate in the context of elections and economic distress? Psychologists have established that the rhetoric of American presidents toward the Soviet Union becomes more simplistic (its cognitive complexity declines) in the latter half of election years,¹⁹ and that a decline