



המכון ליחסים בינלאומיים  
ע"ש לאונרד דיוויס  
The Leonard Davis Institute  
for International Relations



Konrad  
Adenauer-  
Stiftung

# Voters Attitudes on the Arab-Israeli Conflict and the 1996 Elections

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***Voters' Attitudes on the  
Arab-Israeli Conflict  
and the 1996 Elections***

Davis Occasional Papers  
The Leonard Davis Institute

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This publication is part of a series published by the Davis Institute on Israeli Foreign Policymaking.

The series is the result of a three-year research project funded by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation and run by the Leonard Davis Institute of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. It includes the following:

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Davis Occasional Papers, No. 66, April 1999  
The Leonard Davis Institute for International Relations  
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem  
Israel

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## INTRODUCTION

The interrelationship between voters' attitudes and politicians' attitudes is well known. In fact, this relationship forms one of the main arguments of many linkage theories. On the one hand, voters tend to be quite volatile in their stances once political leaders make significant policy changes. On the other hand, politicians tend to express popular positions and to implement popular policies in order to increase their own popularity.

Thus, for example, in past surveys of Israeli public opinion most voters expressed negative attitudes toward a full withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula, but this changed with Anwar Sadat's visit to Jerusalem. After the peace agreement with Egypt, a vast majority supported the withdrawal. Most voters objected to negotiations with the PLO, but this changed with the disclosure of the first Oslo agreement. As for Israeli politicians, many, for example, who have supported the establishment of an independent Palestinian state, or who have believed that no real peace can be achieved with Syria, have tended to refrain from committing themselves publicly to such positions because of their apparent unpopularity.

The outcome of the latter phenomenon is that politicians often prefer individual, partisan, and short-term considerations to general, long-term considerations. In Israel, where many of the political disputes involve existential questions, such a tendency may cause irreversible damage. Nevertheless, because of changes in the "rules of the game" (i.e., the introduction of direct election of the prime minister, the adoption of internal party primaries, and the overall "Americanization" of the political process, especially during election campaigns), such political tendencies have only intensified in recent years.

The dramatic changes in the Middle East, including both new peace opportunities and new existential threats, underline the importance of public opinion. This paper will analyze some major features of Israeli voters'

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attitudes toward the Arab-Israeli conflict. Given the interdependency of voters and politicians, the paper concentrates on the relationship between voters' attitudes toward the Arab-Israeli conflict and voting behavior. Attitudes on these issues are also compared to attitudes on issues that are not related to the conflict. In addition, the paper addresses the question of differences between Jewish and Arab voters. The investigation of these differences is essential when focusing on questions of peace and war between these two Middle Eastern communities.

## **THE DATA**

A few weeks before the May 1996 Knesset and prime ministerial elections, between May 7 and May 17, the Leonard Davis Institute held a national public opinion survey. The data was gathered in 28 geographical clusters and intended to represent the entire electorate including Arabs, religious Jews, new immigrants, voters residing in rural areas, and a small number of voters residing in the occupied territories. The total number of respondents was 1,064.

A similar survey was conducted after the elections; however, the findings shown below (with the exception of Tables 1, 2, and 13) represent the distributions and correlations found in the first survey only. That is because the results of the postelection survey tended to be quite similar to those of the preelection survey. The data for the second survey was gathered in the same 28 neighborhoods from July 14 to July 24, 1997. Although it was not a perfect panel survey, the interviewers were instructed to interview respondents of the same households. The number of respondents in the second survey was 1,087.

The respondents of the July survey tended to adapt themselves to the results of the elections. Thus, as shown in Tables 1 and 2, the support for right-wing attitudes and for right-wing and small parties became slightly higher. The A column in Table 1 represents the May distribution of voting intention in the prime ministerial election. The B column represents the

answers to the question: "Which candidate did you support in the May election for prime minister?" The C column represents the actual support of the voters in July.

**Table 1**  
**Support for Peres and Netanyahu in the May and July Surveys**

	A	B	C
Peres	43.9%	41.2%	39.8%
Netanyahu	40.1%	41.1%	40.6%
Undecided/blank ballot	7.0%	6.9%	6.6%
Refused to answer	9.0%	10.8%	13.0%
N	1064	1087	1087

Hereafter, the distinction between "right-wing" and "left-wing" voters will be indicated by the support for Netanyahu and Peres, respectively. Other indicators of voters' identification with the "right wing" or the "left wing" led to conclusions similar to those presented below.

The highest difference between the May and the July surveys related to the question for which results are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2**  
**Do You Agree With the Statement: "Given the introduction of direct election of the prime minister, it is easier to support small political parties in the Knesset elections"?**

	May 1997	July 1997
Absolutely agree	22.4%	26.6%
Agree	30.1%	31.4%
Maybe	21.9%	20.9%
Disagree	18.9%	16.2%
Absolutely disagree	6.6%	4.9%
N	1040	1059

In both surveys, respondents understood that the new system would enable voters to split their vote such that the power of the small parties would increase. This, however, became much clearer after the elections. The new constitutional framework has had a decisive impact on the Israeli political system. Nevertheless, no direct correlation between its implementation and attitudes toward the Arab-Israeli conflict has yet been identified.

## **DECLARED REASONS FOR VOTING**

The politicians' responsiveness to voters' stances on the Arab-Israeli conflict seems justified by the voters' declarations about their electoral motives.

It seems that the issues associated with foreign and defense policies, and particularly with the Arab-Israeli conflict, played a major role in the elections. Thus, the respondents were asked to indicate what was the main reason for the support of a specific party in the Knesset elections. Some 47.3% of the respondents asserted that voters tend to support a specific party because of its stances on foreign and defense issues. The second most important reason, cited by 20.1%, was that "people support parties that represent people like themselves." Some 15.4% said the leadership of the political parties was the main explanation for voting behavior, and the remaining 17.3% mentioned other reasons. Only slight differences were found between those who intended to support Shimon Peres in the prime ministerial elections and those who intended to support Binyamin Netanyahu. The results are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3**  
**The Reasons Mentioned by Peres and Netanyahu Supporters for the Support of a Specific Political Party in the 1996 Knesset Elections**

The main reason that "people support a specific party"	Peres supporters	Netanyahu supporters	Others	Total
"Support the foreign and defense policies of the party"	42.8%	53.3%	44.9%	47.3%
"Support other policies of the party"	9.1%	7.3%	8.3%	8.3%
"Support the leadership of the party"	18.2%	13.7%	11.5%	15.4%
"The party represents people like themselves"	20.6%	16.6%	27.6%	20.1%
"Desire to prevent the success of another party"	2.0%	2.4%	2.5%	2.3%
Other reasons	7.3%	6.6%	5.1%	6.7%
N	451	409	156	1016

**Table 4**  
**The Reasons Mentioned by Jewish and Non-Jewish Voters for the Support of a Specific Political Party in the 1996 Knesset Elections**

The main reason that "people support a specific party"	Jewish voters	Non-Jewish voters
"Support the foreign and defense policies of the party"	52.8%	21.9%
"Support other policies of the party"	6.1%	18.5%
"Support the leadership of the party"	13.9%	21.3%
"The party represents people like themselves"	17.5%	33.1%
"Desire to prevent the success of another party"	2.6%	0.6%
Other reasons	7.1%	4.5%
N	848	178

It is evident from Table 4 that the parties' stances concerning the Arab-Israeli conflict are far more important to Jewish voters than to non-Jewish voters. Furthermore, it seems that most of the differences between Peres and Netanyahu supporters stemmed from the fact that most of the non-Jewish respondents included in the survey were Peres supporters. The largest percentage of Arab voters responded that the most important reason for the support of a specific party is that the party "represents people like themselves" (33.1%). Nevertheless, even among Arab voters the second most important reason for partisan support was the foreign and defense policies of the parties (21.9%); the third most important reason was identification with the leadership of the parties (21.3%).

## **BASIC ATTITUDES TOWARD THE PEACE PROCESS**

Following the 1996 double elections, many observers suggested that the Israeli public is split on questions relating to the Arab-Israeli conflict such that approximately half of the voters support the peace process and the territorial concessions associated with it, whereas the other half object to such developments.

The findings indicate that such an interpretation is misleading. It seems that most of the voters support the idea of peace in general and the specific peace negotiations in particular; at the same time, there existed a majority who were not ready to meet some of the territorial demands made by Israel's Arab partners.

The respondents were asked to express their level of support for a long series of statements. Tables 5-7 show the distribution of the levels of support among Peres and Netanyahu supporters for statements about the peace process. From these tables it clearly emerges that although Peres supporters do tend to be more supportive of the peace process, even among Netanyahu supporters there are more who favor the continuation of the negotiations than who oppose it. Among those who supported Peres, a majority

“absolutely agreed” that “one should support the peace process between Israel ‘and different Arab partners,’” Syria, and the Palestinians. Among Netanyahu supporters, only a minority either “disagreed” or “absolutely disagreed” with such policies. The supporters of Netanyahu and Peres alike seem to be less enthusiastic about the negotiations with Syria. Nevertheless, even here only a minority of Netanyahu followers “disagree.”

**Table 5**

**Do You Agree With the Statement: “One should support the peace process between Israel and different Arab partners”?**

	Peres supporters	Netanyahu supporters
Absolutely agree	66.9%	15.8%
Agree	29.8%	43.5%
Maybe	1.5%	23.6%
Disagree	1.3%	13.7%
Absolutely disagree	0.4%	3.3%
N	456	423

**Table 6**

**Do You Agree With the Statement: “One should support the continuation of the negotiations between Israel and Syria”?**

	Peres supporters	Netanyahu supporters
Absolutely agree	58.5%	10.1%
Agree	32.2%	35.5%
Maybe	6.9%	17.6%
Disagree	1.9%	22.6%
Absolutely disagree	0.4%	14.1%
N	463	425

**Table 7**  
**Do You Agree With the Statement: “One should support the continuation of the negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians”?**

	Peres supporters	Netanyahu supporters
Absolutely agree	63.4%	7.8%
Agree	32.3%	34.8%
Maybe	3.0%	25.4%
Disagree	0.4%	20.2%
Absolutely disagree	0.9%	11.8%
N	465	425

Tables 8–10 represent the level of agreement of Peres and Netanyahu supporters to three possible major territorial concessions. Israel is consistently requested by its Arab partners to the negotiations to make these concessions within the framework of peace agreements with Syria and the Palestinians. It is clear from these tables that Peres supporters tended to be more dovish than Netanyahu supporters; but it is also clear that most of the supporters of Peres and Netanyahu alike prefer not to make such concessions. Some 81.7% of Netanyahu followers do not agree to a full withdrawal from the Golan Heights, whereas 41.7% of Peres followers either “agree” or “absolutely agree” to it. A lower total of Netanyahu followers, 67.1%, do not agree that Israel should give up its control over the Jordan Valley; 48.6% of Peres followers either “agree” or “absolutely agree.” A large number, 85.5%, of Netanyahu followers do not agree to future partition of Jerusalem, whereas 36.4% of Peres followers either “agree” or “absolutely agree” to it. It is also evident from these tables that concessions in Jerusalem are less popular among all voters compared to possible concessions in the Golan or the Jordan Valley. It is quite clear that all of these tendencies were well known to the campaign managers of both Likud and Labor. The two parties’ campaign messages were designed on the basis of similar findings.

**Table 8**

**Do You Agree With the Statement: "Within the framework of a peace agreement with Syria, Israel should agree to full withdrawal from the Golan Heights"?**

	Peres supporters	Netanyahu supporters
Absolutely agree	30.1%	2.8%
Agree	11.6%	0.5%
Maybe	17.0%	0.7%
Disagree	26.0%	14.3%
Absolutely disagree	15.3%	81.7%
N	465	427

**Table 9**

**Do You Agree With the Statement: "Within the framework of a peace agreement with the Palestinians, Israel should agree to give up its control over the Jordan Valley"?**

	Peres supporters	Netanyahu supporters
Absolutely agree	25.9%	1.9%
Agree	12.7%	2.1%
Maybe	20.1%	6.4%
Disagree	28.5%	22.5%
Absolutely disagree	12.7%	67.1%
N	463	423



**Table 10**  
**Do You Agree With the Statement: “Within the framework of  
 a peace agreement with the Palestinians, Israel should agree to partition  
 of Jerusalem”?**

	Peres supporters	Netanyahu supporters
Absolutely agree	24.9%	2.8%
Agree	11.5%	1.4%
Maybe	15.2%	1.2%
Disagree	19.1%	9.1%
Absolutely disagree	29.3%	85.5%
N	461	427

## SOCIOECONOMIC LEFT-RIGHT IDENTIFICATIONS

Although in most democracies the terms “left” and “right” are used to indicate stances on social and economic issues, in Israel these terms rarely have such connotations. The term “left-winger” is usually applied to someone who holds dovish positions on the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the term “right-winger” is usually ascribed to someone who holds hawkish positions on this issue.

One of the questions in the Davis Institute surveys requested the respondents to locate themselves on a scale of 5 degrees on a socioeconomic left-right dimension. Table 11 shows the results for four groups of respondents.

**Table 11**  
**Self-Placement on a Socioeconomic Left-Right Dimension**  
**(1 = "extreme right"; 5 = "extreme left")**

	1	2	3	4	5	N
Netanyahu supporters	5.3%	40.2%	43.6%	9.9%	1.0%	413
Peres supporters	0.7%	11.6%	33.8%	46.5%	7.5%	456
Jews	3.5%	29.7%	42.5%	21.0%	3.3%	856
Arabs	1.1%	9.0%	23.6%	57.3%	9.0%	178

All four of the groups show very strong centrist tendencies. The combined percentage of those designating themselves as either "extreme right-wingers" (1) or "extreme left-wingers" (5) is 10.1% or less in all groups. The modal answer among Jewish respondents and among Netanyahu followers is 3 (center). The modal answer among Peres followers and among Arab respondents is 4 (moderate left). It is clear, then, that the inclinations toward dovish ("left-wing") or hawkish ("right-wing") positions concerning the conflict are similar to those revealed by questions on social and economic affairs.

## **POLARIZATION**

Polarization between different groups of voters was measured by the comparison of the mean answer given by respondents belonging to the relevant groups. The following values were attributed to the different possible answers:

- "Absolutely agree" (or "extreme right") = 1
- "Agree" (or "moderate right") = 2
- "Maybe" (or "center") = 3
- "Disagree" (or "moderate left") = 4
- "Absolutely disagree" (or "extreme left") = 5

The absolute value of the difference between the mean results of any two groups of respondents compared was then divided by the maximal difference possible (4) such that the measure could have reached values within the range of 0-1 only. The maximal value (1) would occur only if all of the respondents belonging to one group “absolutely agree” with a given statement and all of the voters belonging to the second group “absolutely disagree” with the same statement. The minimal value (0) would occur when the mean results of the two groups compared are identical.

One pair of groups for which polarization was measured was of Jewish and non-Jewish respondents. Another pair examined was of Jewish supporters of Netanyahu and Jewish supporters of Peres.

Thus, the mean self-placement of Netanyahu supporters according to Table 11 is 2.61 and the mean result for Peres supporters is 3.51. Hence, the polarization between these two groups is 0.22 ( $[3.51-2.61]:[5-1]$ ). Likewise, the polarization between Jewish and Arab respondents is 0.18.

The results concerning questions related to the Arab-Israeli conflict are shown in Table 12. The polarization between Netanyahu followers and Peres followers seems to be quite moderate; only in two cases is the polarization measure higher than 0.3. The polarization between Jewish and Arab respondents was, in some cases, quite high. In general, the polarization between the mean position held by the Jewish voter and that held by the Arab voter was greater than the polarization between the mean position held by Netanyahu supporters and that held by Peres supporters. The only exception to this tendency concerns the support for the peace negotiations between Israel and different Arab partners; here the polarization between Netanyahu and Peres supporters is approximately identical to that between Jewish and non-Jewish voters.

**Table 12**  
**Polarization Between Jewish and Arab Voters and Polarization Between Netanyahu and Peres Supporters on Statements Concerning the Arab-Israeli Conflict**

	Polarization between:	
	Netanyahu and Peres supporters	Jewish and Arab voters
One should support the peace process between Israel and different Arab partners	0.24	0.23
One should support the continuation of the negotiations between Israel and Syria	0.38	0.33
One should support the continuation of the negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians	0.34	0.33
There is a good chance that in the near future a comprehensive peace in the Middle East will be reached	0.24	0.43
There is a good chance that in the near future a peace agreement with Syria will be reached	0.22	0.40
There is a good chance that in the near future a peace agreement with the Palestinians will be reached	0.29	0.38
Military experts believe that security can be guaranteed within the framework of a comprehensive peace in the Middle East	0.24	0.40
Military experts believe that security can be guaranteed within the framework of a peace agreement with Syria	0.25	0.43

**Table 12 (cont.)**

	Polarization between:	
	Netanyahu and Peres supporters	Jewish and Arab voters
Military experts believe that security can be guaranteed within the framework of a peace agreement with the Palestinians	0.27	0.43
Within the framework of a comprehensive peace agreement in the Middle East, Israel should agree to reduce the IDF	0.21	0.65
Within the framework of a comprehensive peace agreement, Israel should agree to give up its nuclear capability	0.21	0.65
Within the framework of a peace agreement with Syria, Israel should agree to full withdrawal from the Golan Heights	0.15	0.69
Within the framework of a peace agreement with the Palestinians, Israel should agree to the partition of Jerusalem	0.22	0.70
Within the framework of a peace agreement with the Palestinians, Israel should agree to give up its control of the Jordan Valley	0.25	0.66
The Arab world would have desired to destroy the state of Israel had there been a chance to do so	0.17	0.64
Syria would have desired to destroy the state of Israel had there been a chance to do so	0.16	0.65
The Palestinians would have desired to destroy the state of Israel had there been a chance to do so	0.19	0.61

The polarization measurements prove that there is a huge gap between Arab voters and Jewish voters concerning the "image of the enemy." Whereas most Arab respondents did not believe that Israel's neighbors are interested in the destruction of the state of Israel, Jewish voters—Peres and Netanyahu supporters alike—were very suspicious of the Syrians, the Palestinians, and the "Arab world" in general. It is very plausible that other differences found between Jewish voters and non-Jewish voters stem mainly from the differences concerning the "image of the enemy." This basic difference may explain why Arab respondents were ready to make territorial concessions that are associated with the security issue. It may also explain why most non-Jewish respondents favored the notion of Israel giving up its nuclear capability and reducing its army within the framework of a comprehensive peace settlement.

The sharpest polarization between Jewish voters and Arab voters was found on the Jerusalem question. It is clear that this issue is highly symbolic and involves attitudes beyond the security issue. Even among Jewish left-wingers there was a high degree of objection to partition of Jerusalem. This is seen, for instance, in Table 10. It should be noted that the group of Peres supporters in that table includes his Arab supporters.

## CONCLUSION

As indicated by the findings shown in Table 13, most Israeli voters tended to believe not only before the elections but also in July that Shimon Peres was better qualified for the position of prime minister than Binyamin Netanyahu. Nevertheless, it seems that although most voters supported the peace process, given the basic suspicion of Israel's Arab partners to the peace process and the fundamental reluctance about "total" territorial concessions especially in Jerusalem, many voters were torn between contradictory attitudes.

**Table 13**  
**“Who is better qualified for the position of prime minister, Shimon Peres  
 or Binyamin Netanyahu?”**

	May	July
Shimon Peres	56.9%	55.1%
Binyamin Netanyahu	34.4%	34.3%
Other	8.6%	10.6%
N	1064	1087

The Labor Party focused its electoral campaign on the slogan “Bibi is not fit [to be prime minister].” Likud centered its campaign on the slogan “Peres will divide Jerusalem.” Both slogans were arguably the most effective possible for the respective parties. It seems that many of the “floating voters” were divided, up to election day, between those who believed that “Bibi is not fit but Peres will divide Jerusalem” and those who believed that “Peres may divide Jerusalem but Bibi is not fit.”

The results of the elections show that many people preferred to support a “less qualified” politician for prime minister. This was so despite the fact that a vast majority also supported the continuation of the peace process begun by the Rabin and Peres governments.

It should be emphasized that in many well-defined societal groups the identification with one of the candidates was very pronounced. Thus, 96% of the Arab voters, 90% of kibbutz members, and 79% of the Druze voters supported Peres. On the other hand, 89% of those living in “religious cities” and 87% of Israeli citizens living in the West Bank supported Netanyahu.

Based on the evidence presented here, and given the fact that a small majority of Israeli voters have supported parties to the right of Labor in all elections since 1977, it seems likely that the final results of the elections were dictated by primary partisan and societal identifications, by deep feelings of suspicion toward the different Arab partners, and by the refusal to meet Arab territorial demands that seemed excessive to most Israeli voters.

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