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Publisher: Routledge

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## Israel Affairs

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fisa20>

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Available online: 25 Jul 2011

To cite this article: Lior Livak, Azi Lev-On & Gideon Doron (2011): MK websites and the personalization of Israeli politics, *Israel Affairs*, 17:3, 445-466

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13537121.2011.584676>

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## MK websites and the personalization of Israeli politics

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The article explores the contribution of MKs' websites to political personalization by addressing three questions. Is it more likely that MKs who belong to parties that conduct primaries will establish a website than MKs who belong to parties which select their candidates in a more centralized fashion? Are MKs' websites richer, more interactive and more frequently updated than their respective party's websites? Finally, do MKs link their websites to the websites of their parties? We find some evidence that MKs' personal websites further support and enhance the personalization of Israeli politics.

**Keywords:** Political communication; new media; political personalization; political websites; elections; Knesset; Israeli political system; Israel; parliament; Internet; primaries; selection methods; political parties; online politics

### Introduction

Democracies have institutionalized channels of mediation between constituencies and their representatives. These channels function to transmit and receive information, recruit and mobilize resources and support, and ultimately stabilize the social and political system. The institutional structure, and in particular the type of elections in a specific political system, have an impact on the dominance of certain mediation channels, and the manner in which politicians and parties communicate with their constituencies.<sup>1</sup> This study asks if, and in what ways, the rise of personal websites for members of the Knesset (MKs) in Israel, a new and direct channel of communication between MKs and the public, impacts on processes of personalization which are already prevalent in Israeli politics.

Studies demonstrate that presidential political systems are characterized by more personal communication between politicians and the public. In the USA, for example, voters directly elect the members of Congress in single-member districts; hence, the campaigns tend to focus on the candidates, their platform, opinions, beliefs and personality. The party with which a candidate is associated mostly functions as an organizational framework that sponsors the candidate during the campaign in exchange for support of the party's activities in Congress while in office.<sup>2</sup>

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When elections take place in multi-member districts and when party lists are used, one can expect that the most salient political unit, in terms of maintaining contact with the public, would be the party.<sup>3</sup> The same applies to Israel, a parliamentary democracy in which the elections to the Knesset take place on a single district with 120 representatives. During the campaigns, voters are introduced to party lists which cannot be modified between elections. These lists include the names of all the candidates of the party. Representatives are not directly elected by their constituencies and the public cannot affect their place on the party's list. The incentives for them to run personal campaigns and conduct direct communication with the public seem to be lower than in presidential systems.

Still, a gradual trend of personalization has developed in the Israeli system which, arguably, results from the deterioration of the party as the pivotal political unit. In Israel, which was labelled in the past as a 'Party State', the shift to placing the individual politician at the centre of politics is especially intriguing.<sup>4</sup> A number of noteworthy transformations in the Israeli institutional and communicative landscapes during the 1990s have contributed to the decline of the parties as the key mediators between the public and the political system, and have strengthened the position of individual politicians.<sup>5</sup> One such transformation is the rise of the Internet as a central arena for communication not just between parties and supporters, but more directly between individual MKs and the public.

The study explores the impact of institutional and communicative transformations over the acceleration of political personalization in Israel. The study focuses on three research questions. Is it more likely that MKs from parties which conduct primaries establish a website than MKs who belong to parties that select their candidates in a more centralized fashion? Are MKs' websites richer, more interactive and more frequently updated than their parties' websites? Finally, do MKs link their websites to the websites of their parties?

### **Institutional change and political personalization**

Since the 1970s, the Israeli political system has been undergoing a gradual process in which the power of political parties has been declining and simultaneously that of individual politicians strengthening. The decline of the parties is a familiar phenomenon which exists in many democracies and is manifested in the decline of their electoral power and shrinking of their scope of operation and impact over the societies in which they operate.<sup>6</sup>

The Yom Kippur War was a significant turning point in the relationship between the political elite and the Israeli public. The war fractured the trust of Israelis in their political system, which was centred since the pre-state period on political parties.<sup>7</sup> The distrust of citizens is evident in polls and studies that consistently show a high level of trust in the army and in the Supreme Court, compared to low levels of trust in the parties and members of Knesset.<sup>8</sup>

As in many democracies in Europe, the decline of the parties in Israel is manifested in a decline in the scope of party membership, the weakening connection

with labour and other organizations, and the gradual replacement of the model of mass parties in favour of the electoral party model.<sup>9</sup> In the past, the Israeli parties were based on a large popular support base, strong central control, well-defined ideology and a variety of activities in multiple spheres. Starting from the 1990s, parties were based on limited membership, run by a small group of party activists and had a limited number of members. They are active especially during the election season.<sup>10</sup>

One of the factors that exacerbated the electoral decline of the big parties in Israel was the change in the election system which took effect in the general elections of 1996.<sup>11</sup> Until these elections, Israel had a parliamentary system with proportional elections of 120 parliament members in a single district. The electoral reform introduced for the first time in Israel direct election of the prime minister alongside the choice of a party for representation in the Knesset. For the Israeli political system, which had maintained its character as a parliamentary system with proportional representation since the state was established, this ground-breaking change aimed at strengthening the governability of the executive branch and, at the same time, preventing small parties from maintaining excessive bargaining power, derived from their swing positions.<sup>12</sup>

Implementing the electoral reform significantly supported the personal element in Israeli politics and yet, did not support stability in governance. In the 1996 and 1999 elections, many voters split their vote between a prime minister and a party that best fit their ideological positions, not necessarily the party that the candidate for prime minister represented. Election results demonstrated that the power of sectarian parties increased at the expense of the two major parties, and the ability of the executive branch to govern actually weakened.<sup>13</sup> This was demonstrated by the short term in office of the two governments which were established after the elections of 1996 and 1999, which were among the most short-lived in Israel's political history. In 2001, the Knesset eliminated the direct election for prime minister and by the elections of 2003, the original parliamentary system had been reinstated.<sup>14</sup> In spite of the short time for which direct elections for prime minister prevailed, its impact was evident in the years to come and is still manifest in the continued electoral decline of the big parties.

Another major change that the political system experienced during the 1990s was the change in the manners in which the major parties chose to select their candidates and compose their party lists. Arguably, the democratization of candidate selection in these parties supported a process of personalization in Israeli politics and resulted in the further decline of the parties.

Candidate selection methods may have an impact on the behaviour of MKs during their term in office. Candidates who are selected by a small group of leaders may be more inclined to stay close to party discipline in order to improve their chances of being re-elected by the party. On the other hand, when the choice is made by a large-scale voting body, the chances increase that those elected will be more inclined to fulfil the interest and wishes of large groups of voters and as a result party discipline and cohesiveness may deteriorate.<sup>15</sup>

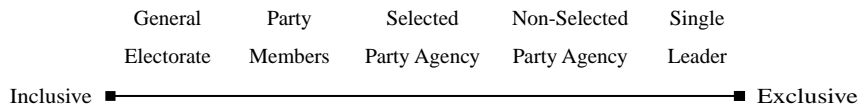


Figure 1. Party selectorates and levels of inclusiveness. Source: Based on Reuven Y. Hazan and Gideon Rahat, "Candidate Selection," in *Handbook of Party Politics*, ed. Richard Katz and William Crotty (London: Sage, 2006), 109–21.

One may position the different selection methods on a scale anchored by inclusivity or exclusivity. On the one hand, candidates are selected by a single leader and, on the other, by all eligible voters in the entire state (Figure 1).<sup>16</sup> Between these two extremes, there are some other methods in which candidates are selected by a committee or a non-selected party agency (public council), a selected party agency or all the members of the party (closed primaries).<sup>17</sup>

The political system in Israel is composed of a variety of parties that appeal to varied constituencies: from centrist parties that address the majority of voters through peripheral parties with a more specifically defined political identity to sectarian parties that address communities with distinct ethnic or religious identities. Parties select their candidates to the Knesset according to their own rules. For example, Shas or Yahadut Hatorah, which address the Ultra-Orthodox and traditional voters, use an exclusive method in which a council of rabbinical figures decides upon a list of candidates. On the other hand, since the 1990s the Labor (Avoda) and Likud parties, which address much larger audiences, have maintained a more open process of primaries in which many voters (from a few thousand to hundreds of thousands) participate.<sup>18</sup>

Primaries took place in Israel for the first time in 1977, when the Democratic Movement for Change (DASH) selected its candidates for the Knesset. But DASH disintegrated after one term in the Knesset and although it introduced the concept to the Israeli political system, no primaries of a similar scope occurred in Israel until 1992.<sup>19</sup> In 1992, the Labor party, preceded by the Likud and Meretz (the three big parties in the 13th Knesset), opened the process of candidate selection to thousands of party members.<sup>20</sup> This process was the peak of a gradual shift from selection through a committee, headed by party leaders, going through larger party institutions, to conducting primaries in the 1990s.<sup>21</sup>

Among the reasons for a change in parties' selection mechanisms was the desire to solicit new candidates, which was thought to improve parties' problematic public image. Supporters of the primaries argued that it involved a democratization of candidate selection that would increase parties' membership base, enhance public involvement in the campaigns, and allow new and fresh forces into the parliament.<sup>22</sup> Another key reason behind the move to primaries was the belief among Labor members (followed by Likud members) that changing the system may assist their party at the polls. Doron argues that behind the decisions to adopt both primaries and the direct election of the prime minister was the short-term interest of the big parties.<sup>23</sup>

But in practice, the move to primaries led to an additional deterioration of the parties and increased the independence of Knesset members. Candidates who were elected by the voting public to a high place on the candidate list assured their place in the Knesset, independently of the interests of the party leadership.<sup>24</sup> As a result, MKs' political future was no longer dependent upon party institutions and leadership. Primaries increased the MKs' independence and populist politics, which added to the deterioration of party discipline. MKs' expected sources of votes and funding became a much greater potential determinant of their voting behaviour as opposed to the parties to which they belonged.<sup>25</sup> In a study that analyzes the development of personalization in Israeli politics, Rahat and Sheaffer demonstrate that a personalization at the institutional level, i.e. changing the method of candidate selection among some of the parties, shifted media coverage to focus on the individual politician instead of the party, eventually affecting the manner in which the MKs function in the Knesset and the issues they focus on.<sup>26</sup>

Another noteworthy characteristic of the primaries in Israel is the strengthening of the local element. Competition in the local districts aimed at refreshing the party lists and focused MKs on the interests of local audiences and associations who knew how to use their organization as scaffolding for political power.<sup>27</sup>

The shift to more inclusive and transparent methods of election has become prevalent in the last few years in many parliamentary systems across the world. Many parties have adopted more democratic electoral methods to confront the decline in registered party members and voter loyalty.<sup>28</sup> As in Israel, not all democracies enact laws which clearly specify the manner in which parties' candidates for Parliament should be elected. Among the few countries who did enact such laws, one can mention the USA, in which every state determines its own primary laws, as well as Germany and New Zealand, in which the law sets up a general framework for candidates' selection in primaries.<sup>29</sup> Comparative studies demonstrate that, as in Israel, alongside the advantage of including voters in making the decision about parties' candidates, inclusive selection methods that encourage personal politics may be detrimental for party cohesiveness.<sup>30</sup> These methods open a door to massive vote recruitment and increase the dependence of candidates on their sponsors due to the high costs of campaigning.

Since the shift to primaries in Likud and Labor, the two parties have moved along the scale between choosing the candidates in the party council to choosing them via closed primaries. In Kadima, which was established in 2005, candidates were first selected by a small number of leaders, and after that primaries were adopted. Before the 2009 elections, the three big parties conducted closed primaries separately for the leader of the party and for its Knesset candidates.<sup>31</sup>

### **The new media environment and political personalization**

Along with the institutional changes in Israeli politics, far-reaching changes have occurred in the Israeli media environment which may also have supported the decline of the parties and the consequent rise in political personalization. These

changes brought about a more open and pluralistic media map in which private media organizations have gained considerable power and the political and governmental hold on the media has declined considerably.<sup>32</sup>

During the 1970s and 1980s, the Israeli newspaper market experienced a sharp decline in the circulation of the parties' news outlets, which had served as an important instrument of the parties since the pre-state period but were unable to compete with privately owned newspapers and were shut down one after the other.<sup>33</sup> During the 1990s, radio and TV had also experienced a major transformation, where a very centralized media market (which included one state operated television channel and a limited number of state and military operated radio stations) turned into a privatized market with dozens of regional radio stations, cable TV channels and even a first commercial television station.<sup>34</sup>

Television is still considered to be most influential for political exposure, and arguably politics lends itself to the language of the television in which images are more significant than ideology and personality characteristics take centre stage. This is manifested in the rise of politicians who know how to present themselves to the media, at the expense of more 'grey' politicians who climbed their way up the party system but lack a more polished media presence. Often politicians give greater weight to issues with 'added TV value' and prefer to concentrate on matters that are salient to the media, in order to obtain positive coverage.<sup>35</sup>

One of the central characteristics of such mediated politics is personalization, i.e. where the 'person' carries the message of the party and, in fact, becomes the 'issue' itself.<sup>36</sup> It also results in the rise of professional strategic advisers, spokespersons, PR experts, pollsters and other professionals who specialize in 'spinning' the agenda and mediating between politicians and journalists and, indirectly, the public. Both Caspi and Aronoff call this trend the *Americanization of Israeli politics*.<sup>37</sup>

Since the 1990s electoral campaigns have gradually changed from ideological battles to competitions between leaders. In the elections of 1992, even before the direct elections were introduced, former Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's name was emphasized in the Labor campaign due to his advisors' view that his image as a centrist would assist his party to win the elections.<sup>38</sup> The following campaigns further emphasized party leaders Benjamin Netanyahu and Shimon Peres in 1996, Netanyahu, Ehud Barak and Yitzhak Mordechai in 1999, and Barak and Ariel Sharon in 2001. Even after returning to the parliamentary system in 2003, the leaders of the major parties who competed in the elections, Ariel Sharon, Amram Mitzna, Benjamin Netanyahu, Amir Peretz, Ehud Olmert and Tzipi Livni, gained personal salience at the expense of the party.

Since the mid 1990s, as more Israelis became connected to the Internet, political usage of the web has increased. The advantages of Internet use for MKs are multiple. They can send their messages directly to constituencies and to the public at large, bypassing the mediation of media organizations and political gatekeepers.

Politicians can use the Internet to collect information, store it in databases and use it to keep in touch with potential voters.<sup>39</sup> The Internet can also be used to gather donations online and recruit supporters and volunteers. Personal websites may even function as a medium to express an opinion which runs counter to the opinion of the party.<sup>40</sup> Lastly, personal websites may also improve communication with other political players such as representatives, local branches and administrators of the party machine.<sup>41</sup>

One of the variables affecting the decision of politicians to establish a personal website is the level of competition in the political environment in which they function. Gibson and McAlister argue that the greater the competitiveness between candidates, the higher the incentives for candidates to set up websites.<sup>42</sup> An additional study, which examined the period in which Congressmen first started using the Internet, found that Congress members who were less certain that they would win their district and were elected after a fierce competition in the last elections were more likely than others to include contact information in their websites.<sup>43</sup>

A personal website enables the MKs to distinguish themselves from the party on whose list they are competing. Stanyer compared the image that British MPs and US members of the House of Representatives displayed on their personal websites and demonstrated that in the American system the personal ingredient is much more emphasized with regard to family values and the region from which they come, while British MPs emphasize party affiliation.<sup>44</sup> Stanyer explains that many of the Congressmen in the USA cannot rely on voters' loyalty to the party and thus emphasize their personal qualities and the district which they represent on their website while their party affiliation is not mentioned. In the UK, even though the MPs are also personally elected in their districts, the personal loyalty of the voters is more to the party than to the candidate. Alongside the personal qualities and actions of the candidate, British MPs emphasize their party.<sup>45</sup> Additional evidence lends further support to these differences. Most of the candidates in the US Senate elections in 1996 refrained from making their party affiliation salient and 14 out of the 50 candidates made no mention of their party at all.<sup>46</sup> On the other hand, a study from 2003 showed that most of the websites of British MPs included links to their party's website and posted information on behalf of the party.<sup>47</sup>

The importance of the party in the Internet activities of its members is manifested in other parliamentary systems as well. A study that looked into websites of MPs in South Korea in 2005 shows that 86% of the 222 MPs' websites that were available at the time included a link to the party website.<sup>48</sup> An additional study conducted in the same country three years later demonstrated a similar proportion of personal websites linked to the corresponding party websites. The authors argue that the parties' wide presence in their MPs' personal websites demonstrate their central role in the South Korean parliamentary system.<sup>49</sup>

The scholarly literature demonstrates that in Israel, as in other countries, politicians use this medium especially during campaigns and less during incumbency. However, there have been studies of MKs' Internet activities during



their term in office as well. In spite of the medium's richness and the interactivity that it allows, in most cases MKs use their personal websites more as a platform for information and less for bi-directional communication, recruiting activists and interacting with constituencies. Parties typically use the websites as complementary marketing platforms.<sup>50</sup>

An analysis of the activities of individual politicians in the primaries demonstrated that, in this case as well, most of the activity is unidirectional and the medium is hardly used for interaction with voters, mobilizing and fundraising.<sup>51</sup> Analysis of the web activities of candidates for mayoral elections in Israeli municipalities also demonstrated very limited usage of the medium.<sup>52</sup> Still, in time, the awareness of MKs to the advantages of the Internet seems to grow. Most of the MKs who use personal websites perceive the site as a tool for exchanging ideas with the public, getting ideas about legislation and as a platform to send information to the public. Still, some of the MKs perceive the website as a tool which is used mainly for political marketing and PR, especially during the primaries.<sup>53</sup>

In addition to personal websites, the rising popularity of social networking sites in Israel led many of the MKs to open personal profiles or Fan Pages. Social networks, mainly Facebook, are used by a very high percentage of young people in Israel and so function as fertile ground to recruit potential activists or volunteers. The use of Facebook is even more prevalent than the use of personal websites. This is probably due to the low costs of creating a page or a profile on Facebook. According to Haleva-Amir, in January 2009 more than half of MKs had some kind of presence on Facebook while in September 2010, 70% of them (84) were active on Facebook. Political parties are also quite active on Facebook. Six parties (50% of the parties that are represented in the Knesset) have official Facebook pages that include updates about the parties' activities.<sup>54</sup>

MKs are indeed present on Facebook in large numbers but often fail to take advantage of its interactivity and use it mostly to disseminate information about their activities. More often than not, MKs do not respond to questions posted by Facebook users on their wall.<sup>55</sup> Still, a limited number of MKs take advantage of their social presence by posting daily updates, present links to their personal websites, use social networks to recruit supporters for their online as well as offline activities and, above all, encourage direct dialogue (by their actual communication with the public), and address citizens' concerns.<sup>56</sup> It seems that social networks have an important place in the toolbox of politicians, but the study of this phenomenon is still new and focuses almost exclusively on campaigns.<sup>57</sup>

### **Study questions and hypotheses**

This study focuses on website usage by MKs and parties. In light of the personalization process of Israeli politics it is interesting to observe to what extent do MKs use the Internet and what activities they engage in. This study examines the personalization of Israeli politics through three hypotheses about the online activities of MKs and parties.

*Hypothesis 1:* In parties where the primaries are open and inclusive, more MKs set up personal websites compared to parties where the selection method is closed and centralized. This is based on the assumption that the more inclusive the election method is, the more the candidates should have to keep in touch with a larger public which may impact on their election or re-election. Personal websites may function as an official platform for MKs to send their messages directly to party members who decide their fate in the next election. In parties that have a more centralized selection method for candidates, the fate of the MKs depends on a smaller number of people, and so there is less need for personal websites. To examine this hypothesis, for each party that is represented in the Knesset, we looked at the number of MKs with a personal website and the method of candidate selection.

*Hypothesis 2:* Personal websites of the MKs focus on the MKs' activities and not on their party affiliation. We examined this hypothesis by observing whether the MKs' personal websites included a link to their party's website. In the academic literature, there is some evidence that in parliamentary systems the MPs' websites highlight the party to which they belong and include a link to their party's website. On the other hand, in the US the party is scarcely mentioned and the candidates' websites seldom link to their parties' websites. In Israel, elections take place in one multi-member district, so one can hypothesize that MKs will clearly mention the party on their website but opposite findings would provide solid support for the personalization hypothesis.<sup>58</sup>

*Hypothesis 3:* MKs' websites are more frequently updated and richer in features than party websites. Earlier studies demonstrated that parties use the websites mainly for campaigning. Parties are most active during election campaigns while MKs maintain a high level of activity throughout their incumbency. The assumption is that while collecting the data for this study in July 2010, a year and a half after the general elections (when signs of the next elections were not evident), MKs' websites would demonstrate more activity than parties' websites. If this hypothesis is supported then this is another manifestation of the personalization of Israeli politics.

### **Method**

The hypotheses were examined using content analysis of political websites, a method commonly used in the scholarly literature to examine the activities of parties, candidates and MPs. The index used in this study is composed of four

distinct dimensions of Internet activity, proposed by Gibson and Ward and later used (with modifications) by other scholars.<sup>59</sup>

All the official websites of the parties and MKs in the 18th Knesset were located using search engines, the Knesset website, party websites and mass media publications. MKs' websites were defined as a website with an independent URL, which is used exclusively by the MK.

The study includes websites that were updated during the six months prior to their retrieval, where the last date on which the website was updated was determined by checking the content and news section of the websites. The content analysis was performed between 15 and 31 July 2010, and each website was analyzed using an index developed for the study and adapted from Gibson and Ward's four dimensions of analysis. Each dimension is composed of a list of variables which stand for content and interaction components on the website. The four dimensions are:

- (1) Information Provision (19 variables that address unidirectional informational items that were found on the site);
- (2) Resource Generation (seven variables representing fundraising and recruitment of activists and supporters);
- (3) Interactivity (seven variables that examine whether the website enables the users to communicate with representatives and express their opinions);
- (4) Connectivity (three variables that examine the existence of links to external websites). (The full list of variables appears in Appendix 1.)

Analyzing the websites according to the index enabled us to compare party websites to the websites of MKs who represent them in the Knesset and see if the personal websites trump party websites in terms of their richness, interactivity, mobilizational ability and connectivity.

## Findings

According to the analysis, 40 of the 120 members of the 18th Knesset have an updated personal website. Kadima, Likud and Labor have the highest number of MKs with personal websites. Each of these parties has nine MKs with personal websites.<sup>60</sup> Each one of the right-wing parties, Israel Beytenu (Israel Our Home), HaBayit HaYehudi (The Jewish Home) and Ha'Ikhud HaLeumi (National Unity) are represented by three MKs with personal websites. In the cases of Ha'Ikhud HaLeumi and HaBayit HaYehudi, which are represented in the Knesset by only four and three MKs respectively, this is a relatively high rate of MKs with websites. On the other hand, only a fifth of the 15 MKs of Israel Beytenu have a personal website. Hadash has two MKs with a website, and the New Movement–Meretz and Shas have only one MK with a personal website. There are no MKs with a personal website representing the parties Yahadut HaTorah, Ra'am-Ta'al and Balad.

These results support Hypothesis 1 (Table 1). The majority of MKs with a personal website belong to Kadima, Likud and Labor, which conduct primaries among their tens of thousands of party members. The three parties are

Table 1. Number of MK websites and the candidates' selection method shown by party.

Party	Candidates' selection method	MKs serving in the Knesset	MKs with website	Percentage of MKs with websites
Kadima	Party members (closed primaries)	28	9	32
Likud	Party members (closed primaries)	27	9	33
Israel Beytenu	Non-selected party agency	15	3	20
Labor	Party members (closed primaries)	13	9	69
Shas	Non-selected party agency	11	1	9
Yahadut Hatorah	Non-selected party agency	5	0	0
Ha'Ikhud HaLeumi	Non-selected party agency	4	3	75
Hadash	Selected party agency	4	2	50
Ra'am-Ta'al	Non-selected party agency	4	0	0
The New Movement – Meretz	Two-phase method combining selected and non-selected party agencies	3	1	33
HaBayit HaYehudi	Non-selected party agency	3	3	100
Balad	Selected party agency	3	0	0
Total		120	40	33

represented in the Knesset by 68 MKs, 27 of whom (nearly 40%) have a personal website. The other nine parties use less inclusive methods to select their party lists (ranging from the multi-level elections in Meretz through elections in a selected party agency, as in Hadash, and through selection by a small group of leaders, as in the ultra-Orthodox parties). These parties are represented in the Knesset by 52 MKs, out of whom only 13 have a personal website (25%).

Whereas the three parties that conduct primaries are centrist parties that address large audiences, the other nine parties are smaller and represent more nominal groups. Especially interesting are Israel Beytenu and Shas, represented by 26 MKs combined, but only four members from both parties have a website. It seems that this negligible online presence is associated with the more centralized leadership style of these parties.

Israel Beytenu, the third largest party in Israel, which gained 15 seats in the last election, was established in 1999 by Avigdor Lieberman, who still heads the party today. It is considered a highly centralized party; it has relatively few employees and has a small organizing committee that selects its candidates for the Knesset. Until the last elections, Lieberman himself individually selected the candidates. Only three of the party's MKs have websites and these sites contain very limited information compared to other personal websites.

Shas, which appeals mainly to traditional and ultra-Orthodox voters, is controlled by a narrow council of rabbis who also select its candidates for the Knesset, and maintain a strict party discipline. Another party representing

the ultra-Orthodox public is Yahadut Hatorah, also run by a council of rabbis. While the ultra-orthodox MKs (Usually five or six) represent a large public, in reality they need to be accountable for a very small number of leaders who determine their fate before each election. In addition, it seems that the character of their constituency makes the use of personal websites even less necessary.

The only Knesset member of Shas who has a personal website is MK Chaim Amsellem who is unique in the ultra-Orthodox political landscape. During his service in the 18th Knesset, MK Amsellem stood out as an oppositional voice to the leadership of Shas and rejected the party leadership's call that he resign his post in the Knesset.<sup>61</sup> Amsellem's decision to operate a personal website in a party in which the method of candidate selection is so centralized may be a sign of his ambition to gain publicity and status based on his personal traits. It may even open a path to political activity outside his current party.

To clarify the picture, we present the percentage of personal websites among the five largest parties (10 mandates or above), on a scale of inclusiveness of candidate selection (Figure 2). The three big parties, Kadima, Likud and Labor, which hold primaries, are responsible for most of the MKs that operate websites (40% of their MKs have personal websites). On the other hand, Israel Beytenu and Shas, who select their candidates through a small group of leaders, are responsible for only four websites (only 16% of their MKs have websites).

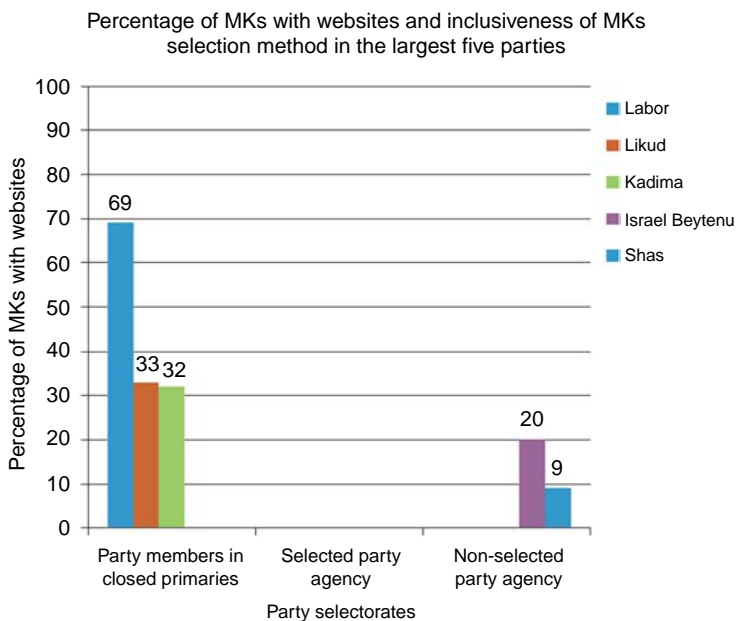


Figure 2. Percentage of MKs with websites and inclusiveness of selection method for MKs in the five largest parties.

Hypothesis 2 is partly supported. Of the 40 MKs who have websites, 33 have a party website that they can link to from their website (for seven MKs there is no corresponding party website to link to because the party does not have a website). Out of the 33 sites, only 16 include a link to the party website (48%). The MKs who choose to link to the party website come from a large variety of parties and a particular pattern cannot be identified to explain why some choose to link and some choose not to. Still, the fact that more than half of MKs do not place a link to the party website runs counter to findings from other parliamentary systems in which MPs' websites were much more often connected to their respective party's website.<sup>62</sup> On the other hand, these findings do not correspond to findings from political systems in which the choice is personal and in which such links are much less prevalent.<sup>63</sup> It seems that, in this regard, the linking pattern of Israeli MKs is somewhere in between the patterns previously found in parliamentary and presidential systems.

Analyzing and comparing the websites of MKs and parties only partially supports Hypothesis 3. With the exception of the Labor party, in all cases where personal websites of MKs could have been compared to party websites, the party website was richer in information and in ability to mobilize as well as interaction and connectivity, compared to the average features available on the websites of MKs from that party (Table 2). Still, a number of MKs 'lead over' their party in the accumulative index or in some of the dimensions. In addition, there are some parties that do not operate a website while some of their MKs do.

Of the 12 parties that are represented in the Knesset, eight have a party website. Of the eight there are only six parties whose members have personal websites. In three cases, some MKs have an updated website while their party does not (Ha'Ikhud HaLeumi, HaBayit HaYehudi and Shas). In two cases, the situation is reversed: Balad and Ra'am-Ta'al have a website but their MKs do not. Yahadut HaTorah does not have a party or any MK Internet presence.

The website of Israel Beytenu leads by the biggest margin over the websites of its MKs. The website contains richer information and more opportunities for resource generation and interactivity compared to its three personal MK websites which tend to be very poor in content compared to other MKs' websites. The website of

Table 2. Comparing the scores of the websites of the three major parties with the average scores of the websites of the MKs representing those parties, across the four dimensions of the Index.

Dimension	Kadima		Likud		Israel Beytenu	
	Party	MKs	Party	MKs	Party	MKs
Information	14	13.8	22	15.8	20	7.3
Resource generation	2	0.8	3	1.1	4	0
Interactivity	2	2.4	2	2.1	3	0.3
Networking	1	0.4	1	0.4	0	0.3
Total	19	17.4	28	19.4	27	8

the Likud also leads by a big margin over the average scores received by the personal websites of its MKs. Still, two MKs are equal or better than the party website.<sup>64</sup>

Unlike the case of most parties, the findings about the online activity of the Labor party and its MKs support Hypothesis 3. After the 2009 elections, the website of the Labor party went offline and was replaced by a poorly designed, amateurish website containing few contact details for the party. The inactivity of the party on the Internet corresponds to its current poor position in the political system.<sup>65</sup> In the last elections, for the first time, Labor lost its place as one of the two major parties and became the fourth largest party in the Knesset. Its weakness is also manifested in internal struggles between its MKs, which eventually led to the resignation of five MKs led by party chairman Ehud Barak who started a new party, Atzmaut (Independence).<sup>66</sup> Given the lack of party activity on the Internet, the online activity of its MKs is dominant. Their websites were among the richest compared to the average of other MKs' websites (Table 3). The high rank of MKs with an active website (69%) further demonstrates the gap between the party and its MKs' activities and serves as evidence of the personalization of the MKs' activities, at least where communication with constituencies is concerned.

The data about Ha'Ikhud HaLeumi and HaBayit HaYehudi also supports Hypothesis 3. The fact that neither party operates a website whereas six of their seven MKs do have a personal website is a clear sign of their MKs' electoral strength compared to the parties' electoral weakness. The two right-wing parties have lost some of their electoral strength over the last decade and recurring attempts to merge them into one strong right-wing party have failed.<sup>67</sup>

The absence of websites for these two parties compared to the high rate of personal websites among their MKs demonstrates a high degree of personalization. It may be that the independent activities of the right-wing MKs online are derived from their wish to maintain a high profile among their constituencies in light of their parties' weaknesses. An MK who can use his website as a platform to improve his public presence may increase his chances of getting elected regardless of his current party's public status.

Table 3. Scores of the websites of MKs whose parties do not have a website, compared to the average score of MKs' websites.

Dimension	Shas MK Chaim Amsellem	Ha'Ikhud HaLeumi MKs	HaBayit HaYehudi MKs	Labor MKs	Average score of MK websites
Information	15	14.0	13.6	14.5	14.0
Resource generation	0	0	0	1.8	0.9
Interactivity	2	2.3	1.7	2.2	2.0
Networking	0	0.3	0.7	0.1	0.4
Total	17	16.7	16.0	18.7	17.3

## Conclusions

The Israeli political system is undergoing a gradual process in which the power of the political parties is declining and the status of the individual politicians is rising. This process is manifested in the way in which messages are conveyed from politicians to the public. At present, although the Israeli political system is party based, the communicative behaviour of many of the MKs is characterized by a high degree of independence.

It seems that adopting personal websites, as some of the MKs do, is another step in the disassociation of the individual politician from his party. Many MKs run personal websites which act as useful tools for disseminating information to the public and maintaining contact with their constituencies.

MKs from parties that conduct primaries among a large voting population have more incentives than MKs who compete in more centralized parties to establish websites, and indeed do so. Most of the MKs with personal websites come from the only three parties in the Knesset which run primaries. Unlike MKs from other parties who are selected by a more exclusive group of leaders and activists, MKs from these parties find it more important to maintain contact with the tens of thousands of party members who decide their fate in the primaries. Still, only a third of MKs operate personal websites and even among the parties who have primaries, the percentage of MKs with websites stands, with one exception, at less than half.

Comparing the activity of party websites to that of personal websites leads to inconclusive results. On the one hand, in all cases where parties have official websites, the party website was more active and richer than the average personal website of their MKs. Most MKs' websites do not compare in their richness and frequency of update to their party's website. On the other hand, there are exceptions. That is, parties that do not have an operating website but the rate of their MKs with a website is relatively high. This is the situation in the Labor party, Ha'Ikhud HaLeumi and HaBayit HaYehudi.

The research field of online political activity in Israel is still relatively young, and the landscape is shifting fast. Future studies should delve into the realm of social networking sites, which carry millions of people into social and political engagement online. The ability of social networking sites to create and maintain social ties, their usage for viral information transmission, their ease of use and the reduced threshold for participation both for the public and the politicians increase their chances of being adopted by MKs as central venues for contact with the public. MKs' personal websites should also be studied further, especially the concept of intra-party selection methods as a possible indicator for the presence of MKs' websites.

## Notes on contributors

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Dr. Azi Lev-On is the head of the new media track at the Ariel University Center in Israel. Azi's studies explore behaviours and collective action in computer-mediated environments, employing a variety of methods such as link analysis, surveys and laboratory experiments. Recent research analyzes how and why computer-mediated communication impacts on monetary transfers and trust, how people rank news stories online, Internet usage by candidates in the Israeli municipal elections 2008, and by Ultra-Orthodox women who participate in closed forums online. For more information, see <http://www.azilevon.com>.

Professor Gideon Doron teaches political science, political communication and public policy at Tel Aviv University and serves as the Chairman of the Department of Political Science at the Yezreel Valley College. He is the President of the Israeli Association of Political Science, the author of 17 books and dozens of articles. Doron served as the chairman of the board of the public council of the second authority for television and regional radio.

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## APPENDIX

Appendix 1. The list of variables used in the content analysis of MKs and parties websites

Dimension	Variable	Value	
Information provision	Leader profile/biography	Present – 1; Absent – 0	
	Political platform/values and ideology	Present – 1; Absent – 0	
	Official documents/bill proposals	Present – 1; Absent – 0	
	Issues on the agenda	Present – 1; Absent – 0	
	Personal blog/articles	Present – 1; Absent – 0	
	Personal blog/articles – frequency of publication	No articles – 0	No articles in the last month – 1
			One article a month – 2
			2–7 articles a month – 3
			Two articles a week – 4
	News updates	Present – 1; Absent – 0	
	News updates – frequency of publication	No updates – 0	No updates in the last month – 1
			One update a month – 2
			2–7 updates a month – 3
			Two updates a week – 4
	Publications in the mass media	Present – 1; Absent – 0	
	Calendar of events	Present – 1; Absent – 0	
	Photos	Present – 1; Absent – 0	
	Photo gallery on the website	Present – 1; Absent – 0	
	Video clips on the website	Present – 1; Absent – 0	
	Link to photos/videos outside the website	Present – 1; Absent – 0	
Website search	Present – 1; Absent – 0		
Tag cloud	Present – 1; Absent – 0		
Information on donations and/or donators	Present – 1; Absent – 0		
Offline contact information	Present – 1; Absent – 0		
Speeches	Present – 1; Absent – 0		
Resources generation	Updates and or invitations to events	Present – 1; Absent – 0	
	Registration information for volunteers	Present – 1; Absent – 0	
	Online registration for volunteers	Present – 1; Absent – 0	
	Information for donators	Present – 1; Absent – 0	
	Online donation	Present – 1; Absent – 0	
	Registration information for party membership	Present – 1; Absent – 0	
	Online Registration for party membership	Present – 1; Absent – 0	
Interactivity	Contact form/email	Present – 1; Absent – 0	
	Post comments for articles/posts	Present – 1; Absent – 0	
	Link to social networks	Present – 1; Absent – 0	

Appendix 1 – *continued*

Dimension	Variable	Value
Connectivity	Sign an petition	Present – 1; Absent – 0
	Upload content to the website (text/photo)	Present – 1; Absent – 0
	Sign up for a newsletter	Present – 1; Absent – 0
	Sign up for RSS updates	Present – 1; Absent – 0
	Constant link to the website of MK from the party	Present – 1; Absent – 0
	Constant link to the website of MK from another party	Present – 1; Absent – 0
	Constant link to websites related to the government, the Knesset or other public institutions	Present – 1; Absent – 0