Agenda Setting of Corruption in Israeli Politics

Yaron Katz*

Head of U.S. tax at KPMG Israel

ABSTRACT

Media coverage of corruption has become a prominent issue in the political environment in Israel and setting corruption as an agenda has been a usual practice by the media. Political communication scholars have emphasized the role that the media play in shaping public opinion and the relationship between media coverage and public opinion. The media are the principal means for people to receive their information about policy issues. Much of the public's knowledge and information about public affairs is mediated through the media as people's opinions about political issues are shaped by the selection and presentation of information. The study uses the theory of agenda-setting as a basic framework for testing and delineating the relations between the political elite and agenda setting. It aims to understand the effectiveness of agenda setting in reporting political corruption and to contribute to the academic literature on the impact of the coverage of political corruption on the development of the political system in Israel. The research is looking at the way that the media influenced public opinions about the role of corruption in determining the future of Israel's politics by examining the changes in political ideology of four consecutive prime ministers – all which abandoned their ideological policies and adopted practical policies that were supported by their traditional political rivals and the mass media. The conclusion is that the change of their ideology was as a result of corruption charges that these leaders had to confront – as a practical means to influence public agenda in a way that is supported by the political elite and the media.

Keywords: Agenda setting, Corruption, Israel, Politics, Ideology

INTRODUCTION

Research on the determinants and consequences of political ideology concentrates on investigation of genetic influences on ideology (Feldman and Johnston, 2014). The basic assumption of political scientists is that political parties are founded on ideology for which they advance their activities and achieve their policy goals. The ideology of a political party is what makes it distinct and different from others, with related beliefs held by a group of individuals or a particular social class.

Political ideology has been a confusing topic for social analysts, since it is a set of beliefs that guide decisions of individuals and communities. Bhambra and Margree (2010) maintain that in identity politics people tend to form exclusive political alliances based on their shared religion, race, class, sex, culture, sexual orientation, disability or other characteristic. Heywood (2007)

defines the main levels of ideological values as a model of a desired future and a vision for a better society. Gjorshoski (2014) looks at elements of ideology based in democratic principles, including sustaining, preserving and protecting the system, protecting the rights and freedom of citizens, and preserving public moral. Kirk (2010) introduces principles of ideology that relate to cultural norms: public moral, customs, rules and continuity, cautious, reform, imperfection, freedom, property, volunteer community, limited authority, balance between the changes and consistency.

The concept of the political ideology is a collection of ideas on what it considers to be the best form of government. But the tension between the power and consistency of ideology and the reason and flexibility of practical politics identifies history of political theory (Allen, 2012). Bhambra and Margree (2010) argue that the problem with identity politics is the way in which

the traditional principle of identity replaces practical politics. They maintain that productive practical politics should understand that the identity of the political grouping is based on the need to respond to an existing situation in which the need for the identity claim is no longer present. Additional research further exploits the contrast, concluding that political ideology has often been called "the most elusive concept in the whole of social science". This is because while ideologies tend to identify themselves by their position on the political spectrum (such as the left, the center or the right), they can also distinguish themselves from other important issues that may conflict with the basic ideology of their political camp. The result is that often ideology prevents politicians from implementing practical politics (Gjorshoski (2015).

The emergence of new politics, based on social media and powerful leadership,brought criticism over traditional politics which is based on solidarity and identity. New politics is largely based on the idea that political dialogue involves differences between different sections of society and therefore incapable of building the broad-based movement necessary to form identity politics (Kumar, Elliot-Cooper, Iyer and Gabriel, 2018). Criticism against identity politics maintains that solidarities based on identities as the basis of political action have become too powerful and therefore increasingly problematic. Criticism is evident both in the academy and the public sphere (Klandermans, 2013). It is argued that identity politics is one-sided and treats identities as static entities, aimed only at serving the interests of community interests and defending the sanctuary of their identity through political activity, rather than serving the interests of the entire population (Rectenwald, 2013). In contrast, practical politics can enable people to recognize and deal with political problems (Alexander, 2016).

Academic research provides important classification for basic values that put ideological and practical politics on the same frame. It is argued that political theory is addressing itself to the way political institutions frame political disagreements and orchestrate resolutions to view social ideals (Waldron, 2006). Philip (2010) argues for greater realism in political theory with respect to judgements about what politicians ought to do and how they ought to act. He advocates a version of political realism that is rooted in an understanding of the distinctive character of political rule and provides the basis for a contextualist but non-relativist account of 'what is to be done'.

In competitive elections between ideological parties, there is uncertainty about the eventual victor since voters will be less likely to vote for a candidate as her corruptibility rises. But the main issue in question about the validity of ideology in any political system is the conflict with practical politics. According to Cukierman (2010), ideology determines the broad long-term objectives to which policymakers of a nation aspire, but those objectives are seldom fully achieved and can be considered as practical politics rather than political ideology. Practical politics, in contrast to ideology, is based on practical rather than moral or ideological considerations, and as a result the boundaries between ideology and practical politics have been subject to a continues debate among political theorists (Freeden, 2006).

The research examines changes in political ideology of four consecutive prime ministers in Israel in the issue that has dominated Israel's public agenda since the establishment of the state: the conflict with the Arab World and the Palestinian issue. It is argued that all four prime ministers have abandoned their ideological policies and adopted practical policies that were supported by their political rivals and the mass media. It is also argued that the change of their ideology policies was as a result of corruption charges that these leaders had to confront – as a practical means to influence public agenda in a way that is supported by their traditional political rivals and the media.

Political communication scholars have emphasized the role that the media play in shaping public opinion and the relationship between media coverage and public opinion. The media are the principal means for people to receive information about policy issues.

Much of the public's knowledge and information about public affairs is mediated through the media as people's opinions about political issues is shaped by the selection and presentation of information. The paper aims to contribute to the academic literature on the impact of the coverage of political corruption on the development of the political system in Israel. The research is looking at the way that the media set the agenda and influenced public opinion about corruption in determining the future of Israel's politics.

AGENDA SETTING AND CORRUPTION

The agenda setting theory implies that the media pre-determine what issues are regarded as important at a given time in each society. According to the theory, the media creates images of events in our minds and policymakers should be cognizant of those pictures in people's heads (Lippmann, 1922). Cohen (1963) explains that the media can influence on public opinions or attitudes, and although it may not be successful in telling people what to think, it is successful in telling people what to think about. The theory analyses the power of the news media to influence public opinion by focusing public attention on a few important issues and shape public agenda to match with media (McCombs, 2005). It determines that the media can be considered as responsible for influencing and shaping public opinion, intentionally or unintentionally (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987) and as a result extend its influence on other related social science studies such as political communication (Reese, 1991).

The agenda theory refers to the way that the media impact political behavior during elections. It was introduced by McCombs and Shaw (1972). They found that the media influenced those who were driven with enthusiasm in following up with the 1968 US presidential campaign's information. Following this research, studies concentrated on the correlations between the media agenda and the public agenda (Golan & Wanta, 2001), and researchers found that agenda setting can be set up by politicians and public relations practitioners as well as governments (Walgrave and Aelst, 2006; Roberts & McCombs: 1994). The theory assumes that while the media set the agenda, political actors, such as governments, political organizations, and activist groups, can influence the media to set the agenda in a

way they want, which is a process called agenda-building (Walgrave, Soroka and Nuytemans: 2008; Rogers and Dearing: 1988).

The original agenda-setting study examined elections, although later research looked at the impact of new media and its ability to influence public attitudes on long term political debates (McCombs, 2005; Young & McCarthy, 2009). McCombs (2004) indicates that one of the important criteria to evaluate a political leader is his or her influence in setting the agenda. He claims that inter-media agenda setting has high correlation between agendas of the elite news media and other news media. The impact of the media is therefore not limited to election campaigns, but also to maintain political leadership. This includes coloring an event for the audiences (Matsaganis and Payne, 2005) or influencing the audiences' perceptions, values, focus and priorities (Littlejohn and Foss, 2009). By emphasizing a relatively small number of issues at a time, the mass media focus public attention on these issues and set the themes of public opinion so that people agree on what to think and talk about.

While the original agenda-setting hypothesis asserted that the media are influential in deciding what issues become major themes of public opinion, new concepts of agenda setting look at the influence on how people make sense of a given theme. The theory elaborates the connection in term of relationships between the emphasis that the media can put an issue and public reaction or attributes to such issue. It focuses on what the media tell the people that they should think about and on how the media tell people that they should feel about the topics in the news by emphasizing some attributes and ignoring others. According to Rogers and Dearing (1988), there are three main agenda settings – public agenda, media agenda and policy agenda. The combination of these three main forces has become a major force in determining political developments, to the extent of "agenda building", which is based on the debate of who sets the media's agenda (McCombs, 2004). Agenda building research appeared as a natural expansion of the original agenda setting research by focusing on the process by which the agenda is engendered. With the rise of digital and social media, political actors have gained new tools to influence public agenda directly or indirectly, such as official campaign websites and social media platforms.

Conventional models of agenda setting hold that mainstream media influence public agenda by leading audience attention and perceived importance to issues. However, increased selectivity and audience fragmentation in today's digital media environment threaten the traditional agenda setting power of the mass media. Though the theory was developed in the era of traditional media, the advent of new media has broadened the scope and platforms in which agenda setting could occur. As determined by this research, the impact of agenda setting shows that the theory became even more relevant with new media, since the media not only tell us what to think about but also how to think about these issues. Taking the case of Israel as a test case, we can see that Israeli media is concentrated and traditional media services also dominate digital media and are influenced by social media. This conclusion is supported by

Feezel (2017), which investigated agenda setting through social media and the importance of incidental news exposure and social filtering in the digital era. He explains that being exposed to political information through social media yields an agenda setting effect by raising participants' perceived importance of certain policy issues. Similarly, the intermedia agenda setting between traditional and new media was examined by Su and Borah (2019). They found that social media is more likely to influence old media agenda in terms of breaking news, whereas traditional are more likely to lead social media agenda in terms of ongoing discussions during non-breaking news periods.

As information sources have increased dramatically and became more fragmented, social media sources with many followers set the tone for the agenda that dominates public agenda. A growing number of researches suggests that social media alter the traditional political uses by democratizing access to media sources and speeding the circulation of information, which in turn can facilitate and spread collective. Harrison (2007) suggests that the profile of corruption increased with the growing impact of social media and has prompted rethinking of the 'abuse of public office' definition. However, he explains that the definition of political corruption in any given society is a changing phenomenon, based on aspects of perceived morality, cultural values and socio-economic status. Park (2012) found that many people are distrustful about whether the media are playing their basic roles in revealing corruption and suggesting rational and practical solutions, since the media usually provide a certain interpretation of corruption influencing the way they are discussed and evaluated in public debate. The conclusion that can be utilized for Israel is that since the media often adopt a framing strategy, corruption needs to be treated contextually and diachronically.

AGENDA SETTING AND ISRAELI POLITICS

The argument that corruption charges of political leaders can lead to policy changes from ideology to practical politics is supported by research of political science. Burlacu (2020) found that when corruption is high, voters place less importance on ideology because of their reduced ability to accurately positions of different parties. The study shows that in countries with high levels of corruption, voters consider ideology less in their voting decisions, partially because they face difficulties identifying ideological positions and/or they do not believe parties can implement their electoral programs. A study by Boukouras and Koufopoulos (2011) presents a model of political competition that shows that where voter decisions are affected by their ideological adherence to political parties, an equilibrium exists even though voting is fully deterministic. Acemoglu, Egorov and Sonin (2013) claim that when voters fear that politicians may be influenced or corrupted, these politicians choose "populist" policies aimed to the left of the median voter - as a way of signaling that they are not beholden to the ideological interests of the right. They argue that this populist bias of policy is greater when the value of remaining in office is higher for the politician; when there is greater polarization between policy preferences of the median voter and right-wing special interests;

when politicians are perceived as more likely to be corrupt; when there is an intermediate amount of noise in the information that voters receive; when politicians are more forward-looking; and when there is greater uncertainty about the type of the incumbent leader.

Philip (2008) further provides an argument that is directly connected to the characteristics of Israeli politics and the traditional ideology policies of peacemaking. He explains that questions of the definition of corruption are central to understanding the significance and prominence of the charges in peacekeeping contexts

The experience of Israeli politics shows that right-wing voters are more ideological while left-wing voters are more practical. This analysis was evident multiple times in the course of Israeli politics, when right-wing leaders that were accused of corruption adopted left-wing traditional policies. In the last two decades four consecutive prime ministers have been subject to police investigation about their connections with tycoons and bribery. These are Benjamin Netanyahu, Ehud Barak, Ariel Sharon, Ehud Olmert and again Netanyahu.

BARAK'S PRACTICAL POLITICS

Ehud Barak, who served as Prime Minister from 1999 to 2001, was investigated on allegations of illegal campaign financing, bribery and money laundering. The police ended their investigation in 2003, citing a lack of evidence, and in 2006 the State Attorney's Office announced that the case had been closed without any indictments.

For many years, Barak - former Chief of Staff of the Israel Defense Forces - had objected to a one-sided framework based on interim peace agreements, in which Israel steadily gave up assets in exchange for a permanent status agreement. But during his term as Prime Minister and considering his criminal investigation, he accepted the invitation of President Bill Clinton to come with Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat to Camp David for negotiations on the Middle East peace process. The summit ended without an agreement, although at its conclusion a trilateral statement was issued defining the agreed principles to guide future negotiations.

Barak agreed to go farther than any Israeli leader had considered before. He accepted Palestinian statehood, agreed to dismantle almost all the settlements, exchange land for the blocs to remain along the green line, shared or divided control in Jerusalem, and resolve the refugee issue. The failure of Ehud Barak's effort to reach an agreement with the Palestinians, at almost any price, brought Israelis back to the core issues of the conflict with the Palestinians and the Arab World. Consequently, he lost the support of most Israelis, including much of his political supporters, who claimed that Barak was too generous and agreed to an unprecedented peace plan. Having no public and political support to his initiative and facing criminal charges of corruption, Barak was forced to resign after serving only a year and a half in office – the shortest term of any Prime Minister.

SHARON'S PRACTICAL POLITICS

In a special election held in 2001, Ariel Sharon was elected Prime Minister, decisively defeating Ehud Barak 62 percent to 38 percent. Contrary to Barak, Sharon held far-right policies in the fight against terror and the conflict with the Palestinians and the Arab World. He insisted on visiting the Temple Mount Haram al-Sharif compound and his visit triggered a wave of violence that put an end to the Oslo peace process and brought about the fall of his rival, Ehud Barak. As Prime Minister, he pursued an uncompromising line against Palestinian terror groups and insisted that the Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat was an obstacle to peace and personally responsible for much of the violence of the Intifada.

Sharon was a commander in the Israeli Army from its creation in 1948 and participated prominently in the wars with Arab armies in 1948, 1956, 1967 and 1973. Former Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin called Sharon "the greatest field commander in our history". Upon retirement from the military, Sharon entered politics, joining the right-wing Likud party. As Minister of Defense, he directed the 1982 Lebanon War. His major policy priority was the ideological expansion of Israeli settlement activity in the West Bank and Gaza, driven by security and topographical needs to protect Israel from conventional military threats from its neighbors.

In the 2003 elections he defeated Labor Party candidate Amram Mitzna, who called for unilateral disengagement and withdrawal from Palestinian areas and construction of a defensive barrier to fend off terror attacks. However, contrary to his ideological policy of constricting and expanding settlements, after he was charged by the police for corruption, Sharon reversed his policy from far-right to far-left and was widely supported by the left-wing camp and the media. He adopted major portions of the plan developed by his opponent (Amram Mitzna) and announced his own Gaza disengagement plan. The plan aimed to evict all Israelis and military bases from Gaza Strip and four isolated settlements in northern Samaria and to withdraw unilaterally. Although it was controversial, the plan won the support of most of the cabinet and Knesset members. The eviction process of the residents lasted for six days and was accompanied by vast activities of the army and police forces in fear of violent acts by the evacuees. It was covered by an extensive local and global media coverage and was entirely controlled by the security forces.

Formerly viewed as an extremist ideological right-wing politician, Sharon adopted the ideology of the left-wing. He even left the Likud party after three long decades and formed a new centrist party which was alternative to his old political home (Kadima party). The disengagement plan faced enormous opposition from the right-wing camp as it threatened to dissolve the political unity of the Israeli right, formerly Sharon's greatest supporters. However Sharon was widely supported by the left-wing camp, the Israeli elite and local and global media, despite the fact that during that time he was accused of taking hundreds of thousands of dollars in bribes in the late 1990's in what came to be known as the Greek Island affair. Prosecutors said that an Israeli businessman paid Sharon's son large sums of money to

persuade his father, then foreign minister, to promote real estate deals - including one on the Greek island resort of Patroklos - that was never built. Sharon escaped corruption charges after the Attorney General decided that there was not enough evidence against him. Gur (2014) claims that Sharon changed his traditional policy without any ideological grand narratives or political visions to which he felt obligated. According to Cook (2009), Sharon successfully escaped criminal charges by adopting the disengagement policy, which disarmed his critics and transformed him into a peacemaker feted by the Israeli elite, the media and the international community.

OLMERT'S PRACTICAL POLITICS

Ehud Olmert became Prime Minister after Ariel Sharon was incapacitated by a stroke in 2006. Following the Second Lebanon War, Olmert's popularity ratings fell to 3% and the chief of staff publicly stated that Olmert should resign. He resigned in 2009 after the police recommended that he be indicted on bribery and money-laundering charges. He was convicted of granting favors to a former law partner while serving as trade minister, accepting $430,000 bribes from a luxury apartment developer while serving as mayor of Jerusalem, and accepting around $600,000 in cash-filled envelopes from an American businessman. He ended up serving 16 months of a 27-month prison sentence.

Olmert was a veteran ideological right-wing politician, which for more than two decades advocated for Jewish settlement expansion in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. He was uncompromising spokesman for the government's policy of not countenancing any outreach to the Palestine Liberation Organization. But as Prime Minister, while being investigated for corruption, he adopted a far-left policy for peace with the Palestinians. Once a vocal opponent of concessions to the Palestinians, Olmert underwent a political transformation, compromising his ideological policy to practical politics.

His plan to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict included the establishment of a Palestinian state and land swaps with Israel. PLO chief negotiator Saeb Erekat who was present at the negotiations between Olmert and the President of the Palestinian Authority Mahmud Abbas said that Olmert literally accepted all the Palestinians' publicly expressed demands and even offered more than the full area of the West Bank and Gaza. However, Olmert resigned as Prime Minister when police recommended charges against him. President George W Bush wrote in his memoirs that the talks broke down when Olmert announced that he would resign from office, and the Palestinians refused to finalize an agreement on the grounds that they did not want to sign a peace deal with a Prime Minister on his way out of office. In his resignation speech, Olmert addressed the cases of corruption of which he was accused, saying that he was "proud to be a citizen of a country in which a Prime Minister can be investigated like any other citizen", but also stated that he "was forced to defend himself from ceaseless attacks by the self-appointed soldiers of justice, who sought to oust him from his position".

NETANYAHU'S PRACTICAL POLITICS

Following the elections in 2009 Benjamin Netanyahu became Prime Minister, and a decade later he was officially charged of deception and breach of trust in cases 1000 and 2000 and of deception, breach of trust and receiving bribes in case 4000.

Case 1000 involves valuable presents and gifts received by Netanyahu and his wife from several wealthy acquaintances. Case 2000 deals with recorded conversations Netanyahu had with the chairman and editor of one of the largest newspapers in circulation in Israel Yediot Aharonot), in which they discussed legislation that could harm a major competitor (Israel Hayom). Case 4000 relates to the relationship of Israel's main telecommunications company (Bezeq) with its regulator, the communication ministry, at the time headed by Netanyahu, to favor business dealings for its owner in exchange for favorable reporting to Netanyahu by a leading news website owned by him (Walla News).

Netanyahu admitted that he got gifts in case 1000, did not deny the discussions in case 2000, and did not deny his relations with the owner of Bezeq and his directions to receive favorable coverage on his website – but he has denied any wrongdoing. He claims that the investigations against him were discriminatory – arguing that it is permissible to accept gifts from friends (case 1000), that his negotiations with the media giant were merely toying with each other and neither of them had any intention of keeping his promises to the other (case 2000), and denies any connection between his actions regarding Bezeq and the coverage on the website while maintaining that the regulatory decisions were reasonable and approved by professional officials (case 4000). He made the accusation that the corruption allegations brought forward against him constitute a "witch hunt" intended to remove him from power.

Ideologically, Likud is both conservative and nationalist. As the leader of the Likud party and the right-wing camp, Netanyahu always objected to form a national unity government with the left-wing parties and insisted on maintaining the right-wing block majority. He won the elections in 2009, 2013 and 2015 and headed right-wing governments. In the April 2019 election, the right-wing block received only 60 Knesset Members – one vote short of a majority of 61 of the 120 Knesset Members, and a second round of election took place in September. However, the right-wing block received only 55 members, and a third round of election took place in March 2020. Although Netanyahu faced an imminent trial for criminal corruption charges, the right-wing block made significant gains, receiving 58 Knesset Members, but still did not have enough support to form a coalition.

Consequently, and as he was facing criticism that he could not be appointed Prime Minister with criminal corruption charges, Netanyahu chose practical politics over ideology and signed an agreement to form an emergency unity government. The deal between Netanyahu's Likud Party and the left-center Blue and White party ended a political stalemate in which the two rivals failed to form a government through three consecutive elections. The two political leaders agreed that Netanyahu be sworn in as prime minister for the first 18 months with benny Gantz serving

as "alternative prime minister", and in the second period of 18 months they would change leadership as Gantz would become Prime Minister. The agreement averted a fourth election in just over a year and was reached after anti-Netanyahu legislation that would prevent a criminal defendant from forming a government had already been submitted to the Knesset.

The process exposed deep political divisions among the country's leadership and between segments of the Israeli population. Petitions to the Supreme Court were filed, demanding that the court prevents Netanyahu from forming a government, due to his criminal indictments. However, according to the agreement, it was agreed that if the Supreme Court disqualifies Netanyahu from remaining prime minister due to his indictment, it would automatically trigger new elections. In terms of practical politics, 62% of Israelis and the media supported the unusual political deal of the new emergency national unity government. Thus, according to the American Institute, Israeli politicians will all continue to pay close attention to public opinion, and with continued high levels of support for Netanyahu and his government, the coalition is likely to last despite its deep internal political and policy divisions (Pollock, 2020). The new government is a proof that Netanyahu is implementing practical politics as a consensus politician leading from the center - with his ideological right-wing allies cut out of the decision-making process (Tobin, 2020).

AGENDA SETTING AND DEFINITIONS OF CORRUPTION

In order to examine the significance and prominence of corruption as it is viewed by the public in Israel, we need first to look at what is perceived by Israelis as corruption. Polls that examine this question show that the public appears to be largely indifferent, with public officials suspected of corruption even seem to be tolerated. Close to half of Israelis – 47% – believe the country's leadership is corrupt, but only 23% of right-wing supporters think so, according to the Guttman Center for Public Opinion and Policy Research at the Israel Democracy Institute (Hoffman, 2018). In the case of the current Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, another poll found that 52% of Israelis believe that he should resign as prime minister following his indictment on corruption and bribery charges, but only 33% of right-wing voters think so (Channel 12, 2019). Israel Hayom poll (2019) conducted after State Attorney announced that Netanyahu was to be indicted, showed that his Likud party was not impacted by the legal issues and his own popularity was not impaired. Indeed, the Likud increased its political power from 32 Knesset Members in the September 2019 election to 36 Knesset Members in the March 2020 election – even though during the period between these election campaigns Netanyahu was officially indicated, and his trial was scheduled to begin two weeks after election day.

The question that should be examined therefore, is if the Israeli public is largely indifferent to corruption, what is the role of the media in placing corruption as an utmost important issue on public agenda? In response to these findings, Caspit (2020) claims that efforts to put government corruption on the agenda during elections have failed as the attempts of the media to

consider elections as a referendum on the rule of law itself met with public apathy. Melamed (2020) claims that the reason for that is because corruption is not at the top of the media agenda, but the overthrow of the right-wing government is. His conclusion is that the impact of the media is by setting public agenda, when politicians from the left are judged leniently by the media while politicians from the Right are judged severely. This can be explained according to the conclusion of Van de Walle (2008), that citizens hold different expectations of corruption from different government actors depending on their positions. Navot (2008) further explains that although political corruption is commonly understood as the improper use of public office to promote personal interests, the standards and criteria for defining what exactly constitutes corruption are subject to dispute in Israel.

With the dispute over the definition of corruption in Israeli society, the research examines how political decisions have been determined by the impact of the media on public agenda and the perceptions of voters. It is argued that the power of the media in determining public agenda is in the way that they report corruption events (Canel and Sanders, 2006). The role of the media in this process is extremely important by setting public agenda and the relevance of corruption issues verses the practical politics in discussion. The information acquired through news media becomes an important factor for trust formation and participation in different forms of political actions, which are not limited to electoral activities (Cama, 2013). Jensen (2005) found that when citizens are questioned about politics, most discussions revolve around corruption. This might be related to the tendency to pay more attention to negative facts (Wayne and Murray, 2009), since increased polarization in politics tends to make political communication more negative (Geer, 2008). In the case of Israel, the political impact of the media is related to the ability to gratify the cognitive needs of the members of the political elite. Report by State Comptroller from November 2019 examining political influence on Israel's media supports this conclusion. The report emphasized the lack of separation between the media and politicians and concluded that the failure to create an independent communications authority doesn't enable the necessary separation between politicians and communications bodies. Israel Corruption Report (2020) also reached similar conclusion. It stipulates that the media are independent and privately owned and freedom of speech and press are guaranteed under the law, and thus the media can report on corruption, but its concentration in the hands of a few displays the political bias of media owners.

After concluding that the public and the media define corruption differently, the research further examines the change of policy of the last four consecutive prime ministers, following charges of corruption made against them. Lavie (2012) explains the reasoning for Israeli leaders to turn into practical polices even in the price of losing their ideological supporters. She argues that the Israeli peace architects, which are mostly upper-class politicians and entrepreneurs, have ignored the lack of support among most Israelis for their policies. Yet, they control most of the Israeli media and acknowledge movements that show national unity while ignoring movements without this

national unity. She claims that this elite regime represents the left-wing camp as the "the chosen people's", whereas the right-wing camp is designated by race, class, or religious observance.

The political and cultural division between left and right is related to the fact that Israel has been a country built by immigrants. People from all around the world make up Israeli society, which is a diverse society - ethnically, culturally and economically. Since its establishment in 1948, Israel's demographics have shifted greatly due to large immigrant waves, and this has increased the socio-economic division, since each of the immigrant groups assembling Israeli society adopted a different way in its assimilation into Israeli society. Israel is divided along ethnic, national, religious and political lines, emphasizing social factors such as gender, class, region, age and education as the main cause for political division between the left and the right. Immigrants that arrived from Asia and Africa (Mizrachi) have traditionally supported the right, but they had a lower level of education and social and economic disadvantages in comparison to immigrants that came from Europe or America (Ashkenazi) – that traditionally supports the left.

According to OECD Economic Survey (2018), Israeli society remains marked by weak social cohesion and significant disparities, which penalize parts of the population. The role of the media in the significant divisions between left and right supporters is related to the linkage of the media to the country's social and political development (Klein, Shagrir and Keinonen, 2016). Berger (2017) explains that Israel's media are dominated by a relatively centrist liberal press. During war times it swung more to the right, but during periods of peace more to the left. Freedom House report (2016) maintains that although Israeli media offer a diverse range of views and are generally free from overt political interference, the regularly faced instances of political pressure in recent years. Former member of the Knesset, Roy Folkman (2018), explains that throughout the State of Israel's existence, the notion of a select group of individuals - in government, the military, business or the religious establishment - has been strongly rooted. He argues that the perception of this "serving elite" alternated over time between positive and negative. According to Grinberg (2019), the old Ashkenazi establishment of the Israeli left is still doing everything in its power to prevent Mizrachi and other oppressed groups from taking over its hegemony. These conclusions are supported by IDC poll, which found that nearly half of Israelis believe that the media represent and protect the interests and hegemony of the Ashkenazi elite, while more than half of respondents believed that media reports accurately represented the reality (Grave-Lazi, 2016).

CONCLUSION

The research examines the change of policy of the last four consecutive Israeli Prime Ministers, following charges of corruption made against them. The change of policy by these leaders is related to the two issues that have dominated Israel's public agenda since the establishment of the country: the Jewish state versus Arab neighboring states and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. The trend is clear: in the last two decades, Israeli leaders have abandoned their ideology for practical policy that

favors the elite regime that represents the left-wing camp and the media. Leaders who supported hard line and objected to peace concessions have changed their policies and adopted a liberal agenda, even at the price of loosing the support of their ideological voters. As evident in this study, the experience of Israeli politics shows that right-wing voters are more ideological while left-wing voters are more practical. The evidence is however that the prime ministers adopted practical policies that were supported by their political rivals and the mass media and have done so while confronting corruption charges.

The relationship between the political system and the media is related to the definition of the role of the media in the development of Israel's society and politics. In democracies such as Israel, which faces security needs on a permanent basis, the media are expected to carry social responsibility duties of not publishing information that is sensitive to national security. The Israeli society has traditionally seen national security as more important than the public's need for sensitive information. Israelis agree that the news media are a major source of public information on political processes and can be regarded as a crucial tool for mobilizing opinions in political and social conflicts and disputes. But it is also commonly agreed that since the country faces security needs on a permanent basis, the media are expected to carry social responsibility duties of not publishing information that is sensitive to national security. These social agreements demonstrate the important role of the media in determining public agenda and the consent of the public to allow dominant elite groups to dictate public policies and mute other groups. Israeli society is comprised of groups of people, with different and sometimes clashing values and world views, and the political environment is dominated and instructed by the agenda setting of the media.

The issue of corruption has dominated public agenda in the last two decades, although the Israeli public is largely indifferent to corruption charges of its leaders. The research examines how political decisions have been determined by the impact of the media that have constantly put corruption on the public agenda. The perceptions of voters of corruption have not been in tune with public agenda however, and prime ministers representing the right-wing have been elected despite being charged of corruption. It can be concluded that different definitions of corruption allow the right-wing to win elections but not public agenda, which is controlled by the left-wing. This conclusion is supported by Israel's Media Watch, which found that the ongoing close relationship between the political elite and the media is intended to influence the voter, which is subject to intense pressure to act based on uncertain information. They explain that media has long rejected the demand for objectivity and fairness, while determining public agenda by blurring of the distinction between news and comment (Medad and Pollak, 2019).

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