Israel Goes to the Polls

• • • *The Road to Elections for the Constituent Assembly, 1948–1949*

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ABSTRACT: The Constituent Assembly elections on 25 January 1949 were a crucial step—governmentally, politically, and symbolically—in the transformation of Israel into a democracy in the spirit of the November 1947 UN partition plan resolution. The election campaign, conducted amid the battles of the War of Independence, focused on where the newly founded state should be heading, that is, whether the military conquests should continue or should be wound up. The American administration attempted to exert direct and indirect influence over the conduct and outcomes of the election campaign. Mapai, however, needed no outside assistance to impose its political dominance, much of which was based on the leadership of David Ben-Gurion. The successes on the battlefield assured Mapai's electoral triumph among both civilians and soldiers, with the latter accounting for a significant portion of the electorate.

KEYWORDS: Ben-Gurion, Constituent Assembly, democracy, IDF, Mapai, Provisional Council, UN Resolution 181, War of Independence

"The State of Israel was founded in a revolutionary manner, without elections and without democracy, and it was not possible to do it otherwise. It was more important to establish the state than to strictly observe democratic procedures." This is how, on the eve of the elections to the Constituent Assembly, which were held on 25 January 1949, David Ben-Gurion described the legal reality that had existed in Israel for more than a year. We know, he added, that this is "a temporary arrangement and, at the first opportunity, the power assumed by the government and the Provisional Council will be handed over to the people, who will elect its

representatives in democratic elections, and they will determine the legal foundations of the state."[1]

The main revolutionary event that took place in 1948 was the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel on 14 May. The declaration stipulated, at Ben-Gurion's initiative, that "an elected Constituent Assembly" would begin operating no later than 1 October (Tal 2003: 566). The date was not arbitrary. It was grounded in Resolution 181 of the UN General Assembly, passed on 29 November 1947. Resolution 181 provided that Palestine would be divided into two independent states, one Arab and one Jewish, with an economic union between them, and that the city of Jerusalem would be under a special international regime (*corpus separatum*). Regarding the timetable, the resolution stipulated that after the evacuation of the British army and the end of the Mandate, which were due to occur by 1 August 1948, the two states and the international regime would be established "no later than 1 October 1948."[2] This was the origin of the initial date set for the elections to the Constituent Assembly. It was a democratic act and a natural step, as part of the process of institutionalizing the new state, but it was also an essential stage in the process of Israel joining the fold of sovereign and legitimate states in the family of nations.

The argument that is the leitmotif of this article is that the political process leading up to the election campaign to the Constituent Assembly, and the manner in which the campaign was conducted, can be regarded as an important political and institutional demonstration of the strength of the young State of Israel. The historical fact that, as soon as the administrative, technical, security, and political conditions allowing it were created, democratic elections, with all their meticulous details, were held in Israel should not be viewed as a natural and obvious matter. The initial preparations, which included formulating rules for the elections and the campaign itself, took place in the midst of a war, which was alternately intensifying and diminishing in an atmosphere of severe uncertainty, accompanied by a variety of harsh internal conflicts. The preparations and the successful elections were the result of the increasingly functional skills of the Zionist movement and the Yishuv (the Jewish community of Palestine before 1948), which had nurtured and preserved an efficient democratic system that was capable of maintaining an appropriate level of mutual trust, restraint, and cohesion and of curbing some parties' desires for power and domination.

The historical record and secondary sources regarding the election campaigns to the various institutions that had a parliamentary nature—the Zionist Congress, the Assembly of Representatives, the Constituent Assembly, and the Knesset—and that operated in the Zionist movement, in the Yishuv, and in the State of Israel over a number of decades are quite incomplete and scanty. In spite of the importance of the results of these various

elections and the attention devoted to them while they were taking place, it is hard to find, in the academic discipline of historical research, systematic studies on the election campaigns during the period of the Yishuv and that of the state.

This is also the case with regard to the elections to the Constituent Assembly, except for the bird's-eye view of Zeev Zahor (1994: 381–387) and the discussion of the Herut movement by Yechiam Weitz (2002: 185–238). According to Zahor's evaluation, it was apparently impossible to extrapolate from the election campaigns in the Yishuv what the results of the elections to the Constituent Assembly would be, since the number of those entitled to vote had increased by about 40 percent from 303,000 on 29 November 1947 to 506,000 on 25 January 1949, when the Constituent Assembly was elected. This was in addition, of course, to the establishment of the state and the War of Independence (Zahor 1998). In this article I will outline some of the most prominent milestones on the road to these elections, which were, as Ben-Gurion noted in a speech before the Mapai convention on the eve of the election, "the first time in which the people of Israel elects its government."[3]

The Provisional State Council approved the order of the elections on 18 November 1948 but left their dates open.[4] In its next meeting a week later, the minister of the interior, Yitzhak Gruenbaum, suggested holding the elections for the Constituent Assembly on 25 January 1949. The proposal was approved unanimously. Quite strangely, this event—certainly a historic decision in the annals of the new state—was completely omitted from the protocol of the discussions of the council.[5] The editorial published in the newspaper *Davar* on the following day stated that "setting the date for the elections removed the last sign of 'temporariness' from the institutions of our state … Even the most sober among us would feel and admit the historic weight of the event we are facing."[6] This was also a sign of sovereignty. Yosef Sprinzak, the chairman of the Provisional State Council, concluded: "Now, let us wish all of us elections that will honor the State of Israel."[7]

The American Perspective

The international orientation of the new state between East and West was an important issue at the time. The identification of Mapam with the Soviet World of Tomorrow contradicted the tendency of Mapai to regard the United States as the decisive power in assuring the survival of the young state (Bialer 2009: 657–661). In this context, it is worth examining the link between the elections to the Constituent Assembly and the *de jure*

recognition of Israel by the United States. This link was one part of a more important aggregate, which concerned American willingness to acknowledge the territorial conquests of Israel on the battlefield. This required abandonment of the Bernadotte scheme as the road map for the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict in favor of reaching a British-American consensus regarding the future of Palestine, in view of the inter-bloc confrontation with the Soviet Union.

On 13 August 1948, Moshe Shertok (later Sharett), the provisional foreign minister, met with the special American envoy to Israel, James MacDonald (later the first American ambassador to Israel), and told him, among other things, about the preparations for the census and for the elections. While from August to October, the time discussed—and even determined—for the elections was November to December 1948, in that meeting Shertok said that the elections would be held "sometime in January 1949." MacDonald reported to Secretary of State George Marshall that he was convinced that the provisional government was determined to hold the elections "in the earliest time possible."[8]

In spite of this report, Marshall wrote at the end of August to US President Harry Truman that the *de jure* recognition of Israel should follow the elections, then scheduled for 1 October, and the establishment of a regular government, and that this recognition should be granted simultaneously with a *de jure* recognition of Transjordan, as the British wanted. At that time, argued Marshall, there would be enough evidence to determine whether the Israeli government was supported by the will of the people and if it was actually in control of its territory and ready to meet its international commitments. Marshall continued, in the following days, to maintain this position,[9] which was actually meant to prevent the resumption of the military actions initiated by Israel. Delaying *de jure* recognition would also make it more difficult for Truman to use the *de facto* recognition he had granted 10 minutes after midnight on 15 May to improve his standing among Jewish voters in the ongoing presidential campaign. Marshall succeeded in delaying the *de jure* recognition of Israel until after both the US and Israeli elections took place.

Following his surprise electoral victory in November 1948, Truman took the occasion of the first anniversary of the passage of UN Resolution 181 on 29 November to promise Chaim Weizmann that *de jure* recognition would be granted Israel immediately after the elections to the Constituent Assembly, by then set for 25 January 1949.[10] About a month before the elections, MacDonald predicted that Mapai would win 30 to 35 percent of the vote and Mapam 18 to 20 percent. He assumed that Mapai would form a coalition with the center and the right, and he recommended to the State Department that the United States should act to strengthen the elements

that clearly leaned toward "a just socio-economic" policy. He requested that the US issue a statement regarding *de jure* recognition, or at least the promise of a financial loan, as tangible evidence to convince Mapai to trust the United States.[11] But instead, the State Department demanded the withdrawal of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) to the line in force before Operation Yoav, according to the UN Security Council resolution of 16 November, in return for the willingness of the Security Council to consider the acceptance of Israel to the United Nations before the elections.[12]

In late December 1948, the United States demanded that the IDF withdraw from the Sinai Peninsula, which it did. Following that, MacDonald once again suggested to Marshall, on 5 January 1949, to consider, in order to balance this step and prevent damage to Mapai in the elections, granting the *de jure* recognition immediately, or at least to approve the loan.[13] The *de jure* recognition was eventually granted six days after the elections, on 31 January.

However, after the special representative of the US State Department, Samuel Klaus, allayed fears that Israel would become "a red state,"[14] the Export-Import Bank, the official export credit agency of the US government, announced on 19 January (before the elections) a loan of $100 million to Israel for economic and public development. One day earlier, the British foreign minister, Ernest Bevin, announced in Parliament that Britain would release the last detainees in Cyprus.[15] The loan and the release were described by the Mapai newspaper *Davar* as evidence for the disappearance of "the last doubts about the political and economic stability of the Jewish state" and were regarded as helping Mapai just a few days before the elections. The editorial in *Al Hamishmar* (the Mapam newspaper) described these steps as "a friendly attack" and as an expression of the possibility of an Israeli surrender to the imperialist forces. The right-wing newspaper *Herut* swore that "the foreign intervention plot will be thwarted!"[16] The editor of the independent newspaper *Ma'ariv,* Ezriel Carlebach (1949), also rushed to pass his judgment that "this money was given to sovereign states as a bribe" and that regardless of what was done with it, "a bribe remains a bribe."

War and Peace in the Election Campaign

The link between the foreign policy crisis that followed the downing of five British planes by the Israeli Air Force on 7 January 1949 at the end of Operation Horev in the Negev and the domestic Israeli mood became clearer. The date for the elections to the Constituent Assembly was drawing near, and the prevailing feeling was that the submission of the lists

of the parties' candidates a day earlier actually opened the election campaign.[17] The newspaper *Ha'aretz*, which at first bemoaned the lack of "a central topic" in the campaign, changed its mind two days later and pointed sharply to the political rifts between Mapai, Mapam, and Herut.[18] Menachem Begin, the leader of the right-wing Herut party, argued in a speech in Petah Tikva that "the choice is between Abdullah and Bevin near Petah Tikva and us on the Jordan River." In a radio campaign speech, Moshe Sneh, then a leader of Mapam, declared that the goal of Mapam was to drive the invaders out of the entire country and over the Jordan River, as well as "the establishment of an independent, democratic Arab state" next to Israel, with an economic union in the spirit of UN Resolution 181, as if nothing had changed in Palestine in 1948.

The secretary-general of Mapai, Zalman Aharonovich, had spoken before the Central Committee of the party on 30 November 1948 regarding the strategy that the party should employ in the election campaign, arguing that in the foreign policy sphere "the party should move to an offensive."[19] The circumstances created in the second week of January 1949, with the end of the fighting in the south and the shooting down of the British planes, exhibited Israeli firmness in the international arena and facilitated the ripening of a convenient situation for Mapai as the elections approached. The calm on the battlefield was further reinforced with the beginning of the armistice negotiations between Israel and Egypt on 13 January, an event that *Davar* reported under a headline indicating its historical significance: "The first direct negotiation between Jews and Arabs has been opened."[20]

The combination of these political, military, and diplomatic circumstances, which were unrelated to the upcoming election and which Shertok described as a godsend, laid the foundation for his decisive statement, in one of the most brilliant of his political speeches, delivered before the Mapai convention on 12 January: "It is not the question of what the Gentiles will say that should accompany our political considerations, but rather the simple question of what *we* will say." Shertok asserted that the choice before the voters was whether Israel was heading toward war or toward peace. The issue was not peace as a desirable vision or war for the lack of any alternative, but whether "the political initiative should aim at renewing the fighting and continuing the conquest drive, or whether it should be directed toward achieving peace."[21]

Ha'aretz hastened to question Shertok's candor and his choice of the 'peace or war' issue as the focus of the election campaign, since it was hard to know whether this step would increase or reduce the number of votes won by his party. As the article put it: "To the extent that the public mood is, for example, against leaving the 'triangle' and the old city of Jerusalem

in the hands of Abdullah, many of those who tended to vote for Mapai may vote for the opposition parties only because of Mapai's compromising position on this question." The newspaper reported that "interestingly, the top echelon of Mapai was sure that the public wanted peace immediately."[22]

Herut and Mapam, which held political views opposite to Mapai as well as to each other, each passionately defended its own position. Begin compared the dialog with the Egyptians in Rhodes to the negotiations that Chamberlain had conducted with Hitler in Munich in 1938. He recalled that "our sages said that in order to stay on good terms it is allowed to attend a Gentile funeral, but in Rhodes we now attend a Jewish funeral" and declared that "we can rise this very day and inherit the earth."[23]

Mapam's Sneh (1949) reacted by saying that Mapam intended "to build a bridge between the two parts of the land, with the chance of creating, in the future, a united country, through the brotherhood of both peoples," instead of "the abyss of partition" espoused by Mapai, which was putting off "the possibility of uniting the country." A few days later, Mapam was already keeping silent regarding the fate of the West Bank in order to obscure its support for the establishment of a Palestinian state there and to evade the accusation that it was willing to shed Jewish blood in order to transfer the territory from Arabs to other Arabs. General Yigal Allon, a Mapam leader, summarized the party's approach: "Peace? Yes, willingly, with the inhabitants of the country. With invaders? No!"[24] Both Mapam and Herut called for the withdrawal of the foreign armies from western Palestine, maintaining that Israel should not participate in the peace talks in Rhodes based on the current situation on the ground, and both promised that their way would guarantee "real peace."[25]

The issue of war and peace was at the center of the election campaign toward its conclusion and surpassed in importance any other topic on the public agenda. Stemming directly from the reality of the time, it reached its peak in a series of mass rallies that took place throughout the country on the weekend of 14–15 January. On Friday night, about 5,000 people thronged to the Esther Cinema in Tel Aviv and the adjacent Dizengoff Square to listen, directly and through loudspeakers, to the speeches of Generals Yitzhak Sadeh and Yigal Allon, both of Mapam. Public attention that weekend was primarily devoted to the 'heavy guns', as the senior politicians were commonly known, which included Ben-Gurion, Shertok, Begin, and Israel Rokach, who spoke at different gatherings throughout the city.[26] The most important of these speeches was that of the most prominent IDF general in the War of Independence, Yigal Allon, the commander of the southern front. We can say in retrospect that these words determined the trajectory of his subsequent military and political careers: "Our achievements on the battlefield did not come to us through miracles,

nor were they the result of someone's Napoleonic genius, but they were, rather, gained because a whole collective became its own leader. The victory is not the fruit of ministers or great commanders. It is the victory of our soldiers, the victory of the people, of volunteering from the bottom up, of a healthy feeling which preceded the political wisdom and replaced many things: training, arms, equipment."[27]

Davar puzzled whether the "image of the army" that Mapam had in mind was such "that every officer would be like a Chinese or Mexican general and carry out a policy for himself and for his party."[28] Following the description in *Al Hamishmar* to the effect that Allon "blushed like a rose" when Yaacov Riftin, the political secretary of Mapam, enumerated his virtues before the audience at Esther Cinema, *Herut* mockingly asked whether Mapam intended to turn the IDF commanders into "pin-up girls"—beauties in bathing suits who flamboyantly decorated the pages of magazines read by English and American soldiers.[29]

More detrimental for Allon's career was the reprimand voiced by Ben-Gurion during a meeting of the IDF general staff, which he instructed the chief of staff, Yaakov Dori, to deliver to all the senior commanders of the army, down to the level of battalion commander. Ben-Gurion ordered that although any soldier or commander had the right to participate in the election campaign and could even criticize or disparage whomever he wanted, "an army commander is not allowed to discuss, in public or non-public gatherings, military commands that had been given him," even while wearing civilian clothes. Such an act would be "a severe breach of the integrity of the army and a grave violation of the orders of the general staff regarding its code of conduct."[30]

During the two weeks before election day, the commander of the northern front (Moshe Carmel), the commander of the Givati Brigade (Shimon Avidan), and the commander of the Harel Brigade (Yosef Tabenkin), as well as Sadeh and Allon, all took part in about 10 public gatherings of Mapam and made a significant contribution to its campaign. At the same time, the minister of defense, Ben-Gurion himself, did not miss the opportunity to publicize his own party's position to army commanders. In a meeting with some Mapai followers on the day following his announcement to the general staff, one unidentified participant complained that "in some units, the members of the party are oppressed by the commanders, and many of them have to hide their views."[31]

Ben-Gurion referred in this forum to Mapam's political position with unprecedented clarity: "It is amazing to me that we would kill ourselves over the establishment of an Arab state in part of the country. No! We are not ready for that!" He doubted whether Mapam itself was ready to do so, maintaining that they could make such statements "because they are

sure that they are the minority and will not have to follow what they say." Ben-Gurion concluded: "Not one soldier, not one drop of blood, not one prutah [a small coin]."[32]

Election Days

The campaign for the elections to the Constituent Assembly was moving sluggishly. It seemed to be conducted in an atmosphere of demonstrated reluctance, which was summarized, in the language of the time, in the question: "Is all this fuss worth it, while our boys are still at their posts?" Two prominent articles characterized this phenomenon. An editorial in *Ha'aretz* on 3 December sarcastically noted that out of the 4,000 new Jewish immigrants who had entered the country a week earlier, only three did not belong to any party—the babies who were born on the ship. The article continued that "there is a strange feeling that the Yishuv, together with its leaders, escapes to the familiar paths of the election campaign in order to put off the weight of the enormous historic mission imposed on it."[33] *Ha'aretz* demanded the abandonment of the "amusing verbal struggle" regarding the advantages of capitalism versus socialism, which, in any case, would not change the political balance of power, and called instead for a focus on the common task of absorption and settlement. From the point of view of its editor, Gershom Schocken, a prominent spokesman of the Progressive Party, the advocates of private initiative had "a few other strong cards, in addition to the votes in the elections," for shaping the socio-economic character of the State of Israel—their financial power and capabilities.[34]

The key competition in the election was for the votes of two main target audiences: new immigrants and soldiers. The parties regarded them as extensive groups that were definite yet amorphous at the same time. The new immigrants were living in absorption camps or were in the process of moving to temporary or permanent places of residence around the country. Some of the soldiers served at the fronts, while others filled a variety of logistic and instructional roles. Clearly, however, both the soldiers and the new immigrants constituted a large proportion of those voters who experienced, more than any other groups in the budding Israeli society, the upheavals of the war and the transformation of the Yishuv into a state. The tension between the mundane matters that weighed on all voters and affected their vote and the historic feeling of living at a crucial crossroads in the annals of the Jewish people, affected these groups more than any other.

Seemingly at the margins of the election campaign, politicians and parties brought up the 'past sins' of their opponents. Herut's militant image bothered Aharonovich, who said that the party was conducting a "diabolic

incitement" among the new immigrants and the Oriental Jews. He even worried that the former members of the Irgun (Etzel) would interfere by force on election day or attack institutions of the workers' parties.[35] Ben-Gurion replied that "any attempt to use force will be mercilessly suppressed."[36] This mood attested to the feeling of tension and uncertainty regarding the assimilation of the democratic process, although, in fact, there was not even one case that required police involvement. Arguments over who "drove the British out of Palestine" did echo here and here in the addresses of some of the speakers from all parts of the political spectrum, but on the whole this topic did not play a central role in the election campaign.[37]

Even the old slur comparing Revisionist Zionism with fascism seemed to have lost much of its force. Still, a particularly provocative example was published in a propaganda leaflet titled *Niv Hahayal* (The Soldier's Expression), which was distributed by Mapai in early January. In it, pictures of Begin and Mussolini raising their arms were juxtaposed under the heading "The same shape—the same content." The captions under the pictures said "Il Duce" and "The Leader Begin," respectively, and in the Yiddish version, since not all the soldiers could read Hebrew, the parallel terms were "Der Dutche" and "Der Führer." Herut members were furious about the offensive publication, which reminded them that in the past Ben-Gurion had called Ze'ev Jabotinsky "Vladimir Hitler."

The same leaflet also aroused the anger of *Al Hamishmar*, which published on its first page the defamatory cartoon in which Mapam was seen locking the gates of Palestine before Jews and opening them for the Arabs.[38] The goal was to shame Mapai in the eyes of labor voters. *Herut* and *Al Hamishmar* also used caricatures against Mapai, depicting its leaders as riding on the heads of the workers.[39] It seems, then, that mutual defamation in the daily newspapers and through posters on billboards played a prominent role in the campaign.

The Election Campaign in the Army

Political and partisan issues that converged with military matters were an inseparable part of the events of the War of Independence. Appointments, military moves, strategic considerations, the structure of the army, the reorganization of units, the imposition of authority, and methods of combat and training aroused major controversies and conflicts. The most famous of these were the dismissal of the head of the Haganah, the Generals' Revolt, the Altalena Affair, and the dismantling of the Palmach (see, e.g., Gelber 1986; Shapira 1985). It is no wonder that the tension between the army and the political arena significantly affected the election campaign for the

Constituent Assembly, especially since about 100,000 soldiers, who comprised about 20 percent of registered voters, not including their family members, served in the army on the eve of the elections.

In a meeting with Mapai youth on 7 August 1948, Ben-Gurion defined "the conquest of the army" by Mapai—that is, educating it in the spirit of its general party values, as the unified army of the people, the support of the whole nation, and the bearer of the vision of redemption—as one of the three goals of the party, together with operating among the masses and nurturing the young generation.[40] Nevertheless, Ben-Gurion's attempts to attract the military vote seemed clumsy and ill-prepared.

There was great apprehension within Mapai regarding the elections in the military. Yehiel Duvdevani, head of the Mapai department for military affairs, asserted in a meeting of the party's bureau on 28 October that "our situation in the army is catastrophic—there will not be votes for Ben-Gurion in the army. If we take action, we can salvage ourselves."[41] Aharonovich maintained that it was essential to explain to the soldiers "why the blanket, which did not come on time, did not need to cover the state, which did come on time" through the initiative of Mapai leadership. He added that "the military equipment, which also came on time," thanks to Ben-Gurion's decisiveness, enabled the IDF to achieve its victories. His words expressed a common feeling among the drafted Mapai activists to the effect that any logistical fault that arose was immediately used by Mapam members in the army to blemish the reputation of Defense Minister Ben-Gurion.[42]

A few weeks later, the uncertainty over the elections reached the verge of hysteria. Aharonovich warned that "the IDF defeated the Arabs and may defeat the Party of the Workers of Palestine [Mapai]." He noted that the military command "is, mostly … in the hands of Mapam." Duvdevani added that three of the four commanders of the regional fronts were members of Mapam (Carmel in the north, Zvi Ayalon in the center, and Allon in the south), as were 9 of the 14 brigade commanders. Duvdevani reported to his colleagues that he had met with Ben-Gurion and asked him to replace the head of the personnel division of the IDF, General Moshe Tzadok, who was non-partisan, with "a person who understands matters." He also suggested that each regional front headquarters should include two people who were loyal to Mapai. In his opinion, the choice was between "relying on a miracle and inviting our ministers here [to the Mapai bureau], together with Yaakov Dori [the chief of staff], in order to try to save something."[43]

Duvdevani's proposals were supported by Shraga Nosovitzky (Netzer), one of the heads of the Mapai apparatus, who demanded that the ministers of the party be summoned, as well as four or five "top commanders in the army," for an urgent meeting of the bureau. He then asserted: "If Dori

is a member of the party, he has to come to the bureau meeting." On the other hand, Isser Ben-Zvi, the security expert of the kibbutz movement Hever Hakvutzot, who was familiar with the results of the confrontations of the previous months over appointments of the top command echelon, cooled the militancy of the party activists: "I do not believe you imagine that we can, before the elections and for the sake of the elections, change the command echelon of the army. Even if Ben-Gurion and Dori had the best intentions in this matter, they could not succeed with it."[44]

Pinhas Lubianiker (Lavon), the secretary of the labor federation Histadrut, made it clear that Mapai also had an interest in conducting propaganda activity in the army and that politicians should be allowed to appear before the soldiers. He rebuked Duvdevani for describing the situation of Mapai in such dark colors to the point of expressing fear that a company or platoon commander who was identified with Mapam would keep the soldiers from voting because of an invented military task. The bureau meeting ended without any concrete resolution.[45]

From Aharonovich's summary—"In the matter of the army we are up against the wall. Such a thing has never happened to us"—we clearly see the willingness, even among Mapai's senior activists, to introduce partisan and political considerations that had nothing to do with professional matters or with concern for the quality of the army command in the midst of the war. This finding contradicts the general trend in the research, which prefers to highlight this aspect as a shortcoming that was more typical of Mapam.[46] Bitterly, Aharonovich warned: "We cannot accept the possibility that the elections to the Constituent Assembly of the State of Israel will be determined by one party, which, through certain circumstances, gained decisive control of various command echelons and is using that for its own benefit and for the detriment of others." He demanded that the Ministry of Defense take measures that would assure equality in conducting the election campaign in the army.[47]

Ben-Gurion believed that the fear of Mapam 'taking over' the military, which numbered about 100,000 soldiers, was exaggerated. He suggested that this might be true mainly with regard to the infantry, which constituted about a quarter of the combat forces (27,375 soldiers), and the artillery (3,958 soldiers), but not with regard to the other services. He rejected Aharonovich's proposal that Mapai should initiate a convention of soldiers, arguing that "it means organizing a party in the army."[48] But what no doubt bothered him, at least to some degree, was the fear of giving Mapam legitimacy for a similar move.

The sensitivity concerning the voting of those serving in the army was manifested to some extent in the pessimistic mood that spread among Mapai party activists, reflecting their view that they were in an inferior

position in this sector of the population, which they perceived as inaccessible. This was revealed in full force during the discussions on how to conduct propaganda in the army, the technical arrangements for voting, and the structuring of the active and passive participation of soldiers and officers in the election campaign. On 22 September, Ben-Gurion appointed a committee that was intended to propose to the Ministry of Defense how to handle election propaganda in the army and to arrange for the participation of soldiers and officers in the election campaign. However, the committee never succeeded in reaching a clear conclusion.[49]

Following this early controversy, the issue was brought before the government, then the Security Committee of the Provisional State Council, and finally the full council. Dori and Yigael Yadin, head of the operations division of the IDF, objected to the appearance of party representatives in the army, contrary to Ben-Gurion's position. This was also the decision of the Security Committee after a stormy debate in which the representatives of Mapai and Mapam were left in the minority. In the discussion in the Provisional State Council on 25 November, the delegates of Mapai, Mapam, and Maki (the Communist Party) mustered their best rhetorical arguments: the Jewish soldier is a conscientious person who fulfills a national mission; myriads of brothers and sisters who stand in battle should not be fenced in; they are not being allowed to read posters, as if they were savages; "this is thrusting a wedge between the army and the civilians"; and also "Why do you patronize the IDF, which mostly belongs to the workers' movement? Who gave you that right, that privilege?" Their goal was to allow the left-wing parties to be free to campaign in the IDF, where they assumed that their political support was much greater than that of the right.

The balance was tipped by the decisive position of David Zvi Pinkas, the brilliant parliamentarian of the Mizrahi (Religious Zionist) party, who headed the Security Committee. Pinkas responded: "Just imagine an assembly of soldiers in which one of the soldiers yells 'Get out!' at a commander from Mapam who is speaking, and how a military base would look if its walls were covered with slogans like 'Begin out!' or 'Ben-Gurion out!' (I am using 'parliamentary expressions'). It would destroy military discipline, which means destroying morale, destroying the army."[50]

In this spirit, oral election propaganda in the army camps was prohibited, as was posting any partisan publication except the platform and list of candidates of the party, which could be placed on special billboards designated for that purpose. It seems that Ben-Gurion supported the use of election propaganda in the army camps reluctantly, mainly to seem responsive to the requests of the party activists, who shouldered the daily burden of the election struggle. Even in the Provisional State Council's debate he kept silent.

However, the attempts to entirely prevent the participation of army personnel in the election propaganda, since they were "the heroes of the people and not of the party"—or at least to limit those who were allowed to participate to the rank of major and below, arguing that senior commanders should be prohibited from "being involved in politics"—also failed. The rule adopted instead, following Ben-Gurion's approach, provided that soldiers and officers would be allowed to participate in the election campaign as long as they did not wear their uniform, their rank was not mentioned, and the activity they took part in was performed on their own free time.[51]

Unlike in future elections, active duty soldiers were permitted to be candidates for the Constituent Assembly, provided that their military service would end if they were elected. A last-minute attempt to eliminate this condition, arguing that military discipline would still bind the elected soldier to keep army secrets, was rejected by the government out of hand. "The [Constituent] Assembly will meet on a regular basis. So if he is a battalion commander, who will do his work? Will he get a replacement?" asked Ben-Gurion, with unconcealed derision.[52]

Instead of the forbidden oral propaganda, the competing parties were allowed to send, once a week for four weeks, about 50,000 items of propaganda through the army administrative system. On 20 January 1949, the IDF newspaper, *Bamahane*, published a special issue with the parties' platforms. Not included were the platforms of the Arab parties, which did not supply them, and the platform of the Lehi (Stern Gang), which was sent by the Fighters List and was not approved. The soldiers voted with their identity cards and their army personnel numbers. The army set up about 200 polling booths throughout the country where soldiers were stationed. In order to avoid long lines, which might have disrupted military activity, no more than 700 soldiers voted in each polling booth. The voting was done in double envelopes in order to maintain the distinction between the verification of the right to vote and the actual vote.

Election Day and the Results

Following Ben-Gurion's suggestion, the government decided that election day would be an official holiday, mainly in order to ease the administrative problems that remained in distributing the identity cards and busing voters to polling places far from where they lived. This set a precedent, which remains in force to the present day, and the 'credit' goes to Ben-Gurion. The parties' representatives agreed that schools would not hold classes, since many served as polling places. In order to enable as many people as possible to vote, the polls opened at 6:00 AM and remained open until midnight.[53]

The election served as a watershed for the intensive series of security and political events that had begun in late 1945. It signaled the beginning of the transition to the routine of a sovereign state, leaving the revolutionary days behind, even though, as the forthcoming massive *aliyah*, new settlements, and austerity policy would attest, revolutionary times faded only gradually. As had happened to him in the past before fateful moments, Ben-Gurion fell ill on 24 January and remained in bed.[54] Unlike the previous two festive days in the history of the Yishuv, 29 November 1947 and 14 May 1948, this was a proper holiday, with no casualties on the following morning. Carlebach (1949), the editor of *Ma'ariv*, skillfully described, as a gifted public spokesman, the nature of this "holiday of Israeli maturity":

We, who are too close to the act, cannot fathom the greatness of this holiday. We, who hold the ballot in our hands, according to official, practical instructions, tend to forget the value of this slip of paper that we are holding. How many generations and peoples were killed and destroyed for this piece of paper, which is now piled in front of us, free for the taking? How many revolutions did the world undergo until it came to recognize the right of every person in every nation to shape its regime? How great is the deed that we carry out today, since both the president and a young woman who only yesterday came on *aliyah* have each one equal vote, since all people are equal in their civil rights, all of them are created in the image of the same God … and if for any nation such a holiday is a tremendous achievement, for us all the more so. For the first time in the history of the oldest of peoples, its members go to the polls—free. For the first time they can experience their actual creation—a Jewish state, which grants all the rights to the Jew, by virtue of being a Jew.

Tears, shining eyes, and a *Shehecheyanu* (Jewish prayer of thanks) were inseparable parts of the first Israeli state election. The festive atmosphere was everywhere.[55] The *Ha'aretz* editorial noted that, unlike previous election campaigns during the time of the Yishuv, complaining and resentment were absent. Perhaps inadvertently alluding to itself, the newspaper added that "even the harshest critics cannot ignore, deep in their hearts, the miracle of such momentous events," referring to the eight months that had passed since the establishment of the state.[56]

The number of those entitled to vote in the elections for the Constituent Assembly was determined based on the residents registered in the census of 8 November 1948. Out of the 782,000 residents of the state (713,000 Jews and 69,000 non-Jews), 506,567 were determined to be entitled to vote, 418,268 of them in the civil sector, although some did not receive their identity cards in time. About 90 percent of the holders of identity cards actually participated in the elections. In the military sector, about 75,000 soldiers (88

percent) voted. Altogether, 440,095 people voted in the elections, constituting 87 percent of the registered voters. The number of votes needed in order to gain a seat in the Constituent Assembly was 3,592.[57]

Below are the election results for the parties that succeeded in passing the threshold to receive seats in the Assembly.

TABLE 1 Election Results for Constituent Assembly, 25 January 1949

Name of list	No. of Valid Votes	% of Total Votes	No. of Seats
Mapai	155,274	35.7	46
Mapam	64,018	14.7	19
United Religious Front	52,982	12.2	16
Herut movement	49,782	11.5	14
General Zionists	22,661	5.2	7
Progressive Party	17,786	4.1	5
Sephardic and Oriental Jews	15,287	3.5	4
Maki (Communist Party)	15,148	3.5	4
Nazareth Democratic List	7,387	1.7	2
Fighters' List	5,363	1.2	1
WIZO and Union of Women for Equal Rights	5,173	1.2	1
Yemenites' Association	4,399	1.0	1

Source: *Official Newspaper*, No. 49, 7 February 1949.

The election results for the soldiers were as follows: Mapai: 31,158 votes; Mapam: 15,767; Herut movement: 11,151 votes; United Religious Front: 5,644 votes; General Zionists: 2,644 votes; Maki (Communist Party): 2,488 votes; Progressive Party: 2,106 votes; Fighters List: 1,355 votes; Sephardic List: 1,251 votes.[58] Afterward, Ben-Gurion commented that although many members of Mapai had assumed that "the party is boycotted in the army," he had not believed it. In fact, Mapai won 40 percent of the votes among the soldiers, 5 percent more than its share of the total population. His conclusion was that "the work that started in the army before the elections should be done not just in connection with the elections."[59]

Aharonovich summarized the results of the elections to the Constituent Assembly, as well as the elections to the Histadrut, which took place a few weeks later, by saying that instead of "getting into the jungle" of the numerical analyses of the returns, attention should be focused on the main conclusion. The results, he averred, gave Mapai a historic opportunity "to determine the destiny of the working class in Israel for a whole generation, and to shape the nature of the state for a whole generation."[60] In a radio speech to the citizens of Israel delivered on the eve of the election, Ben-Gurion declared that "the voters are those who laid the foundations

of the State of Israel" and expressed his hope that the elected government would publish "for eternal memory" the registry of voters, "so our children and grandchildren, and all the following generations, will know who the founders of the state and the first ones who shaped it were."[61]

Thus far, Ben-Gurion's hope has not been realized. The Provisional State Council, the first parliamentary body of the State of Israel, operated for 11 months, and its history has not yet been the subject of a systematic scholarly examination. The Provisional State Council served as a bridge between the era of the Yishuv, which essentially comported itself on a voluntary basis under British Mandate patronage, and that of the newborn state, where law would rule. The debates in the Provisional State Council, an important anchorage for the resilience of the fledgling Israeli state, showed that, alongside military victories, decision-making could take place democratically and in accordance with binding rules adopted with the consent of representatives of all shades of the diverse political spectrum.

In retrospect, it appears that the most important achievement of the Provisional State Council was its success in assuring the democratic transition from a mix of voluntary organizations and institutions based on free will and persuasion to a sovereign state based on a democratic regime. A crucial junction, perhaps even the climax, of its activity was the process that led to the elections for the Constituent Assembly.

A trace of the atmosphere that characterized the proceedings of the Provisional State Council throughout its existence was described in the newspaper *Herut* (in jest, but with a great degree of truth) in reference to the novelty of open parliamentary life in Israel. "In the past, when a Zionist activist came from the Diaspora to Eretz Israel for a visit, the officials of the Jewish Agency would take him to a kibbutz, so he could see with his own eyes how 'class-conscious' cows were being milked. But now, the guests from abroad hurry to the 'Parliament' in Tel Aviv, to breathe the air of a real Jewish state." There, the writer did not fail to add, they had the privilege of watching, from the height of the gallery, the yarmulke on Zerach Warhaftig's head, "which was about the size of a 10-grush coin."[62]

On 14 February, Ben-Gurion wrote in his diary: "At three o'clock I went to Yeshurun Synagogue to listen to the prayers, as I had promised Rabbi Berlin [leader of the Mizrahi movement] yesterday. It was the first time for me in Eretz Israel that I was in a synagogue during services. At four o'clock the Constituent Assembly opened."[63]

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NOTES

1. Provisional State Council, 13 January 1949, 10. Please note that the text of this and other Israeli publications is in Hebrew.
2. UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/181(II), 29 November 1947.
3. Mapai Council, 12 January 1949, Labor Party Archives, Beit-Berl (hereafter, LPA).
4. Provisional State Council, 18 November 1948, 8.
5. Provisional State Council, 25 November 1948, 7; Provisional Government, 6 October 1948, Israel State Archives, Jerusalem (hereafter, ISA). See also "The Elections—on the 25th of January," *Ha'aretz*, 26 November 1948.
6. M"D (*Davar* Editorial), "Dvar Hayom," *Davar*, 26 November 1948.
7. Provisional State Council, 18 November 1948, 21.
8. Letter from MacDonald to Marshall (Fine and Classen 1976: 1326–1327). See also Cohen (1990: 240–274) and Ganin (2005: 158–163).
9. Memo from Marshall to Truman, 30 August 1948 (Fine and Classen 1976: 1359); memo from Marshall to Truman, 8 September 1948 (ibid.: 1380).
10. Letter from Truman to Weizmann, 29 November 1948 (Fine and Classen 1976: 1634).
11. Letter from MacDonald to Marshall, 20 December 1948 (Fine and Classen 1976: 1674–1676).
12. Meeting of Eliahu Epstein with US State Department officials, 21 December 1948 (Fine and Classen 1976: 1678–1679).
13. Letter from MacDonald to Marshall, 5 January 1949 (Fine et al. 1977: 614–615). See also Morris (2008: 365–368).
14. Ben-Gurion Diary, 25 November 1948, Ben-Gurion Archives, Sede Boqer Campus (hereafter, BGA).
15. Editorial Note (Fine et al. 1977: 681). See also Bialer (1990: 208).
16. M"D (*Davar* Editorial), "Dvar Hayom," *Davar*, 21 January 1949; "Friendship Attack," *Al Hamishmar*, 21 January 1949; "The Hebrew Voter Will Show His Maturity," *Herut*, 23 January 1949.
17. See, for example, "In the Elections Battle," *Hatzofeh*, 7 January 1949; "In the Elections Battle," *Herut*, 7 January 1949.
18. "No Central Issue in the Elections War," *Ha'aretz*, 10 January 1949; "The Foreign Policy Events That Are Shaping the Election Campaign," *Ha'aretz*, 12 January 1949.

19. Mapai Central Committee, 30 November 1948, LPA.
20. "The First Direct Israeli-Arab Negotiations Opened," *Davar*, 14 January 1949.
21. Mapai Council, LPA, 12 January 1949; "The Craftsman of Words on Mapai's Stage," *Yediot Aharonot*, 13 January 1949.
22. "The Voters Should Decide Whether to Continue the War," *Ha'aretz*, 13 January 1949.
23. "Menachem Begin among Thousands Gathering in Tel Aviv on Saturday," *Herut*, 16 January 1949.
24. "War and Peace Covered with Smoke," *Al Hamishmar*, 20 January 1949.
25. "The Opposition Answers to Shertok's Question about Peace or the Continuation of the War," *Ha'aretz*, 16 January 1949; "The Decisions of Mapam Regarding the Conditions for Peace," *Davar*, 18 January 1949.
26. "Saturday of Elections Campaign," *Davar*, 16 January 1949; "The Opposition Answers to Shertok's Question about Peace or the Continuation of the War," *Ha'aretz*, 16 January 1949; "The Elections Propaganda Reaches Its Peak," *Haboker*, 17 January 1949.
27. "Mass Crowd from the Village and the City Heard Mapam's Opinions about the Soldier and the Working Man," *Al Hamishmar*, 16 January 1949; "I Didn't Disappoint You in the Past, and I Won't Disappoint You in the Future," *Haboker*, 16 January 1949.
28. "To the Voter," *Davar*, 17 January 1949.
29. "They are Coming!" *Al Hamishmar*, 18 January 1949; "'Pin-up Girl'…," *Herut*, 20 January 1949.
30. Ben-Gurion Diary, 17 January 1949, BGA. See also Shapira (2004: 449).
31. Ben-Gurion Diary, 18 January 1949, BGA; Ben-Gurion, "The Political and Military Battle," 18 January 1949, BGA, meetings and gatherings division.
32. Ibid.
33. "From Day to Day: The Elections War and Its Nature," *Ha'aretz*, 3 December 1948.
34. "Economic Planning—Desirable but It's Important to Avoid Using It for Political Purposes," *Yom Yom*, 8 December 1948; "The Progressive Party Cards," *Al Hamishmar*, 12 December 1948; "200 Tons of Paper Will Flood the Voters," *Ma'ariv*, 13 December 1948.
35. Ben-Gurion Diary, 16 and 22 January 1949, BGA.
36. Ibid. Regarding where events occurred during the election campaign, compare Zahor (1994: 383) and Weitz (2002: 201–203).
37. See, for example, Yaakov Meridor's speech in "Kol Israel," *Herut*, 11 January 1949; "Shertok Speaks at a Soldiers' Meeting in Natanya," *Davar*, 23 January 1949.
38. Niv Hahayal, LPA; "Mapai's Fair Elections Propaganda," *Al Hamishmar*, 13 January 1949; "Niv's Mapai Obscene Language," *Al Hamishmar*, 13 January 1949; "On the Sharp Tip of a Pen," *Herut*, 14 January 1949; "'Vladimir Hitler,'" *Herut*, 16 January 1949.
39. "In the Margins of Things," *Davar*, 18 January 1949.
40. Ben-Gurion Diary, 7 August 1948, BGA.

41. Mapai Bureau, 17 August 1948, LPA.

42. Gathering of activist members in Mapai, 7 November 1948, Labor Movement Research Archives, Tel Aviv (hereafter, LA), IV-406-107; Ben-Gurion Diary, 8 November 1948, BGA.

43. Mapai bureau, 23 November 1948, LPA.

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid.

46. Ibid.

47. From the Diary of Zalman Aharonovich, 12–19 November 1948, LA, IV-104-127-228.

48. Ben-Gurion Diary, 18 December 1948, BGA.

49. Letter from David Bar-Rav-Hai to Yaakov Dori, 17 September 1948, IDF Archives, Tel Hashomer, 126/6127/1949; letter from Ben-Gurion to committee members of election propaganda in the army, 22 September 1948, ibid., 263/580/1956; the Committee's Report, 4 November 1948, ibid.

50. Provisional State Council, 25 November 1948, 23.

51. Security Committee of the Provisional State Council, 12 and 19 November 1948 and 10 December 1948, ISA, K-11/435; Provisional Government, 1, 5, 8, and 9 December 1948, ibid.; Provisional State Council, 25 November 1948, 15–28, and 16 December 1948, 39–43, ibid.; letters from Ben-Gurion to the chief of general staff, 13 and 23 December 1948, BGA.

52. Provisional Government, 9 December 1948, ISA.

53. "It Was Suggested to Declare Sabbatical on the Elections Day," *Ha'aretz*, 11 January 1949; Provisional Government, 19 and 23 January 1949, ISA.

54. Ben-Gurion Diary, 23–28 January 1949, BGA.

55. See, for example, "Today Israel Is Going to Choose the First House of Parliament," *Haboker*, 25 January 1949; M"D (*Davar* Editorial), "Dvar Hayom," *Davar*, 25 January 1949; "The Elections Took Place in a Celebration Atmosphere and with Tremendous Participation," *Herut*, 26 January 1949.

56. Editorial, "Honor Certificate," *Ha'aretz*, 26 January 1949.

57. Ben-Gurion Diary, 2 February 1949, BGA; "The Results of the Elections to the Constituent Assembly," *Official Newspaper*, No. 49, 7 February 1949; see also Israel Government (1950: 7–8).

58. Knesset Minutes, 21 November 1949, vol. 3, 127.

59. Mapai Central Committee with party delegations from the branches, 16 March 1949, LPA.

60. Ibid.

61. Ben-Gurion, "To the Nation and to the Army," 23 January 1949, BGA.

62. "Who Will Stay and Who Will Be Absent," *Herut*, 16 January 1949.

63. Ben-Gurion Diary, 14 February 1949, BGA.

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