THE POLLS—A REVIEW
THE TIMES'S ISRAELI POLL ON THE EVE OF SHAMIR'S 1989 VISIT

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On Sunday, April 2, 1989, the nation's most influential newspaper, the New York Times, published as its major news story of the day the results of a survey it had commissioned on the attitudes of Israeli Jews toward negotiation with the PLO. The emphasis on the poll as late-breaking news, rather than as background analysis or commentary, was heightened by printing the story in the main right-hand column on the front page of the Times, datelined Jerusalem, under the byline of the primary Times correspondent in Israel, Joel Brinkley.

Moreover, the Times story appeared on the eve of Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir's "visit to Washington . . . where he [was to] present his plan for regional peace to officials in the Bush administration" (p. 1)—a plan that precluded any negotiation with the PLO.1 There had been considerable talk of possible pressure by administration and congressional leaders in Washington on Shamir to modify his stand against negotiation, and the story was apparently intended to show the extent to which Shamir's position was backed by the Israeli public. In other words, it was reported much as if it were a referendum on Shamir's position. It is also important to realize that Shamir's visit to Washington occurred after nearly 16 months of the Palestinian uprising (intifada), and that it followed a widely publicized "peace offensive" by Yasir Arafat that, according to the Times story, had led an Israeli intelligence report to conclude "that the PLO has undergone a genuine change and is truly interested in a peaceful settlement with Israel."2

It seems likely that the Times story influenced not only the wider

1. All quotations, unless stated otherwise, are from the New York Times, April 1, 1989. The page number (p. 1 or p. 6) is given from the National Edition of the Times.
2. The quotation marks around "peace offensive" are my own and are included to avoid taking sides on the validity of the PLO effort, but the remaining quotation in this sentence is from the Times story (p. 6).
public that reads the *Times*, including other newspaper editors around
the country, but also officials in Washington who wished to press
Shamir to move toward some form of negotiation with the PLO. Thus
the importance of the story, as well as the example it provides of the
increasing presentation by leading newspapers of poll results likely to
influence major government actions, makes a close examination of the
*Times* article worthwhile. Readers will recognize that some of the
points raised refer to standards that might be applied to any serious poll
report, but that others involve matters of professional and editorial
judgment about which there is doubtless room for disagreement.

The emphasis of the *Times* story was that an "overwhelming major-
ity of Israeli Jews oppose peace negotiations with the Palestine Libera-
tion Organization at this time," though "more than half say they would
favor talks later if the PLO were to further moderate its behavior." Whatever the qualification about possible future negotiations, I believe
that most readers primarily took away from the story the resistance of
the Israeli public to negotiation "now" (April, 1989)—soon after the
PLO’s peace offensive had reached a high point and with Washington
concerned to encourage some sign of a positive response from the
Israeli government. This was certainly how the poll results were
greeted by Prime Minister Shamir, who is quoted in the fifth paragraph
of the story: "I was sure all the time that this was the way people
were thinking," he said with a broad smile.

Most of the results emphasized by the *Times*, including all those
referred to in three sets of headlines and reported on the front page, are
based on "marginals" from single questions apparently asked for the
first time. At no point does the story note that percentage distributions
to such questions can vary greatly as a function of the way the question
is conceptualized and worded. For example, if the question had re-
ferred explicitly to the conclusion of the Israeli government intelli-
gence report, the results might have been different. Nor is full ques-
tion wording ever given in the *Times* article, only paraphrases and what
one can reasonably infer, but cannot be sure, are excerpts from ques-
tions. "No opinion" percentages are also not provided, although a
later, privately circulated release shows them to range around 10% for
a number of questions. In addition, except for cross-tabulations with
political party leaning, there is little presentation even of the most
obviously useful bivariate relations. A newspaper report cannot be
expected to include detailed analysis, but it would be of considerable

3. The possible sensitivity of response distributions to legitimate variations in wording
might have been shown by including some key questions in split-ballot form, as the
*Times* has done on a few past occasions. (For an example of this being deliberately done
on a controversial issue, see Schuman, 1986, which also discusses more generally the
danger of an emphasis on marginals.)
interest to know whether opposition to negotiation with the PLO is related to variables such as respondent education or political interest, since these are apt to reflect respondents' potential influence on government actions.

One source of variation that could not be examined at all is that between Jewish and Arab citizens of Israel, for the Times poll excluded from the survey the sixth of the Israeli polity that is of Arabic origin. (This is, of course, quite apart from the exclusion of Arabs on the West Bank and in Gaza.) It is difficult to justify the omission of Arab Israeli citizens, since they would presumably vote in a true referendum and their representatives vote regularly in the Knesset. The Times story notes that Israeli Arabs "are often suspicious of pollster's questions," but offers no evidence that well-trained Arab interviewers could not obtain reasonably valid answers to the main questions used for the article. In any case, whatever the reason for the exclusion, the Times presents the decision as a minor technical one, yet it has important political consequences for the reporting of referendum-like results, as well as more generally because of the easily drawn inference that Arab citizens do not really count as part of the Israeli polity.

In addition to restricting the sample composition and failing to stress the dependence of univariate percentages on exact question wording, the Times story raises a more subtle issue. The fact that one question showed that a large majority of the Israeli public opposed negotiation with the PLO at that time, but that a majority would favor such negotiation "if the PLO officially recognizes Israel and ceases terrorist activity," seems to imply a public that will change only in response to further specific actions by the PLO. Thus, the results are presented as though they directly reveal Israeli attitudes toward negotiation, rather than as imperfect indicators of underlying attitudes that may require interpretation for their meaning to become clear. However, there are two important types of evidence that challenge just such an assumption.

First, the Times story itself contains trend data that show recent shifts in the Israeli public that are quite likely a result of the intifada, as well as of changes in PLO public statements. The question asking whether Israel should negotiate "if the PLO officially recognizes Israel and ceases terrorist activities" had actually been asked a number of times earlier, and we learn later in the story (p. 6) that in April, 1987, before the Palestinian uprising began, only 42% had agreed, whereas now the figure had risen to 58%. A small graph on an inner page (p. 6) shows other time points, and if we can assume that the earlier samples were about the same size (1,000) as the new one—unfortunately, no figures are given with the graph—it is clear that this substantial change is quite reliable.
Furthermore, toward the end of the story another important trend is noted: the percentage of the public saying that "Israel should be willing to give up some territory in exchange for 'suitable guarantees'" increased from 41% two years earlier to 54% in the current poll—again a very large shift over a relatively short period of time.

Thus, far from being unmovable, the Israeli public, whether it realizes it or not, has moved a remarkable distance during the period of the uprising. This is, I believe, the most important finding from the entire survey, and the one that should have been emphasized in the article. Moreover, it has the great advantage of being based on trend data rather than on univariate percentages. Although trends based on the same question asked over time are not completely impervious to wording and context effects, they are likely to be considerably more robust than are most marginals.4

A second reason to distrust the picture of an Israeli public unwilling to move without further concessions from the PLO is tied directly to Prime Minister Shamir's visit to Washington. There is a good deal of evidence showing that an energetic effort by political leaders can itself change public attitudes, as indeed happened when former Prime Minister Begin agreed to a peace treaty with Egypt in 1979. Moreover, recent analysis of a 1986 survey in Israel led Arian, Talmud, and Hermann (1988) to conclude that Israeli leaders have "enormous leverage. They can change policy, if they so decide, secure in the knowledge that they will be able to swing public opinion to their position if they properly present it; in short, if they lead."5 There were certainly political limits on Shamir and other Israeli politicians, but there was also a realistic possibility that American influence could have been exerted on the Israeli public through Shamir, or in other ways. Indeed, if one is willing to take univariate distributions literally, as the Times tends to do, its own 1989 poll reports that 81% of the Israeli public believes that American aid is "vital to the well-being of Israel's citizens," and that half that public believes that "the United States has the right to try to influence Israeli policy" because of the aid it gives. Thus the conclusion, easily drawn from the Times article, that Shamir simply represented the dominant and ineluctable view of the Israeli public and thus could hardly have been expected to be influenced by the American government, is itself highly questionable.

4. According to the Times article, the Israeli intelligence report mentioned earlier was filling the newspapers "as the survey was being taken." It would have been useful to see if later cases in the sample seemed to show effects of hearing or reading about the intelligence report, even though randomized sequential subsamples were not used.

5. It is interesting to note that Asher Arian, the senior author of the 1988 monograph, is cited as the consultant to the 1989 Times Israeli Poll. For other examples of the influence of leaders and for other relevant references, see Kinder and Sears, 1985.
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In sum, a more careful consideration of the Times poll and what it can tell us leads to a rather different set of conclusions from those likely to be drawn from the first few paragraphs of the story, which were probably all that many readers had the time and experience to absorb. If this conclusion is accepted, then the question becomes whether it is fair to ask that a newspaper story introduce these kinds of considerations into a poll report. Perhaps not in the case of an ordinary newspaper use of a poll, but the Times has long presented itself as willing and able to provide depth of coverage, and its use and presentation of poll data have shown increasing sophistication over the years. In the case examined here, the Times took on itself the role of making news and of influencing government and public opinion by the timing and way in which it presented the poll as a referendum on Israeli opinion aimed to coincide with Shamir's visit to Washington. One therefore has the right to ask that it present the evidence with more professional thought than the published article demonstrated.

This further suggests, however, that important new survey results and interpretation probably should not be presented in the form of a late-breaking news story, written by a foreign correspondent untrained in survey design and analysis. Such survey evidence belongs in a carefully written feature article, preferably prepared jointly by a Times specialist on polls and a reporter like Joel Brinkley who helps to interpret the results. This would be in line with many other important Times background articles, where joint contributions are explicitly acknowledged.

Furthermore, when the Times commissions polls of a referendum nature for a significant policy purpose, several additional steps should be taken to present the evidence in a more complete way. Exact wording should be given for those questions that are the main basis of the conclusions of the article, and even the order of questions should be noted when it might be relevant to the results. Meaningful design and response-rate information should be provided, rather than the now standard but uninformative statement that "the practical difficulties of conducting a survey of public opinion may introduce other sources of error into the poll." And greater emphasis should be placed on trend and other analysis that helps interpret the nature and movement of public opinion, with less focus on item marginals as though they reflect some immediately meaningful and fixed reality, impervious to the way questions are phrased or the way political leaders act.

It should be stressed again that New York Times polls over the past several years have shown increasing recognition of the complexity of assessing and reporting public opinion by means of survey data, one example being an April 26, 1989, poll-based report on attitudes toward abortion. From this standpoint, the Times Israeli poll seems to me to
have been a step backward in the way it was designed and analyzed, as well as in the attempt to treat item marginals as the major news of the day.

References


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