THE HANDBOOK OF ISRAEL'S POLITICAL SYSTEM

There is growing interest in Israel's political system from all parts of the world. This *Handbook* provides a unique comprehensive presentation of political life in Israel from the formative pre-state period to the present. The themes covered include: political heritage and the unresolved issues that have been left to fester; the institutional framework (the Knesset, government, judiciary, presidency, the state comptroller, and commissions of inquiry); citizens' political participation (elections, political parties, civil society, and the media); the four issues that have bedeviled Israeli democracy since its establishment (security, state and religion, the status of Israel's Arab citizens, and economic inequities with concomitant social gaps); and the contours of the political culture and its impact on Israel's democracy. The authors skillfully integrate detailed basic data with an analysis of structures and processes, making the *Handbook* accessible to both experts and those with a general interest in Israel.

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The Handbook of Israel's Political System

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To my beloved children:	*To my beloved grandchildren:*
Shaked	*Rotem*
Alon	*Zohar*
Amir	*Maayan*
Klil	*Oren*
	Ori-Yeela
Dana	*Itzhak*

May they live as equal, happy citizens.

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Preface

Politics

In many democracies around the world, including Israel, the reputation of "politics" has been sullied. Surveys indicate dwindling public trust of the authorities, political leadership, media, and political parties. This disenchantment derives both from the high expectations of the state that were never realized as well as the improper behavior of some politicians. Nevertheless, the term "politics" will be used in this book in an entirely neutral manner, even biased somewhat toward the positive, in recognition of the onerous tasks imposed on good, dedicated, and honest politicians.

The tasks that we, the citizens, bring to the political system include problems that have proven intractable in other frameworks – the economic market, social organizations, the community, or even the family. Indeed, the issues we relegate to politics are among the most sensitive (security, environment) and elusive, certainly more than issues addressed in the business world. To carry out these tasks, politicians must build coalitions, mobilize support, conduct negotiations, compromise, postpone decisions, and balance the public good with more narrow, conflicting interests. Without these tools, politicians would find it very hard to set policy or implement it, but because of these tools, the image of the "political" has become synonymous with dishonesty or corruption.

To come up with creative solutions or compromises, the political process has sometimes had to merge disparate elements.[1] Such solutions may appear strange, but are often a function of the complexity of the problem and the fact that no simpler practical solution can be found. Bear in mind also that "engaging in politics" is not

[1] For example, the Gaza-Jericho Agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Authority in May 1994 defied geographical logic, but created a common denominator, allowing for an end to the political stalemate. In another example, the Tal Commission, appointed in 2000 to examine the issue of drafting Yeshiva students into the army, recommended a compromise designed to appease both the secular and ultra-Orthodox communities: Young ultra-Orthodox men who elected to discontinue their Torah studies would be allowed to enter the job market after an abbreviated military service. This proposal met opposition from both seculars (as it allowed for the continued shirking of military service) and the ultra-Orthodox (as it spelled the beginning of apostasy), and failed.

confined to national or local government, but can also be found in public organizations or corporations, as well as universities, hospitals, volunteer associations, and sometimes even families. Naturally most of us would deny that we ever "engage in politics," but prefer to ascribe such behavior to a self-interested other: "They" do dirty politics, while "we" operate out of legitimate interests. A negative approach to politics (a climate of "anti-politics") endangers democracy because it may stir a demand for "rule by experts" – elected or not elected – who will straighten out the politicians.[2] This belief in the need for "experts," like the yearning for "strong leaders," paves the way for a non-democratic regime. In politics, there is legitimate manipulation and sometimes necessary contortions, but these must be done with integrity or risk the loss of credibility. Political behavior must be legitimate, not just in keeping with the law or some code of ethics, but because elected representatives must set a personal example. In short, politics is a social mechanism and therefore not "good" or "bad" in and of itself; note, also, that in some democracies, politics is not perceived as fundamentally bad. In Israel, too, many examples exist of positive politics: a government minister who resigns because a decision conflicts with his world view or conscience; a Knesset member (MK) who tables a bill for the public good despite criticism from her constituents; Knesset members from different parties who make common cause to promote an issue; politicians who turn down an opportunity for an interview on the grounds that they are not familiar with the issue.

For purposes of this book, we will make do with a simple definition of the "political" as compared to the non-political – "the effort to develop and utilize organized social power" (Heller 1933, 301). To which we add that, in democratic politics, cooperative activity to achieve common goals rests upon consensus regarding the rules of the game. The merit of this definition is that politics is defined as a tool for purposeful activity by society. No issue is inherently "political"; it becomes political when it has a common component that requires organized effort (e.g., compulsory education, epidemic prevention, security, law, environmental quality). Issues enter and leave the political system in accordance with the preferences of that society: A decision by society, for example, not to leave it up to a driver to calculate the risk of injury in a car accident led to legislating the mandatory wearing of seat belts. A neutral discussion of politics is intended to restore to it its lost honor, as distinct from the deeds or foibles of specific politicians or dissatisfaction with the political system of Israel (Galnoor 2003).

Political Systems

A political system is not a concrete entity – it is not the ruler or the government, nor is it a state, institution, or organization, but rather an abstract concept – the sum total of political interactions in a specific society (intended, as noted, to enable cooperative activity).[3] This analytical concept allows us to draw from the range of human endeavor those activities that can be defined as "political." The market, for example,

[2] In the 2003 Knesset election, a party ran for office named "A Different Israel – Because We're Fed Up with Politicians." Purporting to engage in "politics without politicians," they even convinced 7,144 people to vote for them.

[3] This definition is drawn from Easton (1965, 49–50), who holds that a political system is a series of social interactions of individuals and groups geared to the "authoritative allocation of values."

is part of the economic system, but the laws and regulations governing it, and their enforcement, are political. Another example: When the state arrogates decision-making about pensions – and makes these payments compulsory – pensions have become political. Note that what is political in one society may not be political in another. Public health services may be the responsibility of the political system in one national or regional government, but not in another. The concept "political system" allows us to think about political activity in terms of interactions within all of society, not just within the governing institutions or nationally. Thus, the analysis also incorporates a discussion of the dynamics of political life, such as the technological breakthroughs of online media and their repercussions on public space; the impact of civil society organizations; the degree of "politicization" of certain issues (such as civil service appointments); or the "politicization" of issues unique to Israel, such as relations between religion and the state.

Steering Capacity and Representation

The role of the political system resembles that of steering a ship: keeping the system steady and guiding it toward common goals.[4] Steering capacity is therefore the ability of the political system to secure its self-survival, to invest in its own viability, to adapt to environmental changes, and, of course, to shape policy and make binding decisions. A political system without steering capacity is a ship with a disconnected rudder. It can drift, but it cannot engage in purposeful movement. The concept of "steering capacity" points to the dynamic of political activity that must navigate in situations of flux, trauma, or crisis. For this reason, we prefer "steering" to other terms, such as "governability," which suggests the ability to govern a specific society; or "capacity to govern," which ignores the fact that political activity requires not just governance, but also the trust of its citizens and their cooperation in the steering process. Our approach in this book is that focusing on the government does not reveal the range of happenings in the political system, which may include some non-democratic elements that reduce the contribution of citizens, social organizations, and the media. In every democratic society, there are multiple centers of power in addition to the government, and no one of them is entirely sovereign (Dahl 1971, 24). The steering mechanism must connect well the helm and the rest of the ship, the political system and society (on profiles of steering capacity in Israel, see Galnoor 1996). And a *democratic* political system is also measured by its responsiveness to the will of the citizens – its representativeness.

"Representation" in a democracy means that citizens authorize those elected to public office to work toward common goals. At the same time, every democracy grapples with questions about the system of representation, how to ensure oversight of elected officials, and conflicts between the general, public interest and partial, vested interests. Added to this is the media revolution, which is transforming personal and public patterns of behavior, and has already brought about dramatic political changes locally and globally.

[4] The original Greek concept of government refers to the art of holding the steering wheel (Deutsch 1963, 182).

In this book, we focus particularly on the tension between steering capacity and representation, and whether the balance between them has been upset. True representation allows citizens not just to cast a ballot, but to influence the political system and sometimes even become involved in policymaking; true steering capacity requires that the government navigating the political system will act not just according to the legitimate interests of individuals and groups, but also mediate between conflicting interests, and work toward achieving goals for the public at large. In other words, steering capacity means that when the government turns the wheel, the ship actually turns with it; and, in the age of media, that this is not just the *image* of movement.

We start from the first two decades following the establishment of the state, when the steering capacity of the Israeli political system was strong in terms of achieving common goals, withstanding crises, and maintaining stability. This is not a value judgment; no claim is made that these goals were worthy, or that the progress was inclusive of all social groups, or that stability is necessarily a good thing. Indeed, in the relevant chapters we suggest that the steering capacity in the early period was achieved largely at the expense of the representation, openness, transparency, and public oversight of policymaking. The balance, in other words, was tipped toward steering capacity rather than representation. Later, the political system became more responsive to public concerns, and could be said to be more representative. But was it? And if so, how did steering capacity fare? And has the result been that Israeli society is more or less democratic? We will try to answer these questions in the final chapter of this book.

Structure of the Book

The book opens with the formative years of the political system around the establishment of the state, and considers its development to this day. A factual description is integrated with an analysis of processes and their significance, and does not avoid presenting the positions of the authors on controversial matters.

The five parts of the book:

- Part I: "Establishing the State" presents the formation of the political system in the early years (1948–53) in the context of the political heritage from the Yishuv period, and the supremacy of politics. The second chapter raises the question "Does Israel have a constitution?" and lists the issues that have never been resolved, but left to fester for future generations.
- Part II: The five chapters of "Institutions Matter" examine the institutional framework – the presidency, legislature, executive, and judiciary – as well as the oversight monitoring mechanisms, such as the state comptroller, with the pitfalls of each and subsequent crises in steering capacity.
- Part III: "Political Society" is about the political behavior of citizens and bodies that are not part of the political system. It tracks the political participation of Israeli citizens in various channels (political parties, elections, civil society, media), and declining public trust in the elected organs.
- Part IV: "Unresolved Policy Problems" probes the four issues that have bedeviled the Israeli political system since its inception (security, the status of Israel's

Arab citizens, economic inequality with concomitant social gaps, and religion–state relations). It traces the sources of these problems and the reasons why they have become political challenges.

- Part V: Finally, "Democracy in Israel" considers the contours of Israel's political culture, its impact on democracy, and the dangers facing it.

The book is based on the course "The Government of Israel" taught for many years by Professor Galnoor in the Political Science Department of Hebrew University, previously published writing, and his experience as Civil Service Commissioner under Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin (1994–96). Significant insights presented here were developed during his years with the Israel Democracy Institute (1988–93). The book also draws from the publications of Dr. Blander and her work in the Israel Democracy Institute. Above all, this book is the result of seven long years of fruitful work together.

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English Version

This *Handbook* was published with the support of the Israel Science Foundation.

In addition, support for the English translation of the book was provided by the Israel Institute; the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute; and the Israel Democracy Institute.

The translation of this book required several tasks at once: make it lucid for English readers; omit details about Israel that would require long explanations; keep within the page limit, given that an English text can be a third longer than the Hebrew; correct omissions and errors; and update it extensively as the Hebrew book was published in 2013. Orchestrating it all was our senior translator, Gila Svirsky, who translated most of the chapters and the Hebrew bibliography, scanned the entire manuscript to ensure uniformity, and made valuable improvements of the content. Alongside her, doing exceptionally good work, was our second translator, Ira Moskowitz. We are greatly indebted to Gila and Ira. We would like to thank our editors at CUP, Lewis Bateman and Sara Doskow, who took over from Lewis in 2016; Daniel George Brown, the content manager; and Julene Knox, our expert copy-editor, for their enthusiastic support, encouragement, and professional handling of such a complicated manuscript. Thanks also to two anonymous readers, whose comments and good suggestions we tried to follow to the best of our ability.

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In a book of this length, errors are unavoidable. We would be grateful to readers who draw our attention to them and welcome those who wish to respond:

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