Chapter 5
Cleavages and Links: Mapping Linking Patterns between Israeli Political Websites

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ABSTRACT

In the past decade, the Internet has extensively penetrated the political landscape in Israel. A variety of actors, including parties, Knesset members, NGOs, and more, have realized the significance of using the Internet to promote their goals and have established an online presence via a variety of platforms. Consequently, the Internet is becoming a fertile ground to study Israeli society with its multiple cleavages. This chapter analyses how the ideological cleavage in the Israeli society is manifest online, through the linking patterns between political Websites. Link analysis is used to study political visibility and centrality online, to map the channels of information flow between the various political actors, and to identify recognition and discourse networks between the various political actors. From the link analysis of the sites of some 200 political parties, MPs, and NGOs, we found no links between right-wing and left-wing political sites; each side in the political spectrum conducts a different linking strategy. Most of the sites of political parties and MPs received no in-bound links from the other political sites. On the other hand, NGOs have a central role in the online political networks in Israel and maintain a relatively dense linking network.

INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, the Internet has extensively penetrated the Israeli political landscape. A variety of political actors, including parties, Knesset (parliament) members, NGOs, social activists and others have realized the significance of using the Internet to promote their causes and established an online presence via a variety of platforms. Hence, the Internet is becoming a fertile ground for the study of Israeli politics and society, with their multiple cleavages.

This article analyses how the ideological cleavage in Israeli politics between right and left is manifest online, through studying the linking patterns between political websites. The disputes between political right and left in Israel regarding...
peace negotiations, security, and the possibility and character of a future accord with the Palestinians, all stand continuously at the height of the political, public and media agenda in Israel. Therefore, we chose to focus on these cleavages in examining patterns of connectivity between Israeli political players.

Any decision that is made online concerning what to read, whom to respond to and how, whom to link to and how, happens at the micro level of the individual user. However, the accumulation of decisions made by many individuals produces interesting conclusions at the macro level. In particular, studying the online linking behaviors of the various political actors enables us to better understand if and how the online arena reflects existing social cleavages, and whether links assist in bridging these cleavages, or rather further exacerbate them.

Link analysis enables examination of online political centrality and visibility, mapping channels of information flow between actors, and identification and mapping of patterns of recognition and discourse between various political actors. Studying links allows to better understand if the Internet exposes users to opposing views and stimulates interactions between ideological rivals, or rather the very opposite – if it encourages users to become more entrenched in their prior opinions and get exposed only to like-minded perspectives.

The extensive penetration and multiplicity of uses of the Internet enables a new angle of analysis of the social cleavages within Israel. The present study examines the links between the websites of various political players, MKs, parties, and social organizations, in order to analyze if and how the ideological divide between the Israeli right and the left is reflected online.

The Political Use of Links

The “melting pot” ideology, according to which newly-arrived Jewish immigrants coming to Israel from different backgrounds should form a new type of Zionist person, was prevalent in Israel’s early years (Kimmerling, 2001; Lissak, 1999; Almog, 2004; Horowitz and Lissak, 1990). Still, over the course of Israeli history, the Israelis started to recognize that Israeli society is and will be composed of a large number of cleavages. These cleavages include gaps between Jewish Israelis and Palestinians and between various ethnic, religious, and political ideological groups (see Peres and Ben-Raphael, 2006; Kimmerling, 2001, Lissak, 1999; Almog, 2004; Horowitz and Lissak, 1990). On one hand, the existence of multiple cleavages can be translated into a multiplicity of opinions expressed in public spheres, reduce the possibilities of hegemonic domination over the public discourse and force agents to become exposed to each other and mutually adjust their positions accordingly. On the other hand, however, when cleavages become extreme and the society becomes polarized, this situation may impair the integrity of the social fabric, thus challenging governmental legitimacy and stability.

This article focuses on the political cleavage in Israel and its online expression. The Internet