



A Guide to the Israeli Electoral System

By Jan Jaben-Eilon

Israel is a parliamentary democracy based on proportional representation. The entire country is a single electoral constituency, and all citizens aged 18 or older may vote.

The electoral system is far from simple. The prime minister, technically first among equals in the Israeli cabinet, isn't elected directly (except for a brief period in the 1990s). Political parties that qualify for elections choose up to 120 candidates for an electoral list; many parties hold primaries in which party members have some influence on the ranking of individual candidates on their list.

Israelis thus vote for a party, without specifying a candidate. (There is no absentee voting, other than for diplomats serving abroad, the merchant marine, or soldiers on active duty.) The Knesset's 120 seats are distributed among the parties based on the percentage of votes each received; only those parties with a minimum percentage of the vote may sit a representative in the Knesset

The party that receives the largest percentage of the vote is asked by Israel's largely symbolic president [elected by the Knesset to a single, seven year term] to form a new government. In a parliamentary system, it's almost unheard of for a single party to receive a clear majority of the vote, so that party leader will almost always need to negotiate with leaders of other parties to establish a coalition. Without a majority of 61 seats, the prime minister will be unable to advance his policies and agenda in the Knesset.

If the coalition is dissolved, either by the exit of one or several parties, or by decision of the prime minister, and the prime minister is unable to build a new coalition, the government falls and elections are called. A government can also fall if 61 or more Knesset members support a no-confidence motion, or if the Knesset fails to approve the annual budget by March 31 of any year.

Although elections are meant to be held once every four years, none of the past several governments have survived that long. Indeed, no government since that of Menachem Begin in 1981 has served four full years and then been re-elected to a second term – and even that second government didn't last for the entire term. This instability has created an enormous strain on Israeli politics and society, forcing prime ministers to focus on keeping fragile coalitions intact, rather than on finding creative solutions to the conflict with the Palestinians or domestic problems.

In order to stay in power, prime ministers often have to cobble together alliances between sworn enemies (the parties of the progressive left often sitting with right-wing parties), further hampering any government's ability to function effectively. Several times, Israel has been led by a "unity" government anchored by two of the largest parties, Labor and the Likud. A unity government is often preferred by the populace when there is a major crisis to surmount, such as war, economic crises, or, the Gaza disengagement - but once the crisis has been averted, these governments are often hopelessly fettered by the fundamental differences between the leading parties.

Israel's Political Parties

Party politics in Israel are never boring, but in the past twenty years, following their ins and outs has been like riding a roller coaster. Parties come and go, change names, spin-off and merge into others at a dizzying pace. In 1999, voters had more than 30 parties to choose from. A number of parties didn't meet the minimum percentage of votes to enter the Knesset, and have never been heard from again. In 2009, there are 33 parties from which voters could choose and predictions are that several won't attract enough voters to obtain a seat in the next Knesset.

This constant re-invention of parties was seen when the now comatose Prime Minister Ariel Sharon left Likud, the party he founded, to form Kadima. Many Likud stalwarts joined him, as did a number of former rivals – including former Labor head (and now President) Shimon Peres. Kadima proposed to provide a "middle road" to those Jewish Israelis who would not disavow limited territorial exchange, and yet were equally unwilling to accept a complete disengagement from the occupied territories.

When he launched the party, Sharon clearly banked on his popularity proving more important to voters than their loyalty to the Likud, and generally left Kadima's platform as ambiguous as possible, allowing voters to read what they wanted into his intentions. After Sharon's stroke forced him out of office, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert did not stray far from this formula. If anything, Olmert proved less rightist than Sharon over the years, and centrist-minded voters who might have been scared off by Sharon's more hawkish past were successfully wooed by his protégé in the 2006 elections.

The major change expected in the 2009 election is the strength of the Russian party, Yisrael Beiteinu, which will probably pass the Labor Party as the third largest party after Likud and Kadima. The right-leaning Yisrael Beiteinu is benefitting from the recent war in Gaza and Israelis' pessimism about any peace process. It is significant that the Labor Party (in the form of its predecessor Mapai) which created the State of Israel and led it in its initial years, could fall so far in popularity.

The makeup of the Knesset is expected to remain multi-faceted with Arab and other parties to the "left" of Labor, as well as several parties to the "right" of Likud, and several different religious lists. Although many Israelis are born into families with long standing party affiliation, these loyalties have increasingly been challenged, often by evolving party positions on peace negotiations, the economy, or religion and civil liberties, and most recently, by the creation of Kadima and the strengthening of Yisrael

Beiteinu.

Because neither Labor nor the Likud have ever had enough votes to either control the Knesset or, in recent years, command strong coalitions, smaller parties have often had an inordinate amount of bargaining power, demanding sizeable budgets for their constituencies as well as prestigious ministerial positions in return for joining the government.

Yet, for all this, until 2006 two parties stood at the top of the political heap for all of Israel's history. From 1948 until 1977, Israel was led almost exclusively by Mapai, the party that became Avoda, or Labor. In 1977, Labor was unseated for the first time by Likud, led by Menachim Begin. Likud remained in power until 1992, when Labor returned to the premiership under Yitzhak Rabin. Following Rabin's assassination, Likud again came to power. In 2006 Kadima turned that history on its head. The 2009 elections are expected to do that once again.

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