

14 Points to Help Make Sense of Israeli Politics

Benjamin Netanyahu just called me up on the phone! I couldn't believe it! He asked me to vote for him and told me what a good job he has done the last four years. However, when I tried to talk, he just kept talking ... like I wasn't there. Shelly Yacomovich (Labor Party) called me last night! She too, just wanted to talk and not listen.

I am not special. Israelis are getting recorded phone calls like this from various characters, from ultra-religious extremists to left wing doves who still think Hamas just wants peace. They all want our votes. Yes, election time is here.

I realize that most of my readers are in the U.S., where there are only two major parties, and therefore can't fully appreciate how *crazy* the Israeli political system is. With elections coming on January 22, I figured I would try, in as fewest words as possible (14 points), to give you a understanding. Here we go...

1. Israel uses a parliamentary system of government. That means simply that you vote for your party (or the one you dislike the least), not the candidate. Of course calling them parties is a bit confusing, because there is no fun, no music, no cake—just adults acting like children, fighting for position.

2. The party with the most seats is asked by the Israeli president (The president has no authority like in the U.S.—but is more like the Queen—ehh, no, strike that—it is a procedural position) to work with other parties to form a coalition.

3. There are 120 seats, and no party ever wins a clear majority, so they must compromise, promise, give-in to black mail, forcing them to work with people they wouldn't even

carpool with, in order to garner enough partners to present a coalition of at least 61 members.

4. A rare exception would be, as we saw in the last election, when the leading party cannot muster up enough partners to form a coalition. (Like being the kid with all the toys, but still no one will play with you, because frankly, they can't stand you.) In this case, the president would turn to the party that he deems most viable of forming a coalition. Four years ago, Tzipi Livni's *Kadima* (Move Forward) party had the most seats, but no one wanted to play with Tzipi (and they still don't). So, the president turned to Netanyahu's *Likud* party to form a coalition.

5. In the forming of the coalition, agreements are made, cabinet posts are promised and smaller parties, such as the orthodox parties exact a price. In the end, the orthodox parties typically control immigration, 'who is a Jew', and who can get married in Israel. Once, because the Labor party came in second, their leader ended up with the Defense ministry post, despite the fact that he was a life-long union leader and knew virtually nothing about defense, he found himself leading the most advanced army in the Middle East. His incompetence was highlighted during a photo op, when he looked through a pair of binoculars with the caps still on. In our most recent government, a fellow who is better suited to be a Russian crime syndicate boss, found himself in the delicate position of Foreign Minister, where you can't just threaten to break the legs of an opposing Foreign Minister as starting point for negotiations. Oh, he just had to resign because he is being indicted for corruption. (Are you starting to feel better about your own government?)

6. Because of all these backroom deals, we end up with a ridiculous number of cabinet ministers in our government (30 ministers and 9 deputies). Switzerland, a country of comparable size has only seven ministers. Or, in the U.S., this would be like having about 1,300 cabinet positions!!! We

have two Vice Prime Ministers, a position created a few years ago, if memory serves me correctly, when one of the Likud ministers had to give up the foreign ministry. He cried, and so they created a position for him.

7. There are at least 15 parties vying for 120 seats in the upcoming elections.

8. Unlike in the U.S., where the two parties have large platforms and take opposing sides (i.e. Pro-abortion/Pro-life; Big Government/Small Government; Higher Taxes/Lower Taxes; Pro-Justin Bieber/Would rather die a slow painful torturous death than listen to JBieb), Israel has parties that will focus on single issues. A few years ago, we had a party called the *Pensioners* whose sole purpose was to fight for the rights of seniors. Most parties are broader than this, but can still be very narrow in their concerns.

9. The primary issues in this upcoming campaign are:

- Iran/Security
- The Peace Process (or lack thereof)
- The economy—However, the economy is taking shape as the number one issue and this is making Likud and Netanyahu vulnerable, as security/Iran has been their primary issue. And let me add, not since Winston Churchill stood up against Hitler or Reagan against the USSR, has a leader made the world take notice of a major threat to *world get-along-ness* [world peace was stretch])

10. The Shas Party, who are ultra-orthodox, is merely there to vote according to what their rabbis tell them. Their tri-leader, Ariele Deri (They have three leaders, so no one gets offended. Despite being *religious* their egos are every bit as big as the other politicians) someone who is beloved by the masses, but thought of by others as corrupt (he spent three years in jail, after being convicted of taking \$155,000 in bribes in 2000) says, "Shas is not Right or Left. We ask

rabbis what to do and we go by what they say.” Sadly, this is a horrible form of democracy, putting all of the control in the hands of the rabbis—and yet people will still vote for them.

11. The ultra religious parties and the Arab parties (Yes, we have Arab parties! Does Egypt or Syria have a Jewish party?) still attract virtually all of the ultra orthodox and Arab vote, but fortunately, not much beyond that.

12. Yair Lapid, a former popular news anchor, talk show host, novelist and just outright handsome dude, has started his own party, championing the middle class called *Yesh Atid* (There is a future). He is anti-Religious and pro-economic reform.

13. Tzipi Livni, who quit the *Kadima* party when she lost her number one position, took her marbles and has formed a new party called, simply *Hatanua* (The Movement). (I am resisting my deep desire to make a joke about the name of her party.) She *nobly* wants all the center-left parties to unite—however, even more *nobly*, she wants them to united under her (according to Lapid and Labor leader Shelly Yakomovich). Lapid’s *Yesh Atid* and the *Labor* party said, “thanks, but no thanks.”

14. Stunning most of the talking heads in Israel has been the emergence of (my neighbor) Naphtali Bennett and his party, *Bayit Yehudi* (The Jewish Home), who stands to become the third largest party, growing from three to 14. While I personally was not crazy about him (primarily because the media presents him as an extremist) this article by the Guardian has endeared me to him. He is for breaking the monopolies over the Israeli economy (You can often find Israeli products overseas, cheaper than in Israel!) and he is a realist when it comes to making peace with Islamists. It’s “insoluble.” Amazingly, he is attracting many young voters who would typically vote center-left, with his no-nonsense plan for the Palestinians which can be see here. He comes across as humble, confident, religious, but not extremist. And best of all, he is my neighbor and has

promised me 31st cabinet position, the newly created Minister of Hummus and Pita, if I vote for him.

Who do Believers Endorse?

I can't really answer that. I know many believers who love Likud for it's bold stance on security, others are attracted to newcomer Lapid, as they are tired of the limited possibilities for the Middle Class. They want to be able to get a mortgage and buy a house, something almost impossible today without at least \$100,000 U.S. in cash. Still others see Naphtali Bennett's combination of both security and economic reforms as a breath of fresh air.

One thing we all agree on is that politics is not our savior. More than anything else we dream of a spiritual awakening in this country. Will you dream with us?

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