

Democracy on Steroids: A Guide to Israel's Elections

Israel goes to the polls on Tuesday to elect a new government. Not only can most people reading this not name more than one, or at top two, potential candidates to be the next prime minister, but most people reading this do not understand the nature of Israel's representative democracy, what I call democracy on steroids. This may leave you scratching your head anyway, but hopefully with a better understanding.

For Americans or others who have a largely two-party system, understanding Israel's parliamentary democracy may be challenging. On Tuesday, we will be electing our 20th Knesset. That means in Israel's short 67 years we have held 20 national elections; an election on average of once a little more than every three years. It's been just over two years since the last election.

Twenty-four political parties are running for seats in Israel's 120-member parliament, the Knesset. Largely because of mergers of several parties, that's fewer parties than the last election, but only about 12 parties are expected to get enough votes to be represented in the 20th Knesset.

This year, in order to reduce the paralysis of having so many parties with conflicting, or at least unique and often parallel agendas, in order to have any seats a party needs to receive at least percent of the vote, up from 2 percent last time. For parties which receive less than percent, the votes they receive will be thrown out, and they will not have even one seat in the Knesset.

In Israel, we don't vote for a specific candidate for prime minister as Americans vote for president, senator or even mayor. We vote for a specific political party. Each party

selects its own list of up to 120 representatives and, based on the number of seats each receives, the list of new Knesset members for that party is pre-determined. A party that receives enough votes for 12 seats, 10 percent of the Knesset, will have its top 12 candidates selected to serve.

Some parties select their list democratically, with party members voting in a primary. Some parties have a small internal network that selects their candidates (and which place they will be on the list), serving often at the grace of the party chair. Some parties seek rabbinic guidance to determine their slate of candidates.

When we go to the polls, we put a slip of paper with a 1-3 letter representation of the political party of our choice in an envelope, and put that into a literal ballot box. Strangely, the alphabetic representation of the respective parties often has no direct relation to the name of the party. So going into the poll, one almost needs a decoding device. To my knowledge, no smart Israeli start up has created an app for that yet, so it's up to us, the voters, to know which alphabetic symbol represents which party. I'm sure there's a reason for this, but not sure why the ballots don't simply say the party name in Hebrew, Arabic and English.

For instance, the current ruling Likud party is represented by a three letter symbol that one needs to know but does not say Likud. Yet the Yisrael Beiteinu (Israel is our Home) party is represented by the Hebrew letter "Lamed" (L) which represents the name of the party chair. In an age of hanging chads, it's possible to slip the wrong piece of paper into the ballot box just by not paying attention.

Current polls are indicating a close race between two top parties, Likud and the Zionist Camp, the latter being a merger between the "Labor Party" and "the Movement." Most recent polls indicate a leaning toward the Zionist Camp over Likud by anywhere from 26-27 seats to 21-23 seats. But some polls last

week were giving Likud the lead with 26.

By comparison, in Israel's First Knesset, the leading party received 46 seats, nearly double that which polls are saying the lead party will receive this year. A lot can happen between now and Election Day, and it's anyone's guess as to who will get the most votes.

But because it typically requires a parliamentary majority of 61 seats to form a government, something never achieved by one party in Israeli electoral history, the party with the most votes may not end up being the winning party. All Israeli election results have required the formation of a coalition among multiple parties to reach at least 61 seats and form a government. This means the leading party needs to create a series of agreements with as many as several parties, to enter and form a ruling government, appointing cabinet seats, government ministries, diplomatic postings and weaving together a common political agenda that all can agree to. Of course, coalition parties also compete for part of the state budget for their own agendas, causes, institutions and sometimes cronies.

Based on the outcome of the election, Israel's president (who as head of state but not government is more a figure head than a political leader), has the task to interview the heads of all political parties that pass the electoral threshold and ask who they would support to form the government. Therefore a party that receives anywhere from 1-3 seats less than the "winning" party can actually be tapped to form the government because there's a greater likelihood of their putting together a governing coalition. In fact, that has happened, and could happen again this year.

And it will be the leader of the party that forms the next government who will become prime minister, and task close advisers and confidants to begin negotiations with other parties to form the next government. One of the paradoxes here

is that while recent polls indicate a smaller number of seats for the Likud party than the Zionist Union, all polls steadily show much more support for the Likud chairman and current prime minister, Netanyahu, as the most qualified to be prime minister, by a much wider margin. But because we vote for the party and not the candidate, it's anyone's guess as to what will be.

There are many wild cards that the polls may not factor and which could be game changers. Politics here is a particularly ugly business and in the last days and hours lots can happen, and lots can change. One wild card is the formation of a new ultra-orthodox Jewish women's party which currently is polling below the percent threshold. However, polls may not typically reach ultra-orthodox women, and if they do, the women might not indicate their support for this party which may not be religiously sanctioned in their respective communities but which may resonate with them individually.

Another wild card is the newly merged Arab party, a combination of three parties that have served in the Knesset for years. Together, they realized that with the new percent electoral threshold, one or all might not make the cut running individually. Today, as a merged party, they are polling in the range of 12-13 seats but could win more, and become the third or fourth largest party in the 20th Knesset. Yes, Israeli Arabs are eligible to vote like all Israelis and anyone who suggests that Israel is an apartheid state just needs to wait to see members of this Arab party sworn into office, and then begin ranting against Israel from the podium of the Knesset itself. Not only could this never happen with blacks in South Africa but it could never happen in any of our neighboring Arab states.

Please feel free to email me for a list of the parties running, their candidates for prime minister, and a summary of their political orientation, as well as articles or explanations of the outcome.

I have my political leanings and preferences and look forward to be able to vote. I do pray that my party will win and form the next government, but I pray more that whoever forms and serves in the next government will be inspired by Divine wisdom, guidance, bravery and faith to lead Israel in the traditions of thousands of years of our forefathers, kings, prophets, and rabbinic leaders.

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