



## GOVERNMENT WITHOUT THE ULTRA-ORTHODOX? Demography and the Future of Israeli Politics

By Richard Cincotta



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It would be hard to conjure up a more grave and immediate set of peacetime challenges than those that Israel faces today—from the advances in Iran’s nuclear program, to the political instabilities that continue to play out along the length of its borders. Yet, the outcome of the January 2013 election of the 19<sup>th</sup> Knesset appears to have been shaped less by the Israeli public’s perceptions of foreign threats, and more by its domestic concerns. After the votes had been tallied, *Yesh Atid*, led by former broadcast journalist Yair Lapid, had secured 19 of the Knesset’s 120 seats, a surprising showing for a party organized only a few months prior to the election and running a list of political outsiders. As Prime Minister Netanyahu assembled his coalition partners, *Yesh Atid* struck up a “both of us, or neither of us” pact with *HaBayit Yehudi* (*The Jewish Home*), a nationalist party to the right of *Likud* led by Naftali Bennett that sent 12 members to the current Knesset (MKs). As a result, Lapid and Bennett were able to exclude the two major ultra-Orthodox-led electoral lists—*Shas* with 11 MKs, and *United Torah Judaism (UTJ)*, a list including two Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox parties) with 7 MKs—from the ruling coalition.<sup>1</sup>

This brief note raises two questions: How did *Yesh Atid* rise from a virtual standing start to claim a critical position in Israel’s 33<sup>rd</sup> government? And what does this party’s electoral achievement mean for the future of Israel’s democracy? To respond, I will assume a position that most Middle East analysts are likely to consider highly speculative—that minority population growth has pushed the nation’s secular political establishment into a corner; neither can they afford to invite ultra-Orthodox parties into a ruling coalition, nor can they continue to neglect the public’s demands for policy reforms that would change the fundamental relationships between the ultra-Orthodox, Israel’s Arab citizens, and the state. While this position appears like unfettered speculation to those holding the “conventional view”, to others with a demographic perspective on Israel’s social turbulence, this shift seems virtually inevitable.<sup>2</sup>

The conventional view has it that, rather than the forerunner of change, *Yesh Atid* is the latest in a long and line of ephemeral centrist parties that have achieved significant power in the Knesset over the past fifty years. Each has exploited a wide ideological gap between the two secular Zionist “status quo” parties—those that have governed and upheld the basic structure of Israel’s domestic institutional arrangements: *Likud*, now led by Benjamin Netanyahu, on the right; and to the left, *Labour*, headed by its new chairman, Isaac Hertzog. In the conventional

<sup>1</sup> Central Election Committee, “Final official results of the Elections for the Nineteenth Knesset,” (Jerusalem, Government of Israel, 2013). Available online at: [http://www.bechirovot.gov.il/elections19/eng/list/results\\_eng.aspx](http://www.bechirovot.gov.il/elections19/eng/list/results_eng.aspx), last accessed: Oct. 10, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Kaufmann, Eric. *Shall the Religious Inherit the Earth?* (London, Profile Books, 2010), Ch. 6; also see: Ben-David, David. “A Demographic Look Ahead at Israel,” *Tauber Center Bulletin*, 2.1 (2010): 10-11.

view, *Yesh Atid*—like all of its centrist-party predecessors—is purported to be fragile, held intact by the political prowess and public personae of its party leader and by his or her abilities, before each election, to distinguish the party’s immediate agenda from both *Labour* and *Likud*, and thus resist being absorbed by either.<sup>3</sup>

Political demographers, however, understand the rise of Lapid’s party very differently. In this demographic perspective, *Yesh Atid* represents the latest “standard bearer” for the growing number of *equity voters* who go to the polls with issues of domestic politics foremost in their minds. These Israelis perceive the distribution of the privileges and responsibilities of citizenship—which, they argue, favors ultra-Orthodox and Arab citizens over middle-class and state interests—to be Israel’s most pressing political concern. Many believe that the long-term growth trajectories of these minorities threaten Israel’s future prosperity and security. *Yesh Atid’s* platform (much like the platform of *Shinui*, a centrist party once led by Yair Lapid’s now-deceased father, Tommy Lapid) has pledged to reform state policies and institutions that have, virtually since independence, reinforced and subsidized the separation of ultra-Orthodox and Israeli Arabs from the mainstream of Israeli society. In addition, Lapid has pledged to reduce the power of the Chief Rabbinate, which has been controlled by ultra-Orthodox rabbis and has maintained jurisdiction over the institutions of Israeli Jewish life: Jewish marriage and divorce, conversion to Judaism, eligibility for immigration to Israel, control of Jewish religious sites and rabbinical schools, and kosher certification.

For decades, it has been a common post-election practice for the party that wins the most Knesset seats—whether from the political left, right or center—to complete its coalitional majority by striking a bargain with the ultra-Orthodox parties. “The Deal”, like coalition-building deals anywhere, comes with a sizable price tag. For ultra-Orthodox parties to join the coalition and guarantee its stability, the principal partners customarily promise to continue to extend family welfare expenditures to ultra-Orthodox families, and national service exemptions and stipends for young-adult students at yeshiva (rabbinical schooling).<sup>4</sup>

However, these subsidies are not fixed costs. As the ultra-Orthodox population has grown from an inconsequential minority at independence—numbering perhaps as few as 40,000 individuals—to roughly 800,000, an estimated 10 percent (about half of whom are under the age of 16) of Israel’s eight-million-plus population today, so have The Deal’s financial, social and political costs. In 2009, Tzipi Livni backed away from this trade-off as head of *Kadima*, relinquishing her chance to head a new government and weakening her grip on the helm of *Kadima*. In May of 2010, Livni made a public plea to Prime Minister Netanyahu to replace the ultra-Orthodox parties in his government with *Kadima*, in order to begin integrating the ultra-Orthodox into the Israeli mainstream. While Netanyahu rejected her proposal, Livni’s argument resonated with the press and among local politicians.<sup>5</sup>

Since then, two additional developments have amplified the public discourse around Israel’s minority issues. In 2012, Israel’s Supreme Court declared the Tal Law, which codified the ultra-Orthodox’s military exemptions, unconstitutional. Then, in December, the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) released a report that published high, low and medium projections for three groups of citizens: ultra-Orthodox Jews, Israeli Arabs, and the remaining population. According to the CBS’s middle-of-the-road “medium projection” for each of the three groups, by 2030 about 21 percent of Israel’s eligible voters will be of Arab descent—up from about 17 percent at the time of the 2013 election. Another 11 percent, according to this projection, will be comprised of ultra-Orthodox Jews—up from nearly 7 percent in 2013 (Fig. 1).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Finkelstein, Justin Scott. “Can the Israeli Center Hold?” Foreign Policy Research Institute, *FPRI eNotes*, August, 2013. Available online at: <http://www.fpri.org/articles/2013/08/can-israeli-center-hold>, last accessed: Aug. 28, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Effron, Noah J. *Real Jews: Secular vs. Orthodox and the Struggle for Jewish Identity in Israel*. (New York, Basic Books, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Cincotta, Richard, and Eric Kaufmann. “Unpromising Demography in a Promised Land: the Growth of Dissonant Minorities and the Escalation of Demographic Politics in Israel.” *NIC-2010-05* (Washington, DC, National Intelligence Council, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Paltiel, Ari, Michel Sepulchre, Irene Kornilenko, Martin Moldonado. *Long-range Population Projections for Israel: 2009-2059*. (Jerusalem: Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), Demography and Census Department, 2012). Available online at: [http://www1.cbs.gov.il/reader/cw\\_usr\\_view\\_Folder?ID=141](http://www1.cbs.gov.il/reader/cw_usr_view_Folder?ID=141), last accessed: Oct. 10, 2013.

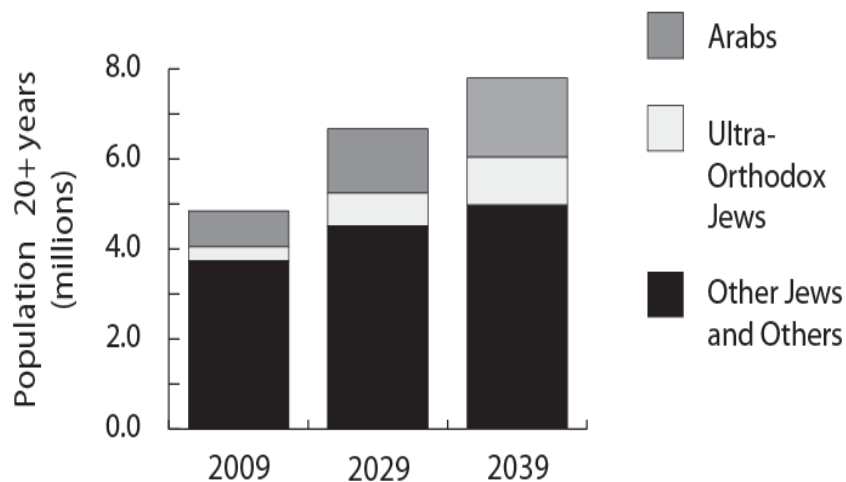


Figure 1. Estimates of the populations, 20 years of age and older, of Israeli citizens of three demographic categories in 2009, and projections for 2029 and 2039. The projections provide an image of the projected trajectory of voting-eligible populations of these sub-populations (Israeli citizens are eligible to vote at 18 years of age). Data source: Paltiel et al., 2012 (Central Bureau of Statistics, Israel).

Despite these minorities' relentless growth, neither the ultra-Orthodox parties nor the Arab parties have plotted a steady upward course in the Knesset elections. The vast majority of *Shas's* electoral support has come from non-ultra-Orthodox Sephardim and Mizrahim. Having peaked in the 15<sup>th</sup> Knesset with 17 MKs, the electoral popularity of *Shas* has waned—due, perhaps, to the ongoing integration of these North African and oriental Jewish communities into secular Israeli society, or to shifts in *Shas's* leadership. For *UTJ* and the Arab-led lists, electoral support has wandered a somewhat unsteady path that has ultimately led upwards. *UTJ* has added two MKs since the 15<sup>th</sup> Knesset—moving from 5 then, in 1999, to 7 MKs in today's 19<sup>th</sup> Knesset. Meanwhile, the Arab and communists lists have added just a single MK—moving from 10 in the 15<sup>th</sup> Knesset to today's 11. Whereas, in the years following Israel's independence, more than 75 percent of Israel's Arab citizens voted and a majority cast their ballots for mainstream Jewish-led parties, in the 2013 election, Arab voter turnout was estimated at 56 percent (up from 53 percent in the 2009 election)<sup>7</sup> and, by my calculations, the proportion of Israeli Arabs voting for Jewish-led parties was probably near 25 percent.

Has Israeli democracy seen the last of The Deal? As I indicated at the beginning of this essay, I assume that it has—that the political costs of governing in partnership with ultra-Orthodox parties have grown too large for a mainstream Zionist party to bear, even for rightist *Likud*. And, I argue, the Israeli public's frustrations with minority privileges and subsidies, with the political displays of ultra-Orthodox and Arab politicians, and with the population growth trajectories of both minorities are likely to make *Yesh Atid* into a strong and stable feature on Israel's political landscape. If this analysis is accurate, then *Shas* and *UTJ* have arrived at a level of unacceptability to the secular Zionist political establishment that has been reserved, since independence, for the Arab-led lists alone. And, if this shift has occurred (or when it does), it promises to empower parties at Israel's political center, making them virtually indispensable members of all coalitions well into the future.

This effect can be illustrated by examining the past five electoral outcomes, from the 15<sup>th</sup> Knesset in 1999 to the 19<sup>th</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Smooha, Sammy. "Ethnic Democracy: Israel as an Archetype." *Israel Studies* 2.2 (1997): 198-241; also see, Lowrance, Sherry. "Arab Non-voting in Arab Elections: To Boycott or Not" (Unpublished manuscript, undated). Available online at: [https://www.academia.edu/203500/Arab\\_Nonvoting\\_in\\_Israeli\\_Elections\\_To\\_Vote\\_or\\_Not](https://www.academia.edu/203500/Arab_Nonvoting_in_Israeli_Elections_To_Vote_or_Not), last accessed, Nov. 1, 2013; "Ben Solomon, Ariel. "Israeli Arab 56% Voters' Turnout Defies Expectations" *Jerusalem Post*, Jan. 25, 2013. Available online at: <http://www.jpost.com/Diplomacy-and-Politics/Arab-Israeli-voters-56-percent-turnout-defies-expectations>, last accessed: Nov. 17, 2013.

in 2013, while excluding both the ultra-Orthodox-led and Arab-led parties from the coalition-eligible tally (Table 1). While votes for leftist parties, in aggregate, increased between 2009 and 2013, this group experienced the only unambiguous downward trend in Knesset seats over the five previous elections. In fact, the left's electoral fortunes have declined so deeply that, without the involvement of ultra-Orthodox parties, no center-left coalition could have produced a majority during this period—a constraint that prevented Tzipi Livni from forming a *Kadima*-led government in 2009.

Overall, rightist parties, in aggregate, have made impressive gains since 1999. In the 2013 election, rightist parties received twice the votes of the left. However, despite this gap, the performance of rightist parties has been extraordinarily erratic (Table 1) over the previous five elections, and no rightist-only coalition garnered sufficient votes to “go it alone”—to achieve a majority in the Knesset without taking on an ultra-Orthodox-party partner and yielding to the political deal that comes with it.

Election		Votes (1000s) and MKs <i>ultra-Orthodox-led and Arab-led parties</i>			Votes (1000s) and MKs <i>remaining parties</i>					
Year	Knesset	Shas	UTJ	Arab-led	Left	Center	Right	Total	<i>Left plus Center</i>	<i>Right plus Center</i>
1999	15	430.7 [17]	125.7 [5]	267.9 [10]	924.0 [36]	569.2 [20]	794.7 [32]	2288.0 [88]	1493.2 [56]	1364.0 [52]
2003	16	258.9 [11]	135.1 [5]	230.7 [8]	619.3 [25]	473.3 [18]	1299.3 [53]	2392.0 [96]	1092.6 [43]	1772.7 [71*]
2006	17	399.1 [12]	147.1 [6]	252.9 [10]	590.7 [24]	876.7 [36]	788.0 [32]	2255.3 [92]	1467.3 [60]	1664.6 [68*]
2009	18	285.3 [11]	148.0 [5]	314.8 [11]	434.5 [16]	758.0 [28]	1333.0 [49]	2525.5 [93]	1192.5 [44]	2091.0 [77*]
2013	19	331.9 [11]	195.9 [7]	348.9 [11]	604.5 [21]	811.7 [27]	1231.0 [43]	2647.3 [91]	1416.2 [48]	2042.7 [70*]

Table 1. Despite the rapid population growth of Israel's most politically active ethnoreligious minorities—ultra-Orthodox Jews and Arabs—the votes and number of MKs (in brackets, [x]) awarded to Israel's ultra-Orthodox-led and Arab-led parties have vacillated over the past five legislative elections (from 1999 to 2013). If these parties were discounted, a right-plus-center coalition would still have achieved a majority (\*) in four of these elections. Data source: Central Election Committee, 2013 (Government of Israel).

If we assume that the ultra-Orthodox parties have become unacceptable as coalition partners, then the list of viable arrangements becomes somewhat abbreviated. Other than a unity government—gathering parties from the left, right and center—only governments that bring together rightist and centrist parties appear to be viable under current political conditions in Israel, when bound by this constraint. In fact, such right-center coalitions have been possible in the four previous elections (2003, 2006, 2009, and 2013). And, without an epic resurgence of *Labour* or a

near doubling of *Yesh Atid's* Knesset seats in the coming elections, there seems little reason for this powerful constraint to disappear.

What would Israeli politics look like should this constrained future come to pass? Over the next two decades, Israelis could expect to be governed by coalitions of rightist and centrist parties, devoid of ultra-Orthodox participation, and bent on reforming the institutions that regulate the relationship between minorities and the state. I believe that is exactly what is in store for Israel. Admittedly, given the tumultuousness of Israeli politics and the frequency at which threats to Israel's security evolve in the region, one can easily over-speculate on the details of future Israeli elections. Perhaps I have. Nonetheless, it would be naïve to believe that the conflictual politics associated with Israel's ultra-Orthodox and Arab minorities will, in our lifetimes, recede from the front line of Israel's political discourse.

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