



REFORMING THE ISRAELI ELECTORAL SYSTEM: WHAT'S NEEDED? WHAT'S POSSIBLE?

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Over a month and a half has passed since the March 17th Israeli parliamentary elections decisively granted Netanyahu's Likud party more seats in the Knesset than the opposing Zionist Union. Yet Netanyahu was unable to form a working government until May 6th, only two hours before the deadline, and even then he scraped by with a coalition that gave him a narrow – and precarious – majority of one vote in the Knesset. Something is wrong with this picture.

Since the birth of the country, Israel's electoral system has been criticized for favoring small parties over large ones and for granting a disproportionate amount of power to fringe ideological groups. The polarizing effect of this electoral system has led to a rapidly changing political landscape with parties popping up and disbanding with great frequency. It has led to stagnant governments that are more and more often dissolving themselves before the end of their term. It has led to a wild political scramble to form a coalition that continues for weeks after the results of an election come in.

In the aftermath of the 2015 election, some scholars have critiqued Israel's electoral system and called for various reforms. This isn't the first time in Israel's 67-year history that the electoral system has been questioned but it has sparked an important debate about how the electoral system shapes government and how it will shape the government in the future.

What are the basic contours of the Israeli electoral system? What problems have Israelis discerned in the system? What changes have been made to address those problems, and what reforms may still be helpful?

The Development of the System

Historically, Israel's electoral system developed as a result of the Yishuv political landscape. At the time of its founding, Israel needed a system that supported many parties because the influx of immigrants from a wide range of countries led to a rapidly changing Israeli polity.¹

Instead of a presidential system where the executive branch is separate from the legislative branch and the president is elected directly by the people (as in the US), Israel chose a parliamentary system based on the principles of **proportional representation (PR)**. In this type of system, voters cast ballots for political parties rather than individuals and all parties that surpass the minimum threshold of votes are awarded a number of seats in the Knesset that is proportionate to the percentage of votes they received. By keeping this **electoral threshold** low, there were few barriers to political entry and the system encouraged the formation of new parties with a wide range of platforms. It allowed for many smaller, ideological parties to flourish, which is compatible with an immigrant population that is building a new national identity. At the country's birth the electoral threshold was as low as 1 percent of the vote.

Within a PR system, the candidates elected to the legislative body can be chosen through either closed or open lists. Israel adopted a **closed list system** wherein each party internally determines the order of the candidates on its party list before the

¹ *The Knesset*. "The Electoral System in Israel." http://www.knesset.gov.il/description/eng/eng_mimshal_beh.htm#1.

election. When voters go to the ballot box, they cast a vote for a party, knowing that if the party wins 15 seats, those seats will be filled by the top 15 individuals in that party's fixed ranked list.² This electoral decision served to increase the power of party elites in Israel's burgeoning new state by giving them the power to determine the order of the candidates as opposed to voters who determine the order of candidates on an open list.

Another electoral choice is district size. In the formation of the Israeli electoral system, Israel was not divided into subdistricts that each elected one or multiple candidates. Rather, the entire country is treated as **a single constituency** and candidates run on a national platform. This means that candidates are not territorially tied to their constituents and do not need to rely on concentrated local support for reelection. This makes sense in the context of the emerging Israeli state because Israel is a very small country geographically and did not have strong regional distinctions at its birth.

The parliamentary elections are only the first part of forming a new government in Israel. According to the Israeli electoral law adopted at Israel's formation, the leader of the party that wins the most votes is not automatically selected as the prime minister. After the election results are announced, the Israeli president is tasked with asking whichever party leader he thinks can succeed to try and form a governing coalition. While the president *usually* asks the leader of the party that received the most votes to form a coalition, this is not true across the board. This practice of the **president selecting the prime minister** is a response to setting up a system that creates many political parties, none of which are likely to gain enough votes to govern on their own. Therefore, Israeli governments rely on coalitions between different ideological parties and the president's involvement serves to ensure that the new prime minister is capable of forming such a coalition. The Knesset member chosen to create a coalition is granted 28 days by law to form a coalition, with the possibility of extending for up to 14 additional days. If s/he cannot form a coalition by that time, the president is to select another Knesset member to form one.

Finally, the Knesset's Basic Law of 1958 establishes that the Knesset can dissolve itself before the end of its full term if a law calling for its dissolution is passed by a majority of Knesset members.³ The prime minister may call on the Knesset to dissolve itself if the government is at a stalemate.

Proposed and Enacted Electoral Changes

Since its founding, Israel has undertaken gone through some electoral reforms, relating to the electoral threshold and method of selecting a prime minister, and further reforms have been suggested that were never actually adopted.

The **electoral threshold** has steadily increased since the birth of the state. The Knesset passed laws to raise it from 1 percent to 1.5 percent in 1992, then to 2 percent before the 2003 election.⁴ Just before the 2015 election, the electoral threshold was raised once more to 3.25 percent. These changes were made with the intention of excluding the smallest parties from government and thereby strengthen the power of the most popular parties. Nonetheless, the Israeli electoral threshold has only changed by small increments over the history of the country and still falls well below that of many other countries. Thresholds are a popular feature of electoral systems and are present in twenty out of twenty-eight EU countries, yet only two of those countries have thresholds below 3 percent. Thresholds in European countries are much more likely to be in the 5-10 percent range.⁵

Additionally, the country went through a brief period (1992-2001) in which Israeli constituents **directly elected the prime minister**, forming what was essentially a "presidential" system (though the Knesset still had to affirm the prime minister's election with a vote of confidence).⁶ This new system was adopted after "the stinking maneuver," 3 months of crisis and stagnancy in the Knesset in the early 1990's, with the hopes of ending the political stalemates that resulted from the PR system.⁷ However, the new electoral reform only lasted for three elections (1996, 1999, and 2001) before it was repealed.

² For example, the full Zionist Camp list can be found on the website of the Israeli Central Elections Committee.

<http://www.bechirot20.gov.il/election/Candidates/Pages/OneListCandidates.aspx>.

³ *The Knesset*. "Basic Law: The Knesset – 1958." http://www.knesset.gov.il/laws/special/eng/basic2_eng.htm.

⁴ Neri Zilber. "Israel's Governance Law: Raising the Electoral Threshold." *The Washington Institute* March 10, 2014.

<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/israels-governance-law-raising-the-electoral-threshold>.

⁵ *Ibid*.

⁶ It is important to note that the Israeli Prime Minister does not simply function as the head of the largest party in the Knesset as the Majority Leader in the Senate or House of Representatives in the US, but also holds most of the real executive power (the Israeli president is the official head of state).

⁷ Emanuele Ottolenghi. "Why Direct Election Failed in Israel." *Journal of Democracy* 12:4, 2001, pp. 109, 111. Available through: Project MUSE. https://muse.jhu.edu/journals/journal_of_democracy/v012/12.4ottolenghi.pdf.

Instead of limiting the power of the smaller parties that had caused political stalemate as expected, critics argue that the new reform led voters to split their ticket, voting for a prime minister candidate not associated with the party they voted for in the parliamentary election.⁸ Without the incentive to vote for one of the major parties so that its leading MK could become prime minister, voters were more inclined to cast ballots for smaller, fringe parties, further fragmenting the political landscape.

Roy Isacowitz, a writer for *Haaretz*, argues that the negative experience of moving to the direct election of the prime minister and then repealing that measure soon after has made Israelis wary of instituting further electoral reform. He writes:

Israel has experience with the unintended effects to electoral tinkering. The best-known example was the brief interregnum during which the prime minister was elected directly. That had the wholly unanticipated effect of weakening the larger parties and was soon revoked. It should be a lesson to today's generation of MKs.⁹

Regardless of its impact on electoral reform today, this method of choosing the Israeli prime minister lasted only a short time and is generally considered a failure.

Many electoral reforms dealing with **district magnitude** have been suggested, though not passed, throughout Israel's history. As an alternative to the whole country being treated as a single constituency, a direct majoritarian system was proposed by David Ben Gurion in the 1950's, in which Israel would be divided into 120 single-member districts each of which would elect one Knesset member. A similar districting plan was proposed by MKs Igael Hurvitz and Zalman Shoval of the Telem Party in 1980, though it was not adopted by the Knesset.¹⁰ Another early proposal by MK David Bar-Rav-Hai of the Mapai party was a regional districting system in which each district elected multiple candidates.¹¹ A mixed system, where part of the Knesset is elected through district elections and part through a national ballot, was proposed by various Knesset members in the following years: 1958 (MK Yosef Serlin of the General Zionists), 1972, and 1988 (MK Mordechai Virshubski of the Ratz Party).¹²

Government officials attempted major electoral reform in 1984 and again in the early 1990's, but without much success.¹³

The 2015 Election

The recent 2015 elections shed light on the current state of the Israeli electoral system and has led many critics to call for renewed attempts at electoral reform.

In preparation for the election, a law was passed in March 2014 to continue raising the electoral threshold to 3.25 percent. The push for this electoral "reform" was initiated by leaders of the right and center, led by Foreign Minister Avigdor Liberman (Yisrael Beiteinu) and Finance Minister Yair Lapid (Yesh Atid),¹⁴ primarily for political reasons. They hoped to crowd out the smaller Arab and leftist parties and therefore to win more seats in the Knesset for the right.

The Israeli electoral system has always been criticized for fragmenting the constituency and awarding small parties with a disproportionately large influence on policy. When small parties are needed to form a coalition, they can make high demands of the larger parties in exchange for their support. Not to mention that the presence of smaller parties in the Knesset takes seats away from the larger parties. As an electoral "tool," raising the electoral threshold is supposed to reduce the power and significance of smaller parties.

Raising the electoral threshold to 3.25 percent last year did not lead to the *political* results rightist leaders intended, but did have a predictable effect on the electoral system at large.

⁸ Ibid, p. 110.

⁹ Roy Isacowitz. "Who's Afraid of Raising the Electoral Threshold in Israel - and Why?" *Ha'aretz* March 11, 2014. <http://www.haaretz.com/news/national/.premium-1.578941>.

¹⁰ *The Knesset*. "Proposals for Electoral Reform in the Knesset." http://www.knesset.gov.il/description/eng/eng_mimshal_shi.htm.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid. See also: Ottolenghi, "Why Direct Election Failed in Israel."

¹⁴ Zilber, "Israel's Governance Law: Raising the Electoral Threshold."

Instead of crowding out the left, the raised threshold caused the exclusion of Eli Yishai's new Ultra-Orthodox party from the Knesset. It also led to the unprecedented Joint Arab List which became the third largest party in the Knesset as a result of the March elections.

In an article published just after the election, Hussein Ibish, a Senior Fellow at the American Task Force on Palestine, wrote that the real story of this most recent election was not the surprising Netanyahu win over the Zionist Union, but rather the story going on beneath the surface—the consolidation of Arab and Jewish-leftist parties under the Arab List coalition and the unprecedented Arab voter turnout.¹⁵

On January 23rd, the Jewish and Arab-leftist Hadash, United Arab List, Balad, Ta'al, and the Islamist movement, what many have called “unlikely bedfellows,” combined to form the new Arab List. Upon its formation, Ahmad Tibi, the fourth candidate on the list, said that “for the first time, we are sending a message to the Arab public that unity is power, unity of a minority, of all the parties that represent the minority...Despite the disagreements between the parties, we succeeded in bridging the gaps, made concessions to achieve our goal.”¹⁶

In the 2009 and 2013 elections, Arab voter turnout had remained relatively low (53 percent and 56 percent, respectively) as compared to Jewish voter turnout, which hovered around 70 percent in both elections.¹⁷ Even after the formation of the Arab List, it was unclear if the partnership would lead to increased political participation by Israeli Arabs. Yet the 2015 election resulted in a 63.5 percent voter turnout among Arab Israelis, an increase of over 27 percent from the 2013 election.¹⁸ Additionally, the elections resulted in 13 Arab List seats in the Knesset (an increase in the number of seats held by Arab Israelis by about 19 percent since 1992),¹⁹ making it the third largest party and a force to be reckoned with in the Israeli parliament.

This kind of unprecedented unity highlights the effect of the raised threshold on the Israeli electoral system as a whole. As a result of the increased electoral threshold, the 2015 elections resulted in the *smallest* number of parties in the Knesset since 1992 and generally *larger*-sized parties than had been included in the past.²⁰ This is what we would expect to happen as a result of a raised threshold—reduced fragmentation and a concentration of voter support for larger parties. However, what might not have been predicted was the willingness of smaller parties to overcome their differences and unite in order to get seats in the Knesset.

The Desire for Electoral Reform: Reacting to the 2015 Election

One of Netanyahu's campaign promises (which he has also promised in the past) was to implement electoral reform. In January of 2015 he claimed that one of the first things he would do after being elected would be to implement a law that would make the leader of the party that won the most seats automatically the next prime minister, without requiring the involvement of the Israeli president.²¹ Netanyahu argued that Israel's record of having 33 new governments in 66 years has caused “instability” and must change.²²

Tal Shalev of *i24 News* pointed out in an article in January that, in making these promises, Netanyahu forgot that he himself had benefited in the 2009 elections from the system he was campaigning to overturn. In 2009 the Kadima Party, led by Tzipi Livni, won the most seats in the Knesset and yet President Shimon Peres tasked Netanyahu with forming the governing coalition instead of Livni.²³ Furthermore, in the 2015 election, President Reuven Rivlin's dislike of Benjamin Netanyahu had

¹⁵ Hussein Ibish. “The Specter of an Arab Israel.” *Politico* March 19, 2015. <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/03/israeli-election-arab-israel-116243.html#.VT-YciFVhHw>.

¹⁶ Quoted in Jodi Rudoren. “Diverse Israeli Arab Political Factions Join to Keep Place in Parliament.” *The New York Times* January 23, 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/24/world/middleeast/israeli-arab-political-parties-form-single-ticket-for-elections.html>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ariel Ben Solomon. “Arab Sector Turnout for Recent Elections Reached 63.5%, Polling Data Shows.” *The Jerusalem Post* March 24, 2015. <http://www.jpost.com/Israel-Elections/Arab-sector-turnout-for-recent-elections-reached-635-percent-polling-data-shows-394878>.

¹⁹ *The Israel Democracy Institute (IDI)*. “IDI Resources on the 2015 Elections.” 2015. <http://en.idi.org.il/tools-and-data/links-to-idi-resources/the-2015-knesset-elections/idi-resources-on-the-2015-elections/>.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ *I24NEWS*. “Netanyahu Launches Campaign, Accusing Rivals of Endangering Israel's Security.” January 6, 2015. <http://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel/politics>.

²² Ibid.

²³ Tal Shalev. “Israeli Election Diary: Netanyahu's Maneuvers and the Electoral Storm.” *I24NEWS* January 7, 2015.

analysts questioning whether or not he would recommend a Herzog coalition or unity government over giving Netanyahu the chance to form a coalition, even if Likud won a slight majority of seats. This sparks the question about whether or not Netanyahu's campaign promises were intended for short-term political gain or long-term change in the Israeli electoral system.

Israel's brief stint in the 1990's with directly electing the prime minister was scrapped because it encouraged voters to cast ballots for smaller, fringe parties instead of consolidating power in the larger parties. There was no correlation between the party a constituent voted for and the prime minister who would be elected. Similarly, the logic behind granting the prime minister position automatically to the head of the winning party is to encourage voters to vote for the bigger parties (thus consolidating their power) in order to determine who will fill the prime minister position. This electoral reform should result in the Israeli system moving closer to a two-party system than the current multi-party system.

Much of this year's election campaigning (on both sides) was centered around the character of Benjamin Netanyahu. Different factions on the left and center organized to campaign on an "anti-Bibi" platform—in fact the strongest campaign promise of the left was to get rid of Netanyahu as prime minister. Israel's electoral system is designed to focus on parties, rather than individuals, but the 2015 elections showed an increasing focus on the individual who becomes prime minister. This indicates that, if the party with the most votes was automatically guaranteed that its leader would become prime minister, it might encourage more voters to vote for the bigger, frontrunner parties. Even in this 2015 election, Netanyahu's last-minute campaign strategy was to encourage voters who were inclined to vote for smaller right-wing parties to vote for Likud instead in order to ensure that Netanyahu, not Herzog, became the prime minister.

Potential Electoral Changes

In the weeks following the 2015 election, many criticisms of the current Israeli system have been uttered. The need for a law mandating automatic selection of prime minister is echoed by one of the most vocal supporters of new electoral reform in Israel: Yohanan Plesner, president of the Israel Democracy Institute (IDI). Plesner and the IDI also argue for additional reforms including raising the electoral threshold and setting limitations on dissolving the Knesset.²⁴ Additionally, other scholars are pushing for further reforms relating to the following areas of the electoral system:

List PR:

Changing from closed list PR system to a more open list is one suggested reform. As opposed to a closed list, where the ranking of candidates in each party is fixed prior to the election, an open list system allows voters to express a preference for individual candidates on the list when they go to the ballot box. Political Science Professor Matthew Shugart proposes a semi-open list PR system in which a party would put forth a ranked list prior to the election, but voters would still rank the individual candidates according to their preferences. Any candidate that received a certain percentage of votes would move up in the list.²⁵

As mentioned before, the 2015 election came to be largely about the figure of Benjamin Netanyahu and those who supported him or were opposed. But we can imagine that with a semi-open list PR, a vote for Likud would not necessarily have been a vote for Netanyahu—rather, there might have been room for another candidate to surpass Netanyahu within the Likud Party. Granted, the Likud Party *did* hold a primary in December 2014 in which Netanyahu was selected as the party's first-ranked candidate.²⁶ Primaries in the Israeli system are supposed to counteract some of the implications of having a closed-list system and give voters more of a say in the order of the candidates. However, a lot of scandals about Netanyahu and attacks against him came out in the months after the primary and before the general election. Therefore, it is feasible that a semi-open list could have produced a Likud victory with a different leading candidate.

The Israel Democracy Institute published a report in 2011 entitled "Reforming Israeli's Political System: Recommendations and Action Plan," which proposed a semi-open ballot system as well and provided an example of what a such a ballot would look like for Israeli voters (See Figure 1). As depicted in Figure 1, an example of a semi-open list PR ballot, this system would

<http://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel/politics/56950-150107-israeli-election-diary-a-storm-is-brewing>.

²⁴ See Yohanan Plesner. "The 2015 Elections and Israeli Governance," *The Israel Democracy Institute (IDI)*, March 25, 2015.

<http://en.idi.org.il/analysis/articles/the-2015-elections-and-israeli-governance/>.

²⁵ Matthew S. Shugart. "Political-Institutional Reform in Israel: A Comparative Perspective." *The Israel Democracy Institute (IDI)*, 2011, p. 10.

http://en.idi.org.il/media/1760789/IsraeliPoliticalReform_Shugart.pdf.

²⁶ "Israel election updates / Likud primary results are in." *Ha'aretz* January 1, 2015. <http://www.haaretz.com/news/israel-election-2015/1.634851>.

allow voters to choose between voting for a party's list as it stands or voting for the same party while also indicating a preference for the order of the candidates in the party's list.

Semi-open lists are actually quite popular. Other countries with semi-open list systems include the Netherlands, Slovenia, Austria, Denmark, Sweden, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Cyprus, Belgium, Greece, Norway, and Iceland.²⁷

Figure 1

SUN

Israelis
for Sunrise

Option A: Cast this ballot without selecting any of the candidates. Casting of an unmarked ballot is equivalent to casting a vote for the party slate ranked by the party as it appears on the ballot.

Option B: Select up to three names in order to influence the ranking of the candidates on the party slate for the Knesset. Please mark an X in the box to the left of the candidate's name.

- Use pen only.
- Candidates whose names appear next to a black square are not subject to ranking.
- A ballot with corrections, deletions or with more than three names marked will be cast as an Option A ballot.

Candidates in order of party ranking:

<input type="checkbox"/> 1. Yuli Maagan	<input type="checkbox"/> 21. Ben-Hor Braun	<input type="checkbox"/> 41. Shiran Oren
<input type="checkbox"/> 2. Banya Bar-Am	<input type="checkbox"/> 22. Ta'ir Barkai-Admon	<input type="checkbox"/> 42. Genya Goz
<input type="checkbox"/> 3. Genya Ofek-Biran	<input type="checkbox"/> 23. Omri Shem-Tov	<input type="checkbox"/> 43. Geula Eliassaf
<input type="checkbox"/> 4. Leila Joseph	<input type="checkbox"/> 24. Amram Shamgar	<input type="checkbox"/> 44. Yossi Misgav
<input type="checkbox"/> 5. Eitan Lotem	<input type="checkbox"/> 25. Shmuel Inbar	<input type="checkbox"/> 45. Lachan Granit
<input type="checkbox"/> 6. Nasrin Agbaria	<input type="checkbox"/> 26. Aharon Ofer	<input type="checkbox"/> 46. Gilat Elhan
<input type="checkbox"/> 7. Lital Lotan	<input type="checkbox"/> 27. Elah Kubeisi	<input type="checkbox"/> 47. Yona Mayer
<input type="checkbox"/> 8. Lihi On	<input type="checkbox"/> 28. Eran Galila	<input type="checkbox"/> 48. Liam Gal-Or
<input type="checkbox"/> 9. Lulit Elial	<input type="checkbox"/> 29. Ahava Aldor	<input type="checkbox"/> 49. Shaadia Adiat
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 10. Yehiel Shebach	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 30. Udi Elhanan	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 50. Lian Alon
<input type="checkbox"/> 11. Belphoria Shavit	<input type="checkbox"/> 31. Eli El-Or	<input type="checkbox"/> 51. Galia Iyov
<input type="checkbox"/> 12. Maoz Yom-Tov	<input type="checkbox"/> 32. Matanel Yizrach	<input type="checkbox"/> 52. Eli Geffen
<input type="checkbox"/> 13. Boutrous Hourri	<input type="checkbox"/> 33. Ofir Eliassaf	<input type="checkbox"/> 53. Natanella Elizur-Givati
<input type="checkbox"/> 14. Shuni Simcha	<input type="checkbox"/> 34. Orgad Eliahu	<input type="checkbox"/> 54. Leora Ahiassaf
<input type="checkbox"/> 15. Matan Yotam	<input type="checkbox"/> 35. Issa Massawra	<input type="checkbox"/> 55. Latifa Ahidah
<input type="checkbox"/> 16. Benayahu Barak	<input type="checkbox"/> 36. Yishaiyahu Noy-Shaham	<input type="checkbox"/> 56. Abraham Levi
<input type="checkbox"/> 17. Timor Ben Zion	<input type="checkbox"/> 37. Oron Elimelech	<input type="checkbox"/> 57. Dana Simchon
<input type="checkbox"/> 18. Tirosh Maksim	<input type="checkbox"/> 38. Or-el Elior	<input type="checkbox"/> 58. Abir Ghanaïm
<input type="checkbox"/> 19. Tchelet Bashur	<input type="checkbox"/> 39. Wadad Hatib	<input type="checkbox"/> 59. Yehoram Vaknin
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 20. Marwa Al Huzail	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 40. Li-Zar Shevach	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 60. Mila Henin

The Israel Democracy Institute (IDI), "Reforming Israel's Political System: Recommendations and Action Plan" October 2011, p. 22. <http://en.idi.org.il/media/2077306/PoliticalReformBooklet.pdf>.

²⁷ *The Israel Democracy Institute (IDI)*. "Reforming Israel's Political System: Recommendations and Action Plan." October 2011, pp. 44-45. <http://en.idi.org.il/media/2077306/PoliticalReformBooklet.pdf>.

Districting:

In terms of district magnitude, both a district-based system and a two-tiered system have been suggested to replace Israel's single national constituency. Shugart worries that the larger the district magnitude is, the lower the electoral connection and the smaller the district magnitude, the more "visible" legislators are to those they represent.²⁸ The late Daniel Elazar, Political Science professor and founder and president of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, suggested that a pure single-member constituency system (a "first past the post" system similar to that used in the UK) might strongly favor minority groups such as the ultra-Orthodox and Israeli Arabs. Because both of these groups tend to be geographically concentrated, Elazar argues, they would be able to secure a number of seats in the Knesset under a single-member district system. Elazar's proposal, however, was to divide Israel into 12 multi-member districts based on the 12 administrative sub-districts under the Ministry of the Interior, each of which would elect a number of candidates proportional to its population. Voters would have the choice of either voting for a straight party ticket or for individual candidates.²⁹ A hypothetical 12-district system was depicted by the Israel Democracy Institute in their 2011 report on Israeli electoral reform as shown in Figure 2. Shugart also suggests between 10 and 20 multi-member districts, electing 6-10 candidates per district.³⁰

Figure 2:

12 electoral districts and three models for allocation of seats*

	Electoral District	Number of eligible voters**	Number of seats (out of 120)	Number of seats (out of 90)
1	Jerusalem and Judean Hills	526,139	12	9
2	Safed-Tiberias-Jezreel Valley	474,227	11	8
3	Acre	379,685	9	6
4	Haifa-Krayot	454,047	10	8
5	Hadera-Hasharon	523,736	12	9
6	Petah Tikva	494,686	11	8
7	Ramle-Rehovot	591,489	13	10
8	Tel Aviv	383,585	9	7
9	North Dan	360,357	8	6
10	South Dan	330,019	8	6
11	Ashkelon	357,473	8	6
12	Be'er Sheva	403,137	9	7
	Total	5,278,985*	120	90

The Israel Democracy Institute (IDI), "Reforming Israel's Political System: Recommendations and Action Plan" October 2011, pg. 41. <http://en.idi.org.il/media/2077306/PoliticalReformBooklet.pdf>.

²⁸ Shugart, "Political Institutional Reform in Israel," pp. 6-7.

²⁹ Daniel J. Elazar. "Electoral and Constitutional Reform for Israel." *Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs*. <http://www.jcpa.org/dje/articles2/electconstref.htm>.

³⁰ Shugart, "Political-Institutional Reform in Israel," p. 7.

A third option is a two-tiered system in which a number of the Knesset seats are elected through districts but other seats are elected in a single national constituency. This creates a more complex, and potentially confusing, system for voters at the ballot box.

Dissolving the Knesset:

Lior Akerman, a former division head in the Shin Bet and a writer for *The Jerusalem Post*, criticized the Israeli election system for being lengthy, costly, and occurring way too frequently, and yet producing little benefit to the Israeli people.³¹ Akerman, like many others, argues that the power of small parties in the existing system leads to “weak governments that rely on unstable coalitions” and that frequent elections prevent long-term planning and reforms.³²

The fact that a prime minister can dissolve the parliament and call for new elections or that a Knesset can vote for early elections has led to a lot of political upheaval in recent years. The 2nd, 5th, 10th, 11th, 13th, 14th, 15th, 17th, and 18th Knessets have all been prematurely dissolved, and that the likelihood of early dissolution has increased in recent decades.³³ If more checks were put on dissolving the government, there might be more cooperation in the middle instead of polarized coalitions. Plesner argues that a new prime minister and/or government should be able to be chosen *within* an existing parliament rather than through national elections. This would be possible through a vote of confidence by Knesset members.³⁴

Additionally, he argues that smaller, fragmented parties lead to the weakness of coalitions and the increased likelihood that the current government will dissolve, calling for new parliamentary elections. Therefore, he claims that by implementing his other reforms that aim to strengthen large parties, the reformed system would also lead to a reduction in the number of times the Knesset is dissolved before the end of its term.

Israel calls for elections much more frequently than many other European countries.³⁵ This is not surprising as Israeli law makes it fairly easy to dissolve the parliament earlier than expected. Under articles 34 and 35 of the Knesset Basic Law, the Knesset can be dissolved if a law is passed by a majority of the Knesset to call for new elections.³⁶ Due to these relatively easy methods for dissolving, there have been 33 governments in Israel since 1988 and none of them stayed in place for a full term.³⁷

The Likelihood of Implementation

In terms of the implementation of practical reforms, some of these proposals are more salient than others. The whole electoral system would have to be uprooted and changed for it to rely on smaller districts or a two-tiered system, making these reforms more unlikely. However, raising the electoral threshold, changing the electoral laws that govern how a prime minister is selected, increasing the barriers to dissolving parliament, and even enacting legislation that opens the closed-list system, are all more practical reforms to keep an eye on in the future.

Yet some of these reforms are oversimplified. For example, Plesner and others claim that a policy automatically selecting the prime minister would further encourage voters to vote for larger parties rather than fringe ones. However, it could cause practical problems should the head of that party (and thus the prime minister) be unable to capture the majority of Knesset members in a governing coalition. This is not far-fetched. Imagine if the Zionist Camp had gained the most seats in the 2015 election but, if all the smaller rightist parties had aligned, Herzog might not have been able to form a coalition. Would the leading coalition then be headed by a prime minister who is actually the head of the opposition? Even if a formal coalition was not required by law, a prime minister whose party does not control bargaining power in the Knesset would likely face a stalemate when enacting policy.

³¹ Lior Akerman. “We Need Electoral Reform Now.” *The Jerusalem Post* March 26, 2015. <http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/We-need-electoral-reform-now-395266>.

³² Ibid.

³³ *The Knesset*. “The Electoral System in Israel.” http://www.knesset.gov.il/description/eng/eng_mimshal_beh.htm.

³⁴ Yohanan Plesner, “How to Prevent the Recurrence of Early Knesset Elections” *The Israel Democracy Institute (IDI)* December 18, 2014. <http://en.idi.org.il/analysis/articles/how-to-prevent-the-recurrence-of-early-knesset-elections/>.

³⁵ *The Israel Democracy Institute (IDI)*. “How Often Elections are Called in Israel and Around the World.” December 4, 2014. <http://en.idi.org.il/about-idi/news-and-updates/how-often-elections-are-called-in-israel-and-around-the-world/>.

³⁶ Dana Blander. “The Many Ways to Dissolve the Knesset.” *The Israel Democracy Institute* December 10, 2014. <http://en.idi.org.il/analysis/articles/the-many-ways-to-dissolve-the-knesset/>.

³⁷ Ibid.

Also, raising the threshold is an electoral reform that is indeed easy to implement—it simply requires a law to be passed and then any party that does not meet the threshold is simply excluded from the Knesset. However, raising the electoral threshold too quickly may have unanticipated consequences and it is doubtful that this reform alone would lead to a strictly two-party contest in Israel.

Legislation passed to make it harder to dissolve the Knesset before its full term would help the Israeli government be more functional, but it still does not solve the core problem with the Israeli government—the dissolution of the Knesset is a mere side-effect of the stagnation that results from so many powerful small and midsized parties.

On the other hand, some reforms aren't being taken seriously enough. Not many critics focus on the fact that the current system seems to favor political leaders breaking off from their former parties to form smaller niche parties (like Livni's Hatnuah and Kahlon's Kulanu) because they can get enough of a following based on their individual popular status to give them sway in forming a coalition. In the 2015 election, many commentators noted that Kahlon had the most power to influence the outcome of the election by deciding whether to align Kulanu with the right or the left. Perhaps in a more open-list system, there would be more competition between leaders within a party as opposed to leaders forming new parties.

Small, Incremental Reforms are the Best Options

Practically speaking, smaller incremental reforms are the most promising ways to start changing the Israeli electoral system. If Israel were to follow the precedent of incrementally raising the electoral threshold, then that would likely have the effect it had in this election—consolidating previously fragmented parties or eliminating those unable to move towards the center. Additionally, enacting legislation that makes it more difficult to prematurely dissolve the Knesset could stabilize the system by reducing the incentive to deal with every political conflict by spending a lot of money, time, and political capital on new elections.

These smaller measures of “reform” should be passed to begin improving the functionality of the electoral process. But they also must be recognized as mere band aids on wounds that run deep in the Israeli electoral system. Israel is still a young country and it is still possible to make sweeping electoral reforms—to really transform the fundamentals of the system—in order to help it function better in the future.

The problem, of course, is that the current coalition system gives enough power to smaller parties to block reforms that would limit their own power. The razor-thin coalition Netanyahu has reached this week, heavily reliant on smaller rightist parties, has set him up once again to fall short of achieving real electoral reform—electoral reform that would hurt the very parties that have ensured Netanyahu's return to power.