



UNDERSTANDING ELECTORAL SYSTEMS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND BEYOND

This Country Profile, Timeline, and Case Study on Israel – created by [Tamar Friedman](#), a Junior Fox Fellow in FPRI's Program on the Middle East – are part of a larger interactive [infographic](#) about electoral systems in the Middle East. Other countries highlighted as part of this project include: Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey.

Country Profile: Israel



1 National District

- All of Israel is treated as one electoral district.

Unicameral

- Israel has a single legislative body made up of 120 parliament members.

Proportional Representation: Closed-List PR

- In Israel, voters select a party rather than individual candidates. Before the election, each party creates and publicizes a ranked list of its members.
- The number of seats a party wins in the Knesset¹ correlates (proportionally) with the percentage of the total vote that party received. If a party ends up with twenty seats, the first twenty people on the party's ranked list will fill those seats.

Executive Branch

- The President of Israel is the ceremonial head of state and is elected by the Knesset.
-

- The Prime Minister of Israel holds all executive power and is nominated by the President.

Electoral Threshold

- Israel has one of the lowest electoral thresholds in the world at 3.25%. This means that a political party needs a minimum of 3.25% of the total vote to guarantee themselves seats in the Israeli parliament.

Coalition Government

- Never in Israel's history has one political party won over 50% of the seats in the Knesset.

Forming a Coalition

Therefore, a coalition—an alliance of multiple parties that collectively fill more than 50% of the Knesset seats—must be formed for the government to function.

- After the election results have been determined, the Israeli President tasks the party leader deemed most likely to form a coalition (which is almost always the head of the party that won the

¹ The Israeli Parliament.

most seats, but does not need to be) to do so within 60 days.

- If the leader cannot form a coalition within 60 days, the president may ask a leader from another party to do so.

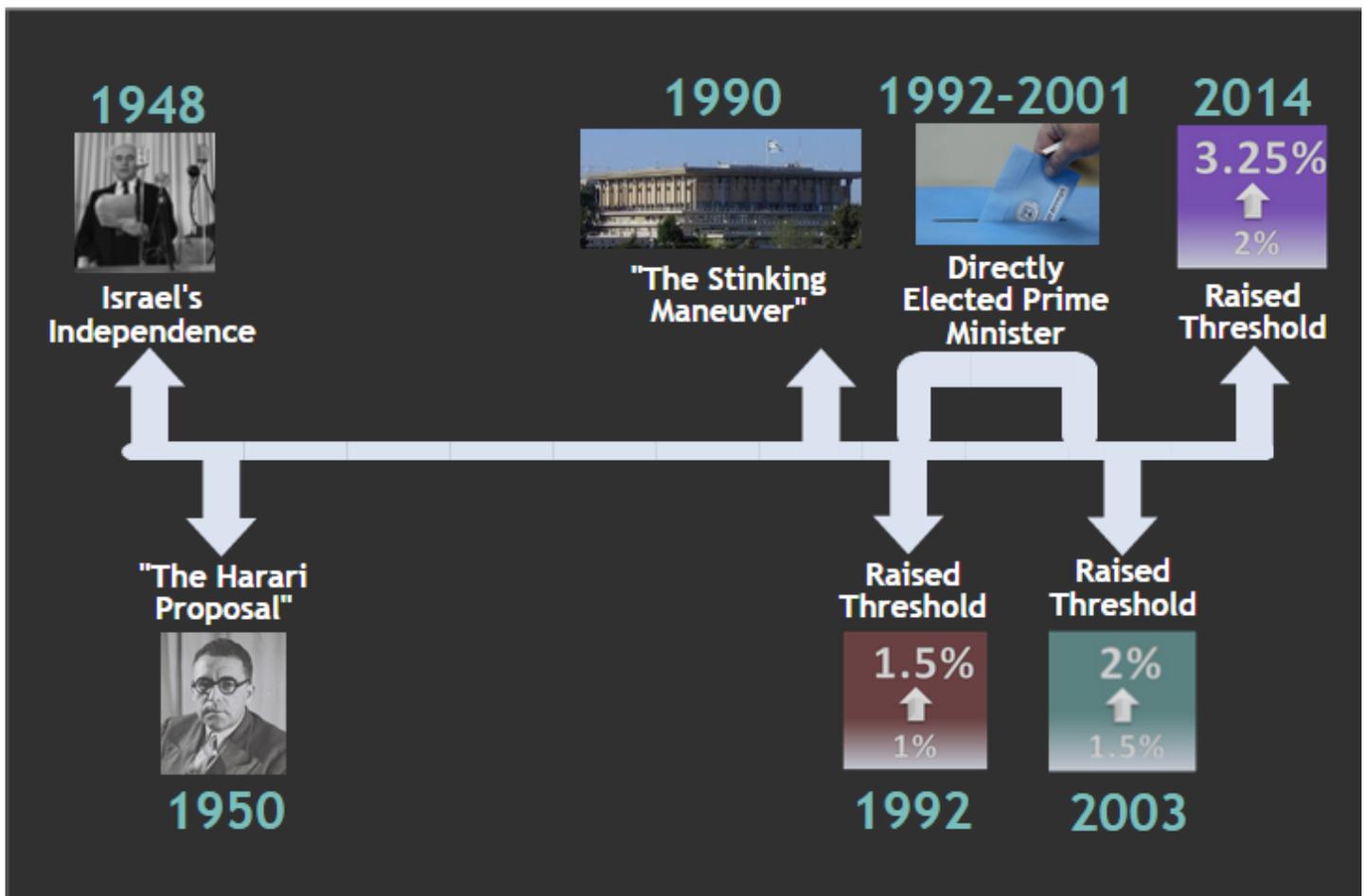
Voter Eligibility

- All residents within the 1949 borders (whether Jewish, Arab, Druze, or other) are eligible for citizenship and those over 18 are eligible to vote.
- Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza are not

eligible for citizenship or to vote. Israeli settlers in the West Bank (and those who were in Gaza prior to disengagement) are eligible for both citizenship and voting.

- In East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights, which have been formally annexed by Israel, all residents (including Arab and Druze) are eligible for citizenship and the right to vote. However, few Arab and Druze residents have pursued citizenship from these areas.

Timeline



- **1948 Israel Independence**: The Proclamation of Independence declared on May 14, 1948. The Proclamation stated that an Israeli constitution should be created within the year.
- **1950 “The Harari Proposal”**: After heated debate among political leaders about whether to adopt a written or unwritten constitution, the Knesset passed “the Harari proposal” which dictated that the country would pass a series of “basic laws” that would collectively act as the Israeli constitution. The constitution of Israel remains uncodified until today.
- **1990 “The Stinking Maneuver”**: The political stagnation that lasted for three months in the spring of 1990 (over coalition negotiations) paralyzed the government and led to the 1992 Basic Law that called for direct election of the Israeli Prime Minister.
- **1992 Raised Threshold**: The electoral threshold was raised from 1% to 1.5% of the total vote.
- **1992-2001 Directly Elected Prime Minister**: During the 1996, 1999, and 2001 elections, the Prime Minister was directly elected by Israeli voters on a separate ballot.
- **2003 Raised Threshold**: The electoral threshold was raised from 1.5% to 2% of the total vote.
- **2014 Raised Threshold**: In preparation for the upcoming 2015 election, Avigdor Liberman (Yisrael Beiteinu party) and Yair Lapid (Yesh Atid party) led right and centrist parties in an effort to raise the electoral threshold once again. The threshold was raised from 2% to 3.25% of the total vote.

Israel Case Study: Small Parties, Big Power

A proportional representation (PR) system with many small parties is hard for U.S. students, who are used to a two-party system where Democrat and Republican candidates run against one another, to understand. Yet list-PR is the most popular electoral system in the world.² Israel is an excellent case study to learn about some of the benefits and challenges of systems that encourage the participation of small political parties.

Israel has a proportional representation Closed-List PR system where voters select the party of their choice and the party fills the seats it wins with the top members of its pre-ranked list. Each party receives a number of seats in keeping with the percentage of the national vote the party won in the election.

Throughout the country’s history, Israel’s low electoral threshold has allowed smaller fringe parties to thrive. Though the threshold has been raised from 1% to 3.25% over the years, this still falls well below the threshold in most countries (by comparison, thresholds in European countries tend to be in the 5%-10% range³).

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.⁴ If a party needed only 1% of the total vote to win a seat in the Knesset, the different interests of the young country’s citizens could be better reflected in the parliament.

With so many parties gaining seats, it is nearly impossible for one party to control more than 60 of the 120 Knesset seats (a simple majority) on its own. Therefore, in order to govern, the leading party must form a coalition by courting other parties through political bargaining. Effectively, the party with the most seats in the Knesset, which has won a large percentage of Israeli voter support, is paralyzed unless it woos smaller parties, giving the leaders of small parties a great deal of power to negotiate. In exchange for their cooperation in the coalition, small parties may receive assured support for particular issues on

² International IDEA Database <<http://www.idea.int/esd/search.cfm#prebuilt=yes>>.

³ 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>>.

⁴ The Knesset, “The Electoral System in Israel” <http://www.knesset.gov.il/description/eng/eng_mimshal_beh.htm#1>.

their party platform and/or obtain powerful cabinet positions for themselves (these positions are appointed by the Prime Minister).

Critics claim that this leads to a fractured Israeli electoral system where parties that represent fewer constituents have a disproportionately large influence on policy. Not to mention that a system supporting so many parties is more prone to stalemates, the frequent disbanding and formation of political parties, and premature parliament dissolution.

In many ways, the 2015 parliamentary election exhibited the effects of an electoral system that particularly favors small parties.

2015 Election

The previous coalition, which had served since March of 2013, was led by Benjamin Netanyahu and the center-right Likud party. The disagreements that had been brewing between party leaders within the coalition, particularly over the controversial [“Jewish State” law](#), boiled over on December 2, 2014 when Netanyahu [fired](#) Yair Lapid (Yesh Atid) and Tzipi Livni (Hatnua) from their cabinet positions and called for early elections.

The two largest parties running were Netanyahu’s Likud party and the Zionist Union, a joint platform of the center-left Labor party led by Isaac Herzog and the liberal Hatnua party led by Tzipi Livni. Benjamin (Bibi) Netanyahu has long been a contentious public figure and much of the Zionist Union campaign focused on gathering votes from “anti-Bibi” Israelis. Netanyahu mostly campaigned on preventing Iran from obtaining nuclear capability and national security issues at large while the Zionist Union campaigned on domestic economic issues as well as in support of an Israeli/Palestinian peace agreement.

The polls leading up to the election on March 17, showed Likud and the Zionist Union neck in neck in the weeks preceding the election, with the Zionist Union pulling ahead in the last week before the vote. However, on election day the Likud party won a larger percentage of the vote, gaining thirty seats in the Knesset to the Zionist Union’s twenty-four.⁵ Still, Netanyahu struggled to negotiate with other parties to form a coalition, and was unable to do so until May 6, 2015, only two hours before the deadline. Even then, he scraped by with a coalition that gave him a narrow – and precarious – majority of one vote in the Knesset.

Who Actually has the Most Power and How did They Get it?

One reason that small parties gain disproportionate power is that prominent political figures have realized that, in Israel’s electoral environment, they will have more bargaining influence if they splinter off from the more established political parties to form a new party.

This trend gained momentum in the lead-up to the 2006 parliamentary elections when then Prime Minister Ariel Sharon split from the Likud party and formed the centrist Kadima party. In a two-party system, splitting off from one’s original party and running as an alternative virtually hands the election over to the opposition. However, in Israel’s fragmented multi-party system, a candidate as prominent as Ariel Sharon (and as Ehud Olmert who took the leadership following Sharon’s stroke in January 2006) can gain a lot of popular support by splintering off from their former parties. Kadima won the most seats in both the 2006 and 2009 elections.

By 2013, Tzipi Livni, who had been a major leader within the Kadima party, left the party to form Hatnua, a party with a more progressive platform.

Forming a new party is a strategic move in a system that favors small parties because it can give already popular political figures more prominence and more bargaining power than they had from within their previous parties. Even if the new parties don’t get the most votes, as Kadima did, leaders of larger parties are forced to negotiate with these splinter parties in order to form a coalition.

In the 2015 election, forming their own splinter parties benefited both Tzipi Livni, founder of the Hatnua party, and Moshe Kahlon, founder of the Kulanu party.

⁵ “Israel election: Netanyahu’s Likud storms to victory,” *BBC News*, March 18, 2015 <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-31933326>>.

In Livni's case, the Labor party was not strong enough to oppose Netanyahu's Likud party on its own and entered into a coalition with Livni's Hatnua to form the Zionist Union. Early in the campaign, it seemed that Herzog and Livni would take turns as prime minister should the Zionist Union form a governing coalition, though later the Zionist Union declared that Herzog alone would serve as prime minister. Nonetheless, had the Zionist Union won (which it nearly did), Livni would have secured more influence for herself than she would have as the second or third-ranked member of a more established party.

But perhaps the strongest example from the 2015 election is Kahlon. Kahlon had been a high-profile member of the Likud party, but left Likud to form the Kulanu party in November of 2014 in preparation for the upcoming 2015 election. In what turned out to be a surprisingly tight race between Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party and the Zionist Union, with each potentially capable of forming a governing coalition, Kahlon's Kulanu party was transformed into the 2015 deal-breaker. Had he not received what he wanted from Netanyahu, his lack of support would have doomed Netanyahu's coalition and provided an opportunity for the Zionist Union to attempt to form a coalition instead. Because of this power, the media began calling Kahlon a "kingmaker" with the ability to spring either Likud or the Zionist Union into power as well as the "biggest winner" of the election, securing for himself his desired cabinet position as the Minister of Finance.⁶

A system that allows for many small political parties, encourages the formation of splinter parties because there is little political risk in forming new parties and the leaders of these new parties end up holding more bargaining power than they did before.

Raising the Threshold: The Electoral System and Political Engineering

One way to curb the disproportionate power of small parties, is to exclude them from the parliament by raising the electoral threshold.

On March 11, 2014 the Knesset voted to raise the electoral threshold once again to 3.25%. The push for this initiative was championed by leaders of the right and center, particularly by Foreign Minister Avigdor Liberman (Yisrael Beiteinu) and Finance Minister Yair Lapid (Yesh Atid).⁷

Raising the electoral threshold can be used as a political "tool" to influence election outcomes without completely changing the electoral system, much like redrawing electoral districts. The intended consequence of raising the threshold is to reduce the power and significance of smaller parties. In this case, Liberman and Lapid hoped to secure more seats in the Knesset for their own parties by crowding out the small Arab and leftist parties with whom they did not align.

Raising the electoral threshold to 3.25% in 2014 did not lead to the political results rightist leaders intended but, from a theoretical standpoint, did have a predictable effect on the electoral system at large.

Unintended (but Predictable?) Results

On January 23rd, the Arab parties: United Arab List, Balad, Ta'al, and the Islamist movement, as well as the Jewish and Arab-leftist Hadash party combined to form the new Joint Arab List. These "unlikely bedfellows," as many commentators called them, were each at risk of falling below the new threshold on their own, but together were a much stronger contender. Upon its formation, Ahmad Tibi, the fourth-ranked candidate on the Joint Arab List, said:

"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."⁸

Instead of crowding out the left, the raised threshold ended up excluding Eli Yishai's new Ultra-Orthodox party from the Knesset (which likely would have aligned with rightist parties). It also led to an unprecedented "win" for the Joint Arab List in the March 2015 elections.

⁶ Luke Baker and Jeffery Heller, "Hard-right shift delivers upset election win for Netanyahu," *Reuters*, March 18, 2015 <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/03/18/us-israel-election-idUSKBN0MC2G620150318>>; Jodi Rudoren, "Netanyahu Soundly Defeats Chief Rival in Israeli Elections," *The New York Times*, March 17, 2015 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/18/world/middleeast/israel-election-netanyahu-herzog.html>>.

⁷ Zilber, "Israel's Governance Law: Raising the Electoral Threshold."

⁸ 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>>.

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.⁹

In the 2009 and 2013 elections, Arab voter turnout had remained relatively low (53% and 56% respectively) as compared to Jewish voter turnout which hovered around 70% in both elections.¹⁰ 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% voter turnout among Arab Israelis, an increase of over 27% from the 2013 election.¹¹ 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% since 1992)¹² 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 and, specifically, on election outcomes. The increased threshold in the 2015 elections resulted in the fewest number of parties in the Knesset since 1992 and generally larger-sized parties than had been included in the past.¹³ 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 the smaller Arab parties to overcome their differences and unite in order to get seats in the Knesset and the way this alliance might influence the Israeli political playing field in the future.

Conclusion

Israel's system, created to encourage a diversity of political and ideological positions, has made small parties attractive to strategic politicians. This can have a destabilizing effect, causing a lot of political bargaining, splintering of existing parties, and constant calls for early elections. All of this fragmentation and stagnation are obstacles to governing. Yet it will be interesting to see how the political landscape changes as the steadily rising threshold necessitates unlikely alliances.

⁹ 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>>.

¹⁰ Rudoren "Diverse Israeli Arab Political Factions Join to Keep Place in Parliament."

¹¹ 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>>.

¹² "IDI Resources on the 2015 Elections," *The Israel Democracy Institute (IDI)*, 2015 <<http://en.idi.org.il/tools-and-data/links-to-idi-resources/the-2015-knesset-elections/idi-resources-on-the-2015-elections/>>.

¹³ *Ibid.*