

Israel's National Elections Results

The 1999 Elections - Consequences for Israel's Electoral System

Report No. 6

At the close of the 1999 elections, Ehud Barak won a landslide victory (he received 12% more votes than did Netanyahu in the current election). Nonetheless, the outcome of the Knesset elections has not parallel that victory. No party or sectoral representative has been able to translate the results into clear-cut political gains. These results buttress Barak's position as attempts to form a government. A paradox, however, has evolved: whereas Barak is undoubtedly the nation's leader, the candidate who received an overwhelming mandate to determine the public agenda and make the crucial decisions before the nation, his majority is useless in the face of a splintered parliament.

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The process of parliamentary fragmentation is not new. It began with the 1996 elections. At that time, however, two parameters — a clear-cut victory in the race for Prime Minister and the decline in the dominance of the two major parties — were absent. As to the first, in the 1996 election, Netanyahu won by a hair, a mere 0.5% of the vote. As to the second, contrary to 1996, the current Knesset is composed of 15 parties: three parties of medium size, and nine of medium-to-small size. This situation is ushering in an era of instability, one threatening to Israeli democracy, and impeding the elected head of government to rule the nation.

The 1999 Vote

The rate of voting in the 1999 election was identical to that in 1996: 79%. The minimum required to gain a Knesset seat stood at 50,000, or 1.5% of the votes

cast. Considering the large number of parties running, we can assume that several Knesset members will propose raising the minimum to 4% of the vote cast.

Israel's electoral system, in which Knesset seats are allocated according to the absolute proportion of votes cast, encourages the political fragmentation. During its 50 years, no Israel Knesset has ever witnessed an absolute majority of seats held by any one party. For example, in the 13th Knesset (1992), the last elected according to the former system, 10 parties were elected. The two major parties obtained only 71 of the total 120 seats. The inauguration of direct elections for the Prime Minister in 1996 simply aggravated the negative aspects of this system, including the tendency for parties to split.

The trend toward fragmentation is also visible in the Knesset's fractional alignments, which significantly changed following the 1999 elections. As a result of the system introduced in 1996, many Knesset members left their original fractions to create new alignments with the hope of enjoying the financial and other benefits distributed to party members as well as to fractions.

Trends in Party Voting

The shrinking of the rightist coalition: The political balance between right and left evaporated in the 1999 elections. Accordingly, the dream of "the Land of Israel" is no longer expressed by a parliamentary majority. The results indicate that many rightist voters redeployed to the left and to the center.

The *Mafdal*, which attempted to compensate for the moderate swing witnessed in its internal elections by raising the extremist Chaim Druckman to a prominent position on its roster (replacing a moderate candidate in the process), received only five votes. Two *Mafdal* votes were lost two to the ultra-rightist *HaIchud HaLeumi*, led by Benny Begin. Thus, *HaIchud HaLeumi*, which received four seats, is the only rightist party waving the flag of "the Land of Israel".

The right's decline is unrelated to the electoral system. Rather, it is a product of the political socialisation Israeli society has experienced as of 1993. Yitzchak Rabin removed the ban from talking with the PLO; Netanyahu continued that policy during the Hebron-Wey negotiations. This process matured during the 1999 campaign. Barak's direct election crystallised the public's preference for a moderate rather than hawkish political policy. Therefore, despite the internal divisions, the public has given Barak a mandate to take meaningful political steps toward peace.

The demise of militant doves and hawks: A related trend visible in the 1999 Knesset election is the seeming disappearance the dove-hawk cleavage. With the opening of discussions between Israel and

representatives of the Arab world, the status of this cleavage was shaken. Processes of social change have opened the way to direct interest group representation and to the appearance of parties having a blurred ideological identity but focusing on reform of the governance structure. This trend influence on Israel's political system will continue to be felt in the coming years.

Minority representation: The *Shas* vote is considered to be a protest vote, made by the Sephardic members of Israeli society, and similar in character to their vote for the Likud in previous elections. The vote for *Shas* as well as for other parties representing minorities indicates that the narrowing of economic gaps in recent years has far from assuaged their sense of political deprivation: The closing of those gaps in many areas of Israeli life has strengthened these groups' unwillingness to continue playing marginal roles in national decision making.

Conclusion

Barak's landslide victory gave the new prime minister more public support and greater potential freedom of action than any of his predecessor. Notwithstanding these notable accomplishments, the electoral system is weakening if not undermining Barak's ability to translate their accomplishments into a stable government. Therefore, the inevitable conclusion is that the system needs an in depth reform.