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Israel Office

### How do Israeli Elections Work?

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In Israel, elections for the Knesset are held at least every four years. However, disagreements between coalition partners often trigger early elections.

#### **Parliamentary Democracy**

- Unlike the United States, which has a presidential system of government, Israel is a parliamentary democracy. Its system is more similar to that of the United Kingdom.
- In Israel the people only elect the 120 members of Knesset (the Israeli parliament). In turn, the Knesset elects a government, headed by a prime minister, from among its 120 members. So the administrative branch is effectively part of the legislative branch.
- Separately, the Knesset elects an Israeli president in a secret ballot that is held once every seven years. The role of the president is almost entirely symbolic and ceremonial; the president has almost no real power.

#### **Campaign Period**

- Once the Knesset is dissolved and a voting date is declared, there is usually a 100-120 day campaign period.
- Election financing and fundraising is strictly controlled and limited, and there is a very different feel with fewer rallies and less advertising than in an election in the United States.
  - The state provides budgets to political parties which are running. The level of funds provided by the state is determined by a formula based primarily on how many seats a party held in the outgoing and previous Knesset.
  - Individuals can make limited contributions to Israeli political parties, as long as the donor is an Israeli citizen. Anonymous contributions are not allowed, and donations are limited to 2000 NIS (around \$550) per household; or half that amount in a non-election year.
  - Corporations and other groups are prohibited from making campaign contributions.

- As of 2018, the state also provides funding for individual candidates standing in primary elections, for those political parties that hold primaries. The new provisions also now ban contributions by citizens to individual candidates.

### **Political Parties**

The Israeli system is heavily centered on political parties, which play a critical and central role in the process.

- Forty-five days prior to elections all parties must register themselves and submit a list of their proposed candidates, in order of preference (typically numbered from 1 to 120). First on the list will be the party leader (usually the larger parties' candidate for prime minister), followed by a list, in descending order, of the party's preferred candidates.
- Once those lists are submitted they cannot be changed or rearranged in any way.
- Each party can decide how it will compose its list.
  - Some parties (notably the traditionally two largest parties: Likud and Labor) hold primaries among registered party members to vote on the candidates for their lists.
  - Other parties' leaders choose the candidates themselves (including those led in this election by Benny Gantz, Avigdor Lieberman and Naftali Bennett).
  - Some of the religious parties' candidates are chosen by a panel of rabbis.
- The names of all parties who register, and their lists of candidates, are published for all to see.
- Each party is then assigned a 1, 2 or 3-letter symbol/ code (with parties usually able to choose their preferred symbol). Traditionally, Likud has been known by the three Hebrew letters for "Machal," and Labor by "Emet."

### **Election Day**

- All Israeli citizens above the age of 18 and currently in the country are eligible to vote. Overseas voting is only permitted for foreign diplomats serving abroad, and Israeli merchant sailors. In addition, the Jewish Agency for Israel recently successfully lobbied for legislation that allows its shlichim – emissaries serving abroad – to vote in national elections.
- On Election Day, which is always a national holiday, voters do not vote for individuals or candidates, nor do they vote according to the area or district where they live. Instead, every citizen in the country is given the same option: to select one political party. This is a critical point: Israeli voters make one choice only: Which party they want to vote for.
- In the private booth, voters see slips of paper with the 1, 2 or 3-letter codes of every registered party. The citizen simply chooses the slip with the code representing the party they have chosen, and places the slip in the envelope. So, for example, if a person decides that they would like to see the people who are listed on the Labor Party's list in the Knesset, then they take the slip that says "Emet" (Labor's code), and place it in the envelope.
- Unlike in the United States, there are no other ballots conducted (such as an initiative or a referendum).

- Voting takes place across the country from 8 am until 10 pm. No polling data or results can be publicized before 10pm.

### **Election Night**

- At precisely 10 pm Israel time (3 pm ET), as the polls close, various Israeli media outlets publish the results of exit polls that they conducted during the day. These polls are typically fairly accurate and do a good job of predicting the final results.
- Actual vote counting is simply a matter of adding up the number of votes that each party received across the entire country.
- Votes are tallied and once totals are known, each party is awarded the same percentage of Knesset seats as the percentage of votes that it received. So a party that wins 10% of total votes, receives 10% of the seats in the 120-seat Knesset. (In other words, a party receiving 10% of the votes across the country would win 12 seats, out of the total of 120 seats in the Knesset).
- To discourage small parties and limit the disproportional influence they can wield in Israel's parliamentary system, votes for any party that does not win at least 3.25% of the total (around 130,000 votes) are completely discarded and that party will not receive any seats. This "electoral threshold," is the reason that many parties merge before the elections, as voters are reluctant to "throw away" their vote by supporting a party that will not make it past 3.25%.
- Once the final results are known the submitted lists of candidates are consulted to see who enters the Knesset. So, a party that receives 10 seats will send to the Knesset the top 10 people listed on their pre-submitted list. Should a member of Knesset resign or pass away during the Knesset's term, then the next person on the list takes their place.

### **Forming a Government**

- Once the results are finalized it is now clear exactly who the new 120 members of Knesset will be.
- These 120 must now vote to support a prime minister from among their rank, who in turn will appoint ministers, and thus establish an administrative branch. In order to do this, a majority of members (at least 61 out of the 120 total seats) must form a governing coalition, and agree on who they want to see as prime minister, as well as the direction that the new government should take.
- In Israel's entire history no single party has ever won a majority of Knesset seats. Therefore, coalitions between multiple parties have to be formed in order to govern.
- Many parties declare their allegiances prior to elections, often announcing who they prefer to see as prime minister; so once final results are out it can sometimes be clear who is likely to emerge at the head of a governing coalition.
- By law, after results are final, the heads of each party are summoned to meet with the President, who asks them who they prefer to see as prime minister. Once all parties have been consulted, the President then decides who he or she believes has the best chance of securing the support of a majority of Knesset members. That potential prime minister then has 45 days to try to form a government.

- “Forming a government” involves conducting negotiations with other parties in an attempt to strike a deal. Smaller parties will make certain demands in return for joining a coalition. These demands will usually include a certain number of ministerial and other positions, plus a commitment to certain policies and directions. Once finalized, agreements to join a coalition need to be made in writing, and must be made public.
- Upon mustering the support at least 61 members, the successful party leader can then become the prime minister, with the backing of the majority of the Knesset.
- The Knesset needs to confirm the coalition in an investiture vote – essentially the opposite of a no-confidence motion. Then the prime minister and the new government (after this election Israel's 35<sup>th</sup>) will be sworn into office.
- The new prime minister remains in power until he or she no longer has the support of the majority of the Knesset, at which point new elections are called.
- Additional details about the electoral system can be seen [here](#) or [here](#). A comprehensive site on elections, including virtual voting, can be viewed [here](#).
- For further information, please contact JFNA’s [Dani Wassner](#), Director of Government Relations in Israel.

**Sources:** *The Knesset, Basic Law: The Knesset, The Jerusalem Post, Ha’aretz, The Office of the Prime Minister, Israel Democracy Institute, Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs.*