



Plus ça Change, Plus C'est La Même Chose: The 2015 Israeli elections



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ABSTRACT

In many ways, the 2015 parliamentary elections in Israel followed patterns that have been evident ever since the establishment of the state. The campaign positions of the parties, the politicians, and the voters related predominantly to defense and foreign affairs, and less to socio-economic policies. Religion-state issues in general, and the relationship between the Jewish majority and the Arab minority in particular, were also prominent. All these issues played a role in the 20th general elections held on 17 March 2015, just as they did in the first general elections in 1949.

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1. General features of Knesset elections

In many ways, the 2015 parliamentary elections in Israel followed patterns that have been evident ever since the establishment of the State. The campaign positions of the political parties, the politicians, and the voters have always related predominantly to defense and foreign affairs, and somewhat less to socio-economic policies. In addition, religion-state issues in general, and the relationship between the Jewish majority and the Arab minority in particular, have always been prominent. The Arab-Israeli conflict and the repeated calls throughout the Muslim world to destroy Israel have confronted Israel with existential threats ever since it achieved independence. All these issues played a role in the 20th general elections held on 17 March 2015, just as they did in the first general elections in 1949.

Elections to the Knesset, Israel's parliament, take place in a single, nation-wide electoral district. The competition is between 'closed ranked lists' of candidates prepared by the political parties. In some cases, two parties or more can prepare a merged list of candidates. Such was the case with the Joint List, the Jewish Home, and the Zionist Union in the 2015 elections. A proportional representation Hagenbach-Bischoff formula has been employed since 1973. In the 2015 elections, the electoral threshold was raised from 2 percent of the valid votes to 3.25 percent.

From 1949 and until 1992, Israel had a pure parliamentary system. In 1996 and in 1999, separate and direct election of the Prime Minister took place on the same day as the Knesset elections (Diskin and Diskin, 1995; Hazan, 1996). In 2001, due to the resignation of the Prime Minister, a 'special' direct election of only the Prime Minister took place, while the Knesset elected in 1999 continued to serve. Immediately after the 2001 elections, the separate direct election of the Prime Minister was abolished, and Israel returned to a pure parliamentary system where only the 120 members of the Knesset are elected.

The full term of the Knesset is four years. Under certain conditions, due to the Jewish calendar, a Knesset may serve more than four years but less than five. In practice, early elections are often called. Since 1988, every Knesset has called for early elections. The mean term of an Israeli Knesset is 3.5 years. The outgoing 19th Knesset served only two years and two months. Its term was the shortest since 1961.

In Israel, like in most other multi-party parliamentary systems, a major question that voters consider is what governmental coalition is expected following the elections. The political outcome of an election is dictated not only by the voters, but also by the negotiations held between the leaders of the parties that won representation in the newly elected parliament. There has never been a majority party in the Knesset, but all the governments of Israel have enjoyed the support of a parliamentary majority when formed. However, it should be noted that following the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin (on 4 November 1995), Shimon Peres formed a coalition that formally included parties with only 59 MKs

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(Members of Knesset), but in practice it had the legislative support of 64 MKs.

Since 1949, Israel has had 20 general elections and 34 governments. Many argue that switching governments on average every two years is an indication of severe stability and governability problems, but in fact, the number of governments often reflects technical or formal issues and not real political difficulties. Only once, in 1990, an Israeli cabinet headed by Yitzhak Shamir faced a successful no-confidence vote. However, even in this case, after unsuccessful efforts of the opposition to form an alternative government, Shamir was able to form a new government. Nonetheless, there is no question that the 33rd government, formed in 2013, faced several internal difficulties that contributed to Netanyahu's decision to hold early elections in 2015.

2. From the 2013 to the 2015 elections – a timeline

Eleven days after the 22 January 2013 elections, on 2 February, Israel's ceremonial President, Shimon Peres, officially nominated Benjamin Netanyahu to form the new government. Netanyahu declared that given the challenges the new government would face, he wanted to form the largest coalition possible. By law, a prime minister designate has no more than six weeks to form a government, and it took Netanyahu the entire time to do so (Diskin and Hazan, 2013). A major question was whether Netanyahu would try to include centrist and/or left-wing politicians in his government, as he had done after the 2009 elections.

In the 2013 elections, the merged list Likud Our Home won 31 seats, clearly outdistancing its long-time rival Labour (with only 15 seats) and the newly created but second-largest party Yesh Atid (There is a Future, with 19 seats). The first party Netanyahu included in his government was HaTnua led by Tzipi Livni. Livni, the most dovish leader who agreed to participate in Netanyahu's government, was nominated Minister of Justice and the cabinet member in charge of negotiations with the Palestinian Authority (PA). The government also included HaTnua's Amir Peretz as Minister of the Environment, who was previously the leader of the Labour Party, and a very dovish one at that.

Yesh Atid, led by Yair Lapid, and the Jewish Home, led by Naftali Bennett, together held 31 seats – equivalent to the number of seats won by Likud Our Home. The two party leaders pledged that neither would join the coalition without the other. While Netanyahu pushed for the inclusion of Shas and United Torah Judaism in his coalition, Lapid and Bennett vetoed this possibility, and thus Netanyahu's attempt to form a large coalition failed.

The final composition of the coalition was announced just before the 42-day deadline to form the government, and on 18 March, the new government was presented to the Knesset. It was based on Likud Our Home, Yesh Atid, the Jewish Home, and HaTnua for a total of 68 seats. Likud Our Home, Yesh Atid and the Jewish Home formally had equal voting power in the coalition (Diskin and Koppel, 2010), while HaTnua had no measureable voting power.

Israel's 33rd government was comprised of 22 ministers: Likud Our Home had a majority of 12 ministers, including the important portfolios of Defense and Foreign Affairs; Yesh Atid held 5 portfolios, including the Finance Ministry; the Jewish Home held 3; and HaTnua held 2.

Two days after the new government took office, on 20 March 2013, US President Barack Obama made a visit to Israel. Immediately after Obama's departure, US Secretary of State John Kerry began his diplomatic push for restarting the negotiations between Israel and the PA. Because of Secretary Kerry's diplomatic efforts during the following months, and in order to pave the way for opening direct negotiations between Israel and the PA in Washington, the cabinet voted on 28 July to release 104 Palestinian

terrorists imprisoned in Israel in four stages. Initially Israel was opposed to any pre-conditions for the resumption of negotiations. However, Kerry succeeded in brokering a deal, by which Israel would release prisoners and the Palestinians would conduct negotiations with Israel for the following nine months, with a goal of achieving a framework agreement by April 2014.

Domestically, the death of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, the spiritual head of the ultra-religious Shas party, in early October marked a turning point for the party. He was the leading religious figure of his generation, helped found the political party in the 1980s and had remained its unchallenged spiritual leader and dominant figure until his death. With his passing, the party began internal squabbling that would eventually split it apart.

On 21 November, Isaac Herzog was elected leader of the Labour Party, defeating Shelly Yachimovich in a membership primary by 58.5%–41.5% and replacing her as Leader of the Opposition. Many blamed Yachimovich for the disappointing Labour performance in the January 2013 elections.

On 24 November, an interim deal was signed in Geneva between Iran and the P5+1 countries (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany). Netanyahu and other Israeli officials criticized the deal in harsh terms. In Israel's view, the US administration had reneged on its promise to maintain the harsh sanctions regime against Iran, while at the same time allowing Iran to preserve much of its nuclear facilities. The differences between Israel and the US over Iran would become a significant issue of the election campaign after the early collapse of the Knesset one year later.

In March 2014, the Knesset passed by a majority three important pieces of legislation as a package deal, since each bill was championed by some, but not all, of the parties in the coalition. One of these bills, which was strongly criticized by the ultra-religious parties, established a more egalitarian compulsory military service. Another was the 'Governability Law', which was an amendment to the Basic Law: The Government and to Israel's Knesset Elections Law. In addition to the increase in the electoral threshold (from 2 percent to 3.25 percent) mentioned above, the bill placed a cap on the number of ministers (19 including the Prime Minister) and deputy ministers (4) a government could have, and it fully adopted the constructive vote of no-confidence, according to which the Knesset can express no-confidence in a government only by placing its confidence in an alternative government. The last bill was a new Basic Law: Referendum, which obliged the government to hold a referendum (never before held in Israel) in case territorial concessions were to be made in Jerusalem or in the Golan Heights (but not in the West Bank) but were not supported by a two-thirds majority in the Knesset.

Cracks in the governing coalition began to appear already in January 2014, only 10 months after it took office. Both Lapid and Bennett made threats concerning their continued participation in the coalition. The tensions escalated when the negotiations with the Palestinians were on the brink of breaking down, with Lapid stating that there was no reason for his party to stay if there were no negotiations and Bennett criticizing any additional release of convicted terrorists in order to get the negotiations moving. The head of Israel Our Home, Avigdor Lieberman, announced in mid-April that the cooperation between Likud and his party had ended, and that the merged list from the 2013 elections would revert to two separate parties. In early July, Israel Our Home split from the Likud Our Home merged list. The Likud party was left with only 20 of the 31 seats. However, personal changes in the Knesset composition of the merged list, due to such things as resignation, meant that by the end of 2014 Likud declined to only 18 MKs while Israel Our Home rose to 13. Likud thus became the second largest party in the Knesset, after Yesh Atid with 19 MKs.

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