

V.I.P. ARTICLE SUBMITTED BY:

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Elections in Israel

Israel is a parliamentary democracy, established in 1948. It does not have a formal constitution and therefore the election process is determined by a set of basic laws.

The people elect the national legislature, the Knesset, on a national list basis. The Knesset has 120 members, elected for terms of four years. However, out of the 17 Knesset assemblies in the country's history only 6 completed their full terms. Things have been unstable especially during the last two decades where virtually all Knesset assemblies met their untimely end. Early elections can be called by a vote of the majority of Knesset members, or by an edict of the President or in case the Prime Minister has passed away or no longer can fulfill his/her duty due to health or personal reasons. Early elections normally occur on occasions of political stalemate and inability of the government to get the parliament's support for its policy.

Israel has a multi-party system and generally no one party is able to form a government, requiring the parties to form coalition governments. In a typical Knesset at least 10 different parties are represented. The elections in Israel are proportional, i.e. the number of seats allocated to each list of candidates is proportional to the number of votes it receives in the elections. For instance, a party which receives 20% of valid votes from voters will have 20% of Knesset seat. There is an electoral threshold of 2%, making it more favorable to minor parties than systems used in other countries. The parties determine the order of their candidate lists by various methods - primaries (among registered party members) or selection by a party committee or another body.

Israel has a President who is elected by the Knesset, but his/her role is essentially a figurehead position, with the real governmental power being in the hands of the Prime Minister. Unlike in the US, the entire government, rather than the Prime Minister, is the head of the state. The Prime Minister must be also a member of the Knesset. Other ministers do not have to be Knesset members, but most of them are.

The government is not elected directly by the people. Following an election, the President nominates a Prime Minister after asking party leaders whom they support for the position. The nominated Prime Minister is not necessarily the head of the largest party, but the person whom the President believes has the highest chances of forming a coalition government.

In 1992, a system of direct election of the Prime Minister has been adopted, in order to give the Prime Minister more control and allow them to be less dependent on the whims of his/her coalition. However, this method has been abandoned in 2001 since it led to further fragmentation of the parliament.

Every Israeli citizen of age 18 or older may vote. Any Israeli citizen over 21 may be elected to the Knesset, barring some limitations. There is no need to register for voting, as the government keeps a central population registry and all people eligible to vote receive a notification by mail, stating the location of their ballot. There are no absentee ballots except for Israelis who are on a government mission abroad. Therefore, airports are rather busy during election time.

Voting is not mandatory but is encouraged by making election day a national holiday. Therefore, turnout is relatively large, and is approximately 60-70% (the rate is significantly lower among the Arab citizens of Israel). Upon entry to a polling station, the voter is given an official envelope, and is shown

to a voting booth. Inside the booth is a tray of ballot papers, one for each party. The voter chooses the relevant paper for their party, puts it in the envelope, seals it, and then places the envelope into the ballot box.

The ballot papers contain minimal information - they are dominated by the "ballot letter(s)" of the party (between one and three letters), with the party's name and sometimes a slogan written underneath in small text. Each party publishes their letter prior to election day, with most election posters featuring them.

Ballots are produced in both Hebrew and Arabic, according to whether the population in a given city is mostly Jewish or Arab. The system has the advantage of being incredibly simple to use for those with limited literacy. This is especially important in Israel where many new immigrants struggle with the language, especially with reading the Hebrew alphabet. Voting in the polling booths takes place secretly – the voter enters a specially designated booth alone, selects the voting slip of his/her choice, places it in a sealed, opaque envelope and inserts the envelope into a ballot box, such that no-one can be aware of his/her vote. The votes are counted manually after they are closed, which occasionally leads to fraud accusations.

Sources:

Personal experience.

The Israeli Government portal:

<http://www.gov.il/FirstGov/TopNavEng/EngSubjects/EngSElections/EngSEElectoral/>

Wikipedia:

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