UNTANGLING ISRAELI DEMOCRACY AND ELECTIONS

Israel takes pride in being the only democracy in the middle east, with high rates of citizen participation. Despite this, few Israelis are excited about what feels like a never-ending cycle of inconclusive elections. The only democracy in the region and it can't seem to make up its collective mind. What's going on here?

Let's take a step back for a minute and consider how the Israeli system works. While the US and Israel both are democracies the US has a presidential system, and Israel has a parliamentary system, more similar to Canada, Italy, or Germany than to the US. Israel's parliament is called the Knesset.

Unlike the US, where the people vote for a presidential candidate once every four years, Israelis vote for political parties. Generally, the leader of the party that wins the most seats in the Knesset becomes prime minister for a term that's supposed to last four years, but rarely does.

Are you confused? Don't worry, we'll explain.

Before Israel gained independence in 1948, the area was ruled by the British, and when they left, many of the systems they had established were adapted or updated. While Israel's system differs from the British one—there are no kings and queens in the Jewish state—the parliamentary system was left intact.

The new country's Declaration of Independence guaranteed that Israel "will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race, or sex," which means that every citizen over the age of 18 gets to vote.

Unlike the US, which is massive and is divided into hundreds of districts for Congressional voting, Israel is a small country and everyone votes as a single district. So the vote of a citizen in Be'er Sheva goes into the same pot as a vote from a citizen in Haifa, Jerusalem, Dimona, Shfaram, Kibbutz Dan, and, well, everywhere.

Of course, that doesn't mean there aren't regional differences in voting patterns like we see in the US; for example, Tel Aviv generally skews left and Jerusalem tends to skew right. But that's a discussion for another time.

As we said, Israelis vote for a party, not a person. The number of votes a party gets determines approximately how many seats it will have in the Knesset. So if one party gets more than half the votes, they'll get more than half the seats in the Knesset, and the person chosen to lead the party becomes prime minister.

In order to form a government, a party needs to earn a majority of the seats—but that has never happened in Israel. The Knesset has 120 seats, and the most seats a party has ever won is 56. So after every election, the leader of one party—usually the party that won the most seats—has to negotiate with the leaders of other parties to cobble together a coalition that collectively controls at least 61 seats. Only then can a potential prime minister present a government to the newly elected Knesset members for a "vote of confidence."

It doesn't help that literally dozens of parties run in each election. There are parties catering to every political, ethnic, religious, and social group you can think of—and probably a few you never knew existed! There are lots of ways to "do" democracy.

It'll come as no surprise that there's history here, too. When the new state was preparing for its first elections in 1949, the founders felt it was important that everyone feel they were represented in the new government. The country was witnessing an ingathering of hundreds of thousands of Jewish refugees from 100 countries around the world, in addition to the Jews, Arabs, and others who were already living there.

In order to help everyone feel included and counted, it was decided that any party that got 1% of the popular vote would be represented in the Knesset. That contributed to the reality of no party ever getting a majority.

To help reach a majority, in 2014 the minimum threshold was increased to 3.25%. If you vote for a party that doesn't get at least 3.25% of the total number of votes, that party won't join the Knesset and your vote gets discarded.

Alright, so where were we?

We know that Israel has a parliamentary democracy, (different than the US but similar to lots of other countries around the world).

We know that coalitions usually are put together by the leader of the biggest party and that that person becomes prime minister.

And we know a government should serve for four years.

So why have there been so many elections lately?

A Knesset must vote its confidence in a government before it will take office. Should it vote "no confidence," it falls, usually leading to new elections. Back in December of 2018, the government lost the confidence of the Knesset, so elections were rescheduled for April of 2019. After those elections, no party was able to win the support of a majority in the Knesset so—in an unprecedented move—yet another election was scheduled for September of 2019. But guess what? The same thing happened—no one could get to the magic number of 61.

Since then, the results have never been very different, but for short amounts of time, even the most unlikely partners have come together, motivated by a mix of personal ambition and the greater good. And sometimes the prime minister doesn't even come from the largest party in the Knesset, as happened in 2021 when a government was formed by Yair Lapid of the centrist Yesh Atid party and Naftali Bennett of the rightist Yamina party. Bennett's party had just six seats, but the stars aligned in such a way that he became prime minister. The eight-party coalition included right-wing, centrist, and left-wing parties along with one Islamist party. This experiment lasted for about a year.

And so, after so many failed attempts at creating a stable government in a relatively short period, it's hard to imagine an election with a different outcome. Israelis seem destined to keep returning to the polls over and over again, hoping for a government that will last years rather than months.

In the meantime, here are some questions to help you join the conversations that millions of Israelis are having every day about the future. Pause the video after each question to allow for question and discussion.

What unites Israelis? What divides?

What factors do you think influence Israeli voters' choices the most?

What can we learn about Israeli society from regional and sectoral voting patterns?

And one more question especially for you: Why does any of this matter to you, and how does it influence your connection to Israel?