



International Snapshot: Israel Knesset Election, March 2006

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Election System Basics¹: Israel elects all 120 seats to its parliament, the Knesset, using a national “closed list” system. Voters across the nation vote for one political party’s full candidate slate, rather than for individual candidates, and seats are awarded proportionally to all parties receiving a threshold amount of at least 2% of the vote. For example, a party receiving 10% of the vote receives roughly 10% of seats in the Knesset, and those seats are awarded in order to the first 10% of candidates on a party’s list. This minimum threshold of 2% has gradually been increased in recent elections; in the previous election in 2003, the threshold was just 1.5%.

Common Misconceptions about Israel's Election System: Israel, along with Italy, is frequently criticized for having an election system that produces unstable and short-lived governing coalitions. Some critics mistakenly blame proportional voting for this instability. However, many forms of proportional voting systems exist, often producing stable governments in many countries around the world. It is Israel’s particular version of proportional voting, combined with Israel’s unique political climate and very diverse electorate, which contributes to the relatively unstable governing coalitions.

One important difference between Israel’s proportional system and those used in other countries is the low threshold needed to win seats. Many countries set thresholds of five percent or more, with higher thresholds reducing the number of minor parties that are able to win seats. Israel’s low threshold results in a large number of parties in the Knesset and makes it unlikely that one of the major parties will be able to form a governing coalition without including multiple small parties.

The national closed list system also plays a major role in shaping Israel’s governments. Unlike an open list system under which voters can influence the direction of a party by determining the order of candidates on that party’s slate, a closed list system gives

¹ http://www.knesset.gov.il/elections17/eng/about/AboutIndex_eng.htm

voters little ability to influence party positions on issues. Not having regional lists, where candidates are elected proportionally within regional districts, also puts more distance between representatives and voters. Therefore, voters unhappy with a major party's policy directions may be likely to shift support to any of a number of minor parties.

Election Results in March 2006¹:

Party	Seats	Party	Seats
Kadima	29	NU/NRP	9
Labour	20	Gil(Pensioners)	7
Shas	12	Torah Judaism	6
Likud	12	Meretz	5
Israel Beitenu	11	United Arab List	3

With 29 seats, the newly formed Kadima party will be asked to form a government by building a coalition representing at least 61 seats. Labour is a likely partner, bringing the total to 49. Shas is a possibility, which would just reach the minimum at 61; even with Shas, however, Kadima will probably look for more partners to ensure a safer majority. Likud, the largest party in the last election, is not a likely partner; therefore, the final government coalition will almost certainly include at least four parties. The large number of parties needed to form a government is a direct result of the low threshold and can contribute to instability in the Israeli system.

As discussed above, many countries address this issue by using higher thresholds. A five percent threshold still allows seat allocation to be roughly proportional while at the same time discouraging formation of smaller single-issue parties that can dissolve governing coalitions despite holding only a few seats and representing a small fraction of voters. Under a 5% threshold, the number of parties entering the Knesset would be reduced to 7 instead of the actual 12. Kadima would win 34 seats, or 28% of seats, with its 22% of the total votes. More importantly, Kadima and Labour would combine to hold 57 seats, meaning a government could be formed with just one additional party.

While adding stability, this higher threshold would not necessarily remove minor party voices from the government. Instead, smaller parties would be encouraged to work together to gain seats. For example, United Arab List, Hadash and Balad, which win seats under a 2% threshold but not under a 5% threshold, might choose to run on an Arab party list instead of on three separate lists.

We are not necessarily advocating that Israel raise its threshold to 5%. That decision must be the result of a balancing of the goals of an electoral system, as another goal that is particularly important in a nation like Israel where so many citizens come from different nations and different backgrounds is to provide full representation of voters. If significant interests and views were not represented in Israel, it would produce a different instability that might be even more dangerous for the nation's long-term health.

¹ Gil Hoffman et al., "Final: Olmert Gains Center-Left Majority," *Jerusalem Post*, March 31, 2006.

Knesset Election 28 March 2006

Party	Unofficial Results*				1st Round Calculation					
	Votes	% Total Votes	% Votes over Threshold (2%)	Seats	% Votes Over Threshold (5%)	Actual Seats	Remainder	Index	2nd Round Seats	Totals
Kadima	690,095	21.99%	23.37%	29	28.33%	34	201	5.91		34
Labour	472,746	15.06%	16.01%	20	19.41%	23	6053	263.17		23
Shas	299,130	9.53%	10.13%	12	12.28%	14	15056	1075.43	1	15
Likud	282,070	8.99%	9.55%	12	11.58%	13	18287	1406.69	1	14
Israel Beitenu	281,850	8.98%	9.54%	11	11.57%	13	18067	1389.77	1	14
NU/NRP	223,838	7.13%	7.58%	9	9.19%	11	637	57.91		11
Gil(Pensioners)	185,790	5.92%	6.29%	7	7.63%	9	3171	352.33		9
Total Over Threshold Hypothetical Threshold (5%)	2,435,519				100.00%	117			3	120
Torah Judaism	146,958	4.68%	4.98%	6						
Meretz	118,356	3.77%	4.01%	5						
United Arab List	94,460	3.01%	3.20%	3						
Hadash	85,830	2.73%	2.91%	3						
Balad	72,013	2.29%	2.44%	3						
Total Over Threshold Actual Treshold (2%)	2,953,136		100.00%	120						
Greens	47,634	1.52%								
Ale Yarok	40,419	1.29%								
Hazit Yehudit Le'umit	25,935	0.83%								
Tafnit	18,746	0.60%								
Atid Echad	14,007	0.45%								
Hetz	10,274	0.33%								
Shinui	4,907	0.16%								
Justice for all	3,819	0.12%								
Da'aM	3,695	0.12%								
Herut	2,883	0.09%								
Brit Olam	2,280	0.07%								
War Against Banks	2,164	0.07%								
Lev	1,765	0.06%								
Tzomet	1,509	0.05%								
Lehem	1,384	0.04%								
New Zionism	1,278	0.04%								
Power to the Poor	1,218	0.04%								
Arab National Party	738	0.02%								
Leeder	580	0.02%								
Totals	3,138,371	100.00%								

1st Round Calculation

1 Mandate = 20296

Seat Calculation Formula (5% threshold):

1 Mandate = Total Votes for all parties over threshold / 120 Knesset seats

1 Mandate = 20296

1st Round Calculation:

Actual seats + remainder = Total party votes / 1 mandate

Remainder = Total party votes - (1 Mandate * Actual Seats)

Index = Remainder / Actual Seats

2nd Round Calculation:

Remaining seats awarded to parties with highest first round indices

***Source: Gil Hoffman et al., "Final: Olmert Gains Center-Left Majority," Jerusalem Post, March 31, 2006.**

Facts in Focus

Turnout¹: 62.3% of eligible voters cast ballots, a record low for Knesset elections. This may be in part due to expectations about Kadima's victory and Likud's poor showing, removing much of the Labor-Likud rivalry that has dominated previous elections.

Representation of Women²: 17 women were elected to the 17th Knesset, one less than in the previous election, which is comparable to representation of women in the U.S. Congress. This low percentage of women is unusual among countries using proportional voting systems. The closed list system may contribute to the lack of women being elected; even if female voters wish to elect women, they are limited in their ability to do by where parties place female candidates in their lists. Many other countries using closed list systems, including several in Latin America, compensate for this by requiring parties to nominate a certain percentage of female candidates throughout their lists.

Prisoner Voting³: Prisoners meeting age and citizenship requirements are allowed to vote. According to the Jerusalem Post, 53% of eligible prisoners voted on Election Day.

Election Day Holiday⁴: Although voting took place on a Tuesday, Election Day is a public holiday in Israel. Beyond this, Israel encourages participation in its elections by offering public transportation vouchers for qualifying individuals to travel to polling locations on Election Day.

¹ Dan Izenberg, "Voter Turnout 63.2%, Lowest Ever for Knesset," *Jerusalem Post*, March 29, 2006.

² Greer Fay Cashman, "Number of Women MKs Decreases by One," *Jerusalem Post*, March 30, 2006.

³ Jpost.com Staff, "53% of Israel's Prisoners Exercise Right to Vote," *Jerusalem Post*, March 28, 2006.

⁴ http://www.knesset.gov.il/elections17/eng/about/AboutIndex_eng.htm.



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