

# Introduction

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The 1999 elections, held on May 17, 1999, featured two parallel races. One was for the office of the prime minister, and the second was for the Knesset (Israeli Parliament). This was the second time that the rules for the simultaneous direct election of the prime minister and the selection of the Knesset based on a fixed-list proportional representation formula applied. The change in the electoral system was legislated before the 1992 elections, but was activated for the first time in 1996. The prime minister was elected under a winner-take-all system, with a second-round runoff between the two candidates with the most votes two weeks later if no candidate received a majority in the first round. The Knesset was elected as in the past, using a strict proportional representation list system with very few procedural or technical obstacles facing a group that chose to compete. The threshold for Knesset representation was 1.5 percent, in effect since 1992. In 1999 there were five candidates for prime minister a week before the election, and almost three dozen parties were running. But just before the deadline, three of the candidates for prime minister and two of the competing lists withdrew.

The government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, elected in 1996, had been plagued with instability from the outset. The style of his rule, his inability to cooperate with other leaders of his Likud Party, such as Benny Begin and Dan Meridor, and the fragile majority he commanded in the Knesset, combined to weaken him. In addition to these, he lost support from parties of the right because of his begrudging acquiescence to pursue the path of peace outlined by the Oslo accords initiated by the slain Yitzhak Rabin. Netanyahu signed the Wye River Accord with Palestinian Authority Chairperson Yasser Arafat in October 1998 to the dismay of many in his right-wing coalition.

The opposition in the Knesset made a motion in December 1998 for early elections, originally scheduled for the end of 2000. According to the provisions of the law regulating the direct election of the prime minister, had Netanyahu been voted out of office by the Knesset, new elections for the prime minister and the Knesset would take place within sixty days. After initially opposing the move, Netanyahu finally decided to embrace the inevitable and to control the length of time available for the campaign. Netanyahu agreed to legislate early elections and the date finally agreed to was May 17, 1999, thus giving the parties and candidates six months to prepare for the showdown, rather than the two months that would have been the preference of those who drafted the legislation.

Many shifts of affiliation occurred during the campaign period. One member of the Knesset, Eliezer Zandberg, actually changed his parliamentary affiliation five times, beginning with membership in the extreme right-wing Tzomet and ending up on the anticlericalist dovish Shinui list. The Center Party emerged, formed by leaders from various parties (see the chapter by Nathan Yanai, in this volume), and the Labor Party coalesced with two smaller parties to form One Israel (see the chapter by Gideon Doron, in this volume).

The front-runners for the prime minister post were Netanyahu, and Labor Party leader Ehud Barak. Netanyahu's campaign used the slogan, A Strong Leader for the Future of Israel, signaling that only he could properly defend Jerusalem, and a variation on the Peace and Security slogan that brought him to power three years earlier. Netanyahu, engaged in political infighting, found himself unable to heat up the torpid campaign during the long election period. Ideological differences were muted as both candidates appealed to the center, most notably narrowed because the right-wing Netanyahu government had approved the Wye River Accord and had actually handed over some West Bank land to the Palestinian Authority.

Most Israelis accepted the land-for-peace formula although differences remained regarding how much land would have to be given up. There was also a growing realization that a Palestinian state was inevitable. Ironclad ideological credos of the past were downplayed as the party dealigned because of the international political developments and the changes introduced to the electoral system (see the chapter by Asher Arian and Michal Shamir, in this volume). Rather than dwell on the difficult issues of concessions in the West Bank, the future of Jerusalem, or how much of the Golan Heights should be returned to Syria, the campaign focused on one issue: Netanyahu's performance as prime minister. In a TV debate months before the election and just after resigning as Netanyahu's defense minister to run at the head of the Center Party, Yitzhak Mordechai blasted Netanyahu with unforgettable phrases

accusing him of engaging in “compulsive lies,” “dangerous adventurism,” and “unethical leadership.”

As Election Day approached and as support for Barak grew, Netanyahu became more desperate. The prime minister had the Likud replay commercials that featured scenes of suicide bombing attacks in Israeli streets, blaming the Labor opposition for being soft on terror. His appeal to such controversial arguments indicated to many just how embattled he felt.

Close to the election, the polls showed that Barak was likely to win a majority even in a field that featured many candidates. Hence three of them, all opposed to Netanyahu, decided to withdraw their candidacies a short time before the final deadline as provided by the law. The three candidates were Benny Begin, formerly of the Likud and a candidate of the nationalist right; Azmi Bishara, an Arab member of the Knesset; and former defense minister Mordechai, head of the newly formed Center Party.

Table I.1 presents the results of the elections in both the prime minister and the Knesset races. The prime ministerial race came down to Netanyahu against Barak. Barak won by a landslide (56% to 44%) but the parties of the candidates, Likud and Labor, won fewer seats in the Knesset than they had in decades, and only middle-size and small parties were elected to the Knesset. Table I.2 brings the vote results for the prime ministerial candidates, and for Likud and Labor in selected communities in 1999 compared to 1996.

The dual system of elections led to a very fragmented Knesset, and with it, a high probability of an unstable government. The prime minister is the focus of power and policy and since he was directly elected this concentration of power was increased. But since the prime minister cannot rule without a majority in the Knesset, he becomes hostage to coalition negotiations, and these are very costly in terms of the prime minister's time and the public's money. The dual ballot system fostered middle- and small-size parties, and those parties had greater bargaining power in the absence of large-size parties.

The reform that provided the voters with two ballots instead of one changed their voting calculus, and altered the nature of the campaign, the party system, and the relations between the legislative and executive branches. The electoral reform and its repercussions are featured in all of the chapters in this volume. The major aspect of the electoral reform, the direct election of the prime minister, receives considerable consideration but there were developments in other areas, such as in the selection methods of candidates (see Gideon Rahat, chapter 12, in this volume).

The voters intuitively understood the potential of the reform and acted accordingly. Large parties were abandoned since voters assessed that policy

Table I.1 Results of the 1999 Elections

Prime Minister	% of Valid Votes	Votes	
Ehud Barak	1,791,020	56.1	
Benjamin Netanyahu	1,402,474	43.9	
Knesset	Valid Votes	% of Valid Vote	Knesset Seat
One Israel <sup>a</sup>	670,484	20.3	26
Likud <sup>b</sup>	468,103	14.1	19
Shas	430,676	13.0	17
Meretz	253,525	7.7	10
Israel b'Aliya	171,705	5.2	6
Shinui	167,748	5.1	6
Center	165,622	5.0	6
National Religious	140,307	4.2	5
United Torah Jewry	125,741	3.8	5
United Arab List	114,810	3.5	5
National Union	100,181	3.0	4
Hadash	87,022	2.6	3
Israel Beiteinu	86,153	2.6	4
Balad	66,103	2.0	2
One Nation	64,143	1.9	2
Pnina Rosenblum	44,953	1.4	0
Pensioners	37,525	1.1	0
Green Leaf	34,029	1.0	0
Third Way	26,290	0.8	0
Greens	13,292	0.4	0
Hope	7,366	0.2	0
Casino	6,540	0.2	0
Heart of Immigrants	6,311	0.2	0
Negev	4,324	0.1	0
Tzomet	4,128	0.1	0
Natural Law	2,924	<sup>c</sup>	0
Romanian	2,797	<sup>c</sup>	0
Raam	2,151	<sup>c</sup>	0
New Arab	2,042	<sup>c</sup>	0
Male Rights	1,257	<sup>c</sup>	0
Heritage	1,164	<sup>c</sup>	0
TOTAL	3,309,416	99.6%	120

Minimum needed for representation (1.5%)—49,642 votes.

Quota per Knesset seat—25,936 votes.

SOURCE: *Central Bureau of Statistics*. There were 4,285,428 eligible voters; 3,373,748 (78.7% of eligible voters) participated in the elections. In the prime minister vote, 3,372,952 participated (78.7%) and 3,309,416 (77.2% of eligible votes) participated in the Knesset vote. For the prime minister, 179,458 (5.3% of votes cast) were invalid because they were blank ballots, or they were cast for candidates no longer running (9,826 votes). For the Knesset, 64,332 (2.2%) were disqualified, and 197,093 (6%) were for parties below the minimum required.

<sup>a</sup>Labor with Geshet and Meimad in 1999; Labor in 1996.

<sup>b</sup>With Geshet and Tzomet in 1996.

<sup>c</sup>Less than 0.1% of the vote.

**Table 1.2** Voting Support (in %) for Prime Minister, Likud and Labor in Selected Communities, 1999 and 1996  
May 17, 1999 (May 29, 1996)

	Netanyahu	Barak (Peres)	Likud <sup>a</sup>	Labor <sup>b</sup>
National Total	43.9 (50.5)	56.1 (49.5)	14.1 (24.9)	20.3 (26.6)
Jewish settlements	48.3 (55.6)	51.5 (44.3)	15.4 (27.4)	21.6 (27.7)
Non-Jewish settlements	5.3 (5.2)	94.3 (94.7)	1.3 (2.2)	7.7 (16.7)
Druze settlements	20.6 (21.3)	79.3 (78.6)	7.9 (11.7)	21.7 (40.5)
Bedouin settlements	8.6 (6.8)	91.3 (93.1)	0.7 (1.5)	4.0 (14.9)
Bnei Brak	88.7 (88.9)	11.2 (11.0)	6.5 (11.1)	4.4 (6.6)
Jerusalem	64.5 (69.9)	35.4 (30.0)	15.2 (25.6)	14.1 (16.3)
Nazareth	1.1 (1.3)	98.8 (98.6)	0.2 (0.3)	3.4 (8.5)
Nazareth Heights	46.0 (51.2)	53.9 (48.7)	19.3 (28.4)	12.9 (28.4)
Tel Aviv	35.6 (44.8)	64.2 (55.1)	15.4 (26.6)	27.4 (33.9)
Golan Heights	41.4 (49.7)	58.5 (50.2)	9.2 (16.3)	23.3 (31.2)
Jews beyond Green Line	78.0 (83.7)	21.9 (16.2)	19.5 (32.1)	8.3 (10.1)
Kibbutzim	6.8 (10.0)	93.1 (89.9)	1.8 (3.1)	50.5 (54.8)
Moshavim	44.2 (51.8)	55.7 (48.1)	16.3 (26.7)	30.8 (34.8)

SOURCE: *Election results of the Central Elections Committee, as reported in Haaretz and Maariv, May 19 and May 23, 1999; and in the Hayom supplement of Maariv, June 2, 1996, 8–17.*

<sup>a</sup>Likud-Gesher-Tzomet in 1996.

<sup>b</sup>One Israel in 1999, with Gesher and Meimad.

would be set by the election of the prime minister and not by the vote for the Knesset, and accordingly the vote for parliament became the arena for sectarian contestation. Fifteen parties won seats in the 1999 elections compared with 11 in 1996. The effective number of electoral parties rose from 6.2 to 10.3; the effective number of parliamentary parties rose from 5.6 to 8.7; electoral volatility rose from 17.3 to 24.8. These were the highest in the history of elections in Israel and one of the highest in Western democracies (Hazan and Diskin 2000, 632).

Four chapters in this volume analyze voting behavior, from four different perspectives. Our chapter (chapter 1) analyzes the 1999 election from a comparative and long-term perspective in terms of the party system and voting behavior. We discuss the different phases of the Israeli party system, its current dealignment characteristics, the increase in issue voting, the growing importance of candidates in voters' calculus, and the vitality of the bloc alignment. We consider changes in electoral behavior, and in particular the increased importance of issue voting, candidates, and performance evaluations. As the parties and voters' party identification weaken, the prime ministerial candidates replace the parties in the eyes of the voters, and the blocs of left and right gain in importance.

The next two chapters focus on strategic and split-ticket voting. Up to two days before the election, there were five prime ministerial candidates. Paul Abramson and John H. Aldrich (chapter 2) discuss strategic voting considerations in the prime ministerial race before three of the candidates withdrew, based on survey data we collected in the month before the election as part of the Israeli National Election Study.

There was a good deal of split-ticket voting as a result of the system, whereby a voter selects the candidate for prime minister representing the Likud or Labor, but selects a different party for the Knesset vote. Due to the two-ballot system, split-ticket voting became easy and popular. Dana Arieli-Horowitz (chapter 3) assesses this phenomenon based on aggregate data in the 1996 and 1999 elections, the two elections held under the hybrid system of simultaneous elections to the Knesset and for the prime minister.

The chapter by Michael Shalev and Sigal Kis (chapter 4) attempts to resurrect the role of class in electoral behavior. Indeed most voting research in Israel—including our own—has noted the relative absence of class politics and class voting. Using our 1999 survey data, in addition to ecological analysis of aggregate data, and multilevel analysis, they demonstrate class effects. However, they conclude their study by suggesting that in Israel “the most obvious correlates of these class-voting linkages are non-economic: disputed issues of collective identity, the role of religion in personal and national life, and management of the peace process and future borders.” This indicates less of a disagreement with our work than a difference of emphasis. Collective identity, nationalism, religiosity, and ethnicity are exactly the factors we emphasize in our analyses. Class effects are mediated and depend upon the social and historical experiences of individuals and groups, and do not by themselves and directly define electoral behavior. The sophisticated and multifaceted analysis by Shalev and Kis is to be commended, and we join their plea for more ecological studies, and in particular for multilevel analyses and better data.

The list of special group parties that did better in 1999 than ever was wildly variegated: it included the Haredi, ultra-Orthodox, non-Zionist Shas; the passionate anti-Haredi secular Shinui; two parties appealing to immigrants from the former Soviet Union; and Arab parties. The usual large parties, Labor and Likud, became much smaller. Yoav Peled’s chapter (chapter 5) analyzes the continuing electoral success of Shas; As’ad Ghanem and Sarah Ozacky-Lazar (chapter 6) focus on the Arab parties and voters. Zvi Gitelman and Ken Goldstein (chapter 7) discuss the “Russian” revolution in Israeli politics. Daphna Canetti, Howard L. Frant, and Ami Pedhazur (chapter 8) analyze these developments in terms of party system polarization.

This array of parties is especially interesting because it suggests the importance of domestic issues in determining the outcome. This appears to be the case for the Knesset vote, but not for the vote for prime minister. There was much evidence of rising unemployment, decline in the rate of growth of the gross domestic product (GDP), and misspending of public money, but the economic policy differences between the two main parties were not all that wide. Personalities seemed to matter, since many voters seemed attentive to the character of the contenders. The fact that Netanyahu had lost the support of many of the Likud leadership such as Begin, Mordechai, David Levy, and Meridor, worked against the prime minister.

Some observers, especially in the foreign media, interpreted the election of Barak as prime minister as a fundamental sea change in Israeli priorities and belief patterns. This analysis was encouraged by the fact that the voting resulted in the largest margin ever achieved in Israeli elections. Consider: No party had ever won an absolute majority of the votes; the Netanyahu-Peres contest of 1996 was decided by less than 1% of the vote; accordingly, the 1999 spread (Barak 56% and Netanyahu 44%) seemed like a landslide. But this view was incorrect. Old patterns funneled into a new system of voting produced the 1999 results. As always in elections, and probably more than before, the candidates played a fundamental role in determining the results. A more appropriate way to think of the 1999 Israeli elections is that a weak candidate (Barak) bested a wounded prime minister abandoned by most of his political allies (Netanyahu).

Based on the landslide, political scientists might be tempted to view 1999 as a realigning election. But that would also be incorrect at worst, premature at best. As we show in our contribution, the election results do not signify significant readjustments in the size or in the social and ideological makeup of the opposing camps. Barak's plans for peace with the Arab world may or may not be realized, but the election was not focused on those plans.

Both candidates made great strides toward the center of the Israeli political spectrum in forming their platforms and while their styles and temperaments differed, on fundamental positions they seemed not that far from one another. The contributions by Gideon Doron (chapter 9) and by Jonathan Mendilow (chapter 10) discuss these and other aspects of the election campaigns of the two candidates and their parties. Their analyses are complemented by Nathan Yanai's (chapter 11) investigation of the emergence and failure of the Center Party. Gabriel Weimann and Gadi Wolfsfeld (chapter 13) examine the struggle over the electoral agenda between the media and the prime ministerial candidates, comparing the elections of 1996 with those of 1999.

The Israeli political system has changed, and it has changed in complex ways. Just as a range of factors affects the decision of the individual voter, myriad forces drive the transformation of a society and its political system. There are not many settings more appropriate to study these matters than Israel in the 1990s. The rules of the game have been altered; new groups of voters have emerged; international and economic shifts present new challenges. Our collection explores all those in the context of the 1999 elections.

### Reference

Hazan, Reuven Y., and Abraham Diskin. 2000. "The 1999 Knesset and Prime Ministerial Elections in Israel." *Electoral Studies* 19: 628–37.