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# Israel National Elections Analysis

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## Background – The Electoral System

Israel has an electoral system based on nationwide proportional representation, and the number of seats which each list receives in the Knesset is proportional to the number of voters who voted for it. A party must pass the qualifying threshold - at least 2 percent of the votes - to be elected. According to this



system, the voters vote for a party list, not for a particular person on the list. The parties which have chosen to institute a primary system directly elect their candidates for the Knesset, while the others elect their candidates via the party's institutions. In ultra-religious parties, it is the spiritual leader's responsibility to appoint candidates. Knesset elections take place once every four years. However, the Knesset or the Prime Minister can decide to hold early elections.

The multi-party system and low-entry threshold has meant that no single party is able to form a government. Rather, the parties are required to form coalition governments. In 1992, Israel adopted a direct-election system for the post of Prime Minister. The Prime Minister was directly elected, separately from the Knesset, in 1996, 1999 and 2001. This system was abandoned after the 2001 election, because it failed to produce more stable governments (the 2001 elections were held less than two years after the previous one) and led to further fragmentation of the parliament.

Israel also has a President, who is elected by the Knesset every five years. He or she essentially serves as a figurehead, while the actual governmental power resides in the hands of the Prime Minister.

The President's key role is to decide which Member of Knesset (MK) will be given the power to form a coalition after elections take place. Historically, this MK has been the chairperson of the largest party elected. However, this person is also the one who has the best chances of forming a governable coalition. The president decides this after meeting all heads of parties who inform the President whom they would support as Prime Minister. The 2009 elections have created a precedent in which Kadima, the largest party elected, has less chance of forming a viable coalition than Likud, thereby complicating the President's decision. In this context, it is important to note that the President was a member of Kadima when he was elected to his post by the Knesset.

## The Recent Elections and their Impact

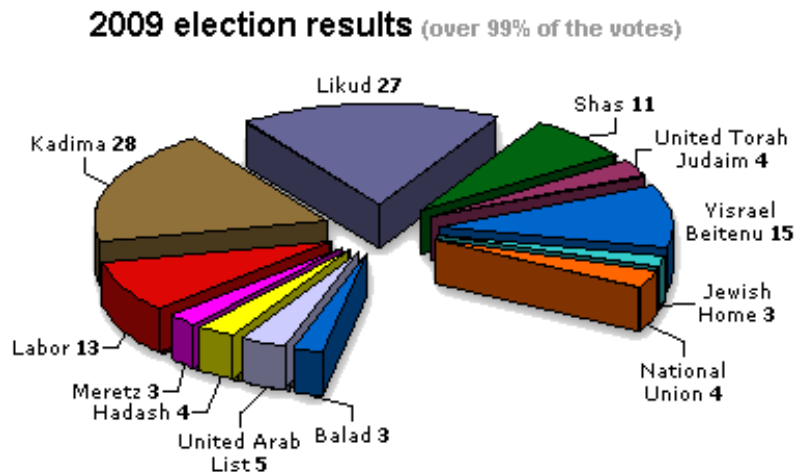
The February 10, Israeli parliamentary elections reflected the shift to the political right of the Israeli public. This shift is a result of rising Iranian influence in the region, which directly affected Israel's national psyche during the war with Hezbollah in 2006, and the escalation of violence with Hamas since the Gaza pullout in 2005. The Israeli public still views security as its number-one issue of concern. The election results show a correlation between the rise of violence and the support of right-leaning parties.

The structural flaws of the Israeli political and electoral systems also influenced the results. The Israeli voter gave a slight advantage to the center-left party Kadima and its leader, Tzipi Livni, but denied Livni the power to form a government. This outcome shows the frame of mind of the Israeli left, which decided to vote against Benjamin Netanyahu and his Likud Party rather than positively for another party. In other words, although the system does not provide for the direct election of a leader, the populace did vote for a leader.

The power to form the coalition government will most likely be given to the Likud leader, Benjamin Netanyahu, who may choose to form a small right-wing coalition of 65 members. This is the less attractive option for Netanyahu, who needs to consider the leverage that small parties could have on such a coalition. The Likud would be dependent on small parties to pass any reforms or policy initiatives. A right-wing coalition is also likely to have more issues in its dealings with an Obama administration, which is likely to push for progress in the Israeli- Palestinian peace process and possibly exert more pressure on Israel than the Bush administration did. Thus, the preferred coalition by Netanyahu would include the Kadima party; Kadima has been the ruling party for the past several years and, due to its size, would offer a much more stable government.

However, since Kadima is the largest party, it has expressed willingness to join a coalition only if Netanyahu and Livni would take turns and lead for just over two years each. The last time this "rotation" of power took place was in the 1984 election when Shimon Peres of the Labour party and Yizhak Shamir of the Likud took turns as Prime Ministers in a National Unity Coalition. Netanyahu has so far been reluctant to accept this offer from Kadima.

## The Composition of the New Knesset



The composition of the new Knesset illustrates the reason why Netanyahu has the upper hand in forming a coalition. Of the 120 MKs, there are 65 right-leaning individuals, including the ultra-Orthodox, who tend to join right-wing parties. The historic left parties have shrunk considerably. Thus, even with the help of the three small Arab parties, which represent the large Arab minority in Israel, Kadima would still be unable to form a coalition without the Likud.

### **The Rise of Lieberman (“Yisrael Beiteinu” – Israel Our Home)**

The rise of Avigdor (Ivet) Lieberman can be explained by the rise in regional violence which followed the Israeli withdrawals from Lebanon in 2000 and from Gaza in 2005. Despite being well known for his political fear campaigns and provocations of Arab-Israeli citizens and MKs, Lieberman also stands at odds with some right-wing parties. He represents a large constituency of Russian-speaking immigrants whose main concern in Israel is religious legislation which oversees issues such as immigration rights, marriage, kosher laws, etc. Lieberman opposes many of these laws and is thus at odds with the religious parties. Given that Netanyahu’s key support in a narrow-base right-wing coalition would come from the ultra-Orthodox parties, Lieberman may choose not to support Netanyahu when making his recommendations to the President.

### **Democratic Reform**

There is one realization by the larger political parties that brings them together. Electoral system reform is urgently needed to prevent further fragmentation of the political system.

The Likud, Kadima, Yisrael Beiteinu and Labour view reform as the top priority necessitated by Israel's democratic system. Since 1996, there have been six national elections – which average out to an election almost every two years. This has led to a serious lack in governance, preventing policy reforms on many fronts and on many issues. This will be a major task of whichever party takes the leadership in the coalition.

## Potential Scenarios

### Likud-led right-wing collation

A coalition headed by Likud will be joined by Yisrael Beiteinu, the right-wing religious parties and the ultra-Orthodox parties. Kadima would head the opposition.

- **Peace process:** Less inclined to move forward on the peace process, more at odds with the U.S. administration.
- **Economy:** Government spending likely to increase in light of the number of coalition partners.
- **Stability:** Likely to be fragmented. Chances of an early dissolution are high on account of the need to concede to U.S. demands on the peace process.

### Likud/ Kadima Coalition

Coalition led by Benjamin Netanyahu and a potential rotation with Tzipi Livni. Several parties could join, including Yisrael Beiteinu and religious parties. Labour would head the opposition.

- **Peace Process:** Should move at the same pace as it has with Israel embracing the Palestinian Authority as a partner for peace and resorting to force against Islamic radical elements. Government more inclined to concessions.
- **Economy:** A more responsible budgetary policy focused on dealing with financial crisis.
- **Stability:** High chances of dissolution given the personal nature of the key principals; increased chances for election reform process.