

Young Arabs' Boycott of the Israeli Elections: A "Double Protest"—against the Government and the Arab Leadership

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Brief Analysis

The choice of about half of Israel's Arab citizens not to exercise the right to vote in Israel's last parliamentary election in April dramatically affected election results, while also reflecting some powerful basic trends in Israel's Arab society. While the voting rate—49 percent—was higher than expected due to concerns over an extensive election boycott by Israel's Arab citizens, it was nonetheless a low point in Arab participation in the democratic game. With the upcoming election, the question of whether this boycott will be sustained is one of the major questions surrounding the voting in September 2019. Understanding the social and political frustrations behind this boycott is key to reversing an ongoing trend in Israeli politics.

The boycott of the last election was but the latest manifestation of an ongoing process of more than two decades that has seen more and more Arabs call for a boycott—though the 2001 elections were an outlier, when in the wake of the October 2000 protests only 18 percent of Israeli Arabs voted. However, in the most recent elections, the relative weight of the younger generation of Arab society was especially important. This demographic is both a considerable demographic bloc and made up the majority of boycotters, which can be explained in part by its relationship both with the Israeli government and Arab political leadership in Israel.

At present, most young Arabs between 18 and 30 see little point in voting, in large part because they do not believe that they have the ability affect or shape the political system. But that is not to say that young Arabs are indifferent to what is going on around them, despite this portrayal by some in politics, the media, and in academia. Instead, segment's future participation in politics and elections depends on its satisfaction with the government and the political system, as well as on political parties' ability to resolve the socioeconomic challenges faced by this younger generation.

The pattern of behavior of young Arabs in the last election raises several key questions that must be considered in future elections, including what is valued in political representation, a sense of buy-in or lack thereof In the political system, and what could change in the current political system to increase participation.

A social profile of this generation demonstrates that they do not resemble earlier generations, many of whom came of age during the period of martial law in Israel and were shaped by the formative events of the military campaigns (1948, 1967, 1973, 1982) and the traumatic tensions between the Arab citizens and the state, such as the Kafr Qassem massacre in 1956 and Land Day in 1976. In comparison, the younger generation is highly sensitive to economic and social issues and possesses a profound political awareness. Many possess clear, coherent stances on the core issues of interest to Arab society in Israel. In particular, they are concerned about the rise in criminality, the housing and land crisis, the “Basic Law: Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People,” and the so-called Kamenetz Law regarding construction in Arab towns and villages.

Inspired by the expanded use of the virtual sphere and social media, young Arabs—like their peers elsewhere—are well informed of international affairs. They attribute a great deal of importance to values less important to their parents and grandparents, such as self-realization, career development, efforts to reform social conventions, and a new collective identity focused on their generational experiences.

In particular, young Arab women are now an especially prominent force in all aspects of life. They are a majority of undergraduate students at Israeli universities and are integrating into the labor force at an unprecedented rate. Given these social developments, significant gaps between the young and all the sources of authority surrounding them are emerging: state institutions, the Arab political leadership, and their parents’ generation.

In consequence, young Arabs feel doubly alienated in their daily lives: both from the governing establishment and from the Arab political leadership. Consequently, despite an increased political awareness and clear societal values, a significant portion of young Arabs live a life of fundamental alienation and have little clarity regarding their future.

The situation is particularly dire in relation to the Israeli governing establishment and the public sphere. Many young Arabs, especially those with high levels of education, display a desire to integrate more fully into the various levels of Israeli society, be it the workplace, academia, or the cultural sphere. However, they encounter serious obstacles such as the “Basic Law: Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People” and socioeconomic gaps between themselves and their Jewish peers. These obstacles in turn create feelings of tension, frustration, and despair: precisely when they are showing an unprecedented desire to integrate into various aspects of society, Arab citizens are facing major barriers to participation.

At the same time, young Arabs also feel alienated from the political parties of Arab society in Israel, and many doubt its ability to address the most acute problems of the Arab population. Public opinion surveys done just before the April election showed that most Arab citizens expect Arab members of Knesset to confront a steady rise in crime and house demolitions in Arab towns. The collective disappointment with the Arab MKs’ actual priorities was one major reason for the election boycott, especially by the younger generation. Alienation is exacerbated given a limited representation of youth among political leadership in most positions of influence, both at the local and national government level, at around only 10 percent. Of the ten MKs from the Arab political parties, for example, only one is under 40.

Posts by young Arabs on social media provide a window into an increasing alienation with politics in general and their parliamentary representatives in particular. The media discourse reflects widespread longing for participation in democratic processes such as elections, a demand for some institution or entity that will respond to their wishes and troubles (especially socioeconomic), and especially a desire for a sense of belonging. But because they are also deeply skeptical about their ability to improve their situation via the ballot box and since their sense of belonging is so disrupted, social media discourse is particularly rife with calls to focus on personal interests and avoid taking part in the official political game.

The activities and attitudes of young Arabs studying at Israeli academic institutions reflect a microcosm of the

heated debates in Arab society about the election, especially the increasing calls for an election boycott.

Conversations held with college and university students before the last election revealed extensive support for the boycott and an expectation that the boycott would be widespread. This was also evident in the young people's—especially students'—disproportionately large presence in the boycott campaign in the months leading up to the election, which included both widespread dissemination of messages and videos online as well as billboards in Arab towns. The videos and photos showed young people wearing T-shirts with the election boycott slogan hanging posters and billboards with the same message.

These efforts bore fruit during election day. Political meetings held before the election in Arab communities were marked by the absence of young participants in the audience, a departure from previous years when they were a visible presence. In the town of Baka al-Gharbiyya, for example, there were no young people at the Ra'am-Balad's (a coalition between Islamic party and Arab nationalist party) convention held just a few days before the election; in the past, this type of event would have drawn masses of young voters. Their absence was especially notable on election day itself. As done on previous parliamentary election days, Arab party activists urged the community to go vote through social media and vehicles equipped with loudspeakers two to three hours before the polling stations closed. However, these last minute efforts appeared to only bring older voters—younger voters by and large stayed home.

However, despite the bleak picture, the young generation in Arab society is not “lost.” The young people of today have many fine personal qualities and possess a desire to integrate and participate in a political process where they feel represented. But they are struggling to find appropriate ways to participate and make a difference, which exacerbates their feelings of alienation and pushes them to protest the sources of authority around them.

To make sure that the potential of these young people is not wasted and that they can be convinced to recognize the election process and voting as effective means of making a change, the government must assume responsibility and undertake meaningful steps focused on youth, both before and after they reach voting age. Israel's political parties, as well as the government, must work to include young Arab men and women in their decision-making processes to the impact of this generation in Arab society. And once avenues for representation are publicly visible, is important to inspire young Arabs to understand the importance of their role in safeguarding democracy and the rule of law.

Leaders must also address young Arabs' lack of trust in the current political system—both the government overall and the Arab political parties—and in particular the feeling that the political leadership only calls on them before elections. These potential voters are looking for a party that will address their unique needs and challenges and, ultimately, inspire them to identify with the political process. In the last election, it was clear that the political parties, including the Arab parties and political leaders, had lost touch with this key demographic. So long as political parties continue to ignore the major issues relevant to this group, youth will continue to disengage due to the sense that they are no more than a temporary electoral asset.

However, deeper societal changes are also in order. The educational curricula in the Arab school system in Israel, for example, generally focuses only on existing knowledge among the young and their understanding of politics.

Educational curricula must also strengthen collective trust in the political system and its potential to affect change through participation. It may therefore be necessary to examine existing civics programs in schools and assess the extent to which they encourage the democratic activity of future generations.

Outside of the school systems, political institutions should expand intervention programs among young people who lack access to knowledge sharing activities and platforms to encourage their participation in democratic institutions. In 2018, the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Education launched a joint campaign urging young people to vote in the local government elections, which emphasized to students the importance of voting. Such educational efforts would be appropriate before parliamentary elections as well.

On the eve of the election called for September, Israel's leadership must wake up to the reality of Arab society in general and the situation of the young in particular. The will to integrate into the political institutions and society writ large still exists, but so does the risk that this understandable frustration will worsen, leading to further alienation and increasing friction between the government and the country's Arab citizens. All the major players in Israel's political arena still have the muscle to respond to the call of young Arabs. In the following years, the Arab parties must place members of the young generation in appropriate positions. Meanwhile, Jewish parties must find a way to open their ranks to provide representatives of Arab society—especially its youth—realistic places and begin a discourse of equals with this segment of Israeli society.

For their part, Young Arabs in Israel are unwilling to continue as a political tool without real representation, whether because of government action or because of the Arab leadership's own policies. Without a comprehensive acknowledgement of and response to young Arabs' problems, they will be forced to search for alternatives to representation at the official political level and engage in political activism outside of the official government. ❖

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