

Israeli Elections: Results and Implications

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Brief Analysis

Campaign: Israel's elections were primarily a referendum on Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's leadership, and the verdict was clear: "Anybody but Netanyahu." This was also the sentiment during the campaign, especially when the three prime ministerial candidates (Yitzhak Mordechai, Ze'ev "Benny" Begin, and Azmi Bishara) from the three smaller parties dropped out of the running. There was unanimity from the left, right, and center that Netanyahu had to go, a fact further underscored by the magnitude of Ehud Barak's victory.

An examination of the numbers is particularly telling. In 1996, Netanyahu received 50.4 percent of the vote. In this election, he received only about 44 percent of the vote. This is especially surprising given that two of the three groups which constitute the majority of Israel's 300,000 new voters -- Russian immigrants and 18-, 19-, and 20-year-old ultra-Orthodox Jews -- are traditional Likud supporters. Netanyahu would have won in a landslide had he kept the support of those who voted for him in 1996 and added a strong percentage of the new voters. Instead, he lost support among every religious, ethnic, and subgroup in the Israeli political spectrum, including those in the West Bank and the Golan. In the end, Barak did not even need the Arab vote, given that he received a Jewish majority of about 4 percent. For Netanyahu, this was a crushing defeat.

Ironically, this election need not have happened. The National Religious Party, which brought down the government, was in the end fighting frantically to save it. History will tell the story of Netanyahu's lost opportunity in 1996 to reshape Israeli politics and be "king of Israel" for a decade. His 1996 coalition was an opposition coalition, capable of defeating a sitting government, but Netanyahu never formed a coalition capable of governing effectively. Moreover, Netanyahu realized too late that the key Russian vote was energized more by personal concerns (control of the Interior Ministry) than by nationalism (Foreign Minister Ariel Sharon's Moscow gambit).

Netanyahu's mistakes notwithstanding, Barak ran a smart campaign. He kept quiet and let other people talk for him. He also trumpeted a simple message of "change" and did not elaborate on it. Even Barak's miscues during the campaign -- when he put a Russian on the Labor party list ahead of an Ethiopian, and when one of his supporters calling Sephardic Jews "riffraff" -- worked to his advantage by signaling to the Russians that their place was with Barak.

The candidates conspired to make this an issue-free campaign, which also worked to Barak's advantage by focusing the election on Netanyahu's leadership. Netanyahu did try to add peace process urgency late in the campaign, but nobody went along with it. Ironically, the peace process was not a major issue precisely because in the last three years Netanyahu largely succeeded in forging an Israeli consensus on how to make peace. After excising both "wide-eyed" idealism and the concept of "Greater Israel," what remained was an 80-percent consensus that peace with the Palestinians should be based on territorial compromise with strong security considerations. Netanyahu's legacy is that this is one issue on which Israeli society is united.

Knesset Winners and Losers: The biggest winners in this year's election were the two poles of the secular-Orthodox debate: Shas, the Sephardic, ultra-Orthodox party, and Shinui, the militantly secular party. Shas now has seventeen members of Knesset (MKs), just two short of the Likud (see table below). Its success can be attributed in part to the fact that it had a cause celebre after the conviction of its leader, Aryeh Deri. But Shas's votes were not limited to Sephardim. The party received support from others who viewed it as a party that fulfills its commitments to deliver social services. On the flip-side of the coin, Shinui catapulted from nowhere to win six seats based on a simple message of anticlericalism. The Arab parties were also winners, taking ten seats -- five of which go to the Islamist party. The One Israel party, combining Labor, Gesher, and Meimad, did not fare as well as its leader, and won only 26 seats, nearly a quarter down from 1996.

The biggest losers in the fifteenth Knesset are the far right, Likud, and the Center Party. For the far right, the National Union's four seats are the only ones in the Knesset completely opposed to the Oslo agreements. This signals the end of "Greater Israel" ideology. At the same time, the Likud will be just a "big small party" with its nineteen seats. In many ways, it has lost its identity, leadership, and raison d'etre. The Center Party was another big loser. Amidst a "dream team" of personalities, it had no real ideas and only won six seats. This makes for an interesting comparison with Shinui: coming from nowhere, the party with one leader and one idea equaled the party with four leaders and no ideas. Finally, the passing of the Third Way and Tsomet suggests that the Israeli electorate is, to some extent, less anxious about immediate Israeli concessions in the peace process.

The Fifteenth Knesset

One Israel	26
Likud	19
Shas	17
Meretz	10
Yisrael Ba'aliyah	6
Center Party	6
Shinui	6
National Religious Party	5
United Torah Judaism	5
United Arab List	5
National Union	4
Yisrael Beiteinu	4
Hadash	3
Balad	2
One Nation	2

Coalitions: The Knesset is fairly evenly divided among three major blocs: One Israel has twenty-six seats; a secular/centrist/left bloc of Meretz, Yisrael Ba'aliyah, Shinui, the Center Party, and the workers' party -- One Nation -- has thirty seats; and the religious parties have twenty-seven seats. Also, the Likud has nineteen; the Far Right has eight; and the Arab parties have ten seats. With these blocs, Barak could form four potential coalitions.

- The first would be a secular coalition comprised of Labor, Shinui, Meretz, Center, Yisrael Ba'aliyah, and One

Nation. This would be a minority coalition based on tacit support from the Arab parties. This coalition is unlikely, because it will be viewed as too narrow to make significant moves in the peace process and is likely to invite the type of divisiveness Barak wants to dispel.

- The second option is a narrow national unity government (NUG). This would be a coalition of Labor, Likud, Center, and Yisrael Ba'aliyah, with neither the religious nor the antireligious parties. A narrow NUG would also be a minority government and is highly unlikely, because Likud will not be part of a government that must rely on tacit Arab support.
- The third -- and most likely -- coalition is a broad-based, non-NUG that would include religious as well as secular parties, but not the Likud. Shas needs to join the government to receive funding to support its institutions. Otherwise, it will be one of the big losers in the next election. And whereas it may be difficult to get the secular parties to sit with Shas, Meretz has done so in the past and Shinui may as well. Even other religious parties might join the government to prevent Shas from having a monopoly on religious benefits. This coalition could reach as high as 85 seats, with Likud and the far right as its opposition.
- The fourth and final option is a "wall-to-wall" NUG comprising every party except for Yisrael Beiteinu, National Union, and the Arab parties. This is a possibility if Barak makes his focus final-status talks and a narrow platform based on the peace process consensus.

Implications: Domestically, there is going to be a redefining of government priorities, with some reapportionment away from Haredim and settlements and toward Russians and secular education. Owing to Shas's success, however, this will be less than one might have imagined. There will probably be an early deal on army enlistment for Yeshiva students.

Peace Process Re-engagement: It is known that Barak wants to pursue the Syria track, and he may be even more ambitious than was Rabin by trying to pursue two tracks at the same time. There are signs that Syria might be interested in a deal, and this may be intriguing to Barak. Moreover, the prospect of a deal with Syria during the campaign -- even with Barak's reaffirmation of the depth of withdrawal equaling the depth of security -- did not bring voters out against Barak.

Barak will certainly push ahead on the Palestinian track by changing the atmospherics, engaging directly with Arafat, and trying to implement Wye early. Yet, his victory does not make for a clear path to a final-status agreement. In fact, on substantive issues, Barak and Netanyahu are very similar. They both support the right to Jewish settlement in the West Bank, and though Barak will limit expansion, he will not declare a settlement freeze. They both oppose dividing Jerusalem, and Barak is likely to be particularly careful on this issue lest he prove Likud's campaign accusations accurate. Barak may even be tougher than Netanyahu in some areas. Tactically, he will want less direct U.S. involvement, preferring that the United States compensate both parties in tertiary ways rather than be involved directly in the bargaining. And, based on his policy that "high fences make good neighbors," he might not care what the Palestinians call their entity, but he will be very careful about what powers it has and what territory it controls. This may lead to a "Sharon-esque" Palestinian entity that is contiguous, yet small so as to be relatively harmless.

The challenge facing Barak is to capitalize on the consensus that Netanyahu achieved at home to make peace abroad. This means pursuing Wye while at the same time avoiding the polarization of Israeli politics which occurred in the past. He stands a good chance at home precisely because about 80 percent of Israeli voters agree on the general outlines of a final peace agreement with the Palestinians: a possible state with limited sovereignty, no withdrawal to

the 1967 borders, no division of Jerusalem, retention of large sections of the West Bank and the vast majority of settlers, and a refusal of Palestinian refugees' right of return.

U.S. Policy: If Barak remains true to his platform, the wide gap that separates the Israeli consensus from the Palestinian one will soon become apparent. This should precipitate a rethinking of the U.S. administration's approach to the peace process. During Netanyahu's premiership, the U.S.-Palestinian bilateral relationship expanded as a way to compensate for Israel's perceived rigidity. At the same time, the administration stayed quiet as the Palestinians won international reaffirmation of the original partition resolution, United Nations General Assembly Resolution 181. This Palestinian strategy is effectively an "insurance policy" against Barak, expanding the contours of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict so that no Palestinian leader will ever have to make the concessions -- on territory, Jerusalem, and refugees -- that the Israeli consensus requires for a final peace deal. This is an extremely dangerous approach. With Barak at the helm, the U.S. administration's responsibility should be to lower Palestinians' sights, not to permit an expansion of the conflict. This means pushing for real, substantive concessions from the Palestinians, repudiating claims to territory, not just postponing them. If Washington allows the Palestinians to continue the strategy of "moving the goalposts," the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is likely to survive for decades.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Adam Frey.

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