

JERUSALEM LETTER / VIEWPOINTS

Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

VP 64 21 Elul 5747 / 15 September 1987

VP 65

ELECTORAL REFORM FOR ISRAEL

Daniel J. Elazar

The Need for Reform / How to Achieve Electoral Reform / Possible Alternatives:
1. Raising the Threshold of the Present System; 2. The Westminster System; 3. Equal Multi-Member Constituencies; 4. Mixed Systems; 5. A Fixed District System; 6. A Presidential System / The Fixed District System Preferred

The debate over the reform of Israel's electoral system has attained the status of a perennial issue -- always in the air, frequently discussed, but essentially stalemated because the proposed reforms conflict with basically immovable political interests of long standing. Moreover, while the public overwhelmingly supports electoral reform in the polls, until now the issue has not been sufficiently important to them to make a real effort to bring about change.

Any change in a state's electoral system clearly represents a fundamental change in its constitution, since it alters the very basis of political representation -- one of the major elements, if not the very essence of democratic government. Consequently,

electoral changes are among the hardest to effect. If such a change is to be effectuated, it must be made in a way that is most harmonious with the overall political style of the state, in order to be as acceptable as possible to the broadest public, so as to meet the demands of public consensus.

The Need for Reform

The present party system, which antedates the state, was developed to meet the needs of pioneering the resettlement of the land as they were perceived by the settlers from Eastern and Central Europe. As vehicles for pioneering before the existence of a Jewish government, the individual parties -- particularly the labor and religious parties which embraced strong

Daniel J. Elazar, Editor and Publisher; David Clayman and Zvi R. Marom, Associate Editors.
21 Arlozorov St. Jerusalem, 92181, Israel; Tel. 02-639281. © Copyright. All rights reserved. ISSN: 0334-4096

doctrinal positions -- developed educational, welfare, and social service institutions of their own that went far beyond the normal political purposes of party organizations in other countries.

After the establishment of the state, the new government gave active assistance to these party institutions in order to facilitate the development of the country and the absorption of the mass of new immigrants that arrived after 1948. Thus the parties consolidated their position in Israel's political system in ways that transcend the usual political concerns of access and representation to become virtually self-contained provinces within the state. This, in turn, strengthened the vested interests opposed to electoral reform, since any threat to the existence of a particular party could undercut the life structure of many people.

It is hard for outsiders to visualize the degree to which the parties or ideological camps (groups of parties sharing an overall ideology such as Labor's socialism, Likud's populist nationalism, or the religious parties' traditional religion) dominated the lives of ordinary Israelis, something which Israelis took for granted. In their heyday before the state, everything from sports clubs to paramilitary forces, from schools to banks, was organized by party or camp. While many of these functions were subsequently nationalized when the state was established, many others still remain in party hands. This helped create a very centralized party system with considerable power in the hands of the party leadership and bureaucracies through their control not only of normal electoral politics but also of economic opportunity for party members.

Even as the parties were being consolidated within the framework of the state, however, the change in Israel's population introduced large numbers of people -- either immigrants or members of a new native-born generation -- who had no ideological stake in any particular party and did not particularly care to be dependent upon the parties for services they consider to be rightfully the province of government. As those people increase in number, they provide a base of support for electoral reform, but one that is limited because it is unorganized and must face

the united opposition of those who actually hold political power in the country.

The real problem that has developed out of all this is that central control over the nominations process has led to an increasing mediocritization of Israeli politics. Party business is conducted so that, with rare exceptions, only professional politicians -- people who are prepared to spend all their time in partisan political activity -- can gain enough seniority and recognition to be nominated to high office. Citizen involvement in politics is minimal under such a system, while the number of good people willing to kowtow to the party leadership for a sufficiently lengthy period of time to rise in the ranks is quite limited.

The results stand in stark contrast to what happens in local politics where the direct election of mayors, introduced in 1978, has led to a flowering of political talent as interested people find it easier to run for office on the basis of their personal talents.

How to Achieve Electoral Reform

Any way out of this apparent impasse must take into consideration the existence of the present party system and the reluctance of any of the present parties to accept any electoral arrangement that does not give at least those parties in the coalition some hope of survival. At the same time, any electoral reform, to be worth the effort, must meet the demands of the "non-party" population which is increasingly dissatisfied with the status quo, by providing for closer relations between the voters and their representatives; broader representation of the different interest, ethnic, and geographic groups that make up Israel's society; and greater independence from their party hierarchies for Knesset members.

An examination of the political situation in Israel today in light of these contradictory factors would seem to indicate that, while electoral reform remains a live issue, it is a stalemated one that requires a massive effort at mobilization of public opinion to move the political establishment. Various proposals for change have been advanced, ranging from continuing the present parliamentary system, with a certain percentage of the

Knesset's 120 seats elected from districts and the remainder elected at large, to a complete constitutional change instituting presidential government. What is necessary at this point is not to decide on the specific system but to mobilize the public so that change may be effectuated. It is clear that any proper change adopted would have to eliminate exclusive reliance on proportional representation with its debilitating consequences, among which are the extreme multiplicity of parties; the strengthening of the party bureaucracy at the expense of the government and the voters; the unhealthy deepening of political divisions in the country as a whole; and the increasing sense of political alienation that envelops many Israelis.

Electoral reform should lead to an electoral system that will offer the voters a choice of both candidates and parties, rather than just a choice of party lists, in Knesset elections. Knesset members should be elected on the basis of local, as well as national, attachments, thereby increasing the voice of the citizen in governmental affairs and better reflecting the spread of social and economic interests in the country. This, in turn, is likely to encourage the election of capable people regardless of their party standing, since they will be able to challenge the party organizations within their localities. Finally, such a system could be used to foster healthy regionalism, local attachments and local political activity, since the electoral districts could also be used as the basis for locally concerned democratic decentralization of decision-making.

Only the Knesset can enact electoral reform. Since this is unlikely to happen of its own accord in the present political climate, what is necessary is to organize a democratic "citizens revolt" in the form of a massive campaign of public mobilization. A half million to a million signatures on a petition that would demand a change in the electoral system presented to the Knesset by 50,000 citizens marching in Jerusalem could have the effect of breaking down present resistance to electoral reform on the part of the powers that be. The process of obtaining that number of signatures would in itself involve a major public effort, with all that this entails in the way of public education accompanying it.

If such an effort can be mounted, it would have excellent prospects for success. While the Israeli establishment appears to be very conservative, in every case where there has been a massive public outpouring, the establishment and the government have responded rapidly to the pressure. One need only look at the response in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War or the aftermath of the massacres in Beirut, not to speak of a number of less prominent situations. What is needed is a public figure to take the lead and an organization to provide him with proper support and funding necessary to mount a campaign. Both are now available.

Possible Alternatives:

1. Raising the Threshold of the Present System

The simplest change in the electoral system would be to retain proportional representation as at present, but to raise the minimum percentage needed to win a seat. Today slightly over one percent of the total vote will gain a seat in the Knesset. That is how Kahane was elected. Were that threshold to be raised to a three percent minimum, all the present fly-by-night splinter parties established to foster the ambitions of some individual would be eliminated while preserving those parties -- large, medium-sized and small -- that have demonstrated staying power on the political scene over the years and thus arguably deserve representation. Such a change would alter the present system which rewards splintering by encouraging leaders of factions within existing parties to set up their own parties prior to each election and thereby improve their chances of gaining election to the Knesset.

2. The Westminster System

Named after the system that prevails in Great Britain, this would involve dividing the country into 120 single member districts, in each of which candidates would be elected on a winner-take-all basis. David Ben Gurion thought this system would automatically lead to a two-party system, but as we know from Britain itself where four parties (Conservatives, Labour, Social Democrats and Scottish Nationalists) presently divide the districts among them, this is not necessarily the case, nor is it likely to be the case in Israel. On the other hand, it would make

it difficult for minorities with real ideological and political interests that are scattered throughout the country to achieve adequate direct representation in the Knesset. They would have to negotiate within larger party coalitions for influence instead. (Some have suggested that this might enhance the power of the religious bloc, which would provide the swing vote in a majority of the districts.) This system might eliminate the need for coalition government, but then again, it might not.

3. Equal Multi-Member Constituencies

Under this system the country would be divided into between 24 and 40 districts, roughly equal in population, each of which would elect 3 to 5 members on a party list. If it used weighted voting (that is, allow voters to cast up to three or five votes, with the option of casting all of their votes for a single candidate), this presumably would allow minority representation while at the same time introducing a strong element of geographic representation. While it probably would allow the perpetuation of a limited multi-party system and require coalition government, it should reduce the present fragmentation.

4. Mixed Systems

Some reformers have advocated electing a percentage of the Knesset through districts while continuing to elect the remainder through the present proportional representation system, that is to say, single state-wide lists, presumably to get the advantages of both systems.

5. A Fixed District System

Under this system, the country would be divided into a fixed number of large districts, say 8 or 12, based on permanent regional divisions, and the 120 Knesset seats apportioned among them periodically on the basis of population. Within each district as many parties as wished could submit lists, but voters could vote either for party lists or for individual candidates up to the total number of seats allotted to that district. This would reduce the number of parties able to compete in the election, allow voter choice of individual candidates and not simply party lists, thereby encouraging the parties to nominate attractive candidates in every district, and at the same time would allow

Israel's permanent groupings an opportunity to be represented in the Knesset as at present. Such a system would assure appropriate regional representation in the Knesset, something that now is lacking, without overemphasizing localism.

6. A Presidential System

Some reformers are advocating a complete change in the structure of the Israeli political system from a parliamentary to a presidential one, whereby a chief executive would be directly elected by the voters independently of the Knesset and would relate to the Knesset on a separation-of-powers basis similar to that of the United States or France. Those who propose this concentrate on the direct election of the president rather than on the form of election to the Knesset, though most are also in favor of some system of district election.

The Fixed District System Preferred

Electoral reform is no panacea. Indeed, there are reasons for preserving the present system. Yet, on balance, one must conclude that it is vitally necessary for Israel at this time because it would open up the system to new blood. Any of the changes proposed would do that.

Of these proposed reforms, the first seems most easily achieved although at present both major and minor parties oppose it as strongly as any other system change. The last seems most difficult to achieve and most problematic, given the nature of Israeli politics to date. All told, in this writer's opinion, the best plan is that of fixed multi-member districts which offer representation to the major geographic regions of the country, yet in such a way that the non-territorial minorities can be properly represented as well. Perhaps best of all would be a combination of this system with a separately elected executive which would strengthen the separation of executive and legislative powers, enable the development of stronger executive leadership, but at the same time with stronger legislative checks on the executive.

* * *

Daniel J. Elazar, President of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, is a long-time advocate of electoral reform.