Elections in Israel

The Knesset is elected by general, national, direct, equal, secret and proportional elections.

When Are the Elections Held?

The elections for the Knesset in Israel take place every four years. However, the regular date of the elections will change in the following cases:

- The Knesset has dissolved itself due to failure to form a new government.
- The Prime Minister has dissolved the Knesset as the most sensitive Members objected to the government and no alternative government was formed.
- The Knesset dissolved itself due to failure to assemble a new government.
- A vote of no-confidence was passed and a new candidate for Prime Minister failed to assemble a government.

What Are Parties, Lists, and Factions?

A “party” is an organization of people based on their common political and social ideologies. One or more parties compete for seats ahead of the legislative national elections. Elected lists become factions when the Knesset is formed.

Who Has the Right to Vote and Be Elected?

- Every Israeli citizen who is 18 years or older on the date of the election and who is entered in the Voters’ Registry has the right to vote.
- Every Israeli citizen who is 21 years old and up may be elected, including some position holders in the public sector, such as chief rabbis and judges.

Election Day

According to the law, Election Day is a public holiday. However, emergency services, services such as grocery stores (until 12 PM), public transportation, the media, restaurants, bural services, parking lots and gas stations operate regularly, as per the Central Election Committee’s determination.

■ Voting at Israeli hospitals, polling stations are open from 7 AM to 10 PM. In small towns, jails and hospitals, polling stations open from 8 AM to 8 PM. Polling stations may close earlier only if all citizens who have the right to vote in them have voted.
■ Postal votes must be counted by the secretary of the polling station committee by using an Israeli identity card, a valid Israeli passport, a valid drive’s license or a Knesset member card.
■ Striking or picketing by the public near the polling places is not allowed.

Invalid Votes

- Blank ballot slips.
- Votes stating something other than the list’s letter or shorthand.
- A vote in an envelope that has a mark that may identify the voter.
- An envelope containing more than two identical notes.
- An envelope that is not sealed by two members of the polling station committee.

Distribution of Mandates among Lists

- A list of candidates or a candidate will not participate in the elections if their goals or actions include one or more of the following:
  - The negation of the existence of the State of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state.
  - Incitement to racism.
  - Support for armed struggle by a hostile state or a terrorist organization against the State of Israel.
- In 1985, the “Coalition List” was barred from running in the elections as its members included members of the Ah-Asad Organization.
- Legal inquiry or any act or omission relating to the elections.

The Central Elections Committee

The Central Elections Committee is responsible for the following:

- Approval of lists, list names, and the shorthand for the lists.
- Supervision of political advertising.
- Logistic organization of the elections.
- Recruitment and training of workers for the polling stations and committees.
- Organization of the vote tally and the distribution of mandates.
- Legal inquiry regarding any act or omission related to the elections.
- Guiding the public on relevant matters.

- The Chairman of the Central Elections Committee is a Supreme Court Justice. His or her members are representatives of the factions, according to their size. Each faction will have one representative for every four Knesset members, and if it has less than four members — it will be represented by one Committee member.
- Each one of the regional committees is presided over by a judge and their composition is identical to that of the Central Committee.
- Committee employees are usually civil servants, retirees or people who worked in such committees in previous elections. The committee’s responsibility is to organize the elections in the region and make sure they are proper.
- Each polling station is staffed by a secretary who is an employee of the Elections Committee, and representatives of different factions appointed by the Regional Elections Committee.
- New lists or parties from the outgoing Knesset who are not represented in the polling station may send observers to the polling stations.
- The composition of factors in each and every polling station is determined at the Central Committee. Most polling stations have an police officer and a superintendent.

Election Results

Counting the Votes

- After each polling station closes, the polling station committee members count the ballots, mark the number of votes each list received, compare this number to the number of people who have the right to vote in the polling station and sum up the results.
- The process is completely transparent, with full consent by all polling station workers and observers.
- Counting errors are to be corrected by the Chairman of the Regional Elections Committee.
- Records and paperwork are transferred to the Regional Elections Committee for review, and the results are fed into a computer that is connected to the Central Elections Committee’s computer.
- The Central Elections Committee publishes the election results and the distribution of mandates, and final results are published in the “Red Humor” (official gazette).

Counting the Votes in Double Envelopes

Dissatisfied citizens who believe the official complex polling stations arrive at the Knesset while they are sealed. There, they are checked according to the identification numbers of voters with which they are marked. At the Knesset, Central Elections Committee workers make sure that the voters’ names were not deleted from the list of voters in the polling station(s) they are registered in. If this has been done, it means s/he voted twice, which constitutes an illegal offense. The internal voting envelopes are transferred to the Central Elections Commission workers, who are present in the Knesset for that purpose. Tallies are performed in the same manner in all regular polling stations.
The elections for the 19th Knesset by Numbers

- 32 lists ran in the elections
- Supreme Court Justice Elaycein Rubinstein was the Chairman of the Central Elections Committee
- The Electoral Committee had 36 members; the chairman had 6 deputies from the following factions: Kadima, Likud, Yisrael Bteinu and Shas
- The Committee’s budget in the election year was approximately 4.5 million
- The electoral threshold was 2% of valid votes
- The Voters’ Registry was closed on November 29, 2012
- The number of eligible voters was 5,656,705
- 10,132 polling stations were placed across Israel on Election Day
- 1,550 of them were accessible to people with mobility impairments
- 194 polling stations were placed in hospitals and 57 polling stations were placed in imprisonment facilities
- 95 polling stations were placed in Israeli missions abroad
- Approximately 7 million ballots were printed for each list, and a total of about 262.5 million ballots were printed.

The elections for the Constituent Assembly were held on January 25th 1948, about 8 months after the proclamation of the Declaration of Independence, and shortly after the War of Independence ended. The Constituent Assembly then became the 1st Knesset.

Key Terms

- The electoral threshold: the lawful electoral threshold is a certain rate out of the total valid votes a list must win to be included in the Knesset. This is the only limitation on lists that run in the elections for the Knesset, and it is to minimize the number of represented parties in the Knesset and make sure each faction will have the minimal number of members according to the law.

- Until the elections for the 12th Knesset, the electoral threshold was 1%.
- From the elections for the 13th Knesset through the elections for the 16th Knesset, the electoral threshold was 1.5%.
- Then it was raised to 2%.
- After the elections for the 19th Knesset, the electoral threshold was raised to 3.25%, the current threshold.

- General elections: all registered voters in the Voters’ Registry may vote.

- National elections: the State of Israel forms a single voting district.

- Direct elections: voters vote directly for lists of Knesset candidates.

- Equal elections: one vote per voter, and each vote carries equal weight. All lists have an equal opportunity to run.

- Secret elections: voters are entitled to keep their votes secret. Voting in a sealed envelope behind a veil guarantees that the elections will be fair and prevents the exertion of undue pressure on voters.

- Proportional elections: a list’s weight in the Knesset is proportional to the number of votes it received in the elections.

- Excess votes agreement: an agreement between two lists to bring their excess votes together following the first distribution of mandates in order to increase their chance of winning an extra seat in the Knesset. The excess votes agreements must be published before the elections.

- Double envelopes: the envelopes used by special polling stations. The regular voting envelopes are inserted into external (blue) envelopes that state the voter’s identification number. Blue envelopes are counted in the Knesset.

- The Voters’ Registry: the Voters’ Registry is the list of eligible voters for the Knesset. It is regularly put together and revised by the Ministry of the Interior. The Registry is closed 54 days before the elections and it includes all citizens who will be 18 years old or older by Election Day.

- The Bader-Ofer Method: a method for dividing remaining mandates following the first division until 120 mandates are reached. It is known worldwide as the Hagenbach-Bischoff (D’Hondt) method. The method is based on calculating the “list quota”:

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\text{list quota} = \frac{\text{number of mandates} + 1}{\text{number of eligible votes a list won}}
\]

The list which received the largest list quota will win an additional mandate. Calculations are made repeatedly until all 120 mandates are distributed.

Main Statutes Relating to the Elections

- Basic Law: the Knesset
- Basic Law: the Government
- The Elections for the Knesset Law [Combined Version] 5729-1969
- The Elections (Medias of Propaganda) Law 5719-1959
- The Political Parties Financing Law 5713-1973
- The Parties Law 5752-1992
- The Knesset Law 5754-1994

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