

Electoral Reforms

Israel currently operates under a proportional rule electoral system. Citizens vote for a party rather than for individual politicians and any party that receives more than the threshold of 1.5 % of the total votes gets seats in the Israeli parliament, the Knesset. The result is that smaller parties have an incentive to form around fringe political positions, so long as it captures enough votes to gain seats. Numerous, factionalized parties, none of which alone capture a majority of seats, then characterizes the Knesset. The larger parties, Likud and Labor, are forced to bargain with these small extreme parties to form coalition governments.

Prof. Norman Schofield of Washington University opened the discussion on electoral reform presenting a mathematical model that he and Professor Sened have recently developed to better understand and explicate the bargaining game between the large and small parties and the vote optimization effort by the different parties. According to the Schofield-Sened model, and indeed according to empirical observation, small parties that have only a narrow agenda, like controlling one or two specific government Ministries, have the ability to demand payment from larger parties in order to secure their coalitional support. As a result, small fringe parties have extensive control of the national bureaucracy and the budgets that come with it.

Responding to Prof. Schofield's presentation, Professor Uriel Reichman, author of the 1992 Electoral Reforms in Israel and President of the Interdisciplinary Center in Herzliya, Israel, spoke on the need for electoral reforms to reign in the influence of fringe politics. Following independence from Britain in 1949, Israel set up a British-styled common-law form of government, rather than writing a formal Constitution. The consequence of this decision is that the Knesset has the power to change the government without an Amendment process and without a check on its power. The same fringe parties that are able to secure power through bargaining within coalitions are able to manipulate the system much more easily than in the U.S., for example, because they have no Constitutional check on their actions. In addition, the fractionalization of the Knesset has far-ranging business and investment consequences. The average Israeli government stays in power for a meager 22 months because coalitions based on pay-offs to small parties are inherently unstable. Potential investors may be reluctant to send money to Israel given the uncertainty of who will be in government in 22 months, and what those in power will do. Reform is thus necessary, though exactly how to reform remains an important question.

Suggestions prepared for discussion in this session by participants, including Washington University's Itai Sened and the Interdisciplinary Center's David Nachmias, ranged from implementing minor tweaks to the existing electoral system to conducting far-reaching overhaul. One simple solution in the short-run will be to raise the electoral threshold from 1.5% to higher number like 5%, thus only granting seats to parties with a higher vote total. Then the power of the fringe parties will be greatly diminished in favor of moderation. Another possibility would be to change the employment rules within the Israeli bureaucracy. Whereas it is almost impossible to fire civil servants at the moment, Israel could implement a meritocratic system based on achievement. Further reforms could include moving to a weak-Presidential system similar to the American model, thus bringing power into a strong leader's hand when emergencies occur, but still retain democratic representation. Finally, it was pointed out that the suggested shift to single-member district elections, rather than proportional rule, while a move in the right direction, would only have a moderate effect as ethnic groups live in distinct clusters throughout Israel.