The increasingly polarised and fragmented party system in Israel will make it difficult for a stable government to emerge from this month's elections.

Blog Admin

Israel's next parliamentary elections are due to be held on 22 January. As part of EUROPP's coverage of the European neighbourhood, André Krouwel *and* Daniel Rajmil *give an overview of the country's highly fragmented party system, noting that the results are likely to be significantly different from those in the last election in 2009. New parties have emerged in the last four years, while the largest party in the current parliament, Kadima, could well lose all of its seats.*

Of all established democracies, Israel has the highest electoral change per election over the post-war period. Only new democracies in Eastern Europe are more electorally volatile. On average almost a quarter of the Israeli electorate shifts party allegiance per election.

One of the main reasons for this exceptional electoral volatility is that Israeli elections are held under a system of proportional representation (PR). This means that many political parties will enter the fray, as it is relatively easy to enter parliament compared to majoritarian electoral systems. Parties will gain a number of seats equal to the proportion of the vote they gained in the election, albeit that Israel has introduced a 2 per cent threshold to avoid too much parliamentary fragmentation. Nevertheless, over the last decade between 12 and 15 parties entered the Knesset in each election. Few countries have such an open electoral system where the whole country is one single constituency (in Europe only the Netherlands and Slovakia have adopted such a pure form of PR), but the justification in the Israeli case was that the political system needed to accommodate the incoming immigrant population. Of course, the other side of the coin of such fragmentation is that forming a majority government and maintaining government stability is infinitely more difficult.

This high level of volatility cannot be attributed solely to disloyal, party-switching voters. It is also the political establishment of Israel that keeps changing the available party options. Frequently new parties emerge, or they run in joint lists for elections. Now – again in 2013 – the political map of Israel has considerably changed, just as it did in 2009. For the upcoming Knesset elections on January 22, no less than thirty-four parties have entered the race and opinion polls predict that between 12 and 14 parties will pass the 2 per cent threshold and make it into the Knesset.

Israel's Political Landscape

While many lines of conflict characterise Israeli politics, two deep social cleavages dominate. Like elsewhere, parties can easily be aligned along a socio-economic left-right dimension. Widespread social protest during the summer of 2011 showed that economic issues are still salient, regardless of the geo-political situation of the country.

Obviously, the second salient dimension arises out of the continuing Arab-Israeli and Israeli-Palestinian conflict and related security issues. On all sides, Israel borders countries and territories that have explosive or at best fragile political structures: Syria, Lebanon, the West Bank, Gaza and Egypt. Jordan seems to be the only relatively stable neighbouring country. Add to this the constant threat of terrorism and the hostile posture of Iran, and it becomes clear why security related issues capture the lion's share of public attention in the country.

Clearly issues concerning territorial security are strongly associated with the religious-secular cleavage.

Those who are most religiously zealous on both sides of the conflict are also less inclined to support territorial concessions. One of the most visible parts of this religious-territorial conflict is settlement construction on contested territories, particularly in East Jerusalem. On top of that, many non-orthodox Israelis resent the fact that the ultra-Orthodox and Arab populations do not serve in the military and are exempt from taxation. These and many other contentious issues that relate to the secular-religious divide derive from the strong religious inclinations of the Jewish state.

Figure 1 illustrates the current political landscape on a two dimensional plane, with each party's position represented by their logo. The horizontal axis relates to the two major (and overlapping) cleavages in contemporary Israel – security and religion. Secular parties and those with more conciliatory positions on security ('Doves') are located on the left, with more religious and hard-line parties ('Hawks') located on the right. This intersects with a vertical axis that represents policy positions on the economy, welfare, human rights, law, and governability. For a full outline of the calculations see electioncompass.org.

Figure 1: Israel's Political Landscape in 2013
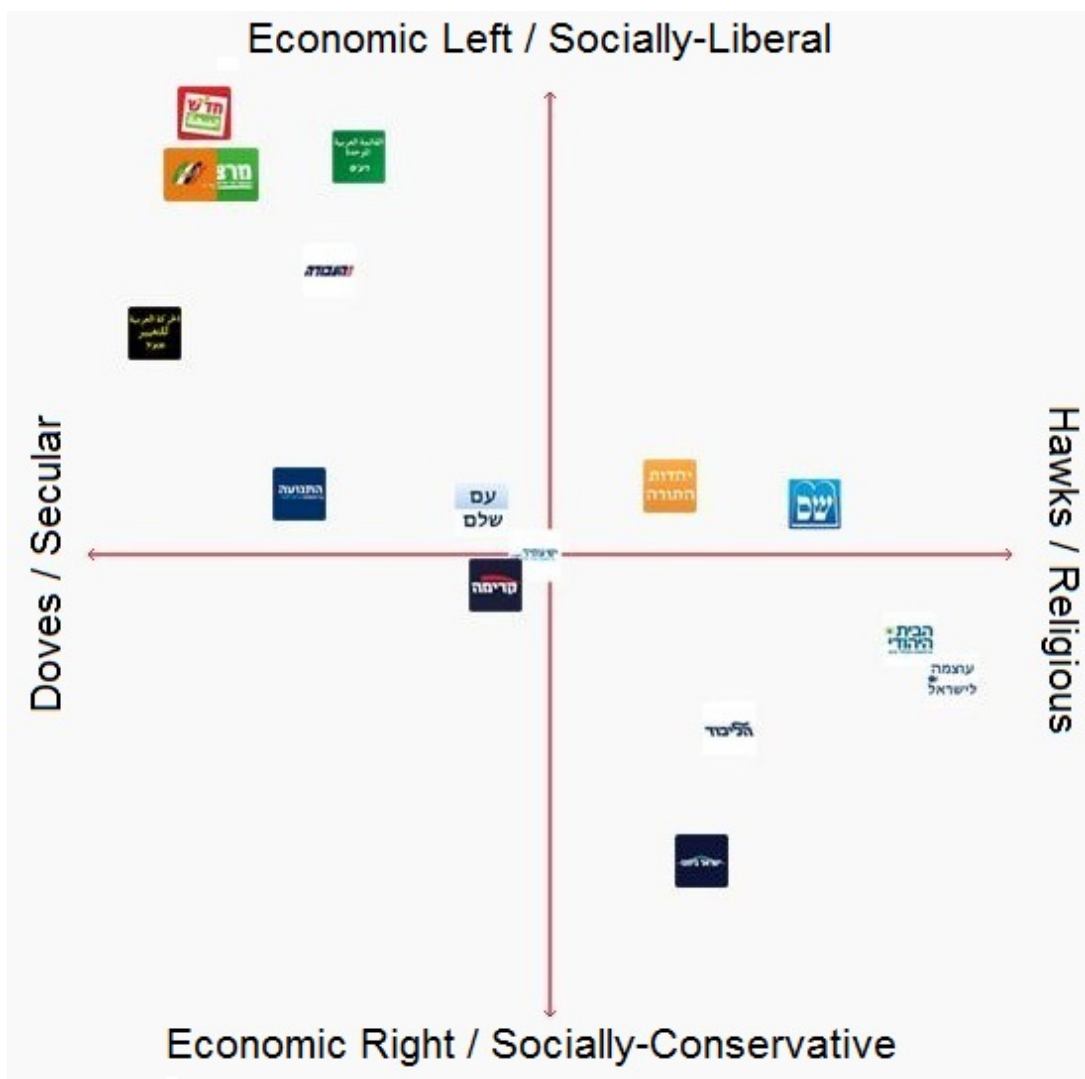
Parties of the Right

Likud

Yisrael Beiteinu

HaBayit HaYehudi

Parties of the Centre

Kadima

Yesh Atid

Hatnuah

Parties of the Left

Labor

Meretz

Parties of the Religious-Right

Shas   United Torah Judaism

Am Shalem   Otzma LeYisrael

Arab Parties

Ra'am

Ta'al

Hadash

Balad

New party formations on the right confuse voters

When we look at the last three elections – as shown in Figure 2 – we see that the right-wing parties remain the strongest party block. Yet there have been several attempts to unite the centre, first under the Shinui banner and since 2006 with the formation of Kadima. The left party block has been considerably weakened by electoral losses.

Figure 2: Support for Israeli Parties in Parliamentary Elections (2003-2009)
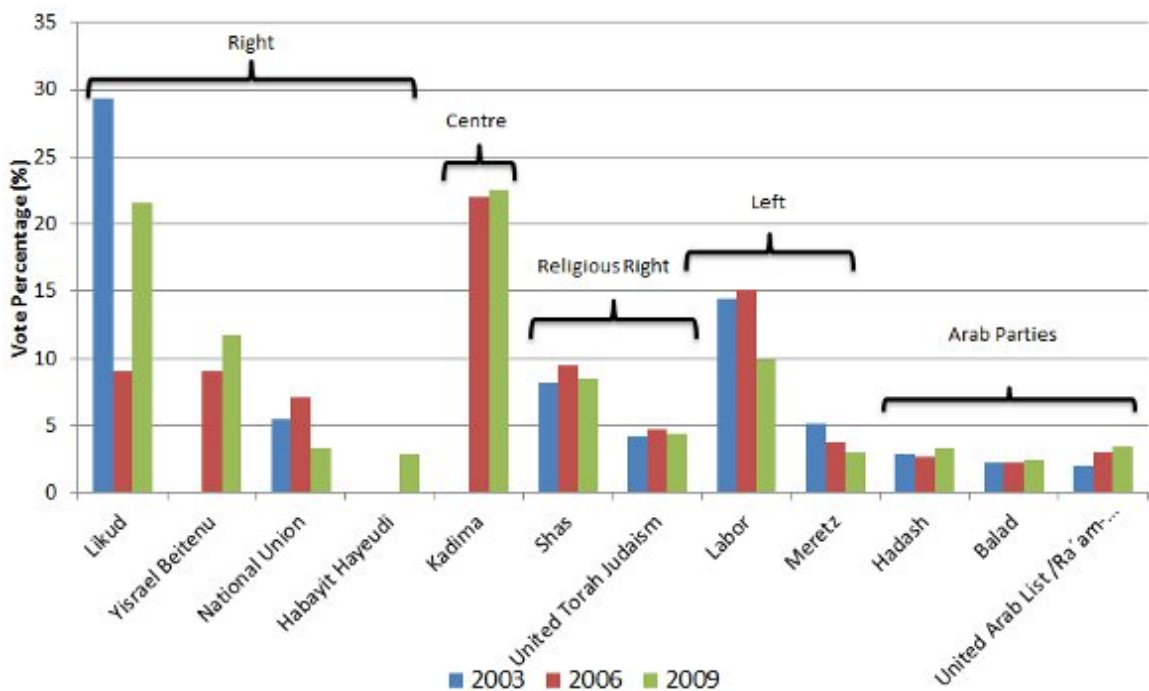
On the right wing the main contender is the newly formed joint list of the ruling party **Likud** and its coalition partner **Yisrael Beitenu**. Recent opinion polls give them between 33 and 37 seats, which compared to their current 42 seats means that these two governing parties stand to lose in the

upcoming election. Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu (Likud) and former foreign minister Avigdor Lieberman (Israel Beytenu) are heading this joint list, a collaboration that is tainted since Lieberman faces charges of breach of trust and fraud.

This formation of a joint list seems to confuse many former Likud and Yisrael Beitenu voters on the political direction of both parties. The losses predicted in the opinion polls are not surprising when we consider that the two leaders Benjamin Netanyahu and Avidgor Lieberman represent vastly different groups of voters. While for many Likud voters the coalition participation of Lieberman was difficult to swallow, a joint list may be a step too far.

Lieberman's secular orientation, in particular, seems to worry prospective Likud voters. Historically, electoral support for Likud is drawn from traditionalist religious circles, which do not feel at ease with Lieberman's policies. Likud Mizrahi voters have already made clear that they see a danger for Israel's future with the secularisation of the country. In addition, centrist voters that traditionally supported Likud see in Lieberman an unwanted form of extremism compared to the more diplomatic and tactical approach of Netanyahu. Yet the new formation seems to send out a confusing message of hard-line opposition towards territorial compromises with the Palestinians, while Netanyahu at the same time publicly voiced support for the establishment of a Palestinian state under certain conditions.

More radical parties, like **HaBayit HaYehudi**, that represent the more religious Zionist right wing part of society, may benefit from the Likud-Yisrael Beitenu merger and from the National Union split. This party strongly supports the expansion of Israeli settlements in Judea and Samaria, and holds conservative views on issues of religion, and state and civil rights. Also right-wing religious parties such as **Otzma LeYisrael** formed by previously National Union members are polling between 1 and 3 seats, which means that it will be increasingly difficult to reconcile the opposing views on territorial issues in the next Knesset.

A weakened centre

Recent polls strongly suggest that **Kadima**, the largest party in the Knesset at present, will be totally wiped off the political map, after most of its members defected to other parties or left politics altogether. In particular more centrist voters will be confused with the formation of a new party by Tzipi Livni, **Hatnuah**. As leader of Kadima, Livni was a powerful entity to be reckoned with, but after she was ousted from the helm of the party and it entered the right-wing nationalist Netanyahu government, Kadima seems to have signed its own electoral death sentence. Shaul Mofaz, the current leader of Kadima, was essentially tricked into supporting Netanyahu, without any policy compensation, and he and his party are paying the price for his naiveté. Hatnuah now polls between 8 and 12 seats, nowhere near the level of support that Kadima was able to muster. Livni's new formation advocates immediate renewal of negotiations with the Palestinians and pursuing the Peace Process, which will make a coalition with the Netanyahu/Lieberman list problematic at best.

Moreover, the emergence of another centrist party, **Yesh Atid** has added more fragmentation to the political centre. The voter base of traditional parties seems to be undermined further due to the appearance of media figures as political leaders. Yesh Atid's leader, the news anchor and media star Yair Lapid, exemplifies this development. Lapid's supporters seem attracted to his 'catch-all strategy' with references to both left-wing and right-wing political concerns while claiming to be the most attractive centrist party. He advocates military service for all citizens, 'improvement' of the education system, and 'reforming' the electoral system. He has used his media popularity to criticise both the political system as well as Netanyahu's socio-economic policies, which resonates particularly well among discontented middle class voters.

The fragile left

This fragile party context will not only confuse right-wing and centrist voters. The left-wing opposition is in even more disarray. **Labor** is seeking to find a new or renewed identity after Ehud Barak left the party in shatters. Now led by Shelly Yachimovich, the party is polling 16 to 20 seats, yet this is a far cry from their predominance of Israeli politics up to the mid-1970s. Labor has not yet reaped the rewards of vast social discontent at the current government's performance. While many voters showed their

dissatisfaction with the austerity measures of the Netanyahu administration, social movements captured the protests just like in other parts of the world. The political left seems unable to capitalise on the widespread impoverishment of the working and middle classes and the retrenchment of the welfare state.

Labor leader Shelly Yachimovich has sent confusing messages, sometimes addressing the dire socioeconomic situation of many Israeli voters, but at the same time playing down the socialist traditions of the party. She may face a hard time convincing traditional voters to trust Labor again after Barak's entry into the Netanyahu government after the last election. This widespread distrust of Labor may be one of the reasons why Yachimovich has shifted her electoral strategy in the middle of the campaign and publicly announced that she will either be the next prime-minister or will be in the opposition block, distancing herself from any possible association with a future Netanyahu government.

Left-wing parties are conflicted over where to move on the security issues and the settlements. Labor seems happy to ignore the geopolitical environment of Israel in their party platform, rather than developing an alternative to the Netanyahu-Lieberman strategy. In addition, there seems to be little agreement on security issues between the broader progressive left of Labor, Meretz and the Arab parties (Hadash, Ra'am, Ta'al, and Balad).

Meretz, currently at 3 seats, stands to gain one or two seats, still not making it a relevant party for government formation. This left-wing Zionist party puts a strong emphasis on human and civil rights, the separation of state and religion, social justice, and has a conciliatory approach to territorial questions. Meretz is one of the few parties which seems willing to compromise on the Palestinian territories and the Golan Heights in exchange for peace.

Stability on the orthodox- religious right

One stable factor of Israeli politics stems from the ultra-orthodox religious-nationalist parties. Under leader Eli Yishai, **Shas** seems to hold on to their support. They may even gain some momentum if dissatisfied religious Likud voters decide that they are a safer bet than Netanyahu's adventure with Lieberman. Shas, which represents the ultra-Orthodox Sephardi and Traditional sections of Israeli society, currently polls between 10 and 13 seats. It is a highly clientelist party that is capable of providing high levels of monetary transfers to their voters due to their 'blackmail' potential in coalition formation. Similarly, parties such as the religious moderate **Am Shalem** can enter the Knesset, as well as the far-right **Habeit HaYehudi** and **Otzma LeYisrael**, who may be able to syphon off votes from the new Likud combination by emphasising nationalist-religious stances, such as support for settlements in occupied territories.

Most ultraorthodox voters will likely remain loyal to **United Torah Judaism**, the traditional Haredi party that historically attracts a more social following than Likud and Shas. The party, which now polls around 5 to 6 seats, is a combined list of two Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox parties. It follows the spirit of the Torah and traditional Judaism and calls for the unification of the People of Israel and the Land of Israel under Jewish religious law. Some view the ultra-Orthodox parties as part of the right-wing bloc, due to their tendency to join rightist coalitions and in light of the hawkish tendencies of their voters. However, the ultra-Orthodox parties have also participated in coalitions headed by leftist or centrist parties in the past.

Entrenched Arab parties

While parties that represent the Arab speaking Israelis have a stable and loyal following, they matter little to government and policy formation. **Hadash** now polls roughly the same number of seats they currently have (4 seats). Their ideology is more or less socialist in its orientation, and the movement incorporates the former Israeli Communist Party. While it defines itself as a bi-national Jewish-Arab party, it mainly attracts the Arab vote. Hadash favours the establishment of a Palestinian state, equal rights for all Israeli citizens, Arabs and Jews alike, and an equitable distribution of national wealth.

The second largest Arab party is **Ra'am-Ta'al**, currently at 4 seats. This is a joint list made up of the Islamist Ra'am (United Arab List) and the secular Ta'al (Arab Movement for Renewal). It supports the establishment of a Palestinian state, with East Jerusalem as its capital, and affirmative action to reduce

the disparities between the Arab and Jewish populations. Finally, **Balad** is a small party which currently holds 3 seats and defines itself as a Palestinian patriotic Arab nationalist party. Its political goals highlight the principle of "a state of all its citizens" and official recognition of the Arab minority as a national minority with individual and collective rights.

Uncertain electoral shifts and political instability

What can we expect in the upcoming elections? If we look at the past three elections of 2003, 2006 and 2009, there were high levels of vote transfers between Likud, Kadima and the Labor party. Already in 2003 we saw a substantial shift towards the right-wing and centrist parties, at the expense of the traditional left-wing parties. Labor has been gradually weakened since 2003.

The emergence of new centrist movements also weakened the traditional representative of the right, Likud. The party lost almost ten per cent of its support between 2003 and 2009. Also the emergence of the nationalist right-wing Yisrael Beytenu in 2006 has weakened Likud. It seems that Likud has made the calculation that it cannot beat Lieberman's party, so they opted to join his political project. Our data show that this strategy is alienating traditional Likud voters.

The traditional electoral logic in Israel was shattered with the emergence of Kadima in 2006. The party was founded by then prime minister Ariel Sharon as a split from Likud. In his attempt to monopolise the political centre in Israel – the party indeed incorporated both important Labor and Likud politicians – Sharon destroyed the centripetal tendencies within Likud. With the collapse of Kadima, it is unclear where centrist voters are most likely to shift.

Will these voters shift to the new centrist options Livni's Hatnuah or Lapid's Yesh Atid, support Yachimovich's 'New' Labor, or will they jump on the Netanyahu/Lieberman tandem? Livni, Lapid and Yachimovich are allegedly discussing collaboration to form an alternative to a new Nethanyahu government, but Lapid seems unwilling to commit and totally rule out participation in a centre-right government.

Whatever the shifts and tactical moves of the political elite, a more fragmented party system is the most likely outcome of the elections in two weeks time. The political skills of the party leaders will be tested in forming the next government. They need to bridge an increasingly polarised and fragmented political landscape. With all the instability in the surrounding countries and the wider region, an unstable Israeli government is a worrying prospect.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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