
Israel's Political System

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- [The Knesset](#)
- [Electoral Reform](#)
- [Political Parties](#)
- [The 2009 Election](#)

The Knesset

Seats in Israel's legislative assembly, [the Knesset](#), are assigned through a system of nationwide proportional representation: Rather than electing individual candidates, voters cast ballots for an entire party. Any party receiving more than 2 percent of the vote is assigned a proportional number of seats in the 120-member legislature. Prior to the general election, each party holds an internal election to decide on a list of representatives to occupy any seats the party should win. If, for instance, a party wins ten seats, the first ten names on the slate will become members of the new Knesset. Each Knesset is expected to serve a four-year term. However, if a majority of the representatives agree, they may elect to dissolve the body and hold early elections. The legislature's tenure may also be prolonged beyond four years, though this requires a "special majority" of eighty votes. The Knesset elects the prime minister, and also holds the power to remove the president. New laws require a simple majority vote.

The [prime minister](#) is elected by the Knesset. A prime-ministerial candidate must be a member of the Knesset and needs a simple majority of votes to be confirmed. Prime ministers are expected to serve four-year terms, though these may be shortened by a vote of no confidence in the

Knesset. Such votes name a replacement candidate, who is given the opportunity to form his or her own government.

To form a new government, a prospective prime minister has forty-five days to fill cabinet positions and win Knesset approval. Since no single party has ever won a majority of the seats in the Knesset, this requires forming a coalition with other parties in order to win majority approval. After parliamentary elections, the president invites one of the party leaders to form a government. The president does not have to extend this invitation to the party that controls the most seats in the Knesset, rather, the invitation goes to the party the president believes is most capable of forming a coalition. In forming a coalition, a party leader must offer some cabinet positions to members of the smaller coalition partners, as smaller parties often represent the additional votes needed to pass legislation. These smaller parties tend to use this influence to further their political agendas.

If a replacement candidate is unsuccessful at forming a new government, the Knesset is dissolved and new elections are held.

Electoral Reform

Because forming a coalition involves smaller parties, it often means that groups at the periphery of Israeli politics acquire disproportionate influence. For this reason, some experts, including CFR Senior Fellow [Steven A. Cook](#), suggest that Israel needs to reform its electoral system by raising the threshold for a party to gain representation in the Knesset. Currently, a party only needs to obtain 2 percent of the vote. This percentage is relatively very low (Turkey's threshold, for instance, is 10 percent). Yet prime ministers must cobble together coalitions that number sixty seats, making them vulnerable to the demands of fringe groups. This can lead to policy stalemate and a majority beholden to much smaller political movements. Significant concessions, such as cabinet appointments or budgetary appropriations, are sometimes made to secure coalition support of policies. This creates a system where small, perhaps extreme, parties wield a disproportionate amount of influence.

Political Parties

Israel's major parties are Kadima, Likud, Yisrael Beytenu, and Labor. [Eight other parties](#) are also represented in the legislature.

The largest parties are:

- **[Kadima](#)** (Twenty-eight seats). Formed by then Prime Minister Ariel Sharon on November 21, 2005, Kadima, or "Forward", seeks to find middle ground in the contentious Israeli political arena. A week after its formation, the party revealed its platform: maintaining a Jewish majority in Israel by making territorial concessions; preserving Israeli control of Jerusalem and large Jewish settlement blocs; and supporting the formation of a demilitarized, terror-free Palestinian state. Many prominent politicians left their parties to join Kadima, including former Labor Party leader **[Shimon Peres](#)**, then Defense Minister **[Shaul Mofaz](#)**, and cabinet minister Tzipi Livni. Kadima appeared to be in jeopardy when on January 4, 2006, Sharon suffered a stroke that effectively ended his political career. Sharon's deputy, **[Ehud Olmert](#)**, took the party reins, and helped Kadima win twenty-nine seats in 2006. In 2008, Olmert was implicated in a financial scandal that resulted in his resignation. Then-Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni assumed leadership with the party's future in question.
- **[Likud](#)** (Twenty-seven seats). Following the 2005 controversial withdrawal from all Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip and four in the West Bank, the center-right Likud Party faced a crisis. The decision to evacuate the Jewish settlements, which **[Likud traditionally views](#)** as the country's "unassailable right" to return to the historic "Land of Israel," caused a rift within the party. Likud has maintained a hard line in dealing with Palestinians, directly targeting terrorist leaders and opposing Palestinian statehood. But more recent statements from party leaders suggest a willingness to negotiate on the question of a Palestinian state. Many in the party feared the Gaza pullout would lead to attacks against Israel by Palestinian militants. Playing off these fears, **[Benjamin Netanyahu](#)**, a former prime minister and finance minister, mounted a challenge to then Prime Minister Sharon's party leadership. Rather than face Netanyahu in a party primary, Sharon split with Likud--which he helped found--and formed the centrist Kadima party. Likud did not fare well in the 2006 election, losing more than half its seats, though it rebounded with a strong showing in the 2009 elections.
- **[Yisrael Beytenu](#)** (Fifteen seats). Founded in 1999 by former Likud member **[Avigdor Liberman](#)**, Yisrael Beytenu, meaning "Israel, our home," is a secular, right-of-center Zionist party. The party advocates a hard line toward the Palestinian Authority and Arab states and has even proposed forcing Israeli Arabs to pledge loyalty to Israel or forfeit their citizenship. Nevertheless, the party supports a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
- **[Israeli Labor Party \(ILP\)](#)** (Thirteen seats). Prior to the 2006 election, the center-left ILP was a major opposition party in Israel. The party was led by Peres, until his leadership was upset in a November 8, 2005, party primary by **[Amir Peretz](#)**. Peres then quit Labor and joined Sharon's Kadima. The ILP, which once dominated Israeli politics--appointing every prime minister prior to 1977 when Likud's Menachem Begin was elected--remains a major player, though it hasn't had a prime minister since Ehud Barak stepped down in 2001, and

lost a third of its Knesset seats in the 2009 vote. Unlike Likud, ILP members support negotiations with Palestinian groups and withdrawal from the settlements in Gaza and the West Bank. In December 2004, the ILP aligned with Likud in order to implement Israel's [disengagement plan](#). After the 2006 vote, ILP aligned with Kadima to form a government. Labor has an agreement with small Zionist party Meimad, whereby that party gets the tenth seat on Labor's list. Labor has become increasingly centrist, no longer supporting Socialist ideals, though it still prioritizes socioeconomic issues. Several of the ILP's leaders left to join Kadima.

- [Shas](#) (Eleven seats). As its primary platform goals, Shas--a non-secular ultra-Orthodox minority party with waning Knesset influence--supports a more prominent role for religion within the Israeli state. Party leaders have remained fairly flexible on policies toward Palestinians, a stance that often enables them to affect the balance of power in the Knesset. In 2006, Shas agreed to join the Kadima-Labor ruling coalition with the stipulation that it did not have to support a further withdrawal from the West Bank settlements.

The 2009 Election

When Tzipi Livni assumed leadership of Kadima in late 2008, she proved unable to form a coalition. As a result, the next national election, which was due to take place in 2010, was held in February 2009. Livni's Kadima and Netanyahu's Likud Party won nearly the same number of seats, raising questions of who would lead the next ruling coalition.

Shas and Yisrael Beytenu could play the role of kingmaker. Both aligned with the Kadima-Labor coalition in 2006, but when Livni assumed her party's leadership in 2008, Shas made new demands for increased social welfare and the territorial preservation of Jerusalem. Livni rejected the deal, saying "I'm not willing to be blackmailed, either diplomatically or in terms of the budget, and therefore, I will go to elections." With Likud, Yisrael Beytenu, Shas, and other nationalist parties winning a total of sixty-five seats in those elections, Livni's Kadima party could find itself on the outside of the next ruling coalition.

Netanyahu says he will refuse to negotiate on Jerusalem or the right of return for Palestinian refugees. He has also played up the threat posed by Iran and suggested that the threats posed by Hezbollah and Hamas would be reduced were the Iranian regime "neutralized." The candidates sparred mostly over the necessity for territorial concession: Livni believes territorial sacrifices might be necessary to ensure peace; Netanyahu refuses to entertain the idea of evacuating any more settlements or withdrawing from the West Bank. However, Netanyahu begrudgingly followed

parts of the [Oslo Accords](#) when he was prime minister in the late 1990s by pulling Israeli forces out of Hebron and signing the [Wye River Memorandum](#) with then Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat.