Government and Politics in Israel: Basic Overview

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General Basic Facts

Some facts (CIA world factbook and Central Bureau of Statistics):

- **Population:** 7,695,000 (little less than New Jersey little more than Massachusetts) Jewish 75.4%, Arabs 20.4% and 4.2% 'others'

- **Area**: 20,770 sq km (slightly smaller than New Jersey and almost half of the Netherlands)

- **GDP** (per capita): $28,170 (2007 est.), government annual budget about- $53.63 billion (2007 est.)

- An OECD member with an observer country status at the EU's parliament.

Political Basic Premises

- Israel does not have a formal constitution.

- The constitutional system is based on a group of basic laws (still not completed), regular laws, bureaucratic decisions and court rulings, all developing incrementally.

- Basic cleavages that divide and define the political system: Arab-Israeli conflict, State and Religion, Ashkenazi-Mizrachi controversy, Social-Economic.

- Increasingly overlapping cleavages: Arab-Israeli conflict and State and Religion.

- A contested liberal democracy: Ethnocracy? Ethnic democracy? A 'Stained' liberal democracy'?

The Political System: Elections

- A multiparty parliamentary democracy.

- The country is a single electoral district which elects (from the age of 18) pre-determined party lists to the Knesset (parliament).

- Influence on party lists is determined by parties' internal election methods.

- In order to enter the 120seats Knesset the party lists need to pass a 2% threshold.

- Beyond the threshold lists receive seats based on their votes' share.

The Knesset in Action

- The Knesset is a 120 seat unicameral parliament.

- The usual Plenary Meeting:
  - http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dUodfI7OHcM

- A committee meeting:
  - http://www.youtube.com/user/KnessetForum?blend=24&ob=5

- A stormy meeting:
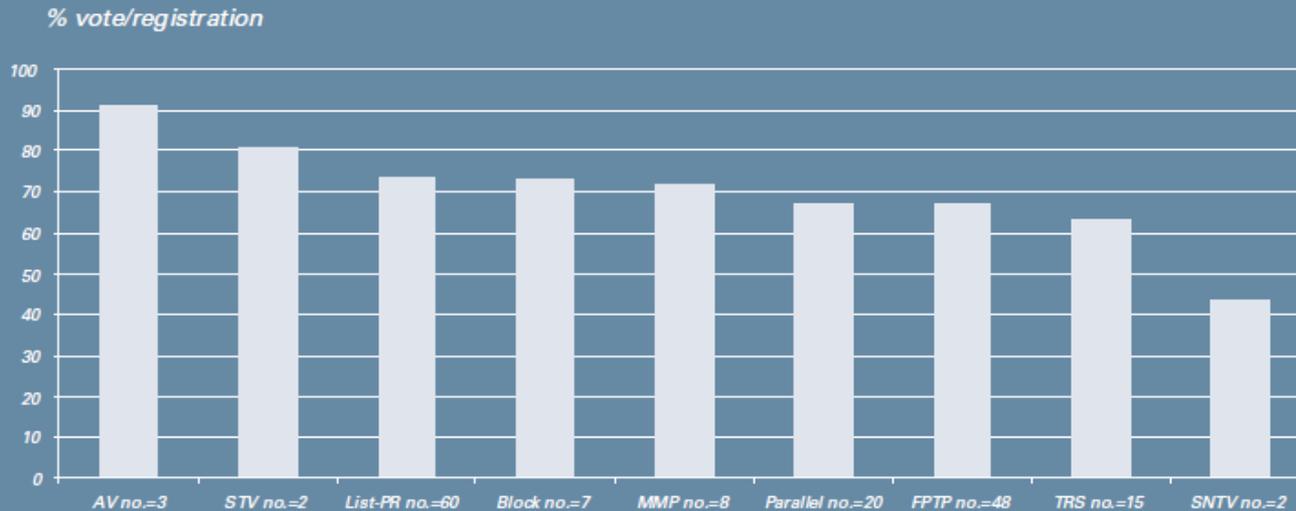 - http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aBErCBF2grM

Some Figures

- Number of eligible voters to the 18th Knesset: **5,278,985**

- Number of voters: **3,373,490 (64%)**

- Electoral threshold: 67,470 (2%)

- Votes per seat (mandate): **27,246**

- Do people vote?

  - http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=du0JLOkAMws

Electoral turnout on national elections about 75% (fluctuates around that figure)

Figure 19: Electoral system & turnout
Vote to registration ratio by type of electoral systems, most recent parliamentary elections

% vote/registration

Key: **no.** = number of countries

The Political System: Coalitions

- The Knesset elects the government.

- The government is formed by the leader of one of the large factions who received an approval by the state's President (a symbolic figure) to negotiate other factions for forming a coalition.

- The President selects a PM:
    - http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eHXEe8ymkzs&feature=related

- Election Outcomes throughout the years:
    - http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pKw_QJTEErI&feature=related

The Political System: Coalitions

- If the leader of the largest faction cannot raise a coalition, permission is given to the next faction with the highest likelihood to raise a coalition.

- If these attempts fail the Knesset will go to new elections.

The Political System: Coalitions

- The logic of coalition formation in multiparty parliaments is based on ideological compromises vis-à-vis' transferable payoffs: membership and leadership of Knesset committees, government portfolios and pre-commitments to budget specific policies.

- Thus- those located at the middle need to make the least compromises so as to enter the government.

- Those at the extremes will need high compensation for entry.

- Basically, as factions' status inside the coalition is more senior, the higher would be their payoffs.

- However, parties which have a credible threat power to switch between coalitions can maximize their payoffs from the bargaining process.

Coalitions and Parties

- Overall, parties which are more cohesive as factions, can maneuver collectively and receive higher payoffs (The German Bundestag).

- Non cohesive parties dismantle and cannot enforce coalitional agreements on their members (Italian Parliament).

The Government

- After the coalition is formed it needs to receive the Knesset's approval (vote of investiture) so as to start its reign.

- Once elected by the Knesset- as long as the government does not lose the confidence of 61 members of Knesset (MK's)- it can survive.

The Government

- From 2001 when a majority of 61 MK's votes no-confidence against the government, it needs to appoint one of its members as the potential head of a new coalition (constructive vote of no-confidence).

- This starts the coalition formation process again.

- If the process fails new elections are called.

- If the Prime Minister resigns (or is declared as unfit to rule due to illness etc.) this also initiates the same process.

Some Figures

- Number of governments in Israel's 63 years: 32.

- Number of PM's: 12

- Average number of government portfolios: 20

- Number of Knessets: 18

- Average number of factions at the Knesset's term beginning: 12 (minimum 9 maximum: 15)

- Average number of factions at the term's end: 16 (minimum: 11 maximum: 24)

Policy Making

- The Prime Minister leads the policy making processes in the government.

- These processes are based on the coalition formation policy guidelines.

- Thus, they should be based on a process of deliberation and consensus where the PM is first among equals.

- As elections are near they are based on conflict and dispute.

- Since elections are frequently near…

Policy Making

- Policy making is restricted by the government's budget (decided by government and Knesset and enforced by the Treasury), Knesset's approval, bureaucratic implementation and judicial review.

- There is an increasing influence of civil society on policy making processes but the main locus of power is in the hands of the government (some say the treasury).

- In academic parlance: too many and powerful veto players, too weak and few agenda setters.

A Comparative Perspective

- US Presidential system: full division of powers, complete term in office (unless the very rare impeachment), bargaining between the White House and Congress (two chambers), two large (and weak) parties.

- Westminster model: A decisive PM leading her party and government, two strong parties, one effective chamber, no need for inter-party coalitions, regional first-pass-the-post elections.

A Comparative Perspective

- Semi-Presidential systems (France): President elected directly, PM by the parliament; unless cohabitation the president is decisive, regional first-pass-the-post elections, few dominant parties.

- Germany: PM elected by a few strong parties' parliament, high electoral threshold, constructive vote of no-confidence.

Conclusion

- The political system in Israel is highly representative, highly unstable, offers many obstacles in policy making and allows governments only to survive somehow.

- Not a problem when no crisis is on hand but in Israel…