POLITICS AND SOCIETY IN ISRAEL

IRE215

SPRING 2020

Session 6

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On The Agenda For Today

- **Israeli Independence**

- **Israeli Political System**
  - President, Prime Minister
  - The three branches (Executive, Legislative, Judiciary)
  - Coalition Formation & Policy Making
  - Parliamentary Elections

- **Israeli Politics: Historical Review**
  - Unique traits
  - Contemporary Political Parties

- **Election 2020**

- **Jewish vs. Democratic**

- **Is Israel a Democracy?**

Israeli Independence

- **Independence =>** 14 May 1948, on the day the British Mandate (from the League of Nations) over Palestine expired

  - The **Jewish People's Council** gathered at the Tel Aviv Museum, and **declared** the establishment of the State of Israel

Government Type

- Israel is a **Parliamentary Democracy,** a form of government in which:

  - The **people hold political power** and rule through elected representatives
  - The **party** with the **greatest representation** in the parliament forms the government and its leader becomes Prime Minister
  - **Executive functions** are exercised by members of the parliament appointed by the prime minister to the cabinet
  - **Laws** are made by **majority vote** and signed by the head of state, who does not have an effective veto power
  - The **Prime Minister** can be **removed** from power if he loses a vote of '**no confidence'**
  - Canada, UK, Italy, Japan, Latvia, the Netherlands, New Zealand …

Israeli Political System

- **Constitution =>** Israel does **NO**T have a formal **constitution.** Underlying principles are expressed in:

  - **The declaration of Establishment** (1948) e.g. individual liberties
  - **Basic laws** (e.g., "the Law of Return")
  - Regular laws, bureaucratic decisions and court rulings

  } Developing incrementally

- **Amendments to the Constitution =>** Proposed by the government/Parliament (aka 'Knesset')

  - Passage requires a **majority vote** of Knesset members, subject to judicial review of the Supreme Court
  - 11/13 Basic Laws have been amended at least once, latest in 2018

Israeli Political System

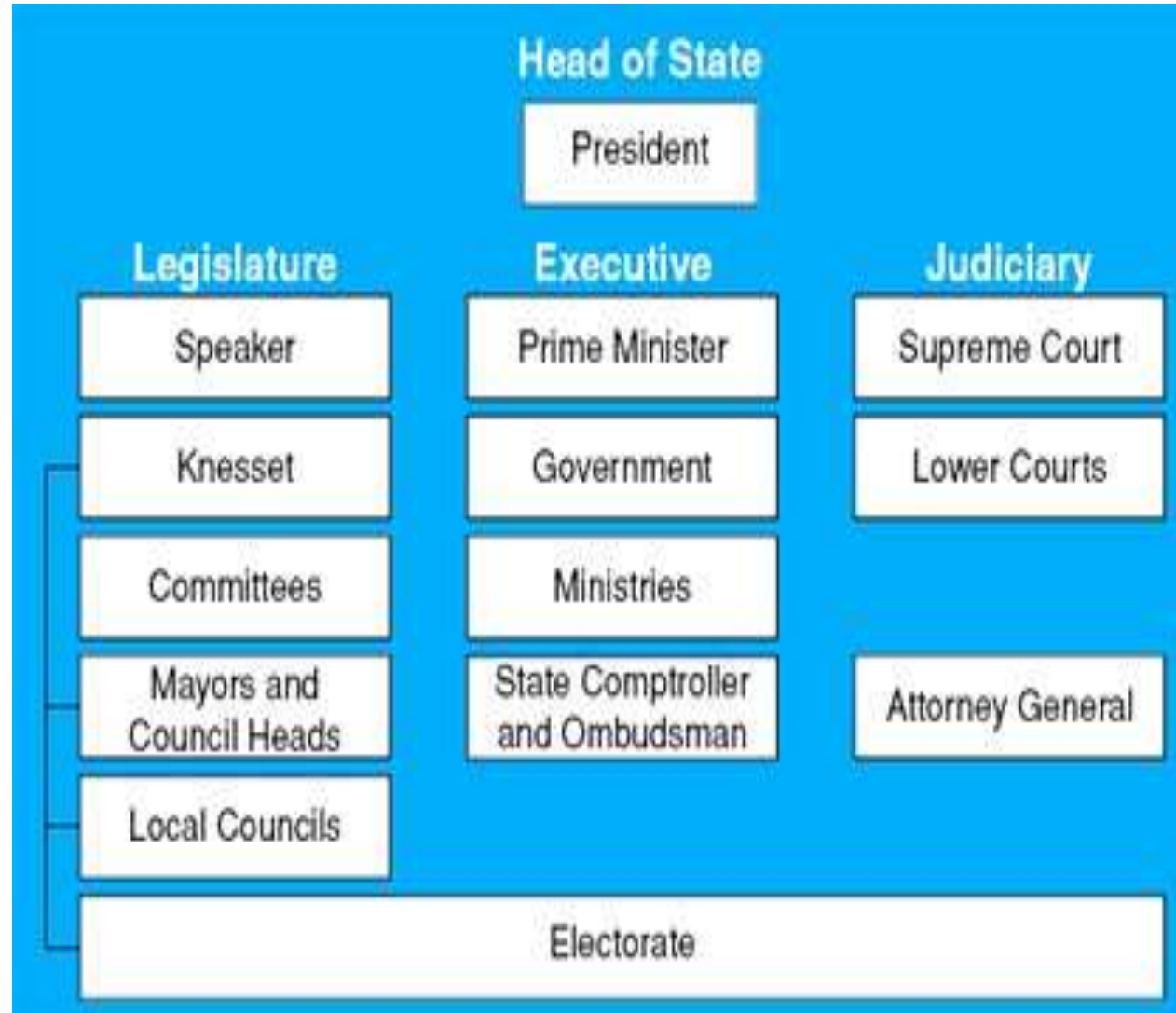- **Head of State**=> **President** Reuven Rivlin (since 2014)

  - Elected by the Knesset for a 7-year term (max)
  - Last elections held on June 2014

- **Prime Minister** => Head of the executive branch, Binyamin Netanyahu (since 2009, reelected in 2015)

  - Netanyahu formed the last center-right coalition
  - 2 rounds of elections in 2019 => No coalition
  - 3rd elections in March 2020: still negotiating …

Israeli Political System

Israeli Political System

Legislature
Speaker
Knesset
Committees
Mayors and Council Heads
Local Councils

Legislative Branch

- **Unicameral* Knesset =>** 120 seats, members are elected in a single nationwide constituency by **proportional representation** vote- **no 'seat saving'**

  - Members serve 4-year terms

  - Situated in Jerusalem

***Bicameral legislatures:** Governments that split into two houses (e.g. US Congress is made up of two chambers: Senate + House of Representatives). When there is **only one house** => **Unicameral** (*uni:* one, *camera:* chamber)

Israeli Political System

Judiciary Branch

- The Supreme Court (Jerusalem) has two functions:

1. **High Court** of Justice *(Bagatz)*, hearing Petitions made by any person (not only citizens or residents) against public bodies and governmental authorities

2. **Final court of appeals** mainly hearing appeals of judgments and decisions pronounced in the District Courts

   - Consists of 15 Justices and two Registrars
   - The head of the Supreme Court and the entire judicial system is the **President of the Supreme Court** (currently Justice Esther Hayut)
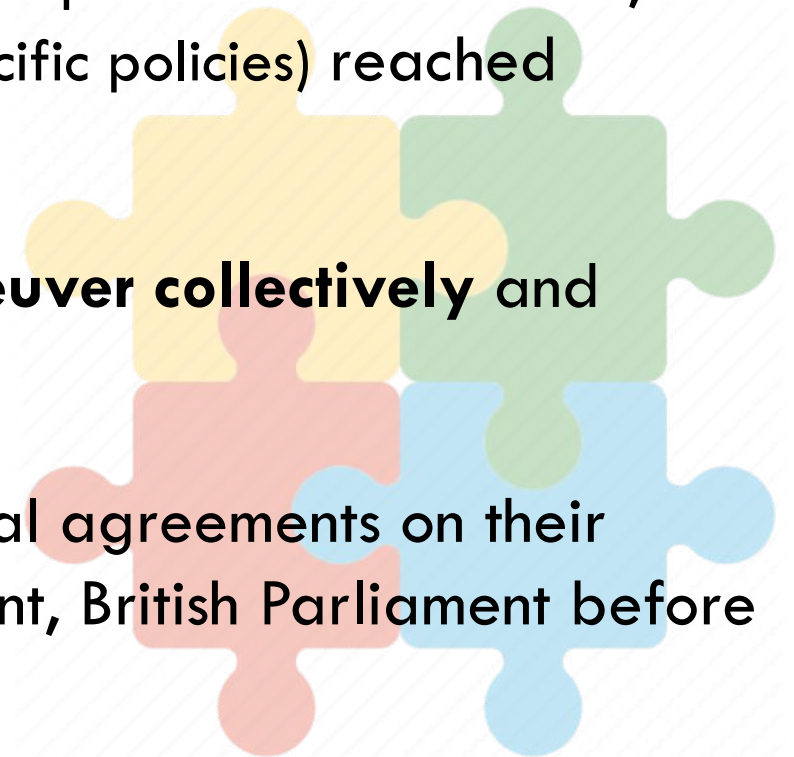
Israeli Political System

Executive Branch

Executive
- Prime Minister
- Government
- Ministries
- State Comptroller and Ombudsman

- Following **general elections,** the president (in consultation with party leaders) tasks a **Knesset member** (usually the **head of** the **largest party**) with **forming a government** (by forming a **coalition**)

  - If he can't form a coalition, the mandate to do so is given to the head of the **second largest party**

  - If both fail => **New elections**

Coalition Formation

- Post elections, each party is endowed with a level of political power

- The logic of **coalition formation** in **multiparty parliaments** is based on **ideological compromises** (Membership and leadership of parliament committees, government portfolios and pre-commitments to budget specific policies) reached following a **bargaining process**

- Parties which are more **cohesive** as factions can **maneuver collectively** and receive **higher payoffs** (e.g., The German Bundestag)

- **Non-cohesive parties** find it hard to enforce coalitional agreements on their members and at times dismantle (e.g., Italian Parliament, British Parliament before Brexit)

Coalition Formation

- The **ruling coalition** consists of a subset of the parties in the specific political environment and decides the **distribution of resources** (budgets, etc.)

- A **ruling coalition** needs to:

  - Contain enough powerful members to win against any alternative coalition that may challenge it
  - Be self-enforcing: No sub-coalitions should be able to secede and become the new ruling coalition

Policy Making

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

  - Based on **coalition formation policy guidelines**

- **Policy making** is **restricted** by:

  - The government's **budget** (decided by the **government** + **Knesset** and enforced by the **Treasury**)
  - Knesset's approval
  - Bureaucratic implementation
  - Judicial review

- **Increasing influence of civil society** on policy making processes but the main locus of power is in the hands of the **government/treasury**

Israeli Political System

Executive Branch

- After a coalition is formed, it needs to receive the **Knesset's approval** (vote of **investiture**) to start its reign

- **Government** => Appointed by the Prime Minister, approved by the Knesset

- Upon approval, the Government survives as long as it does NOT **lose the confidence of 61 members of Knesset** (MK's)

- When at least **61 MK's vote 'no-confidence' against the government,** it must appoint a potential head of a new coalition => Coalition formation process starts

  - If the **Prime Minister resigns**/declared unfit to rule due to **illness** => Same process initiated

Israeli Political System

Parliamentary/General Elections =>

- The country is a **single electoral district** which elects pre-determined party lists to the Knesset

  - "Grading" of politicians within **party lists** determined by **parties' internal election**

- **Citizens** above **18 years** of age can **vote** (including Arab Israelis, not Palestinians in The West Bank/Gaza Strip)

- In order to enter the 120 seats' Knesset, a party need to pass a **3.25% votes' threshold**

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

Israeli Political System

For more info concerning **elections in Israel** please watch these two **short videos =>**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rzpWIXg3HtM

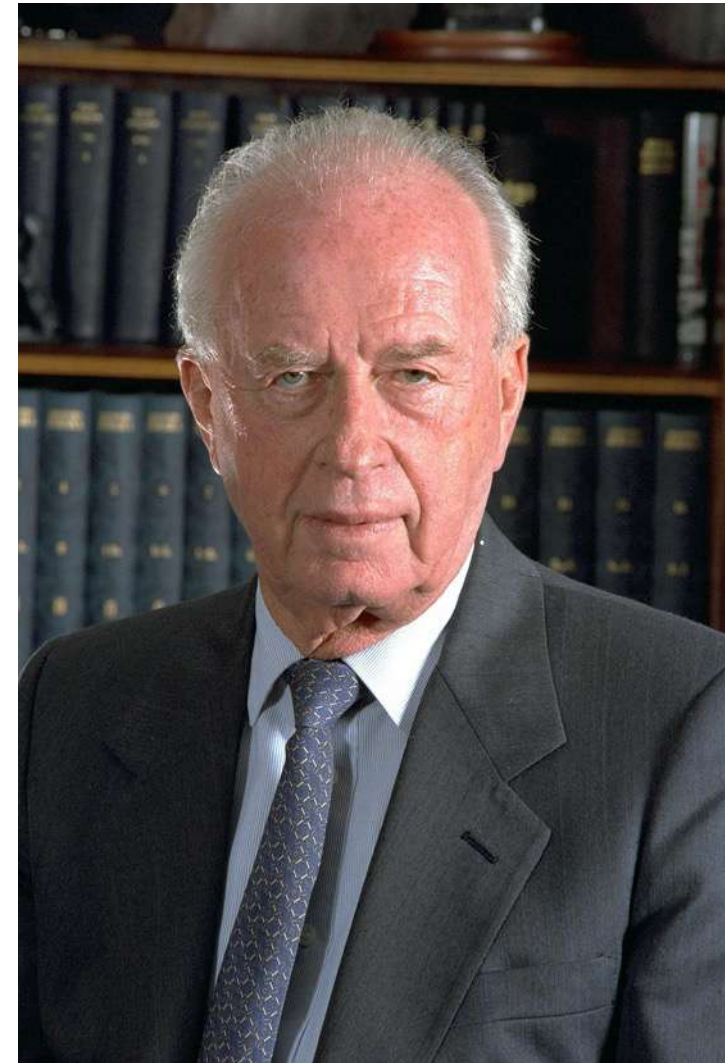https://www.youtube.com/embed/hm_Az2jPdvg

Israeli Politics: Historical Review

- 1948-late 1970s => **Dominance** of the **Labor** party through **coalitions** (Ben Gurion, Meir)

- **Dominance** was **challenged** by the (right-wing) **Likud** party after the 1973 'Yom Kippur War'

- 1977 => **Victory** of **Likud** (Begin) also through **coalitions** and **alliances**

  - 1979 **Peace with Egypt**

- 1980s => **Likud** experiences **hardships,** but Labor didn't manage to dominate the Parliament

Israeli Politics: Historical Review

- 1988 => Governments of **National Unity** (politically unstable)

  - Likud + Labor allied to form a coalition after both lost many seats to small religious parties

- 1992 => Labor (Rabin) won (44 seats) => Coalition with left wing parties (Meretz & Tzomet)

  - 1994: **Peace with Jordan**

  - 1995: **Rabin**'s commitment with peace led to his **murder** by a Jewish extremist

Israeli Politics: Historical Review

- 1996 => **Likud's** victory with a **6-party coalition** (Netanyahu: no interest in advancing peace talks)

- 1999 => Labor (Barak)
  - Barak's peace plan rejected by Yasser Arafat (then Chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Palestinian National Authority) in 2000

- 2001-onwards => **Likud dominated/ National unity governments**

  - 2005-2009: Olmert's 'Kadima' party (centrist party established by moderates from Likud) following contested Likud leadership issue

- 2009-2020 => **Netanyahu** as **Prime Minister**

Israeli Politics: Unique Traits

- **Small Parties** are more **influential** than the mandate given to them by the public (**larger parties need them to form coalitions**)

- **National Security** (mainly responses to terrorism) and the **Israeli Palestinian conflict dominate** any other policy issues (foreign, environmental policy etc.)

- **Right wing** political parties **dominant** more easily due to the **short intervals** of episodes of high intensity **fighting** in recent decades (as part of the **Israeli Palestinian conflict**)
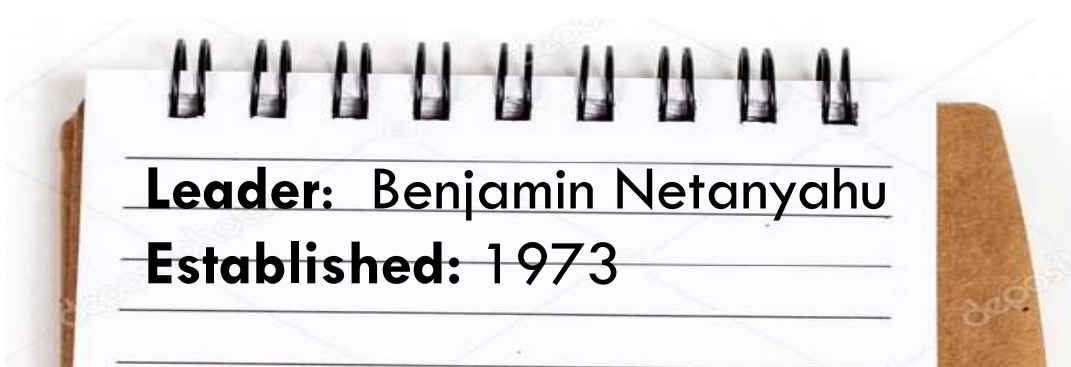
Israeli Main Political Parties

Right Wing Parties

Zenut

Yisrael Beiteinu

Likud

Hayamin Hehadash

Habayit Hayehudi

New- Joint list of three right wing parties

The 'Likud'

Leader: Benjamin Netanyahu
Established: 1973

- Israel's **largest right-wing party** (conservative)

- In 1977, the party broke the three-decade electoral monopoly of the Labor Party and its antecedents. Since then, it has been a **dominant force** in Israeli politics

- **Netanyahu** was first prime minister in 1996, and since 2009
  - After multiple **investigations** for **corruption** that resulted in a pending **inditement,** and failing to form a government after two elections in 2019, he decisively **saw off a party leadership challenge** in December 2019

Israeli Main Political Parties

Center

Kulanu

Kachol Lavan

Gesher

'Labor' united with 'Gesher'
for the 2020 elections

Kahol Lavan (Blue and White)

Leader: Benny Gantz

Established: February 2019

- **New liberal party,** a **merger** between three **centrist parties** ('*Hosen Leyisrael*', '*Yesh Atid*', '*Telem*')

- Former military chief **Gantz** retains the **number one slot in the list** (**rotation** with **Lapid** if the party is elected to lead a government)

- Main opposition to Likud, but both are similarly hawkish on annexations in the Jordan valley

- Gantz campaigned on an anti-corruption, anti-Netanyahu platform

Israeli Main Political Parties

Left Wing Parties

מרצ

Meretz

העבודה

Labor

העבודהגשרמרצ

Labour – Gesher – Meretz Union for 2020' elections

Labor-Gesher-Meretz

Leader: Amir Peretz
Established: January 2020

- Israel's main leftwing party for large parts of its history

  - After the establishment of the state, the Labor party **governed Israel uninterruptedly** for almost **thirty years** (1948-1977)
  - Labor has not held the premiership since 2001, terminal decline in 2019

- For the 2020 elections they've combined with another left-of-center party

Israeli Main Political Parties

Sectorial Political Parties

United Torah Judaism

United Arab List-
Balad

Shas

Hadash-Ta'al

Israeli Political Parties

The 'Joint List'

- A political alliance of the main Arab political parties in Israel (Balad, Hadash, Ta'al + the United Arab List) formed in 2015

- Leader: Ayman Odeh

- The third biggest group in the last parliament

  - The alliance estimated to have received 82% of the Arab vote (2015)

- Allied with Jewish religious parties in the past, were prepared to back Gantz to oust Netanyahu (pre elections)

Elections 2020

- **Recap:** It was the third national election in 11 months, after Netanyahu and military chief Gantz both failed to form a coalition government

- Concerns that **coronavirus** fears and election fatigue would hit **turnout** were dispelled => 71% of the electorate had voted, 7.3% increase from the September 2019 elections

    - 4,579,931 eligible voters have cast their ballots

- 14 special polling stations for 5,630 Israelis quarantined due to exposure to the **coronavirus** (over 70% **turnout**)
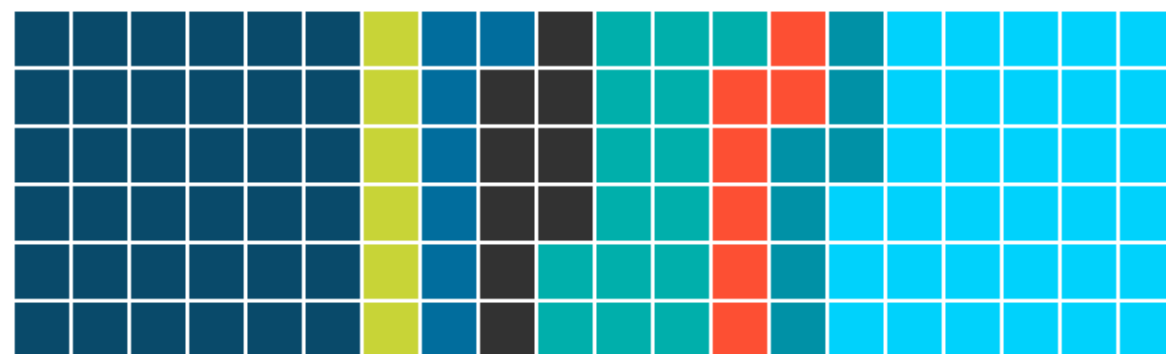
Elections 2020: Results

- Benjamin Netanyahu's **Likud** gained the most public support, but needs the support of other parties to form a government

  - Likud gained **36 seats,** with a total of 59 for his right-wing alliance (shy of a 61-seat parliamentary majority)
  - **Best results** in 3 last elections despite Netanyahu's pending inducement (charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust)

- Natural **allies** of **Likud:** Far-right nationalists and Jewish religious parties

Likud 36   33 **Blue and White**

- 36 Likud   - 6 Yamina   - 7 UTJ   - 9 Shas   - 15 Joint List   - 7 Labor-Gesher-Meretz
- 7 Yisrael Beiteinu   - 33 Blue and White

Jewish vs. Democratic

The Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel =>

" … we, members of the People's Council, representatives of the Jewish Community of Eretz-Israel and of the Zionist Movement, are here assembled on the day of the termination of the British Mandate over Eretz-Israel and, **by virtue** of our **natural** and **historic right** and on the strength of the **resolution of the United Nations** General Assembly, hereby **declare** the **establishment of a Jewish state** in Eretz-Israel, to be known as the State of Israel".

Jewish vs. Democratic

The Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel =>

" … The State of Israel will be open for Jewish immigration and for the Ingathering of the Exiles; it will foster the development of the country **for the benefit of all its inhabitants;** it will be based on **freedom, justice** and **peace** as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure **complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex;** it will guarantee **freedom** of **religion, conscience, language, education and culture;** it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations…"

Jewish vs. Democratic

- **Israel was established as a Jewish democracy**

  - Based on Liberal-Democratic values AND Jewish values

- **Precedence** of **Judaism** over **liberalism**?

- The state should strive to safeguard **equal rights** and **liberties** for all its citizens =>

  - **Interests** of **both** Israeli Jews and Arabs should be **equally accommodated**

- **Civic duties** across ethnic groups (army/civil service, paying taxes, etc.)

Is Israel a Democracy?

Yes, but not without **flaws** in its **political** and **electoral systems**

- Although all votes are counted, **only votes of parties that pass the threshold** (continuously increasing) **count**

  - Votes for **smaller parties** which do not pass the **threshold** are discarded
  - If **smaller parties** pass the threshold but don't sign agreements with larger parties, their votes are meaningless (unless they become part of the ruling coalition)

- **Politicians** who become **ministers** are usually **not experts** in the subject of their position; they **rely on an experienced staff**, the "**deep state,**" bureaucrats (e.g. directors general of ministries and professionals) who provide continuity and expertise, but are **unaccountable** to voters

Is Israel a Democracy?

Yes, but not without **flaws** in its **political** and **electoral systems**

- Members of its Knesset are not **individually** elected by, and accountable to the voters in multi-district/constituency elections

  - According to Israel's system of **Proportional Representation,** citizens do NOT vote not for an individual candidate (representing a particular district), but for a **party's national list**
  - Israeli voters have **no direct access to Knesset members** => **N**ot a 'true' representative democracy

- **Corruption scandals** involving public officials resulted in a loss of confidence in politicians and parties and a decline in voter turnout

Is Israel a Democracy?

- **Is Israel an *Ethnic Democracy*?**

A political system that combines a structured **ethnic** dominance with **democratic,** political and **civil rights for all**. Both **dominant** & **minority ethnic** groups have citizenship and can fully participate in the political process

- **Is Israel an *Ethnocracy*?**

A type of political structure in which the state apparatus is **controlled by a dominant ethnic group**/s to further its interests, power and resources

- **Is Israel a *Contested Liberal Democracy*?**

Liberal democracy is a liberal political ideology & a form of government in which representative democracy operates under the principles of classical liberalism

Next Session…

- Israeli Foreign Policy & International Relations

Questions? Feel free to email the lecturer =>

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