

spotlight

Elections in Israel

Toward the Elections for the 20th Knesset



The Knesset
Research and
Information Center

The Knesset is elected by general, national, direct, equal, secret and proportional elections

When Are the Elections Held?

The elections for the Knesset in Israel take place every four years. However, the regular date of the elections will change in the following cases:

- The Knesset has passed a bill to dissolve before the end of its term.
- The Knesset has dissolved due to failure to pass the budget within three months of the beginning of the fiscal year.
- The Prime Minister has dissolved the Knesset as most Knesset Members objected to the government and no alternative government was formed.
- The Knesset dissolved itself due to failure to assemble a new government.
- A vote of no-confidence was passed and the new proposed candidate for Prime Minister failed to assemble a government.

According to the Basic Law: the Knesset, elections are always held on Tuesdays in order to avoid the desecration of the Sabbath.

Restrictions on Lists of Candidates and Candidates

- A candidate may not run for office if s/he was sentenced to a prison term of over 3 months and if less than 7 years have passed since the time s/he concluded serving his/her term of imprisonment, unless the chairman of the Central Elections Committee has determined that the crime does not bear moral turpitude.
- A list of candidates or a candidate will not participate in the elections if their goals or actions include one or more of the following:
 - The negation of the existence of the State of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state;
 - Incitement to racism;
 - Support for armed struggle by a hostile state or a terrorist organization against the State of Israel.

In 1965, the "Socialist List" was barred from running in the elections as its members included members of the Al-Ard organization. In 1988, the "Kach" list was barred from running and lists that sought to carry on its legacy were subsequently prevented from running.

The Central Elections Committee

The Central Elections Committee is responsible for the following:

- Approval of lists, list names, and the shorthand for the lists;
- Supervision of political advertising;
- Logistic organization of the elections;
- Recruitment and training of workers for the polling stations and committees;
- Organization of the vote tally and the distribution of mandates;
- Legal inquiry regarding any act or omission relating to the elections;
- Guiding the public on relevant matters;

The Chairman of the Elections Committee is a Supreme Court Justice. Its other members are representatives of the factions, according to their size. Each faction will have one representative for every four Knesset members, and if it has less than four members – it will be represented by one Committee member.

Each one of the regional committees is presided over by a judge and their composition is identical to that of the Central Committee. Committee employees are usually civil servants, retirees or people who worked in such committees in previous elections. The committees' responsibility is to organize the elections in the region and make sure they are proper.

Each polling station is staffed by a secretary who is an employee of the Elections Committee, and representatives of three different factions appointed by the Regional Elections Committee. New lists or parties from the outgoing Knesset who are not represented in the polling station may send observers to the polling stations. The composition of factions in each and every polling station is determined at the Central Committee. Most polling stations have an usher, a police officer and a superintendent.

What Are Parties, Lists and Factions?

A "party" is an organization of people based on their common political and social worldviews. One or more parties compile "lists" of candidates ahead of the legislative national elections. Elected lists become factions when the Knesset is formed.

Who Has the Right to Vote and be Elected?

- Every Israeli citizen who is 18 years of age or older on the date of the election and who is registered in the Voters' Registry has the right to vote.
- Every Israeli citizen who is 21 years old and up may be elected, excluding senior position holders in the public sector, such as chief rabbis and judges.

With a majority of 80 Knesset members, and if unusual circumstances which prevent holding the elections on the scheduled date occur, the Knesset may extend its term beyond four years. For example, the elections for the 8th Knesset were postponed due to the Yom Kippur War.

For each list, ballots will be printed according to the total number of voters + 30%. Some of the ballots are printed in Hebrew and in Arabic and they are used in polling stations in Arab towns. The ballots and all voting materials are stored until the final result of the elections is determined and until the deadline for appeals or objections passes, and are destroyed afterwards.

The new Knesset will assemble for its first session at 4 PM on the 14th day after the elections.

Voting at Israeli missions abroad, as well as on ships, is held 12 days before the elections. Soldiers begin voting 72 hours before the elections and until the end of Election Day.

Identification of voters using an identity card without an image is not possible, unless the card states that the Ministry of the Interior permits the voter to carry an ID card without a photo. Such permissions are rare, and are given mainly to Muslim women who wear burkas.

Election Day

- According to the law, Election Day is a public holiday. However, emergency services, services such as grocery stores (until 12 PM), public transportation, the media, restaurants, hotels, burial services, parking lots and gas stations operate regularly, as per the Central Election Committee's determination.
- A voter who is 20 kilometers or more away from the jurisdiction of the town his/her polling station is located in is entitled to transit via public transportation at the state's expense.
- Polling stations are open from 7 AM to 10 PM. In small towns, jails and hospitals, polling stations are open from 8 AM to 8 PM. Polling stations may close earlier only if all citizens who have the right to vote in them have voted.
- Voters must be identified by the secretary of the polling station committee using an Israeli identity card, a valid Israeli passport, a valid driver's license or a Knesset member card.

Voting Outside the Designated Polling Station

- Soldiers, emissaries of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, civil servants working abroad, agents of Zionist institutions, people committed in hospitals, women staying at a battered women's shelter, inmates and citizens with disabilities who are permanently staying in certain institutions may vote using double envelopes according to special voting arrangements.
- People with mobility impairments may vote in polling stations with suitable accessibility and voting arrangements. In the upcoming elections there will be 2,500 such polling stations.
- Votes in special polling stations are made in double envelopes, and are counted at the Knesset.
- Police officers may vote in any polling station, but they must be in uniform (unless Israel Police authorized voting while not in uniform) and present their Israel Police identity card or another means of identification, as well as a special voting card. Once they have voted, their voting card will be revoked in order to make certain that they will not be able to vote in other stations.

Election Results

Counting the Votes

- After each polling station closes, the polling station committee members count the ballots, mark the number of votes each list received, compare this number to the number of people who have the right to vote in the polling station and sum up the results.
- The process is completely transparent, with full consent by all polling station workers and observers.
- Counting errors are to be corrected by the Chairman of the Regional Elections Committee or the Chairman of the Central Elections Committee.
- Records and paperwork are transferred to the Regional Elections Committee for review, and the results are fed into a computer that is connected to the Central Elections Committee's computers.
- The Central Elections Committee publishes the election results and the distribution of mandates, and final results are published in the "Reshumot" (official gazette).

Counting the Votes in Double Envelopes

Double envelopes from the special polling stations arrive at the Knesset while they are sealed. There, they are checked according to the identification numbers of voters with which they are marked. At the Knesset, Central Elections Committee workers make sure that the voter's name was not deleted from the list of voters in the polling station s/he is registered in (if his/her name has been deleted, it means s/he voted twice, which constitutes a criminal offence). The internal voting envelopes are transferred to polling station committees who are present in the Knesset for that purpose. Tallying is performed in the same manner in all regular polling stations.

Invalid Votes

- ✗ Blank ballot slips;
- ✗ Votes stating something other than the list's letter or shorthand;
- ✗ A vote in an envelope that has a mark that may identify the voter;
- ✗ An envelope containing more than two identical notes;
- ✗ An envelope that is not the envelope supplied by the committee;
- ✗ An envelope that is not signed by two members of the polling station committee.

What is the blank ballot slip intended for? If notes for a certain list run out in the booth, a voter may write the list's letter on a white ballot slip and it will be considered a valid vote for all intents and purposes.

In the elections for the 19th Knesset 40,904 votes (about 1% of the votes) were disqualified.

Repeat elections for the Knesset were only held once: in 1988, after the elections for the 12th Knesset, in three polling stations.

Distribution of Mandates among Lists

- ✓ A list of candidates must receive a minimum of 3.25% of the total number of votes that are counted in order to secure its representation in the Knesset. This cutoff point is the electoral threshold for these elections.
- ✓ The number of valid votes for lists that passed the electoral threshold are divided by 120. The result is called the "quota".
- ✓ The number of valid votes each list won is divided by the "quota" to determine the number of mandates it won. After this division, there are still some mandates left to be divided to reach 120. The surplus is divided according to the Bader-Ofer method.

During the 19th Knesset's term, the electoral threshold was raised from 2% to 3.25%.

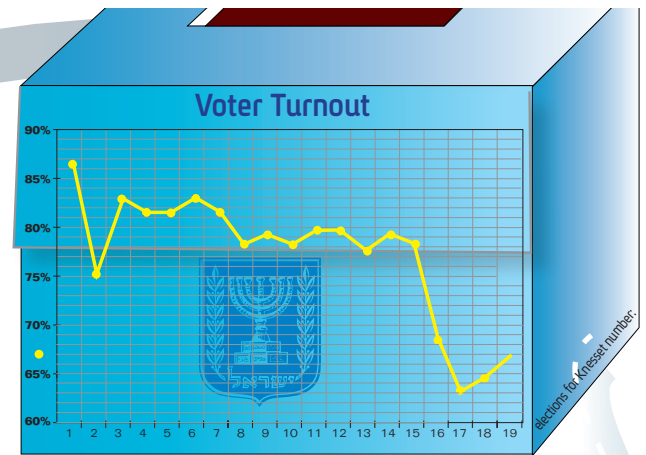
The electoral threshold in the Netherlands is 0.67%, 3% in Spain, 4% in Austria, 5% in the Czech Republic, and 10% in Turkey.

The Elections for the 19th Knesset by Numbers

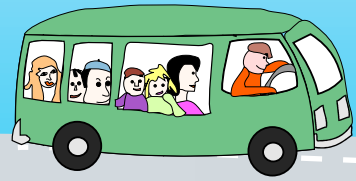
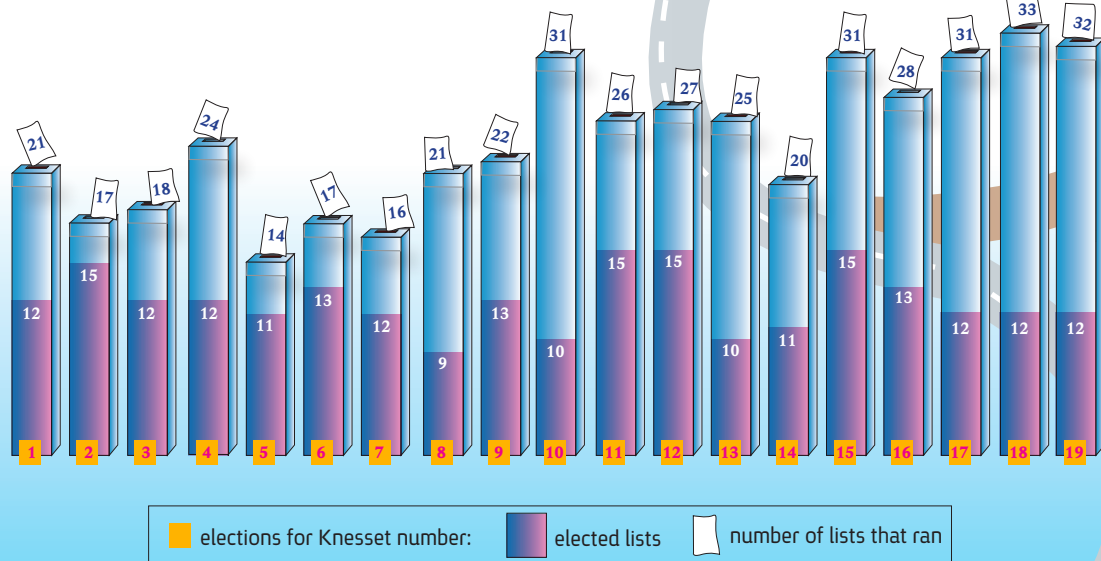
• **32** lists ran in the elections • Supreme Court Justice Elyakim Rubinstein was the Chairman of the Central Elections Committee • The Elections Committee had **36** members; the Chairman had **4** deputies from the following factions: Kadima, Likud, Yisrael Beiteinu and Shas • The Committee's budget in the election year was approximately ILS **247** million • The electoral threshold was **2%** of valid votes • The Voters' Registry was closed on November **29**th 2012 • The number of eligible voters was **5,656,705** • **10,132** polling stations were placed across Israel on Election Day • **1,550** of them were accessible to people with mobility impairments • **194** polling stations were placed in hospitals and **57** polling stations were placed in imprisonment facilities • **95** polling stations were placed in Israeli missions abroad • Approximately **7** million ballots were printed for each list, and a total of about **262.5** million ballots were printed.



Voting in the elections – a right or a duty?
Voting in Israel is not compulsory, however 28 states, including Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Turkey, Costa Rica and Greece demand that voters attend the polling stations by law.



Number of Elected Lists Out of the Total Number of Lists that Ran



A Moment of History

The elections for the Constituent Assembly were held on January 25th 1949, about 8 months after the proclamation of the Declaration of Independence, and shortly after the War of Independence ended. The Constituent Assembly then became the 1st Knesset.

The First Knesset

The voter turnout was 86.9% of all 506,567 eligible voters, and the number of valid votes was 434,684. The electoral threshold was 1% - 4,346 votes, and the number of votes per mandate was only 3,592.

The Nineteenth Knesset

The voter turnout was 67.77% of all 5,656,705 eligible voters, and the number of valid votes was 3,792,742. The electoral threshold was 2% - 75,855 votes, and the number of votes per mandate was 29,366.

Until 1992, voters cast a single ballot in the elections for the Knesset. In 1992, an amendment to Basic Law: the Government was passed, stipulating that in the elections, voters will vote for both the Knesset and directly for the Prime Minister. The amendment was first implemented in the 1996 elections, and votes were cast with two ballots. In 2001, only the prime minister was elected, and then the old procedure was restored. In the elections for the 16th Knesset, held in 2003, voters again only voted with one ballot for lists of Knesset candidates.

Why does the Knesset have 120 members?
The Knesset is named after Ha'Knesset Ha'Gdola (The Great Assembly). This was a legislative institute founded by Nechamya in Jerusalem after the Return to Zion. It was active between 410-310 BC and had 70-120 members.

KeyTerms

The electoral threshold – the lawful electoral threshold is a certain rate out of the total valid votes a list must win to be included in the Knesset. This is the only limitation on lists that run in the elections for the Knesset, and its aim is to minimize the number of represented parties in the Knesset and make sure each faction will have the minimal number of members according to the law.

Until the elections for the 12th Knesset, the electoral threshold was 1%. From the elections for the 13th Knesset through the elections for the 16th Knesset, the electoral threshold was 1.5%, and then it was raised to 2%. After the elections for the 19th Knesset, the electoral threshold was raised to 3.25%, the current threshold.

General elections – all registered voters in the Voters' Registry may vote.

National elections – the State of Israel forms a single voting district.

Direct elections – voters vote directly for lists of Knesset candidates.

Equal elections – one vote per voter, and each vote carries equal weight. All lists have an equal opportunity to run.

Secret elections – voters are entitled to keep their votes secret. Voting in a sealed envelope behind a veil guarantees that the elections will be fair and prevents the exertion of undue pressure on voters.

Proportional elections – a list's weight in the Knesset is proportional to the number of votes it received in the elections.

Excess votes agreement – an agreement between two lists to bring their excess votes together following the first distribution of mandates to increase their chances of winning an extra seat in the Knesset. The excess votes agreements must be published before the elections.

Double envelopes – the envelopes used by special polling stations. The regular voting envelopes are inserted into external (blue) envelopes that state the voter's identification number. Blue envelopes are counted in the Knesset.

The Voters' Registry – the Voters' Registry is the list of eligible voters for the Knesset. It is regularly put together and revised by the Ministry of the Interior. The Registry is closed 54 days before the elections and it includes all citizens who will be 18 years old or older by Election Day.

The Bader-Ofer Method – a method for dividing remaining mandates following the first division until 120 mandates are reached; it is known worldwide as the Hagenbach- Bischoff (D'Hondt) method. The method is based on calculating the "list quota":

$$\frac{\text{number of eligible votes a list won}}{\text{number of mandates} + 1} = \text{the list quota}$$

The list which received the largest list quota will win an additional mandate. Calculations are made repeatedly until all 120 mandates are distributed.

Main Statutes Relating to the Elections

- Basic Law: the Knesset
- Basic Law: the Government
- The Elections for the Knesset Law [Combined Version] 5729-1969
- The Elections (Modes of Propaganda) Law, 5719-1959
- The Political Parties Financing Law, 5733-1973
- The Parties Law, 5752-1992
- The Knesset Law, 5754-1994

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