

January 17, 2013

The Upcoming Israeli Elections

Israelis will go to the polls on January 22 to elect a new legislature, the first step in the formation of a new government. Because no party is likely to gain a majority, Israel's prime minister will need to form a coalition comprising at least 61 seats of Israel's 120-member parliament. Coalition negotiations will help set the leadership and policies of the government. This orderly process demonstrates Israel's vibrant democratic character.

Israel's government emerges from a Knesset chosen on the basis of proportional representation.

- Israel holds parliamentary elections at least once every four years. Frequently, a coalition government does not serve its full term. Following a decision of Israel's current government to dissolve the Knesset, this year's elections are being held a few months ahead of schedule.
- Each party puts forth its slate of candidates for the Knesset. Individuals cast their ballots for a party rather than for individuals. Each party that qualifies for the Knesset receives a proportional share based on the percentage of votes it gains nationwide. Thirty-four parties are running candidates; ordinarily about a dozen parties receive the 2 percent necessary to qualify for representation.
- Following the election, President Shimon Peres will ask a Knesset member to try to put together a coalition. Ordinarily, Israel's president gives this opportunity to the leader of the party that received the most seats. Sometimes—as was the case in 2009—he gives this opportunity to the leader of a smaller party who is more likely to be able to form a government. He or she must succeed within 28 days – with a possible two-week extension. If that leader cannot form a government, Peres will turn to another Knesset member.
- Once the prime minister-designate forms a coalition and determines ministerial assignments, the government will seek a vote of confidence from the Knesset. Then the new government takes office.



Israel's Knesset, or parliament, will hold new elections on January 22.

The U.S.-Israel relationship transcends the particulars of any election.

- Israel is a strong and vibrant democracy that reflects shared values with America. .
- The U.S.-Israel relationship is based on a long-standing friendship and strategic partnership between Americans and Israelis, who face common threats and share a common bond.

- The U.S.-Israel alliance will thrive following Israel's elections. As White House Press Secretary Jay Carney said in May 2012, "a new coalition government in Israel certainly will not affect our policy approach, and we continue to have very good relations with leaders in Israel."

Key political players in the election:

- Benjamin Netanyahu, prime minister since 2009 and leader of the Likud party, also served as prime minister once before (1996-1999) and as finance minister (2003-2005). For the purposes of the election, the Likud party merged party lists with Yisrael Beitenu (Israel is Our Home) to form Likud-Beitenu.
- Avigdor Lieberman, party leader of Yisrael Beitenu, represents many Israelis from the former Soviet Union. Lieberman recently stepped down as deputy prime minister and minister of foreign affairs following an indictment for corruption. Lieberman will not serve as a minister at the outset of the next government.
- Naftali Bennett, party leader for the Habayit Hayehudi (Jewish Home), is a successful businessman who also served in an elite unit in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). Bennett served as Netanyahu's chief of staff (2006-2008) and director general of the Yesha Council (2010 to 2012), an umbrella organization that represents Jewish settlements in the West Bank.
- Shelly Yachimovich is the leader of the Labor party and a former journalist.
- Yair Lapid, former TV news anchor, presenter, actor and journalist, is the leader of Yesh Atid (There is a Future), a new political party he formed this year.
- Tzipi Livni, leader of the newly established Hatnua (The Movement) party and previously the leader of Kadima (2009-2012). She also held several ministerial positions, including minister of foreign affairs (2006-2009) and minister of justice (2006-2007).
- Eli Yishai, co-leader of the Sephardic religious party Shas, is a current deputy prime minister and minister of the interior in the current government.
- Aryeh Deri is co-leader of Shas and a former minister of the interior (1988-1993).
- Shaul Mofaz, leader of the Kadima party and current opposition leader, served as minister of transportation (2006-2009), minister of defense (2002-2006) and IDF chief of staff (1998-2002).