Inter-Agency Task Force on Israeli Arab Issues

Israel's Arab Minority and the Second 2019 Elections:
Outcomes and Discourse on Political Participation

September 25, 2019

Israel's second national elections of 2019 drew 10% more Arab voters than the April elections, earning the Joint List 13 seats (up from 10) and making it once again the third largest party in the Knesset. In contrast to 2015, when the Joint List first formed and also won 13 seats, the highly polarized campaign cycles along with the lack of decisive results in both 2019 races have contributed to rapidly changing discourse about Arab political participation in national government, both within Arab society and in the Israeli mainstream.

In recent years, Arab citizens have increasingly indicated greater interest in real influence in national government, as well as frustration about sensing a lack of efficacy in voting. After historically low Arab voter turnout of 49.2% in April, September's higher turnout of 59.2% is attributed to a number of factors: the reunification of the Joint List, statements by Joint List Chair MK Ayman Odeh about his willingness to be part of a ruling coalition, get-out-the-vote efforts, and the backlash against negative campaigning and voter suppression efforts by Likud.

Following election results, the Joint List is continuing to take a lead in advancing a discourse of greater participation. With a lack of clear path to a governing coalition, the party formally recommended MK Benny Gantz, Chair of Kahol Lavan, as Prime Minister, a move seen by many as "crossing the Rubicon" in terms of Arab leadership's willingness to become a full player in Israeli politics. Their recommendation reinforced the direction MK Ayman Odeh set in August by proclaiming willingness to join a Kahol Lavan-led government, and corresponds to the interests of the Arab public. A recent survey shows that 75% of Arab citizens support joining a governing coalition.
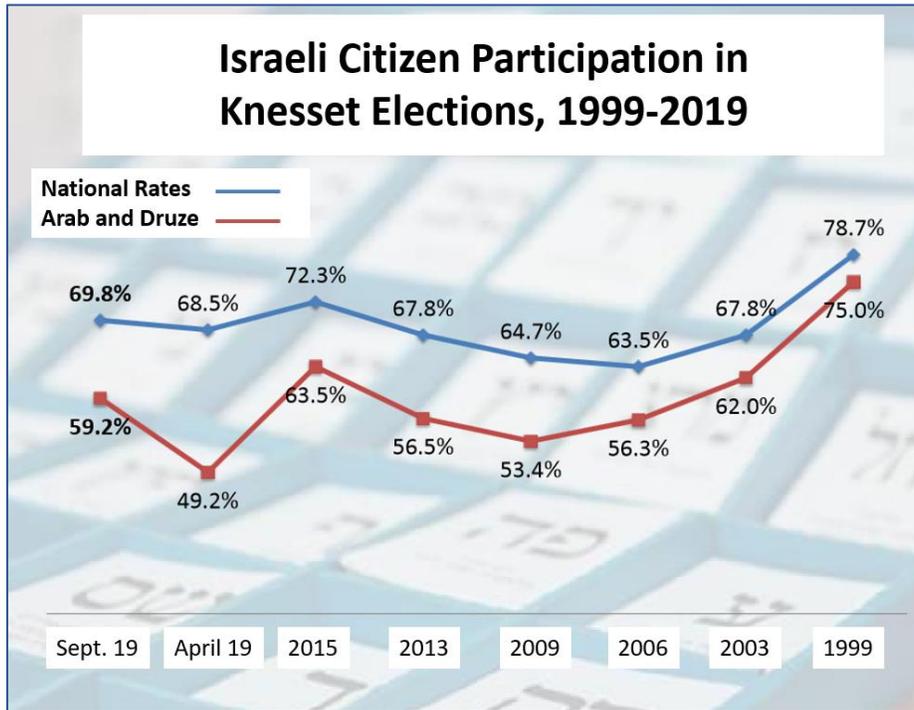
This brief provides official election results and highlights from the discourse that followed, focusing on Arab voter participation, the changing role of the Joint List, and discourse on potential for political partnership.

Arab Voter Turnout

According to analyses based on official election results published by the Central Elections Committee[1], 59.2% of the Arab electorate voted in this Knesset election. This is a 10% higher showing than the

---

[1] Hebrew website: https://votes22.bechirot.gov.il/

49.2% turnout in April's vote. but, as in previous national elections, lower than the 69.8% overall national voting rate.[2]

Israeli Citizen Participation in Knesset Elections, 1999-2019

National Rates ——
Arab and Druze ——

National Rates: 69.8%, 68.5%, 72.3%, 67.8%, 64.7%, 63.5%, 67.8%, 78.7%
Arab and Druze: 59.2%, 49.2%, 63.5%, 56.5%, 53.4%, 56.3%, 62.0%, 75.0%

Sept. 19 | April 19 | 2015 | 2013 | 2009 | 2006 | 2003 | 1999

Source: Arik Rudnitzky, Israel Democracy Institute

Results show that approximately 82% of Arab voters supported the Joint List, significantly higher than the 71% that did so in April's elections, with the rest voting for Jewish-led parties. In a few of the largest Arab cities, such as Nazareth, Tamra and Sakhnin, the Joint List won more than 90% of the votes. In addition, it seems that a significant number of Jewish citizens voted for the Joint List[3], following MK Odeh's appeal to Jewish voters: "Who understand what it's like to be persecuted as the Jews do?…We will win together or we will lose separately."

A significant number of Arab voters (estimated at 7.5% compared with 8.2% in April) supported Kahol Lavan, giving that list at least one and possibly two of its 33 seats. This includes including one in every two Druze voters. Compared with the previous elections, Arab support for the Democratic Camp (a new party for this election that included Meretz) diminished significantly, with only 2.9% of Arab voters supporting this party compared with 8.7% who supported Meretz in April. Labor received 2% of Arab votes in September, up slightly from 1.3% in April. Support for Likud and Shas has dropped among Arab voters, from 2.3% and 2.1% respectively in April to 1.4% and 1.2% in September.

Arab Members of Knesset

The reunited Joint List is once again the third-largest party in the Knesset after Kahol Lavan and Likud. It comprises the three Arab-led parties and the Hadash Jewish-Arab party. Its makeup and distribution

---

[2] Unless otherwise indicated, all numbers below are taken from Arik Rudnitzky, Arab Citizens' Vote for the 22nd Knesset Elections, September 2019, Israel Democracy Institute (Hebrew)

[3] According to the analysis by Arik Rudnitzky of IDI (Hebrew), the Joint List "garnered significant support in cities with a substantial Jewish majority (around 4,500 votes) as well as in the "double envelope votes" - a procedure similar to an Absentee Ballot, used mostly by soldiers and people with disabilities (approximately 11,800).

of seats among the four parties are detailed in the tables below.

Distribution of Parties in the Joint List		
Party	No. of Seats	Order on list
Hadash (Democratic Front, Arab-Jewish)	5	1, 5, 7, 10, 12
Balad (National-Secular)	3	2, 8, 13
Ta'al	2	3, 9
Ra'am (Southern Islamic Movement)	3	4, 6, 11

Joint List MKs	
Members of Knesset	Party
1. Adv. Ayman Odeh	Hadash Chair
2. Dr. Mtanes Shehadeh	Balad Chair
3. Dr. Ahmad Tibi	Ta'al Chair
4. Dr. Mansour Abbas	Ra'am Chair
5. Aida Touma-Sliman*	Hadash
6. Walid Taha	Ra'am
7. Dr. Ofer Cassif**	Hadash
8. Heba Yazbak*	Balad
9. Adv. Osama Saadi	Ta'al
10. Dr. Yousef Jabareen	Hadash
11. Said al-Harumi	Ra'am
12. Jaber Asakli	Hadash
13. Sami Abu Shehadeh	Balad

Indicates the two women on the list
*** Jewish member*

Jewish-led Parties: In parallel, among Jewish-led parties, for the first time since the 2003 elections, there are no Arabic-speaking (Arab or Druze) MKs in the Democratic Camp (previously Meretz), Labor or Likud. There are two Druze members of Jewish-led parties who will be in the next Knesset, Hamed A'amer of Israel Beitenu and Ghadir Merih of Kahol Lavan. With 12 Arab members of the Joint List, the upcoming Knesset is expected to include 14 Arab (including Druze) MKs, accounting for 11.6% of its members, compared to the record total number of 16 Arab MKs in the Knesset elected in 2015.

Discourse on Arab Voter Turnout

In the days prior to elections, there was significant uncertainty over whether Arab citizens would vote, with many citing disappointment about Arab party internal political struggles despite the reunification of the Joint List in August, perceived inefficacy of the Arab MKs, and right-wing attempts to disparage and suppress the Arab vote. However, developments leading up to and on Election Day are considered to have motivated the 10% increase in Arab voter participation.

Counter-effect of right-wing incitement: There is widespread political analysis concluding that PM Netanyahu's attempts to delegitimize Arab participation, including proposing legislation to allow parties to film and photograph inside polling stations, instead backfired and helped spur voter turnout. This is a contrast to the reaction of Arab voters in April, in which similar campaign incitement, on the heels of the passage of the Nation-State Law and in tandem with the dissolution of the Joint List and 1,200 cameras deployed by Likud at election sites in Arab communities, contributed to that election's historic low turnout. In a press conference following Tuesday's election, MK Ayman Odeh said the results showed there is a "heavy price to pay for incitement"; on Twitter, a resident of Tira attributed last-minute decisions by residents to vote to "Netanyahu's ferocious tirades"; and the Mayor of Arabeh stated "it was both a vote and a protest" (Hebrew).

The day after the election, Likud MK Miki Zohar admitted that Likud's failed attempt to push through legislation permitting cameras at polling sites, which was seen as a tactic to suppress Arab turnout, "didn't serve us, it hurt us. It woke up the Arab sector, which in turn came out to the polls."

Joint List Responds to Voter Concerns: This election presented Arab voters with a reunified Joint List, which surveys had indicated was a move favored by a majority of the population. Its messaging addressed Arab voter priorities of crime, housing and employment. And, moving to take the political initiative while heeding Arab citizens' expressed desire to have their representatives participate in government, Odeh stated at the end of August that he would consider joining a coalition under certain conditions, a statement that resulted in a 78% approval by Arab citizens and helped earn him unprecedented coverage in Israeli media. The Joint List worked intensively in the week prior to elections and on Election Day to get out the Arab vote, using catchy slogans such as "We will reach one million voters" and "Our power cannot be ignored," touring Arab localities and garnering the support of public figures and Arab mayors. In turn, one effort to enhance turnout was taken by a number of Arab mayors who, for the first time ever, used Election Day for referendums on local issues of importance to voters.

Jewish Party Outreach to Arab Voters: This campaign cycle, unlike the one before April's election, saw significant outreach to Arab voters by left and center-left parties, including the Democratic Camp, Labor and Kahol Lavan. A pre-election survey of Arab citizens found that the biggest motivating factor to vote "would be a declaration by the center-left parties that issues of importance for the Arab citizenry (such as violence and poverty) are part of their platform."

Voter Turnout Efforts on Election Day: Lastly, a number of civil society organizations, civic groups and popular movements organized immediately before the election and on Election Day to boost Arab participation. Activities on Election Day included, for example:

- **The "Democratic Block,"** an organization monitoring "anti-democratic tendencies in Israel," identified 130 fake Facebook profiles that it claims were used to encourage Arab citizens to boycott the elections. As a result, Facebook removed more than 82 fake accounts advocating an Arab election boycott.

- **Grassroots Organizing Drove Negev Bedouin to the Polls:** The organization Zazim conducted a fundraising campaign to hire buses and taxis to transport Negev Bedouin living in unrecognized villages to the polls. Bedouin communities in the south often lack access to public transportation and are far from voting stations. Following a Likud petition to stop this activity, the Central Election Committee decided two days before the election that Zazim's activity could not continue, ruling that it was politically motivated and beyond the scope of the organization's work. Hours after that decision, hundreds of volunteers organized through social media and arranged to meet with their cars early on Election Day in the Negev to drive Bedouin, especially women, to their voting stations. There were estimates that combined with the work of local Arab volunteer organizations, and Bedouin owners of transport companies who donated dozens of buses, this grassroots effort enabled 7,000 Bedouin to cast their votes (Hebrew). Election results show that the voting rate in Negev Bedouin localities rose from approximately 37% in April to above 50%.

- **Media and Social Media:** Numerous other Jewish-Arab organizations and activists in the field of shared society wrote articles and called on social media for Arab citizens to vote, some changing their Facebook profile to the hashtag #I_am_a_partner (in Hebrew ‫אני_שותף‬#).

Discourse on Political Partnership

Enhanced discourse on Jewish-Arab political cooperation, and on the option of the Joint List joining a government or supporting a coalition from the outside (known as an 'external bloc'), was [central to the election campaign](), bringing into the mainstream ideas and options that have long been considered impossible or taboo in both Jewish and Arab societies. Now, with the inconclusive election results showing neither Likud nor Kahol Lavan easily securing a 61-seat majority, some predict MK Odeh would become ["the kingmaker,"]() while the Joint List, comprising the third-largest party, is a [factor as never before in coalition considerations](), with discussion that the Joint List could either [join a coalition]() or [head the opposition]().

Odeh said that after the election, [he received a call from Kahol Lavan head Benny Gantz]() and the two agreed to meet, while Chair of Labor MK Amir Peretz has [urged Gantz to include the Joint List in the formal coalition talks](). This is an important departure from previous post-election maneuvering in which Arab MKs were not invited to participate in coalition-building efforts.

Voices in Arab society are viewing the Joint List's new clout as an [opportunity for Arab MKs to engage national government]() in addressing the community's pressing priorities such as equality, crime and housing, and to gain influence in national government. According to [a recent poll by the Israel Democracy Institute](), 76% of Arab citizens support Arab parties joining a government, while resistance to such a scenario among Jewish citizens has dropped from 66% in 2017 to 50%.

Joint List MKs walking toward the President's Residence for a meeting to recommend the next prime minister

Joint List (Conditional) Recommendation of MK Benny Gantz: Following elections, in parallel to coalition talks, the heads of all parties are invited to meet President Rivlin, where each recommends a future prime minister. According to law, the MK that receives most recommendations is tasked by the president to form a coalition government. If that person fails, the task is given to another.

Following heated internal debate, mirrored by public pressure and debate on social media, the Joint List recommended MK Benny Gantz for Prime Minister, despite the [objections—and eventual withdrawal from the recommendation--of the 3 Balad party MKs](). This recommendation was defined as "[conditioned on a number of obligations]()" for Gantz, including "the freezing house demolitions in Arab villages, the establishment of a team to look into the issue of unrecognized villages, progress with a government resolution to stem violence in Arab society, the nixing of the Nation-State Law and the launching of negotiations with the Palestinian Authority," as well as "the cancellation of [Kaminitz] law that cracks down on illegal construction." This is only the second time that an Arab-led party has recommended a prime minister, following the recommendation of Yitzhak Rabin in 1992 by the Mada and Hadash parties.

To a large extent, these preconditions echo those [described by Odeh and Tibi during the election campaign]() when they spoke of joining or supporting a coalition. Tibi issued the following statement: "For a full decade we have been a haunted minority, haunted by PM Netanyahu. Now we have become a haunting minority…and we hope our recommendation will bring an end to his rule ([Hebrew]()). In a New York Times op-ed, Odeh wrote that "[Our recommendation of Gantz is a clear message: the only]()

future for this country is a shared future." In a letter to President Rivlin, the Joint List clarified that its recommendation only represents 10 of its 13 MKs, not including the 3 MKs from Balad.

Responses to recommendation: In response, PM Netanyahu posted a video on Facebook ([Hebrew](#)) saying: "It is exactly as we warned, the joint Arab list recommended Gantz…now there are two options: either we'll have a minority government that relies on the support of those who renounce Israel as a Jewish and democratic state and exalt terrorists who murder our soldiers and children, or we will have a wide government." MK Mansour Abbas, Chair of Ra'am (the Southern Islamic Movement) responded in a radio interview ([Hebrew](#)): "Here you have a party, that's running for elections in Israel, not in another country. It recommends a candidate who is a Zionist Jew, and then you get incitement and hate speech against us as if instead of recommending someone we have maybe shot someone."

Meanwhile, since one of the realistic scenarios being discussed is a unity government that will include both Likud and Kahol Lavan (and possibly other Jewish-led parties), Odeh has also stated that he is aiming to [become the next leader of the Opposition](#). If realized, he would be the first Arab citizen in the position, which would entitle him to [receive periodic security briefings](#), meet with visiting dignitaries, and a full-time security escort.