

How do Israeli Elections Work?

At a Glance

In Israel, elections for the Knesset are held at least every four years. However, disagreements between coalition partners and other factors can lead a government to fall and trigger new elections. This has happened several times in recent years. As the current parliament's full term expires, Israelis will head to the polls on October 27, 2026 to elect the 26th Knesset. This is the first time since 1988 that a Knesset has not dissolved early, and the first time since 1973 that an Israeli government has served out a full term.

For a short Jewish Federations video on how elections in Israel work, see [here](#).

Overview

- Unlike the United States which has a presidential system of government, Israel is a parliamentary democracy. Its system is more similar to that of Canada or the United Kingdom.
- A main difference is that rather than voting for prime minister, in Israel people vote for parties to fill the Knesset's (the Israeli parliament) 120 seats. In turn, the Knesset elects a government, headed by a prime minister from among its 120 members. He or she usually comes from the party which has secured the most Knesset seats. As a result, the executive branch is effectively part of the legislative branch – another significant difference.
- Israel's president, who is elected through a secret ballot held once every seven years, is responsible for inviting the head of one of the newly elected parties to form a government. Should this effort fail, the president may invite another party head to try.

This is the main constitutional responsibility of the president, whose role is otherwise largely symbolic and ceremonial.

Campaign Period

- Once the Knesset dissolves or an election date is otherwise set, there is typically a campaign period of around 100-120 days.
- During this time, the outgoing Knesset operates with limited, interim powers until the new Knesset is sworn in. Similarly, the outgoing government continues to serve until a new government is in place.
- Election financing and fundraising are strictly controlled and limited, and there is a very different feel with dramatically smaller budgets, meaning far fewer rallies and less advertising, than in an election in the United States.
 - The state provides budgets to political parties that are running for the Knesset. The level of funds provided by the state is determined by a formula based primarily on how many seats a party held in the outgoing and previous Knesset.
 - Israeli citizens can make limited contributions to political parties. Anonymous contributions are not allowed, and donations are capped by law.
 - Corporations and other groups are prohibited from making campaign contributions.
 - Since 2018, the state has also provided funding for individual candidates standing in primary elections, for those political parties that hold primaries. The 2018 changes also ban contributions by citizens to individual candidates.

Political Parties

The Israeli system is heavily centered on political parties, which play a critical, formal and central role in the process.

- Prior to elections, all parties must register with the electoral authorities, and submit a list of their proposed candidates, ranked in order of priority (typically numbered from 1 to 120). First on the list will be the party leader (usually the larger parties' candidate for prime minister), followed by a numbered list, in descending order, of the party's preferred candidates.
- In 2026, parties must submit their finalized lists to the Central Elections Committee by September 9.
- Each party can decide how it will compose its list.



- Some parties hold primaries among registered party members to vote on the candidates for their lists. The Likud, the Democrats and Religious Zionism are the only three parties holding primaries in this year's elections.
- Most other parties choose candidates either through a committee process or as appointed by the head of the party.
- Some of the religious parties' candidates are chosen by a panel of rabbis or other religious leadership bodies.
- Once those numbered lists of candidates are submitted, they cannot be changed or rearranged in any way.
- The names of all registered parties and their candidate lists are published for the public to see.
- Each party is then assigned a one-, two-, or three-letter symbol/code (with parties usually able to choose their preferred symbol). Traditionally, Likud has been known by the three Hebrew letters for "Machal," and Labor by "Emet."

Election Day

- All Israeli citizens above the age of 18 and listed in the voter registry, including prisoners, are eligible to vote. Overseas voting is only permitted for limited categories of Israelis serving abroad in official capacities. Most Israelis living abroad must return to Israel if they want to vote.
- Soldiers on active duty, patients in hospitals and a few other groups are able to cast their votes remotely. These slips are placed in double envelopes and are only tallied once votes in polling stations have been counted. In the case of a close count, the "soldiers' votes," as they are commonly known, can sometimes tip the balance in a race.
- On Election Day, which is usually held on a Tuesday and is a national holiday, voters do not vote for individuals or candidates, nor do they vote according to the area or district where they live. Instead, every citizen in the country is given the same option: to select one political party from the list of parties registered. This is a critical point. Israeli voters make one choice only: they choose a party. Every voter in the country faces the exact same choice.
- In the private booth, voters see slips of paper with the one-, two- or three-letter codes of every registered party. The citizen simply chooses the slip with the code representing the party they have chosen and places the slip in an envelope. So, for example, if a person decides that they would like to see the people who are listed on the Likud's list in the



Knesset, then they take the slip that says “Machal” (Likud’s code), and place it in the envelope. This is an oddly anachronistic practice given Israel’s startup nation status.

- Unlike in the United States, there are no other ballots conducted (such as an initiative, a local election or a referendum).
- Voting takes place across the country, with most polling stations open from 7 am until 10 pm. Smaller communities and certain special polling stations may operate on shorter hours. No polling data or results can be publicized before 10 pm.

Election Night

- At precisely 10 pm Israel time (4 pm ET on October 27, 2026), as the polls close, major Israeli media outlets simultaneously publish the results of exit polls that they have privately conducted during the day. These polls are typically fairly accurate and do a good job of predicting the final results. Fuller, official results become far clearer by the next morning.
- Actual vote tallying is simply a matter of adding up the number of votes that each party received across the entire country, by counting the number of slips for each party.
- Votes are tallied and once totals are known, each party is awarded the same percentage of Knesset seats as the percentage of votes that it received. So a party that wins 10% of total votes receives 10% of the seats in the 120-seat Knesset. (In other words, a party receiving 10% of the votes across the country would win 12 seats, out of the total of 120 seats in the Knesset).
- To discourage small parties and limit the disproportional influence they can wield in Israel’s parliamentary system, votes for any party that does not win at least 3.25% of the total valid vote are completely discarded and that party will not receive any seats. This “electoral threshold” is the reason that many parties merge before the elections, as voters are reluctant to “throw away” their vote by supporting a party that will not make it past 3.25%.
- In the event that a party is disqualified because it failed to pass the electoral threshold, the percentages are recalculated according to the number of qualified parties and Knesset seats are distributed accordingly.
- Once the final results are known, there is clarity as to who from each of the candidate lists will enter the Knesset. So, a party that receives 10 seats will send the top 10 people on its pre-submitted list to the Knesset. Should a member of Knesset resign or pass away during the Knesset’s term, then the next person on the list takes their place.



- Under a rule known as the “Norwegian Law” in Israel, if an elected MK is appointed as a minister once a government is formed, then that person can choose to resign from the Knesset, allowing the next person on his or her party’s list to take their place. If they later cease being a minister, they can resume their place in Knesset, and their replacement is bumped back off the list.

Forming a Government

- Once the results are finalized, it is clear exactly who the new 120 members of Knesset will be.
- These 120 must now support a government, headed by a prime minister from among their ranks, who in turn will appoint ministers and thus establish an executive branch. In order to do this, a majority of members must form a governing coalition and agree on who they want to see as prime minister, as well as the directions that the new government should take.
- In Israel’s entire history, no single party has ever won a simple majority of 61 or more Knesset seats. Therefore, coalitions made up of multiple parties have to be formed in order to govern. This is why Israel’s democracy is sometimes described as a “coalitional democracy.”
- Many parties declare their allegiances prior to elections, often announcing who they prefer to see as prime minister, even if that person is not from their own party. As a result, “blocks” made up of multiple parties often emerge before the elections take place. Final results on election night therefore often – but not always – provide clarity regarding who is likely to emerge at the head of a governing coalition.
- By law, once results are final, representatives of each party are summoned to meet with the president, who asks them who they prefer to see as prime minister. Once all parties have been consulted, the president decides who he or she believes has the best chance of securing the support of a majority of Knesset members. That potential prime minister then has 28 days to try to form a government and can also request a single 14-day extension.
- “Forming a government” involves conducting negotiations with other parties to strike a deal of support. Smaller parties will make certain demands in return for joining a coalition. These demands will usually include a certain number of ministerial and other positions, plus a commitment to certain policies and directions. Once finalized, agreements to join a coalition need to be made in writing and must be made public.



- Upon mustering the support of at least 61 members, the successful party leader can then become the prime minister, with the backing of the majority of the Knesset.
- The Knesset needs to confirm the coalition in an investiture vote – essentially the opposite of a no-confidence motion. Then the prime minister and the new government are sworn into office.
- If the potential prime minister fails to form a coalition within the allotted time, the president can ask an alternate candidate to try to form a government.
- A highly unusual exception to this system first occurred following the April 2019 elections. Then-Prime Minister Netanyahu could not form a new coalition within the required time period. However, before another candidate was given an opportunity to try to form a coalition, the Knesset voted to dissolve itself, triggering brand new elections. In so doing, the 21st Knesset became the shortest lived in Israeli history, and it never voted in a government (instead, the previous government continued to act as an interim government until the new elections in September). And the 21st Knesset itself became an interim Knesset a few short weeks after it was sworn in.
- What followed were successive rounds of elections that did not give either block a sustainable majority, leading to short-lived governments or situations where no government was even formed. The 25th Knesset, elected on November 1, 2022, is now scheduled to complete a full term, with elections for the 26th Knesset set for October 27, 2026.

Once a coalition and government forms, the new prime minister remains in power until he or she no longer has the support of the majority of the Knesset, the government fails to pass a budget by March 31, or four years has passed, at which point new elections are triggered.

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