The Impact of Undecided Voters in Israeli Elections

Yaron Katz

Holon Institute of Technology, Israel.

ABSTRACT: This paper examines the impact of undecided voters in elections campaigns in Israel. The question asked here is if undecided voters can break the political dead-lock which became evident in four consecutive elections in just two years – between 2019 and 2021. The paper argues that the crucial role of undecided voters is the result of four main developments. The first is the multi-party parliamentary system, which allows the voters to swing between different parties and influence on handful of options to form coalition government. The parliamentary system emphasizes the excessive and crucial role of small parties to determine who will be in power – which means that they are in a position to impose their extreme ideology on the entire society. The second is that participation in elections is constantly declining, increasing the impact of motivated voters who follow the campaigns closely before making their final decision. The fact that this audience is persuaded by specific events and not by ideology or social identity allows to maximize the impact of their vote. The third is related to technological and cultural changes. Digital and social media have become popular among Israeli young people and first time voters, allowing them to promote new social and political behavior and bypass the censorship of traditional media and the traditional ideology of non-first time voters and the old political establishment.

KEY WORDS: elections, political deadlock, undecided voters. Campaigns, parties

INTRODUCTION

Elections are an important aspect of any democracy and are crucial to assume political power in competition between rival candidates. They are considered as orchestrated attempts by political organizations to get public support through persuasive communication in order to influence public policy in their favor (Marmor-Lavie and Wiemann, 2006). Common knowledge is that political campaigns have the capacity to influence voter preferences and determine the power struggle in any political system (Panagopoulos, 2012). As such, they are treated as important by political actors of all sorts – politicians, parties and candidates, governments and other political institutions, lobby groups, social movements and other kinds of citizens' associations – who are convinced of the crucial importance of campaigns on election results and have increasingly view political campaigning as an essential supplement to their engagement in the process of policy-making (Schmitt-Beck and Farrell, 2002). While research shows that traditionally political campaigns had no measurable effects on either turnout or candidate choice (Tuchman and Coffin, 1971), modern campaigns have greater impact on election results by influencing undecided voters (Spenkuch and Toniatti, 2018). But although modern political contests tend to be very close with the result that undecided voters determine the final political outcome of the democratic process, the concept of swing voters has been almost entirely ignored by academic analysts of voting and elections (for example: Schmitt-Beck and Farrell, 2002; Mayer, 2007).

The paper provides another aspect to the issue, arguing that new politics has enhanced the important role of undecided voters, since concentrating on undecided voters can be used as a strategic tool to attract new supporters. As determined here, in an environment of close elections, an important aspect of modern campaigns is that parties are looking to attract new voters which are considered as outsiders or undecided – and could swing their vote between parties and determine the final result (Fenno, 2002). The role of undecided voters can best be examined in the political environment that dominated in the four election campaigns held in Israel between 2019 and 2021. It is argued that in a dynamic environment of multiple elections, the parties that participate in the democratic process cannot change their position from one election to the next, and this reality gives advantage to parties supported by swing or undecided voters, which can break the deadlock between old rivals.

POLITICAL DEADLOCK

In the last decade Israel has been locked in a political deadlock, with the result that four election campaigns took place in just two years. These elections were undecided and left to the influence of small parties that represent minorities and undecided voters. The elections in April 2019 were called after the government failed to legislate the Draft Law and the demand that ultra-Orthodox religious males would not serve in the military. This issue dominated the election campaign with the result that no political party succeeded to form a governing coalition. The result was undecided and tied election – in which the right-wing and the ultra-Orthodox

parties gained only 60 Knesset Members out of 120 – one Knesset Member short of forming a government. A small right-wing secular party representing another minority group – Russian immigrants – refused to join the government, and a second round of election was scheduled to September 2019. The main conflict in the second election was again dominated by the military draft issue, led again by these two minorities groups (ultra-Orthodox and the secular Russian party), and this debate was intensified to a political conflict between two major blocs – the right-wing bloc that supports the ultra-Orthodox parties and the left-wing bloc that supports military service for all. No bloc could form a government since the small secular Russian party demanded a national unity government and refused to support any of the rival political blocs. The stalemate led to a third election campaign (in March 2020), which again ended up in inclusive result and forced to establish a unity government between the right and the left. But this arrangement did not last long, and a fourth round of election took place after a year (March 2021). This election was also decided by small parties and undecided voters – as three right-wing parties were joined by five left-wing parties to form a narrow government with a majority of only one Knesset Member, escalating a public debate about the role of parties that represent right-wing voters but assisted in transferring power to the left-wing.

The consecutive election campaigns were a competitive contest between two main governing alternatives, one from each side of the political map – the right-wing and the center-left wing. But the election results demonstrated the weakness of the large mainstream parties, allowing target groups headed by undecided and swing voters which included ideological, minority and small parties, to determine the final outcome. The question investigated here, is what is the impact of undecided voters on close election results, while looking as Israeli politics as a test case for parliamentary elections. The importance of investigating the Israeli elections is due to the growing number of undecided voters that should attract a lot of interest with its crucial role in determining the close election results of the last decade.

The research aims to investigate the way that internal social changes in these groups can lead to changes in political behavior and voting, in a process that is slowly and gradually changing the Israeli political landscape. These internal social changes are hard to identify and the research is trying to build a scenario that looks at the way that targeted social groups are undergoing internal changes which could have a tremendous impact on the shape of the political system. This social voting has enhanced the impact of small parties and undecided voters that swing between parties, since Israel has been ruled by coalition governments and no political party has ever had a parliamentary majority. The need of support of small parties to form a government turned Israeli politics into politics of conflict, and as this research demonstrates, this position has been widely used by different parties to gain influence among voters and political power in the Knesset.

ELECTORAL SYSTEMS

The impact of undecided voters is important in every election campaign, although it differs in a direct voting system such as a presidential election in the United States and in a multi-party system such as a parliamentary election held in Israel. The winner-takes-all principle applies to American politics (Herrnson and Campbell, 2008). In contrast, in Israel the principle that the candidate who gets the most votes wins the election does not apply, as currently is the situation following the March 2021 election. The largest party of the Likud with 30 out of 120 members of the Knesset (the Israeli parliament) lost the election and a small party with only six Knesset members is heading the government. This unconventional political situation is since Israel is a multicultural society and forming a government requires coalition between parties representing different agendas and cultural groups. Shamir and Rahat (2017) found that Israel's multi-party system results in a more competitive environment than election campaigns in a two-party system. In both political systems undecided voters represent the votes that can provide the margin of victory in any close race, although the consequences may differ. In the American political system, voters that are breaking ranks within the traditional two-party system are identified as independents or voters that "swing" their vote between Democrats and Republicans. But as a whole, with the majority of voters, American politics represents a "zero-sum" game where a vote for one party is practically voting against the other party. Exception may apply, as occurred in the election of the year 2,000, which ended in virtual tie between George W. Bush and Al Gore, but since 1% of the votes were to the Green party, Gore lost the election with just 537 votes difference. In Israel, undecided voters can switch their support to a handful of parties, in many cases within the same political bloc. As proposed by Balmas, Rahat and Sheafer (2012), the multi-party system in Israel promotes fierce competition between the contenders, who are forced to emphasize their leadership abilities in comparison to other candidates who often hold similar ideological positions on various issues. Based on this conclusion, this research looks at Israeli voters as undecided or floating participants which have a wide variety of options to cast their vote, whereas American voters are considered as swing voters that make a black or white one-sided decision with a more radical and direct impact on the election results.

Since Israel has been ruled by coalition governments and no political party has ever had a parliamentary majority, small parties representing minorities are important players in coalition building and party politics (Rahat and Shefer, 2007). This gives them important leverage and political power disproportionate to their size. These parties have had a central role in Israeli politics, maintaining a balance between the left-wing and the right-wing blocs, and their influence has far exceeded their relative size. This instrumental influence may raise a red flag however, since the idea of political identity as a driving force behind intergroup conflict

can lead to fundamentalism, as competition between social identities might be resolved by one identity asserting dominance over the others (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2004). Fisher (2016) explains that fundamentalist movements that participate in political systems can gain prominent political positions that allow them to impose their extreme ideology on the entire society. Geruso & Spears (2020) argue that election disputes can weaken democratic legitimacy and risk political violence.

The influential role of small parties is based on a political system of proportional representation and thus ideological parties which are committed to their identity party politics have an important role. At election time, votes from the entire country are tallied up and parties are represented in the Knesset in direct proportion to the percentage of votes received. This system facilitates the presence of many small parties and makes it virtually impossible for any one party to get the 61 seats required to pass legislation and to govern. The resulting need to form coalitions comprised of several parties gives disproportionate power to smaller parties that can make or break a potential coalition. Parties that represent interests of different groups have been partners in almost every coalition. Since Israel has been ruled by coalition governments and no political party has ever had a parliamentary majority, the parties that represent minority interests are important players in coalition building and party politics and this gives them important leverage and political power disproportionate to their size. These parties have had a central role in Israeli politics, maintaining a balance between the left-wing and the right-wing blocs, and their influence has often far exceeded their relative size.

PARTICIPATION IN ELECTIONS

Undecided voters in Israel's elections set the balance between the two main political blocs. They are considered as swing voters – as they wave between the two blocs while changing their mind at the last minute or by not voting at all. The growing number of undecided voters in Israel should attract a lot of interest due to its important role in determining election results and the growing number of voters that are persuaded by specific events taking place before the elections rather than by informed decision and ideology. Undecided voters provide the most motivated audience in the election before making their final decision (Wolfsfeld, 2001), and this is evident in Israeli politics. Willocq (2019) sees undecideds as sophisticated citizens who follow the campaigns closely before making their final decision, to maximize the impact of their vote. These findings were sustainable in Israeli elections too. For example, Samuel-Azran, Yarchi & Hayat (2021) found that voters that had doubt in the accuracy of the news media consumed news from more diverse sources. The findings indicate that the typical Israeli sophisticated voter consumes more news to follow the campaign from various traditional news outlets and social media, more likely to carry out online discussions about the elections and to base the decision on policy issues, more likely to debate between parties within the same ideological camp (internal floater) and more likely to vote than less sophisticated undecided voters.

The issue of undecided voters has been crucial in every election campaign in Israel, since the difference in voting between the coalition and opposition is marginal and the multi-party system requires coalition between different parties with at least 61 seats out of 120 in the Knesset (Rahat, Hazan, & Ben-Nun Bloom, 2016). As a result, in the last decade all governments were established based on a marginal majority in the Knesset. In 2013, the government had a majority of 62 out of 120 Knesset Members; in 2015 61 of 120; and in three election cycles in 2019 and 2020 no majority was achieved. The government established in 2021 was based on a slim majority of 61 out of 120 Knesset Members.

The participation in Knesset elections is a major factor to decide the results. In the 21st Knesset (April 2019) the general vote was 68.5% and the election ended in a political tie, as the right-wing bloc received only 60 Knesset Members. In the 22nd Knesset (September 2019) general voting was almost equal to the previous election (69.8), although the right-wing bloc declined to 55 Knesset Members. In the 23rd Knesset (March 2020) the participation among the general public was 71.5% but the vote was still short of breaking the deadlock between the right-wing and the left-wing blocs. In the last election to the 24th Knesset (March 2021) the overall participation was 67.4% although a center-right government was established with a majority one Knesset Member (61 of 120). These number show that as the number of undecided voter increases, participation in the elections decreases. This could be explained by lack of interest in the political campaigns, as a survey conducted before the September 2019 election showed that 40% of the voters said that they were following the elections campaign less than they did before previous election (April 2019). A survey conducted before the March 2020 election showed that their proportion increased to 49%. Their proportion mounted in the 2021 election, when more than half of the voters (55%) said they were following the elections less than in the previous ones. Hermann and Anabi (2021) found that in the 2021 election turnout was relatively low, with a decline of more than 4% on the 2020 election. They explain that many citizens had become disillusioned with politics and only 29% of respondents believed that the elections would resolve the political deadlock. The Israel Democracy Institute study (2020) found that the rise in indecision increased across the board, but was especially prevalent among centrists, with 34% that were unsure of who they'll vote for on Election Day compared to just 8% before the March 2020 election. The left voters saw a rise from 9% ahead of March 2020 to 19% before 2021. The right-wing bloc had the lowest level of indecision, at just 14%, but that is still a notable rise from the 8% before March 2020.

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IMPACT OF THE MEDIA

The tendency to generate close elections is true today in all political systems (Geruso & Spears, 2020) because political campaigning is best implemented by successful use of the media and social networks. But it is difficult to analyze the behavior of young people and first time voters, since they are involved in social media and are able to bypass the campaigns held on traditional media. As found by Aldrich, Gibson, Cantijoch and Konitzer (2015), online messages are important for campaign participation, particularly among younger citizens when they are mediated through social networks. Ohme, de Vreese and Albaek (2018) explain that the digital media environment changes the way that citizens receive political information during an election campaign. Ha et. al (2014) suggest that online media use is the strongest predictor for political efficacy, creating a self-selection polarized trend of political use of the media. Another explanation to the growing impact of social media on undecided voters is the relationship between the size of online social networks and election voting and election results (Cameron, Barrett & Stewardson, 2016). This is explained in that social media networks play a significant role in sharing information between individuals and small target groups (Sucharitha, Vijayalata, and Prasad, 2021) while establishing new forms of online engagement that offers different ways for commemoration in various social platforms and among different audiences (Pentzold and Sommer, 2011). By doing so, social media affects its audience and the possible ways to co-create and remember, as well as the ways content is saved and stored, constituting new forms of "decentralized archival regimes" (Zalewska, 2017). The result that in new politics, technological and cultural changes pose new dilemmas for political campaigning as the increasing numbers of undecided voters constitute a challenge for conventional pre-election polls in multi-party systems (Kreiss, Schollmeyer and Augustin, 2021). Pre-election surveys need to deal with the recurrent problem of undecided voters, as data indicates that most of these undecided respondents come to a decision only a few days before the vote, if not the very same day of the election

Israel is a relevant and interesting case study to the impact of the media, since Israelis are highly involved in politics and tend to consume a lot of political information (Nossek & Adoni, 2017). Digital and social media are very popular among Israeli minorities and young people, allowing them in promote social and political behavior and bypass censorship and domination of the old political establishment (Shomron and David, 2022). New media became a major tool for political campaigning in Israel (Laor, 2021) with internet penetration rate of 90% of the total population at the start of 2022. The number of social media users in Israel at the start of 2022 was equivalent to 79.7 percent of the total population (Digital 2022). These numbers establish the crucial role of undecided voters that rely on social media to make their voting decision. As explained by Nossek & Adoni (2017), Israeli citizens are highly engaged in politics and tend to consume a lot of political information. Lachat (2007) argues that undecided voters are heavy users of the media and make informed decisions about their vote. Wolfsfeld, Yarchi and Samuel-Azran (2016) found a clear connection between peoples' informational and participatory repertoires in Israeli elections. They argue that in today's high-choice media environment, individuals and groups with the highest level of political interest are more likely to develop richer political information repertoires that involve exploiting both digital and traditional ways of searching for political information. Thus, as found in Israel's political system, individuals and groups with richer political information repertories can be expected to have higher levels of political knowledge, efficacy, and participation. Samuel-Azran, Yarchi and Hayat (2021) support the other view. Through the investigation of the April 2019 election campaign, they found that voters that had doubt in the accuracy of the news media consumed more news from more diverse sources, highlighting the role of information consumed by both decided informed and undecideds voters.

CONCLUSION

This paper investigates the role of undecided voters as a tie breaker component in modern political campaigns, using the consecutive series of national elections held in Israel. The main target of the research is to examine the consecutive ties in the four election campaigns held in just two years (April 2019, September 2019, March 2020 and March 2021), which all ended is close and almost similar results. The question investigated is what is the impact of undecided voters on close election results, while looking as Israeli politics as a test case for parliamentary elections. The importance of investigating the Israeli elections is due to the growing number of undecided voters that should attract a lot of interest with its crucial role in determining the close election results of the last decade. The research looks at potential modifications and changes in the contest between the right and the left and the transfer of votes from one political camp to the other. It found that there were minor changes in the voting of the vast majority of the supporters of the right and the left blocs, and the marginal changes in voting results were to large extent the result of a small number of voters that were influenced by social media or first-time voters that were influenced by changes in target groups which hold traditional social belongings and political identities. This conclusion highlights the important role of undecided voters in close political races, as is the case in Israel's political system.
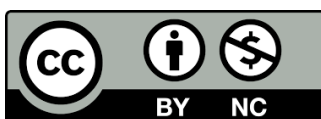
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