**The Waning and Waxing of Centrist Parties in Israel**

Israeli centrist parties transitioned from small satellite parties to ones competing for governmental control; this paper examines the factors behind those changes. Elections in Israel are based on proportional representation, which creates a multi-party system comprised of right-wing parties, left-wing parties, centrist parties, and ethnic and religious parties. The latter two are unrelated to the right-wing/left-wing continuum and will not be treated in this paper.

In Israel, as opposed to many other places, the terms ‘right-wing’ and ‘left-wing’ have changed over time. In the past, left-wing parties were identified with socialist ideology and represented the workers’ class, while right-wing parties were identified with liberal ideology and the bourgeois. Today, the left-wing parties are identified with dovish stances on foreign affairs and matters of security whereas the right-wing parties are identified with hawkish stances on these issues.

The party system in Israel went through some significant changes, from a multi-party system with one dominant party to a multi-party system with two predominant blocks, to a decentralized multi-party system, to a radical multi-party system.

Centrist parties in Israel underwent changes in their impact. From small, satellite parties that are formed right before elections, and survive for a few terms before they disappear, to eminent parties that compete for control.

This paper will discuss the following questions: What are the factors behind the electoral changes that took place in Israeli centrist parties? Is there a connection between the changes in the structure of the party system and the changes that took place in the relative impact of the centrist parties?

To answer these questions, we examined fifteen centrist parties in four party systems.

The study conclusions demonstrate a significant relationship between the structure of the party system and the waning and waxing of centrist parties in Israel.

Key terms: Political system, dominant party, centrist parties, personal parties

**Centrist parties**

Researchers question the very existence of centrist parties. Arian (1990) claims that the terms ‘right-wing’ and ‘left-wing’ are problematic, as they encourage uni-dimensionality, whereas politics is multidimensional. He deems the use of these terms artificial, however, they are nonetheless employed given their convenience for both the voters and the leadership. We can therefore conclude that the term ‘political centrism,’ as found on the right-left continuum, is problematic as well, and for the same reasons. Sartori (1976) claims that the center is a locational center and not an ideological center. He views the center as a function of the length of the political spectrum, where a short spectrum will not allow a party to focus only on the center, whereas a long spectrum would. Smith (1988) determined that the political center is formed artificially, bringing as examples the agrarian parties in Sweden, Norway, and Finland who changed their names to ‘centrist parties’ and thereby created the new center in these countries. According to Smith, the centrist parties are not parties with centrist ideologies. Von Beyme (1985) agrees that parties with centrist ideologies do not exist, explaining this through the policy they enact: “Rule in the center and pursue a left-wing policy with the tools of right.” Duverger (1951) adds that all centrist parties divide into two parts, a centrist-left and a centrist-right, which will eventually be torn into shreds and disappear. Smith (1988) posits that centrist parties hover uncomfortably between the right and the left, belonging at times to one and at times to the other.

As opposed to these scholars, Hazan (1997) and Knoller (2000, 2007, 2017) determine that the State of Israel has true centrist parties. Further, Knoller (2017) claims that Israel has a fixed layer of voters who consistently vote for these centrist parties. She characterizes the centrist parties as ones that were founded at the center of the political system, between the right and the left, from the outset; their party platform is positioned between the right-wing and left-wing platforms regarding the central topic on the political agenda; and they would be willing to join any coalition, comprised of either the right- or the left-wing parties.

According to these characteristics, sixteen such centrist parties have been established in Israel over time. Most of these are flash parties that disappeared after a term or two. Even the middle-sized parties, Raf”i and Da”sh, dissipated before completing their terms. This change in trend is apparent from the first decade of the twenty-first century, where two centrist parties – the Mercaz party and the Shinui party – together won 21 seats in the Knesset. In 2006 the Kadima party won 29 seats, and its leader formed the government. This trend also carried over to the 2013 elections, where two centrist parties, Yesh Atid and Shinui, together won 25 seats in the Knesset; and in 2015 Yesh Atid and Kulanu together won 21 seats. Kahol-Lavan won 35 seats in the 2019 elections, the greatest number of seats ever won by a centrist party. Subsequent elections that same year awarded them 33 seats, and in the 2020 elections they won 33 seats once again.

**Centrist parties in Israel – data**

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| Party | Year established | Number of seats in the Knesset | Length of survival | Comments |
| Progressive | 1948 | 4-5 | 13 years | United with the General Zionists |
| United Liberal Party | 1961 | 17 | 4 years | 1. United with Herut  2. Established Independent Liberals (IL) |
| Independent Liberals (IL) | 1965 | 4-5 | 16 years | Did not pass the electoral threshold.  In 1984 joined the Labor party list, in 1988 established a party with Shinui whose representative did not make it into the Knesset, in 1992 became part of the Labor party |
| Raf”i | 1965 | 10 | 3 years | Merged with the Labor party |
| Democratic party for Change (Da”sh) | 1977 | 15 | 2 years | Dispersed |
| Tele”m | 1981 | 2 | 4 years | Dispersed |
| Yahad | 1984 | 3 | 4 years | Merged with the Labor party |
| Ometz | 1984 | 1 | 4 years | Merged with the Likud |
| Haderekh Hashlishit | 1996 | 6 | 3 years | Did not pass the electoral threshold |
| Merkaz | 1999 | 6 | 3 years | Split between Likud and the Labor party |
| Shinui | 1999 | 16, 15 | 7 years | Dispersed |
| Kadima | 2006 | 29, 28, 2 | 9 years | The first centrist party whose leader formed a government, later dispersed |
| Hatnuah | 2013 | 6 | 2 years | Joined the Labor party to found the Mahaneh Zioni party |
| Yesh Atid | 2013 | 11, 19 | Still surviving | Founded the Kahol-Lavan party and broke off from it |
| Kulanu | 2015 | 10, 4 | 4 years | Joined the Likud party |
| Kahol-Lavan | 2019 | 35, 33, 33, 15 | Still surviving | Broke off from Yesh Atid |

**The party system**