**The Israeli Center for Elections Studies and Voter Behavior: Rationale, Structure, and Activity**

The purpose of this document is to set out initial ideas regarding the goals and structure of the Israeli Center for the Study of Elections and Voter Behavior, which we propose establishing at the School of Political Science, Government and International Affairs at Tel Aviv University.

**Background:**

For over 50 years, the Israeli National Elections Studies (INES) has been the mainstay of Israeli elections research. The research conducted by this body, led by political scientists from Tel-Aviv University, has been performed continuously during every election campaign since 1969. The INES systematically collects comprehensive data about voting, positions on public policy, public attitudes towards the state and its various institutions, political activism, and more. The study of Israeli elections is a unique project in Israel, and its data constitutes the longest timeline dealing with elections, public opinion, and politics in Israel. The data is open access, and affords researchers a long-term, multigenerational perspective on social and political trends in Israel, while at the same time allowing them to view the dynamics of particular election campaigns in high resolution. The INES is also one of the oldest election polls in the world, similar to the polls undertaken in the United States for decades (the ANES), in Britain (the BES), in Canada (the CES), and elsewhere. The INES is also an active member of the CSES (Comparative Study of Electoral Systems), an international project combining election studies from different countries. The participation of the INES in this project allows for the integration of the Israeli case in comparative election and voter studies, as well enabling Israeli researchers to influence the polling modules conducted in the dozens of participant countries.

The INES constitutes academic research of the highest quality. It is traditionally based on a survey poll conducted shortly before the elections, and a second poll, conducted in their immediate wake, in which the interviewees of the first stage are revisited. The polls are conducted by phone, on the basis of large samples that are statistically representative of Israeli voters, and make use of accredited questions and rankings to measure the phenomena that are studied. Recently, we have begun evaluating the possibility of carrying out the poll in an online format, while maintaining the same rigorous standards; such an attempt has not yet been carried out in Israel, and reflects changes that are being introduced in parallel projects worldwide.

Historically, the researchers who have led the INES have had to raise the funding necessary for its operation from external sources. As time went by, and in particular in light of the rising frequency of elections in Israel in the last decades, and costs of planning and carrying out the polls became a growing burden on researchers, who were forced to invest an ever growing portion of their time in locating and securing funding sources, at times with hardly any advance warning. No less troubling is the need to apply for research grants granted on competitive basis; competition strongly increases the likelihood of not securing funding for the INES in coming years, or that the elections survey will be granted to another academic institution. It goes without saying that the project’s great advantage is its consecutive nature, and that the School of Political Science and Tel-Aviv University are proud to be the permanent home of the INES, which is the empirical flagship of the field in Israel.

But even before the budgetary distress reaches the breaking point anticipated in the near future, already today the INES faces significant funding problems. The many possibilities opened by online sampling, and access to information from social networks, allow for expanding the polls’ size and frequency, but such actions require funding that is currently lacking. This funding is nonetheless imperative if the INES is to continue standing at the forefront of academic election studies and respondent representation, collecting data which is both dynamic and varied.

In addition, the study of voter behavior around the world and in Israel is currently enjoying an unprecedented development, with a growing number of studies relying on long-term election polls and data, and focusing on questions that form part of the essential core to which the project responds. This trend is expected to continue growing in coming years, and already influences both students’ expectations and the faculty’s fields of interests. Finally, due to the retirement of Prof. Michal Shamir, who led the project in recent years, the continued action and expansion of the INES relies to a great extent on establishment of personal and institutional responsibility on behalf of the mid-level faculty in the School of Political Science. This group includes an impressive array of researchers who introduce a range of different perspectives to the study of elections and voter behavior, including institutional and behavioral perspectives, and perspectives from political psychology, political economy, and comparative politics.

Against this backdrop, we propose to establish the **Israeli Center for Elections Studies and Voter Behavior** within the School of Political Science, Government, and International Affairs at Tel-Aviv University. The prime objective of the Center will be to house the INES, and to meet its logistical needs by providing it with operational and research funding. Doing so will ensure the continued existence of the INES as part of Tel-Aviv University, while freeing it from the vagaries of ad-hoc fundraising.

Below we elaborate on the objectives and responsibilities of the Center and estimate the resources required to achieve them.

**Objectives and Responsibilities:**

1. Planning, Implementing, and Analyzing the Israeli National Elections Survey and Representing Israel in the CSES
* The Center will bear the exclusive responsibility for the fundraising and budgeting necessary to perform the Israeli National Elections Survey; meeting this goal will be undertaken from a long-term perspective, in a manner than ensures the continuation of the project regardless of the timing of election campaigns, and/or the need to raise funds on an ad-hoc or periodical basis, in advance of every new campaign.
* The Center will take the lead in planning the Israeli National Elections Survey during each election campaign. This will include the initiating a roundtable of researchers, who will be invited to advise the action committee, planning the survey’s research and sample array, setting its timetable, designing the questionnaires, publishing a call for applications for researchers and organizations concerning designated modules, and sorting and ranking the propositions submitted in response, as well as any other research or logistical action related to routine actions necessary in order to perform the survey. This responsibility also includes coordination with the offices of the CSES, so that the survey is performed in a manner suited to the CSES requirements.
* The Center will be responsible for managing and supervising the research institute that collects the data, including performance appraisal, managing the data after their transmission, data amelioration, and the authoring of relevant codebooks and technical reports.
* The Center will publish the survey data on the INES website for academic use by Israeli and International researchers, for the purposes of research and teaching, as well as for the use of the media and the political sphere. The Center will also work to publicize the data and promote its use.
* Following each survey, the Center will perform an analysis that addresses, among others issues, the following subjects: the compatibility and consistency of the survey, the representivity of the sample, and the use of the data by researchers and other organizations. The Center will draw conclusions from each election campaign, and publish a report in preparation for the coming one.
1. Expanding the Research on Elections and Voter Behavior in Israel beyond the Traditional Purview of the INES
* The Center will continually register and observe Israeli voter behavior, political parties, and politicians: the Center will plan and implement large-scale data collection relating to Israeli voter behavior, in as varied a range of media as possible, including interactions between the political and the public spheres. These research actions will be carried out also between election campaigns, thereby filling in the inherent gap created by surveys that focus only on election campaigns and the citizens. The intention is to extend the research also to the period between election campaigns, thereby allowing us to build high-resolution temporal sequences and continuously updated databases. These will provide a solution to complex questions relating to the intricate connections between election campaigns, the dynamics of coalition composition, long-term voter behavior, representation patterns, activity in social networks, grassroots political activism, political events unrelated to election cycles, and the activity of various media bodies in Israel. To the extent its funding enables, the Center will strive to collect such relevant data as frequently as possible and throughout the entire year, making it available to researchers, within the relevant limitations. The Center will lead the initiative to set this activity in motion, in collaboration with researchers and specialists from overlapping fields, and will act so as to ensure access to its information and reports from big data, as well as public and private organizations and bodies.
* Additional directions for development include integration of experimental research methods: natural settings, surveys, and lab settings. This is one of the primary directions for research in political science, as in other social sciences. This involves expanding the focus of election studies beyond the Knesset to local elections, as well as to citizen initiatives and polls.
1. Conducting and Encouraging Research and Publications Based on Israeli election results:
* The Center will lead and encourage research using the data from existing INES surveys, and those that will be collected in the future, particularly and primarily through researchers affiliated with the School of Political Science, the Faculty of Social Sciences, and Tel-Aviv University in general, as well as experts at additional institutes in Israel and around abroad.
* The Center will be responsible for issuing a book that will be published following each election campaign, and will be based on an analysis of the data collected by the INES and other sources. This is a long-term project that constitutes an integral part of the INES, and the Center will be responsible for ensuring its continuation.
* The Center will hold periodic conferences concerning the Israeli elections and Israeli voter behavior. Following each election campaign, a concluding conference will be held at Tel-Aviv University, in which the research studies conducted using INES data will be presented; the Center will take a leading part in initiating and presenting at the conference, which will be open to the public, the media, and researchers from all Israeli institutions. The conference will include presentations by leading researchers, as well as panels aimed at graduate students. The Center will also hold additional events throughout the year, including a periodic conference on political behavior in Israel, a doctoral students conference, and focused meetings and/or seminars on specialized topics that will be decided upon in advance, and to which leading researchers and scholars from Israel and abroad will be invited.
* The Center will be responsible on a regular basis for hosting international, guest researchers who will be invited to take part in its seminars, lectures, and conferences. The Center will encourage international collaborations, both by hosting guest researchers, and by supporting graduate students from the School of Political Science at Tel-Aviv University, who are interested in taking part in working with parallel centers abroad that conduct election and voter behavior surveys.
* The Center will be responsible for constantly and continuously encouraging graduate students and researchers to make good use of its resources. In particular, the Center will enable the registration of doctoral and postdoctoral students as its research fellows, and will act to assist them in obtaining financial support as part of this framework (for example, as research assistants who carry out the election survey and on other projects). The Center will provide its research fellows with academic supervision by its senior fellows, and will conduct internal forums in which junior fellows will present their research, and acquire knowledge in advanced research tools and practices.
1. Teaching and Knowledge Distribution
* The Center will encourage the development of B.A. courses concerning voter behavior and elections, that will be taught in the School of Political Science, for example as part of the section on elections and political behavior.
* The Center’s research fellows will propose advanced courses in topics including voter behavior, political campaigns, and party politics. The subjects of these courses will be in accordance with the courses offered by the School of Political Science and the Faculty of Social Sciences at Tel-Aviv University, and the preferences of the Center’s affiliated research fellows.
* The Center will propose methodological courses for subjects at the core of its activity, such as survey planning and execution, the design of experiments, the analysis of temporal sequences, the analysis of behavioral big data as it relates to politics, and so on. These courses will be open to all students and researchers at Tel-Aviv University.
* The Center will conduct focused training programs in collaboration with non-academic bodies, such as potential employers, relevant government institutions, research institutes, and the media.
* The Center will make public the knowledge produced by its researchers, along with information pertaining to Israeli elections research. As part of this goal, the Center will compose and disseminate insights and knowledge in clear language, accessible by the general public. One of main methods through which this will be carried out is the development and continual updating of the INES website, as well as work that will be conducted with the media both before and after election campaigns. This activity will constitute a practical, social implementation of the knowledge accrued at the Center, which will also hold workshops for high school students studying relevant electives.

**Resources:**

The actions described above require many resources, both financially, and in terms of manpower and logistical infrastructure (office space and computers). Meeting the Center’s core requirements and fulfilling its goals entails the following resources, at the very least:

1. A permanent budgetary framework (such as an endowment), that will enable the conduction of the INES without necessitating separate, ad-hoc fundraising for each election campaign.
2. A stable physical infrastructure that will house the Center’s permanent faculty members, including offices for researchers, fellows, and administration staff, as well as meeting and conference rooms.
3. Stable staff, including, among other positions, an administrative coordinator, a research coordinator, and data and computing administrator.
4. Senior researchers who will be affiliated with the Center for a predefined, long-term. The number of senior fellows will be decided upon further along in the process of the Center’s creation, and their ranks will be filled primarily by researchers at the School of Political Science who deal with the relevant subjects, as well as by researchers from other divisions in the Faculty of Social Sciences at Tel-Aviv University, whose research fields and methods correspond with the field of election and voter behavior studies. The head of the Center will be a senior researcher from the School of Political Science, Government, and International Affairs at Tel Aviv University.
5. The Center will employ doctoral students and postdoctoral researcher as fellows, research assistants, or affiliated researchers on a long-term basis, and will hire additional research assistants on a temporary basis, as its needs require, and particularly during the execution of the election surveys.

In addition, a scientific board, composed of prominent Israeli and international researchers in the field of election studies and voter behavior, will be convened in order to advise the Center.

In the Center’s initial planning and construction phases, a steering committee will be created. The committee will be composed of a limited number of Israeli and international researchers in the field, and will handle the creation of the Center in its initial stages.