

Could electoral reform get Israel out of its Groundhog Day loop? -analysis

Maybe Israel can break out of its endless electoral loop by reforming the system for the better.

By LAHAV HARKOV MARCH 24, 2021 20:48



Israel Elections: Voting ballot, March 23, 2021.
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With Israel's fourth [election](#) in less than two years ending with an inconclusive result as of Wednesday, it seems almost inevitable that there will be a fifth.

Yes, there are political possibilities and difficult negotiations that could lead to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu or, a less likely scenario, someone else eking out another [government](#). But if everyone keeps their promises and doesn't rebel against their own parties, we could be heading back to the polls later this year.

In the movie Groundhog Day, Bill Murray's character, Phil, is released from repeating the same day over and over again when he makes a deep change in himself, to become a good person.

Maybe Israel can break out of its endless electoral loop by reforming the system for the better.

When it comes to electoral reform in Israel, there are suggestions of deep, systemic changes, and then there are smaller quick fixes that some parties are seeking to obstruct Netanyahu.

After the previous election in this saga, Blue and White, which at the time was made up of the party currently using that name as well as Yesh Atid, unseated then-Knesset speaker Yuli Edelstein with a plan to advance three bills meant to plug up legal loopholes that Netanyahu has used to his advantage.

The amendments to Basic Law: Government were to require a prime minister to resign immediately upon indictment for a crime involving moral turpitude, to ban anyone convicted of a crime carrying moral turpitude from becoming a prime minister, regular minister, deputy minister or mayor, and to impose term limits for a prime minister, who would be able to serve either two terms or up to eight years. Netanyahu has been prime minister for over 15 years, 12 of which were consecutive.

If the final election results give a majority to the “change bloc,” as Netanyahu’s opponents have labeled themselves, then they will probably install a new Knesset speaker who will make Netanyahu’s life very difficult, even if the “change bloc” doesn’t manage to establish a government. Whether they will be able to pass those laws, however, remains to be seen.

Those changes, however, are not really electoral reform; they’re “dirty politics to stop Netanyahu from forming a coalition,” Kohelet Policy Forum senior fellow Emmanuel Navon posited.

Electoral reform would go deeper in addressing the core problems with Israel’s system of elections and governance.

Israel Democracy Institute president Yohanan Plesner said that “electoral reform is badly needed. Now, it’s not only policy wonks and political scientists who understand this; rather, it is all players in the political system and the public at large.”

Plesner argued in a press briefing on Wednesday that the “Netanyahu factor” laid bare the preexisting weaknesses in Israel’s system.

World Likud chairman and former ambassador to the UN Danny Danon called for two changes to the system. First, the 3.25% threshold for parties to get into the Knesset should be raised.

“Then, we won’t be dependent on the small parties. Look at Ra’am; a few hundred votes are determining the fate of the country. This distorts the will of the voter,” he said.

The second reform Danon suggested, which the Israel Democracy Institute also recommends, was that the leader of the largest party automatically be given the task of forming a government. Danon argued that it would streamline the process of building a coalition.

Navon, however, argued that, while electoral reform is important, it will not solve Israel’s current problem.

“The crisis is not related to the system. We had it for 72 years and we never had this before,” he pointed out.

The problem, Navon said, is that “Netanyahu is holding the country hostage.

“For the past two years, there has been a majority for the Right and not for Netanyahu; that’s the whole story,” he said.

Israel’s proportional, parliamentary system is the most common among democracies around the world, Navon said, and, in fact, past electoral reforms made Israel’s political system worse.

For example, direct election of a prime minister made the government less stable, because it empowered smaller parties and weakened the premier, because the leading party ended up being relatively small. As such, it was canceled in 2001.

The other reform Navon knocked was increasing the electoral threshold.

“For some reason, people think increasing the threshold improves stability, but the opposite is true, and it was proven in Israel,” where the threshold was raised in 2014, he said. “If you don’t have a first-past-the-post system with two dominant parties, the more parties you have, the easier it is to form a coalition, because you have more options.”

Instead, Navon suggested increasing accountability for Knesset members by having them elected personally, and not as integers on a prescribed party list. Navon recommended two ways to do this. First, half of the Knesset’s members should be elected in districts, with a first-past-the-post model. The second way would be to have the public vote for the members of a party’s list on Election Day, instead of the party choosing its own list internally.

While the experts are split on whether electoral reform would bring the much-needed end to the repeat-election cycle, they are in agreement that political circumstances are unlikely to allow it to happen.

Plesner said that “electoral reform is the remedy, but it can only be put in place if a government is formed with that agenda in mind.

“We need electoral reform to restabilize the system and restore its ability to achieve decisive outcomes. It cannot happen in a narrow government and requires some kind of broad coalition,” he stated.

Danon, similarly, said that electoral reform is “the right thing for Israel’s future,” but that “in order for that to happen, we need a unity government,

because it's hard to do it in a narrow government.

"We had an opportunity with Blue and White," which was not realized, he said.

As such, the search for a way to get Israel out of its political Groundhog Day continues.