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Arab citizens of Israel account for 21% of Israel's population of 8.5 million, a total of 1.84 million. While Israel defines itself as a Jewish and Democratic state, and while three fourths of Jews believe the two descriptions are compatible, only a third of Arabs share that view.¹ As Arab citizens hold the right to vote in Israel, they represent an important voting bloc in Israel's parliamentary democracy. How multiple sub-groups of Arab Israelis exercise their right to vote for one of many political parties or abstain, as well as how Arab Israelis feel toward the various Israeli political institutions becomes critical to understand as Netanyahu fails to form a government.

The 2015 legislative election marked the first union of the Joint List, a union of the four main Arab parties; Balad, Ta'al, Hadash, and the United Arab List; and the ascension of its leader, Ayman Odeh. The Joint List caused a spike in voter turnout, from 46% to 64%, and won 13 seats in the Knesset, an increase of two from the 2013 elections. Arab citizens also elected 17 Arab MPs in 2015, which is five more than in 2013.²

Since the election of 2015, Arab voter turnout has sharply declined, from 64% to 49% in the April 2019 election. One factor is boycotts and disillusionment following the split of the Joint List into two tickets. Many decisions to boycott came from individual preference, but many also came from organized movements by groups such as the Sons of the Village and the Northern Branch of the Islamic Movement. The Sons of the Village began as a local organization focusing on community issues and grew into a nationwide political organization focusing on the rights of

¹ Tamar Hermann, "The Israeli Democracy Index 2013," The Israel Democracy Institute, 2013, 8, PDF.

² "Israel election: Netanyahu's Likud storms to victory," *BBC*, March 18, 2015, accessed September 16, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-31933326>. Areej Hazboun and Daniel Estrin, "As Arab MKs unite, a new political landscape emerges," *The Times of Israel*, January 28, 2015, accessed September 16, 2019, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/as-arab-mks-unite-a-new-political-landscape-emerges/>.

Palestinians in Israel.³ The Northern Branch represents the radical, Hamas-affiliated sect of the Islamic Movement in Israel.⁴ Additionally, laws such as the 2018 Nation State Law, which explicitly states that only Jews hold the right to self-determination in Israel, pushed many potential voters to lose hope and focus on local issues, ignoring national elections.⁵ Another reason may be the deployment of around 1,200 cameras to voting stations by the Likud party, which the Central Elections Committee's legal counsel declared prohibited.⁶

As Netanyahu has failed to form a majority coalition and the Joint List has reunited, Arabs have the potential to influence the outcome of the September 2019 election. Netanyahu has spread fear over the Arab voting bloc, sparking Arab support for rival parties like Gantz's Blue and White Party⁷. Though record few Arabs voted in the April election and Netanyahu won a plurality, the September election presents another opportunity for Arab voters to have a larger impact than in previous elections. While the Blue and White Party has rejected Joint List leader Odeh's proposal to allow Arab lawmakers into the Blue and White coalition, Gantz has tried to appeal to Arabs as a realistic alternative to Netanyahu.⁸ Some Arabs seek representation through

³ "Sons of the Village," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 8, no. 1 (1978): 167, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2536115?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents.

⁴ Itamar Eichner, Hassan Shalaan, and Yoav Zitun, "Israel bans northern branch of Islamic Movement," *Ynet*, November 17, 2015, accessed September 16, 2019, <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4726750,00.html>.

⁵ Omar H. Rahman, "Why did Arab voter turnout for Israel's election plunge?," *Brookings*, April 16, 2019, accessed September 16, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/04/16/why-did-arab-voter-turnout-for-israels-election-plunge/>.

⁶ Megan Specia, "Israel Voting Cameras Lowered Arab Turnout, Netanyahu Backers Claim," *The New York Times*, April 10, 2019, accessed September 16, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/10/world/middleeast/netanyahu-cameras-arab-voter-turnout.html?module=inline>.

⁷ David M. Halbfinger, "Hectoring by Netanyahu, Israeli Arabs Could Have the Final Say," *The New York Times*, March 20, 2019, accessed September 16, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/20/world/middleeast/netanyahu-arabs-election.html?module=inline>.

⁸ David M. Halbfinger, "Netanyahu's Fate May Depend on Israeli Arab Voters. Will They Turn Out?," *The New York Times*, September 14, 2019, accessed September 16, 2019, <https://nytimes.com/2019/09/14/world/middleeast/israel-arabs-election-vote.html>.

Rami Ayyub, "Israeli parties vie for Arab vote in bid to oust Netanyahu," *Reuters*, September 12, 2019, accessed September 16, 2019,

extra-parliamentary organizations, like the High Follow-Up Committee (HFC). The HFC has members from the Israeli political sphere, but it often fails to exercise power outside of documents and strikes.⁹ A majority of Arabs hold a negative view of the HFC.¹⁰

The number of Arab voters in Israel changes often, and different sub-groups of Arab Israelis exercise different voting patterns. When Israel annexed the Golan Heights from Syria, it offered citizenship to the mostly Arab Druze inhabitants. Most refused, but a growing number of young Druze have been choosing to opt for Israeli citizenship.¹¹ With a high birth rate, the Bedouin population of the Negev desert grows more influential in Israeli politics. Some Israeli officials and academics hold concern over the Islamic fundamentalist movement's growing influence in the Bedouin community.¹² Netanyahu has proposed land swaps with Palestine in the past, which would dramatically alter Israel's Arab population. One proposed swap in 2014 would have transferred 300,000 Arab citizens to Palestine, lowering the percentage of Arabs in Israel to around 12%.¹³

According to a 2017 survey, attitudes of Arabs toward Israeli political institutions are mixed. A slight plurality of respondents expressed a negative opinion of the Knesset and local authorities as well as the government as a whole, while a slight plurality of respondents showed

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-election-arabs/israeli-parties-vie-for-arab-vote-in-bid-to-oust-netanyahu-id-USKCN1VX1RP>.

⁹ Itamar Radaï and Arik Rudnitzky, "Bayan: The Arabs in Israel," *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung*, no. 12 (December 12, 2017): 18, PDF.

¹⁰ Radaï and Rudnitzky, "Bayan: The Arabs," 18.

¹¹ Tamar Pileggi, "As Syria crumbles, Golan Druze seek Israeli citizenship," *The Times of Israel*, November 1, 2015, accessed September 16, 2019, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/as-syria-crumbles-golan-druze-seek-israeli-citizenship/>.

¹² Judy Lash Balint, "The Bedouin in Israel," *My Jewish Learning*, accessed September 16, 2019, <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-bedouin-in-israel/>.

¹³ Robert Tait, "Israel 'proposes land swap' as part of peace deal with Palestinians," *The Telegraph*, January 1, 2014, accessed September 16, 2019, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/israel/10545947/Israel-proposes-land-swap-as-part-of-peace-deal-with-Palestinians.html>.

approval of the Supreme Court, President, police, and army. Druze Arabs expressed very positive attitudes toward institutions, while Muslim Arabs expressed slightly negative opinions overall, and Christians were in the middle on average. A similar pattern of approval appeared when respondents were asked whether they receive a fair allocation of the government's budget. The survey also found polarization among Arabs over their sense of belonging to the state of Israel. Around a third of respondents expressed a low sense of belonging, and over 45% expressing a high sense of belonging, with a small percent feeling a moderate sense of belonging. Those who are middle-aged, Druze, and highly educated expressed the highest sense of belonging to the state of Israel.¹⁴

As Netanyahu fails to secure a majority and the support of small parties becomes more crucial to forming a government, the power of Arab Israelis in Israeli elections increases. Numerous sub-groups of Arab Israelis hold different views of political parties and institutions, and their population and ideologies change in complicated ways. Many Arabs seek political representation outside of mainstream parties, supporting smaller parties, extra-parliamentary groups, or withdrawing from politics altogether. All these factors complicate the relationship between Arab Israelis and the Israeli state, which is crucial to understanding Israeli politics.

¹⁴ Radai and Rudnitzky, "Bayan: The Arabs," 20.

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