Israel's Electoral Complex

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I srael's political crisis has reached alarming proportions. Never before in the country's history has there been a state of affairs such as exists today, whereby the former president, the current prime minister, and those he originally appointed as finance minister, justice minister, and head of the Income Tax Authority are all in various stages of criminal investigation, indictment, or conviction for offenses ranging from sexual misconduct and tax fraud to unlawful patronage and embezzlement. Clearly, the political arena is in a state of severe moral deterioration.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the Israeli public's faith in the integrity of its governmental institutions is declining rapidly. This pervasive sense of decay has only been compounded by the Second Lebanon War, during which Israel's politicians failed in their most essential task: The defense of the nation against outside threats. This failure raised questions not only about their morality, but also their competence. Moreover, the abundance of excellent leadership elsewhere in Israel—in, for example, the business, technology, and science sectors—forces one to ask why it cannot be found where it is needed the most.

Some place their hopes in a change of leadership. Yet it is hardly that simple: The magnitude of the corruption and ineptitude currently being uncovered, its penetration into all levels of national and local government, and its chronic persistence even in the face of widespread public revulsion force us to look for explanations that transcend momentary circumstances.

Concerned observers suggest several explanations for Israel's current woes. Some point to excessively intimate social ties between businessmen and politicians. Others point to the replacement of Israel's old collectivist ethos with a new individualism, one that places self-interest above everything else. And still others blame a cultural leniency towards the abuse of power. In fact, the root cause of Israel's current political malaise is not moral or ideological, but structural: Namely, Israel's unique electoral system.

Israel maintains the world's most extreme model of the proportional electoral system, and the results are nothing short of disastrous. This system has been depleting Israel's political energies for decades: It radicalized the territorial debate, debilitated the economy, obstructed long-term planning, derailed government action, distracted cabinets, diverted budgets, weakened prime ministers, destabilized governments, enabled anonymous and often incompetent people to achieve positions of great influence and responsibility, and blurred the distinctions between the executive and legislative branches of government. Perhaps most crucially, it has led talented, accomplished, moral, and charismatic people to abandon the political arena to the mediocre, unimaginative, and uncharismatic people who currently populate it. The electoral system's contribution to Israel's current crisis of leadership and governance is grave and possibly decisive. Now is the time, then, to probe its flaws and consider its replacement—before it is too late.

Historically speaking, electoral systems have fallen into two general categories: Proportional representation and relative majority. The former is often referred to by the abbreviation PR, and the latter is known as the plurality voting system. In its purest form, the PR system

allocates power between political parties according to the percentage of overall votes they receive in a single, nationwide election. By contrast, under the plurality voting system, voters cast ballots for candidates running in district elections. The candidate who receives the most votes is declared the winner. This is known as the "first past the post" or "winner takes all" mechanism. In effect, it means that votes cast for losing candidates are simply discarded. The PR system, therefore, attempts to represent the public's collective will with maximum accuracy, whereas the plurality system tries to ensure stability through decisive outcomes.

The proportional system was contemplated in theoretical terms as early as the French National Convention (1792-1795). The term itself had surfaced in the previous decade, at the American Constitutional Convention, though not in the context of a discussion of PR *per se*, but rather of the states' rights dilemma. The aftermath of that debate—the creation of the bicameral system, whereby one house reflects and another ignores the size of a particular state's population—also produced America's "first past the post" system.

Over the next half-century, advocates such as English educator Thomas Wright Hill, Swiss legislator Victor Prosper Considerant, and Danish finance minister Carl Andrae continued to make the case for PR.[1] However, it was only with the publication in 1857 of Thomas Hare's *The Machinery of Representation* that the PR system became the focus of a high-profile debate, one that pitted the philosopher John Stuart Mill against economist Walter Bagehot.

Mill's arguments in favor of PR were presented in his *Considerations on Representative Government*, published in 1861, in which he praised the proportional idea for a variety of reasons.[2] First, he believed that it would facilitate the political representation of "every minority in the whole nation."[3] Furthermore, Mill claimed, a legislator elected proportionally would represent a voluntary constituency of true supporters defined by their political beliefs, rather than an arbitrary constituency defined by geographical coincidence. The plurality system, according to Mill, forces a politician to

represent all voters within a given district, including those who voted against him; under the PR system, however, "every member of the House would be the representative of a unanimous constituency."[4] Most important to Mill, a proportionally elected governing body would rectify the deficiencies of the plurality system, in which a relative majority imposes its will on smaller, non-represented minority groups. "Injustice and violation of principle," Mill asserted, "are not less flagrant because those who suffer by them are a minority."[5]

Bagehot's counterclaims were published a few years later, in *The English Constitution*. Bagehot argued that PR would see the election of "party men mainly." Those crowning them "would look not for independence, but for subservience."[6] Eventually, parliament would come to comprise "party politicians selected by a party committee and pledged to party violence."[7] Worse yet, a proportional system—or "the voluntary plan," as he called it—"is inconsistent with the extrinsic independence as well as with the inherent moderation of a parliament—two of the conditions which, as we have seen, are essential to the bare possibility of parliamentary government."[8]

The debate remained largely theoretical, as England, on which it focused, would not experiment with PR. However, the debate over PR was lent renewed relevance in the twentieth century, after a major power experimented with one of its purest variations. That power was Weimar Germany.

The Weimar Republic's unique Electoral Law of April 27, 1920, later enshrined in Article 22 of its constitution, was passed against a backdrop of national defeat and social uncertainty. Though debated, it was ratified with relatively little public interest. At a time when luminaries such as Max Weber and Thomas Mann were compelled to preach such basic democratic notions as the merits of politics as a vocation and the possibility of patriotism without monarchy, the German public was not

ready for a debate over the mechanics of democracy.[9] Some, however, did caution that Weimar's choice of an extreme proportional system would prove fateful.

The Weimar electoral system divided Germany into thirty-five regions in which votes were cast for lists of candidates fielded by the national parties.[10] With the German population at 62.4 million, and electoral districts averaging 1.7 million inhabitants, a party needed to receive either 60,000 votes per district or 60,000 surplus votes garnered from several contiguous regions in order to enter the Reichstag. Then, further seats could be obtained with only 30,000 surplus votes collected from anywhere in the republic. This system ensured that almost no votes were wasted, but it also set the threshold for election at 0.04 percent on average. This effectively guaranteed that almost any political party, however small, would be granted some form of representation, and thus political power, in the Weimar legislature.

The boldness of this political experiment and its eventual failure were the subject of a heated debate among political scientists. Of those who witnessed the Weimar Republic's emergence and demise, PR's leading and most perceptive opponent was Ferdinand A. Hermens.[11] Quoting German social theorist Friedrich Naumann's warning that PR would make stabilizing the fledgling Weimar Republic impossible, Hermens presented an insightful analysis of the PR system's drawbacks: The radicalization of political parties, the deterioration of the political elite, the demise of parties' internal democracy, the depletion of overall political vitality, the decline of political opportunity for young people, and, ultimately, the stagnation of the entire political system.

Hermens posited that, while it honors the democratic principle of ideological diversity, the PR system's low threshold percentage for election makes it far too easy for non-mainstream political parties, including radical movements, to enter parliament. The system then sustains their activity—however destabilizing—by paying their officials, giving them a public platform for their inflammatory rhetoric, and shielding them from

legal repercussions by granting them parliamentary immunity. According to Hermens, this allows a small, radical party to indulge in "world outlooks" that are never tested by "the stubborn facts of real experience," in effect "unfolding a life of its own imagining."[12] The result is power without responsibility. In contrast, voters in a plurality system shun radicalism because they tend to base their political choices on practical considerations and local concerns rather than abstract ideology. Political parties operating under such a system are therefore compelled to field candidates who, despite leaning Right or Left, will tend towards the pragmatic Center. If they do not, they will not be able to command the kind of stable consensus that is a prerequisite for election under a plurality system.

Moreover, because PR relieves politicians of the need to court the majority, it inevitably gives rise to special-interest parties, whose members of parliament are "pledged to the consideration of one interest only."[13] Consequently, major national issues are neglected so as to make way for the narrow economic concerns of a small constituency. Some of these parties have no practical plans for running a country, focusing instead on an agenda of "social autarchy" whose aim is to preserve a partisan subculture among party members, including the establishment of social institutions—from sports clubs to kindergartens—so as to shackle constituents to the party regardless of external developments. Moreover, large parties gradually become subservient to special-interest parties, first by placing special-interest representatives on their candidate lists, then by abandoning themselves to the devices of these parties' contradictory concerns. Eventually, the large parties lose their unity and, therefore, their ability to lead effectively.

As a result, according to Hermens, the PR system weakens and corrupts the nation's political elite. Whereas in the plurality system "everything depends upon the voter's opinion as to the fitness of the candidate," in a proportional system "a candidate need not be the kind of man who appeals to a majority of the citizens."[14] Instead, he must be agreeable only to the specific minority group he represents. Consequently, "the country is deprived of some of the choicest of its leadership material."[15]

At the same time, Hermens asserted, voters feel disempowered, since they "cannot consider any particular candidate as 'their' candidate, as people do in a single-member constituency."[16] Similarly, a candidate on a party list cannot consider any particular group "his" voters, since those who elected him in fact voted for his party as a whole. What's more, those in control of the party hierarchy will "reappoint one another from election to election to the highest places on the party list," which makes pleasing the party elders far more important to a potential candidate than fighting for his political following and convictions.[17] The end result is the gradual takeover of the party system by people who are conformist in character, rather than ambitious, independent, or self-motivated.

This phenomenon discourages party rejuvenation, because the party's old guard will inevitably refuse to step down from the top of the list, and younger members will be forced to curry the veterans' favor in order to be granted a place on the list at all. This removes any motivation for younger politicians to challenge the old guard, squanders the natural fighting spirit of the new generation of party activists, and facilitates the rise of party apparatchiks with weak and submissive personalities. Even if young party activists are not inclined to be subservient at first, they must learn to become such if they are to survive politically. As a result of these factors, the party hierarchy fossilizes and eventually degenerates.

Damage to governance is particularly harsh, as PR first shrinks and ultimately destroys parliamentary majorities. Since any given election will produce extremely diverse results, the electorate never emerges with a clear, collective statement on the issues at hand. The morning after an election each party will claim that its programs express the will of the people, while in fact, the will of the people has not been expressed at all. In reality, once they are elected, lawmakers do as they please.

To make matters worse, PR creates coalition governments that "do not form an organic unit, and anything resembling real teamwork is impossible."[18] Cabinet members will think in partisan rather than national terms. The prime minister cannot be a leader, but only a first among equals.

"He has little influence in the selection of cabinet ministers, and it may even happen that a party will place a man in a cabinet post with the express intention of using him as a check upon the prime minister and prevent his exercising any real authority."[19] Ultimately, "the cabinet works in much the same way as an international conference."[20] As a result, coalition governments often refrain from attacking vital questions at all; they simply let matters drift.

Hermens' critique of the Weimar Republic's PR system was, unfortunately, well grounded in fact.[21] Between the adoption of the 1920 Electoral Law and Hitler's rise to power in 1933, Germany held eight general elections. The ease with which parties could enter the Reichstag caused them to proliferate, from ten in 1919 to fifteen in 1928. Meanwhile, the proportionally elected parties had an inherent disinterest in cooperation, which accelerated the rise and fall of coalition governments, of which there were twenty between 1919 and 1933.[22] These governments habitually included implacable antagonists, like populists and industrialists or republicans and monarchists, who seldom found common ground on any issue. This congenital disunity effectively paralyzed the German government, allowing extremist parties—whose popularity was exaggerated by the proportional system—to increase their power and influence by attacking the status quo. Indeed, the 1930 election, in which the Nazi party made its great breakthrough from twelve seats to 107, would have turned out very differently were it not for Weimar's proportional system.[23]

Continental Europe learned its lesson from the Weimar debacle, and after World War II generally shunned this extreme form of PR. West Germany, and then post-reunification Germany, adopted a system in which half of its lawmakers are elected locally and the other half nationally. In fact, other than a handful of anecdotal exceptions—such as Iceland, whose population of 313,000 is barely that of a small city—veteran democracies have generally adopted a mixed or full plurality system, in which at least half of all lawmakers must personally run for election in their districts of residence. A completely proportional system—one that offers voters nothing but

national party lists, and lacks any regional element—did not exist even in Weimar Germany, and exists nowhere in today's significant democracies.

Nowhere, that is, except in Israel.

The precipitous degeneration of Israeli politics serves as a sad vindication of Hermens' critique of PR. The problems themselves are well known: The Knesset is chronically fragmented; governments change every two years on average and ministerial turnover occurs at a dizzying pace;[24] infighting, corruption, nepotism, and patronage are commonplace; long-term policy schemes, such as the Wisconsin Plan for the labor markets, the Dovrat Reform of the school system, or the Electric Corporation's de-monopolization are abruptly modified, obstructed, and sometimes derailed by newly arrived ministers. Moreover, Israeli ministers frequently lack managerial experience and are therefore often overbearing. They micromanage, and dole out appointments and pork-barrel allocations at the expense of the long-term planning that both their duty and the national interest demand.

Consequently, Jerusalem's political corridors are seen as lacking the vision, charisma, responsibility, and accomplishment that have become commonplace in Tel Aviv's corporate boardrooms. More ominously, voter turnout is steadily declining, reaching an all-time low of 63.2 percent in the last general election. This included a sizable number of young voters who consciously treated their ballot as a joke, some by voting for the Gil pensioners party, and others by voting for Ale Yarok, a single-issue party which advocates the decriminalization of marijuana.

It should not be surprising, then, that accomplished young Israelis are far more likely to direct their ambitions towards the high-tech industry, business, academia, or the free professions than towards politics. Under the current system, they likely never will, since it demands their selection by and subordination to professional party bosses. As Bagehot predicted about PR in general, Israeli politicians are "party men mainly," and as such they

"look not for independence, but for subservience." Consequently, talented young leaders shun politics, and the ones who do enter politics are seldom leadership material. Witness the critical mass of Israeli politicians who are either former briefcase carriers for other politicians or children of prominent lawmakers—the so-called "princes."

In a category of their own are Israel's retired generals, whose unique place in Israeli politics is not only, as most people assume, a byproduct of the country's ongoing military conflict with its neighbors. It is also a result of the proportional system's deficiencies. Retired generals have been a permanent fixture in the Knesset for the past four decades because lackluster career politicians—the PR system's "party men"—need them to create the impression that their lists are offering the charisma that they themselves lack. However, once admitted to the system, the generals, too, are soon conditioned to serve party bosses and forums, often by distributing patronage. Worse still, while the generals are frequently blessed with leadership skills, they are just as frequently politically clueless. Though well-informed on matters of national security, they are glaringly uninformed regarding fundamental domestic issues. In a district system, most of them would fail to be elected, because voters would expect them to discuss local concerns such as teachers' salaries, health care, and electricity bills before regaling them with insights into the grand questions of war and peace.

Indeed, the basic reality of most Western democracies, in which political careers begin with, and depend on, constant dialogue with local voters, has yet to arrive in Israel. Local politicians—whether they are careerist technocrats or ex-generals—are not accountable to their voters, but to the few thousand members of their party's central committee, or worse, to a single charismatic leader who handpicks the party list.[25]

Worse still, the PR system has seriously impaired the Israeli government's ability to tackle controversial but nonetheless vital issues. Several fateful moments stand out in this regard. The 1985 economic stabilization program, for example: While the plan was presented by Likud finance minister Yitzhak Modai, and was in line with his party's pro-free

market platform, it was nonetheless opposed by Likud members of Knesset (MKs) who were forced by a minority within their faction to oppose measures like cutting food subsidies, freezing public-sector wages, and raising interest rates. Fortunately, the plan ultimately received cabinet approval despite populist opposition, and saved the Israeli economy from disaster. Yet despite its necessity, the effort was nearly squelched because of the exaggerated influence the proportional system grants to small special-interest groups.

The Knesset's treatment of the territorial dilemma Israel has faced since the Six Day War suffers from the same malady, as the PR system tends to reward extremism and discourage consensus. One can be happy or unhappy with the settlement buildup of the 1980s or the Oslo accords of the 1990s, but there can be no arguing with the fact that both were inspired by the extra-parliamentary groups Gush Emunim and Peace Now, respectively, which appropriated and radicalized what should have been—and initially was—a civil and pragmatic policy debate. These movements took advantage of the chronic divisions inherent in a proportionally elected legislature to create the false impression that the country was split down the middle between extreme choices.

Israel's PR system not only radicalized political positions, it also cheapened them. In 1994, three lawmakers from the Tzomet faction decided to back the Oslo process in return for seats in the government, thus salvaging a policy their own voters vehemently opposed, and much of the centrist public had by then abandoned. The Tzomet defectors, whose leader was admitted to Rabin's security cabinet, and later served a jail term for drug trafficking, were susceptible to such wheeling and dealing because PR offered them a unique combination of anonymity and clout that they would not have enjoyed in a district system.

Finally, since the proportional system does not demand constituent service, Israeli lawmakers often see a parliamentary seat as little more than a springboard to executive office. In fact, in the minds of most Israeli lawmakers, there is no point to a political career that does not potentially

culminate in such an appointment. Consequently, the pressure from those still outside the executive branch on those already inside it is structured to persist and escalate, thus increasing the likelihood of officials being appointed regardless of merit, ministers being replaced regardless of record, agencies being created regardless of necessity, and governments falling prematurely regardless of the public will.

H ow did we come to this?
The Israeli electoral system was born in a moment of severe crisis. In October 1948, with the War of Independence still raging, the chairman of the election committee, David Bar-Rav-Hai, reported to the provisional Knesset on the preparations for Israel's first general election:

> The committee spent little time exploring theoretical alternatives, even while some members support in principle a regional system… almost all members concluded that in these elections and under the current circumstances, of war and large-scale mobilization, this theoretical debate isn't important. If we want to carry out an election quickly we have no choice but to opt for a national proportionate system. Any other system would demand much more complicated preparations and will be impossible to carry out within a short period of time.[26]

As this brief paragraph succinctly informs us, the foundations of Israel's political system were improvised under abnormal conditions. With the fledgling Jewish state still fighting for its independence, the need to quickly consolidate its newfound sovereignty by electing its first parliament outweighed any concerns about the mechanics of Israel's political system, and left no time even to consider the kind of exhaustive constitutional debates that accompanied the establishment of most other modern democracies.

Originally devised under the British Mandate in order to elect the quasi-parliament of the *Yishuv* (the pre-state Jewish community in British Mandatory Palestine), Israel's proportional system required political parties

to run lists of candidates on a national ticket, with no local representation whatsoever.[27] Under pre-1948 circumstances this was a reasonable system, since the Yishuv was minuscule, its elected representatives were not sovereign, and the representation of myriad ideologies and communities, as allowed by the proportional system, seemed both just and practical. Subsequent history, however, soon proved the system inadequate.

The first Israeli statesman to issue an explicit warning about the defects inherent in the proportional system and to advocate its replacement was none other than David Ben-Gurion, who attempted as early as October 1948 to pass a cabinet resolution in favor of plurality elections based on the British model. Ben-Gurion believed that PR created too many political parties, none of which would ever be large enough to constitute a majority of the Knesset, and which would be forced to share power in ways that would paralyze policymakers. Worse still, the system would nurture its own instability, since it allowed—and in fact encouraged—smaller parties to bring down the government in service of their own partisan interests. Though Ben-Gurion's concerns would later prove to be prophetic, his proposed reform was flatly rejected by the cabinet's religious members, who were convinced, with good reason, that they would lose political power and influence under a district-based system.

Over the course of his long career, Ben-Gurion attempted to change Israel's electoral system several times. In September 1954, the leadership of Ben-Gurion's ruling Mapai party voted 52-6 in favor of including electoral reform in its platform. The decisive statement, however, was made passively by the party's remaining forty-seven members, who did not share Ben-Gurion's reformist zeal and abstained from the vote.

In 1964, a year after his resignation from the office of prime minister, Ben-Gurion toyed with the idea of setting up a multi-party, ad-hoc movement that would run on the sole issue of electoral reform. For that purpose, he joined forces with the Liberal party and met with Ari Jabotinsky, son of his prestate rival Ze'ev Jabotinsky, as well as former IDF chief of staff and famed archaeologist Yigael Yadin. Ben-Gurion soon learned, however, that

prime minister Levi Eshkol had rendered his efforts futile by promising various small parties that he would block any attempt at electoral reform for the following eight years. Finally, when Ben-Gurion established the Rafi party in 1965, electoral reform was central to its platform, but by the time it joined the Eshkol government on the eve of the Six Day War, the looming conflict had pushed all other issues aside.

Bills calling for regional elections were presented to the Knesset some ten times between 1958 and 1988 by various sponsors, including prominent mainstream politicians from the Right, Left, and Center. Some of the bills passed their first readings, reflecting broad public awareness of and disenchantment with the effects of Israel's PR system.[28] However, all such attempts at reform were summarily torpedoed by the religious parties, which, unlike the rest of the anti-reform lobby, have almost always been partly represented in Israel's many governments, and were therefore in a position to obstruct any reform legislation.

Only once did electoral reform seem to be within reach. In 1984, with the economy teetering on the brink of collapse and the Knesset almost evenly divided between the Labor and Likud blocs, senior members of both parties began the dialogue that eventually produced the national unity government, which ultimately resolved the hyper-inflation crisis. One of the issues they began to discuss was reform of the electoral system, whose deficiencies they had just experienced firsthand, and which had proved as disastrous for the political system as hyper-inflation had been for the economy. This forum convened for several months and began to hammer out a bill calling for partial regional elections. However, this attempt was once again quashed by the religious parties, who threatened to sever all ties with the Likud once and for all should the party support electoral reform. Labor leader Shimon Peres also showed no enthusiasm for the idea he had championed as co-founder of Ben-Gurion's Rafi. By the next general election, the effort had been abandoned.

By the 1990s, most reformers had despaired of challenging the religious establishment, and made do with the idea of direct elections for the office

of prime minister alone. Activated first in 1996, and undertaken three times before being rescinded in 2001, this idea bastardized the whole concept of plurality elections: Providing voters with the opportunity to cast a ballot for a prime ministerial candidate *and* a separate ballot for a party list, this odd half-reform in fact gave voters more, not less, incentive to vote for smaller parties. Other than this one misbegotten attempt at change, Israel's only successful electoral reform has been the raising of the threshold percentage for entering the Knesset to its current level of two percent.

The many political reform bills currently before the Knesset scrupulously avoid the issue of electoral reform.[29] In the course of a personal survey of Knesset lawmakers, conducted in late 2006 and early 2007, this author discovered that most of them take the existing system as a given, whether out of despair, ignorance, or expediency.[30] Evidently, the anti-reform lobby's pressure has been so effective that Ben-Gurion's original reformist inspiration, and a subsequent generation's attempts to fulfill it, have all but vanished, even as Israel's political decay has become impossible to ignore.

The anti-reformists give diverse explanations for their position, most of which tend to conceal their fear of a new and unknown system in which many of them have reason to suspect they will not survive politically.[31]

They argue, for instance, that Israel does not need regional elections because—to quote a former foreign minister—"Israel is a small country and there is no difference between Tel Aviv and Ramat Gan."[32] This reasoning confuses regionalism with federalism, as district elections are held not in order to respect local distinctions, but in order to hold legislators accountable to their constituents rather than to a party apparatus. Furthermore, the idea that Israel's size precludes the use of a plurality system is patently unfounded. Denmark, Austria, Finland, and Sweden, all of which have populations roughly comparable to Israel's, have held regional elections for decades to no ill effect; so, too, does New Zealand, whose population of 3.8 million is

only slightly more than half that of Israel.[33] Such facts, however, have yet to have any significant impact on the anti-reformists.[34]

Some critics of PR claim that, in a district system, voters will be forced to accept representatives with whom they disagree, for whom they did not vote, and who may not tend to their specific needs.[35] This implies that no voter should live where he can't get his favored candidate elected, a bizarre argument when one considers that accepting occasional political defeat is a fact of life in any kind of democracy. Moreover, a regionally elected representative who chooses to pander to a single group within the larger community he represents is unlikely to be re-elected. For this reason, politicians elected in a district system tend towards pragmatism and moderation, eschewing exclusionary or sectarian policies.

Other opponents of reform maintain that a regionally elected Knesset would neglect the national agenda.[36] Yet experience elsewhere in the world demonstrates that regionally elected parliaments manage national affairs no less patriotically or efficiently than the proportionally elected Knesset. Undoubtedly, district constituents will expect representatives to look after their local affairs while deciding, for instance, how to treat a proposed budget, and a lawmaker may well cast his vote in return for a local quid pro quo. However, a district representative will also have to consider whether his constituents, who will now also be his neighbors, will approve of a failed budget vote and an early election as a result.[37]

Another common argument among the anti-reformists refers to Israel's delicate social fabric. Regionalizing the Israeli system, some of them caution, would diminish the representation of unique populations such as Arabs, Druze, modern-Orthodox, and Haredi Jews, and effectively disenfranchise them. There is no doubt that Israel's sociological makeup is unique, and it would be unwise to ignore the political dimensions of this fact. The question, however, is whether regionalism would actually hurt these communities, and the answer is that it is unlikely to do so. Under a regionalized system, the large parties will be forced to field candidates who will be agreeable to the local communities they serve, whatever their

origins may be. In America, for instance, Jewish or black constituencies have historically favored representatives from the Democratic Party, despite the fact that these representatives have not necessarily been Jewish or black themselves. Moreover, in existing regional systems around the world, extra-parliamentary ideological movements and non-governmental organizations tend to create alliances with the major political parties to the benefit of their supporters, though it is true that in a plurality system these groups will not wield the kind of influence that Peace Now and Gush Emunim have enjoyed in the past. It is equally likely that reform will relegate smaller parties such as Meretz and the Ihud Leumi (the National Union) to the political sidelines. It is doubtful, however, that this will be the case with Shas or the various Arab parties, whose constituencies are more stable and contiguous. These parties will survive a regionalist reform, though their politicians will likely emerge from it more moderate and pragmatic.

The anti-reform lobby's impact is most potent among senior politicians, many of whom simply refuse to take a stand on the issue.[38] Clearly, they are all deeply aware of this lobby's influence, and prefer not to confront what ought to be seen as a significant threat to Israel's political future. Surely, any reform will be difficult to plan and execute, yet it is nothing that has not been done elsewhere. Nor is it unprecedented in Israel's history. The 1985 economic reform, for instance, also entailed socially explosive measures, and was challenged by skeptics who insisted that what works in Europe and America does not apply to Israel. Indeed, the slogan endlessly repeated by Israeli supporters of PR is "Israel is different." Their opponents can retort that it is not.

It may take years for meaningful electoral reform to take shape, but ultimately Israel will have to undergo a thorough political overhaul, one in which at least half, and hopefully many more, of its lawmakers will be elected directly in their districts of residence. Under this system, the Knesset will be governed by a different spirit, one in which a critical mass of

lawmakers will be dependent on, and thus loyal to, their local community, and not to a party machine. Regionally elected legislators will spend much of their workweek in their constituencies, in day-to-day personal contact with voters. Thus, with his priorities set by his neighbors rather than party forums, an MK's convictions will be less vulnerable to pressure from party bosses and the manipulation of radical NGOs. The prospect, for instance, of Israel's Basic Laws being abruptly amended in order to meet a particular government's momentary needs will become less likely, because the directly elected lawmaker, as his community's sole representative in the legislature, will be much more closely scrutinized.

A directly elected Knesset will also raise the quality of leadership and governance in Israel, because a candidate's election will depend on satisfying his local constituents and not on blind obedience to party superiors. Consequently, people who are more courageous, accomplished, and independent than today's average Israeli politician will begin to gravitate toward the political arena. At the same time, legislative output itself will improve, as service in the Knesset will be seen as a mission rather than a patronage appointment, and will no longer be considered inferior to an executive position.

Since small parties and single-issue movements will find it much more difficult to win district elections, a directly elected Knesset will be less fragmented. As such, it will be less vulnerable to the kind of radicalism that corrupted the post-1967 territorial debate and exacerbated the post-1977 economic crisis. In a district system, radicals lose the ability to manipulate the political parties through the central committees. Instead, they will have to go from constituency to constituency seeking election, only to learn that most people prefer pragmatic lawmakers who focus on voters' day-to-day problems rather than on indulging, as Hermens put it, in "world outlooks" that are never tested by "the stubborn facts of real experience."

Furthermore, a reduction in the number of parties will increase government stability. Coalitions will comprise fewer parties and be easier to create, while cabinets will see less turnover and greater collaboration among

ministers. So, too, as governments last longer and become less bloated with officials appointed for political reasons, they will become more capable of long-term planning. Finally, as the system gradually attracts better leaders and produces better governance, it will be met with greater voter turnouts and, most important, greater trust and respect from the general public.

These difficult but necessary changes demand a leader who is prepared to confront the powerful anti-reform lobby, much as the 1985 economic recovery plan demanded a confrontation with pro-union forces from the Left and economic populists from the Right. The crisis that the Israeli political system faces today is no less ominous than the catastrophe that faced the Israeli economy in the mid-1980s. It threatens the integrity, the strength, and the future of the state, in much the same way as PR debilitated the Weimar Republic.[39] Treating it will therefore take the same vision, resolve, and impartiality that Israel's leaders displayed back then, and rarely display today. Yet now as then, it is nothing that cannot be done. It just takes leadership.

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Notes

1. For a related bibliography, see Carl J. Friedrich, *Constitutional Government and Democracy: Theory and Practice in Europe and America* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1941), p. 633.

2. John Stuart Mill, *Collected Works, XIX* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1977), pp. 371-577. See also Douglas J. Amy, *Real Choices/New Voices: The Case for Proportional Representation Elections in the United States* (New York: Columbia, 1993); Harry Eckstein and David E. Apter, *Comparative Politics: A Reader* (New York: Free Press, 1963), p. 254; Friedrich, *Constitutional Government and Democracy*, p. 278; Ian Shapiro, *The State of Democratic Theory* (Princeton: Princeton, 2003), pp. 110-112.

3. Mill, *Collected Works*, p. 455.

4. Mill, *Collected Works*, p. 455.

5. Mill, *Collected Works*, p. 449.

6. Walter Bagehot, *The English Constitution* (London: Oxford, 1927), p. 136.

7. Bagehot, *English Constitution*, p. 137.

8. Bagehot, *English Constitution*, p. 140.

9. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg, eds., *The Weimar Republic: Sourcebook* (Berkeley: University of California, 1994), pp. 92-96 and 105-109.

10. Dieter K. Buse and Juergen C. Doerr, eds., *Modern Germany: An Encyclopedia of History, People, and Culture, 1871-1990* (New York: Garland, 1998), p. 271.

11. Ferdinand A. Hermens, "The Dynamics of Proportional Representation," in Eckstein and Apter, *Comparative Politics*, pp. 254-280.

12. Hermens, "Dynamics of Proportional Representation," p. 261.

13. Hermens, "Dynamics of Proportional Representation," p. 262.

14. Hermens, "Dynamics of Proportional Representation," p. 263.

15. Hermens, "Dynamics of Proportional Representation," p. 261.

16. Hermens, "Dynamics of Proportional Representation," p. 269.

17. Hermens, "Dynamics of Proportional Representation," p. 271.

18. Hermens, "Dynamics of Proportional Representation," p. 275.

19. Hermens, "Dynamics of Proportional Representation," p. 275.

20. Hermens, "Dynamics of Proportional Representation," p. 276.

21. The general election of 1919 ended with the moderate wing of the Social Democrats winning 37.9 percent of the vote and the Christian Democrats 19.7 percent. Statistical studies indicate that in a plurality system the Social Democrats would have won an absolute majority. Hermens would later claim that the theoretical ailments he found in the PR system, from rejecting young talents to

promoting non-leaders, plagued the Weimar Republic in practice. See Ferdinand A. Hermens, *The Representative Republic* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame, 1958), p. 168. Buse and Doerr conclude that "proportional representation made it easy for small parties to enter the Reichstag, may have exaggerated the fragmentation of parties, and increased the power of the party bureaucracy which drew up the candidate list." See Buse and Doerr, *Modern Germany*, p. 192.

22. This includes eleven minority governments that lasted an aggregate eight years, or nearly two-thirds of the Weimar Republic's existence.

23. Under the British system, Germany's Social Democrats would have doubled their seats in the 1930 Reichstag rather than decline from 153 to 143 out of a total of 577 seats. The Nazis not only would have failed to make their dramatic gains, then, but would actually have lost seats. Buse and Doerr, *Modern Germany*, p. 192.

24. Over the past decade alone, the positions of prime minister, defense minister, foreign minister, and finance minister changed hands an aggregate twenty-nine times among some twenty people.

25. In the current Knesset, this form of electoral abuse has reached such an extremity that 65 of its 120 legislators (29 from Kadima, 12 from Shas, 6 from United Tora Judaism, 11 from Yisrael Beitenu, and 7 from the Gil pensioners party) have been selected by party leaders rather than elected in a freely contested procedure involving the public. Ehud Barak's recently expressed desire to handpick a sizable portion of Labor MKs indicates that this trend will not be offset anytime soon.

26. Provisional State Council Proceeding (1948), p. 17 [Hebrew].

27. On the evolution and character of Israeli democracy see Asher Arian, *Politics in Israel: The Second Generation* (Washington, D.C.: Chatham, 1989); Dan Horowitz and Moshe Lissak, *The Origins of the Israeli Polity: Palestine Under the Mandate* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1978); Peter Medding, *The Founding of Israeli Democracy, 1948-1967* (New York: Oxford, 1990); Ehud Sprinzak and Larry Diamond, eds., *Israeli Democracy Under Stress* (Boulder, Colo.: L. Rienner, 1993).

28. In 1984, a bill based on Ben-Gurion's original model of 120 MKs elected in 120 regions passed a first reading in the Knesset. Other than this, the electoral-reform bills in question offered assorted mixed models, as their sponsors sought to allay fears that such reform would effectively kill the religious parties. In 1958, Yosef Serlin of the General Zionists proposed an electoral reform that would divide the country into thirty regions, each of which would elect three lawmakers, while the remaining thirty would be elected nationally. In 1972, a bill based on this system passed a first reading. In 1987, a bill sponsored by the Labor party calling for the election of eighty MKs in twenty districts, and forty MKs nationwide passed a first reading. In 1988, a bill sponsored by MK Mordechai Virshubski (Ratz)

and forty-three other MKs offered two alternatives: One proposed the creation of twenty districts that would elect four lawmakers each, while the remaining forty would be elected nationally; the other proposed that sixty MKs would be elected in sixty districts, with the remaining sixty elected nationally. This too passed a first reading.

29. Likud MK Gideon Sa'ar has introduced a private member's bill calling for the election of sixty MKs in sixty regions, though he concedes that this is a gesture of protest and the bill has no chance of even being tabled. Law Committee chairman Menahem Ben-Sasson told this author that he wants more than sixty MKs to be elected regionally, but has yet to find sufficient backing for proposals that are even less ambitious.

Proposed governmental reforms in the current Knesset include: Capping the number of ministers; crowning as prime minister the leader of the largest elected faction; raising the minimal number of MKs required for a no-confidence vote; making the number two on the ruling party's list the prime minister's automatic replacement; and requiring that a minimum number of non-partisan professionals be included in the cabinet.

Parliamentary reform proposals include: Granting Knesset committees the power to fire ministers; formation of a separate committee to supervise each ministry; capping committee size at fifteen MKs each; requiring periodic ministerial reports to the relevant Knesset committees; banning joint membership in the Knesset and the cabinet; canceling the Knesset's automatic dissolution in case of failure to pass the budget; raising the number of MKs necessary for dissolving the Knesset; demanding a party executive's approval for the breakup of a parliamentary faction; and raising the threshold for Knesset election to 3 percent.

Proposed budget-related reforms include: Moving the submission deadline forward by thirty days, delegating the budget debate to various parliamentary committees, and subjecting the budget framework to a separate legislative process.

30. Based on statements made to this author in a survey of seventy-eight currently serving MKs whose parties do not oppose district elections, and four leaders of the anti-reform bloc. The survey was conducted via personal meetings, telephone, and email in late 2006 and early 2007.

31. Opponents of reform comprise half of the current Knesset and include eighteen MKs from Kadima, Labor, Likud, Yisrael Beitenu, and the Gil pensioners party. An additional twenty-four MKs from the mainstream parties refuse to take a position on the issue. Thirty-six MKs support a transition to various models of regional elections.

32. Likud MK Silvan Shalom to this author, in an email received February 6, 2007.

33. In Denmark (pop. 5.2 million), 135 of the *Folketing*'s 179 members are elected in seventeen metropolitan districts. In Austria (8.06 million), the *Bundesrat*'s 62 members are elected in nine provinces, and the *Nationalrat*'s 183 members are elected in twenty-five districts. In Finland (5.2 million), the *Riksdagen*'s 200 members are elected in fifteen districts; in Sweden (9 million), 310 of the *Riksdag*'s 349 members are elected in twenty-eight districts. And in New Zealand (3.8 million), sixty-nine of one hundred twenty Members of Parliament are elected in sixty-nine districts and fifty-one by party list. See Michael Gallagher and Paul Mitchell, eds., *The Politics of Electoral Systems* (Oxford: Oxford 2005); Arthur Banks, Thomas Muller, and William Overstreet, eds., *Political Handbook of the World 2005-2006* (Washington, D.C.: CO Press, 2006).

34. MKs Zahava Galon (Meretz), Michael Melchior (Labor), Yitzhak Aharonovich and Robert Ilatov (Yisrael Beitenu), Limor Livnat and Yisrael Katz (Likud), have cited Israel's size as the primary reason for retaining the current proportional system. Some, like Katz, appear to be unaware of the use of the plurality system in other small countries, and, in a telephone exchange with the author on February 14, 2007, Katz expressed genuine interest in the issue. Others, like Melchior, a native Scandinavian, cannot claim ignorance. In an email to the author received on December 27, 2006, Galon conceded through a spokesman that her primary objection is the fact that small parties like her own are unlikely to survive serious electoral reform.

35. Phone interview with MK Michael Melchior (Labor), February 26, 2007. A resident of Jerusalem, Melchior went on to say that in a district system he would be represented by Haredi politician Rabbi Meir Porush, "and there is no chance he will look after my needs."

36. This objection was raised by MKs Ruhama Avraham and Ze'ev Elkin (Kadima), Limor Livnat (Likud), and Alex Miller (Yisrael Beitenu).

37. In an email received by the author on March 19, 2007, Yosef Shagal (Yisrael Beitenu) expressed concern that local issues would override national ones. In contrast, chairman of the coalition Eli Aflalo (Kadima) stated through a spokesman that, in his opinion, the election of MKs by region will help the national cause by catering to the currently underserved periphery. Aflalo's comments were made to the author via email received on March 19, 2007.

38. Included among them are such senior figures as Ehud Olmert, Benjamin Netanyahu, Dalia Itzik, and former MK and current president Shimon Peres. Most tellingly, Olmert's official reply, received via email on May 13, 2007, was that he would take a position on the issue only when the Knesset officially addresses it—a prospect he knows to be highly unlikely. Equally evasive were former finance minister Avraham Hirchson, his successor Roni Bar-On, Transportation Minister Shaul

Mofaz, and Internal Security Minister Avi Dichter, all of whom refrained from taking a stand.

39. Obviously, Israel's political predicament is not fully analogous to that of the Weimar Republic. Israel is now almost five times as old as Weimar was at its death, and has a vibrant democratic tradition going back to the original Zionist Congress in 1897, a tradition that did not exist in inter-war Germany. Moreover, the emergence of a fascist threat to Israeli democracy is highly unlikely in a society which embraces defiance of authority as both a moral value and something of a national pastime. However, this does not change the fact that Israel's political system—as opposed to its democratic ethos—is showing signs of decay not unlike those that heralded the Weimar Republic's demise; and while Israel's citizenry may not be ripe for the fascist plucking, its electoral system, which is even more radically proportional than that adopted by the Weimar constitution, is increasingly losing the people's trust, respect, and attention. While authoritarianism is not much of a danger to twenty-first century Israel, anarchy most certainly is.