

How to Understand the Participation of Arabs in the Israeli Elections

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The purpose of this article is to introduce an empirical analytical framework through which to analyze the electoral behavior of the Palestinians in Israel. Using this framework provides initial answers to two central issues concerning patterns of electoral participation, namely: participation and abstention from voting and distribution of Arab voters across the three Arab lists. Or, put simply, the following analysis addresses two questions: Why do the Arabs in Israel vote? And how do the Arabs vote?

Participation, boycott, and voting patterns: Questions that require answers

Some Arab academics have presented explanations for the political and parliamentary electoral participation of the Palestinians in Israel from many aspects.¹ Despite the importance of these explanations, most are based on interpretations of qualitative research and impressions of the election results on the ground without offering empirical data based on quantitative research. Borrowing from the existing approaches, this article provides an empirical analysis of Arab voting patterns, by analyzing a public opinion poll—taken from a representative sample of 517 respondents—conducted by Mada al-Carmel a week prior the last election.

Who votes?

According to the results of the poll, 69% of the respondents said they would participate in the elections (with a weighted ratio of 57.3%), 15% said they were

¹ These approaches include: The identity voting approach presented by Rouhana, N. (1986). Collective identity and Arab voting patterns. In A. Arian & N. Shamir (Eds.) *Elections in Israel*, New Brunswick (pp. 121-149) New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction; “The crisis of the Arabs as a national minority in an ethnic state” approach presented by Ghanem, A. & Rouhana, N. (2001). Citizenship and the parliamentary politics of minorities in ethnic states: The Palestinian citizens of Israel. *Nationalism & Ethnic Politics*, 7(4), 66-86.; political behavior as a form of “community” expression offered by Jamal, A. (2002). Abstention as participation: On the complexity of Arab politics in Israel. In A. Arian & M. Shamir (Eds), *Elections in Israel* (pp. 75-100). Jerusalem: The Israel Democracy Institute; and an approach developed recently regarding the axis of hostilities between the state and the Arab population as an additional component in understanding the patterns of political and electoral participation of Palestinians in Israel by Saleh, N., Rohana, N., & Sultani, N. (2004). *Voting Without a Voice: The Palestinian Minority in Israel's 2003 Elections*. Haifa, Israel: Mada al-Carmel.

undecided, and nearly 16% said they would not vote. The primary reasons given for non-participation were: I do not care (27%); lack of unity among the Arab parties (21%); and ideological reasons (27%).²

The survey indicates no significant statistical differences between the personal specifications of participants and non-participants in the elections; not in terms of age, level of education, gender, religion, or place of residence. However, the poll does demonstrate statistically significant differences between those who participated and those who did not concerning their perception of the parliamentary work of the Arab parties and their performance in the Knesset. This includes perspectives on the law-making process in the Knesset; defending land and housing issues; solving the economic problems of Arab citizens; solving the problems of the Arab educational system and violence in Arab communities; combatting racist policies toward the Palestinians; contributing to the end of the occupation of the Palestinian territories; and exposing the State's racism towards the Arabs. In examining the statistical correlation between participation in the elections and the positions of the respondents to the work and performance of the Arab parties, we found that there was a clear positive relationship between performance appraisal and participation. We also ascertained that a low evaluation of the work and performance of Arab parties reduces the possibility of participation in the elections, and vice versa.

In addition to differences in opinion regarding the effectiveness of the Arab parties in the Knesset, some Arab citizens justified their non-participation in the elections by the existence of alternatives to political participation that should be used. These other methods of political participation are no less important or effective than parliamentary work. These can include, for example, participation in the work of civil society institutions and in direct popular protest (demonstrations) and public struggles.

In the poll, we likewise examined these alternatives. What concerned us specifically is whether alternative forms of political participation can explain non-participation in the elections. However tests indicate statistical significant differences between the two groups (those that planned to participate in the elections and those that planned not to) concerning alternative methods of political participation. Thus, contrary to what was suggested by respondents, a positive relationship exists between involvement in the work of civil society institutions and protest on one hand and participation in the elections on the other. Or, to rephrase, higher levels of participation in civil society work and social protest increase the likelihood of voting in the elections. Furthermore, we observed the higher the respondents' assessments of the impact of Arab protest

² These percentages are calculated from the 16% who said they would not participate in the elections.

in its various forms against government policies the more likely they were to vote rather than abstain. We also found that the likelihood of voting among these individuals increased the greater the respondent's belief in the contribution of Arab parties to the success of public protests.

Therefore, the poll indicates that non-participation in voting cannot be explained by involvement in alternative methods of political participation; rather, the reverse. Therefore, we can conclude that the fundamental differences between voting participants and abstainers are: individual assessments of the work and performance of the Arab parties in the Knesset and opinions on the prospect for making progress through parliament on the issues of daily life, personal livelihood, and national issues that affect Arab life in Israel. Those who participate in the elections are generally less pessimistic about the potential for having a political influence through parliamentary work.

Who do we vote for?

The findings of the Mada al Carmel survey allow us to provide initial answers to the question, how do Arab voters choose from among the Arab parties? According to our knowledge, this is the first time this question is being addressed from among the studies on the voting patterns of Arab voters. Therefore, we examined several sets of variables that contribute to understanding the Arab voters' decisions, including: personal specifications and identity; respondents' views of the Arab parties; assessments on the effects campaigning Arab parties have on daily living; and opinions on national issues. For our approach, we analyzed the "logistic regression" for all the aforementioned variables for supporters of each individual party compared to the rest of the voters; in all, the responses of voters for Hadash – The Democratic Front for Peace and Equality compared to the rest of the voters; voters for the United Arab List compared to the rest of the voters; and voters for Balad – The National Democratic Assembly compared to the rest of the voters.

Statistical test results reveal some differences in the individual specifications of the voters for the three Arab parties. There are significant statistical differences in relation to age, religion, and place of residence, while there are no differences in levels of education, gender, and living standards. However, the measured effect of these differences on the choice of the party is not substantial.

Comparatively, we found that evaluations of the Arab parties' performances in the Knesset have a fundamental impact on which party Arab voters support. Across all parties, support from Arab voters depended on respondents' assessment of a party's attention to national issues and evaluation of a party's leadership and candidates. In other words, we found a significant positive statistical correlation between the evaluation of party performance on nationally

related issues and voter support for the party. In addition, a more positive evaluation of the party candidates' efficiency increases an individual's likelihood to vote for the party. However, we did not find that specific party political programs or attention to issues of daily life effected voter support for the party.

Therefore, the results of the public opinion poll postulate that Arab voters' choice of party is primarily influenced by their assessment of party performance, interest in national issues, and the efficiency of its leaders, and is less influenced by the individual specifications of the voters, such as age, religion, or place of residence.

Conclusion

This article presents preliminary findings from an empirical interpretation of the electoral behavior of the Palestinians in Israel. The results of this statistical analysis indicate the awareness of the Arab voter on the limitations of parliamentary work and the political influence of the Arab parties. It also demonstrates Arab voters' awareness of the importance of the presence of Arab political parties in parliament and choice to participate in elections despite of these limitations. Voters choose among the Arab parties based on the parties' national performance and individual assessments of the leaders' competencies and not on the basis of the parties offering specific material advancements in daily life; however it is impossible to absolutely rule out the impact of this concern. Therefore, we can say there are signs of rational behavior in the Arab voters who use the elections as a way to express their resentment of government policies and the status quo. Arabs cast votes by looking for parties that can provide *collective* benefits—specifically in the area of collective identity--and work to combat the authorities, not just influence these authorities according to their political outputs. Their vote, in effect, becomes an act of protest. The topics discussed in this article would benefit from additional and extensive research to strengthen and clarify these preliminary findings.

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