PRESIDENTIALIZED PARLIAMENTARISM:
ELECTORAL VERSUS POLITICAL PRESIDENTIALIZATION
IN ISRAEL’S PARLIAMENTARY DEMOCRACY

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INTRODUCTION

Nowhere has the presidentialization of parliamentary democracies achieved such a magnitude as in Israel. In the early 1990s, the Israeli parliament, the Knesset, adopted a new law that altered not only the electoral system, but also Israel’s political system. According to this new law, Israel is the first parliamentary democracy in which the prime minister is directly and popularly elected. However, after taking office, the prime minister may be removed by a non-confidence vote in the Knesset supported by a bare majority (61 of the 120 MPs). The new electoral system thus produces a unique political system in which a “presidentialized” prime minister has been grafted onto an essentially parliamentary democracy. In light of these developments, this paper seeks to address the following points:

- First, did the electoral reform in the 1990s reflect a political reform that had already taken place? In other words, is it appropriate to speak of a phenomenon of presidentialization occurring within Israel’s parliamentary democracy prior to the 1990s? Did the electoral reform simply make the implicit explicit, or was it a radical departure from pure parliamentarism?
- Second, what were the causes and consequences of the subsequent electoral presidentialization? What factors are acting as constraints on the electorally
presidentialized prime minister? How have these outcomes affected the political parties, electoral competition, political representation, legislative behavior, legislative-executive relations, and other associated factors?

- Finally, does Israel’s rather extreme experience with the presidentialization of parliamentary democracy present a positive argument for this phenomenon, or a negative assessment of its consequences for democratic theory? Should other countries embrace this phenomenon, or take steps to limit its spread?

POLITICAL AND/OR ELECTORAL PRESIDENTIALIZATION

From the late 1940s, when Israel achieved independence, until the early 1990s, the political system in Israel was purely parliamentary, inspired by the British model. The Knesset was elected according to one of the most proportional systems in existence -- surpassed only by the Netherlands in 1956 when the Tweede Kamer was enlarged from 100 to 150 representatives. The electoral system in Israel consisted of one national constituency, the Hare quota for seat allocation until 1973 and since then the Hagenbach-Bischoff quota (with results identical to d’Hondt), fixed party lists and a legal threshold set at only one percent of the valid vote. The result was a multiparty system, with no less than ten parties represented in the Knesset, and usually at least a dozen. No party had ever won a majority, leaving the government in the hands of coalitions that often included five or more parties, and was based on a political culture of power sharing.
During this period, the office of the prime minister was strengthened politically over time. This is due to two main reasons. First, institutional provisions. Second, the personality of the prime minister. The first variable is exhibited by a change from the objectives outlined in the Government Yearbook of 1949. The formal institutional definition of the prime ministerial office at that time was minimalist -- coordination and organization of government. Since then, the scope of the prime ministerial office increased significantly. For example, permanent ministerial committees were formed in the prime ministers office to direct economic policy, legislation, interior, and foreign and security issues.

By the early 1960s, the Government Yearbook already redefined the prime ministerial office in a more activist role, entrusted now with agenda setting and policy initiation. At times the prime ministerial office concentrated mainly on formulating guidelines and initiatives for the ministries to carry out, and at other times it was directly involved in their implementation as well. By the late 1970s, the prime ministerial office evolved into an increasingly centralized organ, with the formation of sub-cabinets on many salient issues, headed by ministers without portfolios under the prime minister and entrusted with policy making, evaluation and implementation of special programs. Occasionally, a team or staff within the prime ministerial office was formed in order to constrain or even counter the activities of particular ministries.

In 1981, a new law allowed the prime minister to dismiss a minister -- a decision that until then he was not legally capable of doing. By the early 1990s, the increased executive functions of the prime ministerial office, and the diminishing role of the individual ministers, was manifested by the creation of the “prime minister’s staff” to
help the prime minister and his director-general in the execution of government policy, according to the prime minister’s priorities, and in the coordination and control of the ministries. The cumulative effect of these institutional provisions continuously modified the position of the prime minister and formalized his dominant position.

An example of the second criteria, personal attributes, is the clear leadership role that David Ben-Gurion took, Israel’s first prime minister. Being one of the nation’s “founding fathers”, he dominated the Mapai party, which lead all Israeli governments until the late 1970s and was the predominant party in the party system (Hazan 1998).

Ministerial appointment, at least those important offices which the main party controlled, and continued tenure in office, became increasingly dependent on the prime minister. By the late 1970s, when Menachem Begin became prime minister -- the undisputed leader of the Likud party -- the office became even more active in dealing directly with most pressing issues, including both those issues that the prime minister personally tended to and issues of great national importance.

The political presidentialization of Israel’s parliamentary democracy was thus in effect long before the electoral change was adopted. In other words, the definition of the prime ministerial position as primus inter pares gradually eroded, and was replaced by what in Israel is referred to as “prime ministerial government” (Amir 1997). It is, therefore, appropriate to speak of a phenomenon of presidentialization occurring within Israel’s parliamentary democracy prior to the 1990s. The electoral reform in the mid-1990s, however, did not simply make the implicit explicit, but was quite a radical departure.
The monumental reform of the “Basic Law: The Government” -- originally enacted in 1968, and amended in 1992 -- changed the electoral, political and constitutional systems in Israel. The new electoral law makes Israel the first country to directly and popularly elect its prime minister, concurrently with the parliamentary elections. This new system was first implemented in the 1996 elections. The prime minister is elected using the two-ballot system -- similar to French and Russian presidential elections -- thus requiring an absolute majority. The Israeli Knesset continues to be elected by an extreme form of proportional representation on the same day as the first round of the prime ministerial election.

The electoral reform has had a profound effect on the constitutional form of government itself. The directly-elected prime minister has the power to nominate the government, but a parliamentary vote of investiture is required before the government can take office and begin to function. At any time during the prime minister’s tenure, he can be ousted by the Knesset through a no-confidence vote, which requires only a bare majority of 61 out of the 120 Members of Knesset (MKs). However, such a removal of the prime minister brings about the dissolution of the Knesset as well, heralding new elections for both. By the same token, the prime minister has the power to dissolve the Knesset, which ends his tenure as well, and forces new elections for both.
The main political reform that resulted from the new law is that Israel ceased to be a purely parliamentary democracy, due to its direct election of the prime minister. In parliamentarism, the executive emerges from and is responsible to the legislature -- a fusion of powers -- whereas in presidentialism, there exists a separation of executive origin and survival from the legislature. As of 1996, with the direct election of the prime minister, the head of the executive branch no longer emerged from the legislature but was separately elected. The direct popular election of the prime minister dismantled the parliamentary system that Israel had possessed since its creation. Israel thus no longer belongs to the parliamentary regimes category. Yet, it did not cross into the presidential category, because while the prime minister is elected separately, he continues to be responsible to the Knesset and must be a member of it -- an apparent violation of the separation of powers principle.

Israel is also not “semi-presidential,” like the French Fifth Republic. Semi-presidentialism (Duverger 1980), or premier-presidentialism (Shugart and Carey 1992), is a “mixed” regime whereby a directly-elected president coexists with a government headed by a premier who rests on parliamentary confidence. In Israel, it is the directly-elected prime minister himself who heads the government and rests on parliamentary confidence.

In semi-presidentialism a dual executive serves to oscillate power between the executive and the legislative. When the directly-elected President has the support of the legislature, power rests in the hands of the President. However, when the President is faced with a hostile legislative majority, the prime minister can take control of the reigns of power -- as is the current case in France. As Aron (1982, 8) wrote, “the
President of the Republic is the supreme authority as long as he has a majority in the National Assembly; but he must abandon the reality of power to the prime minister if ever a party other than his own has a majority in the Assembly.” This is true for other semi-presidential systems, such as Finland and post-1982 Portugal, which have faced opposing executive and legislative majorities. On a continuum between parliamentarism and presidentialism the French case presents an alternation -- not a synthesis -- between two abated versions of the possible pure types, it is never strictly presidential nor strictly parliamentary.

This flexible and interim type of regime, which alternates between presidential and parliamentary prevalence without changing fully between the two contrasting types, is not the case in Israel. If the legislative and executive majorities coincide -- the results of the 1996 and 1999 elections -- Israel’s new political system functions in a similar, yet attenuated, manner to the French system when the President has a supportive legislature. But if the legislative and executive majorities do not coincide, there is no parliamentary-supported premier in Israel to lead a government backed by the legislature. The Israeli Prime Minister, and the entire executive branch, will find themselves confronting a hostile legislature, akin to the situation of divided majorities in a pure presidential regime.

The new type of regime in Israel thus provides, much like Fifth Republic France, for an alteration between presidential and parliamentary phases. However, both the parliamentary phase and the presidential phase in Israel are further removed from pure parliamentarism and pure presidentialism than in semi-presidential France. The reason for this is the nature of executive-legislative relations in Israel. In other words, there
are more parliamentary limitations on presidential attributes in Israel than in France (Brichta and Zalmanovitch 1986), and more presidential constraints on parliamentary rule as well. In short, the Israeli case presents an oscillation similar to the French model, but further constrained between the two poles.

The Israeli Prime Minister, backed by a majority in the Knesset, will not be as presidential as the French President is with similar legislative support. On the other hand, a prime minister in Israel who faces a hostile Knesset will be more presidential - for example, by building ad-hoc coalitions to push various issues 4 -- than the French President is when the reigns of power are handed to the prime minister. That is, while French semi-presidentialism is an alternation between curbed presidentialism and checked parliamentarism, Israeli presidential-parliamentarism is more of a synthesis between diminished versions of the two French phases, more of a half-way system.

The Israeli case is, therefore, a synthesis of both parliamentary and presidential regime types, in which the elements are equally balanced. Israel is no longer purely parliamentary nor purely presidential, and has not become semi-presidential. In other words, as of the 1996 elections Israel is an institutionally unique and hybrid type of political regime, which may best be termed “presidentialized parliamentarism” (Hazan 1996).
THE CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF ELECTORAL PRESIDENTIALIZATION

The consequences of the earlier political presidentialization were a gradual shift from collective to individual control over the formulation of governmental programs. This process was accompanied by, and also further propelled, parallel shifts within the political parties such as the growth of the leader’s power. Particular factors also played an important role, such as the international nature of Israel’s most pressing political problem -- foreign affairs and security, which would become its dominant dimension of electoral competition -- and helped pave the path toward political presidentialization. The gradual \textit{de facto} shift towards greater personal visibility, accountability and power subsequently lead to formal changes in institutional arrangements. The Israeli Prime Minister, during the era of pure parliamentarism, and despite the multiparty nature of both the \textit{Knesset} and the governing coalitions, was not a \textit{primus inter pares}, but more of a first among, or even above, unequals.

The \textit{de facto} and the formal institutional provisions of political presidentialization were minor by comparison to the constitutional reform that brought about the electoral presidentialization of the 1990s. However, the consequences of the electoral presidentialization were quite the contrary. This is not because they were intended to be so, but rather due to the unexpected ramifications resulting from this reform, which served to undermine many of the institutional provisions that created the earlier political presidentialization of Israel’s parliamentary democracy.
The direct election of the prime minister was adopted in order to ameliorate a deteriorating political situation and increase governability in Israel. The extremely fragmented, fractionalized and polarized nature of the Israeli party system in the 1980s led to difficulties not only in the formation of governments, but in their survival as well (Diamond and Sprinzak 1993). The electoral system, designed to represent the interests of the numerous sub-groups in Israeli society, came under fire because it granted disproportionate influence to minorities, particularly the religious minority. The religious parties, who since 1977 had possessed the pivotal position in the process of coalition-formation, were able to hold the two main parties hostage to their ever-increasing demands. The result was not just exaggerated influence, but also governing coalitions that became more and more difficult to maintain. Weak governments and frequent crises came to be perceived as extremely disruptive to the stability of Israel’s democracy by both the electorate and the politicians.

Beyond their desire to strengthen the prime minister and thereby to enhance governability, the reformers hoped that the direct election of the prime minister would also reduce the size, number and influence of the smaller parties in the Knesset, without changing the proportional nature of the electoral system used to elect it. That is, they hoped that a separate ballot for the prime minister, with its requirement of an absolute majority, would reduce the prime ministerial race to the two main parties and encourage “straight-ticket” voting in the second ballot for the Knesset. The results of the 1996 and 1999 Knesset elections were quite the opposite. The availability of “split-ticket voting” actually increased the multiparty composition of the Knesset, while the two main parties were decimated. In other words, the electoral reform not only failed to attack the problem for which it was designed, but actually made it worse.
Ballot-splitting -- a hitherto unavailable option in Israeli elections -- decreased the size of the two major parties (Labor and Likud) from 76 to 56 seats in the 1996 elections, a reduction of over 25%, and then to 45 in the 1999 elections, a further reduction of 20%. The sectarian parties -- those representing a particular sub-group in society -- increased their representation from 21 to 39 seats in the 1996 elections, a growth of 86%, and to 47 seats in the 1999 elections, a total increase of 224%. These parties include the religious parties, who represent the orthodox religious Jewish minority and whose seats increased from 16 to 23 in the 1996 elections, and to 27 in the 1999 elections; the Arab parties, who represent the national minority in Israel and whose seats rose from 5 to 9 in 1996, and to 10 in 1999; and the immigrants’ parties, who represent the Russian ethnic minority, and won 7 seats for the first time in 1996, and 10 in 1999.

In other words, not only did ballot-splitting increase fragmentation in the Israeli party system, it reduced the strength of all of the main ideological and aggregating parties while it exacerbated sectarian tensions along the three main contentious cleavages in Israeli society: religious and secular Jews; Arabs and Jews; and natives and immigrants.

**TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE**

The results of the first two implementations of separate executive and legislative elections are, therefore, dramatic. The largest party list in the *Knesset* has been reduced to its lowest point ever, while the parties representing the three sub-cultural minorities in Israeli society -- orthodox Jews, Arabs and immigrants -- together control more seats than the two largest parties in the Israeli party system.

**FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE**
The two largest parties together now hold only 45 seats -- 38% of the total number of seats -- which is the lowest number of seats they have ever won. In the 1999 elections, the main party on the right, Likud, and the main party on the left, Labor, each won their lowest number of seats ever. Despite the multiparty nature of the Israeli party system, the competitive two bloc structure -- albeit with some smaller parties located in the middle who participated in governing coalitions with either bloc -- was significantly damaged in the 1996 elections, and was even further destroyed in 1999 (Hazan and Diskin 2000).

The implications for governability in light of this decline, and the upsurge in sectarian representation, are clear. With the direct election of the prime minister, the decision of who would be prime minister was no longer in the hands of party leaders, and no longer the result of extensive horse-trading in the process of creating a coalition government. Yet, while the first two directly-elected prime ministers were able to create a coalition relatively easily, since the smaller parties could no longer act as king-makers but faced a simple decision of being in or out, they each confront the increasingly difficult tasks of keeping the coalition intact and sustaining its legislative discipline. The reason for this is ballot-splitting, which eroded the size of the two major parties and benefited the necessary coalition partners in terms of both size and number, thereby undermining the nucleus of support for either prime ministerial candidate. The Likud party in 1996 and the Labor party in 1999, whose candidates won the first two directly-elected prime ministership contests and who headed the two subsequent coalition governments, did hold the largest number of seats in their respective coalitions but they were a minority within these coalitions (22 of 66 legislators in 1996, and 26 of 75 in 1999) -- the first two times this has occurred in Israeli history.9

The dominance of the prime ministerial race thus, paradoxically, served to weaken the governability potential of the directly-elected prime minister. The main parties
understood that in order to win the necessary absolute majority their prime ministerial candidates would have to attract voters from other parties, including the opposing party. The race for the prime minister had to be “above” parties. Their candidates, therefore, conducted campaigns that were practically devoid of a party connection.

The parties, for their part, not only accepted this clear priority and allowed the campaign to focus on the prime ministerial race, but held back from competing with the smaller parties, fearing that if they challenged them in the Knesset race, the smaller parties would not support their candidate for prime minister. Both Labor and Likud were therefore willing to sacrifice seats in the proportional Knesset election in order to win the majoritarian prime ministerial race. The two main parties thus did not try to preclude the possibility of vote-splitting by the electorate, but actually supported and even augmented this new phenomenon, resulting in their own decline.

The consequences of adopting a new electoral system in Israel, and the resulting presidentialized parliamentary political system, are thus quite reminiscent of presidential systems that use proportional representation for their legislative elections, both empirically and theoretically (Shugart and Carey 1992, especially chapter 11). However, the extent of divergence in electoral outcomes for the two branches is greater in Israel than in any of the other cases that use concurrent elections.

On the voter behavior level, the availability of two ballots allowed each voter not only to split the ballot, but also to create a hierarchy of voting intentions for each ballot based on different motivations. Since the two prime ministerial candidates competed primarily on the dominant dimension in Israeli politics of foreign affairs and security, the voters adopted this dimension as the criterion for choosing either candidate. At the Knesset level, where parties presented much more particular appeals, some of them correctly assessing that with more than one ballot it was now possible to compete on
an entirely different dimension, while remaining neutral on that of foreign policy and security, the voters could now express a more particular, sincere identity.

The voters were thus able to express both a national interest and a rather narrow social identity, or specific ideological stand, by selecting from a multidimensional menu of parties on two distinct ballots. This is, again, precisely what one sees in presidential systems (Shugart and Carey 1992, chapters 1, 2, and especially 9). The prime ministerial elections became the arena for general ideas -- the “representation of ideas” in Pitkin’s (1976) words -- while the Knesset became the arena for more precise ideas -- the “representation of presence” according to Phillips (1995). The political parties in the Knesset who either gained entrance -- except for the single case of the Center party in 1999 -- or enlarged their representation, were the less aggregative ones who sought a more specific social or ideological voter base.

The new, mixed electoral system did not produce the best of two worlds, but instead what Sartori (2000) calls a bastard parliament that serves no purpose. The already overloaded Israeli political system (Horowitz and Lissak 1989) thus became even more overloaded after the 1996 and 1999 elections (Nachmias and Sened 1999).

The decline of the two main parties and the success of more sectarian ones also shows that the consequence of the electoral reforms is not the strengthening of the incipient bi-polarization of Israeli politics, as the reformers hoped, but its breakdown and Balkanization. Instead of social groups represented within parties, they are now represented by parties. Incentives for negotiation and compromise between social groups have also decreased, due to the enhanced reflection of social cleavages in the party system.
The direct election of the prime minister -- electoral presidentialization -- thus failed to achieve its goal of enhancing governability. On the contrary, governability -- political presidentialization -- was undermined due to the production of a sectarian-centrifugal Knesset via ballot-splitting (Hazan and Rahat 2000). In other words, the electoral presidentialization of Israel’s essentially parliamentary democracy served to undermine the political presidentialization that had taken place before.

Moreover, the electoral reforms have influenced legislative behavior as well. During the 14\textsuperscript{th} Knesset (1996-99), and the first two sessions of the 15\textsuperscript{th} Knesset, the prime minister’s coalition was defeated on numerous issues. Decisions taken by the government were overturned by the legislature due to the abstention of key partners, both in the coalition and in the prime minister’s party, who were holding out for increased pay-offs. The decline of the major parties and the rise of the sectarian ones made coalition maintenance a full-time, if practically impossible, task. The ability of the government to pass its own legislation, or to thwart the opposition’s popular and costly bills, largely failed. The annual budgets, for example, were redrawn by the coalition members in the Finance Committee -- at times with the cooperation of the opposition -- to an extent that was previously unknown in Israel. The directly-elected prime minister was unable to reign in the anarchy within both his coalition and his party, and repeatedly derided his partners for their unruly behavior. However, executive control over the legislature should not have been expected to increase by the reform because, indeed, the direct election of the head of government in democratic presidential systems expands the independence, not the subordination, of the legislature.

The change in legislative behavior has produced a new phenomenon of the prime minister “losing” repeated votes of no-confidence in the Knesset. That is, numerous no-confidence motions against the prime minister have more supporters than
opponents, and in some of these no-confidence votes members of the prime minister’s own coalition voted against him. However, despite the *plurality* of MKs that voted no-confidence in the prime minister, bringing down the prime minister required a *majority* of the *Knesset* (61 of 120 legislators). Since less than the necessary 61 voted no-confidence, the prime minister and his government remained in office. That is, legislators who were part of the coalition felt that they could vote no-confidence in the prime minister as a show of their strength and autonomy, or in order to extract concessions, without having to pay the price of dissolution of the *Knesset* and new elections (as long as the plurality did not become a majority). Therefore, the directly-elected prime minister might be quite durable -- since he has a direct mandate from an absolute majority of the electorate, and since for the *Knesset* to unseat him it, too, might be dissolved -- but this durability does not necessarily translate into enhanced efficiency or effectiveness, compared to previous prime ministers who were not directly-elected (Hazan 1997).

Thus, the first governing coalitions in Israel after the implementation of direct election of the prime minister are exhibiting behavioral characteristics that are significantly different than those that preceded them. The electoral presidentialization has made the prime minister’s control of the legislative agenda and output an extremely difficult task. Therefore, while it is structurally difficult and politically risky for the legislature to bring down the prime minister, it is institutionally easy for the *Knesset* to diminish both the prime minister’s legitimacy and his effectiveness. Enhanced executive control over the legislature, another of the reform’s goals, has not been strengthened but rather diminished. That is, one of the major goals of direct elections was to increase governability -- to enhance the political presidentialization that developed earlier. The actual result has been “virtual” durability, resulting from the fear of early elections, instead of governability.
CONCLUSION: PRESIDENTIALIZED PARLIAMENTARISM AND DEMOCRATIC THEORY

It has long been conventional to divide electoral systems into two broad categories, majoritarian and proportional, and political systems, as well, into two comprehensive groups, presidential and parliamentary. Israel, since the 1996 elections, straddles both of these two continua: it has both majoritarian and proportional elections and it encompasses aspects of both presidential and parliamentary regimes.

Is this Israeli version of a mixed presidentialized parliamentary system the best of both worlds? Was Sartori (1994b, 135; italics in original) correct when he declared, “I believe that the case against the two extremes, pure presidentialism and pure parliamentarism, is a strong one. By the same token I believe that the positive case for ‘mixed systems’ is equally strong.” Regretfully, the current Israeli political system is not the best of both worlds, and it might actually be the worst (Hazan, forthcoming).

A closer reading of Sartori might lead us to the correct assumption regarding the presidentialization of parliamentary democracies, and the risks to be avoided.

Sartori advocates a mixed system in order to alleviate the problems of either pure model. His argument for “intermittent presidentialism” is at its baseline a parliamentary system that is allowed to endure as long as it functions effectively, but that is displaced by a period of presidentialism if it fails to function properly. This is, in my opinion, the semi-presidentialism of the Fifth Republic with one caveat: the oscillation between regime types is not based on election results but on governmental performance. The Israeli mixed system does almost exactly the opposite.
Presidentialized parliamentarism exacerbates the influence of political factors -- i.e., elections -- at the expense of governmental stability and efficiency. As Sartori (1994b, 153) warned,

Presidentialism and parliamentarism are single-engine mechanisms. In the first system the engine is the president, in the second the engine is parliament... Semi-presidentialism is, instead, a double-engine system. However, since its two engines operate simultaneously, what if they start pulling in opposite directions and work against one another? While the French system is able to handle divided government, still the risk of having two counter-pulling engines cannot be ruled out.

The “counter-pulling engines” are produced by adopting, along with mixed versions of presidentialism and parliamentarism, two contrasting types of electoral systems -- each for a distinct element of the mixed regime type. That is, the mixing of electoral system in Israel allows neither the principle of proportionality nor that of majoritarianism to dominate, but instead allows each to operate separately, each electing a different branch of government. At the same time, the mixing of political system in Israel allows neither the principles of parliamentarism nor those of presidentialism to dominate, but rather creates a synthesis of incongruous operating principles. The result is a presidentialized prime minister who, in order to govern and survive, must rely on an ever increasing polarized, fragmented, fractionalized and sectarianized parliament. This combination is dangerous, not only for the effectiveness of Israel’s government, but also for the stability of its democracy.

This rather extreme conclusion can be seen as a result of the growing debate within the field as to whether parliamentary systems are indeed superior. At least to some extent, the empirical evidence still favors the parliamentary model. However, even
those who support presidentialism argue that this type of regime encounters increasing
difficulties resulting from “hostile majorities” if the party system is fragmented and
polarized (Mainwaring 1993). In other words, presidentialism coupled with a
polarized multiparty system is a hazardous combination for democracy.

Israel’s presidentialized parliamentarism has produced an increasingly fragmented and
polarized party system, while the country continues to face divisive existential issues.
Israel thus presents not only an exceptional, but also a precarious constellation -- which
magnifies the consequences of hostile majorities on executive-legislative relations -- for a
democratic country to occupy and manifest.

The preliminary lessons to be learned from the Israeli case is that if political
presidentialization does occur in a parliamentary democracy, it does not necessarily
undermine the democratic nature of a system. However, it presidentialization is not the
result of “extraneous” features -- such as the erosion of social cleavages, the
mediatization or the internationalization of politics -- nor the development of institutional
provisions -- such as the growth of prime ministerial power within the party or the
executive -- but rather the outcome of electoral reforms aimed at fusing opposing regime
types, then it can truly undermine the efficiency and stability of the democratic system, if
not properly designed.

The Israeli decision to synthesize, not to alternate between, presidentialism and
parliamentarism -- by grafting a majoritarian presidentialized prime minister onto a
proportional parliamentary infrastructure -- is a unique and extreme constellation which
has produced more negative consequences than positive results. Other countries have
discussed the possibility of adopting such a system, but in light of the Israeli experience they should avoid such a step. Indeed, due to the negative consequences of the 1996 and 1999 elections, there is a growing movement in Israel itself which is calling for the overturning of the electoral reform which brought about the direct popular election of the prime minister.
### TABLE 1:

**Election Results for the Prime Minister**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>29 MAY 1996</th>
<th>17 MAY 1999</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Candidate</strong></td>
<td><strong># Votes</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benjamin Netanyahu</td>
<td>1,501,023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shimon Peres</td>
<td>1,471,566</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### TABLE 2: Pre- (1992) and Post-Reform (1996 & 1999)

**Election Results for the Israeli Knesset [number of seats]**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BLOC</th>
<th>PARTY</th>
<th>1992</th>
<th>1996</th>
<th>1999</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arab</td>
<td>Democratic Front for Peace and Equality</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>United Arab List</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>National Democratic Alliance</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left</td>
<td>One Nation</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Meretz</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Shinui</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Centre</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yisrael B’aliyah</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Third Way</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious</td>
<td>Sephardi Torah Guardians</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>17</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>United Torah Judaism</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>National Religious Party</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right</td>
<td>Likud</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tsomet</td>
<td>8</td>
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<td>-</td>
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<td>Yisrael Beitenu</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>National Unity</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moledet</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Total Seats:** 120 | 120 | 120

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1. In 1996, the newly formed National Democratic Alliance ran together with the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality.
2. In 1999, Labour joined with Gesher and Meimad to form a joint list called One Israel.
3. In 1992 and 1996, Shinui was part of the Meretz alliance.
4. In 1992, Likud ran alone and won 32 seats. In 1996, the joint Likud-Gesher-Tsomet list won 32 seats, of which 22 were Likud and 5 each for Gesher and Tsomet. In 1999, Likud ran alone and won 19 seats.
5. In 1996, Tsomet ran with Likud and won 5 seats (see note 4 above).
6. In 1999, the newly formed National Unity party was based on splits from the Likud and the National Religious Party, and incorporated the Moledet party.
7. In 1999, Moledet ran as part of the National Unity party (see note 6 above).
FIGURE 1:
The Old and the New Electoral and Political Systems in Israel

The New System
- Proportional elections
- Voters
- Prime Minister
- Government
- Government/Prime Minister
- Knesset elects President
- Knesset dissolves
- President appoints Government
- Government approves

The Old System
- Majoritarian elections
- Voters
- President
- Knesset
- President appoints Government
- Government dissolves
- Knesset elects President
- Knesset appoints Government
- Government appoints Prime Minister
- Prime Minister dissolves

FIGURE 2:
Party Seats in the Israeli Knesset, 1949-1999 (total = 120)

* Religious, Arab and immigrant parties
REFERENCES


NOTES

1 For a discussion of the politics leading to the electoral reform, see Diskin and Diskin (1995); for a description and analysis of the new system see Hazan (1996 and 1997); for contrasting opinions concerning this kind of system, see Bogdanor (1993), Lijphart (1993) and Sartori (1994b).

2 If the Knesset does not approve the prime minister’s government, the result is new elections for both the Knesset and the prime minister.

3 If the Knesset votes to remove the prime minister from office with an extraordinary majority of 80 MKs, new elections are held for the prime minister only.

4 Decisions in government are made by a simple majority vote. Since 1996, in the case of a tie, the prime minister can cast a deciding, second vote.

5 It is rather striking that there was an expectation by the reformers that the prime ministerial race would be limited to only two candidates, even if they have proven to be right thus far. After all, one would expect the two-round system to promote a first round with several candidates, which almost happened in 1999; see Shugart and Taagepera (1994). For a discussion of the expectations versus the results of the direct election of the prime minister see Ottolenghi (1999).

6 Literature on divided government in the United States (Jacobson 1991, Fiorina 1992) is instructive on how this possibility could have been foreseen. Moreover, some of the political scientists in Israel warned of this danger while the electoral reforms were under deliberation.

7 It is interesting to note that some of the smaller parties did not oppose the electoral reforms when they were deliberated and adopted. Maybe they were more confident of the “rationality” of the Israeli voter, of his ability to split his vote, and of the unique opportunity the electoral reform would grant them not only to survive, but to thrive.

8 The decrease can also be seen as one from 84 down to 66, a decline of 26%, if Likud and Tsomet are combined for the 1992 elections and the joint Likud-Gesher-Tsomet list is counted as one party for the 1996 elections.

9 This does not include the deviant case of national unity (grand) coalitions, where either of the two major parties did not, by itself, comprise a majority within the coalition.

10 The contemporary debate is best represented by a series of books, including: Sartori (1994a and 1994b); Linz and Valenzuela (1994); Lijphart (1992); and, Shugart and Carey (1992).