

Israeli Politics

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Israel's government is a parliamentary democracy.

The Israeli political system has three branches: executive, legislative and judicial. The legislative branch is comprised of the Knesset, Israel's parliament, which has 120 members.

The two largest parties historically were the Likud party, which is a center-right party, and the Labor party, which is a center-left party. In 2005, Ariel Sharon founded the Kadima party in order to support his disengagement plan. Moderate Likud and like-minded Labor politicians joined the party, and Kadima won the majority of seats in the Knesset in both the 2006 and 2009 elections.

There are also several "religious" parties ranging in ideology from modern Orthodox to ultra-Orthodox, and a secularist party, Shinui, which also claims to be the party of the "middle class." In addition, there are several Arab parties, and a communist Arab-Jewish party. It should be noted that although parties are considered "Arab" or "Jewish," this does not mean that Arabs are not members and even elected representatives of different Jewish Israeli parties--they are. The Labor, Likud, and Kadima parties all count among their delegates Arab-Israeli citizens.

Smaller parties (including religious parties) are also important in Israeli politics, as their support is necessary to form a coalition required to pass legislation. Small parties can represent identity groups--such as Sephardim (Jews of Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, or Spanish descent), secular Israelis, or immigrants--or they can be formed to advocate for a single issue, such as environmental-protection legislation.

The executive branch of Israel is headed by a prime minister who is the coalition leader of the Knesset. In an election, voters vote for party lists rather than individual candidates, with seats in the Knesset apportioned according to the percentage of votes each party receives in the election. After the election, a coalition government must be formed of the elected party representatives in the Knesset; a ruling coalition must have at least 61 members to ensure a majority of the 120 seats.

The president of Israel formally asks whichever party leader he or she feels is most likely to be successful in forming a government to attempt to do just that and piece together a majority coalition. But since no party has ever achieved a 61-vote majority on its own, they have always relied on other parties to join the coalition; this has given small parties--some with as few as a single Knesset representative--power and importance that they otherwise would lack in the government, with parties agreeing to join a coalition in return for the passage of their pet bills.

The president of Israel is a largely ceremonial role. As head of state, the president participates in ceremonies and serves as Israel's representative both in Israel and abroad. The president is elected by the Knesset for a single term of seven years.

The third branch of the government is the judiciary branch, which consists of courts and tribunals and a Supreme Court. While the State of Israel does not have a constitution, it does have a series of "Basic Laws," which function in a similar matter to constitutional laws.

The press has been considered by some to be the "fourth branch" of the government of Israel.

The number of daily newspapers sold in Israel is the highest per-capita in the world. About a dozen independent newspapers in several languages--Hebrew, English, Russian, Arabic, and others--are published daily, in addition to several weeklies. The airwaves are also full of hourly news radio broadcasts and two Israeli TV channels, plus cable television that brings in channels from all over the world. While news is subject to a military censor, the news outlets in Israel are independent, serving as a check to governmental power.