



Decision 2006



It is clear that these people have expressed their disgust with politics

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The important thing is to vote

Low voter turnout rates strike a blow to more than the sitting government

Yoram Peri

The defilement of politics in Israel and disgust at politicians have led many people to conclude there is no reason to take place in elections.

Alternatively, some people suggest putting a (blank) white slip in the ballot box.

These conclusions are completely flawed. They could also be destructive, no less than corrupt politicians themselves.

Invalid votes

Let's begin with the white slip. It is impossible to know just how many Israelis voted in the 17 general elections the country has held since 1949 (the 2001 election was only for prime minister).

Only the number of "invalid votes", including ripped ballots, double ballots and defaced ballots, in addition to white slips, have been counted. Over the last decade, between one –to – two percent of all ballots cast have been invalidated. That is, 40,000 – to – 50,000 votes.

But we do not know how many of these were white slips. Israel has yet to conduct any studies regarding such ballots.

Ineffective protest

It is clear that these people have expressed their disgust with politics. At the same time, it is also clear that these people have high political awareness; otherwise, they would not have taken the time to vote at all.

But we do not know if their frustration stems from their criticism of individual politicians, from the way government and Knesset function. They could also be protesting against the very regime.

Until such study is undertaken, we will have to rely on another group about whom much is known – those who don't bother to vote at all.

Non-voters

Until a decade ago, this group was very small, indeed. Since Israel was established, some 80 percent of eligible voters have exercised their right to vote,

And since about 10 percent of eligible voters could not vote, mainly because they were overseas on Election Day, de facto about nine out of every 10 Israeli adults voted (in Australia, about 95 percent of the population votes).

But over the years there has been a steady drop in voter participation rates, and during the current decade that number has dropped to below 70 percent.

In the elections for the 16th Knesset in 2003, just 67.8 percent of eligible voters cast their votes (and just 63.2 percent in the 2001 special election for prime minister alone). All signs point to a continued drop on March 28.

This drop is not unique to Israel. Over the last several decades, voter participation rates have plummeted, at an average rate of about one percent per election campaign.

The "champions" are the countries considered the strongest democracies, Switzerland and the United States, in which no more than 54 percent of eligible voters vote, even less than India (58 percent).

What's so terrible?

So what's so terrible about a white slip? Is it really so wrong not to vote? These very questions are enough to make anyone familiar with the theories of democracy shake with fear.

Democracy is built on public participation. A country without an active populace will not remain democratic. Low voter turnout strikes a blow at the legitimacy of the regime.

For instance, look at Americans' feelings about George W. Bush, when many people felt he "stole" the 2000 presidential election.

In Israel, opponents of the Gaza disengagement were a minority of the population, and they were forced to claim (incorrectly) that the decision of the Knesset and the government were illegitimate.

What would have happened if a majority of the population agreed with them? Could the government have carried out disengagement? The fact the orange brigades were forced to lean on the idea of legitimacy shows just how important that idea is in a democracy.

Striking a blow

Low voter turnout over a long period of time could strike a blow, not only to the sitting government, but also to the country itself.

Questionable legitimacy is fertile breeding ground for political violence, and it strengthens forces who would prefer a different method of government altogether.

We've got several hundred thousand of these already: About one-fifth of Israelis strongly agree with the statement, "A strong leader could be better for the country than all its laws and debates."

They also claim that democracy is not the right form of government for Israel. [Moshe Feiglin's](#) "Jewish Leadership" movement – part of the Likud Party openly states its preference for a Sanhedrin religious court.

Are they all the same?

But what does democratic theory matter, when so many of us feel that all politicians are the same – corrupt?

Even during the 16th Knesset, more than a few politicians were clean and honest. Has anyone got a negative word to say about Uzi Landau's or Chaim Oron's moral stature?

Out of 120 Knesset members, several did outstanding legislative work (Michael Eitan), or supervised the government (Yuli Tamir) or the security establishment (Yuval Steinitz).

It is a mistake to stick them all in the same basket and to say they are all the same.

Every vote counts

The notion that elections don't influence anything is simply incorrect. In the United States, for example, the Republican Party manages to win elections because a large number of non-voters are black.

These potential voters lean towards policies pushed by the Democratic Party, but they can't be bothered to actually get out and vote because they feel their votes don't matter.

For this reason, President Bush's party has made great efforts – occasionally using devious, legally questionable methods, like in Florida – to prevent blacks from voting.

A similar phenomenon happens in Israel, too. Here, Arab voting rates are lower than Jewish ones. Therefore, they have fewer representatives in parliament than their percentage in society would suggest.

Thus, they have minimized their political representation. The same is true

for every weak sector of society, who, according to researchers, fail to vote.

Just ask Peres

Amongst election refuseniks there is one group who always think the opposite. In the 1996 elections between Benjamin Netanyahu and Shimon Peres, one candidate wanted to push the Oslo process forward, while the other wanted to stop it.

On the radical left there was a group of super-dovish intellectuals – most notably Tanya Reinhart – who thought Peres had not done enough for peace, and they called on voters to cast a white slip. The rest is history.

And so, despite the fact that the 16th Knesset may not have been the best in history, and despite the fact that some of the most corrupt amongst them will continue to drive their Volvos even after March 28, a white slip is not the answer.

Neither is using the Election Day holiday to go to the beach. Democracy is not perfect; it is just the best form of government there is.

The best weapon in a democracy, despite all its faults, is to vote. We must use the opportunity wisely.

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