

Bayan بیان ביאן

The Arabs in Israel הערבים בישראל

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From the Editor's Desk

The current issue of *Bayan* is published almost one month before the elections for the 22nd Knesset, scheduled for September 17, 2019. This issue contains one essay by Dr. Morsi Abu Mokh who analyzes the factors that influence political participation among Israel's Arab citizens and their voting intentions in the Knesset elections.

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The Konrad Adenauer Program for Jewish-Arab Cooperation (KAP) was established in 2004 by the German Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and Tel Aviv University as part of the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies. KAP is an expansion of the Program on Arab Politics in Israel established by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and Tel Aviv University in 1995. The purpose of KAP is to deepen the knowledge and understanding of Jewish-Arab relations in Israel through conferences, public lectures and workshops, as well as research studies, publications and documentation.

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Morsi Abu Mokh * / Between the Rational and the Emotional: Factors Influencing the Political Participation of Arab Citizens in Israel

Whereas in the past voting was based on ideological considerations, it now rests more upon personal considerations and narrow interests.

The influencing factors in voting intent are diverse and include education, occupation, gender, age, place of residence, group solidarity and more.

The more an Arab citizen feels his participation in the election will change the political reality, the more likely he is to vote and thus voter turnout in Arab society will increase.

Participation in elections is a central component of democratic governance. The participation of Israel's Arab citizens in politics, expressed at the ballot boxes on election day, is necessary to obtain legitimacy for democracy in general, and for legislators (of all political stripes) in particular, as election results are perceived as credible and representative of the will of the citizens. The greater the involvement of citizens in elections, the greater the strength of democratic rule in the state .

In the past two decades there has been a significant drop in the participation of Arab citizens in national Knesset elections: the percentage gradually declined, reaching 49% in the last election cycle, a number which should raise concern .

There has been significant research around the world on the topic of voter behavior and attitudes toward voting. Studies show that a person's decision to vote on election day is influenced by his ability to do so, by his motivation to vote, and by the difficulty he encounters in obtaining the necessary information to realize his right to vote. In the past, voters tended to vote according to an ideology which expressed itself in loyalty to a specific party. Today, voters give more weight to personal considerations that lean more and more on narrow personal interests (Herman, Heller and Atmor 2012, pp. 149, 233).

A variety of factors influence a voter's decisions – interests, where he lives, ideology and more – and not all of these factors are rational. Even decisions that appear rational are based upon subjective stances that have no rationale. It's important to note that our discussion of rationality or rational approaches is based on Game Theory, which assumes that voters employ considerations that rely on a lot of information, that they compare alternatives, and that they make choices that maximize their interest on the basis of cost-benefit considerations (Schafferman, 2013).

* **Dr. Morsi Abu Mokh** has served as mayor of the city of Baqa al-Gharbiyyah since 2011 and is currently in his second term. His doctoral study, which was undertaken at the University of Haifa, deals with the causes of ethnic conflicts in nation states and the role of social capital in building sustainable peace among divided ethnic communities in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Rwanda, and Sri Lanka. Dr. Abu Mokh researches contemporary political issues and specializes in political behavior of minorities and their affinity to central power. His current focus is on Knesset election boycotters from Israel's Arab sector, research that attempts to arrive to the roots of the phenomena, to understand it, and to explain its impact on the political future of the Arab minority in Israel.

The equation established by Downs paved the way for many researchers to develop the discourse on the decision of whether or not to vote (Downs, 1957). Downs contends that if a citizen is supposed to gain some positive compensation or benefit for voting, where the benefits outweigh the costs, then the citizen will participate in elections. The sense of satisfaction achieved by voting is meant to compensate for the disadvantages associated with costs and provides an incentive to vote .

Downs' equation reveals the paradox hidden in the very process of voting: it is only possible to benefit from a vote when it is supported by collective action, which effectively means that most citizens are not supposed to incur costs. As such, motivation or ability to vote increases the chances that one will vote in an election. Conversely, the extent to which a citizen encounters difficulty in voting decreases the likelihood of his participation in an election. Obstacles that stand in the way of a citizen with the right to vote can include issues of mobility or difficulty arriving to polling stations (as is the case with tens of thousand of Bedouins living in unrecognized villages, who are without means to arrive to polling stations in far-off cities and towns) and cultural obstacles, such as elderly Arab citizens who have the right to vote but cannot read and aren't familiar with the candidates or the parties. These difficulties focus on the various conditions that influence the voter – the information available to him about the location of the polls, the physical distance of the polling station to his residence, and the availability of information about the candidates and the political system in general .

For Arab citizens of Israel, having high motivation to vote doesn't necessarily lead to a decision to vote in elections, and on the other hand, obstacles to voting don't necessarily prevent his voting either (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). There is no way to delineate a single cause that explains an individual's decision to vote or not. The influencing factors on the decision to participate in democratic elections are, among others, education, profession, gender, age, genes, place of residence, race, group solidarity and more, as enumerated below.

- **Education:** Education has significant influence on a citizen's decision to vote. Studies show that citizens with formal education tend to participate in elections and therefore each additional year of study means a higher voting rate (Tenn, 2007). Education imparts skills that enable understanding of the political process and encourages them to vote by introducing a sense of civic duty; it awakens interest in the political process or places voters in social frameworks in which voting is considered a normative activity. Moreover, education can decrease the difficulty of voting (Nagler, 1991).
- **Profession and economic status:** A citizen's profession influences the decision to participate in elections. There is evidence that having a profession that grants authority or high status increases one's willingness to vote in elections (Sobel, 1993). One's financial situation is often determined by their occupation and the income derived from it, which in turn affects willingness to vote. Wealthy or rich people vote more than others (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993).
- **Gender** influences the decision to vote, and its influence has changed significantly over time. Since the mid-1980s the percentage of female voters has been comparable to the percentage of male voters and has even sometime surpassed it (Schlozman, Burns, Verba & Donahue, 1995). The voting gaps between the genders in Arab society in Israel also shrank, even though it is a conservative society in its character, and it is understood that additional factors

contributed to the narrowing of the gaps, as women were a weak population in Arab society in the past.

- **Family status:** Even family status has some influence on the voting rate – married couples (and couples who cohabit) vote more than singles (Stoker & Jennings, 1995).
- **Age** explains, among other things, the low voting rate of young Arabs. It appears that the tendency to vote strengthens as one matures and moves into mid-adulthood. Conversely, tendency to vote decreases after age 75 (Turner, Shields & Sharpe, 2001).
- **Historical events** that have been etched in a voter's memory and shaped his personality tend to have a unique influence on a person's attitude toward voting (Lyons & Alexander, 2000).
- **Place of residence:** Studies analyzing voter behavior have shown that people residing in rural areas vote more than people who live in cities. The tendency of farmers to vote in elections is influenced by their level of education and their income level (Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980). Those who live in areas with high socio-economic status are more likely to be politically active (Huckfeldt, 1979).
- **Social involvement:** A citizen who is involved in civic organizations is more likely to participate in elections those who are not involved. As a result, voluntary involvement in organizations may raise the voting rate because it awakens motivation and creates opportunities for social activists to serve society through the improvement of their civic skills (Verba et al., 1995).
- **Personality traits:** Studies focusing on analysis of behavioral patterns in parliamentary elections show that people who tend to trust in others vote more than others. Conversely, suspicious people cast doubt on the system more than those who are trusting, and they even object to the veracity of the election system and the legitimacy of the government in general (Cox, 2003).

Voting is a product of **habit**; it's reasonable to assume that a person who votes once will vote again. The social and psychological forces that prompted him to vote the first time continue to influence his decision in the election cycles to come (Gerber, Green & Shachar, 2003).

People with a **sense of duty** and civic commitment feel a moral obligation and motivation to participate in politics and therefore tend to vote in elections (Knack, 1994).

Having **patience** may raise the voting rate, and it has been observed that patient people prefer to wait longer for large rewards than to take a small reward earlier (Fowler & Kam, 2006).

- **Feelings of opposition:** A citizen who is strongly opposed to the positions of the government is more likely than others to take part in elections because of his desire for change. The larger the gap between the views of the candidate whose positions he accepts and the views of his contestant, the larger the chance that the citizen will vote in the elections (Holbrook et al., 2001). This large gap creates a kind of stimulus that pushes the voter to vote in order to increase the chances of the replacement he believes in (Plane & Gershtenson, 2004). Moreover, it appears that the narrower the margin between candidates on the day before the election, the more voters believe that their vote may determine the outcome of the election (Shachar & Nalebuff, 1999).

- **Group affiliation:** Affiliation with a particular social group (for example, a minority group) awakens a great deal of identification with group members and the development of group consciousness reinforces the tendency to vote in elections. Those who belong to the group signify that the lives of the group's members are linked in a meaningful way – especially if the group suffers from discrimination or disadvantage. Group members are likely to change their political behavior and their tendency to vote rises because of their desire to change what they view as their bleak reality. Their vote seeks to effect change and break free from negative cycles into healthier, more positive cycles (Tolleson-Rinehart, 1992).

Conclusion

Some of the factors listed above, which affect a citizen's decision whether or not to vote, are consistent with the general perception that Arab citizens will vote if the benefits outweigh the costs (i.e., the effort of obtaining election information and the time demands). They are also consistent with the argument that the Arab citizen's attitude towards voting is influenced by his motivation to vote, his ability to vote, and the difficulty involved. The more an Arab citizen feels that his participation in the election campaign will change the political reality, the more likely he is to vote and the more likely voter turnout will increase.

Because of the unique situation of Arabs in the state of Israel, it is unclear if they will vote in the next Knesset elections, and the issue is ambiguous. After the dismantling of the Joint List and the escalation of the seating dispute between its members, Arab citizens began to lose confidence in the party. The Joint List is in serious crisis and Arab citizens' faith in its abilities is waning. As such, the Arab citizen distances himself from the election. He feels that he has no influence on the results of the elections or on the political climate in Israel, and thus is likely to exclude himself from voting and from circles of influence. At the same time, the Arab public is highly alert to socio-political dynamics in Israel, and other entities may join the political arena to bring about change. For now, the Arab parties are struggling for their lives, and the Arab citizen is struggling for his rights and his daily life.

The factors that influence Arab voters are complex and not confined to a particular phenomenon. Some factors are irrational, thus making it difficult to predict voter behavior on election day. The more we understand these factors, the more we can understand what drives the citizens and improve the political system.

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