ELECTORAL REFORM IN ISRAEL: A GEOGRAPHER'S VIEW

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This paper sets out to examine some of the difficulties likely to arise as a result of reforms proposed to the Israeli electoral system. The main thrust of the paper is that the geographical implications of reforms in the electoral system have been inadequately considered or understood, if at all, by those who have proposed the changes, mainly politicians and political scientists. Consequently, many of the political implications that are understood to result from electoral reform proposals are in error due to a failure to comprehend all facets of the problem.

Electoral reform in the Israeli context refers to the abolition of the present system whereby the country elects 120 at-large members to the Knesset from party-lists in which the order of the candidates (and thus their likelihood of election) has been predetermined by the parties, leaving the voter no choice other than that of the party he favours most (Kraines, 1961).

There have been intermittent attempts to change the system during the past thirty years with several attempts being made in the Knesset to legislate electoral reform. In all except one case, these attempts have been unable to gain the support of more than half of all Knesset members (sixty-one or more) needed to amend the Basic Law dealing with the electoral system. In that particular instance in 1974, sixty-one members voted for a generalized version of an Electoral Reform Bill in its first reading: the Bill was subsequently buried in the committee state and notwithstanding the publicity given to Electoral Reform by one of the parties in the 1977 election campaign, it has not reappeared in the plenum (Ya'acobi & Ghera, 1975).

The electoral reform problem in Israel exhibits two facets. First there is the underlying dilemma of whether or not any such reforms should in fact be enacted. This is a political decision which Israeli politicians have decided against taking on several occasions. Should there eventually be a positive decision in this respect, a set of significant political changes seem likely to emerge.

The second facet to the electoral reform problem in Israel is the very practical aspect of making the reform operational. Under almost any circumstances, a reform of the current system would involve districting for the first time. The construction of boundaries dividing electoral districts from one another would thus add an interesting new element to the Israeli political scene. Not only has

this problem not been seriously confronted but it has barely been recognized as a significant factor in reform by those who have most vigorously advocated a change in the system (Waterman, 1977; 1980).

APPROACHES TO ELECTORAL DISTRICTING

As in many other countries which operate under a party list system, the individual voter in Israel casts his ballot for a party and is unable to express further preferences such as among candidates of any single party or of different parties. Thus, under the present system, the elected representatives are not directly responsible to the electorate and are beholden to the central committees of the political parties which, in many cases, are still responsible for determining the position of each member on their respective lists. Thus, the main reason for calling for electoral reforms in Israel is often to personalize the electoral process (Brichta, 1979).

As a consequence, the Israeli citizen has almost no equivalent of a Member of Parliament or Congress to whom grievances can be addressed automatically. In such a situation, he must initiate a series of moves along a chain of personal contacts in order to find the member of the Knesset most likely to take up his particular interest.

The current electoral system in Israel is the result of the adoption of the proportional representative electoral system employed by the World Zionist Congress and the single national constituency principle and party lists of candidate procedure that existed in the Jewish community quasi-government in Palestine during the Mandate period (Kraines, 1961). The party lists are designed to balance the interests of different social and economic sectors represented in the party throughout the country. Moreover, because Israeli society is one consisting mainly of immigrants and their children, distinct regional sentiments (as distinct from national loyalties as associations) are weak and have only begun to develop recently (Waterman, 1974; Cohen, 1977). Both the sectoral arrangement of society and the low measure of regional loyalties have until recently been the main factors responsible for the lack of support for a geographically-based system of elections in which one or more representatives would be responsible to the electorate in any particular constituency.

Assuming that there is now a measure of support for changing the existing system to an areally-based proportional electoral system and that this support is likely to increase with time as the sectoral organization of society weakens and the immigrant's identity with the locality and region in which he resides strengthens, several approaches to solving the problem of districting exists (Taylor & Johnston, 1979, 386—434).

The single-member constituency is rejected as a possible solution as its effect on the political system is considered too radical. As no party has ever succeeded in gaining an absolute parliamentary majority, no party has ever been in a position to pass a bill enabling a single party to form a majority government, the most likely result of such a reform prior to 1977. Before the elections of 1977, the Labour Party and its supporters would most likely have gained a majority of seats using a single-member first past-the-post system under almost any configuration thereby distorting the result of the popular vote at the expense of the other parties (Taylor & Johnston, 1979 40—42). Thus, some form of multi-member constituency system elected by a form of proportional

representation has been the most likely contender to replace the current system.

Because in many ways the list-system is the most proportional of the proportional systems, notwithstanding its deficie ìc es in terms of personal representation, equal representation amongst the constituencies has generally been stressed (Kraines, 1961, 85; Johnston, 1979, 62—70). Two proposals for multi-member electoral districts under proportional representation have been given more attention than others.

The first uses existing administrative areas to serve as electoral districts in a new electoral system. Although this obviates the need to draw new boundaries for the purpose of elections, several difficult problems remain unsurmounted. The proposals utilizing this approach involve the two highest levels in the administrative hierarchy, altogether comprising fourteen geographical subdivisions. On this basis, representation is allotted to each electoral district according to population or a surrogate such as registered voters. Thus, the smallest units would each be entitled to two representatives in a 120-member Knesset; the largest (Tel-Aviv District) would receive thirty-nine. In a constituency with thirty-nine representatives there would be a lack of the personal factor similar to that existing countrywide today, and this deficiency is usually cited as one of the principal reasons in the need to reform (Brichta, 1979). Even an arbitrary division of the Tel-Aviv District into three separate units leaves districts with up to sixteen representatives (Brichta, 1972).

The second approach to districting is that which has acquired most support from parliamentary groups and which formed the basis of the partially successful Electoral Reform Bill of 1974. This approach involves the creation of several electoral districts each electing an equal number of representatives.

The Draft Bill and the proposals leading up to it also specified that as far as possible, there should be equal numerical representation, requiring that each electoral district possess an equal population in order to ensure this. The Bill also implied that contiguity of the electoral districts was to be achieved by specifying the need to ensure their geograpical integrity. Several proposals have been put forward at different times under this framework. The proposals of the Labour Party included eighteen five-member and thirty three-member constituencies with the remaining thirty members elected from national lists (Brichta, 1972; Ya'acobi & Ghera, 1975). A later proposal was for sixteen five-member electoral districts with forty members elected nationally (Ha'Aretz, 16.1.1971). The Bill which passed its first reading had absorbed so much opposition that it was much diluted and only specified that a majority of members be elected on a district basis with the remainder from national lists.

In spite of the fact that the Israeli and American political scene differ considerably from one another, the criteria set out for districting in Israel resemble those used in redistricting single-member American districts in the 1960's and 1970's in which great emphasis was placed on achieving equal numerical representation at the expense of other criteria (Hacker, 1964).

RECOGNITION OF THE DISTRICTING PROBLEM

Electoral reform involving the creation of relatively small, equally-sized districts would probably do much to improve the problem of elections that yield representatives who are not responsible to a clearly defined segment of the

electorate. However, only some aspects of the problem in creating such a system appear to have been recognized and in particular, little thought has been given to the problem of implementing these proposals.

There is an awareness of the political implications of distortions of election results that are caused by differences in constituency size. In particular, attention has been paid to the likelihood of lack of adequate representation of smaller parties with smaller constituency size (Brichta, 1979, 50—51; Taylor, 1973). Similarly, there is reason to believe that the criterion of geographical contiguity of electoral districts has been understood and that the electoral districts should be whole, undivided units. Fulfillment of this criterion aids in minimizing the risk of a gerrymander caused by inclusion of several detached units in a single constituency (Johnston, 1978, 172—183).

However, the difficulties of actually drawing the district boundaries have received scant attention and it may be safely assumed that most aspects of the geography of districting have not been recognized at all. Similarly, there is little evidence to show that the criterion of compactness, designed to prevent another kind of gerrymander, distortion of shape, has been understood by those advocating a constituency system based on new territorial divisions (Johnston, 1978, 172—183).

An example of the difficulty in seeing the many facets of electoral reform has been shown recently in a discussion of the results of the 1977 General Election in relation to the future of electoral reform (Brichta, 1979, 50—51).

A recent proposal for sixteen five-member constituencies served as the geographical basis for the discussion of the possible outcome of the election had it been conducted on a district system. Yet, the sixteen electoral districts are directly based on the use of the administrative Districts and Subdistricts which are inappropriate to this type of districting, for several reasons, A districting plan such as that proposed would yield population differences of more than 25 percent around the mean population per electoral district, a clear case of over representation and under-representation and thus constituting gerrymander. This conflicts with the stated requirement that population of the electoral districts be made equal, as far as possible. The subsequent analysis is further weakened by a statement by the author that was "unable to stick to the principle of equal representation in the districts", thus flouting one of the basic premises of this type of electoral districting (Brichta, 1979, 48).

Although the principle of equal representation was not retained in the analysis, such divisions are indeed possible, even if the result is less than satisfactory. A division into sixteen or eighteen electoral districts each of equal population is possible if based on the Polling District, the smallest geographical unit for which statistics are available (Waterman, 1979). Use of such units produces constituencies that are of almost equal population, are compact and have a high likelihood of contiguity. However, such districts fail on a fourth criterion, homogeneity (Morrill, 1973).

To achieve the desired levels of numerical equality, compactness and cartographic contiguity, the trade-off is with existing recognized boundaries. Although administrative boundaries at the District and Subdistrict levels can probably be sacrificed without much loss of recognition or identity, it is
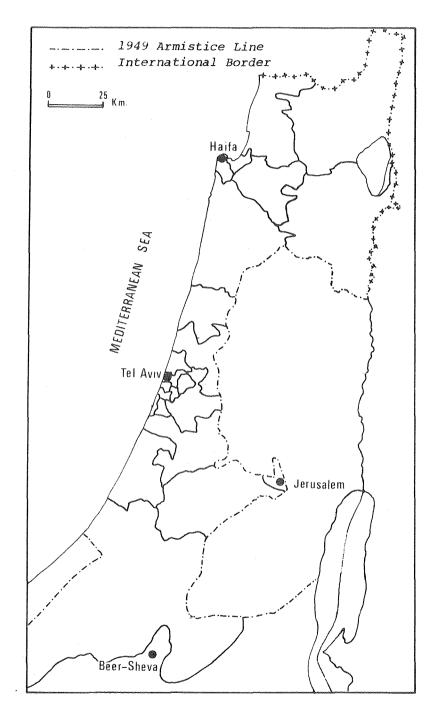
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Fig. 1: Israel, Compromise electoral districting solution
involving 24 districts (after Waterman, 1977)

desireable to retain as far as possible such administrative and political
boundaries as exist on the next level of the hierarchy. This should include where

possible, the Local and Regional Councils (smaller towns and rural settlements) and the Municipalities, or in the case of the larger cities, Quarters. With such constraints it was hard to obtain a satisfactory division (Waterman, 1980) (Figure 1).

A twenty-four constituency solution provided a reasonable districting plan in which the criteria of population equality, compact and contiguous districts that
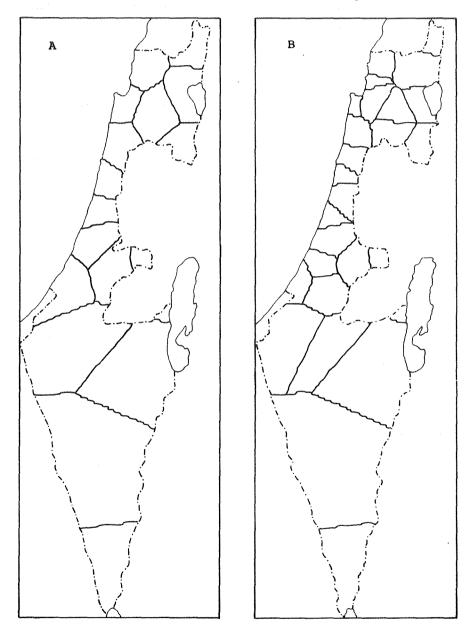

Fig. 2 : Israel, Minimum distance regions around central places.
A) 17 regions   B) 26 regions (after Degani, 1977)

were identifiable were met. Even in this case, the configuration of Israel's population is such that it is impossible to retain all of the districting criteria outlined and, at the same time, assure that established administrative boundaries will be retained in every case (Waterman, 1980).

Another approach to the districting problem in the Israeli case has been set out by Degani (1977) using a logical geographical-mathematical approach of minimum distance regions. However, the results obtained yield electoral districts strikingly different from existing administrative regions (Figure 2).

What is interesting is that these points have been missed or dismissed almost in their entirety by political scientists and politicians. It seems absurd to discuss the political consequences of projected elections or to postdict the probable or possible outcome of elections without first examining the viability of the districting base. This is particularly apt where the elections were actually conducted on an at-large basis (Grudgin & Taylor, 1979).

Moreover, it is somewhat naive to suggest that it is possible to take national at-large election results and project them into constituencies without recognizing that a change in the electoral system would also change the style of campaigning and in many cases would probably affect the decisions reached by the voter. Split-ticket voting in Israel when national and local elections have been held simultaneously has been a recognized phenomenon for years. The Israeli voters, even recent immigrants, are more alert to local and regional personalities and problems, and thus more sophisticated, than has often been credited (Deshen, 1969; Arian & Weiss, 1969). There is little doubt that "personalities" campaigning locally and being able to stress certain local and regional problems as the potential district representative could alter the outcome of elections in a constituency (Johnston, 1974; Taylor & Johnston, 1979, 320—321).

There is also little apparent recognition of the fact that within a constituency system, surplus vote allocation would occur in every constituency rather than in the country at large, thereby creating marginal seats which could swing from one party to another with only a small change in the number of votes cast. Such a situation would involve more intensive campaigns in some districts than in others, a factor also likely to influence the outcome of an election.

CONCLUSIONS

Although electoral reform in Israel has been discussed from time to time during the past three decades and fairly intensively during the past ten years, views have become somewhat fixed.

For political reasons, a miniaturization of the present list-system involving block voting for a party has been suggested for the constituencies. The Single Transferable Vote has not been seriously discussed. Perhaps undue emphasis has been placed on two proposals. The first involves the retention of existing boundaries within the framework of equally-sized districts. This can yield workable solutions but needs periodic redistricting in order to allow for changes in voter distribution. The second proposes the use of variable-sized districts by retaining use of upper-level administrative boundaries. The large size of some of the resulting electoral districts means that impersonal elections, similar to those of today, would be repeated in certain areas. Moreover, the form of representation in the large districts would be different to those in which a smaller

number of representatives are elected.

In the light of these difficulties, it is probably desirable to search for an alternative approach. Paddison's suggestion for constituencies of variable size using current administrative areas is a good basis for districting Israel under a reformed electoral system (Paddison, 1979). Choice of appropriate upper and lower limits would assure that the type of representation in each constituency would not differ significantly. Similarly, surplus votes would carry relatively equal value whatever the system used to allocate those votes amongst the parties. In addition, it has been shown that this system is stable over time in that changes in population distribution are accounted for by a reallocation of seats rather than a redrawing of constituency boundaries. This approach also allows voters to become familiar with constituency boundaries over time. A solution based on this model could therefore be seen as a workable compromise between the two approaches adopted in Israel towards electoral reform till now.

Most analyses and proposals to reform the electoral system in Israel have so far dealt with either the political decision itself or the possible political consequences of adopting a constituency system on the outcome of elections. By injecting the discussion with geographical viewpoints, it is clear that electoral reform in Israel is a good deal more complex than has hitherto been understood and that attitudes to electoral reform and its possible consequences need to be reassessed in the light of a fuller understanding of the problem.

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