



2019 September Elections: Arab Voters and Changing Political Discourse

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Next week's elections will bring to a close a unique chapter in Israel's political history. Unprecedented back-to-back campaign cycles have yielded significant developments in Israel's Arab political arena, and in some respects, for Jewish-Arab relations in the country. Before jumping to what comes next, it is worth looking at what has already transpired.

Changes in the political landscape can be seen in tactical developments, from the difficult and drawn-out reunification process of the Joint List, through the significant degree of outreach to Arab society by Jewish-led Opposition parties, to intensifying right-wing efforts to invalidate Arab participation via claims ranging from [voter fraud](#) to [malicious intentions](#). Among these, a key moment occurred in late-August when MK Ayman Odeh, Chair of the Joint List, proclaimed [Arab readiness to join a Center-Left coalition](#) under certain conditions, stating: "[I don't want to wait until there is a change for me to start influencing](#). I want to be part of that process." Odeh's statement constituted a break from Arab parties' historical stance and challenged leaders from both Arab and Jewish parties to respond.

Reactions to Odeh's overture were mixed in both Jewish and Arab circles. In the context of [delegitimization campaigns](#) against Arab voters and leadership and Odeh's lack of [coordination among his co-leaders](#), warned Jack Khoury in Haaretz, the aim "[to spark public debate](#) that would serve the Joint List and the entire leftist camp" may very well backfire.

Yet the move underscored two questions being seriously examined regarding Arab political participation this time around: What is the level of readiness for Jewish-Arab political partnerships in Jewish and Arab society? And, what would motivate more of the Arab electorate to vote?

In recent years, [public opinion polls](#) have consistently shown that a majority of Arab citizens seek greater political involvement and influence in the national government—as part of a coalition and otherwise. But [recent surveys focused on Arab voter turnout](#) ascribe low participation to an overriding sense among Arab citizens that their vote in [national elections lacks influence or efficacy](#), and a perception of "[abusive attitudes of Jewish politicians towards](#) the Arab public."

With more than half of Arab voters abstaining in April, the Arab electorate (16% of the total vote) is recognized today as some of the "[greatest unexploited potential for increasing the number of votes](#)" in the coming elections. As a result, Jewish-led parties on the left, and even the leading Jewish Opposition party Kahol Lavan which previously [did not reach out to the Arab public](#) for fear of alienating right-leaning voters, have been pushing political boundaries to [engage Arab citizens and speak to their concerns](#).

Kahol Lavan leader Benny Gantz gave interviews to [Arab media](#), met with Arab civil society leaders, and visited Arab towns, as did other key figures from his party. Labor chief Amir Peretz launched his campaign

in an Arab city, promising to end the “[demon of racism](#),” while Ehud Barak issued an apology to Arab society for the [events of October 2000](#) after launching his new Democratic Israel Party.

Still, the question of governing partnership remains a tense and sensitive one. Responding to Odeh’s move, PM Netanyahu said it proves what “[the election is about: It’s either Bibi - or Tibi](#),” echoing the slogan used by Likud to make [Arab citizens a wedge issue](#) in April’s elections. Kahol Lavan, the main target of Odeh’s gesture, [ruled out the possibility of such partnership](#), saying it would not work with anyone who doesn’t recognize Israel as a Jewish state. Meanwhile, Jewish-led parties on the left, [Labor and the newly formed Democratic Union](#), welcomed the statement.

Arab leadership was no less divided on the issue. Leading Arab MKs from the Hadash, Balad and Ta’al parties of the Joint List issued a host of [clarifications and objections](#) to Odeh’s statement, saying they will not sit with “racists and generals,” leading Odeh himself to [further emphasize his preconditions](#) for such partnership in the following weeks.

But a small-scale survey following the announcement [suggests that 76% of Arab citizens welcome](#) Odeh’s move. According to Arab political analyst Ameer Fakhoury, Odeh’s statement was less a demand of Jewish leadership than an intra-Arab conversation, reflecting “[the strong desire of Palestinian Arabs in Israel to put their hand on the national wheel](#).” It was a dramatic step in the growing recognition that the “[Palestinian Arab public in Israel needs, can and is allowed to get wet to save its people from drowning](#).”

The impact of Odeh’s message will depend on many variables, not least of which is Tuesday’s outcome. Author and Hartman Fellow Amotz Asa-el predicts that “Odeh’s road will remain the one not taken” in the near future, but in hindsight, “[parting with his colleagues' rigidity](#) will be this election's most significant event.”

In the meantime, the Arab vote remains in the spotlight. The following detailed update delves into the efforts of Arab and Jewish-led Opposition parties to reach Arab voters, counter-efforts by the right wing, and [civil society campaigns](#) to increase Arab voter turnout.

THE ARAB VOTE

“Long relegated to the margins of Israeli politics, Arab voters are playing a central part in this do-over election,” [writes Yardena Schwartz](#). “On the right, they are being weaponized to scare Israelis into going to the polls...On the left, Arab voters are being actively courted by Israeli politicians who finally understand that they need their support to unseat Netanyahu.”

Following historically low voter turnout in April’s election, research surveys found that the [two top factors that would motivate Arab citizens to vote](#) would be “a declaration by the center-left parties that issues of importance for the Arab citizenry (such as violence and poverty) are part of their platform,” and “the [re]formation of a Joint List including all Arab parties.”

Arab-Led Parties – Joint List Reunification and Outreach

Immediately after the call for new elections, the four Arab-led parties [began talks about reconstituting the Joint List](#), the union of the parties that spurred a 63% Arab voter turnout and won 13 Knesset seats in the 2015 election. Party leaders stated that they understood that the electorate wanted them to run together, with Arab citizens clearly disappointed before the April elections that their leaders were unable to overcome differences in order to work together toward common goals.

However, it took almost another two months before the four parties—Hadash, Ta'al, Balad and Ra'am—reached an agreement to run together in September. Much of the delay was due to [disagreements about allocating spots](#) on the Joint List among the four parties, which led to discord and accusations between the parties' leaders and activists.

Arab journalists and analysts say that dissolution in April, followed by the prolonged talks over list slots and the negative internal discourse, have created an impression in the Arab public [that their leaders have not moved beyond “politics as usual,”](#) leaving the Joint List [with the task of regaining voters' trust](#). Many Arab citizens still believe that the leaders of the Joint List are [not responsive to or concerned with the issues that are important to them](#), such as crime and violence, economic development and integration into Israeli society, and are too focused on the external Israeli-Palestinian arena. This perception persists despite hard data to the contrary [from 2013](#) to [this day](#) regarding the work of Arab political leaders to promote the interests of their constituency.



Figure 1 “We will reach 1 million voters”

Joint List members have targeted their messages in recent weeks in response including: admitting mistakes have been made and promising lessons are being learned ([Arabic and Hebrew](#)); presenting a harmonious reality among themselves ([Arabic](#)), publicizing the support of key Arab public figures in the Joint List (e.g. [here](#) and [here](#) – Arabic and Hebrew), showcasing the work of Arab MKs ([Arabic and Hebrew](#)) and a get-out-the vote campaign called [“Reaching 1 Million Voters.”](#)

It has yet to be seen whether the united ticket will motivate Arab citizens to vote. A survey by the [Abraham Initiatives](#), [Sikkuy](#) and [aChord](#), taken before the Joint List reunified, found that a Joint List ticket would [motivate one-quarter of respondents to vote](#). However, some activists have voiced concern that a [lack of enthusiasm about the ticket among voters](#) will keep them away from the polls next Tuesday. A survey published this week [found that only 32% of Arabs](#) are certain they will vote and estimate a turnout of 56%.

Jewish-Led Parties

With a clearer understanding of these motivating factors and of the demographic reality of the Arab electorate, a parallel development over the past weeks has been increased outreach by Jewish left and center-left parties to Arab voters. While right wing parties effectively [made Arab political participation a wedge issue in the April elections](#), and are campaigning with similar messages – and [with increased acrimony – in the current elections](#), this approach appears to be [“losing its deterrent power on the center-left.”](#) A poll conducted in August by the Abraham Initiatives and aChord Center, among Jewish respondents found that [“Jewish supporters are not deterred by messages that appeal to the Arab public,”](#) and that messages about equality and addressing racism would in fact increase Jewish support for a center-left ticket by 11%.

Opposition party leaders have thus been [actively campaigning for Arab votes](#), a contrast from the previous campaign [in which the list did not seek Arab support](#):

- Kahol Lavan:** Kahol Lavan MK Ram Ben-Barak said [“It was a mistake that we didn’t pay attention to Arab voters in April,”](#) and that “We have an entire department dedicated to the Arab sector.” List head Benny Gantz, interviewed at length in the popular Arab news portal PANET ([Hebrew summary](#)), stated his commitment to address concerns in Arab society such as combating violence and alleviating housing shortages, restating these commitments in a recent interview to Bokra.net ([Hebrew](#)). In a later statement, Gantz said (to representatives of the organization [Standing Together](#) who showed up at his home to discuss Jewish-Arab partnership) that he would [make an effort to appoint an Arab minister](#). [“There is no reason I wouldn’t look Israeli Arabs in the eyes and say to them: You are equal and influential in every way,”](#) he recently said to the Jerusalem Post.



Gantz also visited a number of Arab localities, including a [visit to the Bedouin city of Rahat](#), the first election event in the city by a Jewish-led party in a decade, while list co-chair Yair Lapid visited Kfar Kara and other MKs have made similar visits to Arab towns ([Hebrew](#)). Kahol Lavan has taken out advertising on Arabic news portals such as Bokra.net and in Arabic language posters in Arab localities.

- Israel Democratic Party:** After forming a new party in June, former PM Ehud Barak [apologized for the killing of 12 Arab citizens](#) by Israeli security forces in [the events of October 2000](#) at the beginning of the Second Intifada while he was Prime Minister. The apology, which was a precondition of MK Issawi Freij (Meretz) to establishing the Democratic Union list (the union of several left-wing parties and leaders), generated considerable controversy in Arab society. Some [stated it was an important move](#) and others [viewed it as a transparent attempt to secure Arab votes](#). Democratic Union leaders continue efforts to increase Arab citizens’ support for the list, including numerous events in Arab localities and statements regarding the need to “replace the nation-state law with an equality law” ([Hebrew](#)).
- Labor-Gesher:** Labor-Gesher Chairman Amir Peretz has been [spending Saturdays in Arab, Bedouin and Druze towns and villages](#) and senior figures in the party, such as the head of Labor’s “Young Guard” have been [reaching out to Arab voters](#) and speaking about the importance of Jewish-Arab partnership ([Hebrew](#)).

Meanwhile, even right-wing parties have been making efforts to attract Arab voters. Yamina leader MK Ayelet Shaked, for example, held a Facebook live chat with supporters in which she invited veteran analyst and intelligence specialist Mordechai Kedar, who explained in Arabic to potential voters why they should support Yamina rather than the Joint List ([Hebrew](#)).

Such outreach efforts are raising some controversy among the Arab public, with some activists claiming the Jewish parties, [most of which have no or only symbolic Arab representation on their lists](#), want “Arabs as a decoration” ([Hebrew](#)), and other claiming Jewish politicians will only raise turnout [“by engaging with](#)

[the community](#), through collaboration with civil society organizations and local municipalities to understand its needs and address them in the most efficient way.”

RIGHT-WING COUNTER EFFORTS

As Jewish parties increase their outreach, the right-wing Likud party “[has been busy looking for ways to reduce the number of votes cast in the Arab sector](#),” based on the understanding that the higher the percentage of voters in that sector, the bigger the center-left bloc will be.” Right-wing parties have responded to increased outreach to Arab citizens with attacks on [the legitimacy and validity of Arab votes and political participation](#), including accusations that opposition leaders are [relying on Arab parties who want to destroy the State of Israel](#), and more general [fearmongering against the Arab population](#).

Examples include:

- **Push for Cameras and Claims of Voter Fraud:** After the [Central Election Committee ruled](#) that [Likud activists would not be able to use cameras in voting stations](#), (as it did in [Arab polling stations on April 9](#)), the PM and the Likud [tried unsuccessfully to rush through new legislation](#) that would allow party representatives to take pictures and video of ballot locations and document the voting process.

PM Netanyahu contended that the proposed law was intended to “[prevent election fraud](#)” and maintain “the purity of the elections process,” claiming that Balad only managed to secure enough votes in the April election due to election fraud at Arab polling stations. ([Hebrew](#)), a claim that was [found to be baseless](#). The proposed law, [harshly criticized](#) by numerous journalists, activists and [legal experts](#), as well as by [President Rivlin](#), was also [declared unconstitutional by the Attorney General](#). Nonetheless, it was [approved unanimously by the Cabinet](#) on September 8 and advanced to the Knesset.

Following Kahol Lavan’s announcement that it would vote against the bill, Netanyahu accused the list of “colluding with Ahmed Tibi and Ayman Odeh” and planning “to steal the elections” ([Hebrew](#)). Over the past few weeks, numerous analysts wrote that the slogan “purity of elections” was a ploy to allow cameras at voting locations, which would in turn [suppress Arab voter turnout](#) (as was [done in April’s elections](#)). In response, MK Ayman Odeh said in a TV interview “we will not be intimidated. This will actually help us raise the voting rate” ([Hebrew](#)).

- **Facebook Messenger:** An automatic online messenger on Netanyahu’s Facebook page called on supporters to convince others to vote Likud by warning against “[a left-wing government...that relies on the Arabs, who want to annihilate us all – women, children and men](#).” The message led to a [barrage of condemnations](#), while Likud claimed the message was a staffer mistake, and the PM’s messenger was consequently [blocked by Facebook](#).

GET-OUT-THE VOTE EFFORTS

Despite renewed efforts by the Joint List and greater outreach by Jewish-led parties, it is not clear that these suffice to fuel a sense of purpose and motivate Arab citizens to vote. As [columnist Salman Masalha](#) explains, “an Arab citizen has no incentive to go out and vote.” But many Arab activists and Jewish and

Arab shared society organizations are promoting voting as an exercise in democracy, and to realize the opportunity to be a decisive factor in these elections—regardless of who they vote for.

Writer and journalist Odeh Bisharat urges Arab voters to “[Vote...and Oust Bibi](#)”, activists state that Arabs should vote and then, “if the Joint List leaders fail – we will replace them” ([Hebrew](#)), and hip-hop artist Tamer Nafar, who wrote in Haaretz that [he and his wife intend to vote for the Joint List](#), despite what he perceives as its imperfections. There have also been voices in Arab society [urging votes for Jewish-led parties](#) as a better way to exert influence and attain civil equality than supporting the Joint List.

Some in Jewish society who wish to see a center-left government are also reaching out to Arab citizens, convinced that their vote is key to forming an alternative to a right-wing coalition. Writer Ilan Scheinfeld [issued a public letter to Arab citizens](#) urging them to effect change by voting. “I ask you from the bottom of my heart – don’t stay home and don’t worry about cameras at the polling station. Come en masse to vote for a better life together for all of us.” Amira Haas issued a written “[plea to my Palestinian friends](#)” to “Please vote, and vote for the Joint List.”

Civil Society Efforts

In a similar vein, a number of organizations are working to increase Arab voter participation in the September election:

- **17/9:** A [new coalition of 11 groups active in Arab civil society, called “17/9”](#) has deployed hundreds of volunteers around the country who are using canvassing, social media and billboards urging Arab citizens that they “don’t have the privilege to stay home.” The coalition is aims to convince citizens that they can help shape events if they participate. A host of public figures, among them leading women activists, have also joined the campaign, appearing on election posters that state: “Voting for the Knesset is both a right and an obligation.”



- **Bokra.net:** Arab news portal, Bokra.net, operating out of Nazareth is also running a campaign encouraging Arab citizens to vote by providing data and links about the elections on its homepage, as well as by producing a special video where leading [Arab women are encouraging other Arab women to vote](#).
- **Zazim:** In an effort to get Negev Bedouin living in unrecognized villages, and especially women, to vote, the organization [Zazim](#) is raising funds to hire taxis and buses to transport them to the polls on election day. Bedouin communities in the south often lack access to public transportation and are far from voting stations. The organization is also appealing to women to volunteer to drive Bedouin women to election sites ([Hebrew](#)), and is aiming to be able to help 15,000 people to vote. Recently, the Likud party [filed an injunction aiming to stop this activity](#). Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit [voiced his objection to Likud’s appeal](#).

- **Standing Together:** Standing Together has an [online petition to increase government funding](#) for Arabic-language resources that encourage voter participation. The organization contends that only 7% of the Central Elections Commission budget for voter outreach for the April elections was used for Arabic materials and is demanding that it be increased to 20% for this election, commensurate with the Arab population of Israel.
- **Sikkuy:** [Sikkuy is running a special campaign](#) that aims to counter false claims against the Arab MKs that they do not work for Arab society but rather are only interested in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This perception has become prevalent among the Arab public following years of such accusations by Jewish politicians and media ([Hebrew](#)), but according to Sikkuy's data, it is a false accusation as over 97% of the bills promoted in recent years by Arab MKs centered on the daily lives of Arab citizen of Israel.
- **The Abraham Initiatives:** [The Abraham Initiatives](#), an organization deeply involved in promoting political participation in Arab society, is running a campaign that pressures Jewish-led parties to “engage with Arab voters,” under the slogan “No more excuses,” citing the results of their numerous surveys that show Arab citizens are interested in political partnership.

