



Covid-19 and the 2021 Elections in Israel: Challenges and Opportunities

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Contents

Covid-19 and the 2021 Elections in Israel: Challenges and Opportunities	5
1. Introduction	5
2. Institutional context	5
3. Covid-19 levels in the run-up to the 2021 elections	6
4. Voting measures introduced and the impact on the election campaign	9
5. The challenge of counting	10
6. Voter turnout	11
7. Lessons and opportunities	12
References	13
About the author	15
About International IDEA	15

Covid-19 and the 2021 Elections in Israel: Challenges and Opportunities

Ofer Kenig

1. Introduction

Israel was the first country to experience two general elections at the national level under restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic. However, while the 2020 elections were conducted at the very early stages of the pandemic in Israel, and were not greatly affected by it, the 2021 elections were very different. The fourth elections in under two years, they were the result of a political deadlock that had failed to produce a new government in the two elections of April and September 2019, or to maintain a coalition in power that had been formed following the 2020 elections.

The Central Election Committee (CEC) introduced unprecedented measures and adjustments to the voting process with the aim of minimizing the health risk to voters. These measures, as well as a reduction in the number of Covid-19 cases in the final stretch of the campaign, contributed to the successful conduct of free and fair elections. The modest decline in voter turnout can be attributed to other factors than the impact of the pandemic on citizens' motivation to vote.

This case study examines the institutional context of the 2021 general elections in Israel, focused on the electoral system, the pandemic-related voting measures and the role of the CEC. It describes the timeline leading up to the 2021 elections, paying attention to both political events and pandemic trends at each stage of the campaign. It analyses the various measures introduced to protect voters and allow infected citizens to vote, and addresses the challenges of vote counting and the impact on voter turnout.

2. Institutional context

Israel uses a proportional electoral system to elect the Knesset, its unicameral parliament. The 120 members of the Knesset are elected in a single nationwide district using a closed list system, which means that voters cannot express a preference for a candidate or candidates. This makes Israel's electoral system an 'extreme' example of proportional representation. The proportionality of the system is somewhat moderated by an electoral threshold, currently

3.25, but the Israeli parliament is still one of the most fragmented of the established parliamentary democracies (Shugart 2021).

Voting options for citizens are limited. They are required to cast a ballot in-person at a specific polling station on election day. Each citizen is informed by mail, or on a designated website, about three or four weeks before the elections at which polling station he or she is entitled to vote. This would usually be close to the citizen's home address as registered with the Ministry of the Interior. A few exceptions to this rule have been introduced over time as solutions for certain groups that cannot attend the polling stations at which they are registered. These are mainly for Israel Defense Forces (IDF) personnel stationed at distant military bases, hospital inpatients and prisoners. Apart from some soldiers in military bases who vote a few days before election day, there are no alternative arrangements such as postal, online or early voting. Overseas voting is limited to Israeli diplomats and official emissaries stationed abroad. Therefore, tens of thousands of Israeli citizens living abroad can exercise their right to vote only by travelling to Israel on or before election day (Kenig and Plesner 2016).

The CEC is the body in charge of running parliamentary elections in Israel. This electoral management body (EMB) comprises a political committee made up of representatives of political parties, and an administrative/operational headquarters led by a General Manager and staffed by non-partisan civil servants. The Chair of the CEC, an acting Supreme Court judge, heads this two-part organization. The political committee has a number of responsibilities, from final approval of the list of candidates running in the elections to the power to ban a list on various grounds (Shamir and Weinshall-Margel 2017). The administrative headquarters is responsible for all the operational aspects of running and managing elections. These include recruiting and training the election staff, running the elections on election day, counting the votes and publishing the results.

3. Covid-19 levels in the run-up to the 2021 elections

The Covid-19 pandemic broke amid a profound political crisis in Israel, in the run-up to the third parliamentary elections within a year. Both the April 2019 and the September 2019 elections had failed to produce a new government and a third election had been called for 2 March 2020. Following the latter elections, a government finally took office on 17 May but the Knesset was dissolved on 22 December 2020 and a fourth election in under two years was called for 23 March 2021. Israel was the first country to hold two national elections during the Covid-19 pandemic (See Table 1).

The March 2020 elections were held at the initial stages of the Covid-19 outbreak, and were therefore hardly affected by the pandemic. A day before the elections, the Ministry of Health announced that there were 5,630 citizens in quarantine at home. These citizens were able to vote in 16 designated polling stations, open between 10:00 and 17:00 on the voting day (*Times of Israel* 2020). They were asked to arrive in their own cars and were instructed to wear face masks while voting. The CEC staff in these polling stations wore full protective clothing throughout the procedure. Despite the relatively small number of citizens required to use the designated stations, complaints about long queues forced voting hours to be extended by two hours (Chilai, Blumenthal and Alon 2020).

Table 1. Double crisis: A timeline of Israel's political and health crises

2019	
9 April	Elections
29 May	Failure to form a government, parliament dissolved, elections called for 17 September
17 September	Elections
12 December	Failure to form a government, parliament dissolved, elections called for 2 March 2020
2020	
27 February	First confirmed case of Covid-19
2 March	Elections
20 March	First death linked to Covid-19
7 April	First lockdown begins
17 May	The 35th government takes office
24 May	Prime Minister Netanyahu's trial begins
18 September	Second lockdown begins
20 December	First Covid-19 vaccination
22 December	Failure to approve the state budget, parliament is dissolved and elections are called for 23 March 2021
27 December	Third lockdown begins
2021	
5 February	Death toll reaches 5,000
21 February	Number of vaccinated citizens (2 doses) reaches 3 million
2 March	The cabinet approves the conduct of election campaign events: up to 300 persons at indoor locations and up to 500 at outdoor locations
23 March	Elections

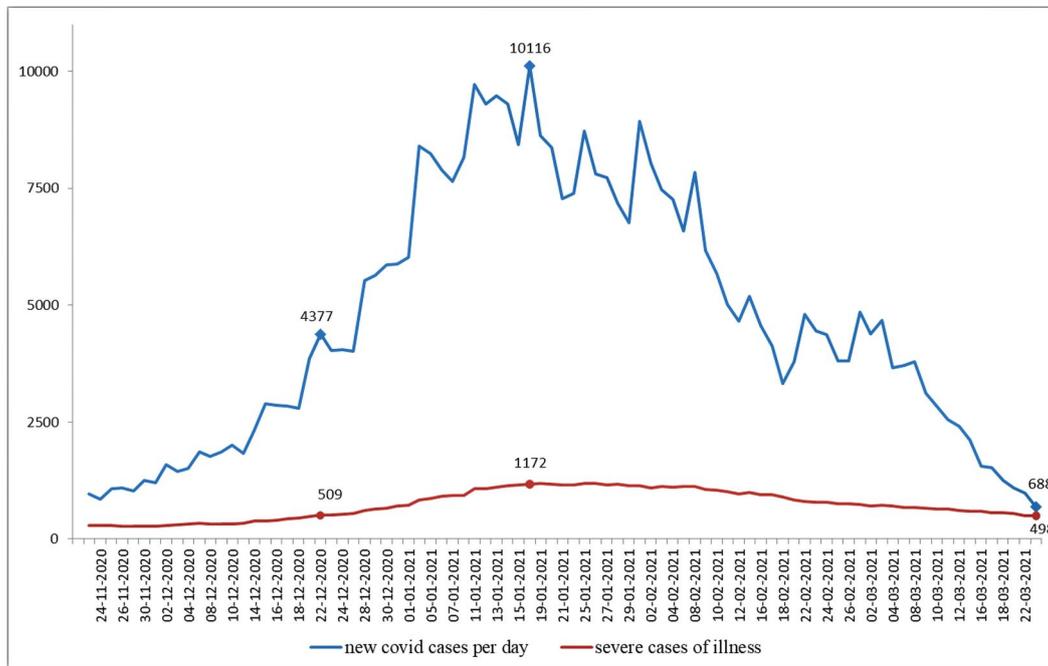
Source: Author constructed using country public information.

The pandemic situation in the run-up to the March 2021 elections was much more severe than it had been for the 2020 elections. This forced the CEC to introduce extensive adaptations to the voting procedure. On the day the Knesset was automatically dissolved due to the failure to pass the annual state budget, more than 4,000 new Covid-19 cases were reported. This alarming rise in the level of cases marked the beginning of a 'third wave' (see Figure 1). Five days later, Israel entered its third lockdown. This involved various restrictions, such as a prohibition on travelling more than 1,000 metres from home, the closure of leisure and cultural activities, and the closure of all non-essential stores and services (Jaffe-Hoffman 2020).

Despite the alarming rise in the number of Covid-19 cases being recorded in the early stages of the campaign, postponing the elections was never considered an option. The only voice to toy with the idea was the deputy minister of health, who said that if Covid-19 infections did not decrease, the ministry would recommend postponing the elections for a

month (Lis 2021). The next day, however, he clarified that the opinions expressed were his own, and that there was no need to delay the elections.

Figure 1. Covid-19 levels in Israel, 23 November 2020 to 23 March 2021



Source: Compiled by the author from data provided by the Ministry of Health, <<https://datadashboard.health.gov.il/COVID-19/general>>.

The CEC held a number of internal discussions on the challenges presented. A January 2021 CEC document on the proposed budget for the elections states:

The main challenge is the conduct of a proper elections procedure under coronavirus conditions...especially in the light of the high levels of uncertainty, such as estimating in advance the level of infections and the number of citizens in quarantine. The guidelines have [the CEC] laid down the creation of a proper balance between conducting elections according to democratic standards, providing every eligible voter with the opportunity to exercise her right to vote, while taking all measures to maintain public health. (CEC 2021a: 9)

The elections budget was set at NIS 675 million (about USD 208.9 million), which included a ‘coronavirus supplement’ of nearly NIS 220 million (about USD 68.09 million). This addition covered the various measures introduced to accommodate the challenge of conducting elections under the threat of Covid-19 (CEC 2021b).

Therefore, the CEC presumed that the 2021 elections would be held amid high levels of Covid-19 infection. As election day came closer, however, the extent of the pandemic declined as a direct result of the remarkable vaccine campaign that had begun on 20 December 2020. Israel has a highly digitized, community-based health system. By law, all citizens must register with one of the country’s four national health maintenance organizations (HMOs). These proved particularly adept at orchestrating an effective and successful national vaccine campaign (Kershner 2021). One month before election day, some

4.5 million citizens (49 per cent of the entire population) had already received a first dose of vaccine, and about 3.2 million (34 per cent) had received a second dose as well. By election day, these numbers had increased to 5.2 million (56 per cent) and 4.6 million (50 per cent) respectively. All this had a visible impact on Covid-19 levels. In two months, the daily number of new Covid-19 cases fell from 10,116 to just 688 (see Figure 1). The decline in the number of severe cases of illness was slower but constant. Despite the evident waning of the disease, however, the various measures that had been put in place by the CEC remained almost intact.

4. Voting measures introduced and the impact on the election campaign

More than 15,000 polling stations were opened for the March 2021 elections, significantly more than the 11,000 used in the previous elections. This substantial increase was the direct consequence of a combined effort to reduce crowding in polling stations and provide various populations, such as citizens in quarantine, with an opportunity to vote safely.

Around 1,100 additional stations were added in order to reduce crowding in the ‘regular’ polling stations. The large polling stations were the most affected, allowing a reduction in the number of voters registered at such stations from 800 to 650 (The Knesset 2021). Several new instructions were introduced at the regular polling stations. Voters were asked to wear masks throughout the entire voting procedure and the CEC Chairs in each polling station were authorized to prevent those who refused to wear masks from voting. To ensure proper social distancing in the queues outside polling stations, voters were asked to maintain a distance of two metres. In addition, voters were instructed to sanitize their hands twice: first before entering the voting room and again after they had been identified by CEC staff and before the act of voting. Finally, transparent protective screens were placed between voters and the CEC staff in each polling station. These instructions and guides were publicized in advertisements on television and radio several weeks before the elections (see CEC 2021c) and on a designated website (CEC n.d.).

In addition to adding more regular polling stations, the CEC made considerable efforts to provide voting solutions to various populations that were either unable to vote (voters in quarantine) or apprehensive about voting (voters at risk) at the stations where they were registered. This effort led to the introduction of a number of alternative voting measures.

First, the CEC opened ‘special’ polling stations in around 500 nursing homes, assisted living facilities and other complexes for the elderly. Such stations were placed in every facility with at least 30 residents. Residents—mostly elderly citizens at high risk of severe illness in case of infection—were able to vote without leaving their place of residence. The intention was to calm fears that people would be exposed to the disease and virus carriers.

Second, an additional 800 special polling stations were opened for citizens in home quarantine, and for verified Covid-19 infected citizens. Many of these were drive-through stations, mainly located in large parking lots and at various sports facilities. This was the first time that the CEC had operated this type of voting arrangement. Rather than allow verified Covid-19 infected citizens to travel independently, a designated door-to-ballot taxi service was operated by the CEC. Phone numbers for the service were published in the media, on the Internet and in social networks. The service was open to any voter whose name appeared on the Ministry of Health list of infected citizens. The operation was efficient and smooth in most cases, although a few voters reported difficulties in arranging a taxi or drivers not showing up at the arranged time. Uninfected citizens in home quarantine were able to attend the drive-through stations in their own vehicles. They were instructed to leave home only for

the purpose of voting, with no stops on the way to or from the polling station. Citizens without private vehicles were entitled to use the taxi service operated by the CEC from their place of residence to the polling stations and back (Tercatin 2021).

Finally, more than 50 polling stations were spread among the hospital wards designated for Covid-19 patients, and four more for citizens staying in ‘corona motels’. Four polling stations were placed at Ben-Gurion International Airport for citizens arriving in Israel on election day.

One of the main challenges for these ‘Covid-19 elections’ was the restrictions on campaigning, due to general limitations on crowd sizes. These limitations imposed a limit of up to 20 people for gatherings indoors and up to 50 people for gatherings that took place outdoors, as well as the practising of social distancing of two metres. Even though the focus of electoral campaigns in Israel has shifted to social media networks in the past decade, face-to-face events such as rallies and tours are still an important means for political parties and candidates to persuade potential voters.

However, the limitations and restrictions on public electoral events were pretty much relaxed in the final stretch of the campaign, thanks to the waning of the pandemic. Three weeks before election day the Cabinet approved the conduct of election campaign events involving up to 300 persons in indoor locations and up to 500 in outdoor locations (*Times of Israel* 2021).

These new voting arrangements were enacted by primary legislation. Measures were included in the framework of the 74th Amendment (temporary order) to the Knesset Election Law of 1969, which was unanimously approved by the Knesset on 22 December 2020.

5. The challenge of counting

A major concern of the CEC was to ensure that the ‘special votes’ were counted effectively. As noted above, these are normally the votes of IDF soldiers stationed at distant military bases, or of prisoners, hospital patients and state officials serving abroad. The process of counting these votes takes longer. The votes are placed in a sealed double envelope to allow verification that the voter did not also vote at her or his ‘home’ polling station. Furthermore, unlike regular votes, these special votes were sent to the Knesset to be counted there by thousands of CEC staff counters.

The special polling stations introduced for this election resulted in many more special votes. Early estimates put the number of such votes at 550,000 to 600,000 (see Table 2), a figure almost twice as high as in the most recent elections, and one that represented a major challenge for the CEC. The aim was to complete the counting of the special votes as quickly as possible. This was particularly important because Israel was about to go into a long weekend that included Passover. Failure to complete the task by Friday noon—about 60 hours after voting had ended—would mean a lengthy delay in the publication of the final results. Predictions of a close result between the pro-Netanyahu and anti-Netanyahu blocs, and the proximity of several parties to the ‘danger zone’ of the electoral threshold, added further stress to the importance of completing the task by the deadline.

Table 2. The number of special votes cast in the 2020 and 2021 elections*

	Number of special votes	Share of special votes among total votes
2020 elections	330,209	7.2%
CEC estimations as of January 2021	550,000 to 600,000	–
2021 elections	421,619	9.5%

Source: Compiled by the author based on data from CEC's formal election results.

* Special votes are the votes of IDF soldiers at military bases, prisoners, hospital patients.

and state officials stationed abroad, as well as the votes cast in the various special polling stations opened due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Another concern was the potential for efforts to be made to discredit the integrity of the counting process, and hence the entire election. Such efforts emerged in social media networks associated with diehard supporters of Netanyahu. These so-called Bibists echoed the false claims made by supporters of former US President Donald J. Trump who, only a few months before, had accused 'deep-state officials' of tilting the results in favour of Joe Biden. The claims made by these groups included accusations that the CEC had conspired to alter the results in favour of the anti-Netanyahu bloc by interfering with the counting of the special votes (Kabir 2021).

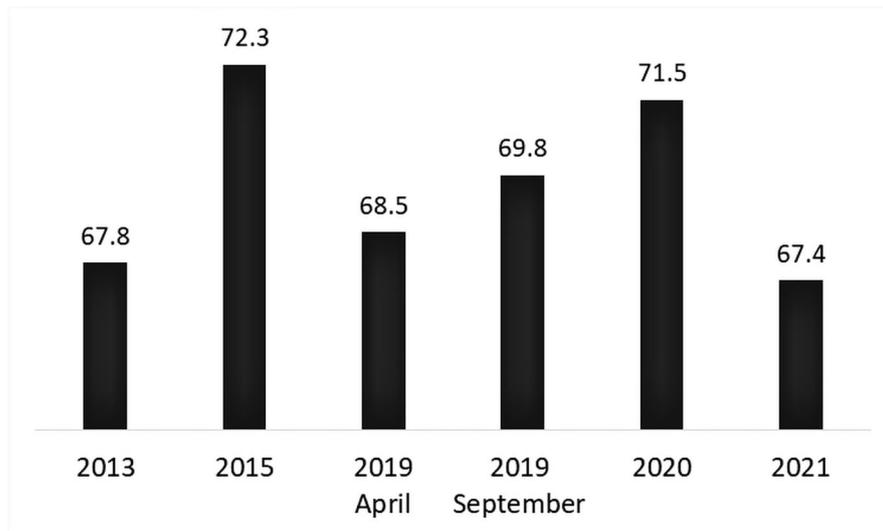
In the end, the counting of the special votes progressed in an orderly fashion and the final results were published before the deadline of the long weekend. This success was the result of two main factors. First, the CEC had doubled the number of staff counting the sealed envelopes from 3,200 to 6,400. Second, the waning of the pandemic as election day approached resulted in a lower-than-estimated number of voters using the special alternative measures. While the number of special votes increased by over 90,000 compared to the 2020 elections, the figure was significantly lower than originally predicted (Table 2).

Nonetheless, despite the swift and effective counting, right wing groups affiliated with Netanyahu's supporters were active on social media networks and platforms, making claims of irregularities and voter fraud in an effort to undermine the integrity of the process. For instance, Netanyahu's son tweeted that 'the forgery has begun' and a post by a far-right journalist alleged that the votes 'are being counted by leftist judges' (Benjakob 2021). These voices made hardly any impact on public opinion, however, and overall the CEC was credited with conducting free and fair elections by all the political parties.

6. Voter turnout

Estimating the impact of Covid-19 on voter turnout in Israel's 2021 elections presents certain challenges. At 67.4 per cent, turnout was relatively low—a decline of more than 4 percentage points on the 2020 elections. However, at least two other factors could explain this decline. First and foremost, these were the fourth Knesset elections in under two years, as a result of the deep political/constitutional crisis that Israel was experiencing. Turnout increased modestly in the first three elections in the series, but voter fatigue might have finally taken its toll by the fourth (see Figure 2). Many citizens had become disillusioned with politics. According to opinion polling, only 29 per cent of respondents believed that the elections would resolve the political deadlock (Hermann and Anabi 2021).

Figure 2. Voter turnout in Israel, 2013–2021



Source: Compiled by the author based on data from CEC's formal election results.

Second, the main 'contributor' to the decline in turnout was Israel's Arab minority. The participation rate of Israeli Arab citizens, who make up about one-fifth of the population, fell to an all-time low of 44.6 per cent. The main reason for this exceptionally low level of participation was disappointment with the Arab political leadership, who failed to maintain a united front and ran on two separate electoral lists (Ra'am and the Joint List). Competition between the two lists was fierce and many Arab citizens expressed their anger and dismay by deciding not to vote (Rudnitzky 2021).

Given that Covid-19 cases fell sharply towards election day, it may be cautiously concluded that the decline in voter turnout was mainly the result of these two factors. Health concerns linked to Covid-19 had only a marginal effect on voter motivation.

7. Lessons and opportunities

Running four elections in under two years would present organizational challenges even in 'normal' circumstances, let alone under Covid-19 conditions. From this perspective, the conduct of the 2021 elections may be considered a success. The CEC rose to the challenge and introduced various measures that addressed the health risks while ensuring access for almost every eligible voter.

For some, experimentation with new methods of voting has proved that it is time to relax the rather limited voting measures that characterize elections in Israel. For instance, it provided an opportunity to seriously discuss the introduction of early voting and expansion of the use of special polling stations in regular elections. This was one of the main ideas raised in a round-table discussion held at the Israel Democracy Institute (IDI), a Jerusalem-based think tank, two months before the 2021 elections. The discussion, on 'Conducting elections during an epidemic', hosted CEC officials, scholars and representatives of political parties. IDI President Yohanan Plesner concluded that: 'the coming elections provide great

opportunities to adopt alternative voting measures that might have a positive effect on voter turnout' (IDI 2021).

The 2021 elections also demonstrated that it is time to address the problem of overseas voting for Israelis residing abroad. Israelis living abroad cannot currently exercise their right to vote unless they travel to Israel. Some do indeed fly to Israel, despite the cost, but the majority just give up their fundamental right. During the 2021 elections the problem became especially severe because even those citizens who intended to travel in order to vote were unable to do so due to the restrictions on entry imposed by Covid-19 countermeasures. Two weeks before the elections the government set a 3,000-person daily quota for entry into Israel. Many Israelis were left 'stuck abroad', unable to return to their home country. The situation created a mini-scandal and was brought before the Supreme Court of Justice. Six days before election day, the court ruled against the daily quota (Bob 2021). The ruling resolved the problem for some of the Israeli citizens who had decided to fly in to vote but did not change the situation for the majority of Israelis living abroad, who remained unable to vote from their place of residence.

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