Episode Book

EPISODE #6075

Israel's Pollsters: Who Calls the Race Before You Vote

PUBLISHED	18 October 2026 at 04:22 UTC
DURATION	21:02
LISTEN	myweirdprompts.com/episode/israel-election-pollsters-guide-71772/
HOSTS	Corn, Herman, Larry, Hilbert
SCRIPT MODEL	anthropic/claude-opus-5.5
VOICES	chatterbox-regular (chatterbox-local)
PIPELINE	V5.10
BOOK GENERATED	19 October 2026 at 17:43 UTC

SYNOPSIS

Israel votes in nine days, and the people who try to call the result before it happens are a small, famous, and fiercely debated cast. This episode maps the polling culture from Louis Guttman's late-1940s research institute through Mina Tzemach, Camil Fuchs, and the pollsters behind every major channel today — including the Channel 14 polls that the rest of the industry watches nervously. It also revisits the nights that made and broke reputations: 1977's Mahapach, the 1996 "went to sleep with Peres, woke up with Bibi" reversal, and 2015's six-seat miss. Along the way: why Israeli polls have consistently underestimated the right, what the refusal rate at exit polls actually tells us, and why a 500-person sample with a four-point margin of error gets argued over seat by seat. With the legal publication blackout about to fall, this is a look at who's on the hook when the numbers land.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Nine days before Israel votes, Daniel wants to know who the people are that try to tell the country the result before it happens.



Corn

Not the numbers this time. The people. Which pollsters actually matter here, who shaped the trade, what they've already got right this cycle, and when the exit polls land on the night. And underneath that, what the culture of polling in this country actually looks like, because he suspects it's its own peculiar thing.



Herman

It is. It is very much its own thing. Israel polls itself more than almost any democracy I can think of, and then spends election night furious that the polls were wrong.



Corn

We put our own forecast down the other day, with three methods and a seat count we're now stuck with. So I'll admit I have a personal interest in who else is on the hook.



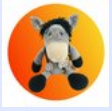
Herman

You have a personal interest in who gets blamed when we're wrong.



Corn

Same thing, Herman.



Herman

Fine. History first, because the culture makes no sense without it. Israel had public opinion research almost from the founding. Louis Guttman, the statistician, set up what became the Israel Institute of Applied Social Research in the late forties, and it's usually described as the first public opinion research body in the Middle East. Early on, people



Herman (continued)

met surveys with a mixture of suspicion and resignation, which, honestly, is still roughly how Israelis answer the phone.



Corn

Suspicion and resignation is how Israelis answer everything.



Herman

Then there's Hanoch Smith. Herbie Smith. He was doing polls on Israel Radio in the fifties, founded Smith Research in the early seventies, and he ran the first exit poll ever broadcast on Israeli national television. And the night that made pollsters famous here was nineteen seventy-seven. The Mahapach. Labor had governed since the state began, and Menachem Begin's Likud won.



Corn

Let me guess. Somebody called it.



Herman

Two somebodies, which is the beautiful part. Smith said, for years afterwards, that he was the only pollster who predicted it. And Mina Tzemach's reputation also rests on that same election night, when her numbers showed the upset. So the founding myth of Israeli polling has two people standing on the same patch of ground, each holding the flag.



Corn

Very Israeli. The foundational event and nobody agrees who was there.



Herman

Tzemach is the figure, though. Hebrew University, then a doctorate from Yale in the sixties. She ran the Dahaf institute from nineteen eighty, she replaced Smith as the national broadcaster's election forecaster, and then she became the chief pollster for Channel Two and for Yedioth Ahronoth. For about thirty years, if you watched an Israeli



Herman (continued)

election, the woman telling you the result at ten o'clock was Mina Tzemach.



Corn

The queen of the polls.



Herman

That's what the papers called her. And in two thousand thirteen she became a partner in Midgam, which Mano Geva had founded in nineteen eighty-eight. Midgam is still Channel Twelve's pollster today.



Corn

Every monarchy has a rival court. I'm guessing this one did too.



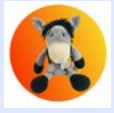
Herman

Camil Fuchs. Statistics professor at Tel Aviv University, chaired the department, polled for Haaretz and Channel Ten, and then for about twenty years he was Channel Thirteen's man on election night. He died in April of two thousand twenty-four, at seventy-eight. And his last election was a good one. His final poll in twenty twenty-two had Likud at thirty-one. Likud got thirty-two.



Corn

One seat off and he'd still have been annoyed about it.



Herman

Oh, he would have been. These are statisticians who became television characters by accident. That's a big part of the culture, Corn. The pollster here is a personality. Tzemach, Fuchs, Geva. People know their faces.

L

Larry

Tired of waiting four years to find out what the country thinks? Introducing Poll of the Month Club, the subscription box that delivers a fresh, hand-weighted poll to your door every single month! Bronze members receive one poll that agrees with you. Gold members get a personal exit poll, read aloud at ten o'clock every night, right in the bedroom. Platinum members are guaranteed a sixty-one seat majority, or your margin of error back! To cancel, simply appear in person at an undisclosed polling station, after sundown on a Friday, during the legal publication blackout. Late cancellations are tallied as double envelopes and counted next week. Poll of the Month Club. Because you deserve to win, monthly.



Herman

I have the Gold tier. It woke me up at ten every night for a month and told me I'd won, and I'd only ever voted in the building committee.



Corn

The misses are the part I actually wanted to get to.



Herman

Nineteen ninety-six is the big one. First direct election for prime minister. Peres against Netanyahu. The exit polls called it for Peres, and the television coverage more or less declared it around midnight. Then, around two in the morning, the real count started turning. Netanyahu won by about thirty thousand votes. Under one percent.



Corn

Went to sleep with Peres, woke up with Bibi.



Herman

That's the phrase, and it comes from exactly that night. It's become a sort of national proverb for the polling trade. And then there's twenty fifteen, which in some ways was worse, because three different channels made the same mistake at the same moment. Channel One had Likud and the Zionist Union tied. Channel Ten, with Fuchs, had them tied. Channel Two, with Tzemach and Geva, had Likud up by one.



Corn

Let me guess the real result. Not a tie.



Herman

Likud thirty, Zionist Union twenty-four. A six seat gap that nobody showed.



Corn

Hm. So the error was all in one direction.



Herman

It usually is, and this is the pattern I'd want any listener to carry into next Tuesday. Israeli polls have tended to underestimate the right. Twenty fifteen, April twenty nineteen, and even twenty twenty-two, which most people remember as a good year for the pollsters. Every major channel's final poll had Netanyahu's bloc at sixty-one or sixty-two. It got sixty-four.



Corn

What do they say when it happens? Because I assume nobody stands up and says, we're bad at this.



Herman

The explanations are actually quite specific. In twenty fifteen, Tzemach said refusals at the exit polls jumped to about fifteen percent, roughly double the normal rate, and they were highest at the stations that leaned Likud, including places with a lot of former Soviet immigrants. People just wouldn't talk to the pollster.



Corn

Which makes some sense. The guy with a clipboard outside the school doesn't look like your friend.



Herman

Rafi Smith, Hanoch's son, put it really well. He said respondents treat pollsters as the establishment, even though we're not. And in April twenty nineteen Tzemach went further. Channel Twelve's exit poll had Blue and White up thirty-seven to thirty-three. The result was thirty-five each. And she said, on the record, that people lied to us in the sample, and that the aim was to screw over Channel Twelve.



Corn

That's a remarkable thing for a pollster to say. Your data is fine, it's the public who are wrong.



Herman

She'd earned a bit of bitterness. She'd been rated the most accurate pollster across three straight elections by an aggregation project called Project Sixty-One. And after that night she stepped away from election polling for Channel Twelve.



Corn

You think she was right, though? That right-wing voters were deliberately throwing it?



Herman

Hm. I think... partly. I think the refusal story is better supported than the lying story. Lying is a strong claim. Refusing is easy to measure. What do you think?



Corn

I think if you spend ten years telling a third of the country it's a backward block, some of them will stop doing you favours on the pavement. I don't think you need a conspiracy for that. You need a grudge.



Herman

That's not a terrible theory, and it's roughly what Smith was saying.



Corn

My phone shows me a different poll every morning this month, and I've stopped being able to tell whose is whose.



Herman

You do, and they come from a fairly small cast. Channel Twelve uses Midgam, with an online panel. Kan, the public broadcaster, and Israel Hayom both use Kantar. Maariv and Walla use Lazar Research, run by Menachem Lazar, with Panel Four All. Channel Thirteen has a consortium now. Channel Sixteen uses Maagar Mochot. i Twenty Four uses Direct Polls. And then Channel Fourteen.



Corn

The one that makes everyone else nervous.



Herman

Channel Fourteen's polls are run by Shlomo Filber. And Filber's biography is the whole story. He was director general of the Communications Ministry under Netanyahu, he became a state's witness in Case Four Thousand, and he founded Direct Polls. The Channel Fourteen poll from the twelfth of October had Likud at twenty-nine and the outgoing coalition at exactly sixty-one. The mainstream polls have the coalition clustered around forty-seven to forty-nine.



Corn

That's not a house effect. That's a separate house.



Herman

Well... it's a house effect of about twelve seats, which we weighed up in our own forecast, so I won't relitigate it. The interesting thing is the culture around it. In twenty twenty-two Channel Fourteen was genuinely close, and it markets itself as the only firm that got it right. A Maariv columnist asked this month whether Filber will bury a generation of pollsters the way Tzemach did in seventy-seven.



Corn

So Tuesday decides whether the partisan pollster becomes the new establishment. That's a better story than most of the campaign.



Herman

It might be the best story of the campaign.



Corn

Here's the thing that's always bothered me. Channel Twelve's last poll was about five hundred people with a margin of error around four points. A Knesset seat is less than one percent of the vote.



Herman

Point eight, roughly.



Corn

So the margin of error is about five seats, and we spend the whole evening arguing about one.



Herman

That's the national sport, Corn. The seat count is how Israelis consume polls. Nobody reports vote share. They report seats, and then immediately they add up blocs, because the only number that really matters is sixty-one. So a poll here isn't read as Likud on twenty percent, it's read as Netanyahu is two seats short, and that becomes the news cycle



Herman (continued)

for the whole day.



Corn

Meanwhile every party has a poll in its pocket that says it's doing brilliantly.



Herman

Constantly. In twenty nineteen Likud was citing internal polls of thirty-five or thirty-six seats while the published ones had thirty-three. Internal polls in Israel are less research than ammunition. You leak the one that keeps your voters from drifting.



Corn

What about the law? Because I know there's a blackout.



Herman

There is, and it's stricter than people think. The Elections Law on propaganda methods bans publishing any new poll from the end of the Friday before election day until the polls close. So the Friday papers carry the last polls, and then four days of silence. Every published poll has to say who paid for it, who conducted it, the dates, the sample, how many people answered, and the margin of error. And the pollster has to file the results and the methodology with the Central Elections Committee, which puts them online.



Corn

I'd love to know what actually happens to someone who breaks it.



Herman

Up to six months in prison, in theory. In practice the famous case is September twenty nineteen, on election day, when the committee chairman asked Facebook to suspend a chatbot on Netanyahu's page because it was publishing polls. It came back about two hours later after a Likud MK promised it would stop.



Corn

Only in this country is the scandal a chatbot leaking a poll on election day. And it gets a two hour suspension.



Herman

And it's not purely historic. This August, Haaretz reported that Channel Fourteen hadn't submitted the data for three of its published polls to the committee.



Corn

Fine. What has already landed this cycle? Things people predicted that we can now mark.



Herman

A few. The first is that this election is happening on time, at the latest legal date, the twenty-seventh of October. A lot of people predicted an early election for most of the term. Shas and United Torah Judaism wanted September. It didn't happen.



Corn

Prediction one, wrong.



Herman

The second is the merger rule. There's an old Israeli pattern that two parties merged poll worse than their separate totals. Bennett and Lapid formed Together in April with Bennett at the top, and since then it's slid. It now polls somewhere between seven and thirteen seats.



Corn

The merger rule holds. And the third?



Herman

The new party rule, which runs both ways and confuses everyone. Brand new parties that are fashionable get overestimated, like Kadima, which was polling around forty early on and got twenty-nine. But new parties nobody takes seriously get underestimated. In two thousand six the pensioners' party was polling two seats or less and won seven. In twenty thirteen, Yesh Atid polled eight to eleven and won nineteen.



Corn

So the polls are good at telling you a new party exists and bad at telling you whether anyone means it.



Herman

That's... yes. One more piece on that. Project Sixty-One, the aggregation effort I mentioned, went back over years of Israeli polls and found they overstate the big parties and understate the Haredi and Arab parties. Which party do you think is most at risk of being undercounted this time?



Corn

Shas, if I had to bet. Its voters aren't sitting on online panels answering surveys between meetings.



Herman

That would be my guess too, and Channel Fourteen is the only one with Shas on ten. Everyone else has it on seven or eight. There's a newer aggregator as well, a poll of polls the Middle East Forum launched in September, which takes the latest poll from each house and deliberately doesn't correct for house effects. You see the raw spread.



Corn

An aggregator that refuses to tidy up. I respect that more than I expected to.



Herman

Meanwhile, in this cycle, Blue and White, Gantz's party, has been polling under the threshold in every recent survey, somewhere around one percent. If that holds on Tuesday, it's a party that came within sight of the prime minister's office five years ago going to zero.



Corn

Exit polls. Daniel asked when they come in.



Herman

Polls open at seven in the morning and close at ten at night. At ten, almost on the second, Channels Eleven, Twelve and Thirteen put up their exit polls. That moment is a genuine national ritual. Families gather for it the way other countries gather for a football final.



Corn

Ten o'clock is the easy part. It's what happens after that I've never understood.



Herman

The Central Elections Committee starts posting results by polling station from about one in the morning. By around eight the next morning about ninety percent is counted. Then the double envelopes, which are soldiers, diplomats, prisoners and hospital patients, checked against their home station and counted afterwards. In twenty twenty-two there were around half a million of them. This time they're due on the twenty-ninth, and the official result on the fourth of November.



Corn

Half a million ballots counted two days late sounds like it should matter.



Herman

They can move the thing that matters most, which is who gets over the threshold. In twenty twenty-one the exit polls had Ra'am under the line. Overnight it sat at about three point two four percent, a hair under the threshold, and it ended up with five seats. That one result erased the path to sixty-one that the exit polls had implied for Netanyahu's bloc.



Corn

So the ten o'clock number decides the mood and the morning decides the government.



Herman

And the double envelopes decide whether anyone's allowed to stop arguing.



Hilbert

Herman, what does a pollster do when someone wants to be in the sample? Not refuses. Wants it. Badly.



Herman

Hm. That's a real problem, actually. Online panels have a version of it. The people who sign up are keener than the people who don't. You weight for it.



Hilbert

I'm asking because of Avner Shushan. He runs the juice stand under my flat. Three weeks ago he heard me say the word poll on the phone and he asked to be in one. I said I don't run polls. He said that's fine, he'd pay. Eleven shekels a call. So now I call him every evening at seven and ask him who he's voting for.



Corn

Every evening.



Hilbert

He changes his answer every evening. That's not the problem. The problem is that last Thursday he started telling me he's voting for a list that doesn't exist. The Pomegranate Movement. He's very committed to it. He's printed a ballot slip. Then his cousins heard he was in a sample and they want to be polled as well, and now I call forty-one people a night, at eleven shekels each, on the telephone in my bathroom, because that's where the line comes into the flat. It's a grey Bezeq set with a rotary dial, plugged in under the sink.



Hilbert

Herman, you're too close to the microphone, move back about two fingers... and the handset doesn't sit on a snout, so I hold it against the side of my head like a shell. Avner now insists on a margin of error. I work one out and I write it on the back of his receipt. Plus or minus three cousins. Last night one of the cousins answered and it was his goat, which they keep on the roof in Nachlaot, and Avner said the goat counts because it's registered at the same address.



Herman

That's a weighting question, honestly. If the goat's in the household roster, you've got a design effect.



Hilbert

The goat is for the Pomegranate Movement. Forty-one people and a goat, and I have the Pomegranate Movement on thirty-eight percent in my sample. It's... you know, it's the most interesting thing I've done all year. Watching a number turn into something people believe in. They talk about it at the stand now. People queue for juice and ask what the latest is.



Corn

You've built a party with a polling lead and no candidates.



Hilbert

It has candidates. Avner's brother-in-law is number two. And Herman, for the record, it wasn't about thirty thousand votes in ninety-six. It was twenty-nine thousand, four hundred and fifty-seven.



Herman

Twenty-nine thousand four hundred and fifty-seven. Fine. I'll take it.



Hilbert

Avner pays on the first of the month, in coins, in a jam jar. I did the census in nineteen eighty-three, for about a fortnight, in Beit Shemesh, and nobody ever paid me. Avner answers on the first ring, every night, and he has never once told me the truth, and I'd trust him with my keys.



Corn

There's a version of that in every published poll, though. The people who answer on the first ring.



Herman

That's the whole difficulty with panels. The people who want to be in the sample are not the people who don't.



Herman

The bit that didn't fit anywhere. In two thousand six, in the Kadima leadership primary, an exit poll was published half an hour before voting ended, showing Tzipi Livni with a big lead. She won by four hundred and thirty-one votes.



Corn

An exit poll that arrived early enough to be campaign material.



Herman

Which is exactly why the law now holds everything until ten.



Corn

Where I come out is this. Tuesday night at ten, three channels will tell you a number, and at least one of them is going to be wrong in a way you'll hear about for a decade. What I'll actually be watching is the people who wouldn't talk to the man with the clipboard. Or the man on the bathroom phone.



Herman

And who shows up after midnight in the double envelopes. Thanks, as always, to Hilbert Flumingtop for producing this one.



Corn

This has been My Weird Prompts. If you've got a minute, leave us a review wherever you listen.



Herman

See you soon.