Episode Book

EPISODE #5568

Israel's Pragmatic Center: Housing, Groceries, and the 2026 Vote

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SYNOPSIS

Israel votes on October 27, 2026 — the first election since October 7, 2023, and the first Knesset in decades to serve a full four-year term. Polls show the economy and cost of living are voters' top concern, yet the campaign and coalition math remain dominated by security, religion and state, and the referendum on Netanyahu. This episode traces the long collapse of the Israeli center-left from Mapai's dominance through the 2024 Labor-Meretz merger into The Democrats, unpacks why closed-list proportional representation produces thirteen parties and a permanent negotiation, and asks whether pragmatic parties like Yashar, Beyachad, The Democrats, and Yisrael Beiteinu can become the fulcrum that reshapes Israeli politics.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Okay, so before we get into this, I want to note that you've been staring at that same page for twenty minutes.



Herman

I've been reading. There's a difference between staring and reading, and the difference is that I'm retaining things.



Corn

You've turned the page twice. I counted.



Herman

That's because the second page was a table of polling data and I was absorbing it. Anyway, Daniel wrote in, and this one's a big one.



Corn

It is. Here's what he sent. He wants to talk about the history of the center and the center-left in the Israeli political spectrum as we gear up for the election. His framing is that as politics gets more polarized around the world, more fire gets fought at the margins, and Israel is significant because of the sheer plurality of its parties, which he calls both a feature and part of the system. Then he asks the real question underneath all of it. Could pragmatic parties, ones that cater to the neglected everyday stuff, cost of living, cost of real estate, among others, be the fulcrum the upcoming election turns on? And could that reshape Israeli politics away from the divisive Netanyahu-era governments toward something new?



Herman

That's four or five questions wearing one coat.



Corn

It is. And they're good ones, because the answers don't all point the same direction. You can have a country where voters say the economy is their top concern and still get a campaign about everything except the economy.



Herman

Which is exactly what's happening. Israel votes on the twenty-seventh of October. First election since October seventh, twenty twenty-three, and the first Knesset since nineteen eighty-eight to actually serve a full four-year term. It dissolved on the seventeenth of July.



Corn

So there's a real baseline here. Voters have had four years of an actual government, not a snap election every eighteen months. That changes what they're comparing against.



Herman

Right. And the polls say the economy and cost of living are the top concern. But the campaign, and more importantly the coalition math, are still dominated by security, religion and state, and the referendum on Netanyahu. So there's a gap, and the gap is the story.



Corn

To understand where that gap came from, we have to go back. Way back. Because the center-left in Israel didn't just lose. It collapsed, and it collapsed from a position of total dominance.



Herman

Mapai was the dominant force from nineteen forty-eight. The Labor movement basically was the state for the first three decades. And then nineteen seventy-seven happens, and it loses power, and it never fully recovers.



Corn

Give me the numbers, because the numbers are brutal.



Herman

Labor won forty-seven seats in nineteen eighty-one. In March twenty twenty-one, it won seven.



Corn

Seven.



Herman

Seven. Out of a hundred and twenty.



Corn

That's not a decline, that's a disappearance with a receipt.



Herman

And the fragmentation that caused it isn't recent. It goes back to ideological splits in the fifties and sixties. Mapam's pro-Soviet orientation. The Lavon Affair. And then Ben-Gurion walks out in nineteen sixty-five and creates Rafi. Colin Shindler's argument is that that walkout opened the way for the right to attain power. The left did the splitting to itself.



Corn

That's the part people miss. The story is usually told as the right rising. But a lot of it is the left dividing, over and over, on principle, at exactly the moments it needed to hold together.



Herman

And each split had its own logic. The Lavon Affair alone is worth a whole episode. A security scandal in the mid-fifties that turned into a generational feud inside the labor movement. Ben-Gurion versus Sharett, then Ben-Gurion versus Eshkol. It wasn't a policy disagreement that festered. It was a personal war that institutionalized itself into factions.



Corn

So the left was already a coalition of rivals before it ever had a serious rival on the right.



Herman

Already a coalition of rivals. And that's the pattern that repeats. Every time the left faces an existential threat from outside, it's busy managing an existential threat from inside.



Corn

And then there's the demographic piece, which is harder to fix than the ideological one. Shmuel Rosner's argument is that the center-left's core, the secular, modern, Tel Aviv tribe, is about forty percent of the population. And his line is that it always plays with a bad hand.



Corn

Forty percent. So even a perfectly unified center-left is a minority bloc by construction.



Herman

By construction. And the collapse in the last decade was fast. In April twenty nineteen, Zionist parties that didn't self-identify as right won forty-nine seats. That's forty-one percent of the Knesset. By December twenty twenty, they were polling at twenty-six. A forty-seven percent drop in twenty months.



Corn

Twenty months. That's not a generation shifting, that's a couple of news cycles and a merger that didn't work.



Herman

And the response, eventually, was consolidation. In twenty twenty-four, Labor and Meretz merged into The Democrats under Yair Golan. First time the Zionist left has run under one banner.



Corn

Which is the logical move. But it's late, and it's small. The Democrats poll around ten or eleven seats now.



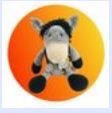
Herman

Right. So the consolidation happened, and it produced a party that's roughly the size of one of the factions that used to be part of a larger Labor bloc. That tells you how much ground was already gone.



Corn

Okay, so that's the history. Now explain the structure, because Daniel's point about plurality is the one I want to sit with. Why does Israel have thirteen parties in a hundred and twenty seats?



Herman

Closed-list proportional representation. One nationwide constituency, no districts. You vote for a party, not a person, and seats get allocated proportionally. The threshold is three point two five percent, which is about four seats.



Corn

So the whole country is one giant district.



Herman

One district, a hundred and twenty seats, and a low bar to get in. The outgoing Knesset had thirteen parties. Thirty-eight lists are contesting this one, and about twelve are expected to cross the threshold.



Corn

Thirty-eight lists. That's more parties than some countries have candidates.



Herman

And the threshold does two things at once. It pushes small parties to merge or get absorbed, because four seats is a real hurdle. But it's low enough that sectarian and niche parties survive. So you get both forces at once, consolidation at the top and fragmentation at the bottom. That's the plurality.



Corn

So the system doesn't produce a two-party dynamic and it doesn't produce pure chaos. It produces a permanent negotiation.



Herman

A permanent negotiation. Which is why nobody forms a government alone, and why every coalition is a collection of promises to very specific constituencies.



Corn

And that's the setup for the pragmatic-center thesis. Because if you're a party that wants to run on housing and groceries, you have to do it inside a system where the math rewards you for speaking to a narrow group instead.



Herman

So let's get to what's actually happening now, because the numbers here are the interesting part.



Corn

Start with what voters say.



Herman

The Israel Democracy Institute surveyed this in September. For Center voters, the economy and cost of living is the single most important voting factor at forty point five percent. Ahead of security, which is twenty-five.



Corn

So the center is telling pollsters, in the clearest possible terms, that it's an economic bloc now.



Herman

For the Left, it's different. Religion and state leads at thirty-nine percent, with the economy second at thirty-four. So even within the non-right camp, the center and the left have different priorities.



Corn

Which is its own fragmentation problem. The center wants groceries, the left wants religion and state, and they're supposed to be one bloc.



Herman

They're supposed to be one bloc, and they poll as two electorates. That's part of why the consolidation into The Democrats is harder than it looks. You can merge the party machinery. You can't merge the voters' priorities.



Corn

And the young?



Herman

This is the number I keep thinking about. Among Israelis eighteen to thirty-five, housing is the top issue for thirty-eight percent. More than double any other issue. And when asked to rate the state's performance on housing, they gave it two and a half out of ten.



Corn

Two and a half. That's not a bad grade, that's a failing grade with a note from the teacher.



Herman

And seventy-five percent said they'd consider voting for a party they'd never voted for before if it offered long-term solutions.



Corn

That last one is the whole thesis in a single number. Three-quarters of young voters are available. They're not locked in.



Herman

They're available. The question is whether anyone's actually asking for them.



Corn

And here's where it gets frustrating. The Times of Israel flagged this. Politicians are largely not campaigning on economic anxiety. The voters say housing, the campaigns say security and Bibi.



Herman

So you have a demand-side surge and a supply-side nothing.



Corn

Which brings us to the new parties. Because the pitch does exist, it's just not in its own vehicle.



Herman

And this is worth being precise about. There is no standalone cost-of-living party in Israel. No single-issue vehicle. The economic pitch is carried inside broad centrist parties.



Corn

Name them.



Herman

Yashar, Eisenkot's party, founded September twenty twenty-five. It's the largest opposition party, polling around twenty-two to twenty-five seats. Its platform includes a universal service law, a state commission of inquiry into October seventh as the first cabinet act, fifteen billion shekels over five years to rebuild the north, and conditions on core-curriculum funding.



Corn

Then Beyachad.



Herman

Bennett and Lapid merged in April twenty twenty-six. Polls around thirteen seats. It was at twenty-six when it formed, so it's lost half its support.



Corn

That's a merger that's gone backwards.



Herman

The Democrats, Golan, ten to eleven. Yisrael Beiteinu, Liberman, around nine.



Corn

So you've got four parties in the pragmatic-to-center space, and together they're substantial, but they're separate, and they're competing for overlapping voters.



Herman

Which is the fragmentation problem again, in a new costume. The center is doing what the left did. Splitting.



Corn

And here's the thing that makes it worse. Those four parties aren't just splitting the vote. They're splitting the message. Each one has to differentiate itself from the other three, so each one drifts toward its own niche. Yashar leans security-competence, Beyachad leans anti-Netanyahu, The Democrats lean social-democratic, Liberman leans secular-right. Four versions of the same pitch, each diluted.



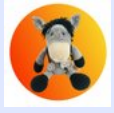
Herman

Diluted and duplicated. And the voter who wants the economic message hears four different half-messages instead of one clear one. That's not a messaging failure. That's a structural one.



Corn

Okay. So here's the arithmetic question, and I think it's the one that decides whether Daniel's thesis holds. Can any of this actually form a government?



Herman

No. Not on the current numbers. Neither bloc reaches sixty-one without Arab parties.



Corn

And the opposition leaders won't rely on them.



Herman

Most of them won't. Eisenkot was explicit about this in his first in-depth English interview this week. His redline is that whoever doesn't accept Hamas is a terrorist organization won't be a partner in the next government. And he says he doesn't see an Arab party that accepts his principles. He's also ruled out a rotation government.



Corn

So the pragmatic frontrunner has redlines that may make his own pragmatism unworkable.



Herman

That's the paradox. He's the guy running on getting things done, and his coalition conditions may prevent him from getting anything done. It's the fragmentation he's promising to fix, operating on him.



Corn

And there's the disqualification fight on top of it.



Herman

On the twenty-fourth, the Central Election Committee disqualified the Joint List and Ra'am, and two candidates, Sami Abu Shehadeh and Ofer Cassif. But it allowed Otzma Yehudit and Religious Zionism–Zehut to run.



Corn

So Arab parties out, far-right parties in.



Herman

The Supreme Court is expected to overturn the party bans. The Joint List called it an attempt to steal the election and deny the voices of more than a million citizens. Mansour Abbas called it political, illegitimate and anti-democratic. Ben-Gvir, for his part, called the effort to disqualify his own party a political assassination.



Corn

Everyone's being assassinated. Nobody's being assassinated.



Herman

That's the register of Israeli coalition politics. It's maximal language deployed over procedural moves.



Corn

But the procedural move matters, because it's a live question about whether the election is seen as legitimate. And that's before we get to the polarization question Daniel raised.



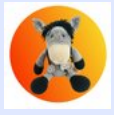
Herman

And here I'd push back gently on the framing. The polarization-at-the-margins story is only partly true for Israel. Voters' stated priorities are actually centrist. Economy, housing. It's the campaign and the coalition math that are polarized, not the electorate.



Corn

So Israel is running against the global trend in one sense and with it in another.



Herman

In one sense, yes. The voters are more moderate than the discourse. But the structure, the threshold, the coalition math, the redlines, all of that pulls toward the extremes because that's where the leverage is. A small party with four seats can hold a government hostage. So the system rewards the margins even when the voters don't live there.



Corn

That's a cleaner version of the thesis than the one we started with. It's not that Israelis are polarized. It's that the system converts a moderate electorate into an extreme government.



Herman

That's the mechanism. And it's why the pragmatic center's rise is real but fragile. The demand is there. The vehicle is fragmented. And the arithmetic doesn't care how popular your platform is.



Corn

Let's talk about the first-time voters, because that's the wildcard.



Herman

Five hundred and fifty thousand of them. That's roughly ten to twelve Knesset seats.



Corn

Ten to twelve seats is the difference between a bloc and a majority.



Herman

It is. And these are voters who've never done this before, who rate the state two and a half out of ten on housing, and three-quarters of whom say they'd vote for someone new. If even a chunk of them turn out and vote on housing, that's the fulcrum Daniel's asking about.



Corn

But turnout is the whole game. And young voters who feel unrepresented are exactly the ones who stay home.



Herman

Which is the trap. The party that speaks to them has to exist, and be viable, and be seen as viable, before they'll show up. And viability in this system means coalition math, which means the thing they're voting for might not be able to govern anyway.



Corn

So the pragmatic center has to solve a problem it can't solve alone, using voters who won't show up until it's solved.



Herman

That's the bind. And there's one more piece. Sixty-two percent of Israelis say they're concerned about Israel's low international standing.



Corn

Which is interesting, because that's not a domestic economic issue, but it's also not a security issue in the traditional sense. It's a competence issue. It's about how the country is seen and whether it's being run well.



Herman

And Eisenkot's line on that is pointed. He said the fact that Netanyahu, quote, Captain America, is bringing Israel to the lowest point in relations with American society. That's a competence attack dressed as a security attack.



Corn

Which is exactly how you'd expect the pragmatic center to fight. You don't out-hawk the right. You argue that the current government is bad at the things the right claims to be good at.



Herman

That connects back to the housing numbers. The state scoring two and a half out of ten isn't an ideology problem. It's a delivery problem. And delivery is where the pragmatic pitch lives.



Corn

The thesis, steelmanned, is this. The center-left's historic weakness is structural and demographic. It can't fix that by being more left. But it might fix it by being less ideological and more competent, and by speaking to a young electorate that cares about rent.



Herman

The counterargument is Rosner's. Forty percent is forty percent. No amount of pragmatism changes the demographic ceiling.



Corn

Unless the pragmatism pulls voters from the right.



Herman

Which is the actual play. Yashar polling at twenty-two to twenty-five seats isn't winning the left's forty percent. It's winning people who voted for Likud and are tired of the chaos.



Corn

The fulcrum isn't the center-left becoming a majority. It's the center-left becoming a coalition partner that the right can't ignore.



Herman

That's a better way to put it. And it's why the redlines matter so much. If Eisenkot won't sit with Arab parties, and he won't sit with Netanyahu, then his path to power runs through a very narrow gate.



Corn

If he can't get through it, the pragmatism was a campaign, not a government.



Hilbert

"Pragmatic" is the wrong word for it.



Corn

How so?



Hilbert

I did polling for a centrist party, back when they still called it that. Weeks on the phone, night after night, same script, same questions. And the same answer kept coming back in different words. I don't care about the peace process, I care about my mortgage. Over and over.



Herman

What did the party do with that?



Hilbert

Nothing. We had the internal numbers. Same forty percent you're describing. Economy first, by a mile. And the campaign manager sat in a room with those numbers and said, you can't win on housing. You win on fear. So we ran on security. And we lost.



Corn

Did you tell him he was wrong?



Hilbert

I was a junior analyst. I was there to dial the phone and log the answer. I logged the answer. He read the log. He made the call.



Herman

The data was there and it was ignored.



Hilbert

The data was there. But here's the thing you're both missing. It wasn't just him. When those same people got into the booth, they didn't vote on the mortgage either. They told us housing. They voted on fear. Every time.



Corn

The polling was right and the voters were lying?



Hilbert

Not lying. Changing their minds in the room. You ask someone in their kitchen what matters, they tell you the truth. You put them in a booth with a ballot in front of them, and something older takes over. The campaign manager knew that. That's why he ignored the numbers. He wasn't wrong about people. He was wrong about the country, maybe. But not about people.



Herman

That's a uncomfortable point. It means the pragmatic center's rise could be a polling artifact.



Hilbert

It means the demand is real and the behavior is not. Those are two different things. I spent two years learning that on a telephone. I don't know what you do with it. I just know the forty percent is real and it doesn't show up on election day the way it does on the phone.



Corn

The party that campaigns on housing has to convince people to vote the way they talk.



Hilbert

Or it has to give them something to fear. That's what the man said, and he'd been doing it longer than I had. I didn't like him. He was right about the booth.



Herman

Can I push on that, Hilbert? Because "voters vote on fear" is a strong claim. Is that really what the data showed, or is that what the campaign manager believed?



Hilbert

Both. The data showed the stated priority was the economy. The behavior showed the vote went to security parties. Those two things sat in the same spreadsheet for months. You can interpret that as voters lying, or you can interpret it as voters having more than one priority and the security one being stickier. The campaign manager interpreted it the second way but acted on the first. That's politics.



Corn

The real lesson isn't "voters are irrational." It's "stated priority isn't the same as decision priority."



Hilbert

That's a fairer way to say it. The kitchen answer is real. The booth answer is also real. They're just answering different questions.



Corn

Okay. So if Hilbert's right, the gap between priorities and politics isn't just a messaging failure. It's a behavioral one. Voters say economy, vote security.



Herman

Which reframes the whole thesis. The pragmatic center's problem isn't that nobody's asking for it. It's that the ask doesn't survive contact with the ballot.



Corn

That's the most common wrong belief about this whole thing. People hear "voters care about the economy" and assume that means the economy decides elections. It doesn't. It means the economy is what voters say when you ask them. What decides elections is what they do when they're alone in the booth, and that's a different question entirely.



Herman

The fulcrum isn't the cost-of-living issue. It's whether anyone can make the cost-of-living issue feel urgent enough to beat the fear.



Corn

Which is a much harder problem than the polling suggests. The demand is there. The behavior is the bottleneck.



Herman

That's the thing to watch on the twenty-seventh of October. Not whether the parties talk about housing, but whether the voters who say housing actually vote that way. If they do, Daniel's thesis holds and the center becomes the fulcrum. If they don't, the forty percent was a number on a phone call, and the campaign manager from Hilbert's old firm was right all along.



Corn

Either way, the answer comes from the booth, not the poll. Which is the one place nobody gets to ask a follow-up question.



Herman

That's the episode. If you want to argue with us about it, or if you think Hilbert's campaign manager was right, the website is my weird prompts dot com. You can also email us at show at my weird prompts dot com.



Corn

Thanks to our producer, Hilbert Flumingtop.



Herman

This has been My Weird Prompts.



Corn

We'll be back soon.