Episode Book

EPISODE #6335

Why Israeli Election Turnout Means Opposing Things

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SYNOPSIS

Israeli elections produced a record nineteen seats for Arab-majority parties, exposing a sharp division between foreign advocacy and domestic coalition building. While international advocates point to Arab voter turnout as living proof of a shared democracy, domestic campaigns frame that same political participation as a national security threat. The discussion explores how Hasbara shapes foreign perception, why coalition arithmetic excludes Arab lawmakers, and what public opinion polling reveals about the limits of shared power.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

You cannot put somebody in the national brochure and then object when they turn up in the national arithmetic. That's where Daniel's argument takes us today. He thinks Israel's fixation on Hasbara, on explaining itself abroad, produces a flattering country that doesn't quite exist. Arab citizens are his clearest example. Abroad, their rights demonstrate Israeli democracy. At home, the Prime Minister campaigns under the choice, it's the right or it's Palestine.



Herman

The same citizens, with the same ballots.



Corn

Daniel goes further. He suspects Jewish and Arab Israelis are much less comfortable sharing a country than the official language admits, perhaps even preferring separation. He wants to know who shares his view that the state's warm rhetoric about its Arab minority lacks real intention behind it. Tuesday's election gives us something concrete to test. Arab parties have won a record representation, while much of the opposition still refuses to govern with them.



Herman

We should distinguish a real right from the sales pitch attached to it. Arab citizens voting is real. Claiming that this proves they are cherished political partners is a much larger proposition.



Corn

The brochure has acquired some ambitious footnotes.



Herman

Hasbara literally means explaining. It covers public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, conversations with foreign audiences, military briefings, and advocacy by independent pro-Israel organisations. Institutionally, you're talking about the Foreign Ministry, the Prime Minister's National Public Diplomacy Directorate, and the IDF Spokesperson's Unit, alongside groups the government doesn't directly control.



Corn

That last distinction matters. An American congressman praising Israeli elections isn't necessarily reading a government script. People can independently reach for the same flattering fact.



Herman

They can, and they often do. The vocabulary has a history too. Nahum Sokolow introduced Hasbara into Zionist usage early in the twentieth century. By the eve of the Second World War, official Zionist institutions were using it in place of propaganda.



Corn

Herman, I can hear the etymology drawer opening.



Herman

One drawer. You're safe.



Corn

You always say that before the filing cabinet arrives.



Herman

Then I'll keep it shut. The operational problem is that much of this communication is reactive. Something happens, an accusation follows, a spokesperson answers. That can be necessary. False accusations deserve answers. Israel faces actual disinformation, actual antisemitism, and enemies who don't want a better explanation.



Herman

Nevertheless, an answer to an accusation cannot repair the condition that prompted a legitimate criticism. If citizens face exclusion from political power, presenting their voting rights doesn't resolve that exclusion.



Corn

I'd defend public diplomacy more strongly than Daniel does. A country needs to explain military decisions, correct false claims, and make itself intelligible. My objection starts when the explanation becomes evidence that no repair is needed. You cannot ask the press officer to substitute for the government.



Herman

Would you call that failure even if the statement itself is accurate?



Corn

Yes, if it's being used to support a claim it doesn't establish. An Arab judge, doctor, or parliamentarian demonstrates something meaningful. None establishes that a governing party treats Arab voters as equally legitimate participants in choosing a government.



Herman

That's the distinction to hold onto. Individual achievement, formal rights, social equality, and coalition access overlap, but you can't exchange them freely. The election exposes precisely which claim each speaker is making.



Corn

Josh Gottheimer celebrated Arab men and women turning out, voting, standing for office, and serving in the Knesset. Tom Suozzi likewise pointed to participation by Jewish, Christian, and Arab Israelis as evidence of democracy. Those are defensible observations. The trouble arrives when participation becomes a certificate covering everything else.



Herman

Mike Huckabee supplied an especially awkward version. He wrote, Arabs vote same as Israelis, then apologised. Arab citizens are Israelis. The sentence accidentally placed them outside the national category while celebrating their inclusion.



Corn

Citizenship, now available as a comparison.



Herman

Meanwhile, a right-wing commentator described the turnout as a political October seventh. That's a grotesque comparison between citizens voting and a massacre. It turns an ordinary democratic act into an image of national attack.



Corn

That juxtaposition is what the Times of Israel analysis captures. Foreign supporters celebrate the turnout because it demonstrates belonging. Domestic campaigners alarm their voters with it because they want it to suggest intrusion. Neither audience needs to see the other message.



Herman

The electoral scale matters here. Near-final results give the Arab-majority parties nineteen seats, split between twelve for the Joint List and seven for Ra'am. Their combined representation has almost doubled from the outgoing parliament.



Corn

Which means there are actual negotiating partners with substantial mandates. Calling them marginal doesn't make the seats disappear.



Herman

Netanyahu's bloc has fifty-three seats. Eisenkot's Yashar-led grouping has forty-eight. Neither grouping can form a majority on its own.



Corn

Those categories also aren't a ready-made coalition agreement. Opposition to Netanyahu doesn't mean agreement on security, religion, budgets, or Arab participation. I wouldn't sell a change government as already assembled.



Herman

No. The reported broader opposition arithmetic, including Arab parties, reaches sixty-six. That's enough numerically, but a government requires an agreement. The obstruction we're examining is the refusal to negotiate with certain elected parties before the bargaining even starts.



Corn

A majority with selected voters removed is easier to manage.



Herman

Arab turnout had been expected around sixty-three percent, with organisers aiming higher. Those were estimates and targets, not a final certified turnout. What's already clear from the seats is that mobilisation delivered substantial representation.



Corn

The poster tells those newly mobilised voters what their representation supposedly means. It's the right or it's Palestine. You aren't being offered two domestic policy programmes. One side gets to represent the country; the other gets associated with its national adversary.



Herman

The photographed Bnei Brak billboard makes that concrete. Netanyahu is set against opposition leaders under Right or Palestine. Another slogan says there's no Gadi without Tibi, tying Eisenkot to Ahmad Tibi as if dependency on an Arab legislator settles the argument.



Corn

The accusation is proximity.



Herman

His campaign also used an AI video showing Eisenkot rejecting a man wearing an Israel unity shirt and embracing Mansour Abbas. It's extraordinarily explicit visual storytelling. Jewish unity on one side, partnership with an Arab leader on the other.



Corn

Apparently a coalition agreement begins with a hug.



Herman

The substantive objection could have been about Abbas's policies, commitments, or conduct. Instead, the image makes the embrace itself incriminating. That's why distinguishing party criticism from civic exclusion matters.



Corn

I can accept someone rejecting a particular coalition on security grounds. I can't accept turnout being described as stealing an election. Those citizens aren't borrowing votes from anybody.



Herman

Netanyahu used precisely that accusation in his election-day video about turnout in Arab towns. Afterwards, he claimed a decisive majority among the Zionist public and called for a national-right government. The qualifying category does the political work. It offers his opponents a reason to privilege exclusion of Arab parties over replacing him.



Corn

Bennett says Arab parties aren't Zionist and therefore he won't rely on them. Eisenkot and Liberman have ruled out governing with Arab-led parties too. That's more consequential than a nasty billboard. The billboard asks voters to accept the boundary. Those commitments make the boundary operational.



Herman

Corn, would you treat Eisenkot's condition about Hamas differently? He's demanded recognition that Hamas is a terror group Israel must destroy, a condition Abbas hasn't met.



Corn

Yes. Hamas is a terrorist organisation, and wanting a partner to state that clearly is a substantive demand. But then make that the test and apply it consistently. Don't slide from a security commitment into the idea that Arab dependence itself contaminates a government.



Herman

Yair Golan breaks with the other senior opposition leaders on that point. He explicitly rejects dividing Jewish and Arab votes and argues for a change government in partnership with Arab citizens.



Corn

Netanyahu's own dealings make the blanket taboo harder to take seriously. He courted Abbas after the twenty twenty-one election. Abbas says Likud approached him again this time. An unacceptable partner apparently becomes more acceptable when the telephone call goes in the other direction.



Herman

His bloc also includes Orthodox lawmakers representing anti-Zionist communities. There are important differences between those parties and Arab parties, but the word anti-Zionist plainly isn't being applied as a uniform coalition rule.



Corn

Your objection can be principled, or it can have opening hours.



Herman

We should move carefully from what leaders do to what citizens want. Before that, a quick call from your mum, Corn. Lovely to hear from her.

D

Dorothy

Hello dear, it's your mother. Time for my grim fact.

D

Dorothy

They had elections and the Arab parties won nineteen seats, a record, but most of the Jewish party leaders said they wouldn't govern with them, so those votes may have counted more abroad than they did at home.

D

Dorothy

Anyway, sweetheart, I've got a nice tuna casserole in the oven. Are you eating? When are you coming to visit?



Corn

Yes, Mum. We are eating.



Herman

The Israel Democracy Institute's pre-election flash survey found a clear Jewish majority opposing either Arab party having a governing role, including outside support. Opposition was stronger toward the Joint List than toward Ra'am. Among Arab respondents, roughly three-quarters wanted Arab parties to have a role.



Corn

That's an important asymmetry. It doesn't sound like two populations equally demanding political separation. One majority resists sharing governing power with the minority's parties. Most minority respondents want those parties involved.



Herman

Participation can also be practical rather than affectionate. Getting a budget, improving services, addressing crime, influencing housing. You don't need to feel warmly about every fellow citizen to want your representatives at the table.



Corn

We manage a shared kitchen on considerably less.



Herman

You're about to defend a long, unhurried negotiation over coalition terms, aren't you?



Corn

Better than a permanent refusal to enter the room.



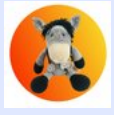
Herman

I'll grant that. Although your negotiations over cupboard space have lacked an agreed endpoint.



Corn

The leaves have legitimate territorial requirements.



Herman

The same survey shows a deeper disagreement over the state itself. Only twenty-nine percent of Arab respondents think Israel can be both fully Jewish and fully democratic. Jewish respondents show majority confidence across the subgroups measured.



Corn

That speaks to trust in the constitutional promise, not necessarily to wanting Jewish neighbours gone. Someone can want to remain in their town, keep their neighbours, and radically change the state's institutions.



Herman

Sixty-five percent of Arab respondents say the Jewish component is too dominant. Forty-one percent of Jewish respondents say so too. That substantial Jewish minority complicates any account of two internally uniform camps.



Corn

Hm.



Corn

Daniel's darker intuition is understandable, but I don't think these questions establish his stronger claim. Opposition to Ra'am, doubt about a Jewish and democratic state, and wishing to live without the other population are different attitudes. The last one needs to be asked directly.



Herman

I haven't seen a direct measure here of that mutual preference for states without the other group. We can identify estrangement. We can't turn coalition preferences into a population-wide wish for separation.



Corn

Nor should we infer the reverse, that voting proves people are content. A person can vote because the system is disappointing and they want leverage over it. Participation doesn't certify satisfaction any more than citizenship certifies affection.



Herman

The priorities are revealing. Jewish respondents put foreign affairs and security first when selecting a party. Arab respondents put cost of living first. Their preferred coalitions differ too. The leading Jewish preference is a broad Jewish Zionist coalition without Haredi parties. The Arab preference is centre-left government supported by Arab parties.



Corn

Security and groceries aren't mutually exclusive interests, though. I worry that describing those priorities without context can make ordinary Arab economic demands sound like an absence of national concern. People experiencing different pressures will rank problems differently.



Herman

Would the evidence about opposition voters change your view of how fixed the exclusion is?



Corn

It would, provided we keep opposition voters distinct from all Jewish voters. A subset can be substantially more willing to cooperate while the national majority remains opposed. What does matter is whether leaders are refusing something their own voters would accept.



Herman

A survey taken as polls closed found a clear majority of opposition voters supporting government with Ra'am. A July poll had found forty-four percent accepting outside Arab-party support. Different questions, different moments... I wouldn't call that a measured trend. It does show room for cooperation that categorical refusals conceal.



Corn

Then the obstacle may partly sit in party leadership, but we shouldn't relocate all discomfort there. The broader survey still records popular opposition. Leaders can amplify a taboo without inventing it.



Herman

You're right. I nearly made the opposition electorate stand for the country. More narrowly, some leaders may be enforcing a stricter boundary than their own supporters require.



Corn

That's politically interesting because they can also change it. If you spend a campaign saying partnership is national surrender, you create a cost for yourself later. You then describe that cost as an immovable fact about the electorate.



Herman

On who shares Daniel's dim view, As'ad Ghanem at the University of Haifa describes Palestinian citizens and their leadership as afraid. His criticism of Abbas is that he offers almost everything for limited budgets while still being treated as Palestinian first.



Corn

Sami Abu Shehadeh blames racism for the deadlock. Yousef Jabareen says anyone offering a genuine alternative to Netanyahu has to talk to his party. Those are different political positions, but they share the complaint that formal representation hasn't secured equal negotiating legitimacy.



Herman

Oren Yiftachel goes much further, arguing that voters are being asked explicitly to endorse apartheid across the territory from the river to the sea. That is a broader argument about the regime across Israel and the Palestinian territories, not merely this coalition dispute.



Corn

I don't adopt that whole label from this election evidence. Daniel himself rejects the apartheid accusation. You can reject it and still acknowledge discriminatory rhetoric and exclusion. Defending Israel doesn't require pretending every criticism is a disguised demand for its destruction.



Herman

Former government spokesman Eylon Levy makes a useful distinction from inside public diplomacy. He says Hasbara isn't a goal in itself for most candidates. What matters is managing international relations to achieve national interests.



Corn

Which I'd agree with. If explaining yourself improves alliances, trade, or diplomatic freedom, it serves a purpose. A polished explanation with no useful result is just an expensive speaking engagement.



Herman

Yaakov Katz describes another political mechanism. Netanyahu argues that whatever Israel does, the world is against it, and whatever it says, the response is antisemitism. If voters accept that explanation without testing it, international criticism becomes politically cheap to dismiss.



Corn

Some hostility really is antisemitic. The damaging move is using that truth to exempt every government decision from examination. It leaves a friendly critic and a committed enemy filed under the same heading.



Herman

Across thirty-six countries, the recent Pew survey recorded a median unfavourable view of Israel of sixty-seven percent. That establishes a severe image problem. It doesn't isolate Hasbara's effect from war, policy, media coverage, or pre-existing hostility.



Corn

We don't know how opinion would look without the advocacy. Still, the promise that better explanations will solve the problem deserves scrutiny when policies keep generating fresh contradictions.



Herman

Foreign audiences can read domestic campaign material too. A spokesperson celebrating equal citizenship has to contend with a Prime Minister portraying those citizens' turnout as a threat.



Hilbert

I agree with that. My niece Ruth is doing translation work for a local candidate's leaflets this month. Outside Israel. Hebrew for one mailing list, Arabic for another, English for the general leaflet. I'm checking the English because she asks me, and now I spend my afternoons on the shuffle. Corn, your distinction between a right and the claim attached to it changes how I read her latest version. The sentence is accurate. The heading makes it promise something else.



Corn

The heading is usually where they put the country they intended.



Hilbert

Ruth calls the campaign office during her lunch break. She teaches in the morning. The manager wants the Arabic to sound more loyal and the English to sound more democratic. He doesn't speak either language well enough to check. She has a sandwich beside the keyboard and three people sending corrections separately. I read the shuffle aloud in the bathroom because that's the only room where I don't get interrupted. The candidate's name sounds quite impressive against tiles.



Herman

Separate corrections will also leave her reconciling promises nobody has compared side by side.



Hilbert

That's what she's doing tonight. The printer wants the files by six. The English says residents will help decide. The Hebrew says the candidate will consult residents. Ruth asks which one he means. The manager sends her a photograph of the candidate standing beside a tree. She sends it to me. I tell her the tree isn't the disputed part.



Corn

Has the shuffle acquired an agreed sentence?



Hilbert

Not yet. She won't send the Arabic until somebody answers her question. Her phone is on charge in the kitchen. The manager is calling her husband now. She has twenty minutes left before the print slot.



Herman

Twenty minutes is a very practical limit on how much honest clarification survives a campaign. Yet her question remains answerable. Will residents decide, or merely be consulted?



Corn

The candidate could settle it in a sentence. That's what bothers me about calling every contradiction a communication problem. Sometimes nobody has committed to the thing the flattering version says.



Herman

One adjacent detail we haven't touched is the ballot access battle. The Central Elections Committee voted to disqualify Ra'am and the Joint List before the Supreme Court overturned that decision.



Corn

A useful reminder that the institutions are pulling in different directions. The court protecting participation is real evidence too. The state contains safeguards and politicians trying to narrow the space those safeguards protect.



Herman

If opposition voters are more willing to accept Ra'am than their leaders, will this larger Arab mandate finally produce an explicit offer to negotiate? Like the difference between deciding and being consulted, participation needs a concrete meaning. Daniel's criticism lands there. His stronger claim about mutual separation remains unproved.



Corn

Thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop for producing today's episode.



Herman

If you want more of this, try episode twelve sixty, The Identity Gap; episode eighteen sixty-one, Emergency Prep You Can Sing To; and episode twenty-one, Is Your AI Secretly American. This has been My Weird Prompts, the human-AI collaboration podcast.



Corn

If you enjoy these conversations, leave us a review wherever you listen. It helps other people find the show.



Herman

See you tomorrow.

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