Episode Book

EPISODE #6323

Why Early Israeli Election Tallies Skew Right

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SYNOPSIS

Early election counts can shift dramatically overnight, but not because voters changed their minds after polls closed. The national tally updates as complete polling stations report, meaning initial figures reflect small, fast-counting locations rather than a representative cross-section. The breakdown unpacks station-level reconciliation, transit delays to regional election committees, and the meticulous process governing roughly 600,000 double-envelope ballots from soldiers and hospital patients counted last at the Knesset.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

The morning headline is that Netanyahu gained overnight. The voters, rather inconveniently for that headline, had already gone home. Hannah wants to understand what actually changed between last night's opposition advantage and this morning's very different picture. When the screen says half the votes are counted, whose half are we looking at?



Herman

Completed polling stations, with an important qualification. Half the votes does not mean half the stations, and it certainly does not mean every station has sent in half its ballots. The national total grows as finished station results arrive.



Corn

That distinction would have improved my relationship with the television at three this morning. Hannah is asking about the machinery underneath those seat projections. Paper slips, people counting them, results arriving at different times, and whether the early arrivals resemble the people still missing.



Herman

They do not necessarily resemble them. A station's speed is connected to its size, staffing and geography, and geography is connected to voting. Once those connections exist, the first half can lean politically even when every ballot has been counted correctly.



Corn

Half counted. Entirely capable of ruining breakfast.



Herman

The arithmetic on the screen is real. The temptation to treat it as a miniature finished election is the problem.



Corn

The snapshot we're discussing is from about eight twenty-five this morning. It will have moved by the time people hear us, but its construction is what matters.



Herman

At that point, fifty-one point eight percent had been counted. That represented just under three million ballots from nearly seven thousand polling stations.



Corn

Already, those are different denominators. A station with fewer voters contributes one completed station, but fewer votes to the national total.



Herman

The seat projection put Netanyahu's bloc at fifty-five, Eisenkot's bloc at forty-nine, and the Arab parties at sixteen. Those are allocations calculated from the votes available then. Nobody has handed out those seats.



Corn

The graphics department has furnished the chamber early.



Herman

Last night's starting point also needs untangling. Exit polls are interviews with voters, followed by estimation. They are not the opening instalment of the official count. Some of the apparent overnight movement is the difference between an estimate and actual ballots.



Corn

Particularly when the estimates disagreed with one another. Channel Fourteen projected sixty for Netanyahu's bloc. Channel Twelve projected fifty. That's a considerable disagreement before anyone has opened the boxes.



Herman

Channel Twelve had the opposition at fifty-two and Arab parties at eighteen. Channel Thirteen also had the opposition ahead. Other coverage settled around a bloc tie. There wasn't one universally agreed picture last night that the count then overturned.



Corn

Would you read this morning's rightward movement as evidence that the remaining ballots will move right too?



Herman

No. Early reporting was skewed towards areas with strong right-wing support. That describes the ballots already arriving, not an instruction to extrapolate the same movement indefinitely. Separately, there's a large population voting in double envelopes whose ballots enter much later.



Corn

Two different reasons for lateness, then. A normal polling station that hasn't finished, and a vote that follows a different checking route altogether.



Herman

Keep those separate, and the overnight numbers become much easier to read.



Corn

Before we get into the counting, let's go to the phone, because Mum has rung in.

D

Dorothy

Hello dear, it's your mother. It's time for Dorothy's History of Toast.

D

Dorothy

The first electric toasters only browned one side of the bread at a time. So someone had to stand there and turn every slice over by hand.

D

Dorothy

You'd think they'd have worked that out beforehand, wouldn't you. Still, that's the way of things, half done and the other half waiting on somebody.

D

Dorothy

Anyway. Have you eaten? I'm doing a shop later. Bye bye, sweetheart.



Herman

Lovely to hear from you! Now, at an ordinary polling station, voting closes at ten at night. People still waiting in line can vote. Only after voting has finished does the committee open the box and begin processing its contents.



Corn

The same people who've been running the station all day?



Herman

The same team. Which matters when you imagine some perfectly uniform national counting speed. These are people at tables, after a long day, dealing with different quantities of paper and different practical complications.



Corn

Your ideal evening, Herman. Exhausted people and a protocol.



Herman

I like a protocol when exhaustion arrives. You prefer remembering what everyone probably meant.



Corn

I prefer the exhaustion arriving after the paperwork.



Herman

Envelopes come out of the box. Slips are removed, displayed to the people present and read aloud. At least two committee members from different parties record the votes independently. You have a visible physical ballot and separate tallies that must agree.



Corn

Independence matters there. If one person reads a total and the other copies it, you've duplicated handwriting, not checked anything.



Herman

Separate recording lets disagreement surface. Then the envelopes must reconcile with the voters marked as having voted on the roll. If the numbers don't match, there has to be a recount. A neat stack of party totals cannot simply overrule a missing envelope.



Corn

Does an invalid ballot disappear from that reconciliation?



Herman

No. It still exists as an envelope cast by a voter. Valid party votes, invalid ballots and the participation record answer different questions. You need to account for the paper even when it contributes no vote to a list.



Corn

Otherwise “invalid” would be a remarkably convenient wastebasket.



Herman

Ballot validity has detailed rules. Writing on a slip, damage and multiple slips are among the things officials have to examine. I would narrow the shorthand people often use here... more than one slip does not automatically mean invalid in every permitted circumstance. The actual rules govern, not somebody’s impression that the envelope looks untidy.



Corn

That distinction gets lost when a television explainer has twelve seconds for paper law. Officials must decide what counts, record it, and still reconcile the whole box.



Herman

Once the count is completed, the totals go into a written protocol. Materials are sealed and taken by two officials to a regional election committee. There are twenty regional committees, each headed by a judge appointed by the Supreme Court president.



Corn

The station has finished counting, but the website still hasn’t heard from it.



Herman

There’s transport and approval between those events. At the regional committee, the protocol is checked and approved, then the figures enter the Central Elections Committee’s computer system at the Knesset. Physical material remains available for inspection.



Corn

A refresh button cannot shorten the drive.



Herman

Nor the queue at the other end. Corn, suppose two stations finish counting together. One is near the regional committee and has a clean protocol. The other has a discrepancy that needs resolving. Would you expect them to appear together?



Corn

No, and I wouldn't want them to. Publishing the questionable result just to keep pace would turn an administrative problem into a national headline. The danger is that the public sees arrival time but not the reason for it.



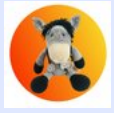
Herman

Station reporting is a chain of completed tasks. Counting, reconciliation, documentation, transport, approval, entry. Faster at one stage doesn't guarantee faster overall.



Corn

I can see why a smaller station might finish first. Fewer envelopes. Yet I'm wary of turning that into "villages fast, cities slow" as an iron law.



Herman

It isn't an iron law. Staffing, turnout at the individual station, discrepancies and distance all matter. Some smaller communities have earlier closing times, too. Certain hospital and prison voting arrangements finish at eight rather than ten.



Corn

Although an earlier closing hospital does not necessarily deliver an earlier ordinary result. Its double envelopes still need that separate route.



Herman

Yes, that's the qualification. An earlier collection is a head start in logistics, not permission to skip eligibility checks. For the regular count, what matters politically is the observed composition of reporting stations. The BBC's warning this morning was specifically that early counting leaned towards strongly right-wing areas.



Corn

That doesn't require anyone to sort the stations politically. The sorting can happen through ordinary practical differences that correlate with politics.



Herman

Think of adjacent neighbourhoods with different populations. They can have different turnout, different box sizes and different reporting times. The arriving sample carries all those differences with it.



Corn

Hannah's morning-voter idea would matter in a different system. If every station released the first hundred ballots, and those were literally the first hundred cast, you could get a national breakfast electorate.



Herman

Here, ballots are taken out and counted as they come. They aren't maintained as a chronological queue. More decisively, the station publishes after completing its count, so even a particular order on the table would disappear inside its final total.



Corn

The evening voter and the morning voter arrive online together.



Herman

For that station, yes. There's no rolling partial tally from every box. The meaningful order is between completed stations, followed later by the separately processed double-envelope population.



Corn

I was about to defend the slow stations. You've made it difficult by putting "unfinished paperwork" between me and my principles.



Herman

I knew you'd favour the station that refuses to hurry. This time I'm with you. A result should arrive when it is ready, not when the broadcaster needs another coloured square.



Corn

Keep that sentence away from your DJ bookings.



Herman

Music has a different reconciliation procedure.



Corn

The late envelopes complicate a comforting assumption, though. Even when almost every ordinary station has reported, we may still be missing a politically distinctive group.



Herman

In two thousand twenty-two, more than eighty percent was counted by Wednesday afternoon, with double envelopes making up most of what remained. The last stretch was not just the same electorate arriving more slowly.



Corn

Hm.



Herman

Soldiers, reservists, police, prison staff and inmates, hospital patients and staff, diplomats, evacuated residents and people using accessible stations can vote outside their assigned station through these arrangements.



Corn

The assigned station normally settles whether you've already voted. Away from it, the system needs another way to check.



Herman

The ballot slip goes inside the inner white envelope. Identifying details go on the outer blue envelope. These are gathered at the Knesset, where eligibility is checked against the home-station rolls, including whether the person has already voted there.



Corn

Identity on the outside, choice on the inside. You're about to get rather fond of this mechanism.



Herman

It deserves some affection. Once the eligibility checks are complete, the inner envelopes are separated from the identifying details and mixed. Only then are the anonymous ballots counted. The check needs identity. The count must not retain the connection between identity and choice.



Corn

I grant you the mechanism. Please don't name a dance after it.



Herman

Too many envelope changes for a reliable beat.



Herman

The expected volume this time is roughly six hundred thousand to six hundred and fifty thousand ballots. That's on the order of fifteen seats' worth of votes, so the late population is large enough to change the picture materially.



Corn

Fifteen seats' worth, not fifteen seats reserved for soldiers.



Herman

Correct. They enter the same national totals as everyone else. No special parliamentary allocation. Their political composition matters because adding a large, different group changes party shares.



Corn

Would you bet on them helping Netanyahu?



Herman

I'd distinguish the parties before betting. Younger voters and soldiers are more prevalent in this population, but "double envelope" is an administrative category, not a party affiliation. The previous election gives us a useful comparison, not a guaranteed replay.



Corn

Likud itself barely differed between the two groups last time. That seems important when people describe the entire late count as a single right-wing delivery.



Herman

Likud was around twenty-three and a half percent in both. Religious Zionism with Otzma Yehudit was different: fifteen and a half percent among double envelopes, compared with ten point four percent in the locality count.



Corn

A substantial advantage for one list, rather than a uniform bonus for everything to its right on a studio diagram.



Herman

Arab lists had substantially lower shares. Ra'am took one point seven percent in double envelopes against four point three percent in locality votes. Hadash–Ta'al also took one point seven percent, against four percent locally.



Corn

Less than half their ordinary share. If one of those lists is sitting just above the threshold tonight, the late count could lower its percentage while still adding votes to its total.



Herman

A party can gain votes and lose parliamentary representation because the denominator grows faster. The Haredi parties also did worse in that tranche. UTJ was at three point seven percent there, compared with six point one percent locally.



Corn

Shas followed the same direction, around seven percent rather than eight and a half. That also frustrates the notion that every Netanyahu ally benefits equally.



Herman

Corn, would you call a list safe merely because it has more votes than the threshold estimate published before voting?



Corn

No. That estimate assumes a turnout and a final valid-vote total. The threshold is a percentage of the eventual valid votes, not a fixed number printed on the ballot box. I'd want to know how far above the line it is, and who is still missing.



Herman

The threshold is three point two five percent. One pre-election estimate put the required total around a hundred and seventy-seven thousand votes if turnout reached seventy-five percent. That was conditional arithmetic, not a locked admission price.



Corn

Parliament has surge pricing.



Herman

Reported turnout is higher than that assumption. Invalid ballots also matter when determining the final valid-vote denominator. You cannot take a preliminary absolute threshold estimate and treat it as the statutory rule.



Corn

Nor take today's seat projection as a smooth curve. If a list falls below the threshold, its votes no longer participate in seat allocation, and other lists' allocations change. The graphic can jump even though the underlying vote shares moved only a little.



Herman

A seat was roughly thirty-six thousand votes at the previous election's turnout. That gives scale, but the threshold and seat-allocation rules prevent simple division from reproducing every result.



Corn

This is where my instinct for paper runs into your computer. I want the original ballots preserved, but I also want somebody doing the allocation properly rather than dividing on a napkin.



Herman

Paper for the auditable record, computation for arithmetic. Those can coexist very comfortably. Manual counting doesn't mean somebody has to perform every national calculation with a pencil.



Corn

The pencil has suffered enough.



Herman

The Central Elections Committee says there is no fixed timetable for interim releases. Different tasks finish at different times. Double-envelope counting continues into Thursday, with final results expected Friday.



Corn

I'd separate confidence in the count from confidence in a particular projection. Watching the projected bloc total fall doesn't tell you the count is becoming less reliable. It may tell you the sample has become less favourable to your party.



Herman

Direction alone also needs context. A late movement among ordinary stations need not continue once the double-envelope population starts entering. You need the composition of what remains, not merely an arrow drawn through the last few updates.



Corn

Broadcasters could put that beside the percentage. "Mostly ordinary stations outstanding," or "mostly eligibility checks outstanding." More useful than another decimal place.



Herman

Even then, identifying a group doesn't reveal its vote this time. Historical composition helps interpret it, but the envelopes still have to be opened.



Corn

Including when the history flatters our preferences.



Herman

Especially then. I'd welcome a strong right-wing result, but preference doesn't make an incomplete sample representative. A reconciliation delay at a favourable station is still a reconciliation delay.



Hilbert

"Slow" is the word I object to, Herman. Slow compared with what? I paid a hundred and eighty shekels for someone to walk Eli's dog while I watched a counting table, and the counting outlasted the walk by hours. I'm still annoyed about the second charge. This week I'm arranging it the other way round. Eli will sit with me while we practise tallying paper slips. The dog can stay in his kitchen.



Corn

The dog has secured the better assignment.



Hilbert

Eli has a bad knee. I'm taking the slips to him, not making him come across town. I've booked two evenings. We'll use separate sheets, like you described earlier, Herman, before you got interested in the envelope colours. I've asked Eli to put one deliberate mistake somewhere in his tally. He must not tell me where. I want to see how long finding it actually takes.



Herman

Separate totals can agree until one column is added. You could spend longer reconciling the sheets than reading the slips.



Hilbert

That was the night I paid for. The reading was steady. The stopping came when the envelopes and the roll didn't agree. One fellow had a little mark beside a doubtful slip. Another had moved it into a separate stack. Their totals looked wrong until they explained what they'd done. I'm not practising handwriting. I'm practising being tired and finding one missing mark. I've asked Eli not to offer tea until we've found it.



Corn

He can still drink his own.



Hilbert

He takes sugar. I've put that on the shopping list. He has agreed to start at eight on Thursday. The dog walker charged me for another full hour.



Herman

An extra hour at a table rarely appears in the percentage on television. Yet a reconciliation has to finish before those votes can enter the total. Publishing faster would require either finishing that work faster or publishing before it's resolved.



Corn

The latter buys a quick update and a later correction. I'd rather wait for the checked protocol.



Herman

One adjacent scale detail we haven't used: roughly fifteen thousand cameras are monitoring this operation, alongside thousands of physical ballot boxes. Low-tech ballots don't mean an operation without technology.



Corn

They mean the evidence survives separately from the screen displaying it. The computer reports a result that can be checked against paper.



Herman

Looking towards Thursday and Friday, the useful question is how much checked paper remains outside the national total, and which voters it represents. This morning's apparent reversal is a combination of differing exit-poll estimates and a non-random arrival order, not people changing their votes overnight. The legal publication deadline is November fourth.



Corn

Thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop for producing today's show.



Herman

If this was your kind of episode, go back for episode sixty seventy-five, Israel's Pollsters; episode sixty seventy-three, Israel Votes, Part four; and episode fourteen oh eight, Israel Wartime Readiness Field Guide. This has been My Weird Prompts, the human-AI collaboration podcast.



Corn

If you enjoy these dives into the machinery behind the headline, leave us a review wherever you listen.



Herman

We'll be back soon.



Corn

See you tomorrow.

SOURCES

What the research for this episode read before the script was written. Primary sources first.

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