Episode Book

EPISODE #6291

Surplus Vote Math in the Knesset

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SYNOPSIS

Choosing between Yashar and BeYachad reveals how electoral mechanics complicate voter intent in Israel's proportional system. A ballot elects a closed list rather than a prime minister, leaving negotiations over the top post to post-election bargaining. The breakdown explores how the Bader-Ofer allocation rules, nationwide single constituencies, and separate surplus agreements between paired parties redistribute marginal seats within political blocs, demonstrating why smaller parties do not inherently gain disproportionate leverage from an extra vote.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Yuki Tanabe brings us our guest prompt today, an election day dilemma between Yashar and BeYachad. Welcome to My Weird Prompts, Yuki. The pull is between a platform that feels closer to home and a different party leader whom the voter wants as prime minister. What can the electoral arithmetic actually tell us about those competing aims?



Herman

The immediate trap is assuming the smaller party automatically gets more value from another vote. Sometimes that intuition has teeth, particularly near the electoral threshold. Here, both lists are comfortably above it in the final published polls.



Corn

Yuki likes the Bennett and Lapid combination as a broad political center, but wants Eisenkot in the top job. Those preferences can coexist. They do not necessarily produce the same ballot.



Herman

Nor does the ballot directly appoint a prime minister. It elects a parliamentary list, and that list enters negotiations with its seats, its commitments, and its preferred candidate. Some of those commitments may collide.



Corn

The ballot is small. The subsequent argument is generously sized.



Herman

We can explain those channels without choosing between the preferences. First, though, the smaller party has no special multiplier merely for being smaller.



Corn

You look disappointed.



Herman

I like multipliers. I prefer real ones.



Corn

Israel elects one hundred twenty members from a single nationwide constituency. No district seat to rescue, no local candidate whose personal lead changes the calculation. You choose a closed list.



Herman

The threshold is three point two five percent of valid votes. Lists below it receive no seats. Votes for qualifying lists then determine the seat allocation through Bader Ofer, a version of the D'Hondt method. Its highest averages calculation slightly favors larger lists.



Corn

Slightly matters there. Bigger parties do not receive a complimentary minister with every purchase.



Herman

Correct. The initial allocation leaves some seats unassigned. For those remaining seats, the calculation compares vote totals against the number of seats already held, plus the next seat being sought. A surplus agreement allows two qualifying lists to compete together in that calculation.



Corn

Qualifying lists. Signing an agreement cannot drag a partner over the threshold.



Herman

Both must cross independently. The agreement also does not merge their candidates or oblige them to govern together. It affects seat allocation, not the President's consultations.



Corn

Before you fall in love with that distinction, Herman, somebody still has to form a government.



Herman

I can appreciate an allocation rule and remember the government. The usual majority target is sixty-one seats. That provides a parliamentary majority, but a government can win its initial confidence vote with fewer supporting members if enough others abstain. Replacing it through constructive no confidence requires sixty-one in favor.



Corn

Meaning the seats outside the proposed cabinet can matter without joining it.



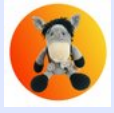
Herman

Very much. The central polling average puts the change camp at fifty-four, Netanyahu's camp at forty-nine point five, and the Arab lists at fourteen point five. Those fractional seats are averages, of course. Nobody serves half a term because the spreadsheet says so.



Corn

Several would negotiate it.



Herman

Neither central bloc reaches a majority there. The crucial distinction is between gaining seats for a camp and changing the balance among parties already inside that camp.



Corn

Especially when the two choices belong to different surplus pairings.



Herman

Yashar is reported paired with Golan's Democrats. BeYachad is paired with Liberman's Yisrael Beytenu. That makes the final-seat calculation more interesting than simply comparing the two party sizes.



Corn

The published polling does support Yuki's starting observation. Yashar is substantially ahead of BeYachad. We are not inventing a neck and neck contest between them.



Herman

The central four-poll summary gives Yashar twenty-two seats and BeYachad fourteen point five. That is a gap of about seven and a half seats. Averages conceal differences, but this particular ordering is consistent across those finals.



Corn

Channel Twelve had Yashar at twenty-three and BeYachad at fifteen. Channel Thirteen had them at twenty-two and fourteen. Neither is a small difference in a parliament this size.



Herman

Kan also had twenty-two against fourteen, while Maariv had twenty-one against fifteen. The range changes the negotiating picture at the edges, but none of those makes BeYachad a party struggling to survive.



Corn

Yet the danger of a wasted vote is real elsewhere on the ballot. It just belongs elsewhere.



Herman

Ofer Winter's Amcha Yisrael averaged two point eight eight percent. The Hendel and Zelekha Reservists list averaged three point one percent. Those numbers sit below the legal threshold, close enough in the latter case that modest polling error could change whether the entire list enters.



Corn

A cliff has rather different mathematics from a staircase.



Herman

Haredi Public was farther below, around one point three percent, with Noam and Blue and White also below in the polling. Those are the situations where survival dominates the strategic conversation. Neither list in this dilemma resembles that.



Corn

The effect also reaches people who never consider voting for those lists. If a party misses the threshold, its voters disappear from the seat allocation denominator. Everyone who qualifies divides the seats without them.



Herman

Yes... no, let me narrow that. Their valid votes still count when determining the threshold. They are excluded from the subsequent distribution among qualifying lists. That separation is important.



Corn

Your favorite kind of sentence. A correction with a denominator.



Herman

You were about to ask about it.



Corn

I was. I dislike admitting how predictable that makes me.



Herman

Try this prediction instead. Would you treat two surplus partners as one party when thinking about the next government?



Corn

No. I would treat them as partners for one calculation and read their coalition promises separately. Otherwise an accounting arrangement becomes a political endorsement it never contained.



Herman

That keeps us out of trouble with the actual map. Alongside the two pairings we mentioned, Likud is paired with Religious Zionism, Shas with United Torah Judaism, and Ra'am with the Joint List. Otzma Yehudit has no agreement in Netanyahu's camp.



Corn

The election paperwork has its own social seating plan.



Herman

A useful correction to the phrase surplus votes, though. These are not identifiable scraps taken from individual ballots. The paired lists' combined totals enter the relevant comparison. If the pair wins an additional seat, another calculation determines which member of the pair receives it.



Corn

Could you show that without making me listen to a spreadsheet being read aloud?



Herman

Suppose a qualifying pair has three hundred thousand votes and already holds nine seats. Its comparison for the next seat is thirty thousand. Another unpaired list holding four seats would need more than one hundred fifty thousand votes to beat that comparison.



Corn

The next seat goes to the higher average, rather than whichever party can display the largest pile of visibly unused ballots.



Herman

Right. Those are invented round numbers to show the operation. Actual marginal outcomes depend on every qualifying competitor, and the allocation continues until all seats are filled.



Corn

That also means nobody can look at a poll saying fourteen seats and tell which individual vote secures number fifteen.



Herman

A poll's seat projection already embeds assumptions about qualifying parties and allocation. A single ballot can matter at a very close boundary, but party size alone does not reveal which boundary will be closest.



Corn

The surplus pool is the thing to watch here, not the threshold.



Hilbert

Hilbert's Mid-Show Haiku. The Surplus Pool. One vote sinks or swims. Two lists share the leftovers, none of them yours. Dry.



Corn

A remarkably bleak swimming lesson.



Herman

On the reported agreements, a BeYachad ballot adds to the Bennett and Liberman pairing, not the Eisenkot and Democrats pairing. There is no common Yashar and BeYachad surplus pot.



Corn

We should distinguish that from saying the parties publicly announced they rejected each other.



Herman

I haven't seen such an announcement. The published pairing map supports separate pools. It does not establish a story about failed negotiations or personal motives.



Corn

It also does not make the choice consequence free. Compared with a Yashar ballot, a BeYachad ballot leaves Yashar with one fewer vote in that comparison. Calling it a different pool explains where it goes. It doesn't abolish the alternative.



Herman

Fair correction. The misleading claim would be that BeYachad somehow passes that ballot along to Eisenkot through a shared agreement. It does not. Moving support between these lists changes their strength and can change a marginal seat. It usually reallocates strength inside the same broad camp rather than adding a whole new supporter to it.



Corn

Usually. Their different partners could still make rounding affect the camp total.



Herman

Yes. Fixed camp totals are an approximation for discussing leadership, not a mathematical guarantee about every possible ballot distribution.



Corn

There is also a final poll that does not resemble this central picture.



Herman

Channel Fourteen's Direct Polls survey put Likud at thirty and Netanyahu's camp at sixty-two, the only final showing that camp with a majority. Its large sample does not automatically resolve the disagreement.



Corn

Eight thousand people can still answer the wrong model.



Herman

Roughly that size, yes. Sampling and turnout assumptions matter. Shlomo Filber's Likud affiliation is another reason to examine that poll critically, not a proof its result must be false. The proper response is less confidence in a single consensus, not pretending the outlier never happened.



Corn

I suspect the leadership campaign matters more than the surplus agreement to what Yuki is actually worrying about.



Herman

Yashar's own pitch makes that explicit. Its activists were told the party must become the largest and overtake Likud to receive the first mandate to form a government.



Corn

Must, according to the campaign. The largest party does not automatically receive the mandate under an allocation formula.



Herman

The President consults parliamentary factions and considers who can form a government. Largest-party status strengthens a claim. Recommendations and feasible partners matter too. A party can finish first and still fail to assemble support.



Corn

The campaign sells first place with rather generous delivery terms.



Herman

It is a political argument about legitimacy and bargaining strength. Eisenkot wants that position. Bennett can make a different argument based on having already served as prime minister.



Corn

Would you expect the President to ignore a larger Yashar if Bennett presented more credible recommendations?



Herman

No. Nor would I expect a clear Yashar lead to have no influence. The point is that there is discretion and coalition evidence between the ranking and the appointment.



Herman

Corn, imagine both parties gain seats from outside the camp, rather than from each other. Does that settle the disagreement over the premiership?



Corn

It improves their collective options, but it might sharpen the disagreement. A stronger Bennett can negotiate more firmly. A stronger Eisenkot can claim a clearer electoral mandate. Neither result tells us whether one agrees to serve under the other.



Herman

There is no published rotation agreement or joint prime ministerial candidacy agreement that settles it. The identity of the next prime minister remains a negotiation.



Corn

That is the missing contract in the comforting version of this dilemma. A strong BeYachad does not come with Eisenkot preinstalled.



Herman

Nor does a large Yashar arrive with enough coalition partners included. The two questions intersect, but neither answers the other.



Corn

I also object to the claim that transferring a seat from Yashar to BeYachad makes a Zionist parliamentary majority more arithmetically plausible. Both seats were already inside that possible majority.



Herman

It doesn't increase the sum. You're right. A broader appeal that brings in additional voters could increase the sum, but an internal transfer cannot. A stronger BeYachad might change which coalition arrangements are politically acceptable, which is a different claim.



Corn

This is why I distrust sentences in which arithmetic suddenly develops a personality.



Herman

You distrust most sentences until they submit supporting paperwork.



Corn

Yours arrive with appendices.



Herman

The minority-government issue changes the available arrangements. Eisenkot has floated proceeding with fifty-eight or fifty-nine change-camp seats and Arab abstentions. That could produce enough support to win an initial confidence vote without those Arab parties joining the cabinet.



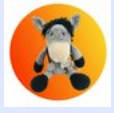
Corn

Hm.



Corn

That requires the abstentions and the members voting yes to remain available. It also requires the supposed coalition partners to accept how the government gets installed.



Herman

Bennett, Lapid, and Liberman have demanded a Zionist-majority government and rejected reliance on Arab votes or abstentions. Golan has left cooperation with Ra'am open. Those positions create a dispute about the route into office, not merely the cabinet's policies afterward.



Corn

A larger BeYachad could therefore make that minority route harder politically, even though the combined change-camp seat count stays unchanged.



Herman

Its leaders would have greater leverage to insist on their condition. That doesn't prove they would never compromise. It means the condition belongs in the calculation instead of being erased by a label like change camp.



Corn

Eisenkot also rules out serving under Netanyahu, including in rotation. You cannot simply complete every missing majority by drawing an arrow to Likud.



Herman

Coalition arithmetic includes refusals. A sum that passes sixty-one on paper is not a workable coalition when a necessary participant refuses to enter.



Herman

What would persuade you that an abstention arrangement is more than campaign speculation?



Corn

Public commitments from the parties whose behavior makes it possible. Ideally, an agreed confidence arrangement with enough named parliamentary support. Not somebody announcing that other people will discover flexibility once the results arrive.



Herman

That distinction explains why a seat forecast cannot produce a reliable prime minister forecast by itself. The central finals put the change camp between fifty-two and fifty-six. Even Eisenkot's floated minority scenario assumes a better result than that range.



Corn

There are two uncertainties, then. What the election delivers, and what the participants agree to do with it. Polling only tries to measure the first.



Herman

A purported late movement adds more noise. Channel Fourteen reported internal polling showing Yashar losing ground while BeYachad gained, accompanied by unnamed criticism that Eisenkot's largest-party campaign antagonized allies.



Corn

An unattributed campaign poll, reported by a pro-Netanyahu outlet, is a thin foundation for declaring a collapse.



Herman

It is a counter-signal, not an updated average. The sample, questions, and full results are unavailable. The hostile comparisons with Benny Gantz tell us something about the argument being circulated, not whether its numerical premise is sound.



Corn

Even a genuine shift would need a magnitude. Losing some support while remaining well ahead is different from the two lists converging.



Herman

We cannot supply that magnitude honestly. Nor can we make the last published figures into an election day measurement. The publication ban began late Friday night.



Corn

Turnout could move the result more than a rearrangement within the center. Around seven hundred thousand first-time voters are eligible. Their existence is a fact. Their collective party preference is not supplied by their age.



Herman

Arab turnout is another major uncertainty. Expectations of an increase from around fifty to around seventy percent would, if realized, substantially alter the weight of the Arab lists.



Corn

Depending also on turnout elsewhere and how those voters divide between qualifying lists.



Herman

Yes. More Arab seats could alter possible confidence arrangements while reducing the seat shares of other lists. It would not automatically provide willing partners for any particular government.



Corn

Up to seventy thousand Israelis are reportedly returning from abroad, and more than thirty-three thousand registered with Fly and Vote. Those categories should not be added together as separate electorates.



Herman

They may overlap. Travel also tells us that someone wants to participate, not which slip goes into the envelope.



Corn

The airline does not file a coalition recommendation.



Herman

One final mechanical question, Corn. Would you try to predict the exact last seat before voting, using the final public polls?



Corn

No. The qualifying parties are uncertain, turnout is uncertain, and those differences move the comparison. I would read an exact last-seat prediction as a scenario, not a discovered fact.



Herman

Running the complete allocation repeatedly as returns arrive is sensible. Trying to maintain a precise prediction from guessed counts before voting ends is impractical. One changed threshold assumption can require the whole calculation again.



Hilbert

That part is right. I run the whole thing again whenever the downstairs neighbor changes her count. This month she is using my landing as a counting room for a practice election, and I am still doing the overnight allocation. It is a mess, Herman. You explain the next-seat divisor once and expect it to stay explained. Mrs. Barak wants it explained separately to every delegate.



Corn

Separate explanations are not covered by a surplus agreement.



Hilbert

Apparently not. There are one hundred twenty delegates, all representing the same bathroom. I am not discussing the bathroom. The neighbor brings the totals upstairs at eleven each night. I enter them with a stylus because the touchscreen does not take anteater claws. She changes one vote at breakfast and requests another complete result.



Herman

A one-vote change can matter if the competing averages are close enough. You still need the full totals to establish that.



Hilbert

I have the full totals. I do not have agreement on whether a delegate taking a bath counts as an abstention. That is the current dispute. I keep thinking about a man I meet once on the ferry to Rhodes. Nissim. He prints election forms. I need his telephone number because Mrs. Barak wants the abstention box wider, and the local printer charges for a new layout.



Corn

You are paying for the box, not the abstention.



Hilbert

Six shekels each revision. She requests four this week. The allocation takes less time than her corrections. This morning she sends the same vote total again, but puts a towel over one candidate's name.



Corn

Those repeated revisions point toward tonight's useful open question. Once actual returns replace estimated totals, will the seat changes create a new governing option, or merely change who negotiates hardest inside the same deadlock? The arithmetic can clarify that distinction without choosing a voter's priorities.



Herman

Poll publication has been barred since the end of Friday, October twenty-third. Circulating internal numbers are no substitute for returns. Official results are scheduled for confirmation on November fourth, and even those will leave the premiership to coalition negotiations.



Corn

Thank you to Yuki Tanabe for the guest prompt, and to Hilbert Flumingtop for producing the show.



Herman

If you want more of this, try episode sixty seventy-three, Israel Votes, Part four; episode fourteen oh eight, Israel Wartime Readiness Field Guide; and episode sixty seventy-five, Israel's Pollsters. This has been My Weird Prompts, the human-AI collaboration podcast. If you enjoy the show, leave us a review wherever you listen.



Corn

See you tomorrow.

SOURCES

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