

Comparative Elections & Political Systems: Israel and the US

Guiding Questions:

- How are the Israeli American democratic political systems similar or different?
What makes them both democratic?
- How can knowing the differences between the two systems help broaden our understanding of Israeli society?

Although both democracies, Israel and the United States have very different political systems. Using the chart below, see if you can identify some of those differences. We've started it for you.

United States	Israel
Presidential	Parliamentary



United States	Israel
Presidential	Parliamentary
Votes are cast for individuals	Votes are cast for political parties
separate elections for legislature and executive	only one election for legislature (Knesset)
country is divided into electoral districts	the country is a single unitary election district
Elected officials serve for a fixed term	Government can be dissolved early by Prime Minister or a vote of no confidence by the Knesset
Supreme Court appointed by executive and confirmed by legislature. Appointments are lifetime.	Supreme Court appointed by a committee made up of judges, lawyers, members of Knesset, and members of the cabinet. Mandatory retirement at age 67
bicameral (two chambers) legislature	unicameral (single chamber) legislature
voting age is 18	voting age is 18
two-party system	multi-party system
President is both the head of state and head of government	President is head of state; Prime Minister is head of government
Winner takes all system - whoever gets the most votes wins	proportional system, each party wins seats in proportion to their share of the national vote provided they reach the minimum threshold of 3.25%
Individuals can only serve in one branch of the government at a time	Individuals can serve both in the legislature and executive branch at same time. Prime Minister is a also member of the Knesset
Presidents can serve maximum of two terms or 10 years; no term limits for members of the legislature	No term limits

Additional questions for discussion:

- **Which type of democracy is most common?** (More countries have a parliamentary system than a presidential system like the United States.)
- **What are the pros and cons of each type of system?** (In the Israeli system, people can have their views represented in the government even if their candidate did not win outright, more parties leads to less stability as governments rarely last the full four years - in the US citizens know when all elections will take place, more parties does mean that the parties are forced to make compromises and work with each other, in Israel not having districts means that there is no equivalent to the electoral college, so the party that wins the popular vote is the winner, no districts also means that you may not have a locally elected official representing your interests in the national government.)
- **What is the difference between a proportional election system and a plurality election system?** (In a proportional system, each candidate or party wins seats in proportion to their share of the national vote. In a plurality electoral system, like the United States, a candidate only needs to win the most votes to carry the district. Some countries have a majority system which require a candidate to get a majority of the votes in order to win.)
- **Do you think this is the most effective way for selecting the Knesset? Is 3.25% of the vote too low of a threshold or too high?** (In the Netherlands, the threshold is less than 1% while in Turkey it is 10%, most countries that use a proportional system have a threshold of 5%.)



Top left: David Ben-Gurion speaking at the Provisional State Council - the precursor to the Knesset on September 30, 1948

Top right: One of the first Knesset's temporary homes in Tel-Aviv

Bottom left: The original Knesset building on King George Street in Jerusalem

Bottom right: Members of the Knesset at a plenum in May 1950

Photos Source: Government Press Office of Israel