

In Search of the Center

By Dahlia Scheindlin

After the Second Intifada (2000-2005), Israel appeared to be hurtling towards rightwing politics with no end in sight. From 2009, the towering figurehead of the right, Benjamin Netanyahu, won election after election. As public sentiment veered to the right, parties competed for extreme nationalist and expansionist policies, and there seemed to be no stopping the trend. Yet the party that finally came close to beating Netanyahu in April 2019, then surpassed Likud in a second round in September that year, was not a competitor from the right but a rival from the Israeli center.

Blue and White was an unlikely challenger. The party was cobbled together ad hoc ahead of the April 2019 elections, led by three former generals with no obvious political ideology, party institutions or base of support beyond the voters of one of the constituent parties in its joint slate, Yesh Atid. The latter was largely viewed as center-left. Yet somehow, voters knew instinctively where Blue and White fit on Israel's map – the center. The party's own leaders worked hard to convey a centrist image as their brand, as well. But do centrist political movements ever succeed in Israel? Can a centrist party become a defining force of Israeli politics, and if so, what exactly does centrism mean in Israel?

The Pull of the Center

On the face of it, centrist politics sound like a potential antidote to Israel's notoriously polarized, fragmented, and aggressive political culture. A center party could become a vehicle to promote moderation and pragmatic policies, in theory.

Yet Blue and White did not actually win either the April or September 2019 elections outright, and it fell decisively behind Likud in a third election held in March 2020, winning 33 seats compared to 36 for Likud. Kadima, another centrist party (originally a breakaway from Likud), almost won the elections in 2009, with one seat more than Likud, but was thwarted at the coalition-building stage – similar to Blue and White's two-seat lead in September which did not enable it to form a coalition (Netanyahu and Likud were unable to do so either, which prompted the third round in 2020).

In Israel's past, other smaller centrist parties have generally won between six and 15 seats, but never enough to challenge the leadership. The biggest success prior to Blue and White was Yesh Atid, with 19 seats in 2013, but as mentioned, many voters viewed Yesh Atid as center-left. Centrist parties that seemed to start with healthy electoral success rarely survived or maintained their strength for more than two cycles. In 2006, for example, Kadima, won mainly by routing Likud's electoral support =, much like Blue and White would rout Labor in 2019. As noted, Kadima did well again in 2009, but Likud rebounded and Kadima began to sink, nearly collapsing by 2013 and long gone since that time.

What does it mean to be the political center in Israel? Can a centrist party become a leading force in the country in the long term? To answer these questions, the notion of political "centrism" in Israel must be examined bottom-up: Who are the people who consider themselves centrist, and what do the parties they support stand for?

The People

The most obvious reason for the limited success of centrist parties is the limited number of voters who identify with the center. When Israelis are asked in polls whether they consider themselves rightwing,

leftwing or centrist, for nearly two decades only about 25% choose the center. The last time this number changed significantly was after the Second Intifada, when many left-wingers began to call themselves centrist – pushing that category to its current numbers.

Around 1999-2000, the self-identified left included over 30% of the Jewish population and centrists numbered about 18%, according to surveys I conducted at the time. The reversal came very quickly after the violence broke out in September 2000. In a 2003 poll, 26% identified as centrist and the “left” had dropped among Jews to about 20%. The basic pattern was set: from then on, the self-identified right rose to more than 50% among Jews (reaching between 55% and 60% in recent years), and the left dropped to about 15% and as low as 12%, as demonstrated [in a survey I conducted one week before the April 2019 elections](#). The center held, rarely exceeding 25-30%, and when the self-identification with the center topped 30% in 2013, the number soon went back down. While Arab citizens’ self-identification lowers the rightwing average and boosts the leftwing average, the center hardly changes even when Jewish and Arab citizens are weighted together.

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Notably, centrist numbers shift in direct inverse proportion to the left; in other words, most of the increase in self-identified centrists in the 2000s came from people who once identified as leftwing. Surveys repeatedly show that they share many basic views with the left but abandoned that label in anger, fear or simply despair. In almost 20 years, the right has gained about 10-15% in uneven increments, most likely from those who once identified as centrist, but including defectors from the left as well.

For the ideological terms “left”, “right” and “center” to be meaningful, it is important to understand what they refer to in the current Israeli context. Unlike Europe or the US, at present these labels do not stand for economic policy, and only somewhat relate to moral norms such as progressive versus conservative values. Although voters do hold different belief systems, mainly along the religious-secular divide, the sharpest ideological division among Israelis is tied to national security, the Israeli-Palestinian (or the broader Israeli-Arab) conflict, and the question of how to resolve it. The religious-secular world view is closely linked to attitudes towards the conflict as well.

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The division over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is so fundamental that questions about this issue in a survey are the strongest predictor of whether Israelis will identify as left, right or center – and their support for parties in the relevant blocs is equally correlated with their positions. Accordingly, when the self-identified center grew at the expense of the left during the Second Intifada, electoral trends favored parties that branded themselves as centrist.

Consider the following change: in 1999, two centrist parties received 12 seats combined. One was called simply the Center Party, established by ex-generals to compete in the 1999 elections. By the next elections in 2003, the Center Party was gone. Yet in 2003 the total center camp grew, as the second centrist party from 1999, Shinui, won 15 seats. That party was led by Tommy Lapid, a beta version of the current centrist party Yesh Atid, led by his son, Yair.

By 2006, a new party practically doubled the size of the centrist bloc. Ariel Sharon established Kadima by breaking away from Likud, his longtime political home. Although Sharon himself fell into a coma midway through the 2006 campaign, his successor Ehud Olmert won 29 seats. Olmert had no great personal following – voters were expressing support for Sharon. But those voters were also supporting the idea of a

large party that fell between the right and left flanks of Israel's largest parties to date, Likud and Labor.

Another party won a surprise showing in 2006: the Pensioners' Party. This was considered a protest vote that was driven in part by young people, winning seven seats. Together with Kadima, the center camp in 2006 thus reached 36 seats, exceeding the 35 seats Blue and White won in April 2019.

The Parties

Defining a party as "centrist" in Israel can be murky too – perhaps by design. For the purposes of this analysis, the main justifications for considering a party centrist is that their voters identify as such in surveys, and their portrayal as centrist in the Israeli political discourse at the time. Parties do well among those voters when their policies lie between the hard right and left regarding the conflict. Centrist parties may also downplay the prominence of the national conflict altogether, and seek support based on other important social and economic concerns. By either transcending the conflict or crafting moderate positions on the issue, these parties attempt to attract "soft" rightwing or moderate leftwing voters disgruntled with the main parties and the older parties' handling of daily life concerns beyond the conflict.

After 2006, the total number of Knesset seats going to center parties decreased but remained above 20 (expressing about 16% of the vote). By a decade later, the portion of self-defined centrists appeared to have stabilized at around 25% or slightly higher. Voter trends reflect this cap: In 2013, centrist parties won nearly 20% of the vote (Yesh Atid and Hatnua), and declined to about 16% in 2015 (Yesh Atid and Kulanu). Perhaps the 26% of votes Blue and White received in April 2019, or 35 seats – before falling to 34 in September and 33 in March 2020 – is the maximum the center can hope to win.

What issues does the center own?

The tension between emphasizing security and the conflict versus social and economic issues has become a core dilemma of the center. What do those social and economic issues include?

In Israel it often feels that the political agenda refers to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the one hand, and everything else on the other

Broadly, when not discussing the national conflict issue, Israelis focus on the cost of living, the nature and size of the welfare state, questions of religion and state, education, health and other social services, and increasingly, LGBT rights,; and a smattering of seemingly marginal issues such as the legalization of marijuana, which is more fashionable than environmental concerns in Israel so far. Although there is growing attention to climate change, no parties have seriously brought environment or the climate crisis into the public debate – Green parties have never crossed the voter threshold to enter the Knesset. But even huge problems such as the economy or separation of religion and state fall well behind attitudes to the conflict as drivers of ideology and voting behavior.

Although survey respondents regularly put the cost of living at the top of their national priorities, this issue is not divisive in any meaningful way: right, left and center alike consider it the first or second general national priority. The national conversation rarely, if ever, revolves around questions such as big or small government, raising or lowering taxes, and so on; at best, there are vague slogans about "closing economic gaps" – which are enormous in Israel – or lowering housing costs, which are notoriously high. Yet nobody disagrees about the problem itself, at least in public discourse.

The center and left alike prefer a secular state and greater separation of religion and state

Separating religion and state is a deeply divisive national issue, and therefore more predictive of left-right attitudes than economic questions. A large segment of Israel's Jewish right-wing voters are religious to varying degrees – roughly one-quarter are either ultra-orthodox or national-religious, and many prefer a greater role for Jewish institutions and identity in public life. The center and left alike, as well as secular right-wingers, prefer a secular state and greater separation of religion and state. Many of the “traditionalists” – who make up about 35% of Jews – also prefer for the state to refrain from imposed religious practices.

Yet even religion and state is less of a voting priority than the two core elements of the conflict: West Bank settlements and the two-state solution. It is these issues that define, in practice, what it means to be leftwing (for two states and against settlements) or right wing (where a strong majority opposes the two-state solution and favors settlements).

Where does the center fit in? As many centrists emerged from the erstwhile left, surveys regularly point to broad agreement between the center and the left on the two key issues. In a survey [I conducted for B'Tselem](#) in the weeks prior to the announcement of elections in December 2018, like numerous other surveys, about two-thirds of self-defined centrists supported a two-state solution. When asked whether settlements help or harm Israeli security in 2017 (also for B'tselem), nearly 60% opposed settlements – although the center broke down evenly between “help and harm” when asked the same question in 2018. However, the same pattern regarding strong center support for a two state solution (nearly two-thirds) can be seen in [joint Israeli-Palestinian](#) surveys I conducted for Tel Aviv University with the Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research and the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research from 2016-2018. This finding has remained consistent over years of research into the conflict.

The Two Faces of the Center

At the same time, polling I conducted between 2016-2017 for special projects showed that the voters of centrist parties in the decade of the 2010s – Moshe Kachlon's Kulanu and Yair Lapid's Yesh Atid – cared primarily about economic issues and the cost of living. While this concern characterized all camps, it was even more prominent among centrist voters. Both Kulanu and Yesh Atid put socioeconomic issues at the core of their identity and their national policy agendas. Indeed, both rose to power on the wave of anger unleashed during an Occupy-style economic protest in 2011 that swept through Israeli society and peaked when roughly half a million people took to the streets.

The emerging picture reveals two sub-types of center in Israel

The emerging picture reveals two subtypes of center in Israel. One type is parties defined as centrist by their approach to the conflict (presumably with a leftwing orientation and realpolitik pragmatism). The other type includes parties that disregard, or seek to transcend, politically sensitive issues relating to the conflict and focus on quality of life problems – the kind of problems that are politically prominent in societies that are not facing a violent, protracted, unresolved conflict. Ariel Sharon's Kadima is an example of the former, Yesh Atid and Kulanu of the latter.

Which type of party fares better in Israel? The answer to this question can influence the entire political map, and therefore has the capacity to shift the balance of power in Israel. Furthermore, parties listen to what they

believe voters want: every political campaign is a dilemma of how to balance what voters seem to desire with the party leaders' vision, assuming they have one.

History suggests the answer. In the two elections in which the center achieved its best results, the parties had a centrist image concerning national security and the conflict. Kadima gained 29 seats in 2006, when Ariel Sharon was at the peak of his popularity following the “disengagement” – the withdrawal of settlements and the IDF from inside Gaza. His campaign ran on the platform of the “convergence plan” – a similar reduction of Israeli presence in the West Bank. Ehud Olmert would later negotiate in detail for a two-state solution, contributing to the party's second-best result in 2009 (28 seats).

Recall that in 2006, the competing centrist parties were Kadima and the Pensioners. Both were brand-new, running for the first time. Both were led by military heroes (the Pensioners' Party was established by [Rafi Eitan, a legendary Mossad agent](#)). But the party that ran on defined platforms regarding the conflict won far more seats, as controversial as Sharon's policy was. The Pensioners, with their domestic agenda, won seven seats in 2006 and never crossed the electoral threshold again. Admittedly, they were also a new party, and Eitan had neither the vaunted status nor political experience of Ariel Sharon. But future center parties would repeat the broad trend.

Yesh Atid had a stellar showing in its first run, winning 19 seats in the first elections held after the 2011 social protest, which was itself almost completely devoid of positions about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Yesh Atid's founder and leader Yair Lapid was nominally in favor of a two-state solution, but Yesh Atid was far more committed to an economic and social agenda. By the next elections in 2015, Yesh Atid had lost nearly half its votes, and by 2019 it ceased to exist independently after merging with Blue and White. Kulanu, the socioeconomic-oriented party from the center-right, ran in just two elections as well, also losing over half of its strength from the first to the second cycle (between 2015 and April 2019). By the time Israel called a do-over election for late 2019, Moshe Kahlon had re-incorporated the party back into Likud – becoming the latest in the long line of short-lived centrist parties. In the lead-up to a third unprecedented election in the space of one year, in March 2020, Kachlon – although still nominally serving as Finance Minister – announced that he would leave politics altogether.

Blue and White maintained constructive ambiguity on most issues in general. It had little by way of a social and economic platform. Three of its four top leaders were ex-generals or former chiefs of staff, alongside Lapid, a non-military figure. The party's first campaign ads focused exclusively on security and military matters, and briefly mentioned the even less popular issue of peace. Even without a clear program, the party sought to reassure voters that it could be trusted on security thanks to the identity of the leaders, projecting a strong image on this front over other issues. The only other core identity of Blue and White was an agenda to replace Netanyahu.

It appears that, ultimately, Israeli voters only turn out in numbers when they have a clear image of what a party represents in terms of the conflict. Even the right-wing parties, which repudiate a two state solution at present, embrace a stance on the issue – whether in support of US President Trump's plan released in January 2020, or a commitment to “sovereignty” – i.e., annexation of parts of the West Bank.

The parties are well aware that their ideological placement depends on how they communicate their position on the conflict

Israeli parties are well aware that their ideological image depends on how they communicate their position on the conflict, which must be clear to voters before they will listen to any other policy position the party supports. The “position on the conflict” need not be a specific plan, but rather a matter of identity, whether the party leaders appeal to a cosmic and biblical, or secular worldview, and whether its value system prizes security over peace; maximalist and militarist ideas over diplomacy and concessions. These positions define which options a voter will even consider, and which parties they will never vote for.

Identity overrides economic plans and social causes. The dual issue of security and the conflict therefore wins quietly, without even necessarily stating a detailed plan for resolving the conflict – Blue and White simply had to project where it stands on this issue to be considered centrist. In this case, based on its platform, Blue and White proposed retaining major portions of the West Bank, but supported an ill-defined “separation” through future diplomacy – symbolic terms more than a blueprint, that helped voters to know, almost instinctively, who they are. By the time of the 2020 campaign, Blue and White courted right-wing voters by insisting that its vision concurred broadly with the Trump plan. And ironically, Blue and White’s overriding identity as a party destined to replace Netanyahu was insufficient as well. The party not only came in a clear second to Likud in April 2020, it split altogether in the stage of coalition negotiations. Acknowledging that it had no distinct difference with Likud on the conflict, the Gantz-led faction of Blue and White joined Netanyahu, and the “anti-Netanyahu” stance was not a strong enough glue to hold the party together.

What the center can do for its country

If the general vision of the Israeli peace camp has been to advance an end to the conflict in order to shift priorities in the future, while the right is concerned with existential triumph, herein lies the contradiction of the center: Those parties that do stake out a specific identity regarding the conflict offer plans that are partial, non-committal, and therefore inadequate for reaching an agreement. Yet the other type – Lapid, Kachlon/Kulanu, and historically Shinui or the Pensioners – purport to solve other issues before even addressing the conflict. Neither approach has been fully effective thus far, but one type does marginally better.

Arguably, the most developed vision for resolving the conflict came from Kadima under Ehud Olmert, in the 2008 negotiations. By this time, the party was clearly considered centrist in Israeli terms. Although the negotiations failed, the elections that followed led to a rare result: a centrist party actually grew in strength by one seat. Yet even Kadima’s better-developed vision for peace was insufficient to win the elections in terms of forming the government (the task went to Likud), nor was Kadima’s centrist approach to negotiations sufficient to reach a peace agreement in practice, which might have been an achievement capable of strengthening its electoral result. Without such achievements, the party essentially exited the political scene.

However, centrist parties of either type have demonstrated their ability to gather a wide voter base at least for an initial win. Their voters share the broad worldview of the mainstream left, in terms of majority support for a two state solution the center parties with a clear image on security and peace in the voters’ minds tend to do somewhat better electorally. These parties seem to be attractive to Israelis who are tired of political polarization, and such parties may well succeed in the future. If centrist parties continue to be a rising force in Israeli politics, they are well-placed to advance a resolution to the conflict – those that articulate a vision do better than centrist parties who ignore the conflict, but it is possible they do not go far enough, or commit to conflict resolution clear enough. Doing so would be the greatest possible service to their country.