EPISODE #148

# The Accountability Gap: Why Your Vote Doesn't Have a Face

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## EPISODE SYNOPSIS

Ever wondered why Israeli politics feels like a constant cycle of national ideological battles with very little focus on local issues? In this episode of My Weird Prompts, Corn and Herman Poppleberry break down the "Accountability Gap" created by Israel's nationwide proportional representation system. They trace the system's roots back to the pre-state British Mandate era and explain how a "temporary" solution for unity became a permanent hurdle for local governance. From the single transferable vote in Ireland to the mixed-member proportional systems of Germany and New Zealand, the brothers explore how different electoral models could bridge the divide between national ideology and the day-to-day needs of citizens. This is a deep dive into how the "hardware" of a democracy shapes the lives of those living within it.

## DANIEL'S PROMPT

**Daniel**

"I'd like to ask a question about Israel's political system and how it fits into the classification of political models. Having grown up in Ireland, I'm familiar with proportional representation where you vote for a local candidate who is accountable to your neighborhood. In Israel, the system of political lists feels disconnected from local issues like the cost of living and social gaps, as there is no concept of local ownership or accountability. How did Israel get the political system it has today, and has it always been this way? What other political models or resources should I consider to learn about a more vibrant democracy where citizens feel more involved in the political process?"

# TRANSCRIPT

**Corn**

Hey there, welcome to My Weird Prompts. I am Corn, and I am sitting here in our living room in Jerusalem with my brother, Herman.

**Herman**

Herman Poppleberry, at your service. It is a bit of a rainy day outside here in the holy city, which is the perfect weather for diving into some deep political theory.

**Corn**

It really is. And we have a great jumping off point today. Our housemate Daniel sent us an audio prompt earlier. He has been thinking a lot about the differences between the political system here in Israel versus what he grew up with in Ireland. He is feeling a bit frustrated with the lack of local accountability here, and he wants to know how we ended up with this system and what else is out there.

**Herman**

I love this topic because it hits on something we feel every single day living here. It is one of those things that feels like a permanent law of nature when you are in it, but when you step back and look at the history, you realize it was a very specific choice made at a very specific time for very specific reasons.

**Corn**

Right. And for our listeners who might not be as familiar with the nuances, Israel uses a system called nationwide proportional representation with a closed list. Basically, when you go to vote, you do not vote for a person. You vote for a party. The entire country is treated as one single electoral district with one hundred twenty seats in the Knesset.

**Herman**

Exactly. And if a party gets ten percent of the national vote, they get twelve seats. Those seats are filled by people on a pre-set list that the party decided on before the election. So if you are number thirteen on that list and your party only gets twelve seats, you are out of luck.

**Corn**

Daniel mentioned that in Ireland, they have a very different vibe. They use something called the single transferable vote in multi-member constituencies. It sounds complex, but the result is that you know exactly who your representative is. You can go to their office and complain about a pothole or the cost of living in your specific neighborhood. Here, if I have a problem with the trash collection in Jerusalem, there is no member of the Knesset who is specifically responsible for my street.

**Herman**

That is the core of the disconnect Daniel is talking about. In political science, we call this the trade-off between representativeness and accountability. Israel's system is incredibly representative of the national ideological landscape, but it is almost entirely devoid of geographic accountability.

**Corn**

So let us get into the history. How did we get here? Was there a moment where someone said, let us make sure no one ever knows who their local representative is?

**Herman**

It actually goes back way before nineteen forty-eight. The system was inherited from the institutions of the Zionist movement during the British Mandate period. They had something called the Assembly of Representatives, or the Assefat HaNivcharim. At the time, the Jewish community, the Yishuv, was a collection of very different ideological groups. You had socialist laborers, religious factions, revisionist Zionists, and more.

**Corn**

And they were all spread out, right? It was not like they had clearly defined borders for their communities.

**Herman**

Precisely. They were scattered across the land, often in small pockets. If they had used a regional system back then, small but important ideological groups might have been completely shut out of the process. The goal was to keep everyone inside the tent. They wanted every faction to feel like they had a stake in the proto-state. So they used a system where every single vote counted toward a national total.

**Corn**

So it was about unity through ideological diversity.

**Herman**

Yes. And when the state was actually founded in nineteen forty-eight, they were in the middle of a war for independence. They needed to set up a government fast. They basically said, look, the system we used for the Zionist Congress and the Assembly of Representatives worked well enough to keep us together so far, let us just keep using it for the first Constituent Assembly.

**Corn**

And as we know, in politics, there is nothing more permanent than a temporary solution.

**Herman**

You nailed it. That first assembly was supposed to write a constitution and then maybe change the system, but they could never agree on a constitution. So the temporary system became the permanent one. And because the parties that were already in power benefited from the system, they had very little incentive to change it to something that might make their individual members more vulnerable to local voters.

**Corn**

It is fascinating because it creates this weird incentive structure. If you are a member of the Knesset, your boss is not the voter in Jerusalem. Your boss is the person who decides your place on the party list.

**Herman**

Right. In many parties, that means the party leader or a small committee of party elders. If you want to keep your job, you do not spend your time walking the streets of your neighborhood asking about the cost of groceries. You spend your time making sure the party leader is happy with you. This leads to what Daniel called the list politics where everything is about national ideological battles and very little is about the day-to-day concerns of citizens.

**Corn**

It also explains why we see so much fragmentation. Every time a politician gets into a fight with their party leader, they just go off and start their own list. Since you only need to cross a certain threshold to get into the Knesset, it is actually viable to just start a new party every election cycle.

**Herman**

The threshold is a big part of this. For a long time, it was very low, only one percent. Then it went to one point five, then two, and now it is at three point twenty-five percent. Even at three point twenty-five percent, it is low enough that we often see ten or more parties in the Knesset. This leads to the perpetual coalition crisis that Israel is famous for. You can never have a one-party government. You always need a patchwork of four, five, or six parties to reach that sixty-one seat majority.

**Corn**

And that is where the leverage comes in. A tiny party with only four seats can suddenly become the kingmaker. They can demand huge concessions or specific budgets for their narrow interests in exchange for joining the coalition.

**Herman**

And that is exactly why the social gaps and the cost of living issues Daniel mentioned get pushed to the side. The big national parties are so busy horse-trading with the small niche parties to stay in power that they do not have the political capital or the long-term stability to tackle major structural economic problems.

**Corn**

It feels like the system is designed for a country that is constantly in an emergency state. It is great for deciding on war and peace or big ideological shifts, but it is terrible for building a functioning civil society at the local level.

**Herman**

That is a very astute way to put it. It is a system for a movement, not necessarily for a mature state. But before we dive into the alternative models and what a more vibrant democracy might look like, let us take a quick break for our sponsors.

**Corn**

Good idea. We will be right back. Larry: Are you tired of the linear flow of time? Do you wish you could just take back that embarrassing thing you said at the office holiday party three years ago? Introducing the Reality Retractor by Paradox Industries. This hand-held device uses proprietary sub-atomic vibration technology to gently nudge your personal timeline six seconds into the past. Did you spill coffee on your white shirt? Click! No you didn't. Did you accidentally reply-all to a sensitive email? Click! It never happened. Please note that Paradox Industries is not responsible for any localized temporal rifts, accidental erasure of distant cousins, or the sudden onset of deja-vu-induced vertigo. The Reality Retractor: because the past is only a suggestion if you have the right hardware. Larry: BUY NOW!

**Herman**

Thanks, Larry. I think I could have used one of those yesterday when I dropped my phone in the hummus.

**Corn**

I think we all could. Anyway, back to the serious stuff. We were talking about the lack of local accountability in the Israeli system. Daniel was asking about other models and how we might move toward a more vibrant democracy.

**Herman**

Right. So, if we look at Daniel's home country, Ireland, they use the single transferable vote. In that system, the country is divided into many districts, and each district elects three, four, or five representatives. You do not just vote for one person; you rank the candidates in order of preference.

**Corn**

I have always found that fascinating. It means your vote is never really wasted. If your first choice gets eliminated, your vote goes to your second choice.

**Herman**

Exactly. And because there are multiple representatives for each district, you often have people from different parties representing the same neighborhood. This creates a huge amount of competition to actually serve the local constituents. If one representative ignores the local cost of living, the other one will jump on it to win your vote next time.

**Corn**

But I can hear the counter-argument from the Israeli perspective already. They would say, if we had local districts, the national identity would fragment. We would have the Jerusalem party versus the Tel Aviv party versus the Galilee party.

**Herman**

That is the classic fear. And to be fair, in a country as small and as divided as Israel, that is a real risk. But there is a middle ground. Many countries use what we call mixed-member proportional systems. Germany and New Zealand are the classic examples.

**Corn**

How does that work?

**Herman**

It is actually quite elegant. You get two votes. One vote is for a local candidate in your specific district, just like in the United States or the United Kingdom. The second vote is for a party list, just like in Israel. Half the seats in parliament are filled by the local winners, and the other half are filled from the party lists to make sure the overall result is still proportional to the national vote.

**Corn**

So you get the best of both worlds. You have a local person you can call when the roads are bad, but the overall makeup of the parliament still reflects the national will.

**Herman**

Precisely. If Israel adopted a system like that, you might have sixty seats representing specific regions and sixty seats from the national lists. Suddenly, you have sixty people in the Knesset whose entire career depends on making sure their specific neighbors are happy. That changes the conversation from purely ideological battles to practical governance very quickly.

**Corn**

It also might break the power of the party leaders a little bit. If you are a popular local representative, you have your own power base. You do not have to beg the party leader for a spot on the list because you can win your seat on your own merit in your district.

**Herman**

That is one of the biggest benefits. It encourages more independent-minded politicians. Now, Daniel also asked about resources for learning about a more vibrant democracy. If you want to see what this looks like in practice, I highly recommend looking into the work of Arend Lijphart. He is a famous political scientist who wrote a book called Patterns of Democracy.

**Corn**

I remember you mentioning him before. He compares thirty-six different democracies.

**Herman**

Yes. He distinguishes between majoritarian systems, like the United Kingdom, where the winner takes all, and consensus systems, like Switzerland or parts of Scandinavia. Israel is actually classified as a consensus system because of its extreme proportionality, but it lacks the other features that make consensus systems work well, like strong local government or a formal constitution.

**Corn**

That is a key point. It is not just the voting system; it is the whole structure. In many vibrant democracies, the national government does not do everything. Local municipalities have a lot more power and their own budgets.

**Herman**

Exactly. In Israel, the central government is incredibly powerful. The Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Interior hold the purse strings for almost everything that happens in our cities. If a city wants to build a new park or change a bus route, they often have to get permission from a bureaucrat in a national ministry who has never even visited that neighborhood.

**Corn**

So even if we changed the Knesset voting system, we would still need to decentralize power to make people feel more involved.

**Herman**

Absolutely. There is a concept called subsidiarity. It is the idea that decisions should be made at the most local level possible. If a problem can be solved by a neighborhood council, it should be. If not, then the city. Only the big stuff should go to the national government. In Israel, we have the opposite. Everything is centralized, which naturally makes people feel like their voice doesn't matter because the decision-makers are so far away.

**Corn**

This connects back to what Daniel was saying about the social gaps. When power is centralized, it tends to flow toward the groups that are best at lobbying the central government, not necessarily the groups that have the greatest need.

**Herman**

Right. And in the Israeli system, the groups that are best at lobbying are often the small, highly organized niche parties that hold the balance of power in the coalition. They can secure billions for their specific schools or institutions while the general public suffers from a lack of investment in public transport or affordable housing.

**Corn**

So, if we are looking for a more vibrant democracy, we are looking for three things. One, some form of geographic representation so politicians are accountable to specific people. Two, decentralization of power so local communities can actually solve their own problems. And three, a clearer set of rules, like a constitution, to prevent the constant horse-trading from undermining the long-term good of the country.

**Herman**

That is a perfect summary. And for anyone who wants to dive deeper into how this could actually work in Israel, there is a great organization called the Israel Democracy Institute. They have been proposing various reforms for decades. They have some very detailed plans for moving toward a semi-regional system that would keep the proportionality but add that local accountability Daniel is looking for.

**Corn**

I think it is also important to mention that a vibrant democracy is not just about the rules. It is about the culture. If people feel disconnected, they stop participating. And when they stop participating, the system becomes even more susceptible to capture by narrow interests.

**Herman**

That is the tragedy of it. The frustration Daniel feels is actually the first step toward change. When people realize that the system is not serving them, they start looking for alternatives. We have seen movements in the past, like the social protests in two thousand eleven, where hundreds of thousands of Israelis took to the streets to talk about the cost of living. The problem was that those protests didn't lead to structural political reform. They were absorbed by the existing list-based parties.

**Corn**

It is like the system has a built-in immune response to change.

**Herman**

It really does. But we are seeing more and more discussion about this now. Especially in the last few years, the realization that the current model might be reaching its breaking point is becoming more widespread.

**Corn**

I wonder what it would take to actually push a reform through. It feels like a catch-twenty-two. You need the politicians who are currently in power to vote to change the system that put them there.

**Herman**

Historically, that usually only happens during a major national crisis or when there is an overwhelming public demand that the parties can no longer ignore. In New Zealand, they changed their system in the nineteen nineties because people were so fed up with the existing parties that they voted in a referendum to completely overhaul how they elected their parliament.

**Corn**

So there is hope. It has been done before.

**Herman**

It definitely has. And I think the more people like Daniel ask these questions and compare our system to others, the more the pressure for change grows. We should not accept the current state of affairs as inevitable just because it is how things have been since nineteen forty-eight.

**Corn**

Well, I feel like I have a much better handle on why our neighborhood doesn't have a specific representative in the Knesset now. It is a legacy of a nineteenth-century movement adapted for a mid-twentieth-century emergency, still running in twenty-six.

**Herman**

That is exactly it. It is a vintage system that is struggling to handle the complexities of a modern, diverse society.

**Corn**

Before we wrap up, I want to reiterate that if you are enjoying these deep dives, please do leave us a review on your podcast app or on Spotify. It really does help the show grow and helps other curious people find us.

**Herman**

And if you have your own weird prompts or questions about how the world works, head over to myweirdprompts.com and send them our way. We love digging into this stuff.

**Corn**

This has been My Weird Prompts. A big thanks to Daniel for the prompt today. It definitely gave us a lot to chew on.

**Herman**

It really did. I'm going to go read more about the single transferable vote now. I find those transfer algorithms fascinating.

**Corn**

Of course you do, Herman. Of course you do. Alright everyone, thanks for listening. We will see you next week.

**Herman**

Until next time!

**Corn**

This has been My Weird Prompts. You can find us on Spotify and at our website, myweirdprompts.com.

**Herman**

Goodbye everyone!

**Corn**

Take care.

**Herman**

And remember, if you see a pothole, don't call your Member of Knesset. They probably don't know where you live.

**Corn**

Sadly true. Bye for now!

**Herman**

Bye!

**Corn**

One last thing, just to really drive home the point for Daniel. If you look at the Irish system again, the reason it feels so vibrant is that the politicians are constantly terrified of their neighbors. In Israel, the politicians are only terrified of their primary voters or their party leader. That shift in who you are afraid of changes everything about how you behave in office.

**Herman**

That is a great final point. Fear is a powerful motivator in politics. We just need to make sure the fear is directed toward the general public's needs rather than internal party dynamics.

**Corn**

Exactly. Alright, now we are really done.

**Herman**

For real this time.

**Corn**

See you later.

**Herman**

Goodbye!