



# Open Primaries in Israel: Opportunities and Challenges

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## **Abstract**

Given the central role that parties play in recruiting citizens for elected positions, the method by which a party selects its leaders and candidates for parliament is of critical importance.

An optimal democratic method to choose a party leader and Knesset candidates should achieve several primary goals: participation, competitiveness, representativeness, responsiveness and fairness. Indeed, the first two goals are principles that help provide the minimal definition for a functioning democracy. Representation is a central component of modern democracy and is based on the assumption that elected officials will be accepted by the citizenry and perform their duties responsibly, in the best interests of the electorate.

Hence, the most democratic method for selecting candidates and party leaders should be based on broad public participation, legitimate competition, representation of societal groups, facilitate a substantial link between the elected and electorate and be fair.

However, there is no ideal method that will simultaneously and equally address and abide by all these criteria. This is our starting point: there is no optimal elected body and no perfect way to either choose a party leader or party list of candidates for the Knesset. No method is problem-free or completely immune from potential abuse.

Recently, the considerable weaknesses evident in the current primary system have led to calls for extending the procedure beyond party members and to adopt an open primaries system. The most obvious advantage of open primaries is that such an electoral method opens the door to wider participation of citizens in political decision making processes.

While this system has other advantages as well, one should not ignore the risks associated with open primaries:

<b>Advantages</b>	<b>Disadvantages and Risks</b>
Increased civilian participation in the political process	Potential for undue influence of supporters of rival political parties
Low participation barrier creates opportunity for broader participation, which will neutralize the undue influence of political kingpins and powerful interest groups	Poor participation creates an opportunity for political kingpins and powerful interest groups to increase their influence
Improved party image – potential enthusiasm could provide significant momentum in election campaigns	If perceived as a failure, open primaries will create a negative impression of the party and thus undermine its chances of doing well in upcoming elections
Expansion of a party's message and reach to new potential audiences	Decrease the influence of party members and activists in favor of less committed citizens
	A very broad spectrum of voters will strengthen the built-in advantage already enjoyed by either wealthy or well-known candidates in inclusive selection methods

### **Foundational Points, Conclusions and Recommendations**

1. There is no perfect method for selecting candidates. However, the primaries system in its present form has several glaring weaknesses.
2. Open primaries must be conducted vigilantly, taking into account the system's own unique set of possible risks.
3. The use of open primaries in parliamentary democracies is a new phenomenon, and so our ability to gauge its effectiveness based on comparative experience is limited.

In consideration of the above, we recommend:

- If a party (or joint list) wants to hold open primaries it should initially experiment with this method only for leadership selection . Such a cautious approach would minimize the risks and potential damage. Only if such an experiment is successful a party may cautiously consider adopting open primaries for selecting the list of candidates to the Knesset.
- The most balanced way to select the list of candidates is to combine several selectorates (slots reserved by the party leader, members of a party's institutions) on top of primary participants. In addition, the adoption of a semi-open ballot that would enable voters on Election Day to choose their preferred candidate/s for the Knesset is a complimentary step that should be examined.
- Since small parties are exposed to a greater risk of hostile takeover with ultra-inclusive selection method, they should proceed with extreme caution when determining the rules of their respective open primary systems.

Measures to ensure the success and reduce the risk of open primaries:

- Amount of participants - The greater the number of participants in the primaries, the less influence that organized voters and vote brokers are likely to have over election results.

*Recommendation: A decision of a party (or a joint list) to hold open primaries should be accompanied by a plan of action to make the election appealing, pertinent and interesting to the general public.*

- Addressing the the negative implications of lowering participation barriers – By definition, open primaries open the door for any potential candidate as well as every potential voter. Such a system might lower the quality of candidates (and their level of identification with defined party values) and increase the amount of voters who have hostile intentions towards said party.

*Recommendation: Balance openness/inclusiveness with a set of requirements and/or limitations. One example would be to set rigid eligibility criteria to ensure that only candidates who are identified with a party's platform can run. Another idea is to require that prospective voters in an election register as party supporters a short time before the primary day.*