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## ***And Now for That Other Election...***

**By Leonard Fein**

Ahhhhhhh, that deep sigh of relief now that the elections are over. Peace and quiet. Good books. No polls, no ads, no rallies, no bumper stickers, no robo-calls or lawn signs. Life can be beautiful.

Oops: Not so fast. The elections are not over. There are two more to go. I refer, of course, to the elections in Israel, scheduled for February 10, just 14 short weeks from now.

That is not to say that the elections in Israel resemble those here. Indeed, there could be no greater contrast than these two (yes, there is a third, and we will get to that) provide. The pre-November 4 tension in the U.S. was nearly palpable; the choices were stark, not only at the top of the ticket but for the Senate and the House, for state and local officials and on propositions (153 in 36 states). And the cost, oh the cost: For the presidential campaigns (starting with the primaries) alone, \$2.4 billion; add in the congressional elections and contributions by outside groups and you're up to \$5.3 billion. (And I don't think that estimate, which comes from the Center for Responsive Politics, includes the costs of state and local elections.)

In Israel, in the meantime, where the election campaign from beginning to end is limited to 90 days, there is little tension (except, perhaps, among the leading candidates). The obvious reason for that is systemic: The Israelis don't vote directly for candidates; they vote for political parties in a system known as "proportional representation." Under this system, each party is awarded the same proportion of the 120 seats in the Knesset that it won in the election. So if your party wins, say, 30% of the total vote, the first 36 people on your party's list will become members of the Knesset. It does you, the voter, no good if you prefer, say, candidate No. 1 on the Kadima list but candidates Nos. 2-5 on the Likud list. You get to pick one list, and that's it.

Israel is not the only country in the world that uses proportional representation. But Israel is unique in that the entire nation constitutes one constituency, meaning that those elected have little connection, if any, to a geographically defined constituency.

The proportional representation system is almost constantly under attack, but reforming it in a major way would doubtless eliminate some of the smaller parties, and they together have sufficient strength to block reforms.

But in the current season, there is a still deeper reason for the humdrumness of the Israeli campaign. Very many voters have concluded that it just doesn't matter who wins. And the reason it doesn't matter is that the peace process is jammed, there is no de Gaulle nor even a Sarkozy, let alone an Obama, to fire things up. There is Tzipi Livni, who squeaked into the leadership of Kadima and who, her reputation for probity notwithstanding, is very much a creature of the system, and there is Benjamin Netanyahu, warmed over but evidently not yet toast. Netanyahu cannot do what Livni might have chosen to do by taking a page from Obama's book — better, a whole chapter — and presenting herself as a fervent change agent. But she did not, has not.

So where the American elections were overflowing with energy, the Israeli elections are drying up from lethargy.

Now, as promised, it's time to introduce the third election I referred to above. It is not generally recognized that in Israel, governments are the result of not one election but two. The second election takes place after the voters have cast their ballots. (The sticklers will point out that long before election day, several of the parties have primaries to determine who will be on the party list and in what order. True, but beside the present point.) That second election — actually, I should be saying “election,” in quotation marks — is the laborious process by which the leader of the party that's scored the most votes (no party has ever won an outright majority) cobbles together a 61-seat coalition. That is the majority required to form a government, and it always involves intricate negotiations with several parties — often enough with parties that have substantially different policies not only from each other but also from the leading party, the one seeking to form the government.

If the majority that emerges is narrow, that means that even the smaller parties in the coalition can — and often do — make outrageous financial demands (one might call the process “pork barrel,” but let's settle for earmarks) in return for their continuing support. It's the job of

the prime minister to deal with those demands, and that job can get totally hairy if the demands of one member of the coalition conflict with demands or principles of another — or with the exigencies of the budget process.

What all this means is that the voters in the polling booth are doubly disabled. They must vote for a party list that includes the names of many people of whom they've never heard and is led by people who do not, in any sense familiar to us in America, represent them — and then, having cast that murky ballot, they must wait to see what sort of government takes power. It is an entirely muddy process, and also a costly one. And the cost goes well beyond the shekels required to sustain the coalition. It includes the cost in civic engagement. Quite likely, it acts as a disincentive to the potential de Gaulles to devote themselves to political careers, ensuring that the best and the brightest will choose other professions.

The upshot? The political decisions that lie before Israel are no less momentous than those that face us here. But the system is sluggish, and the citizens are exhausted.