

## Demography, Democracy and Delusions: What's on the line in Israel's upcoming elections

by

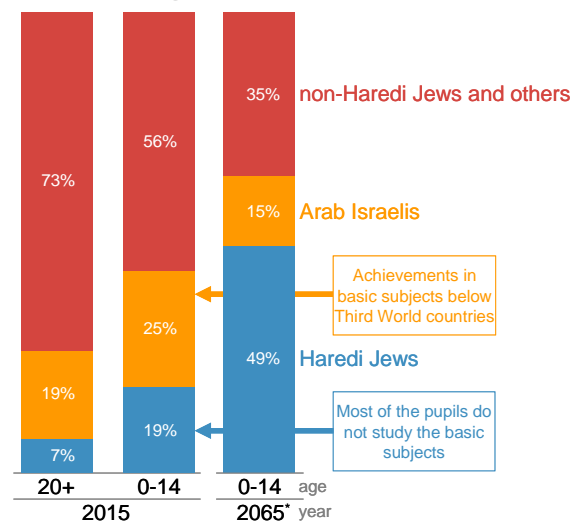
Dan Ben-David

The prevailing state of mind in Israel is possibly best encapsulated by one of the most recurrent phrases in the national vocabulary: “everything will be alright.” It’s the mental bullet-proof vest that enables us to be one of the happiest nations on earth, according to UN rankings, despite being located in the planet’s most dangerous region. It’s also the belief that leads a greater share of Israeli pupils than in any other developed country to claim that they understand even the most difficult material in mathematics – though their actual achievements place them at the bottom of the developed world. In other words, for better and for worse, we’re living in something of a la-la land nurtured by delusions.

This state of mind is a major contributor to the apparent intent of many non-Haredim to skip the election booth and spend the upcoming election day at home or on vacation (business and governmental activity unrelated to the elections officially shuts down on election day). News flash to these voters: the next few years will not only determine Israel’s future character but also whether or not the country will even exist for our grandchildren. Life is not a computer game. It’s not possible to click “undo” or “reset” in the future if it turns out that we messed up today. When those who threaten our very existence are plowing ahead in their efforts to obtain game-changing weapons, our national security will continue to require that Israel have a first world army, and that’s contingent on having a first world economy. Israel’s future ability to maintain a first world economy is being determined in the country’s schools today.

As it happens, these schools are among the worst in the developed world. The achievements of Arab-Israeli children (one quarter of the children) in core subjects (math, science and reading) are below those of many third world countries – and are even below the majority of predominantly Muslim countries – while most of the Haredim (one fifth of all Israel’s children) don’t even study the material. These two groups alone account for nearly half of Israel’s children, and they are further supplemented by the many children living in the country’s geographic and social peripheries. When roughly half of Israel’s children receive a third world education – and they belong to the fastest growing population groups – they will be incapable of maintaining a first world economy when they become adults, with all that this implies regarding Israel’s future ability to defend itself.

Israel's changing demographics  
each religious sector as share of total



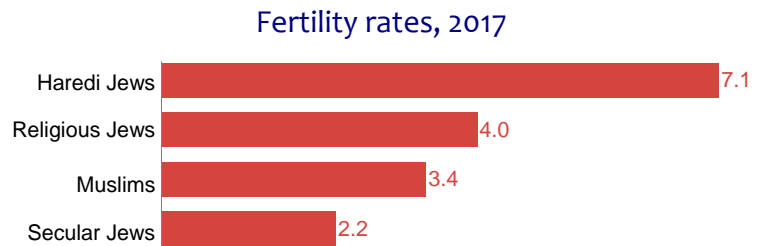
\* midpoint projection

Source: Dan Ben-David, Shores Institution and Tel Aviv University  
Data: Central Bureau of Statistics

## The term “natural partners” needs a makeover

With nothing less than Israel’s physical survival in two generations on the line today, the time has come to redefine the common political expression, “natural partners”, often used by Benjamin Netanyahu to describe his governmental coalitions with the Haredim and right-wing-religious parties. In a country whose future existence is umbilically tied to the young people who will one-day receive the leadership mantle, how is it even possible that government after government refuses to grant an exponentially increasing number of Haredi children the basic right to a core curriculum – a right that is stipulated by law in every developed country, except Israel.

We have reached the point that’s already difficult to imagine the creation of a government requiring a core curriculum. But laws that are difficult to pass in the Knesset today will become literally impossible to adopt as Israel’s demography evolves. While Israel’s average fertility rate is high in relation to every other OECD country, Haredi fertility rates are in the stratosphere: 7.1 children, in contrast to 4.0 among religious Jews, 3.4 among Muslim Arab-Israelis and 2.2 among secular Jews. Alongside the Haredim’s political resurgence in recent years, one that has been accompanied by a boost in benefits, Haredi fertility rates have once again been climbing (while earlier improvements in the abysmally low Haredi male employment rates have abated).



Source: Dan Ben-David, Shoresh Institution and Tel Aviv University  
Data: Central Bureau of Statistics

Even if the number of Haredim who decide to stop being Haredim exceeds the number of persons deciding to go in the other direction – which may or may not be the case – the following example should dampen any possible illusions about potential changes in Israel’s current demographic direction. Suppose that as 20% of the Haredi children mature, they no longer remain Haredim (clearly an imaginary rate by all accounts, one that does not even take into account non-Haredim who become Haredim). That still leaves 5.7 children in each family who will remain Haredim, a fertility rate that continues to dwarf all other population groups in Israel. In other words, the direction that Israel is headed is clear, while only the rate of demographic change may vary.

The national objective cannot be an attempt at turning Haredim into secular Jews, and not only because this cannot be a reasonable goal for a society that regards itself as pluralistic. In any event, this would not have an impact on the direction that the country is headed. The emphasis needs to be placed elsewhere, in a place that is just, that aligns with developed world social norms, and that is also the only realistic lifeline for a society determined to survive: education. Irrespective of whether or not this will have an impact on fertility rates, at least future generations will have the ability to sustain a first world economy and maintain the democratic norms of a modern country.

## There are no shortcuts in education

There are some who believe that the Haredim finally understand the predicament and are beginning to change. The flood of data inundating us makes it difficult to separate the wheat

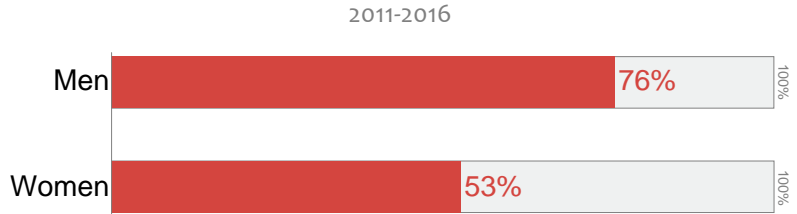
from the chaff, and whether or not sporadic anecdotal evidence is indeed representative of an entire society. But even the evidence that does exist suggests that whatever changes that are occurring are irrelevant, because they are occurring too late in life.

The fact that there are more Haredim attempting the academic track gives many the impression that there has been a pivot in the Haredim’s understanding and that it may nonetheless be possible to skip serious core studies as children. But there are no such short cuts in life. The education that Haredim children receive is so deficient that three-quarters of the men and half of the women are unable to complete their chosen academic track (which is itself at an extremely low level in most of the colleges that they choose to attend).

While conventional wisdom – and Haredi politicians – may suggest otherwise, denying children the education that they need significantly reduces their chances of overcoming this shortcoming as adults. Thus, despite the substantial increase in the number of Haredim embarking on the academic track, the share of prime working age Haredi men (who do not study any core curriculum after 8th grade, nor even a full core curriculum before then) with an academic degree has remained very low and unchanged over the past decade and a half (in recent years, there has been a slight increase among Haredi women).

In the United States, where core curriculums are mandatory for all, Haredim receive a much better education that enables them to go to college, to choose professional careers and to remain Haredim. Consequently, the share of American Haredim with an academic degree is twice that of Israeli Haredim.

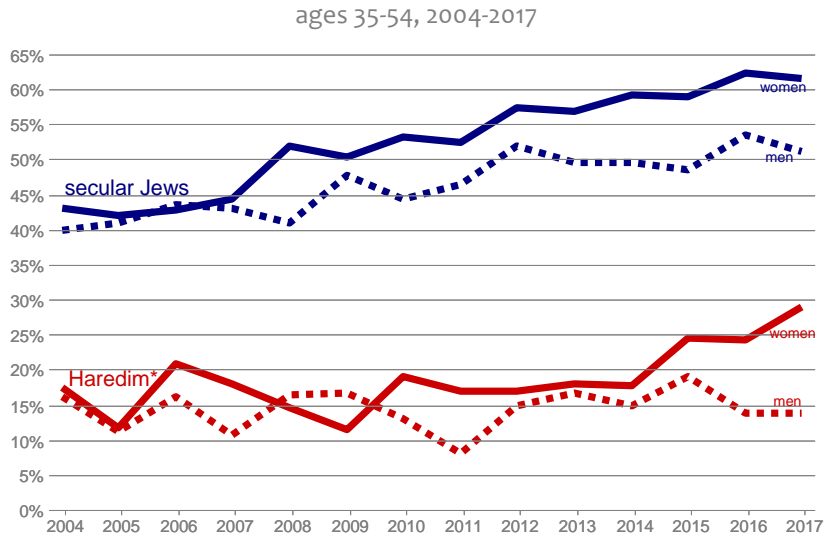
### Haredi dropout rates from the academic track\*



\* includes academic preparatory programs.

Source: Dan Ben-David, Shoresh Institution and Tel Aviv University  
Data: State Comptroller’s Office

### Share of prime working age Israelis with academic degrees



\* ultra-Orthodox Jews

Source: Dan Ben-David, Shoresh Institution and Tel Aviv University  
Data: Central Bureau of Statistics

### Share of Haredim with an academic degree\*, 2013



\* Adults 18 and up in the US and 20 and up in Israel.

Source: Dan Ben-David, Shoresh Institution and Tel Aviv University  
Data: Central Bureau of Statistics and Pew Research Center

## Israel is the Start-Up Nation, but ...

If there may have been any doubt about the general direction that Israel is headed – that is, the multi-decade trajectory rather than misleading annual changes that tend to blur the larger picture – a look at Israel’s labor productivity path says it all (labor productivity divides the GDP that we collectively produce by the total number of hours that it took us to produce it). Not only is Israel’s labor productivity among the lowest in the developed world, the gap between the leading G7 countries (the U.S., Canada, U.K., Germany, France, Italy and Japan) and Israel has increased over three-fold over the past forty years.

Only a very small portion of Israeli society belongs to the hi-tech, the universities, and the other parts of the Start-Up Nation. Most of the country’s population is not receiving either the tools or the conditions to work in a modern society – and it has been dragging down the entire country since the 1970s.

The implication of Israel’s multi-decade retreat from the leading countries is reflected in large and increasing gaps between what Israel’s most educated are able to earn abroad versus their earning possibilities in Israel. Just a very small portion of society has been responsible for keeping Israel in the first world. If a critical mass from this group decides to emigrate, the gap between the leading countries and Israel that has been steadily growing over the past forty years will be blasted to the heavens with the force of a booster rocket.

The writing is on the wall, and the election next week provides one of our final opportunities to fix things. It should be clear that the complexity of the challenges that Israel faces extends far beyond the issue of Haredim. Pervasive poverty and income inequality also exists among non-Haredi Jews, not to mention Arab-Israelis. Not everything begins and ends with education. The on-going neglect of other infrastructures has played a major role when successive governments’ civilian budgets (which had been higher than or similar to the OECD average during these decades) were diverted toward politically powerful sectors and interests.

In the final analysis, requiring a core curriculum in Haredi schools is not a sufficient condition for returning Israel to a sustainable trajectory. However, it is a necessary condition. If a population group this large continues to exercise considerable influence on the direction and amplitude of flows from the government faucet in a manner that only further enhances their exponential growth, while concurrently depriving their children of the vital tools necessary for integration into a competitive global economy and a modern society, Israel will cease to exist.

Is it right and is it even possible to mandate the study of a core curriculum by those who don’t want it? The answer is “yes” in both cases. Those who believe that the Haredim have a



Source: Dan Ben-David, Shoresh Institution and Tel Aviv University  
Data: OECD, Central Bureau of Statistics, Bank of Israel

right to shun modern life, if that is really their choice, are mistaken on a number of levels. What Haredim say and how they behave are not the same, which tends to blur how much they actually want the products of modern life. After all, Haredim do not object to receiving medical treatment by physicians when they are ill, or to living in a building planned by an architect, or to an infrastructure planned by an engineer that delivers water and electricity to their home. These are just a few of the professions requiring basic and advanced education at the highest levels.

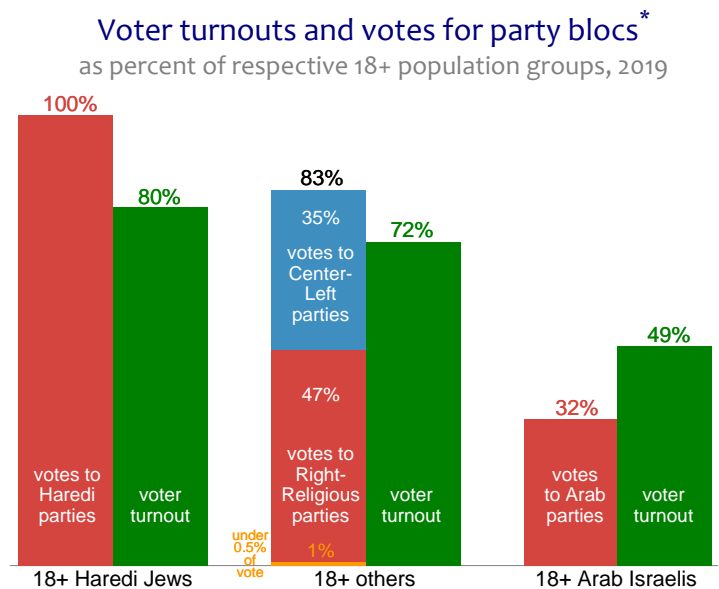
When their incomes are low, Haredim also do not turn down government aid made possible by the existence of a modern economy's welfare system, and they don't object to protection by a modern army from enemies that threaten to do here what prayers did not prevent in the war that began 80 years ago this month. In short, they do not refuse the benefits of a modern country. They only eschew shouldering the burden of responsibilities that make it possible.

In light of the rapid demographic changes that Israel is undergoing, this is no longer a question of a luxury – i.e. what do the Haredim want – but rather an issue of what a country needing physicians, architects, engineers, physicists and all of the other fundamental professions must do to remain in the first world – and in the case of Israel, in the world at all. Period.

As for the question of whether or not it is even possible to mandate core studies at this late stage in Israel's development, the answer is still positive, but it won't be easy, and it won't be possible to do so forever. If such a political decision is made, then the country can stop all public funding of schools that do not teach a complete core curriculum and of institutions with a majority of persons who did not study a full core as children. The firestorm of protests that will surely ensue can still be contained, though this will not always be the case in the future, as the demographic changes accelerate.

The solution lies within the political arena – and here, the picture is somewhat different than the one commonly highlighted in the public discourse. For example, while 49% of the Arab-Israelis voted, the number of votes received by the Arab parties was just 32% of the total number of Arab-Israelis at the age of 18 and up. The implication is that about a third of the Arab-Israelis who voted chose non-Arab parties. A completely different picture arises with regard to the Haredim. The number of votes received by the Haredi parties is identical to the total number of Haredim ages 18 and up. In other words, the Haredi parties have an additional electoral power source – beyond their already high voting rates – that emanates from non-Haredi voters.

When examining the total number of votes received by all of the other parties, it turns out that less than half (47%) of the total votes cast this past April went to right-wing and religious (non-Haredi) parties while just over a third (35%) went to center-left parties. The



\* Haredi and Arab voter turnouts are the share of eligible voters who voted in Haredi and Arab towns (respectively).

Source: Dan Ben-David, Shores Institution and Tel Aviv University  
Data: Central Bureau of Statistics, Knesset and IDI

bottom line is that, already today, neither one of the political blocs is able to build a governing coalition on its own. As the country's demographics continue to change, so will the relative weights of the blocs – and the possibility of passing laws that will save Israel's future will fade with these changes.

### **A coalition of real “natural partners” is needed for changing national priorities**

Assuming that Israel has not yet passed the demographic-democratic point of no-return – an assumption that weakens steadily by the year – one conclusion needs to be clear. There is still a large majority of Israelis who are not extremists, a majority for whom the country's future existence remains above all other considerations. These are Israeli society's true “natural partners.” But they must reach the ballot boxes, vote, and demand that their representatives begin putting the direction of the national ship – which today is similar to the course taken by the Titanic – above all narrow sectoral or personal considerations.

A national unity government, in the full and complete sense of the term, is urgently needed. It must be a government that implements significant changes in Israel's national priorities that will return the country to a sustainable trajectory while it is still possible to do so: from instituting a comprehensive, systemic education reform that will turn Israel's schools – including in the Haredi sector – into the world's best, to transforming the health system into an international beacon and the raising of the country's transportation infrastructure into the 21st century. It is all in our hands.

To preserve this national turnaround in priorities and keep Israel on its new and sustainable trajectories in future decades, it is essential that the next government also take advantage of the opportunity that extremists are not in the coalition. The new government needs to (a) give Israel a constitution, and (b) change the country's currently dysfunctional system of government to a system that enables navigation alongside checks and balances that can withstand the kinds of non-democratic pressures that have been emerging of late.

All of this brings us to the elephant in the room, Benjamin Netanyahu. There's no longer any question about the kind of damage that he is willing to inflict on the pillars of Israel's democracy – not to mention on the future of the Zionist dream – just to ensure his personal objectives. Either he will be permitted to “bring down the temple,” or the State of Israel needs to reach a decision to remove him from the political system as quickly as possible so that it can begin dealing with Israel's existential challenges.

Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin (in his first term) and President Ezer Weizmann were both given the opportunity to avoid criminal charges if they resigned from office. Hence, these are not possibilities that are foreign to Israel. The United States, which needed to put an end to the blood-letting in Vietnam, preferred to give President Richard Nixon a pardon after he resigned just to move past that saga and get the country out of the mud.

We have a country that needs saving. To Israel's real “natural partners”, go to the voting booths in droves, because we have no other country but this one. Afterwards, demand that your representatives begin working together and build the foundations that will ensure Israel's future. Let them be heroes not only on the battlefield (for those who were there) but political heroes that will enter the history books as the ones who saved the Third Temple.