

When the weak and the strong have equal voting rights

by

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Israelis tend to view inequality and poverty issues through the social justice lens. But altruistic motives are insufficient for initiating serious core treatment of these problems. It is time to add an additional lens to the glasses, one of personal interests. After all, in a democracy, the weak and the strong have equal voting rights, so we all benefit – or pay the price – of election outcomes.

Workers lacking the tools or conditions to succeed in an open and competitive economy desperately search for salvation. In a democracy, what goes around comes around on election day – whether it is motivated by revenge or by a candid concern for the future.

The OECD tests not only knowledge in math, science and reading, which provide basic job market skills, areas in which the children of Israel have been at the bottom of the developed world for many years. The organization also tests the problem solving abilities of 15 year olds. The PISA exams define six levels of problem solving abilities. According to the organization, “level 1 students tend not to be able to plan ahead or set subgoals.”

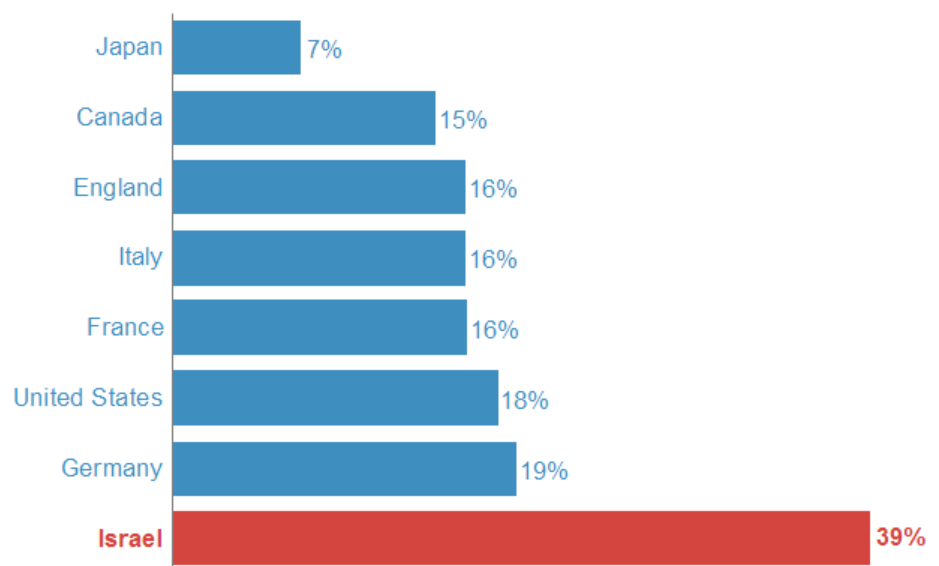
Concerns that they might be inundated by foreigners, alongside difficulties that locals had in finding jobs, led many Britons to vote for Brexit, requiring the country to secede from the European Union. A full one-sixth of British pupils are at level one or below (see figure). This is a similar share to that in the United States, which sees entire economic sectors declining or disappearing. Americans voted in a new president promising to bring the back jobs from China, India and Mexico. Who among the voters was interested in hearing – or understanding – that a large share of the lost jobs did not move abroad but evaporated as a result of technological improvements?

Magic formulas are not a replacement for difficult solutions that could save a person who has lost his entire income. But go tell this to voters who are not “able to plan ahead or set subgoals.” In Israel, 39% of the children are in this category, by far the highest share in the developed world – and that does not include Haredim (ultra-Orthodox) who do not participate in the PISA exams.

There is a very strong correlation in the PISA exams between the share of pupils with very low knowledge levels in core subjects and the share of pupils unable to plan ahead or understand the consequences of

General problem solving abilities

Percent of pupils at or beneath lowest level in PISA 2012



source: Dan Ben-David, Shores Institution and Tel-Aviv University
data: PISA

their decisions. Their lack of basic tools to contend with a competitive economy is combined with a lack of historical and civic knowledge that could alert them when leaders try to sell magic formulas to improve their lot, formulas that have already been tried, and have failed, in the past. The injuries sustained are not only to them personally, but to all of us at the national level.

Is there any public policy more important for the future of Israel's economy and the sustainability of its society than a comprehensive reform of the country's education system tomorrow morning?