

Voting in Arab Society: A Call for Action

Encouraging Arab Citizens to Participate in Israel's Public Life

Executive Summary

This publication, produced by The Abraham Fund Initiatives, whose efforts are aimed to promote social inclusion and equality among Israel's Jewish and Arab citizens, and to encourage the participation of Arab citizens in Israel's public life: in the labor market, the economy, culture, academic and public discourse, in the political system and in decision making circles.

The backdrop of this publication is the considerable, worrisome decline (20%) in voting rates of Arabs in Israel in the past decade: the decline is greater than the decline in voting turnout of Jews in Israel, and in comparison to the western world in general.

The study examines contemporary trends relating to voting participation of Arab citizens, in anticipation of the forthcoming national elections scheduled in 2013, in an attempt to identify the attitudes of the Arab minority on voting. The study also examines the factors that potentially encourage or deter voting in the Arab sector, and the topics on the public agenda that might promote a sense of meaningful citizenship among Arab citizens. The study was conducted by pollsters Dalia Sheindlin and Hisham Jubran.

The complete publication is divided into three chapters. The first chapter presents data on the voting rates in Arab society in Israel over time, and discusses the explanations for the decline in voting turnout. The second chapter presents and discusses the findings of the current study, which used a combination of qualitative methods (focus groups) and quantitative methods (a comprehensive public opinion poll). The final chapter presents the insights that emerge from the study and policy recommendations to promote the participation of Israel's Arab citizens in the forthcoming elections and in Israeli society in general.

Study findings point clearly to the strong aspiration of Israel's Arab citizens to equal participation in the Israeli society, and also to barriers to such participation, headed by Arab citizens' feeling of being powerless to affect decision making circles. Findings also indicate that the decision of some Arab citizens to abstain from voting typically stems from practical considerations based on this sense of ineffectualness rather than from indifference or outright rejection of the concept of participation.

It is important to note that this publication does not purport to impact the political-party arena; its ultimate aim is to support action designed to increase the total number of voters, each according to his or her conscience, values and personal inclinations.

The Current Situation

In the past decade, a sharp and steady decline occurred in the voting rates of Arab citizens in Israel's national elections: from 75% in the 15th Knesset elections in 1999, to 53.4% in the 2009 18th Knesset elections. This decline is alarming since the integration of minority groups in society cannot proceed without their participation in all aspects of public life.



According to Central Bureau of Statistics figures, the population of Israel's Arab residents (including residents of East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights, who are not Israeli citizens) in early 2012 was 1.63 million, accounting for 21% of the country's population. While a translation of the group's relative share in the population into political power indicates potential to elect 25 MKs, in fact Arab voting rate have always been less than their share in the population. In the current Knesset, only 11 Arab MKs are members of Arab factions (including HADASH, the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality). The gap between the electoral power of Arabs in Israel and their share in the population is rooted, first and foremost, in structural causes: the large proportion of individuals under age 18 in Arab society, compared to the proportion of this age group in Jewish society, and the fact that the majority of Arabs in East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights are not eligible to vote.

Even considering such causes, the situation reflects significantly inadequate realization of the Arab sector's electoral power. However, while underrepresentation of Arab citizens of Israel in many areas of life (decision making circles, the civil service, national media, academia, government-owned companies, to name a few) can be attributed to external factors, participation and representation in the political system are rights reserved for all citizens, including Israel's Arab citizens, and are not subject to external constraints or restrictions.

Several studies have indicated possible causes of the decline in voting rates in Arab society:

- An animated debate in Arab society focuses on whether to disassociate from Israel's governmental system and build a separate, autonomous Arab political system, or, in contrast, to increase the strength of the Arab factions by realizing the full potential of the Arab vote at the polls and create a change from within Israel's system of government.
- The call for separatism is supported by the "Sons of the Village" movement, the Northern Faction of the Islamic Movement, and the Popular Committee to Ban the Elections, and is based on [Arabs'] perceived inability to affect decision making in Israel and on their solidarity with the struggle of the Palestinian residents of the Occupied Territories.
- Another reason cited against participation in the political system is directed at the Arab MKs and their failure to influence Knesset and government decision making, and moreover, their failure to form a single united bloc that would allow them to realize the full electoral potential of the Arab sector. The Arab public feels that the Arab MKs have no impact on government moves since they are ultimately relegated to the opposition bloc, and that their own personal motives inhibit the formation of a larger, more influential Arab bloc.
- Alongside the criticism against the Arab MKs, criticism is also directed against the government and the Jewish public. In this case, the declining voting rate reflects the Arab public's protest against discrimination, inequality, and the disregard of its needs and demands, as well as against the actions of the defense establishment against Palestinians in Israel and the Occupied Territories.
- Anti-Arab positions in the Jewish population and recently voiced calls in the Knesset to disenfranchise the Arab citizens of Israel, also flamed the protest of Arab citizens and their banning of the elections.

Notwithstanding these reasons for the decline in voting rates, the study before us shows that the majority of the country's Arab citizens abstained from voting because they believe that they are powerless to influence national decision making, and not because of their desire to withdraw from politics or remove themselves from democratic life. Moreover, the Arab citizens who do participate in the elections in fact express ideological support for their desire to participate in the democratic game and exercise their minority's democratic rights, as well as relative optimism regarding their potential to influence national developments by voting.

The Study and its Findings

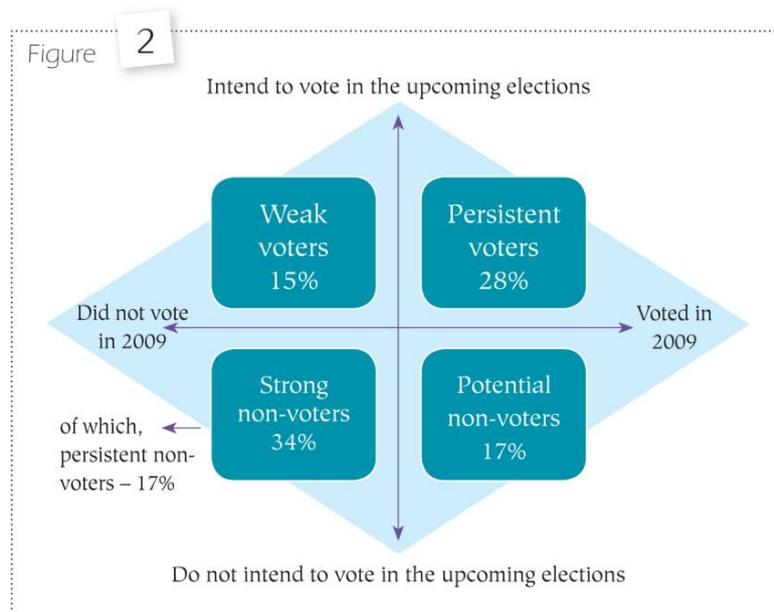
The study was conducted in two phases: The first phase comprised five focus groups of male and female Arab citizens, eligible for voting, from various geographic locations, age and income groups, including individuals who will be voting for the first time and individuals who voted in the past but are not certain they will vote in the upcoming elections. The focus groups were

conducted in Nazareth, Sakhnin, Um El-Fahm, and Rahat. All the groups were conducted in Arabic in May 2012.

On the backdrop of the focus group findings, the second phase of the study, a public opinion poll, was conducted from August to mid-September 2012 among a representative sample of 500 respondents from Arab society. The poll sought to tap into Arab attitudes about the general situation in the country; identify and characterize behaviors and patterns that affect voting and non-voting; examine the messages and scenarios that might encourage electoral participation; examine attitudes toward the Arab leadership; and to review attitudes toward women's status in Arab society.

Main Findings

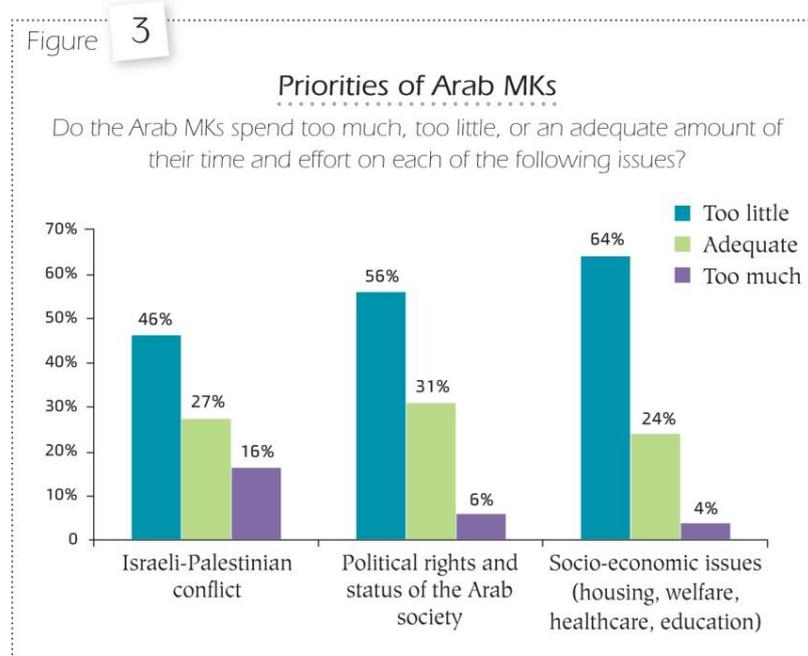
The study identified four groups based on previous voting patterns and voting intentions in the upcoming elections:



Priority to civic issues: Findings clearly show that placing civic concerns shared by Jews and Arabs at the top of the agenda might encourage Arab citizens to vote. Socio-economic issues (led by education; poverty; crime and violence) were ranked by respondents as the most important issues that need to be addressed (these issues were rated as being of highest priority by 24%, 24%, and 16%, respectively). These issues were also rated of greatest importance when men and women were asked about the most important issues that need to be addressed to promote women's status in Arab society. The Israeli-Palestinian conflicts (12%), as well as the tension between Jews and Arabs in Israel (10%), were considered to be of less fundamental importance in encouraging voting participation.

These issues, and especially the state's response to crime and violence, also emerged in the focus groups. Respondents expressed a generally positive

attitude toward the social protest, and viewed Arab-Jewish partnership in such issues as an encouraging opportunity.



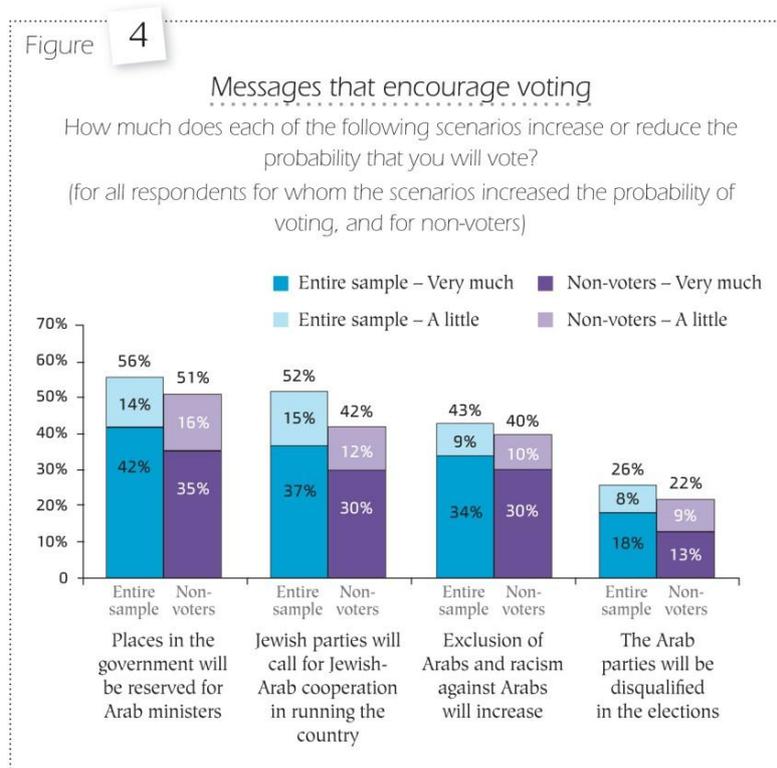
The desire for involvement in decision making: The study clearly indicates that Arab citizens wish to have a greater impact on, and involvement in, the country's decision making, through the elections. Findings from the focus groups indicate that many participants were frustrated and demoralized by the fact that their vote in the previous elections, to either Zionist or Arab parties, failed to make a difference in the conditions of the Arab minority in Israel.

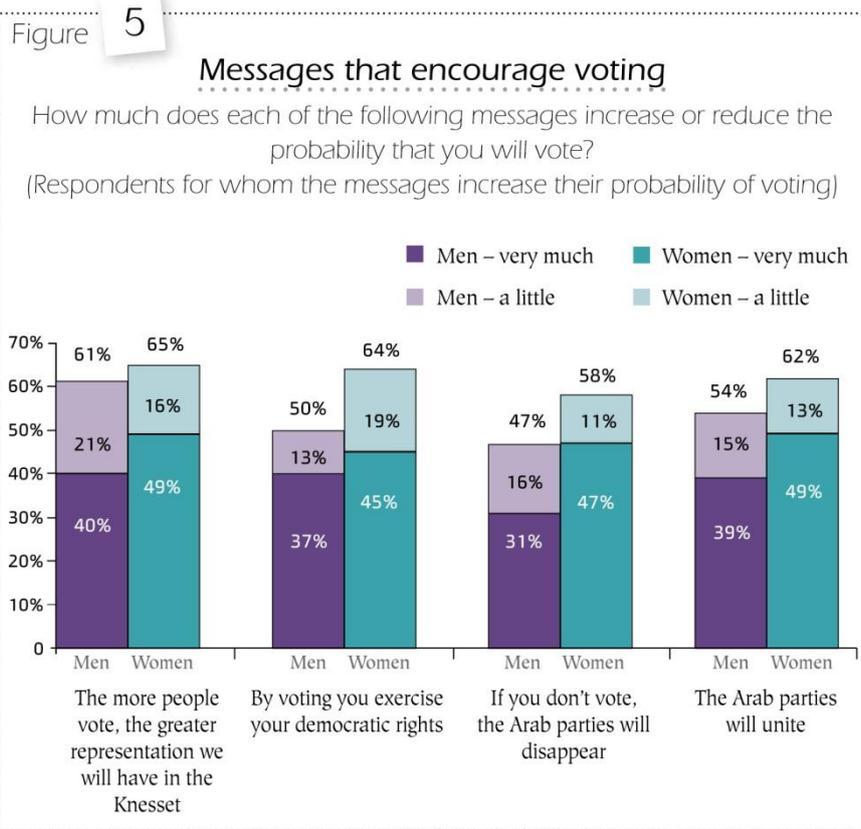
Arab citizens' fervent wishes for a genuine partnership in decision making are reflected in the message that was the simplest and yet rated the most effective in encouraging voting: "The more Arab voters there are, the greater their representation in the Knesset." This message equally affected male and female voters and non-voters (63% and 59%, respectively), and clearly reflects Arab citizens' desire to make a difference. The scenario that was rated in second place by this group of voters and non-voters – unification of Arab parties to increase their strength – also attests to a desire for greater influence on the political system (60% of this group, and of the general sample, stated that this scenario would increase their likelihood of voting).

An exception to this pattern is evident in the slightly lower impact on Arab voting of the scenario in which seats would be reserved for Arab representatives in the Knesset according to the share of Arab citizens in the population. Only 49% of the polled individuals stated that this message would increase their probability of voting. This finding may be attributed to Arab citizens' desire, not merely for fair representation, but for a partnership and significant role in the coalition and government decision making. Evidence of these aspirations can be found in the large proportion of respondents who stated that reserved representation for Arab government ministers — that is,

reserving a place for Arab representative around the decision making table — would increase their chances of voting (56% of the survey respondents, 51% of the non-voters, and 58% of the participants whose intention to vote increased over the course of the survey).

These findings show that Arab citizens are interested in genuine participation in Israeli society in all areas of life – the economy, the job market, higher education, and politics — and an effective role in decision making. In other words, even those who have withdrawn from the public sphere would be willing to reenter and participate provided that they believe that such participation would be effective and meaningful. Support for this attitude is found in the survey participants' opinions on civic service: Approximately one half of all Arab citizens do not object to civic service outright, but they would prefer that they and their representatives play a significant role in designing and administering the system. Moreover, support for organized volunteering increases when the proposed model for volunteering is directed at reducing the differences between Jews and Arabs in the areas of employment and education.





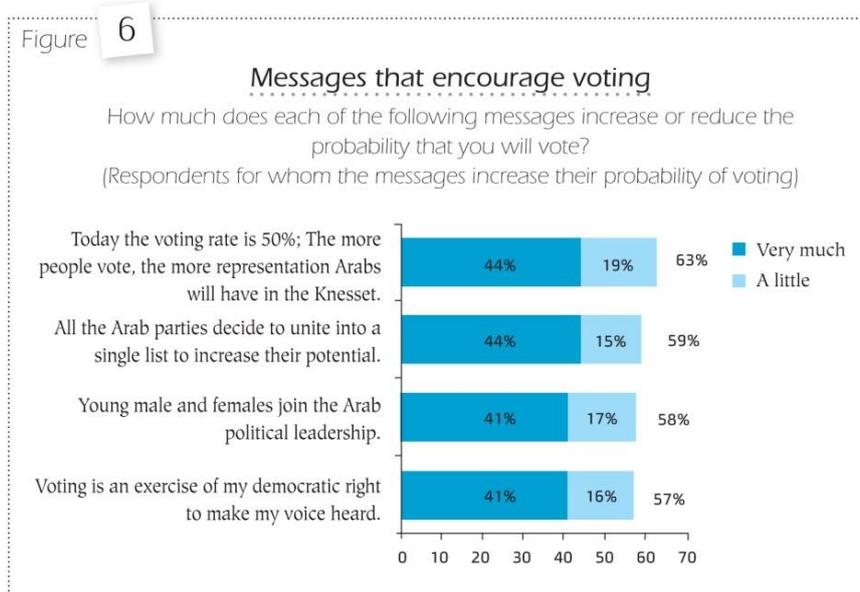
Leadership issues: The study portrays a complex attitude of the Arab public toward the Arab leadership. On the one hand, 30% of the respondents stated that they do not know who they can count on to faithfully represent the interests of the Arab minority in the government. On the contrary, the majority (52%) of the respondents stated that they felt they could count on the following official leadership entities: Arab MKs (30%), Arab parties (9%), Committee of the Arab Heads of Local Governments (8%) and the Supreme Follow-Up Committee (6%). The remaining 18% of the respondents are equally divided between those who consider civil society organizations as the best representatives of their interests, and those who felt they could count on religious leaders.

Findings regarding the performance of the Arab MKs also present a complicated situation. Approximately one half (of the survey sample but a greater proportion of the voter group) have faith that the Arab MKs are performing their role well. This level of trust is greater than the general public's faith in all MKs, and even greater than the faith in MKs reported by the Jewish public alone in the Democracy Index Survey for 2012.

Nonetheless, the survey indicates that many Arabs believe that the Arab leadership in Israel is unable to influence decision making since it is excluded from the centers of power and decision making, and is forever destined to be part of the opposition. This understanding discourages voting. Similar findings emerge from the focus groups.

The possible unification of the Arab parties for the purpose of increasing their strength and its role as an incentive to voting were issues that were raised by focus group participants, even though participants were not directly asked about this, and despite the ideological differences among the participants. Survey findings supported this attitude: 59% of the survey respondents reported that unification would increase the probability that they would vote.

The survey at the same time attests to a desire to refresh the ranks of the Arab leadership, especially by the entry of women and young persons into the political arena. The entry of new young men and women into party politics increases the probability of voting among one half of the non-voting group, and was ranked in fourth place among the scenarios that encourage voting by the group whose probability of voting increased from the beginning to the end of the survey (53%).



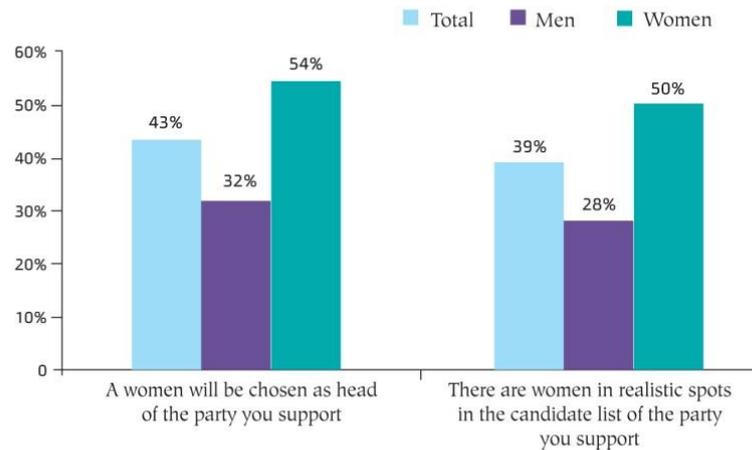
Support for women's involvement in politics: Apparently the entry of more women into politics might encourage voting, especially by women. The survey indicates that there is willingness in Arab society to accept women in a political role: More than 70% of the survey respondents agreed to the statement, "Women are just as good political leaders as men." The possible inclusion of women in the political leadership considerably affects women's desire to vote. The scenario described as "Women will be included in a realistic place in the party you support" increased the chances for voting among 50% of the women (and 28% of the men). The scenario, "A women will be elected as the head of the party you support" increased the probability of voting among 54% of the women (and 32% of the men).

Figure

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Gender-related messages that encourage voting

How much does each of the following messages increase or reduce the probability that you will vote? (Respondents for whom the messages increase their probability of voting, by gender, and for the total sample)



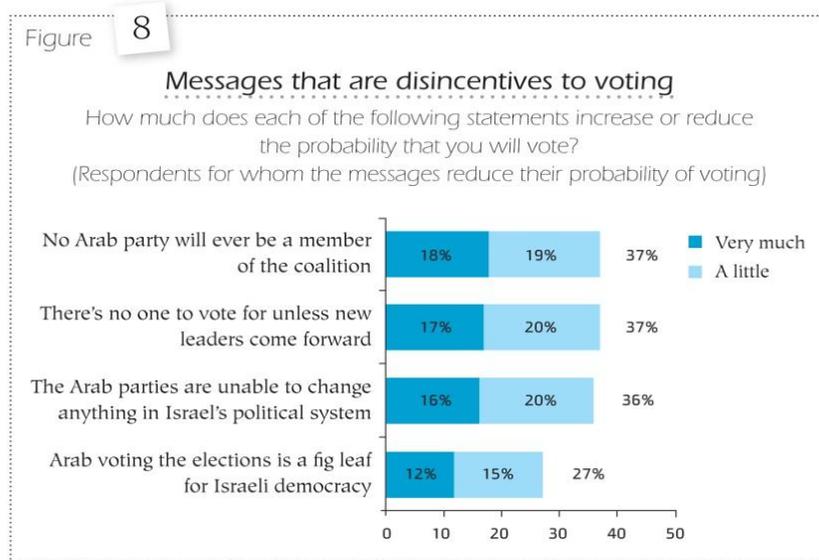
Greater democracy and equality: The feeling that democracy in Israel is not a true democracy emerged clearly in the focus groups. Participants unequivocally tied the issue of democracy to the issue of equality. In other words, in the absence of true equality for Israel's Arab citizens, democracy does not exist.

The responses to the messages tested in the survey illustrate that equality is the main area in which government responsiveness might encourage voting: 50% of the survey respondents stated that placing the issue of equality between Jews and Arabs at the top of the agenda of Jewish leaders would increase their probability of voting. Furthermore, more than one half of the survey respondents selected reasons for voting that reflect an aspiration for an equal partnership in the democratic system: exercise of minority rights and participation in the democratic process.

In this context, the lack of faith in the system itself was prominent. Lack of faith in democracy was one of the reasons given for a lack of willingness to vote: One quarter of the respondents (25%) stated that they do not consider Israeli democracy as serving their interests as citizens. This feeling was also voiced in the focus groups.

This concern was connected to the lack of belief that voting could affect decision making by elected officials. Less than one half of the respondents (46%) stated that decision making can be influenced, while one half (47%) stated that no influence was possible. The trend is clearer among individuals who do not intend to vote: Of this group 51% stated that there is no chance that voting will influence decision making by elected officials, compared to 41% who stated that influence is possible.

Negative messages: It is important to note that negative messages related to democracy's enfeeblement were not effective in encouraging voting. For example, the scenario in which Arab parties are disqualified increases the chances for voting among only 26% of the survey respondents, and among even fewer in the non-voter group. The scenario of increased racism and exclusion of Arabs increases the probability of voting among only 43% of the survey respondents. Even the milder message, that the voice of the Arab public will disappear if they don't vote, increases the chances for voting among less than one half of the respondents.



Increased awareness: The issue of awareness of voting—both on a technical and fundamental level — was revealed to be more significant than could have been assumed. First, at the fundamental level, findings indicated that the very involvement in the elections and in debates on the topic increase the probability of voting. This finding was raised by focus group participants who originally did not plan to vote yet changed their position during the focus group discussions; At the conclusion of the focus group session, without being prompted, participants stated that they would, after all, possibly vote and that the discussion in the group encouraged them to reconsider their position on this issue. This finding was supported by the findings of the survey: 25% of the voter group rose by one increment on the voting probability scale, from the beginning of the survey to the end. This finding is extremely important when planning actions to encourage voting in Arab society, as it attests to the potential contribution of such actions to increase awareness of voting and voting-related issues.

The technical issues (how to vote) are equally important. When survey respondents were asked to select one reason for their decision not to vote, 16% selected the option "I am not sure how to vote or I haven't thought about it." This response partially reflects the previous point and the need to increase awareness of the elections, but also highlights the technical barriers that explain some non-voting behavior: Some citizens abstain from voting

because they don't know how to vote. Such a response was even more strongly voiced by women.

Discussion and recommendations

Findings show that attention to civic issues (education, poverty, unemployment, crime, and violence), both in Jewish society and in Arab society, including responses that take into consideration the unique solutions required by each society, will serve the interests of society as a whole, creating a win-win situation.

The implication of this assumption is that the Zionist parties should explore how to direct their civic agenda to all the country's citizens, taking into consideration the Arab public and its unique concerns. Engagement in topics such as social justice, the cost of living, housing, education, healthcare, and the environment should recognize and consider the Arab public as an integral part of the country's citizens.

At the same time, the Arab parties should explore additional ways of publicizing their parliamentary contributions on civic issues. Increased awareness of their achievements in the social sphere might make a considerable impact on increasing the electoral participation of Arab citizens.

Regarding the Arab parties, findings show that the Arab parties should explore options of creating a joint, supra-party framework to encourage voting and persuade voters about the importance of voting. The Arab public's disappointment over the parties' failure to unite is one of the reasons for non-voting. Since a true unification is not realistic due to the ideological and political differences between the parties, at least a joint framework can be established to encourage voting.

Furthermore, all parties should consider adding "new faces" to their lists of candidates, young male and female Arab candidates who express the voices of the Arab public's young generation. It seems that young candidates, and especially young female candidates, may bring to the polls new voters who have been unable to find a candidate that expresses their position.

The survey clearly indicates the desire of the Arab public to be a partner in decision making; Therefore, in order to promote voting in the Arab public, Jewish parties should declare that they attribute great importance to the participation of the Arab leadership in all levels of government action, and certainly on issues that directly concern the Arab population such as civic service. Statements by political leaders calling to include representatives of the Arab public in decision making and in the coalition and the government, and to promote a solution to controversial issues (such as the civic service) through a dialogue with the Arab leadership, would encourage voting in the Arab public.

Caution is, however, required when encouraging participation of Arab citizens in the elections by promising an effective role in national decision making: Voting that fails to generate tangible results will trigger

disappointment and frustration and will reinforce the current trends of mistrust of the political system. Care should be given to ensure that encouraging voting creates a true partnership that benefits all parties.

Moreover, the Zionist parties should express a clear stand against discrimination and inequality, and against manifestations of racism against the Arab public in Israel. Many Arabs feel that they are targets of discrimination and unequal treatment equally: These are the main reasons for the feelings of frustration and despair that lead them to abstain from voting.

Finally, the study also found that the technical aspect of voting may appear to be marginal, but in effect is the reason that many Arabs, and especially women, abstain from voting. Today, many countries in the world are exploring the impact of technical access to voting on voting rates (factors such as the number of polls and the registration process necessary to be included in the voters registry, as well as issues such as the act of voting at the polls, language barriers, etc.). Therefore, state agencies, headed by the Central Elections Committee, and Israel's political parties should explore methods of increasing Arab citizens' awareness of the upcoming elections, the importance of voting, and the actual voting procedures.