LESSON PLAN

2009 Israeli Election

LESSON AT A GLANCE
This lesson is a primer for understanding the Israeli electoral system and the upcoming Israeli elections, scheduled to take place on February 10, 2009. Students will learn about the system of proportional representation and will compare it to the American system (briefly adopted in Israel for selection of Prime Minister) of voting for a specific candidate to represent each district.

OBJECTIVES

► Students will compare the results of one mock election based on party platforms and another based on pictures and biographies of the leaders of the three top parties.
► Students will explore the ramifications of Israel's electoral system on the nation's political life.

VOCABULARY
political party
elections
security
coalition
government

ACTIVITY: PARTY TIME

1. In advance of the lesson, print out the photographs and biographies of the three leading candidates for Prime Minister. Hang them as campaign posters in different parts of the classroom. They are available at babaganewz.com/teachers.

2. Review the structure and issues of the upcoming Israeli election with the special BabagaNewz online resource and external links associated with this lesson, both available at babaganewz.com/teachers. Discuss the issues facing Israel and the positions of the parties. Do not identify the leaders of the parties.

3. Explain to the class that even though Israelis are well aware of the personalities and personal histories of the party leaders, they actually vote only for the party of their choice—not for individual candidates. Parties that receive at least 2% of the votes are given the number of seats in the 120-member Knesset (parliament) proportional to their percentage of the total national vote. Israel uses a "closed list" system, which means that a party fills the seats it wins in the exact order of its official member rankings list. If a party qualifies for five seats, it fills them with the first five people on its official list. The head of the party who wins the most votes becomes Prime Minister.

4. Divide the class into thirds, and rotate the groups among the posters. Conduct a Candidates' Night in which one student role plays each of the candidates and presents his or her qualifications (provide the student with a copy of the appropriate biography; this can be done ahead of time). Conduct a secret ballot election to vote for Prime Minister (this is not the Israeli model), but do not announce who wins.

5. Distribute summaries of the Kadima, Likud, and Labor positions, available at babaganewz.com/teachers. Platforms for other parties can be included in larger classes. Have a class meeting to discuss the pros and cons of each party. Conduct a secret ballot election in which students vote for their preferred party.

6. Announce the results of both elections.

Did the parties and their leaders finish in the same order?
If not, what do you think accounts for the difference?
Israel is a democracy.

What advantages and disadvantages can you identify for each way of holding elections?

Which type of election do you think better expresses the will of the Israeli people, and why?

7. Elections in the United States are like the first election conducted in class. The people vote for the individual candidate of their choice (not for a party). The candidate who wins the plurality (more than any other candidate) of votes within a district wins that entire district, and losing candidates have no chance for representation. This is referred to as a "winner-take-all" system.

Most United States Representatives and Senators—elected in the winner-take-all system—are re-elected when they run for another term, even though public opinion polls have often shown that Congress itself and the political parties are unpopular.

In what ways might American elections turn out differently if we had proportional representation (if each party were to receive the number of seats in Congress that is proportional to the amount of votes the party received in the election)?

Why do you think the United States chooses to select its leaders in winner-take-all individual elections and what effect do you think that has on the results? [It allows for each vote to go to only one candidate, it gives smaller constituencies a greater voice, it can result in a two-party system, etc.]

8. Follow up your activities on the Israeli election by tracking the results after February 10. Official results must be posted within eight days of the election, although news reports might be available earlier. Suggestions of reliable sources are available at babaganewz.com/teachers.

Israeli law requires that Election Day be designated as a public holiday. The United States does not.

What would be the effect of changing either of those practices?

The United States has a two-party political system, whereas Israel has a multi-party political system. The vast majority of members of the U.S. Congress are Republicans or Democrats. The Israeli Knesset, however, represents far more than two parties.

What are the pros and cons of a two-party system and a multi-party system?

[Two-party systems can be more stable since it doesn't require coalitions, but it gives the single majority party control of the legislature. Multi-party systems allow for representation of smaller parties, which some feel is more democratic, but coalitions may be formed that include parties with huge gaps in their beliefs, making it difficult to agree on policies…]

9. To extend the lesson, have students research the party vote totals for congressional seats in their state.

If the seats had been awarded proportionally, would the party affiliations of your state's congressional delegation be different from what they turned out to be?

Would the party affiliations of the entire House of Representatives be different from what it is?