# The Alternating Prime Minister as a Political Institution: Power-Sharing in a Presidentialized and Fragmented Parliamentary System[1]

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**Abstract**

This paper analyzes the power-sharing political arrangement that prevailed in Israel from May 2020 until November 2022: the alternating Prime Minister method. This arrangement involved power-sharing between two blocs of political parties with mutual veto power of a member of each of the blocs acting as either the incumbent or alternating Prime Minister. The arrangement also included allowing government ministers to resign from Parliament being replaced by another member on their party list. I set this arrangement in a comparative perspective emphasizing its uniqueness in a set of arrangements set to solve hung parliaments. I then analyze the cases in which Israeli coalitions utilized this model, using tools from coalition theory and institutional analysis. The analysis shows that this institution creates a power-sharing setting that fits a presidentialized parliamentary system and a tight majority coalition. However, this model's utility for coalition survival is limited.

**Keywords:**

Power-sharing governments, alternating Prime Minister, personalization, presidentialization, hung Parliament

## Introduction

The political crisis that befell the State of Israel from the end of the 20th Knesset through three elections in April and September 2019 and then in March 2020 led to an inability to form a coalition that would receive the Knesset's (Parliament) support. Following the March 2020 elections, the *Likud (or Consolidation)* and *Kahol-Lavan* (or *Blue-White*) opposing parties formed a power-sharing coalition which was the basis for Israel's 35th government. This coalition adopted quite an extreme level of power-sharing, appointing both an incumbent and an alternating Prime Minister. Benjamin Netanyahu, the Likud leader, was to serve as Prime Minister first, with Benny Gantz, the Kahol-Lavan leader, serving as alternating Prime Minister, to take office after a period stipulated in the agreement (Kenig, 2020). Even though the 35th government's existence was hectic and short, the consequent 36th government decided to use the same arrangement and form a coalition that lasted about a year (Azoulay, Somfalvi & Shalan, 2020; Azoulay, 2021).

This type of power-sharing model between two members of a legislative branch over the status of head of an executive branch is quite rare. Such a model has existed in Northern Ireland since the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. However, this arrangement is unique to the power-sharing regime adopted by Northern Ireland to quell internal tensions (Nagle, 2018). The Israeli decision to opt for that model did not stem from issues relating to immense internal ethnic conflicts as the Irish model did. The discussion to date regarding this arrangement has focused on its constitutional significance (Navot, 2021) or on the unique political circumstances that brought it into being (Kenig, 2021, p. 294). I wish to discuss this model's potential contribution to political stability and system functioning in a more comparative context. Specifically, I set this model within a set of solutions aimed at solving the problem of 'hung' parliaments. A 'hung' parliament cannot produce government coalitions (Kalitowski, 2008). Parliamentary systems that encounter such situations use the following three models: minority, provisional, or technocratic governments (Nirel & Bauman 2021). Setting the alternating Prime Minister model within this context can offer more knowledge on a new way in which 'hung' parliaments can be solved while deferring repeated re-elections. Below, I first set the terms of a 'hung' parliament, present and analyze the standard solutions used to solve this issue. I then offer an institutional analysis of the alternating Prime Minister model and show its uniqueness. The central claim I offer regarding this model is that it can facilitate coalition formation in hung parliaments, yet it cannot facilitate coalition survival.

To study these claims, I examine the circumstances that yielded the alternating Prime Minister model and its usage. I compare how the 35th and 36th governments used this model to construct Israeli governments to the way a similar model was used in Israel during the 1980s. Contextualizing and comparing this model's usage shows that the changes the Israeli system has passed through the years affected the model's usage in its current form: political personalization (Rahat and Kenig, 2018), the presidentialization of the Prime Minister's role (Hazan, 2005; Rosenthal 2023) and the fragmentation of the leading parties in the Israeli political system (Rosenthal 2017, Ch. 1; 2023). These changes necessitated instituting the position of the alternating Prime Minister in Israel's basic laws and expanding the so-called "Norwegian Law": allowing government ministers to resign from Knesset while allowing other party members to enter the Knesset. However, while this model allowed for coalition formation, its ability to facilitate coalition survival was limited. After conceptualizing and analyzing the model and its implementation in Israel, I discuss its potential contribution for solving a situation of hung parliaments.

**Power Sharing in Governments as a Solution to a Political-Systemic Crisis**

Parliamentary systems are often based on coalitions between various parties that consider the coalition as a power sharing agreement that can ensure that they have some influence over government policy, thereby increasing the likelihood of their re-election (Heller 2001). Coalition theory shows that cohesion in policy preferences between the parties included in the coalition, compensation in ministerial portfolios, and budgets for making ideological compromises are vital tools in coalition formation (Sened 1996; Giannetti and Sened 2004). Moreover, parties' ability to participate in coalitions stems from their ability to discipline their factions and maintain cohesion (Hazan and Itzkovitch-Malka 2013). A key issue in coalition formation that depends on party cohesion is the source of the party valence. Assuming that joining the coalition compels a compromise within the party (which is not always the case), if the party valence stems from a particular party faction, then this faction can veto a coalition. However, if the party's valence stems from its leader(s), they can potentially force the various party factions to unite and accept the coalition the leaders wish to join (Schofield and Sened 2005). Moreover, party factions would usually be less moderate in ideological preferences and consequent policy positions than the party leaders (Roemer 2001; Schofield and Sened 2005). Hence, since political parties base coalitions on moderation and compromise, solving the tension between leaders and party factions is essential

for coalition formation and its survival. With sufficient deviation that occurs dynamically while a coalition rules, party factions (and their representatives in Parliament) will face a continuously decreasing utility from the compensations they receive. With sufficiently extensive compromises, these representatives would seek alternatives supporting pursuing their favored ideologies and policy concerns. Such alternatives include defecting to other parties, increasing intra-party pressure until the removal of the party leader, and resigning from Parliament due to the dissonance between party policy commitments and actual policy implementation (Mershon and Shvetsova 2013; Roemer 2001; Schofield and Sened 2005).

When the parliament's parties cannot produce a decisive majority, the parliament becomes a 'hung' parliament. Such parliaments can yield minority governments that no majority in parliament can unite to defeat. Minority governments' survival increases as the conditions set to remove them are hard to come by. In these situations, we might see a parliamentary safety net that assures the minority government would not lose the vote of no confidence (Nirel & Bauman, 2021). What do parliamentary democracies do when they cannot form stable minority governments? Some countries employ a technocratic model of government or a "government of experts" (Nirel and Bauman, 2021). In such governments, parties are sometimes absent from government and nominate experts to take over a significant portion of government decision-making powers (McDonnell & Valbruzzi, 2014). Usually, these "technocrats" are those appointed without a formal party affiliation and have the necessary professional expertise to lead a particular government ministry (McDonnell & Valbruzzi, 2014). Technocratic governments vary in formation, composition, power, and duration, and are quite common in European parliamentary regimes (McDonnell & Valbruzzi, 2014). Indeed, Nirel and Bauman list no less than 27 such governments established in Europe between 1945 and 2021. Technocrats' governments raise concerns regarding the relationship between elections and governance due to the technocrats' limited vertical accountability. Consequently, the norm is that such governments do not lead major policy shifts unless they have to. Thus, such a government can be effective, yet its existence usually coincides with a policy status quo. Another widespread solution to a hung parliament is that of an interim government. Such governments should serve a short period and maintain the policy status quo (Fuchs & Kenig, 2019). When laws determine this arrangement, limiting deviations from these norms is possible. However, without legal and normative restrictions, an interim government may decide to make significant policy shifts that will affect the governments that follow it. In such a

hypothetical case, the government would be effective, but the public response and accountability matters would be controversial.

The Israeli case offers two solutions to a 'hung' parliament that go beyond the interim government model: a two-party power-sharing government with one Prime Minister in office at each point. There is a parity between the major parties that share government power, where this government enjoys a solid parliamentary majority. The other solution is that of a multiparty power-sharing government with two Prime Ministers, power-sharing of the role of the Prime Minister, and a relatively small majority in the Knesset. The first solution is feasible when there is no centralized personalism, no presidentialization of the Prime Minister's position, and the parties enjoy a solid majority in Parliament. The second solution is possible when all these parameters are at play. I now review these models and their influence on the Israeli political system. I begin with the recent second model as it is the focus of this paper and then compare it to the first one.

**Alternating Prime Minister Governments 2020-2022: Political Circumstances**

The model of the power-sharing government and, within it, the institution of the alternating Prime Minister became a law on May 7th, 2020, paving the way for establishing Israel's 35th government. The Likud and Blue-White parties formed this government which they committed to lead for three years jointly. Two Prime Ministers were supposed to lead it: an incumbent and alternating Prime Ministers. The two Prime Ministers were supposed to exchange their positions after about a year and a half. The two political parties began establishing this government because of a political crisis that stretched from 2019-2020. After two elections that concluded with no clear winner, the results for the 23rd Knesset, held on March 2nd, 2020, also failed to break the political stalemate. Although the Likud party won the most votes and garnered 36 Knesset seats, the "bloc" comprising Netanyahu's supporters received only 58 seats. The other parties that opposed a Netanyahu-led government did have 62 seats, which would have given them a majority in the Knesset, but their ideological differences prevented them from cooperating and forming a joint coalition (Kenig, 2020).

Another factor that influenced decision-making concerning the coalition was the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis, with far-reaching national implications. The pandemic began to make its way to Israel in February 2020, and by March, it was already having a clear and widespread impact on the country. The government serving throughout the political crisis of 2019-2020 was an interim government, which limited its ability to deal with the crisis (Zerahia, 2019). After President

Reuven Rivlin gave MK Benny Gantz the mandate to form a government, the latter declared his intention to begin negotiations to establish a unity government with Likud, headed by Netanyahu. Consequently, the Blue-White party broke into three different parties: Benny Gantz headed a party of 15 Knesset members representing Blue-White, and the *Yesh Atid* and *Telem* parties acted as a 16-member joint faction that did not join the Gantz and Netanyahu governments (Alon, Yalon & Roth-Avneri, 2020).

This "National Emergency Government" was established on April 20th, 2020, and received the Knesset's vote of confidence on May 17th, 2020. A key element in forming this coalition was establishing the institution of the "alternating Prime Minister." This arrangement meant that the two heads of the blocs of political parties would bear the status of Prime Minister. One would be the incumbent Prime Minister, exercising full power over the executive branch; the second would be an alternating Prime Minister, leading a block of parties in his coalition. After a given period, the two Prime Ministers were supposed to switch positions. This arrangement included a punishment mechanism: if either party were to violate the agreement, it could not form the government by itself. With the establishment of the power-sharing government arrangement, many political observers criticized that its initiators did not sufficiently explore its implications. Furthermore, critics claimed that the model's primary purpose was to help Benjamin Netanyahu deal with his legal problems, rather than a carefully considered institutional mechanism set to handle the COVID 19 emergency (Shapira and Fuchs, 2020).

The principle of parity was a central tenet in the agreement establishing the 35th government. This principle divided the government into two blocs with equal power relations, led by Likud and Blue-White. This agreement section guaranteed equal voting power and mutual veto rights to both blocs, despite a considerable difference between the number of Knesset members in each bloc. This clause increased the political power the Blue-White party lost because of its split with *Yesh Atid*. Article 30 of the coalition agreement stated that a budget must be approved within 90 days of the establishment of the government. In addition, the agreement stated that if the government fell due to a failure to pass the budget, the Prime Minister's position would be transferred from the party that failed to pass the budget to the other parties' block. Indeed, the disagreement regarding the budget, its scope in time, and its components created turbulence within the Netanyahu-Gantz coalition, leading to its breakup and going to new elections while becoming

an interim government headed by Netanyahu (Amit, 2020; Azoulay, Somfalvi & Shalan, 2020; Liss & Levinson, 2020). The next elections were set for March 23rd, 2021.

Once again, the elections ended with no conclusive victory by either of the political blocs that had evolved throughout the 2019-2020 crisis. The bloc that supported the continuation of Netanyahu's term as Prime Minister comprised 52 MKs, while the bloc that opposed Netanyahu included 57 MKs. Of the 57 MKs, 45 supported Yesh Atid's head Yair Lapid to the PM position, and the rest either supported negotiating with both sides or refused to take a stand. On June 2nd, Lapid announced that he succeeded in forming a government: he and the leader of the Yamina party, Naftali Bennet, were to become alternating Prime Ministers, keeping their power-sharing arrangements similar to the previous government's arrangements. A majority of 61 MKs voted in favor of the 36th Israeli government on June 13th. The process of forming the government took 82 days – the second-longest such process since the establishment of the state. At the same time, the relative size of the Prime Minister's faction in the coalition was the lowest in Israeli history (Kenig, 2021). After about a year, the coalition that supported the 36th government fell apart and dissolved the 24th Knesset (Azoulay, 2022).

Thus, the power-sharing government became necessary during a protracted political and systemic crisis. The model itself did not solve the fundamental causes of the crisis, and the two governments governed within its framework lasted only a short period. Nevertheless, the model enabled these two governments' establishment and partial functioning. To understand the main aspects of this power-sharing government arrangement, I examine the main institutional rules of the game established by the coalition agreements of the 35th and 36th governments.

**The power-sharing government regime: The institutional rules**

*The 35th government*

The 35th government was formed as a power-sharing parity government based on the power-sharing of the position of the Prime Minister (Shapira, 2021). The agreement between Blue-White and Likud stated that the government would be an emergency government for six months and that, as such, any primary or secondary legislation unrelated to the COVID crisis could only be advanced by an agreement between the two Prime Ministers. To attain that aim, three arenas of government work had to be safeguarded: the Prime Minister's day-to-day activities making sure that the incumbent Prime Minister would not become a 'runaway Prime Minister' who will act independently, complicating the second party block in policies it disapproves. Another arena is the

government's table making sure both sides have even powers when making decisions and scrutinizing the actual policy implementation within government ministries and finally, both party block needed to secure their majority in Knesset seeking to pass legislation when needed to support public policies and holding of attempts to pass no confidence votes. The following table shows these traits as they existed in the coalition agreements and legislation that secured the formation of the 35th government.[2]

| *Prime Minister's Activities* | *Government Table* | *Parliament Activities* |
|---|---|---|
| Joint agenda setting powers for both Prime Ministers | The incumbent Prime Minister cannot fire the alternating Prime Minister. | Norwegian law expansion allowing:<br>1. Securing the government in non-confidence votes.<br>2. Policy influence for both blocks in committees and plenary. |
| Both Prime Ministers were to be together in every forum, and both would be fully privy to and transparent with all information. | The blocks would not promote any senior public service appointments during the emergency period if they required the government's approval. | |
| No deputy Prime Minister is appointed. | The heads of the blocs would not be able to fire ministers from the other bloc. | Any legislative initiatives would require mutual consent at the end of the emergency period |
| Only the Prime Ministers that signed the agreement can serve as Prime Ministers | Each government bloc could appoint no more than two vice | |

[2] I should note that these agreements leave many questions remain unanswered about the status of the alternating Prime Minister, which neither the 35th nor the 36th government chose to resolve. For example, it is unclear why the incumbent Prime Minister has a military secretary but not the alternating Prime Minister. It is also unclear what the constitutional position is in the case of a transitional government, with both an incumbent and an alternating Prime Minister, whose date of power-sharing arrives with one of the Prime Ministers leading a party that failed to be elected to the Knesset (Bar-Siman-Tov, 2021). The alternating Prime Minister's ceremonial status and place in the order of precedence at official events and ceremonies is also ambiguous.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | ministers in the ministries of the other bloc. | |

**Table 1: The Policy and Political Elements in the 35th's Government Agreement**

A bird's eye view of these arrangements shows that the agreement relates to the three government activity levels. On the Prime Minister's level, the agreement tried to ascertain two roles with equal agenda-setting and veto powers, where these roles related to the specific individuals that signed the agreement. These emphases reflect the changes in the Prime Minister's powers in parliamentary regimes, which increased the powers belonging to that position and hence the need to monitor it (Elgie and Passarelli 2020). Furthermore, personalizing the Prime Minister's post also reflects the personalization of the politics in Israel (Rahat and Kenig 2018), securing institutional powers in the hands of specific individuals. How the government work was determined allowed for maintaining the veto between blocks, some ministerial independence alongside inter-block scrutiny of other ministries. Finally, their joint existence in parliament is secured by vetoing each other and safeguarding the coalition from losing no-confidence votes. The arrangements in Knesset also reflect this complexity: both blocks can vet each other but work together in Knesset to secure their coalition's survival.

In conclusion, in the 35th government, the institutional arrangement was based on personalities who became institutional veto players on government decisions, both in terms of policy and in terms of appointments and dismissals of ministers and vice ministers. Moreover, the decision-making mechanisms that the parties established institutionalized the joint presence of two mini-coalitions within the coalition: the "political blocs." These blocs acted as party veto players in two arenas – in parliament, where the two mini-coalitions worked together as a government coalition against the opposition, and in the government, where they worked against each other to prevent mutual deviations from the coalition agreement with regards to public policy, budgets, and appointments. At the head of each bloc stood a clear persona with a formal role – an incumbent Prime Minister or an alternating Prime Minister.

*The 36th government*

Eight parties formed Israel's 36th government– Yesh Atid, Blue-White, Labor, Meretz, Ra'am, Yamina, New Hope, and Israel Beytenu. The parity principle, established in Article 2 of the 35th government's agreement, was upheld based on the ministers' affiliation with the incumbent or alternating Prime Minister (Article 7, Yesh Atid-Yamina coalition agreement, 2021). The 36th

government kept the division of the government into blocs headed by the incumbent and alternating Prime Ministers: The Yamina and New Hope factions belonged to the bloc headed by Naftali Bennett, while the Labor, Meretz, Blue-White, and Israel Beitenu parties belonged to the bloc led by Yair Lapid (Article 2, Yesh Atid-Yamina coalition agreement, 2021). The Ra'am faction joined in a separate agreement that it signed with the Yesh Atid party.

As in the previous agreement signed between Likud and Blue-White, the agreements recognized the two blocs' equal voting power, despite the numerical superiority of the Yesh Atid bloc. Similarly, they kept the equal numerical division between the members of the political-security cabinet (Article 2b of the Coalition Agreement for the Establishment of an Emergency and National Unity Government in Israel, 2020; Article 7 of the Yesh Atid-Yamina coalition agreement, 2021).

Given the ideological differences between the leaders of the parties and the veto rights they received, the government's fundamental principles avoided any non-consensus issues, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and, to a large extent, religion and state (Cavari, Rosenthal & Shpizman, 2021). However, it would not be an exaggeration to say that this coalition began to disintegrate when MKs set laws concerning controversial issues on the Kneset's agenda. It began with the controversy over bringing *chametz* (leavened bread) into hospitals on Passover (religion and state), which ostensibly led to MK Idit Silman's resignation from the coalition (Barsky & Bender, 2022) and ended with the need to approve the extension of the regulations that allow for the continuation of the settlement enterprise in Judea and Samaria, which led to the resignation of MKs from Meretz and Yamina from the coalition (Segal & Liel, 2022).[3]

In light of the events that led to the collapse of the 35th government, in preparation for the establishment of the 36th government, it was decided that the alternating Prime Minister would serve as Prime Minister if the parties belonging to the Prime Minister's bloc dissolved the Knesset. That is, the dissolution of the Knesset prior to the power-sharing date would lead to the appointment of the alternating Prime Minister as the Prime Minister of the transitional government. The agreement framers designed this mechanism to lessen the interest of the Prime Minister and his party to strive for an early dissolution of the Knesset to prevent the activation of the power-

[3] Of course, on top of these ideological commitments, the Knesset members also received promises from the opposition, in theory or practice, as a reward for their resignation. However, the emergence of the core issues on the political agenda made it possible to justify the resignation of members of the Yamina, on the one hand, and of Meretz and Ra'am, on the other.

sharing agreement. The idea was for the Prime Minister, his party, and his bloc to view the early dissolution of the government (and likely the Knesset) as so necessary that they were willing to "take the hit" of the alternating Prime Minister taking office. This term of office could last anywhere between three months (between the announcement and the holding of the elections), half a year (an additional three months of coalition negotiations), or an even more extended period (if additional elections were to be held because of electoral and coalition deadlock). With the dissolution of the 24th Knesset and the resignation of Prime Minister Bennett, Yair Lapid became the incumbent Prime Minister.

The Norwegian law was further expanded by the 26th government, permitting half of the members of each faction to resign from the Knesset, with a limit of up to five MKs per faction (Article 17c of the Coalition Agreement). As of April 2022, this amendment resulted in 21 MKs entering the Knesset, replacing ministers and vice ministers who had resigned. In comparison, 11 MKs joined the Knesset due to the law of the previous power-sharing government, and only 4 MKs entered the Knesset in the 2015 government when they first implemented the law. This agreement also expanded the parity principle. Articles 23 and 31 of the 36th government's coalition agreement stipulated that the sides to the agreement would maintain the status quo on matters of religion and state and that changes could happen if both sides expressed open consent for the change. They also decided that all coalition parties would vote against any legislation relating to this issue unless all factions consented.

Overall, the 36th government upheld the mutual veto mechanism that the 35th government had established, securing the status of the two Prime Ministers as veto players. However, the agreements signed between the factions also emphasized the importance of the heads of the various parties beyond being the heads of the two blocs and bounded the two Prime Ministers to the power-sharing agreement as much as possible. In this case, the power-sharing agreement was indeed honored upon the collapse of the coalition and the decision to hold new Knesset elections. These two governments differed from "normal" governments in that they explicitly included two Prime Ministers and an extensive Norwegian law.

Power-sharing arrangements in the face of a political deadlock are not a novelty in the Israeli context. Such governments happened during the 1980s. To understand better the recent solution's uniqueness, I now turn to examine the way it happened during the 1980s

**Was there an institutional change? The power-sharing government model vs. the power-sharing governments of the 1980s**

The reason some may hesitate to regard the institution of the power-sharing government in general, and the alternating Prime Minister in particular, as a fundamental institutional change in Israel is the fact that power-sharing governments have been formed in Israel in the past – in the 21st and 22nd governments, between the years 1984-1988. The very existence of a past government with a power-sharing between two Prime Ministers representing conflicting political camps is the basis for the argument that the power-sharing government does not constitute a regime change.

Members of the constitution of the Alternating Prime Minister institution also expressed this sentiment. For example, in its response to High Court of Justice petition 2905/20, the Blue-White party claimed that the legal establishment of the power-sharing government and the alternating Prime Minister was not a move with far-reaching constitutional consequences, as there have already been governments in the past with a power-sharing between Prime Ministers. According to this position, the difference here was the anchoring of the power-sharing arrangement in legislation and not only its establishment in the coalition agreement.[4] Is this indeed the case?

In the 21st and 22nd governments, there was a similar power-sharing arrangement between Likud and the *Ma'arach* (the Alignment), who signed a power-sharing agreement. The power-sharing was supposed to occur between the heads of the parties for the position of Prime Minister and between the factions' members of the Knesset for a large portion of the ministerial positions. Moreover, according to the agreement and despite the wording of the Basic Law: The Government at the time, the Prime Minister could not fire a minister from a party other than his own without the consent of the acting Prime Minister.[5] On the face of it, this arrangement appears similar to the governments that adopted the power-sharing government model.

Furthermore, in 1984, in preparation for establishing the unity government, the Basic Law: The Government was amended to institute the status of a vice (*Memale Makom*) Prime Minister. This change enabled then-Likud chairman Yitzhak Shamir to lead the Likud party and the group of parties it led in the coalition as a vice Prime Minister within the government.[6] However, the constitutional status of the vice Prime Minister was lower than that of the Prime Minister (Weill,

[4] HCJ 2905/20, p. 16.
[5] See the coalition agreement between the Likud and the Alignment with the formation of the 23rd government: https://main.knesset.gov.il/mk/government/documents/cagreement23.pdf
[6] HCJ 2905/20, p. 56.

2020). From a constitutional point of view, the position of vice Prime Minister allowed the vice Prime Minister to replace the Prime Minister when he could not fulfill his role while setting a limit of one hundred days until the dissolution of the government in the case that this replacement took place (Weill, 2020). Following the creation of the power-sharing government regime and the position of the alternating Prime Minister, the status of the alternating Prime Minister was determined to be more senior than any other member of the cabinet and equal to the incumbent Prime Minister's position (Navot 2021). Nevertheless, what is the significance of this difference? I will explore this using the parameters for government work established in the power-sharing government agreement:

1. A group of parties identified with the Prime Minister forms the government, with the ministers representing the parties committed to him. Moreover, no side's Prime Minister can fire ministers from the other block.
2. The alternating Prime Minister has a legal status equal to that of the incumbent Prime Minister.
3. There is parity in government decision-making, with the two blocs having mutual veto rights on any government decision.
4. The agreement scheduled the power-sharing for the position of Prime Minister on the date set in the coalition agreement (Shapira, 2021).

The formation of the 35th government brought about an institutional change in which the party blocs centered around individuals who lead the blocs, defined as Prime Ministers – one incumbent and the other alternating – both with a constitutionally higher status than the other ministers (Navot, 2021). This was not the situation in the 21st government when only one person was the nominated PM at any given point in time. Some argue that the desire for the constitutional institutionalization of the status of the alternating Prime Minister to specify a particular individual stemmed from the need of then-Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to avoid having to resign from the government despite the legal proceedings against him, which had already commenced (Navot, 2021). Due to the Deri-Pinchasi ruling that requires ministers to resign if an indictment is filed against them, had Netanyahu been a minister rather than a Prime Minister, he would have had to resign from the government the moment an indictment was filed against him. The creation

of the status of the alternating Prime Minister as equal in rank to the Prime Minister could have exempted Netanyahu from the Deri-Pinchasi law (Navot, 2021).

If this were the case, the amendment would have had no significance beyond a specific coalition arrangement created around Netanyahu's need and would have lapsed because of a combination of political and legal circumstances. However, the arrangement continued with the establishment of the 24th Knesset, when the founders of the 36th government chose to maintain it and the institutional rules of the game that were created around it, even when forming a government that did not include Netanyahu. Thus, even if it was initially a personal arrangement, the espousal of it by other individuals indicates that it is an institutional arrangement containing enough positive incentives for the actors to decide to adopt it. That being the case, from a regime point of view, there was a change to the status quo: the equalization of the status of two legislative branch members as the executive branch heads.

The decision to appoint two members of the parties competing for the coalition's resources to the position of Prime Minister does not occur frequently in political systems. Coalition competition models predict that the parties will prefer to hold new elections if there is no agreement on the party from which constructs the coalition (Diermeier, 2006). In the 21st and then the 22nd government, the party blocks' heads did not simultaneously share the Prime Minister's position. Each time there was one Prime Minister – one legislative branch member who was the executive branch head. Although each vice Prime Minister was responsible for the group of parties he led, he did not enjoy the status of Prime Minister. How the 21st and 22nd governments worked was grounded in the coalition agreements built by Likud and the *Ma'arach* – it was on their basis that they acted jointly and with a significant amount of friction. However, the 11th Knesset, which formed the 21st and 22nd governments, was among the few in Israel to complete its entire term (Liss & Kadari-Ovadia, 2019). It would seem, then, that the leaders of the blocs, the leaders of the parties, and most of the members of the Knesset from these parties considered the political arrangement that existed during the 21st and 22nd governments as one that was better than any other political outcome possible at the time. How could this agreement be maintained without anchoring in the law of equalizing the status of the two heads of blocs as Prime Ministers?

One can argue that due to the lack of political options and the desire of the two sides to tackle jointly the governability challenges that arose at that time, it was possible to maintain the 21st and then the 22nd government based on a power-sharing and parity agreement without the need to

appoint an alternating Prime Minister (Kenig 2021, p. 294). However, the parties that established the 35th government had to formalize the arrangements between them in law, principally the identity of the alternating Prime Minister, due to the lack of trust between the parties (Kenig 2021, p. 294). In other words, had the trust between Netanyahu and Gantz been similar to that between Shamir and Peres, there would have been no need to precisely determine the identity of the alternating Prime Minister and the institutionalization of the arrangements between the two blocs in law. Nevertheless, the issue of mistrust in competitive politics is a constant: political players construct agreements they violate as soon as the interests of those who make them allow it (Doron & Sened, 2001; p. 104). Given the option of a more beneficial coalition, coalition members will dismantle the existing one. Such benefits could include more ministerial positions, government budgets, and a decrease in the coalition members' need to compromise on their favored positions (Sened 1996). Thus, it is not easy to assume that the cooperation between Peres and Shamir was an event out of the ordinary in coalition politics. Indeed, the partnership between Peres and Shamir ended in 1990 with the collapse of the second unity government (in which they did not share the Prime Minister's position simultaneously). This coalition collapsed since the continuation of the government did not pay off for both sides ideologically and in terms of promoting policy issues. Moreover, Shamir saw an opportunity to form a right-wing ultra-Orthodox government and went for it (Kenig, 2010). Therefore, the lack of trust in and of itself makes it difficult to explain the creation of the institution of the alternating Prime Minister and, even more so, its retention even after the dissolution of the 35th government. That is to say, even though the arrangement began as one between Gantz and Netanyahu, who had a low level of trust between them, it continued with Bennett and Lapid, for whom, on the surface at least, there was not such a problem.[7]

If personal issues and trust were not the key for formulating the alternating Prime Minister institutional arrangement, then examining the different power sharing governments that took place in Israel using coalition politics tools might be more revealing. The parameters that indicate the benefit political actors receive from participating in a given coalition are the size of the parties that make up the coalition, the number of government portfolios relative to seats in the Knesset (for the coalition founders and its members) and the ideological split between the two parties leading the blocs that form the government. I will primarily try to understand whether there is a fundamental difference between these governments and the rules from coalition theory for

[7] See, for example, Verter, *Ha'aretz* July 1st, 2022.

establishing and dissolving coalitions. If such a difference exists, it may be the key to understanding the qualitative difference between the 1980s and the governments of 2020-2022, which required different institutional arrangements.

| *Quantitative parameters for comparison* | *The 21st and 22nd Israeli governments* | *The 23rd Israeli government until the resignation of the Ma'arach in March 1990* | *The 35th Israeli government* | *The 36th Israeli government* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *The government's term in office (months)* | 2 x 24 | 18 | 7 | 12 |
| *Members of Knesset in the coalition supporting the government* | 97 (96 as of October 1986) | 97 | 73, which became 67 | 61, which became 59 |
| *Government ministries* | 31 | 28 | 42 | 38 |
| *Average portfolios relative to Knesset seats for each party* | 0.49 until rotation, and then 0.38 | 0.33 | 0.73 | 0.54 |
| *Average portfolios/seats for the coalition founders* | 0.33 | 0.33 | 0.62 | 0.55 |
| *Right-left INES average among supporters of the coalition builders (1 right, 7 left)* | Likud: 2.72<br>*Ma'arach*: 4.4<br>Ideological gap: 1.7 | Likud: 2.136<br>Labor: 5.182<br>Ideological gap: 3.046 | Likud: 2.43<br>Blue-White: 4.58<br>Ideological gap: 2.15 | Yamina: 2.515<br>Yesh Atid: 4.569<br>Ideological gap: 2.054 |
| *Right-Left INES average between the two farthest parties in the coalition* | Morasha: 2.71<br>*Ma'arach*: 4.4<br>Ideological gap: 1.69 | Likud: 2.136<br>Labour: 5.182<br>Ideological gap: 3.046 | Yamina: 2.43<br>Labor: 5.52<br>Ideological gap: 3.09 | Yamina: 2.51<br>Meretz: 5.98<br>Ideological gap: 3.47 |

*Table No. 2: Main characteristics of the power-sharing governments*[8]

[8] I retrieved most of the data from the Knesset's formal website. I assessed the policy positions using surveys from the Israel National Elections Survey. Interested readers can access this data here: https://www.tau.ac.il/~ines/.

Table No. 2 displays several characteristics of the unity governments. The governments that appear in the table are unity governments with full rotation that was carried out (the 21st and 22nd), a unity government without a power-sharing, primarily as a comparative point of reference for the arrangements that did involve a power-sharing (the 23rd government), and the power-sharing governments (the 35th and 36th). The immediate difference between the 1980s and those of 2020-2022 is the number of Knesset members who supported the serving governments. In a situation in which the number of the government's supporters within the Knesset is high, it is difficult to damage the coalition majority since the coalition has many protective parliamentary layers. The 35th government, on the other hand, began its term with 73 supporting MKs, but the coalition began to shrink, mainly in the Blue-White-led bloc. The 36th government began its term with even fewer Knesset members supporting the coalition; it was, therefore, even more vulnerable to deterioration.

The varying number of ministers in the different governments reflects the principle of parity and the need to balance the power of the parties in terms of voting power in the government. The frontrunners in this regard are the 35th and the 21st governments – two governments formed by two opposing forces, which tried to mutually balance the bargaining power of the blocs with the help of a large number of portfolios. A large number of portfolios (i.e., the number of ministers in the government) ensures the veto rights of all parties based on the number of ministers around the cabinet table who can balance the ministers of the other parties (Rosenthal 2017, Ch.4). Hence, this tool is critical to establishing this type of government.

The following parameter is the benefit that the parties, in general, and those who formed the coalition derived from sitting in the coalition. A principal assumption regarding the calculations of the benefit of a coalition in a multiparty parliamentary regime is known as Gamson's Law, which asserts that the more portfolios a party receives in the government relative to its seats in Parliament, the greater the benefit of its sitting in the coalition will be (Cox, 2021). The argument underlying this law is straightforward: the more a party loses from leaving the coalition and gains in advancing policies and receiving resources, the more likely it is to remain in the coalition. In Israel, the average allocation of portfolios relative to seats in the Knesset is three seats per portfolio (Rosenthal 2017, Ch.4). Hence, a party that manages to get a higher-than-average return is less likely to defect from the coalition and leads to a process that will end with new elections. The table shows that in the 20th government, which became the 21st government

without dissolving the 11th Knesset, the number of portfolios given to the parties relative to their seats was similar to that in the 35th and 36th governments. After the power-sharing of Prime Ministers, this is a low ratio. The 23rd government was a unity government but not a power-sharing government. The average portfolios relative to seats in the Knesset were similar to the Israeli average, and this government fell apart. However, in the 35th and 36th governments, the ratio of portfolios in the government relative to seats in the Knesset was high, but this still did not guarantee coalition stability.

Beyond the seat-portfolio mechanism, another aspect of coalitional stability is the ability to create a coalition that converges around a set of relatively close policy positions. The claim is that the more distant the positions of those joining the coalition are from those of the formateur party, the lower the chances of the coalition surviving (Schofield, 1995). Here, the focus is on the two founders of the coalition but also its extreme poles. To asses these ideological gaps, I rely on the election survey data of Tel Aviv University's Israel National Election Studies (INES) (Ofek & Meydani, 2016; Schofield & Sened, 2005). For each election, I examined the average left-right self-definitions of party voters that led the coalition blocs and the gap between these averages. The table shows the smallest ideological gap in the 21st and 22nd governments. In the 23rd government, where there was a large gap between the two parties' supporters, the government collapsed before its term was up. In the 35th government, the gap between Likud and Blue-White was slightly higher than that between Yamina and Yesh Atid in the 36th government.

One can see that the ideological disparity between the coalition founders is critical: the more significant the gap, the less likely the government they establish will survive. It is also interesting to see that the gap between the extreme poles of the parties in the coalition, which I calculated in the same way, does not directly predict the coalition's collapse in the same way. That is, it was more important that the parties steering the coalition be ideologically closer to each other than the fringes of the coalition. An analysis of the ratio of portfolios to seats versus the ideological positions shows that even with the relatively generous allocation of portfolios per seat in the Knesset in the 35th and then the 36th governments, the sizeable ideological gap and the small number of Knesset members who supported the coalitions led to the erosion of the Knesset's trust in them and their internal collapse. Thus, we can explain the survivability of power-sharing governments by the tools of coalition theory – a small ideological gap, multi-seat parity, and large parties – the combination of which gave the government a broad base of support in the Knesset.

In this context, the institutional arrangement of the expansion of the Norwegian law adopted by the 2020-2022 power-sharing governments, unlike the unity governments of the 1980s, is easy to explain. If the increase in the number of ministers at the expense of the Knesset to sustain the government's parity was going to take away the workforce to operate the Knesset (the committees and the plenary), then this problem probably also occurred in the 1980s, given the multiple ministers who served in the 21st and 22nd governments. A critical difference between these periods is the changing size of the parties. Because the size of Israeli political parties has decreased over the years, the likelihood that the absolute majority of the Knesset would support the unity government has decreased. As the ideological gap increased and the chances that the coalition would disintegrate within the Knesset seemed more and more probable, the need to fully mobilize Knesset members to defend the coalition in Knesset votes became more urgent. The expansion of the Norwegian Law stemmed from the desire to establish a coalition based on medium and small parties enjoying a narrow majority in the Knesset. The law allowed these parties to maximize their power in the Knesset and impede a vote of no confidence to the extent possible. However, the familiar parameters for designing coalitions cannot explain the 35th and 36th governments' need to declare an alternating Prime Minister. For this we need to turn to the institutional analysis of the executive in parliamentary systems.

The role of the Israeli Prime Minister had undergone vast changes in the decades that have passed since the 1980s, when the 20th and 21st governments were in office. The first change is the personalization of Israeli politics, particularly the centralized personalization that Israeli political parties in Israel have undergone. As part of this phenomenon, political campaigns, and indeed the work of governance, have revolved less around the parties and more around their leaders, especially the candidates for Prime Minister (Rahat & Kenig, 2018). Another shift has been the presidentialization of the position of the Israeli Prime Minister – over the years, direct operating powers, as well as policy planning, have been concentrated in the Prime Minister's office, whose budget and staff have also increased (Hazan, 2005; Kenig, 2021). This phenomenon is not limited to the Israeli case. Moreover, it signifies the extent to which, especially in an era of crises and profound cultural changes, Prime Ministers in parliamentary regimes have become functionally similar to presidents in semi-presidential and presidential systems (Elgie & Passareli, 2020).

From an institutional-political perspective, this is a process in which Prime Ministers have become the actor leading the party and not the leader of the government on behalf of the party.

That is, as long as the party needs its candidate for Prime Minister to preserve its status, it will not limit its ability to govern (Samuels & Shugart, 2010, Ch.2). Israel is an integral part of this trend. For three decades, Israel has been moving along the axis between a parliamentary and a presidential system (Rosenthal 2023). This presidentialization of politics began with the direct election for Prime Minister law (Hazan, 1996) and continued with the ongoing expansion of the Prime Minister's powers (Hazan, 2005). In this regard, the power-sharing government's coalition agreement took a step that officially distinguished the Prime Ministers as having a higher status than their coalition and bloc partners. Therefore, this political arrangement did not change the existing Israeli parliamentary system but highlighted the status of the Israeli Prime Minister as going beyond being a first among equals vis-a-vis his government to becoming a first among non-equals (Sartori's distinction, cited in Hazan, 1996). In such a situation, it is no wonder that the power-sharing government's arrangement divided power between the coalition and the Prime Ministers.

In conclusion, the institutional arrangements of the 35th and 36th governments evolved from a combination of the logical building and maintaining of coalitions in a multiparty parliamentary regime, and specific developments affecting Israel along the last decades such as the rise of political personalism, party fragmentation, and the presidentialization of the role of the Prime Minister. Therefore, the 35th and 36th government coalitions were built with the help of institutional arrangements that preserved the competitive logic of coalitional building and survival yet adapted that rationale to a specific political era. Is the situation, then, not different from the 1980s? Is it more of the same but for two amendments of no significance to the political system? In my opinion, the institutionalization of the position of the alternating Prime Minister established institutionally, legally and symbolically the supremacy of the role of the Israeli Prime Minister relative to the members of his government. The Norwegian Law introduced a mechanism into the Knesset and the government that enables the coalition's management by a series of small and medium-sized parties. In other words, this pragmatic arrangement, established to form a coalition amidst internal divisions and an epidemiological crisis, institutionalized two large-scale political processes and cemented them in the Israeli system of governance.

**Concluding discussion**

This article outlines the contours of a system of governance that was formulated in an impromptu manner to deal with given political constraints and which incorporated various elements that were already present in the Israeli system of government (power-sharing governments and the Norwegian Law) together with a new element that did not previously exist in Israel (nor in most of the world's parliamentary systems) – the creation of the alternating Prime Minister model. I have argued here that this innovation took the model of the power-sharing governments of the 1980s and adapted it to the current Israeli political reality, which is characterized by phenomena including a decrease in party size increase in parliamentary fragmentation, alongside the strengthening of the personalization of politics in Israel. This combination of parameters yielded a situation in which two legislative branch members were also the executive branch heads. Although they did not share full powers simultaneously, they did share the same status. Each one heads a coalition of parties that has joined with another coalition to establish one "super-coalition," constituting the power-sharing government, and each one has the right to veto the other's core work.

Because this model differs from that of the 1980s and other power-sharing models used in parliamentary systems, I used several tools to compare these cases. I showed that a fundamental difference between these two government models is the transfer of the core of power from the party as a collective whose leader is a first among equals to the heads of the parties forming the coalition, who are "firsts among non-equals." The power-sharing government model manifested in the 35th and 36th governments was a consequence of the political era in which they were established – amidst an ongoing political crisis, alongside the decreasing size of political parties whose dependence on their leaders is increasing all the time. These circumstances gave rise to an unusual joining of forces; the personal appointment of two Prime Ministers and an expanded Norwegian Law were the necessary results of the desire to form a government and avoid further elections. This model offers a unique equilibrium but serves as a paradigm for finding a solution for a hung parliament in political systems facing a similar reality.

What I have presented here demonstrates that this arrangement is worth preserving for future use, should it become necessary to favor the stability of the Parliament and the government, even for a limited period, rather than hold new elections. For this paper's purposes I should point out that considering this model as a solution to a 'hung' parliament could have several advantages.

In contrary to an interim government, this model's usage is based on the last electoral results, rather than those that took place usually a significant time before getting into the 'hung' parliament situation. If the election just occurred a short time before the parliament being unable to make a choice between coalitions, then such an arrangement can be a key for avoiding repeated and futile elections. A technocratic government is a potentially effective yet undemocratic solution. Extensive power-sharing models such as rotation governments used in Israel during the 1980's can solve a situation of a hung parliament based on the voters' decisions rather than an opaque process setting the technocratic government in place. When the personalization of politics, presdientailization of the Prime-Minister's post and fragmentation in parliament are added to the midst then the rotating Prime Minister model is an option worth considering.

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