

**The Political Participation of Arab Citizens in Israel:  
An Attitude Survey ahead of the Elections to the 20<sup>th</sup> Knesset  
January 2015**

**Executive Summary**

This study seeks to examine the attitudes of the Arab public in Israel regarding participation in the elections to the 20<sup>th</sup> Knesset: voting intentions, reasons for voting or for refraining from voting, and scenarios that could encourage turnout. The study forms part of a broad-based action plan by the Abraham Fund Initiatives to encourage political participation among Arab citizens in Israel, and to raise awareness within the Jewish sector – most specifically within the political milieu – regarding the critical importance of this participation. These activities are entirely non-partisan and are confined to encouraging participation per se.

The survey was conducted by the Yafa Research Institute, under the supervision of Dr. Aas Atrash, which specializes in studying political trends in Arab society in Israel. The survey was conducted in Arabic with 514 adult respondents, constituting a representative sample of Arab society in Israel. The survey used the multi-stage random sampling method, and has a 95% level of statistical significance, and a 4.5% maximum sampling error.

**Key findings:**

- The unification of the DFPE (Hadash) and the Arab parties in a single electoral list raises the expected turnout among citizens by almost 10 percentage points, from 57% to 66.4%.
- Positive statements about Arabs by leaders of the main parties could increase Arab turnout. Approximately 50% of Arabs would be influenced by mainstream leaders making public commitments to narrowing gaps between Jews and Arabs in education, housing, and employment. About 52% would be influenced by commitments to negotiate the establishment of a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital. Approximately 33% would be influenced by commitments to invite the Arab parties to participate in the coalition negotiations, and 32% by commitments to appoint an Arab minister.
- Worsening racism in Israeli society has increased the desire of Arabs to vote. Approximately 57% stated that they had been influenced by comments about

Arabs by Jewish politicians, while 56% had been influenced by the manifestations of racism seen during Operation Protective Edge.

- Only 17% of those who do not intend to vote are boycotting the elections on ideological principle. The remainder intend to abstain because they feel that the elections do not influence their lives, or because the elections “are of no interest” to them. Ideological boycotters account for three percent of the total Arab public.
- Approximately half the Arab public is unaware that the electoral threshold was raised. Most of those who are aware of the change see this as a racist decision intended to prevent Arabs from being elected, and also state that the decision will actually encourage them to vote.
- The survey reveals significant differences between voting patterns in different geographical areas (the Southern Triangle, the Shfaram area, and the Nazareth area lead in terms of expected turnout); between women and men (expected turnout of 55% and 70%, respectively); and between Muslims, Christians, and Druze (approximately 67% of Muslims intend to vote, compared to 56% of Christians and 44% of Druze); and according to age group – young adults aged 18-24 show the lowest expected turnout, while turnout rises along with age.

## Analysis of the Survey Findings – Detailed Report

**Background:** The past decade has seen a worrying downward trend in the participation of Arab citizens in Israel in national politics. This phenomenon includes two parallel processes: the withdrawal of Arab citizens from the national political system, and the displacement and exclusion of Arabs by this system.

The strongest evidence for the first of these processes – the withdrawal of Arab citizens from politics – is the sharp fall in turnout at general elections. This process intensified following the events of October 2000, which created a profound rift in relations between the Arab minority, on the one hand, and the state and the Jewish majority, on the other. Turnout among Arab citizens fell from 75% in the 1999 elections to 53.4% in 2009 – a drop of over 20 percentage points in less than a decade. The elections held shortly after the events of October 2000 (in February 2001) marked a turning point in the willingness of Arab citizens to participate in the political process. This was most clearly expressed in calls to boycott that year’s direct prime ministerial elections, in order to punish Prime Minister Ehud Barak, and in order to protest against the state’s attitude toward Arabs. Only 18% of eligible voters among the Arab population exercised their right to vote. For the first time, boycotting elections became a legitimate course of action among the Arab public.<sup>1</sup>

In the most recent elections, held in 2013, turnout among Arab citizens rose slightly to 57%. However, it would seem that this is not sufficient to indicate a return of the Arab public to active political engagement. An attitude survey undertaken by the Abraham Fund Initiatives shortly before the 2013 elections<sup>2</sup> found that many Arab citizens intended to abstain from voting due to their feeling that there was no point doing so: “Voting is not translated into tangible achievements on the ground.” The reason for this is that the elected representatives of the Arab public are not perceived by Jewish Members of Knesset as legitimate coalition partners, or even as non-coalition partners who should be consulted or whose views should be taken into account. Accordingly, Arab Members of Knesset are left solely with “the right to shout” – and even then they often do not enjoy an attentive ear. Meanwhile, the Zionist parties do not attempt to provide any response to the needs of the Arab public. Not only have they largely abandoned any pretense of seeking the support of

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<sup>1</sup> Khaider, Aziz, 2011. “The Two-State Solution and the Realization of the National Aspirations of the Palestinian-Arab Citizens of Israel,” in: *The Impact of the Establishment of a Palestinian State on the Israeli Arabs* (ed.: Reuven Pedatzur). Netanya: S. Daniel Abraham Center for Strategic Dialogue (in Hebrew).

<sup>2</sup> Ben-Amos, Aya (ed.), 2012. *Political Participation of Arab Citizens in Israel – Attitude Survey ahead of the Elections to the Nineteenth Knesset*. Neve Ilan: Abraham Fund Initiatives (in Hebrew).

Arab voters, but they also refrain from making the status and rights of the Arab minority a part of their agendas (in part due to their concern that raising this issue will drive away Jewish voters).

Turning to the other side of the coin, the process of the displacement and exclusion of Arabs is reflected most clearly in the widely-accepted axiom that the Arabs are not legitimate partners in a government coalition or in decision-making processes. For example, the 2011 Democracy Index found that 77.8% of the Jewish public believe that important decisions on matters of peace and security should be taken with a Jewish majority; approximately 70% take the same position regarding decisions in socioeconomic spheres.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, in the Peace Index for June 2013, only 46% of Jewish respondents stated that all citizens of Israel, Jews and Arabs alike, should be able to vote in any future referendum on a peace agreement (compared to almost 90% of Arab respondents).<sup>4</sup>

A further component in the delegitimization of Arab participation in politics and decision making is reflected in repeated claims and statements made by Israeli-Jewish public opinion makers, which portray Arab parliamentarians as interested solely in the struggle for the rights of the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and in the campaign against the occupation. According to this portrayal, this focus means that Arab politicians neglect the everyday issues of most concern to their Arab constituents – “the sewage flowing in the streets” (to quote the cliché most frequently repeated in this context), job creation, and so forth. The fact that many of the Arab Members of Knesset who face this semi-criticism have served in the Knesset for many years, and have repeatedly won the confidence of Arab voters, is not seen as disproving claims about their neglect of issues of concern to the Arab electorate. On the contrary, their repeated re-election is perceived by large sections of the Jewish public as proof of the inability of Arab society to organize itself and to change its political representation, and is used to portray the entire Arab public as “nationalist and extreme.” A study prepared by the Abraham Fund Initiatives examining the activities of Arab Members of Knesset in the Eighteenth Knesset, based on the proposed laws tabled by these parliamentarians between March 8, 2011 and October 15, 2012,<sup>5</sup> clearly disproved these allegations.<sup>6</sup> The study found

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<sup>3</sup> Herman, Tamar, Nir Atmor, Karmit Haber, Ella Heller, Dror Walter, Raphael Ventura, and Yuval Lebel, 2011. *The Israeli Democracy Index 2011*. Jerusalem: Israel Democracy Institute.

<sup>4</sup> Herman, Tamar, and Ephraim Yaar, 2013. *Returning to the Negotiating Table: Results of the Peace Index Questionnaire June 2013*. Jerusalem: Israel Democracy Institute and Tel Aviv University (in Hebrew).

<sup>5</sup> Uri Goffer, 2014. *Analysis of the Parliamentary Activities of Arab Members of Knesset in the Eighteenth Knesset*. Neve Ilan: Abraham Fund Initiatives (in Hebrew).

that between 84% and 97% of the use made by Arab Members of Knesset of the parliamentary tools at their disposal, depending on the specific tool examined, related to issues with no connection to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Nevertheless, these allegations are repeated frequently, and thereby also seep into internal discourse within Arab society.

The Abraham Fund's basic assumption is that the participation of Palestinian-Arab citizens is vital in any forum for discussion regarding the future of the State of Israel and its citizens. We believe that the goal of building coexistence between Jews and Arabs will be realized, first and foremost, through open public discourse and dialogue between citizens from both groups and between their elected leaders, even if this process is complex and sometimes raises tensions. From our perspective, one of the most important criteria for assessing the quality of substantive democracy is the participation of minorities in the public arena and the realization of their civil rights. Accordingly, we are concerned by the processes of withdrawal and displacement described above. This attitude survey forms part of a wider set of activities planned by the Abraham Fund to encourage the participation of the Arab public in the elections, and to increase the proportion of the Jewish public – and in particular the political milieu – that understands the vital need for this participation, and that affords it legitimacy.

**Methodology:** The study is based on the collection of quantitative data from a representative sample of Arabs in Israel aged 18 and above. The sample size is 514, the level of statistical significance is 95%, and the maximum sampling error is 4.5%.

The sampling units are Arab households that had a functioning telephone (landline or cell phone) at the time the survey was conducted. In each household, one person aged 18 or above who answered the phone was interviewed. If the phone was answered by someone who is ineligible to vote, they were asked to fetch an adult present in the house. The survey was conducted by telephone from the offices of the Yafa Institute, between 1:00 p.m. and 9:00 p.m., over the period January 9-13, 2015.

The sampling method was the multi-stage random method: sampling of layers in the first stage, clusters in the second stage, and systemic sampling in the third stage. The Arab locales were divided into 12 geographical regions. Sampling of clusters was undertaken within each region, followed by systemic random sampling within the clusters.

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<sup>6</sup> The examination of the allegations regarding the functioning of the Arab Members of Knesset set aside the assumption adopted by critics that the investment of serious efforts on issues relating to the conflict and the occupation is contradictory to promoting the interests of the general public, and the Arab public in particular.

The sample created is a representative sample of Arab society in Israel in terms of geography, sex, religion, and age.

**Analysis of findings:** The following detailed analysis of the findings is divided into four parts:

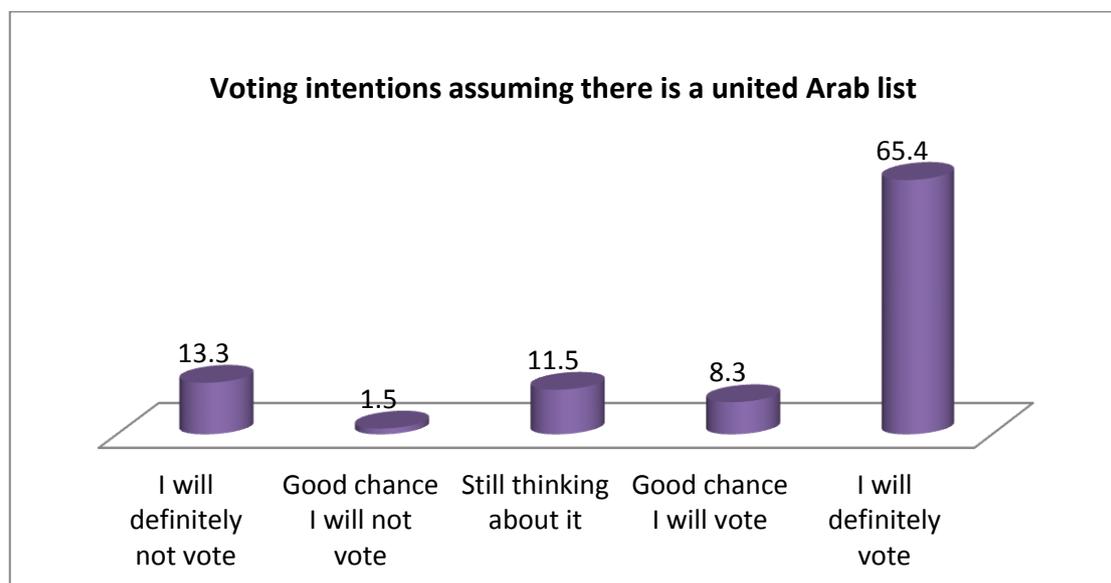
1. Willingness to vote in the elections and expected turnout
2. Factors and scenarios influencing the decision to vote
3. Reasons for voting and for abstention
4. Geographical and demographic differences in voting patterns

**Willingness to vote in the elections and expected turnout**

The findings show that the Arab population can be divided into three segments:

- Respondents with a positive attitude to participation in the elections, constituting some 57% percent of eligible voters, and rising to 73% of eligible voters if the Arab parties unite.
- Respondents with a hesitant attitude, constituting between 8.3% and 11.5% of eligible voters. This segment can be brought into the circle of those voting, depending on the efforts invested during the election period.
- Respondents with a negative attitude to the elections, constituting between 11.5% and 19% of eligible voters. It will be difficult to persuade this segment to vote in the elections.

The expected turnout, assuming that the Arab parties unite and run in a single list, is 66.4 percent. This estimate takes into account eligible voters who will be outside the country on election day, as well as other technical reasons preventing voting on the day.

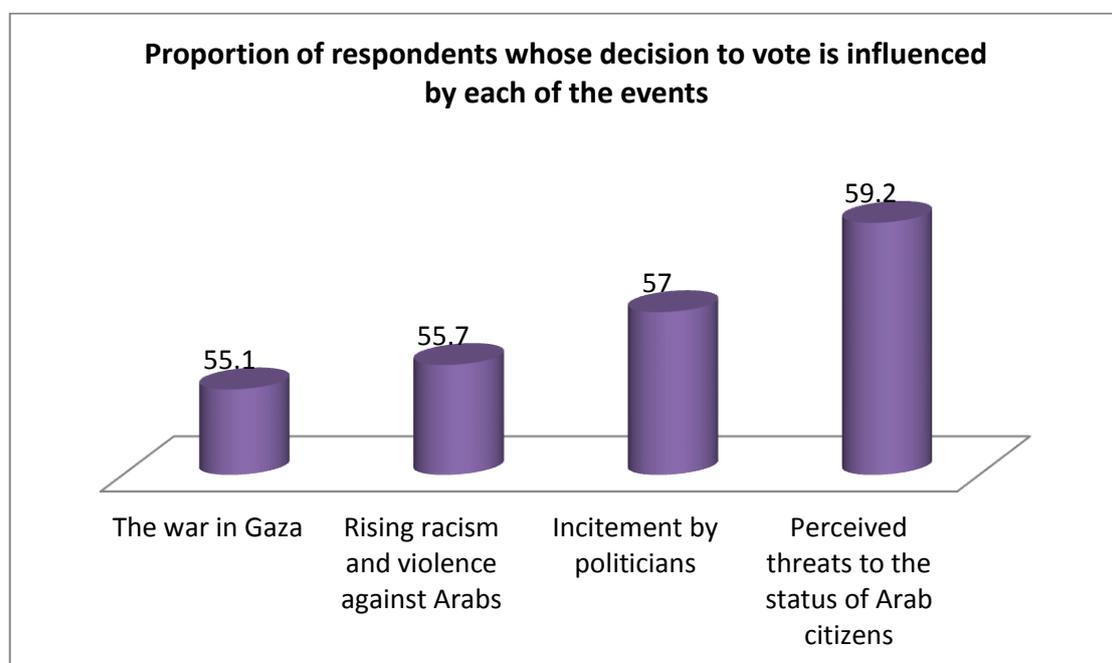


### **Factors and scenarios influencing the decision to vote**

In this section of the survey, we examined the influence of negative events over the past year (such as the war in Gaza and increasing manifestations of racism in Israeli society) on the desire of Arab citizens to vote. We also identified statements by the leaders and candidates of the Jewish parties that could encourage turnout, as well as actions by the Arab parties that could have the same result. We examined the impact of the raising of the electoral threshold on willingness to vote. We also examined which bodies/individuals in society have the strongest influence on the decision by Arab citizens whether or not to vote, and which media are the most effective in influencing this decision.

**Influence of recent events:** The survey examined the influence of four events over the past two years on the desire to vote: the war in Gaza; growing racism and violence toward Arab citizens; anti-Arab incitement and statements by politicians; and perceived threats to Arab citizens in Israel (such as Avigdor Lieberman’s proposal for an “exchange of populated territories,” the Jewish State Law, etc.)

Interestingly, the findings show that these negative developments actually increase the desire to vote among over half the respondents in each instance:

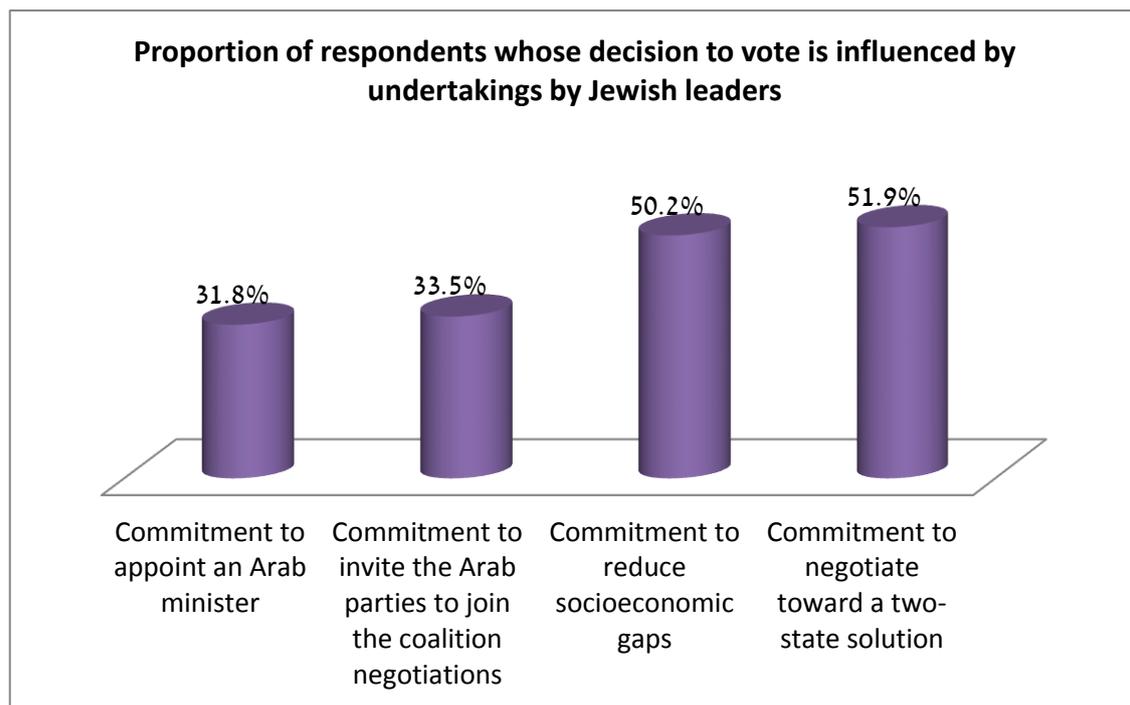


**Influence of statements by Jewish public figures:** As part of the examination of influential factors, the survey examined possible scenarios involving comments by

the leaders of the major Jewish parties that could influence Arab citizens' desire to vote.

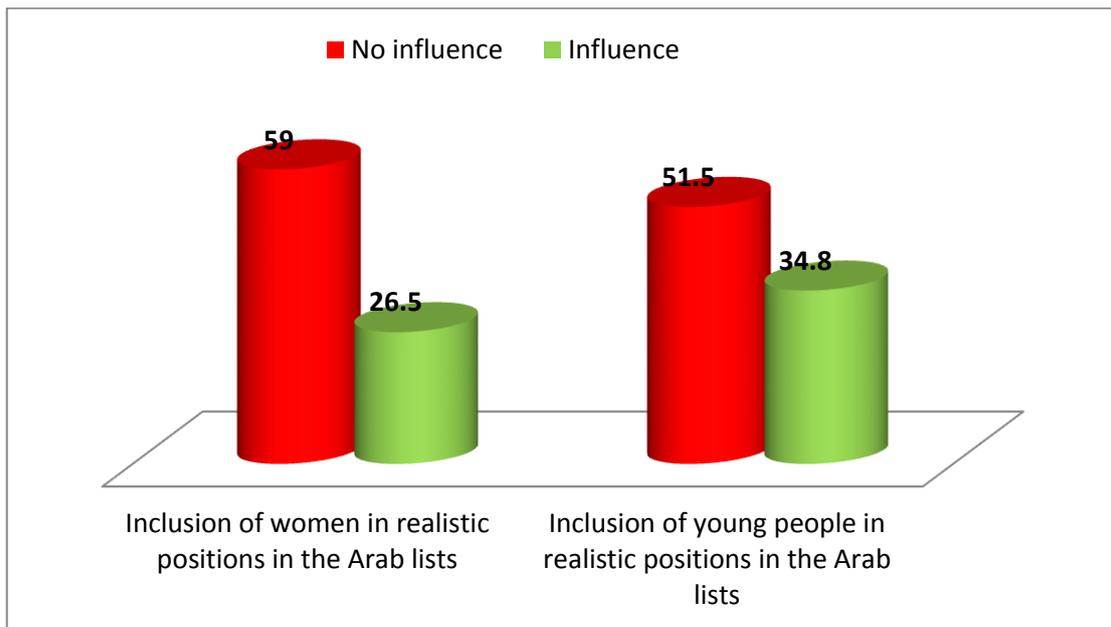
The findings show that positive declarations about Arabs by the leaders of the major parties could increase turnout. Approximately 50% of Arabs would be positively influenced by Jewish leaders publicly committing to reducing the gaps between Jews and Arabs in education, housing, and employment; 52% would be influenced by a commitment to engage in negotiations for the establishment of a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital; 33% would be influenced by a commitment to invite the Arab parties to participate in coalition negotiations; and 32% percent would be influenced by a commitment to appoint an Arab minister.

We should emphasize that such statements will not necessarily lead Arabs to vote for the parties whose leaders make them, but rather will encourage voting in general, since they increase the relevance of political participation from the perspective of Arab citizens.



**Influence of the inclusion of women and young people in the Arab parties:** In addition to the unification of the Arab lists, which is the single most influential action in terms of turnout in Arab society, we examined another factor relating to the conduct of the Arab parties: the inclusion of women and of young people in the party lists of electoral candidates.

An in-depth study undertaken by the Abraham Fund ahead of the 2013 elections, which included focus groups, discovered a clear demand for the inclusion of women and young people on the Arab lists. However, the current study shows that such steps have a relatively modest influence. One possible reason for this is that the question was phrased as relating to their inclusion “in realistic positions,” and not merely to their general inclusion. Some respondents may have perceived this wording as more threatening.

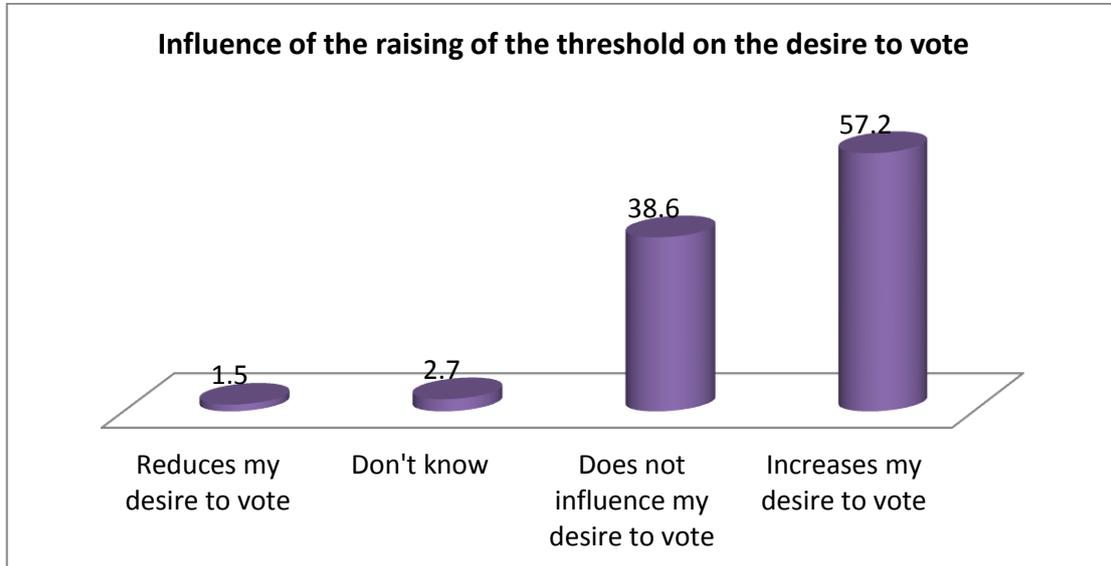


Unsurprisingly, a comparison of the average level of influence revealed a statistically significant difference between women and men regarding the inclusion of women on the Arab lists. The average influence on women (2.51 on a scale of 1 to 5) was higher than that on men (2.15).

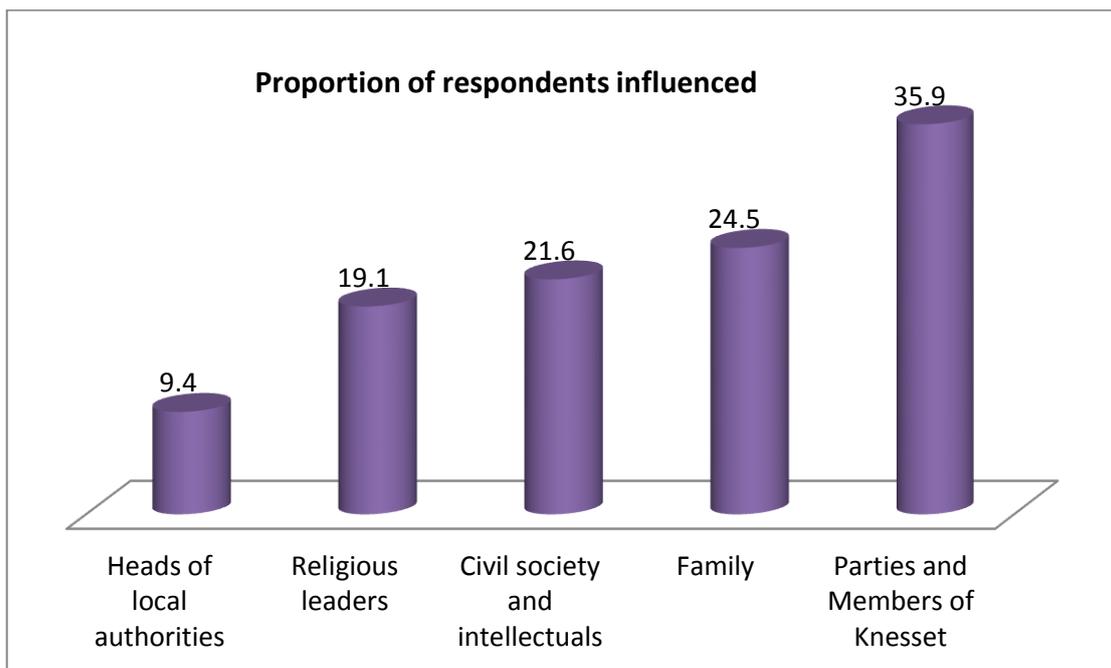
**Influence of raising the electoral threshold:** The electoral threshold (the percent of total eligible votes a list must receive in order to be included in the allocation of Knesset seats) was raised to 3.25% as part of the Governability Law – the most significant structural change since the last elections. This change has clearly had a far-reaching impact on Arab politics, as reflected by the historic decision by the Arab parties to stand in a united list.

However, the survey findings show that only half (47.8%) of the Arab public are aware of this development. Among those who are aware of the change, the majority believes that the change was motivated by racist considerations, with the goal of denying Arabs representation in the Knesset (42.8%); or constituted an anti-democratic decision denying representation to small parties (23.7%). Less than a

quarter of respondents saw the change as a positive decision due to the pressure it creates for the Arab parties to unite (23.8%). Regardless of the different perceptions of the motives for the change, a large majority of respondents state that the raising of the threshold encourages them to vote:



**Bodies influencing the decision to vote:** The respondents in the survey were asked to rank the extent to which their decision whether or not to vote is influenced by the following: Members of Knesset and parties; religious figures; civil society and intellectuals; heads of local authorities; and family. The following graph summarizes the replies for the sample as a whole:



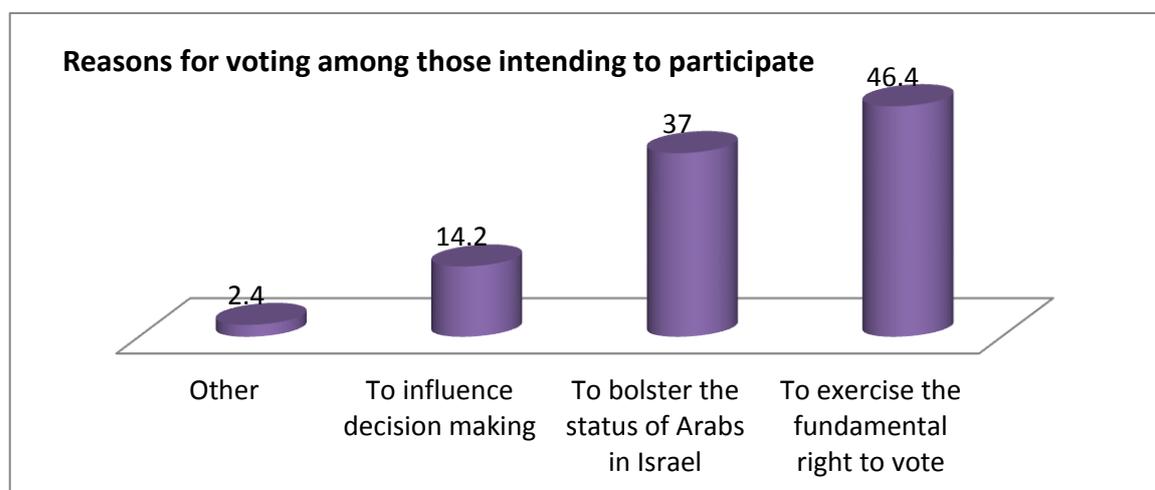
An examination of the average influence, expressed on a scale of 1 to 5, according to sex and demographic factors reveals some noteworthy differences:

- Men are more influenced than women by the parties and Members of Knesset (average 2.77 and 2.41, respectively).
- Muslims are more influenced by religious leaders than Christians (average 2 and 1.49, respectively).
- The family has a greater influence among Muslims (average 2.23) than among Druze (average 1.63).

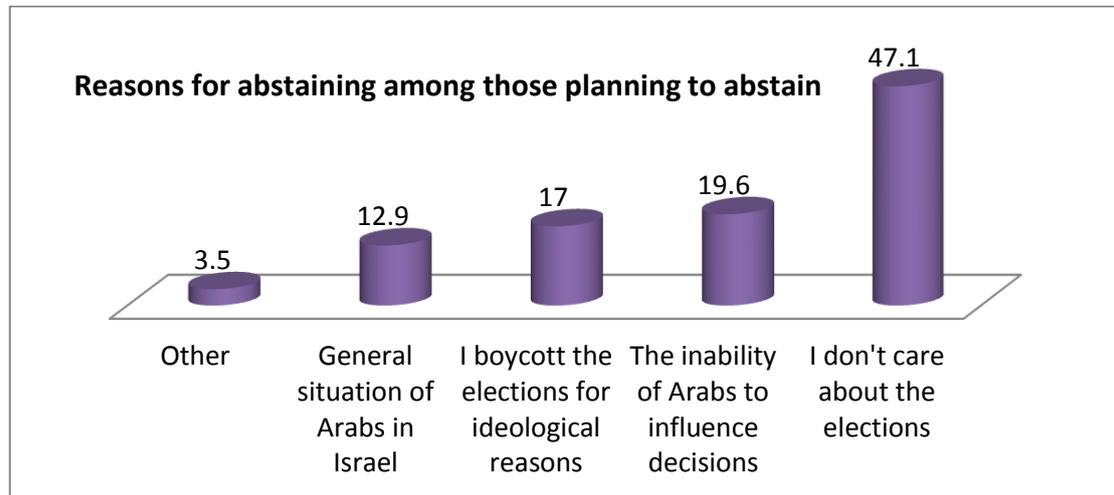
**Influence of different media on the decision to vote:** A further sphere of influence examined the survey is the impact of advertising in various media. In other words, this question examines the most effective way to influence voters in Arab society. The respondents were asked the following question: Advertising in which medium has a greater influence on your decisions during the election period? The findings show that advertising on social networks has the greatest influence (21%), followed by television (18.4%) and websites (16.3%). The written press (9.1%), radio (5.5%), and billboards (3.3%) have the least influence. Approximately a quarter of respondents (26.4%) stated that none of the above-mentioned media influence their decision.

### Reasons for voting or abstaining

**Reasons for voting in the elections:** Almost half the voting public see voting as a manifestation of a civil right; approximately one-third perceive it as securing a national goal of bolstering the status of the Arabs in Israel; while almost one-sixth believe that they can influence decision making.



**Reasons for abstaining:** Among respondents who declared that they do not intend to vote, approximately half refrain from voting due to apathy and lack of interest in the elections (“I don’t care about the elections.”) Over one-sixth boycott the elections for ideological reasons. The remainder explains that they will not vote because of the inability of Arab citizens to influence decision making, and because of the general situation of the Arabs in Israel.

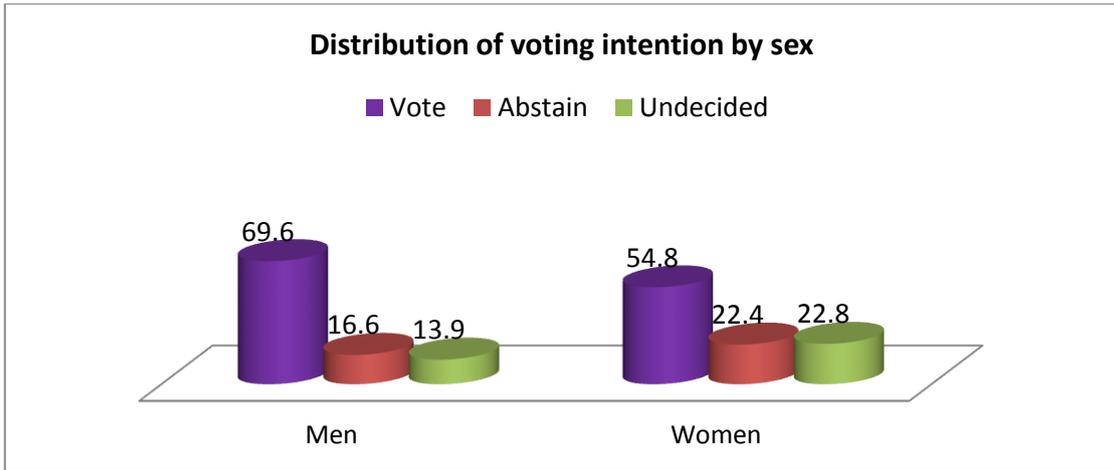


**Geographic and demographic differences in voting patterns**

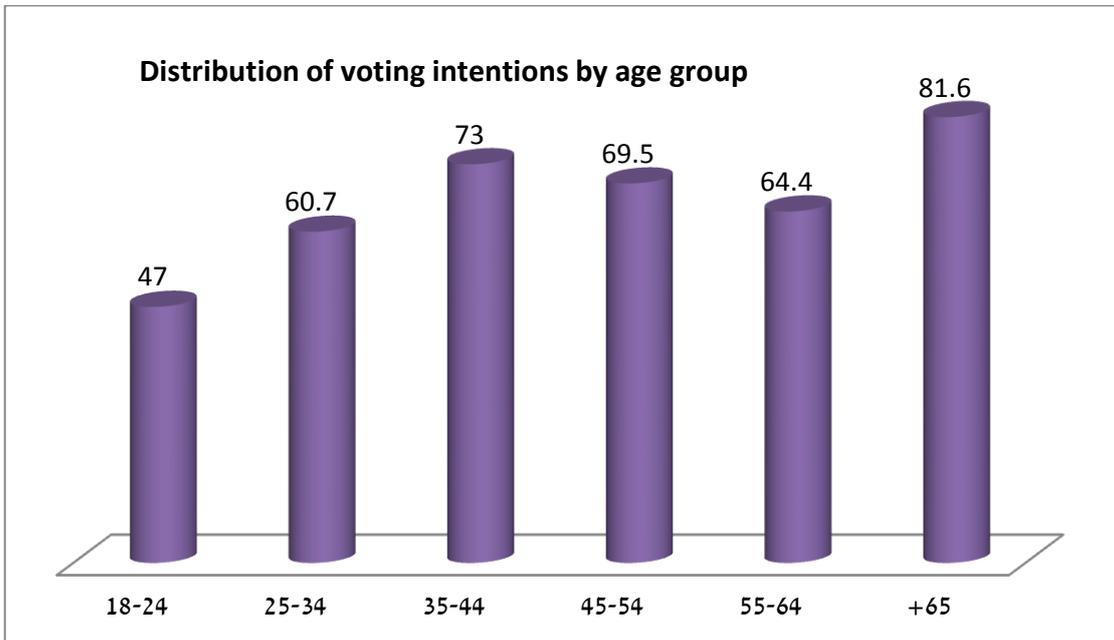
**Geographic differences:** An analysis of voting intentions shows a stark variance by geographic region. The highest proportion of respondents intending to vote was found in the following regions: The Southern Triangle, Shfaram, Nazareth & the Valleys. The highest proportion of respondents intending to abstain was found in the following regions: Sakhnin Valley and Beit Hakerem; Western and Upper Galilee; the mixed cities; and the Northern Triangle.

Voting in Arab society shows patterns of regional/local voting, despite the fact that the Israeli electoral system is based on a single national list. In most cases, turnout is higher in areas from which serving Members of Knesset or candidates originate. For example, a particularly high turnout is expected in the Southern Triangle, which tends to have a high concentration of Arab Members of Knesset, including three in the current Knesset: Ahmad Tibi (Ra’am-Ta’al) from Taybeh, and Esawi Frij (Meretz) and Ibrahim Sarsour (Ra’am-Ta’al) from Kafr Qassem.

**Differences according to sex:** A breakdown by sex shows a significant difference between men and women in terms of turnout. A higher proportion of men stated that they intend to vote, while a higher proportion of women stated that they are undecided or do not intend to vote.



**Differences between age groups:** Significant differences can be seen in voting intentions according to age group. The proportion of respondents intending to vote increases with age, with the exception of the 55-64 age group, in which the proportion is lower than in the next youngest group. The proportion of those intending to vote in the 18-24 age group, which includes first-time voters, is particularly low – less than half.



**Differences between religious groups:** A significant difference was also found in terms of religion. The proportion of those intending to vote among Muslims is higher than among Christians and Druze. This finding is consistent with longstanding voting patterns among these populations over the years.

