

Odfim: How a Surplus-Vote Agreement Works

A short guide for 27 October: what the deals do, what they don't, and why a refusal to sign makes news.

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On Tuesday, Likud announced that it had signed a surplus-vote agreement, a *heskem odafim*, with Bezalel Smotrich's Religious Zionism list, which runs together with Moshe Feiglin's Zehut. Otzma Yehudit said Likud had refused to sign one with it, calling that refusal part of an attempt to weaken Otzma Yehudit and keep Itamar Ben Gvir out of what it says is a unity government Likud is planning with Gadi Eisenkot. On the other side of the map, Yashar has signed with the Democrats, and Naftali Bennett's B'Yachad with Yisrael Beytenu. What do these agreements actually do?

Step one: the threshold

Only lists that win at least 3.25 percent of the valid votes take part in dividing the 120 seats (Knesset Elections Law, section 81(a)). Votes for lists below the line do not count toward any seat.

Step two: whole seats

The valid votes of all the lists above the threshold are divided by 120. The result is the price of one seat. Each list receives as many whole seats as its votes can buy (section 81(b)–(c)). Because the division is almost never exact, a handful of seats are left over.

Step three: the leftover seats

The remaining seats are handed out one at a time by the Bader-Ofer method. For each list, divide its votes by the number of seats it has already won plus one. The list with the highest result wins the next seat, and the sum is repeated until all 120 are filled (section 81(d)). The method favors larger lists.

Where the agreement comes in

Two lists that have signed a surplus agreement are treated as one list at step three: their votes are added together, and so are their seats (section 82(a)). A larger combined list has a better chance at one of the leftover seats. If the pair wins one, its seats are divided between the two partners by the same method (section 82(b)), so the extra seat goes to whichever partner has the stronger claim under the formula, most often the larger one.

Three rules worth knowing

- **One partner only.** A list may link with one other list, and no more (section 67(a)).
- **Both must cross the line.** The agreement counts only if each list passes 3.25 percent on its own (section 82(a)). If one falls short, its votes are lost and the agreement does nothing.
- **A deadline.** The two lists' representatives must file a signed notice with the Central Elections Committee no later than the 11th day before election day (section 67(b)). This time, that is 16 October. The committee then publishes the agreements.

What it does not do

A surplus agreement does not merge parties, put anyone on another party's list, or bind anyone to a coalition. At most it moves a single seat. But in a close race, one seat can decide which bloc reaches 61. That is why most parties sign, why a refusal is read as a political message, and why Otzma Yehudit treated Likud's choice as one.

What it means for your ballot

Your vote goes to the list you choose. Only in the last stage of the arithmetic, and only if both partners pass the threshold, can an agreement turn your list's leftover votes into a seat for its partner, or its partner's leftovers into a seat for your list. It is worth knowing who your party has linked with before you vote.

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