

Demcoracy@Israel (HAKHEL)

3D Democracy for Israel

Prof. Uriel Abulof and Dr. Dana Alexander, Fall 2025

The proposal was prepared in the "Futures for Israel" incubator at the Jerusalem Institute for Policy Research.

In Brief: A detailed and practical proposal for integrating **Citizens' Assemblies** and **Referendums** into the institutional framework of deliberation and decision-making in Israel.

Assemblies and referendums will allow us to deliberate and decide on the core issues that divide us, while renewing the public's self-trust and re-establishing legitimacy for the democratic system as one that enables shared living amidst diversity and disagreement.

This peer-reviewed research booklet, authored by Prof. Uriel Abulof and Dr. Dana Alexander under the Jerusalem Institute for Policy Research's "Futures for Israel 2025" initiative, diagnoses a deep crisis of Israeli democracy and proposes a structural remedy: multidimensional democracy. The authors argue that Israel's purely representative system has failed to resolve core societal cleavages – including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, ultra-Orthodox military conscription, and religion-state relations – while generating dangerous levels of political polarization and institutional distrust. Drawing on comparative evidence from Ireland, Switzerland, and beyond, they propose institutionalizing two complementary democratic dimensions alongside the existing representative framework: deliberative democracy through citizens' assemblies, and direct democracy through referendums. The paper presents a detailed legislative framework, including a new Citizens' Council within an expanded Electoral Authority, binding and optional referendums, and citizen-initiated proposals. Original survey data reveal that Israeli citizens across all sectors distrust elected officials yet express cautious optimism about participatory mechanisms. The authors contend that this multidimensional model can restore civic sovereignty, reduce polarization, and generate broader legitimacy for decisions on contentious national issues.

The Problem: A Crisis of Trust in Democracy

The crisis stems from a structural failure of Israeli democracy: it is solely representative³.

This system provides no tools for deliberating core issues or reaching widely legitimate decisions; it does not allow citizens to influence central decisions, especially (but not only) between elections; and it deepens emotional polarization between groups⁴.

The Result:

- **Personal and superficial politics** – A "Gladiator Arena" revolving around personal and identity rivalries.
- **A lack of substantive, in-depth discussion** on essential issues requiring attention.
- **A representation failure** and loss of public trust in the system and democratic institutions.

To renew trust in democracy as rule *by* and *for* all citizens, we must revitalize democracy by adding two vital dimensions to the representative one: a **deliberative** dimension and a **direct** dimension.

Why are existing mechanisms insufficient?

- **Representative politics** realizes only the *competitive* aspect of democracy, denying expression to the *consensual* aspect vital for a functioning democracy, and preventing substantive discussion and the pursuit of broadly agreed-upon arrangements.
- **Merely electing representatives to the Knesset** every few years gives citizens no tools for meaningful influence on fateful national decisions, particularly between elections.
- **Major decisions** with long-term consequences, remaining within the confines of a parliamentary majority, fail to gain the necessary public legitimacy and continue to serve as a source of division and political instability.

- **There is an inherent gap** between the considerations driving politicians (often linked to short-term electoral gains) and considerations regarding the long-term public good.
 - **The absence of substantive public deliberation** prior to political decisions leads to outcomes that do not necessarily reflect the informed preferences of voters, especially in a polarized environment.
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The Proposed Model

The model is "**Multi-Dimensional Democracy**," combining three dimensions: the existing **Representative** dimension, the **Deliberative** dimension (Citizens' Assemblies), and the **Direct** dimension (Referendums), with reciprocal relations between them.

The model stipulates that a referendum will *always* be held in conjunction with a preliminary Citizens' Assembly, and it empowers citizens to initiate an assembly and referendum process.

The model draws on the experience of successful democracies worldwide (such as Switzerland, Uruguay, and Ireland) and is adapted to the local socio-political fabric.

The combination of Assemblies and Referendums is central to the model:

- **A preliminary Citizens' Assembly** ensures substantive public discussion on the issue at hand; public learning about the issue and the implications of various decisions; reduction of the influence of disinformation and political/economic interests on the vote; and reduction of polarization around the issue, formulating a recommendation with broad consensus prior to the referendum.
- **A Referendum following an Assembly** ensures that the decision reaches broad public legitimacy; that citizens can influence decisions on substantive issues; and that there is real public weight to the Citizens' Assemblies, their deliberations, and their recommendations.

How will it work in practice?

- **An independent state authority** will be established ("The Authority for Elections, Citizens' Assemblies, and Referendums") responsible for managing the assembly and referendum processes.

- **A "Citizens' Council"** will be part of the Authority, comprised of 24 rotating citizens, to ensure maximum transparency and public trust in process management.
- **Referendums will be anchored in law** and consist of three types: **Mandatory Referendums** (regarding changes to borders and sovereignty, constitutional changes, and arrangements regarding natural resources and national infrastructure); **Optional Referendums** initiated by the Knesset; and **Citizen-Initiated Referendums** (proactive or reactive), requiring the support of 12% of eligible voters.
- **A Citizens' Assembly**, established before every referendum, will be composed of ordinary citizens selected by lot who agreed to participate, reflecting the general public in terms of demographic and identity characteristics.
- **The Assembly process** will include structured, in-depth learning from reliable sources; exposure to diverse positions; facilitated discussion to formulate recommendations; and voting.
- **Recommendations winning a majority** in the assembly will be put to public decision in the referendum, alongside the proposal of the initiating body. Decisions winning a majority in the referendum will be binding on the Government and the Knesset.

Expected Contribution to Israeli Society:

- **Strengthening Sovereignty:** The model will strengthen popular sovereignty and public trust in democracy as a system giving all citizens a real voice and influence on fateful decisions.
- **Legitimacy:** The model will increase the legitimacy of difficult decisions, even in the eyes of opponents.
- **Political Culture:** Adding the deliberative dimension will encourage the development of a democratic political culture and return politics to its essence: substantive public discussion and shared decision-making on issues crucial to society and the state.
- **Accountability:** The model will strengthen the correlation between policy promoted by the elected government and the will of the voters, increasing the attentiveness and accountability of elected representatives to the public.

Why Now?

Israel is at a historic testing point and a crisis that has peaked since October 7th. The political deadlock prevents responsible collective coping with core questions and deepens social rifts.

However, there is a **window of opportunity for renewal**, characterized by high civic engagement and widespread fatigue with polarized politics. These conditions—instability and a breakdown of trust between citizens and the political elite—are precisely what drive the adoption of new democratic tools globally.

The "Hakhel" initiative offers a realistic and feasible path: adding democratic tools and channels successfully tested worldwide, without replacing existing institutions; strengthening substantive and informed political discourse over bickering; and creating a transparent, participatory, and educational decision-making system.

This is a measured yet revolutionary change—re-establishing trust and mutual responsibility between citizens and the state.