

In Our Very Own Eyes

Report on the 19th Knesset



Introduction: The Social Guard and the Knesset

The Social Guard was founded in the wake of the Israeli social justice protest movement in order to promote civic engagement and reduce the democratic deficit between the Israeli public and its representatives. In particular, we view transparency and accountability as vital instruments in our struggle for social justice and civic equality in Israel.

Since 2011, hundreds of citizens from all over the country have joined the Social Guard by observing Knesset committee hearings and writing eyewitness reports based on what they saw. During this time, we monitored the performance of MKs from all parties, exposing their voting patterns and participation rates to the general public. As a result of this civic-based effort, we have acquired a unique reputation as a reliable and innovative source of information.

The previous Knesset (the 19th since 1948) was the first which we monitored from start to end (2013–2015). Hundreds of volunteers participated in this project: citizen-observers who attended and reported on hearings, research volunteers who prepared the necessary background materials, website volunteers who edited testimonies for publication, and many other activists who supported and initiated research projects and field events. The following summary presents our insights.

Note from the Director General

During the summer of 2011, all of us that took the streets to protest and demand Social Justice realized that we were at the intersection of three phenomena that were occurring simultaneously. Firstly, for the first time in decades, Israeli society was united by solidarity during a time of peace, rather than times of war. Second, the vast majority of Israelis, regardless of class or income, realized that government-led policies were undermining them as individual citizens, as they shared a daily struggle for economic survival. Third, as part of a global trend, citizens have decided to take action and engage rather than abandon the political system for their elected representatives.

Almost four years have passed, and while these basic foundations of the Social Guard are ever more relevant, as this report shows, we can also sense that change has arrived. Public discourse in Israel has shifted dramatically from dealing with security threats to mending social ones. More and more efforts have been initiated by various civil society organizations to make government more transparent and accountable. Our monitoring efforts currently serve both the Israeli public and the numerous media outlets that view us as a reliable and credible source of information.

Regardless of the results of the upcoming elections, the Social Guard will continue to monitor the Knesset and to fight for **Social Justice** and **Civic Equality** in Israel.

Boaz Rakocz,

Director-General

Main Findings

- **The executive branch in Israel has gained complete control over the legislative branch:** hardly any remnant of checks and balances between the branches remains. Through the Ministers' Committee for Legislative Affairs, the government determines the final results of the voting process.
- **Legislation was not ground-breaking:** 252 bills were passed, of which roughly 55% were focused on socio-economic issues. Approximately half of these consisted of minor changes to existing laws. Legislative initiatives that could have led to fundamental changes were rejected outright or buried in the process.
- **So-called "Coalition Discipline" is a mere excuse:** some coalition MKs successfully challenged the coalition's voting patterns by avoiding critical votes. A greater number of such MKs could have made a real difference.
- **Docile opposition:** the opposition often neglected the plenum and presented no serious challenge to the government. On average, opposition MKs participated in **28 fewer** votes on socio-economic issues than coalition MKs.
- **Lack of transparency in Knesset committees:** votes in the committees are still not recorded – despite explicit promises to The Social Guard by seven committee chairmen.
- **Steadily declining attendance rate:** the plenum attendance rates of MKs across the board steadily dropped throughout the 19th Knesset. Many MKs rarely appeared in the committees, and discussions attended (and chaired) by a single MK were common. The lack of quorum regulations, the heavy workload of each MK, overlapping discussion times, and the large number of MKs who are simultaneously part of the executive branch, all contribute to this phenomenon.

Crucial Issues

A Legislating Government

The government, through its Ministers' Committee for Legislative Affairs, actually and forcefully determines legislation. This committee consists of 13 government members, led by the Justice Minister. Its decisions are technically non-binding, but in practice it determines the vote of coalition MK's. Most bills rejected by this committee are not even presented to the plenum, since they are bound to fail. In other cases, bills that are popular with the public but opposed by the coalition are passed by the committee and buried later on.

Overall, only 14% of the 448 bills submitted by opposition MKs received any measure of support from the committee. This compares to the roughly 60% support for bills submitted by coalition MKs.

It should be noted that the committee does not publish the votes of individual ministers, only publishing its final decisions.

Non-Democratic Parties

The increase in the number of parties who do not hold primary elections contributes to the MK's reduced status and power. Many Knesset members do not owe their position to party members, but rather to the head of the party, who is given full control. 36 coalition members – those from Yesh Atid, Yisrael Beiteinu, and HaTnuah – were members of non-democratic parties.

Budgetary Transfers

Budgetary transfers are transfers of funds **after** the annual budget has been approved by the Knesset. In 2014, the Finance Committee transferred about 14% of the budget, a total amount of 64 billion Shekels. This amounts to a complete upheaval of the budget's declared priorities.

Social Guard's observers' reports from the Finance Committee present a disturbing picture: discussions on budgetary transfers are rushed, MKs are often completely clueless about the destinations and reasons for the transfer of funds, votes are often scheduled for the last minute, with committee members showing up in the nick of time. Votes were often canceled and rescheduled to ensure a majority. **The individual votes have never been recorded, and there are no official minutes.**

- In 2013, 2.75 Billion Shekels were cut from the Ministries of Health, Welfare, Education, Economy, and Social Security, in favor of the defense budget.
- In 2014, 3.7 Billion shekels cut from subsidies for public transportation and day cares, transportation infrastructure and employment programs, were transferred to the defense budget. This included allocations for the Holot Detention Facility for asylum seekers and migrant workers.
- The Social Guard revealed extensive use of budgetary transfers from socio-economic ministries to non-profit organizations associated with various political parties. Furthermore, according to the findings of a recent corruption report, some of this money was allegedly used by officials of the Yisrael Beitenu party to pay bribes.

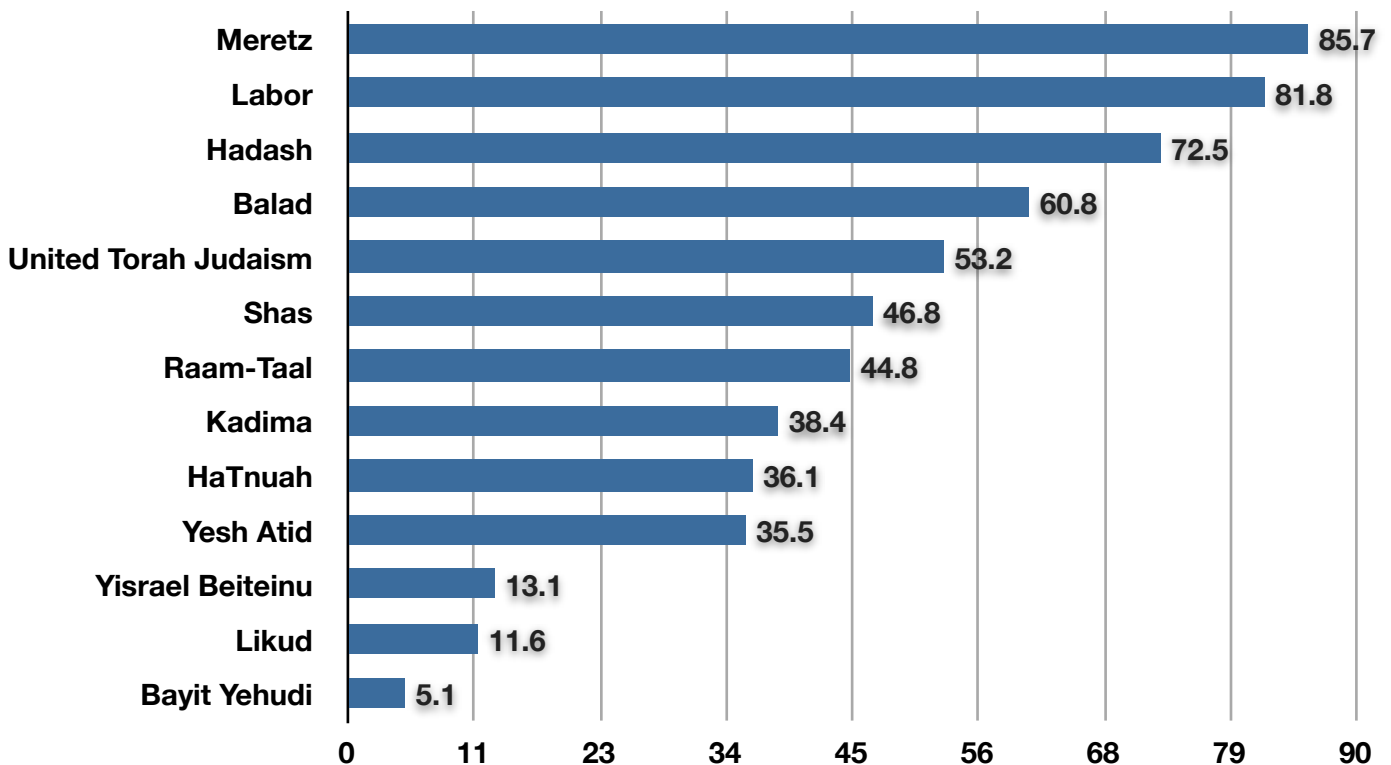
The Social Index

The Social Index, which examines how MK's vote on hundreds of socio-economic bills, is published at the end of each session – checking their votes in the plenum vis-a-vis the Social Guard's position on each of the bills. This position is determined by forty members of our organization – staff, board members, and experienced volunteers – who thoroughly examine and judge the bills against a set of values designed to promote a more egalitarian society.

The Social Index has become a cornerstone of our activity and media presence, and gained significant credibility and prominence in the public discourse.

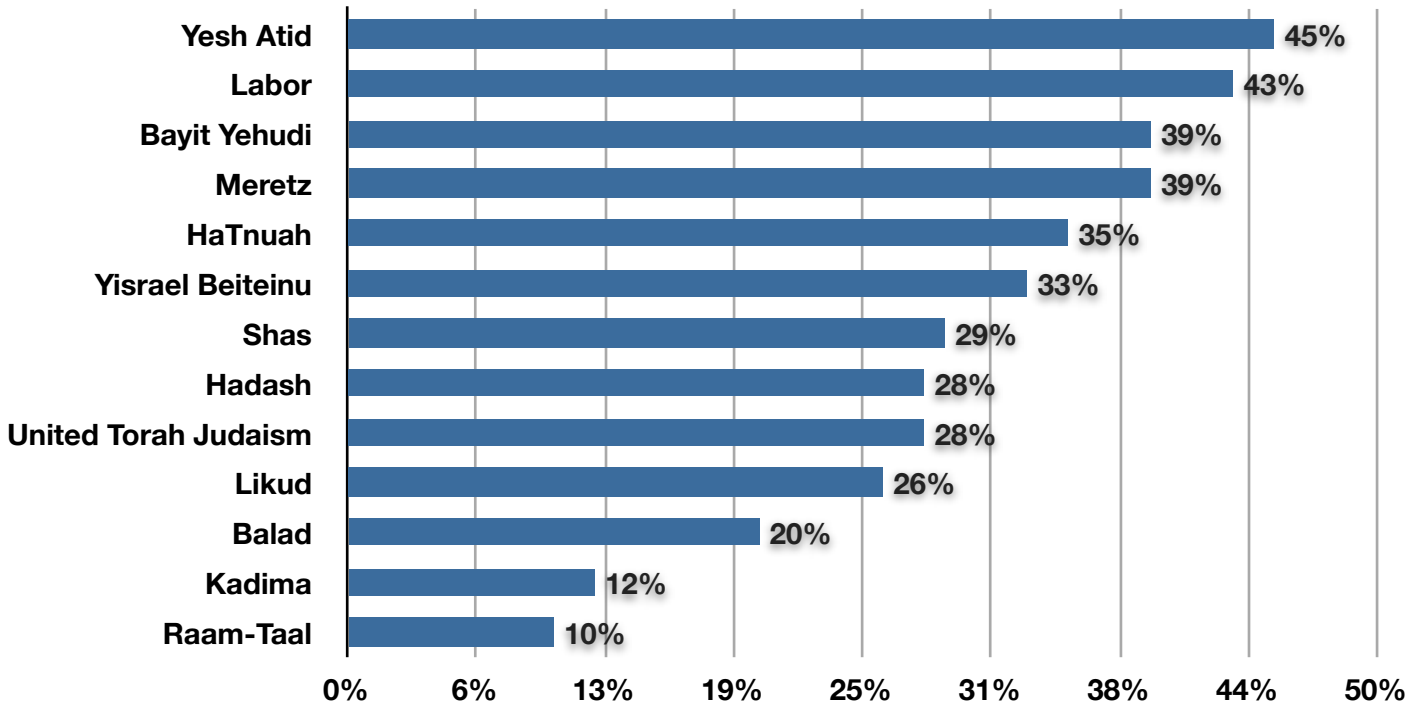
Results of the Social Index of the 19th Knesset

Party Scores



Results of the Social Index of the 19th Knesset

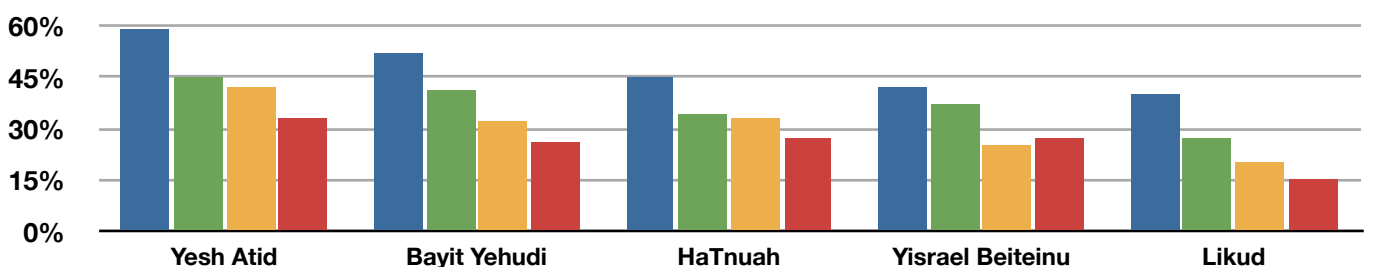
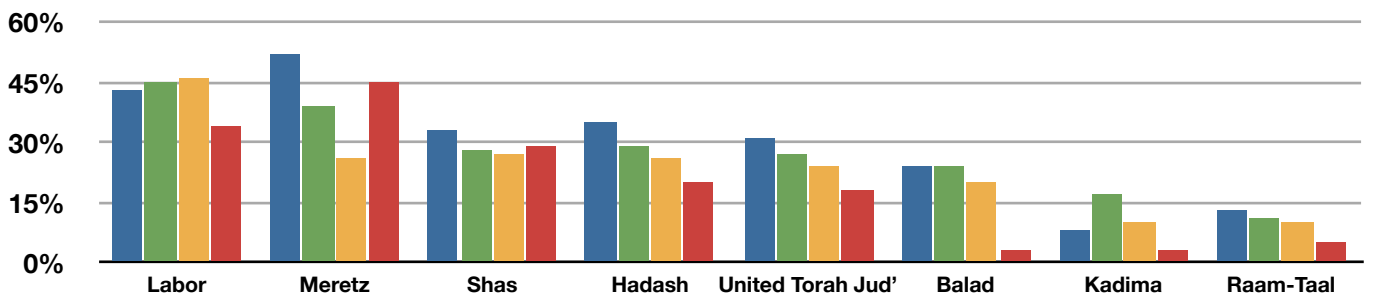
Party Participation Rates (in socio-economic votes)



Results of the Social Index of the 19th Knesset

Participation Rates by Knesset Sessions

■ Summer 13' ■ Winter 14' ■ Summer 14' ■ Winter 15'



Activities of the Social Guard

The 19th Knesset was the first Knesset term in which the Social Guard was present from its first day (February 5th, 2013) until its last, when the Knesset dissolved (December 9th 2014). In this term, the Knesset held a total of five sessions (with only four of actual legislative work) over a total of 64 non-consecutive weeks – during which the Social Guard emerged as an active force in the Knesset and across the Israeli society.

In the Knesset

Our observers are volunteers who come from a wide variety of backgrounds. They come to the Knesset particularly in order to participate in this democratic monitoring project; **for many it is their first visit**. Some volunteer for only several Knesset hearings, while others choose to specialize in a specific Knesset committee or bill, returning repeatedly.

The Social Guard's observers include a diverse set of men and women, Arabs and Jews, secular and religious (including Haredim), holding left- and right-wing political views, college students, pensioners and working people of all ages, **with an increasing number coming from peripheral regions**.

We encourage our observers to record their experiences so as to provide an accessible account of what actually occurs in the Knesset. These reports are published on our website and Facebook page, and are frequently picked up by mainstream media sources. Beyond the factual information contained within them, **these reports portray the interaction between citizens and their representatives**, and attest to the strengths and weaknesses of the Israeli democratic process.

- An average of 15 observers attended an average of 13 committee discussions per week.
- The total number of observers during the course of the 19th Knesset was 216. The total number of committee discussions attended by representatives of the Social Guard was roughly 850.
- Some of the volunteers arrived as representatives of organizations with which we collaborate: the Interdisciplinary Center in Herzliya (IDC), Bar-Ilan University, Ben Gurion University, the Open University, and the Rothschild Ambassadors scholarship program.
- 90 participants attended at least one of our seven training workshops for new volunteers.
- 515 observer testimonials were written during the course of the 19th Knesset.
- 20 activists volunteered in the Website Department, helping to edit and compile testimonials.

Legislative Research

Meticulous research by our volunteers and staff forms the basis of all of our parliamentary efforts. Every single piece of proposed legislation on socio-economic issues is read and interpreted by a member of our Research Department, who then write an accessible explanation in plain Hebrew. We now have a unique archive of over 200 interpreted bills available to the public on our website, in addition to a wide variety of background material on Knesset committee discussions.

- 50 volunteers were active in the research department during the period under discussion.
- They wrote 407 interpretations of bills on socio-economic issues.
- Dozens of primers for observers on Knesset discussions were published on our website and Facebook page.

Public Campaigns: Struggles and Victories

At the beginning of the 19th Knesset's term, we campaigned to shorten its 2013 summer recess: parliament had been paralyzed during nine months, due to the previous elections, and too many bills were stuck in the process. 450 letters were sent by citizens to MK's, and a third of them signed an initiative to extend the summer session. **Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelstein responded to the initiative, and ultimately the summer session of the Knesset was extended by two weeks.**

The Social Guard also joined initiatives with other civil society organizations to encourage **transparency within the Ministerial Committee on Legislation**, to improve the mechanism for passing the budget, and to promote the implementation of the conclusions of the Alalouf Commission on poverty, among others.

Acknowledgements

Our work would not be possible without the meaningful support of our funders and supporters, both in Israel and abroad.

The following is a list of our funders who supported our efforts during the 19th Knesset's term:

- **The Samuel Sebba Charitable Trust**
- **The New Israel Fund**
- **Moriah Foundation**
- **UJA Federation of New York – Commission on the Jewish People**
- **Yad HaNadiv Foundation**
- **Private Israeli citizens**

Thank You!

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