

• By ILANIT CHERNICK

ZIONIST CONGRESS 2020 ELECTIONS:

What are they and why are they important?

The race for the Zionist Congress 2020 election in the United States is on.

Although the election won't start until January 21 - and lasts until March 11 - several organizations have thrown their hats into the ring, calling on supporters to vote so that they can run in the upcoming election.

The election takes place every five years, and American Jews over the age of 18 can vote.

How come we have these elections and why are they important?

Established in 1897 by the father of Zionism, Theodor Herzl, the Zionist Congress was the legislative body of the Zionist Organization (ZO), a non-governmental entity that promoted Zionism.

These two entities are known today as the World Zionist Congress (WZC) and the World Zionist Organization (WZO).

The WZC, which in many respects serves as a "parliament for the Jewish people," comprises some 500 delegates and meets in Jerusalem every five years.

Overall, Israel has 190 delegates, which forms 38% of the congress. The United States has 145 delegates, which makes up 29%, while the remainder of world Jewry has 165 delegates, forming 33% of the congress's make up.

According to the WZO, the Zionist Congress enables delegates to exert ideological influence on both Israeli society and the global Jewish agenda, as well as allocate financial and other resources to various organizations - including the Reform movement - in Israel.

In the US, the American Zionist Movement (AZM) "organizes a grassroots vote where the American Jewish community elects 145 delegates to the WZC.

"This election is also an opportunity to show broad support for Zionism and to express views on important matters affecting the Jewish community, Israel and the Diaspora," the group explained.

The AZM made it clear that the 2020 election is expected to be "historic" because "with more slates than ever before, American Jews have a rare opportunity to make a direct impact on the future direction of Israel and Diaspora affairs."

WORLD ZIONIST Organization vice chairman Yaakov Hagoel told *The Jerusalem Post* that they were expecting some 20 slates to take part in the 2020 election.

"In two weeks, we will have a list of those parties, and we will know who the finalists will be," he said.

Asked how American Jewry was expected to vote, he said it was "too soon to tell, or to see what changes will take place."

Personally, Hagoel said, he hopes that "the right-wing coalition will grow."

Several slates in the past few months have made clear their intentions to run in the election.

Sondra Sokal, past president of AMIT, current member of the Expanded Executive of WZO, and cabinet member of AZM, said in a statement that "This is the only place where the Jews of America get a chance, in a democratic election, to vote for who they would like to represent them on hard issues - such as who is a Jew, such as conversion law - that we grapple with every day."

AMIT made it clear that this vote "will elect the 145 American representatives to the 38th World Zionist Congress - the largest delegation outside of Israel - and will determine which group has the greatest impact on setting policy for the coming years. It will also ultimately determine how \$3 billion gets spent annually on issues and activities that are most important to Israel and Diaspora Jewry."

MERCAZ, the Zionist Organization of the Conservative movement that is also campaigning to run in the January elections, explained on its website that this election is important because "it is the only political arena in Israel where Diaspora Jewry has a seat, and the



THE OPENING of the 26th World Zionist Congress in Jerusalem in 1964. (Moshe Pridan/GPO)

only place where Israeli decision makers must hear us out. We have a voice, and that voice translates into funding. The bigger that voice, the better able we are to allocate funds and influence decisions."

In its message to voters, Mercaz said that a vote for the slate "allows for our Conservative/Masorti communities in Israel to live the lives we take for granted in the United States, where Conservative conversions are accepted without question, women can read Torah proudly and without fear, and egalitarian minyanim are celebrated."

The Kol Yisrael slate defines itself as "For the Love of Israel - Making Zionism Compelling in the 21st Century."

"We can and must respond to these threats to our peoplehood

in thoughtful, strategic and innovative ways at this challenging point in our shared history," their mandate states. "We must reinvigorate the Zionist dream. We in America must find new ways to fully engage with Israel and embrace our shared heritage and shared destiny."

Kol Yisrael's main aims are to "bridge the growing gap and establish personal and meaningful connections between our communities and the State and people of Israel, place the emphasis and focus on our youth" and "restore Zionist innovation."

A new coalition slate calling itself the Zionist Organization of America (ZOA), Torah from Sinai, & National Pro-Israel Partners Coalition: Courageously Defending Israel, Sovereignty

& the Jewish People, said that with the rise in antisemitism, "now is the time to use communal funds to assure the safety and security of the entire Jewish people. We must focus on combating antisemitism and anti-Zionism, and on rescuing Jews from countries where Jews are no longer safe."

During its campaign, it highlighted several aims including prioritizing the saving of Jewish lives; combating Jew-hatred and Israel-hatred; promoting Jewish and Zionist education; and "supporting the Jewish people's rights in Israel, united Jerusalem and Judea/Samaria."

The final list of slates that will have made it into the 2020 election voting process will be announced toward the end of November.