

On the Eve of Israel's Do-Over: Final Maneuvers and Coalition Possibilities

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Brief Analysis

Netanyahu continues to hunt for last-minute right-wing votes, while the center-left has cast its lot with a “national unity” strategy that would aim to peel Likud away from him.

On September 17, Israel is holding an unprecedented repeat election after April balloting failed to produce a coalition of 61 members in the 120-seat parliament. As the two main rival factions push toward this magic number, polls seem to converge on the idea that the right bloc is leading the center-left bloc, an outcome that could extend the long tenure of Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and perhaps initiate legislation that insulates him from corruption allegations. Further raising the stakes, Netanyahu made a final bid to woo right-wing votes last week by saying he would annex the Jordan Valley if elected, and perhaps even absorb all Israeli settlements in the West Bank in consultation with the United States.

CONFIDENCE OF THE RIGHT

Given Netanyahu's string of victories over the years, Israel's political right tends to be more confident than normal during campaigns. Other factors have only added to this confidence on the eve of the election.

First, low national turnout tends to favor the right, which has key constituencies that are more ideological and thus more motivated to vote. The ultraorthodox and settler communities and their sympathizers tend to view elections as existential matters, since the outcome affects government funding for social welfare, government support for religious institutions, and political support to keep hold of the West Bank areas where many of them live.

Second, polling in Israel tends to underreport the right. Some attribute this factor to the “shy Tory” phenomenon—that is, some citizens identify pollsters with the “liberal elite” and do not want to admit they are voting for the right.

Others may deliberately lie to pollsters in order to discredit so-called liberal prognostications. The resultant underreporting benefits Netanyahu, who has become infamous for election-eve “Gevalt” (alarm) tactics that mobilize his base by warning them the right is on the verge of losing.

Third, Netanyahu benefits from the funnel effect caused by his failure to form a government after the previous election. That is, in a normal election, some citizens will vote for “boutique” parties that focus on their pet issues, believing the wider blocs will not need their vote to prevail. In April, for example, the bloc led by Netanyahu’s Likud Party missed out on seven seats because some right-wing voters “wasted” their ballots on small parties that failed to meet the 3.25 percent electoral threshold required to enter parliament. Yet once such voters believe the stakes are too high to partake of that “luxury”—as seems to be happening in this do-over election—they tend to gravitate to the larger blocs in order to make sure their broader interests are secured.

This is why Netanyahu has been taking steps to maximize his position on the far right. These include coaxing a small nascent libertarian party to drop out of the race and pledging to unilaterally annex portions of the West Bank—the second election in a row in which he has employed the latter tactic. He has also called out the militant fringe party Otzma Yehudit, heirs to the late xenophobic ideologue Meir Kahane. He has criticized them not on moral terms, however, but because they will waste right-wing votes if they fail to pass the electoral threshold. (Ironically, the latest polls now say Otzma will put Netanyahu over the top by squeaking into parliament and enabling him to form a right-wing coalition.)

HOPE OF THE CENTER-LEFT

Despite these maneuvers and poll results, the party that leads the center-left bloc, Blue and White, has not given in to despair. For one thing, it has seemingly gained from the [recent drizzle of primetime news leaks](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/to-win-re-election-bibi-netanyahu-is-waging-wars-at-home-and-abroad) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/to-win-re-election-bibi-netanyahu-is-waging-wars-at-home-and-abroad>) detailing the investigations into corruption allegations against Netanyahu.

Moreover, Blue and White is counting on Netanyahu’s aide-turned-rival—Avigdor Liberman, head of the party Yisrael Beiteinu—to siphon some votes from the right and perhaps tilt the balance of power in their direction. As the enmity between the two men deepens, Blue-White leaders have come to view Liberman as a “frenemy” who may once again prevent Netanyahu from forming a coalition government, just as he did in the spring.

Both sides have noticed Liberman’s growing public support, with his party rising from five seats to a high-water mark of eleven. Center-left polling data reportedly indicates that the public likes Liberman’s call for Likud and Blue-White to form a national unity government that excludes the ultraorthodox, thereby curtailing that constituency’s disproportionate influence over Israeli policy. Indeed, the latest projections indicate that Blue and White may have taken a couple seats from Liberman after shifting to his proposal of forming a government with Likud—albeit with the crucial caveat that it would exclude Netanyahu himself due to his legal problems. The party believes this new focus will reach moderate right-wing voters who may be frightened by fringe factions on either edge of the political spectrum.

For now, Likud officials have said they will not abandon Netanyahu even if he falls short of outright victory. Another complicating factor lies in the role of President Reuven Rivlin, who will be tasked with formally deciding which party gets to form the government post-election. Will he give the nod to the party that wins the most votes, or will he go by the recommendations that emerge from the usual post-election party consultations? The latter path could lead him to pick a party that cannot form a majority coalition on its own, essentially making a national unity government the only option (as of September 13, the polls have Likud and Blue-White tied at 32 seats each).

For his part, Netanyahu has been trying to chip away at Liberman’s potential kingmaker role, partly as payback for deserting the Likud bloc in the spring. His tactics have included hiring political operatives away from Yisrael

Beitenu, making calculated appearances in communities with high concentrations of the ethnic Russians who compose Liberman's base, and scheduling a summit in Sochi last week with President Vladimir Putin, whom many Russian Israelis apparently regard as a successful strongman who is not as anti-Semitic as his Soviet predecessors.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE ANNEXATION PLEDGE

In the past, Netanyahu generally avoided making specific date-certain policy promises during campaigns, believing he was better served by emphasizing populist identity politics and opposing concessions to the Palestinians in general terms. This time around, however, he has specifically pledged to annex the Jordan Valley if he is permitted to assemble a government, despite the security establishment's reported request that he hold off on such announcements.

His choice of location is calculated, since there is broad domestic support for retaining the Jordan Valley zone that runs along the eastern perimeter of the West Bank. Historically, Israel was invaded from the east via Jordan and Iraq, and while the geopolitical situation has changed significantly since 1967, many Israelis still fear that the Palestinians could use this frontier to smuggle in radical forces and materiel in the future. Blue and White recognizes this concern as well, sending party leaders (including three former military chiefs of staff) to the area and pledging that Israel will always maintain a presence there.

Obviously, though, the implications of Blue and White's approach are a far cry from Netanyahu's plan for immediate annexation. His idea of taking some 30 percent of the West Bank off the table before negotiations with the Palestinians begin could make it impossible for the United States to resume talks that have been on hold since 2014. And even if Netanyahu intended the pledge merely as an election gambit, its effects could go viral, whether by permanently entering the bloodstream of Israeli political conversation or by triggering international backlash at the UN or elsewhere (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-will-palestinians-respond-to-netanyahus-annexation-announcement>).

TRUMP'S TREATY TWEET?

Another bilateral issue worth mentioning in the context of the election is President Trump's weekend Twitter note that he would be glad to discuss a U.S.-Israel defense treaty with Netanyahu after the vote. Despite the announcement's timing so close to election day—presumably Trump's way of trying to boost the prime minister's chances—the idea has not been well received in Israel so far. Many viewers recognized that the tweet was noncommittal, falling far short of Netanyahu's exuberant reception of it as “historic.” Moreover, leading defense officials attacked the idea for potentially tying Israel's hands if it wanted to launch its own military strikes, something Netanyahu denied. Whatever the case, the announcement was in keeping with the prime minister's style of reaching out to powerful friends abroad in order to burnish his credentials and give his campaign one last push over the finish line.

David Makovsky is the Ziegler Distinguished Fellow and director of the Project on Arab-Israel Relations at The Washington Institute, and coauthor with Dennis Ross of the new book [Be Strong and of Good Courage: How Israel's Most Important Leaders Shaped Its Destiny](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/be-strong-and-of-good-courage-how-israels-most-important-leaders-shaped-its) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/be-strong-and-of-good-courage-how-israels-most-important-leaders-shaped-its>) (PublicAffairs/Hachette). ❖

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