

Momentum Swings Toward Netanyahu in Tight Race

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Mar 22, 2021

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Brief Analysis

Netanyahu has managed to erode support for key rivals and further complicate any opposition coalition scenarios, but the lingering possibility of a fifth round of elections raises troubling questions about the status of Israeli politics.

The Israeli election campaign that will culminate in the March 23 vote is more complex than previous rounds. Instead of two large parties, there are now several midsize parties grouped into pro- and anti-Netanyahu blocs, which could complicate and extend the post-election negotiations to form a coalition—or collapse them altogether.

In the campaign's waning days, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu has barnstormed the country in a bid to raise his potential coalition seat tally in the 120-member Knesset from his recent peak of 58 seats to the 61 required for a bare majority. The latest polls point to an uptick in support for him, at least in part because he is opening the country up from its COVID-19 closures and has presided over rapid, widespread vaccinations. If these gains prove sufficient to give him 61 seats, his allies will no doubt seek to pass legislation granting him immunity from his three ongoing court cases on corruption.

Yet the race remains too close to call, and the results may still allow for an anti-Netanyahu government composed of right, center, and left-wing parties. Any such alliance would be predicated on a degree of political heterogeneity that is bound to make it shaky (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/israels-round-four-new-and-old-dynamics>), however.

The third scenario is that neither side is able to configure a government. Given Netanyahu's court cases and his firm control over his base, this outcome would likely lead to a fifth round of elections.

The Price of Forever Elections

Part of Netanyahu's political success stems from his ability to capitalize on identity politics. For instance, he has

identified the grievances of the Mizrahi ethnic group (Jews of Middle Eastern origin) and convinced many of them that the “elite” media and judiciary are bent on disregarding their religious traditions.

Yet is there a price for pushing this divisive strategy indefinitely and holding round after round of inconclusive elections? Israel’s present political discourse has deteriorated into divisions based on pro- and anti-Netanyahu affiliations, with little substantive policy focus. There is also no public discourse on the need for electoral reform to prevent this unhealthy loop from recurring. Moreover, the country has not passed a budget since 2018, complicating its ability to deal with current and future emergencies.

Election Day Unknowns

This is Israel’s first election to be held during the pandemic, so turnout is a question mark despite the country’s high vaccination rate (turnout reached 71% in the last round). Israel does not have early or mail-in voting for average citizens, and the number of undecided voters remained high in final polling.

Another unknown is the fate of small parties teetering on the electoral threshold required for entry into parliament: 3.25% of the vote, or four seats. Three parties on the center-left—Labor, Meretz, and Blue and White fall in this category, along with one on the right, the Religious Zionists. If any of them fail to cross the threshold, the votes they receive will be “lost” in terms of coalition formation—a potentially decisive factor in such a tight race.

Why Momentum Favors Netanyahu

No challenger is polling as well as Netanyahu’s Likud Party, and his wider bloc is more cohesive than others due in part to his emphasis on forming a “fully right-wing government.” According to the final pre-election poll by Israel’s largest network, Channel 12, Likud is projected to win 32 seats. Its staunchly loyal junior partners, the Mizrahi orthodox Shas Party and the ultraorthodox United Torah Judaism, are polling at 8 and 7 seats, respectively. Netanyahu has also stitched together factions on the hard right, deliberately naming a new party with a phrase that has wide appeal among non-extremists: the Religious Zionists (polling at 4 seats).

As for the Yamina faction (9 seats), party leader Naftali Bennett was originally seen as a younger upstart rival who could be a thorn in Netanyahu’s side, but he now seems likely to join the prime minister’s next coalition. At a time when the country is opening up again, Bennett has been hurt by his critique of how the government handled failing businesses during the pandemic, and he is now limping to the finish line. Moreover, he makes no secret of his desire to take over leadership of the right in the future, so Netanyahu has exploited this aspiration in the current campaign, pressuring Bennett into publicly stating that he will not join an alternative government led by main anti-Netanyahu rival Yair Lapid. Bennett has even called Lapid part of the “left,” even though the public sees him **as a centrist who supports gradualism (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/countdown-israels-election-conversation-yair-lapid>)** on the Palestinian issue.

In addition to Lapid (polling at 18 seats), the opposing side includes parties across the political spectrum, from the **right-wing Likud breakaways Gideon Saar (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-leadership-israel-conversation-gideon-saar>)** (9 seats) and Avigdor Liberman (7), to the centrist Blue and White led by Benny Gantz (4), to four parties on the left: the Joint List (8), Labor (6), Meretz (4), and a breakaway Arab party led by Mansour Abbas (4). According to a few key polls, Abbas could hold the balance of power between the two blocs, a first in Israeli history if it comes about. As mentioned previously, however, several of these parties are on the cusp of missing the electoral threshold, and some have vowed not to sit together—for example, Saar and Liberman say they will not join a coalition with the Arab parties, whom they believe endorse Palestinian violence.

In the end, a party could break such vows and join a coalition with factions they previously pledged not to sit with. Yet the previous round suggests this decision could come at a prohibitive price. Benny Gantz led the anti-Netanyahu forces three times in a row and steadily climbed in the polls, but then joined a power-sharing government with

Netanyahu last year, citing the pandemic emergency. Many of his adherents viewed this as a betrayal, and his Blue and White faction has plummeted from the 33 seats it won just a year ago to potentially missing the threshold.

Netanyahu is surely satisfied that the two parties most capable of spearheading a coalition of change against him are running at half their former strength. Bennett and Saar started the campaign polling at 21 seats each, but now they may not even reach double digits. This drop is due in large part to Netanyahu's relentless tactic of persuading opposition voters to look elsewhere. When media outlets began casting Bennett as a potential kingmaker, Netanyahu publicly called on religious voters to choose a third party, Religious Zionism. Notably, however, one member of this faction, Itamar Ben-Gvir, is racist toward Arabs, a fact that could create problems for Netanyahu if this contemptible candidate winds up holding the deciding vote in any coalition formation scenarios or subsequent decisions.

Netanyahu has also relied on his usual tactic of portraying his main challenger as dangerous to Israel's security. In this round, he helped cast Lapid as the top challenger in order to scare right-wing voters away from Saar and Bennett, playing on fears that both candidates might partner with Lapid in a coalition.

Foreign Policy and the Campaign

Foreign policy has been largely absent as a campaign issue, but the past few weeks of electioneering may nevertheless have damaged Israel's ties with the United Arab Emirates. Netanyahu was keen on getting a photo-op with de facto UAE ruler Crown Prince Muhammad bin Zayed, but proposed visits wound up being postponed amid visible diplomatic friction.

Initially, the UAE proposed an April summit in Abu Dhabi with leaders from Israel, the other Arab states that have normalized relations with Jerusalem, and U.S. secretary of state Antony Blinken. Instead, Netanyahu insisted that he visit the Emirates before the election—an idea that was scotched when his [growing tensions with Jordan](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/getting-israel-jordan-relationship-back-track) led Amman to deny him overflight rights. Further, his office prematurely issued a March 11 statement that the UAE would be investing \$10 billion in bilateral ventures, spurring Abu Dhabi to note that only preliminary discussions had been agreed to. The Emiratis then formally canceled the visit Netanyahu had planned during the week of March 14, and the state of the proposed multilateral summit remains uncertain. It is unclear if these tensions will fade after the election.

Conclusion

In Israel, election day is typically just a first stop along the path of hard coalition bargaining that determines the next government. Yet the uncertainty will likely be more pronounced this week given the larger number of political variables and the potential for ongoing stalemate. If this vote winds up being just a brief prelude to a fifth round of elections, the protracted impasse should raise larger questions about the structure of Israel's political system.

David Makovsky is the Ziegler Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute, creator of the podcast [Decision Points](https://shows.acast.com/decision-points/) (<https://shows.acast.com/decision-points/>), and author of the presidential transition paper "[Building Bridges for Peace: U.S. Policy Toward Arab States, Palestinians, and Israel](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/building-bridges-peace-us-policy-toward-arab-states-palestinians-and-israel)" (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/building-bridges-peace-us-policy-toward-arab-states-palestinians-and-israel>). ❖



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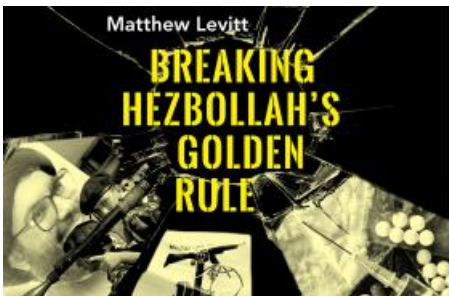
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