

# Netanyahu Suddenly Faces Uphill Electoral Battle

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Brief Analysis

## Forces both within and beyond the prime minister's control have led to his shaky standing.

Just days before Tuesday's Israeli election, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu finds himself behind in the polls by three to four seats to his chief rival, Isaac Herzog, of the Zionist Union, a center-left alliance that encompasses the Labor Party. This is a serious blow for Israel's second longest-serving premier, as the election has become a referendum on his leadership. In an extraordinary move toward the end of this week, Netanyahu gave rare television interviews. He issued the political equivalent of an SOS, urging wayward Likud voters to return home in order to avert his party's loss of power after a six-year run.

The results are hardly foreordained. Israel's multiparty system is such that voting is only the first part of the process. What follows is the maneuvering to determine which party is best positioned to configure a governing coalition with a simple 61-seat majority in Israel's 120-member Knesset. The multiplicity of parties creates many possible outcomes. Netanyahu is clearly hoping for a variation of the 2009 election scenario, when he led only the second-place party but had an easier pathway to reaching a simple majority. The top party in that vote, Kadima, beat Likud by a single seat. A wider margin appears to separate the parties this time, however, boding ill for Netanyahu. But another possibility exists: that neither party will amass the necessary 61 seats for a coalition, possibly forcing a wider power-sharing arrangement between Herzog and Netanyahu.

## Netanyahu's Electoral Woes

The dip in Netanyahu's support has a number of explanations. The first is fatigue. Netanyahu just eclipsed six consecutive years as premier -- and nine years altogether, given his earlier term. The last Israeli to serve six years as prime minister was Menachem Begin, who resigned from office in 1983. Israel's iconic founder, David Ben-Gurion, served just less than eight consecutive years, between 1955 and 1963 -- long before today's intensive media

era, in which familiarity can engender fatigue.

Second, Netanyahu seemed to misread the political map by focusing his campaign exclusively on foreign policy. It is true that the public supports Netanyahu on security issues, especially given a severely weakened Middle East state system and Iran's presumed pursuit of nuclear weapons. (While Netanyahu deserves high marks for his oratory skills during last week's congressional speech, the bump he received in the polls evaporated within a few days.) However, polls demonstrate that the Israeli public also wants a leader who can focus on alleviating Israel's high cost of living. In Friday's *Yediot Aharonot*, in response to a poll asking for the "main issue" determining one's vote, 55.2 percent said socioeconomic issues and 28.4 percent said security or foreign policy. Netanyahu publicly admitted that he has not devoted sufficient time to addressing the high cost of housing, even though the issue dominated Israel's social protest movement during his tenure. Only days before the election, he pledged to do better. He declared that, if reelected, he would "inundate" Israel with apartments. Yet during his campaign, he published no economic policy plan, even as Israel's comptroller issued a report in late February on the country's high housing costs.

This lack of focus has hurt Netanyahu with a bedrock Likud constituency: Sephardic Jews, of Middle East origin, who are very sensitive to socioeconomic issues. These Israelis have been with the Likud since the Begin era, when he identified them as political outsiders neglected by the *Mayflower* party, Labor. While these voters find it hard to back Labor for historic reasons, they now have a third option. A Sephardic Likud leader who deregulated the Israeli cell phone industry, Moshe Kahlon, started his own party and pledged a laser focus on socioeconomic issues. Kahlon has publicly blamed Netanyahu for losing the Begin balance between nationalism and assistance to poorer Israelis. (The perception of Netanyahu's shift to the settlers was exacerbated in recent weeks as he sought to appeal to voters of the Likud's right.) In Thursday night's television interviews, Netanyahu issued a desperate plea to these Kahlon supporters to return to the Likud or else risk tipping the balance to Labor. At the same time, Netanyahu apologized for an insensitive Likud campaign commercial equating the complaints of port workers with the grievances of Hamas terrorists. The ad implicitly cast Netanyahu as having disdain for working-class Israelis.

A third problem that has plagued Netanyahu's campaign involves the political law of unintended consequences. The public still does not understand why he broke up the existing government in November after only two years in office. One cannot recall another time in Israel's almost sixty-seven-year history when the explanation for a government's disbanding has been so unclear. The move seems to have been a major miscalculation for Netanyahu, in part by providing a shot in the arm to rivals Yair Lapid and Tzipi Livni. Lapid was generally languishing in the polls as Israel's finance minister. However, being fired by Netanyahu has helped recast Lapid as an insurgent as he speaks about how to lower the cost of living for Israel's middle class. For her part, Livni's political fortunes seemed to be at a nadir with the collapse of the peace process. Yet Netanyahu's move empowered her as she merged her small party with Herzog's Labor, and together they received a jolt of ten seats in the polls. The Zionist Union has retained this level of support throughout the campaign, gaining a couple of seats in the past week.

Another beneficiary of the political law of unintended consequences has been the Israeli Arab parties. Namely, figures on the right designed a higher electoral threshold aimed at hindering competition by the three Israeli Arab parties. But the parties overcame this hurdle by uniting, and the new Joint List is possibly the third biggest party in Israel.

## Unknowns Ahead

**N**etanyahu may be losing, but several unknowns remain. Turnout is a key variable, with higher turnout likely to benefit Herzog. Furthermore, three parties are on the cusp of the four-seat electoral threshold -- two on the right, one on the left. A last-minute surge by undecided voters responding to Netanyahu's SOS may help him, with possible additional support from Sephardic voters and Russian immigrants. Finally, a terrorism incident close to Election Day

can alter outcomes, historically to the benefit of Israel's right.

## Pathways Beyond the Election

The decision about which party will configure a new coalition will be determined by Israel's maverick president, Reuven Rivlin, who will make a judgment call after consulting with all the parties' leaders. The first party chosen will have the first three weeks -- with a likely three-week extension -- to put together a coalition. If the current polling holds, the following party leaders will urge that Herzog be given the chance: Labor, 26; Joint List, 13; Lapid, 12; and Meretz, 5 -- totaling 56. The alternative group would be: Likud, 22; Jewish Home, 12; and three ultraorthodox parties, 17 -- totaling 51. It remains unclear if Netanyahu's erstwhile political ally Avigdor Lieberman, with 5 seats, will recommend Netanyahu, granting Likud the votes to tie up the Zionist Union. If he does, Kahlon could choose to allocate his 8 seats -- but he might refrain from recommending anyone to Rivlin. In any case, if Herzog leads Netanyahu by three to four seats, Rivlin would give the Zionist Union candidate the first chance to create a coalition with Kahlon and the ultraorthodox -- with Israeli Arabs content to block Netanyahu rather than join a Herzog-led government.

Rumors continue to swirl that Rivlin could call on Herzog and Netanyahu to work out a power-sharing unity government. Netanyahu is believed to favor unity because he views a narrow right-wing government as a recipe for turbulence with Europe and the Obama administration. Yet even within the rubric of such a government, the question remains of who would be prime minister and whether two prime ministers might rotate, as occurred in 1984-1988. One can only assume that each decision will be intensely fought over by the parties -- even in the name of unity.

## Conclusion

In Israel, next week's vote really only inaugurates the electoral process, thanks to the multiplicity of parties and the need to configure a coalition. Therefore, it is too soon to say who will win. However, one can safely acknowledge that Netanyahu is facing more of an uphill battle than he ever could have imagined when he disbanded his own coalition in November.

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