

Bibi vs. Benny: A Conversation on the Eve of Israel's Elections

[Ehud Yaari](#), [Tal Shalev](#), and [David Makovsky](#)

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Three veteran political observers discuss the status of each campaign and what a victory by either side might mean for Israeli policy.

On April 4, Ehud Yaari, Tal Shalev, and David Makovsky addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Yaari is the Institute's Lafer International Fellow and an award-winning commentator for Israeli television. Shalev is the chief political correspondent for the Israeli web portal Walla News. Makovsky is the Institute's Ziegler Distinguished Fellow and director of its Project on Arab-Israel Relations. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

EHUD YAARI

Israel's April 9 elections are about one thing: a referendum on the leadership of Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, whose weaknesses have become the main strength of his opponent, former military chief of staff Benny Gantz. Rather than presenting a detailed platform of its own, Gantz's Blue and White Party is running largely on the disgust that many voters feel for the prime minister.

Netanyahu's presumed intention is to see what happens after the elections and, if tasked with forming the next government, try to enact pending legislation (the so-called "French Law") that would give him immunity from prosecution on a looming corruption indictment. Alternatively, he could seek a plea bargain.

To remain prime minister, Netanyahu does not need his Likud Party to win the most votes. More important are the half a dozen right-wing parties teetering near 3.25 percent of the national vote, the threshold required to enter parliament. If they fall short of that mark, the prime minister's planned coalition could lose hundreds of thousands of votes.

The direction of major Israeli foreign policy issues is not at stake in these elections. Rather, the outcome will determine whether right-wingers can fulfill their intention to reverse the judicial revolution that has recast courts as a check on parliament, a movement instigated by former Supreme Court justice Aharon Barak.

The best outcome may be a grand coalition that includes Netanyahu and Gantz, but it is unclear whether Blue and White would be willing to join. Such an alliance would allow more initiative on the Palestinian issue. Netanyahu himself advocated for this result before the pending indictment was announced in February. If a narrow right-wing government emerges instead, Israel will drift further toward a nationalistic approach, including limits on judicial power and unilateral moves in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

For Blue and White to prevail, the party would need to woo at least some right-wing Jewish voters and moderate Arab factions. Much uncertainty persists, with polls indicating that as many as 35 percent of Israelis still do not

know how they will vote.

TAL SHALEV

This election has featured two important developments: the creation of Blue and White and the preliminary indictment against Netanyahu. Neither development appears to have significantly hurt Netanyahu's chances of winning, however.

Gantz's transformation into a top candidate in three months is impressive, as is his formation of an all-star security team capable of undermining one of Netanyahu's key strengths. More than any other opponent in recent years, the general has gotten close to being deemed just as "suitable" for the office of prime minister as Netanyahu. Yet the vast majority of Blue and White voters are from the center-left; few have been pulled from the right.

As for the indictment, Netanyahu's base seems willing to forgive. He has also been strengthened since the previous elections by President Trump's actions, namely, moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem, recognizing Israel's control over the Golan Heights, and leaving the Iran nuclear deal. Many people—even those who do not support the prime minister—believe Netanyahu is in a different league from Gantz in terms of cultivating such close relationships with world leaders.

Leading up to election day, Netanyahu has been running a vicious but brilliant campaign. Early on, Blue and White stumbled for a couple weeks as its campaign team learned how to work together. The party has since emphasized the need to garner the largest share of the vote and convince left-wing Israelis to choose a centrist government instead of casting ballots for leftist parties. Yet this strategy will be fruitless unless Blue and White can cobble together a bloc with enough seats to form the next government. Party leaders believe that if they defeat Netanyahu's Likud by more than five seats, then aftershocks will ensue, since it would be the first time in a decade that such a gap has opened. The prime minister therefore has to be careful, closing this gap without wasting votes from smaller right-wing parties poised on the 3.25 percent threshold.

Key things to watch for immediately after the election include the results for Moshe Feiglin, a former Likud member who has become a Netanyahu enemy and has run on a platform of legalizing marijuana, pursuing a harsh libertarian agenda, and rebuilding a temple in a Jerusalem location where mosques now stand. If Netanyahu wins, he will do everything he can to keep Feiglin out of his coalition.

The Netanyahu camp is also concerned about President Reuven Rivlin, who is responsible for choosing which candidate gets to form the government after the elections. Usually, this decision is based on which candidate is most capable of assembling a majority coalition, but Rivlin can use a different metric if he so desires.

DAVID MAKOVSKY

The main subtext of these elections is that not many people are moving between the right and left blocs, with the exception of Feiglin. Thus, the large number of undecided voters may not be very significant if these individuals hail from within a given bloc rather than the narrow margin between the right and center.

The right/left divide in Israel has transitioned to a right/center divide since the second intifada. In 1992, the two main left-wing parties, Labor and Meretz, won fifty-six seats, but polls indicate they will win only 18-19 this year. In contrast, the lowest tally for the center-left in recent years was fifty-three seats, and this total is projected to reach fifty-eight next week. At the same time, this means that even after forming an all-star team and watching the attorney-general announce a preliminary indictment against Netanyahu, Blue and White has only managed to boost the center-left by five seats.

Meanwhile, Netanyahu has refashioned the Likud and eliminated its more liberal elements. Taking advantage of demography and the declining number of secular Israelis, he has broadened Likud's base by casting it as a coalition of outsiders. Specifically, he has fostered antagonism toward the old elite, particularly the courts; criticized those who sympathize with Arabs; delinked the Palestinian issue from collaboration with other regional states; and permitted West Bank construction outside the settlement blocs. He also has the power of incumbency on his side, along with his proven ability to attract support from powerful foreign leaders such as Trump and Vladimir Putin.

In contrast, the center believes that Israel must take steps to preserve the possibility of peace with the Palestinians even if negotiations are impossible at the moment. This includes prohibiting further settlements outside the West Bank security barrier.

On that note, the Trump peace plan has a very steep hill to climb regardless of who wins the elections. Even if Gantz prevails, he is unlikely to back any plan that the Palestinians can easily reject, and he will presumably request consultations on the plan's contents before it is released. If Netanyahu wins, the pending indictment process and the composition of his presumed coalition will make him beholden to the right. Accordingly, if Washington presents its peace plan and Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas immediately rejects it, Netanyahu might push for selective annexations in the West Bank and encourage Trump to support these moves.

The Trump administration could go either way on peace diplomacy. If the president feels his plan is doomed to fail, he will likely stop it from being released. Alternatively, he may decide that releasing it is the best way to help

create political space for a grand coalition in Israel.

This summary was prepared by Basia Rosenbaum.

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