

## Netanyahu's Tougher Election Math and the Specter of Succession

[David Makovsky](#)

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A key rival could affect Netanyahu's ability to form a coalition or even retain control over his party, but his track record of winning elections and playing wild cards cannot be discounted.

When Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu was unable to configure a new coalition government following Israel's April elections, the country was forced to schedule an unprecedented do-over vote for September. On August 1, all parties seeking to appear on the next ballot submitted their parliamentary lists. According to a plethora of early polls, Netanyahu and his right-wing allies may face even tougher political math for winning the September 17 vote and forming a coalition than they did in April. (The prospects for Israel's center and center-left parties will be discussed in a subsequent PolicyWatch.)

### **LIBERMAN—KINGMAKER OR KINGSLAYER?**

The biggest shift in the do-over election is Netanyahu's angry split with a long-term aide turned rival, former defense minister Avigdor Liberman. Before the April vote, Liberman declared that his Yisrael Beitenu Party would back Netanyahu as the next premier. After Liberman won five seats, however, he stated that he would not join Netanyahu's proposed coalition, in large part because it would include parties bent on blocking legislative efforts to make more ultraorthodox Jews join Israel's military draft, which is compulsory for all other Jewish citizens. As a result, Netanyahu fell one seat short of the 61-seat majority needed to govern the 120-member Knesset.

By standing up to unpopular legal exceptions granted to the ultraorthodox community, Liberman is rebranding his party. Previously, Yisrael Beitenu focused on issues of importance to its core constituency: Russian immigrants who arrived in the 1990s. Yet the party needed a new focus given the generational shifts that have occurred in the two decades since its founding. Discerning public fatigue with holding two elections so close to each other, Liberman shrewdly pledged to press for a national unity government between the two biggest vote winners in the April elections, the Likud Party and the Blue and White Party, thus limiting the disproportionate power of small parties—except his own.

In addition, Liberman's leverage has been boosted by the recent dissolution of the Netanyahu-allied Kulanu Party. Although the soft-right party's leader, Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon, has rejoined the Likud, the decision removes Kulanu's four seats from a potential Netanyahu coalition (not to mention the fact that Kahlon is positioning himself for the post-Netanyahu succession race, discussed below).

Amid these developments, the latest polls project that Likud and Blue-White will win approximately thirty seats each, bringing them to the edge of the sixty-one seats required to form a government if they were to unite. At the same time, Liberman has apparently doubled his projected tally, while the smaller parties splintered on either side of the aisle seemingly lack enough seats to give Likud or Blue-White a majority on their own. In short, the numbers may be lining up to make Liberman the kingmaker, determining whether the next Knesset is controlled by a national unity government, a right-wing bloc, or a centrist bloc.

For a number of reasons, Netanyahu believes that Liberman's moves are aimed at hurting him. First, he has lost trust in his former ally ever since Yisrael Beitenu refused to join his coalition in June. The enmity between the two only deepened when Netanyahu recruited figures from Liberman's party in order to woo immigrant voters to Likud.

Second, Liberman's actions make it more difficult to form a pure right-wing government, which Netanyahu sees as more reliable than a unity government in terms of insulating himself from the corruption indictments that could emerge from his October legal hearing. Among other factors, polls indicate that two right-wing parties, Zehut and Otzma Yehudit, are well short of the four seats they need to cross the electoral threshold and enter parliament, leaving analysts to wonder if votes for their candidates will be "wasted" in terms of helping Netanyahu form a coalition.

Third, Liberman has said that he will join a unity government only if it excludes Netanyahu's religious allies—namely, the ultraorthodox parties and the right-wing factions sympathetic to the settler movement, whom Liberman has taken to calling "messianists." Netanyahu has always based his political strategy on these "natural partners," so he will be loath to part with them.

Fourth, Blue-White insists that it will not join a unity government with Likud so long as Netanyahu is under a legal cloud. Far from criticizing Blue-White for this demand, Liberman has used it to raise the sensitive issue of Likud succession, urging the party to consider another candidate and mentioning Knesset speaker Yuli Edelstein by name.

## **SUCCESSION AS A CAMPAIGN TOOL**

Liberman's mention of Edelstein during an August 3 television appearance set off a frenzy within Likud. Within hours of his comments, every member of the party's election list—including Edelstein himself—signed a letter disavowing the idea and affirming that Netanyahu is their only candidate for prime minister. This type of loyalty pledge is unprecedented in the history of Israeli politics.

Netanyahu reportedly encouraged the pledge, but was it a sign of strength or panic? Earlier this year, he sought to advance a law forbidding President Reuven Rivlin—another rival of his, and the official who formally selects the prime minister after an election—from choosing any candidate who does not head a parliamentary list. The idea was withdrawn, potentially leaving Netanyahu vulnerable to internal challenges (especially since the public will not stomach a third round of elections if he fails to prevail in the second). It is therefore important to consider what electoral results might trigger Likud to consider joining a unity government without Netanyahu.

For now, though, his control over the party seems total. He has not faced a primary opponent since 2012, and even then the challenge was token. During recent conversations with the author, senior party officials were respectful or fearful of him, not mutinous. In many cases they did not even know the names of the professional advisors and pollsters Netanyahu has hired, trusting his track record of electoral success as sufficient reason to make peace with his hyper-centralized control over the Likud campaign.

Some party members also seem to fear Netanyahu's wife, Sara, and her "take no prisoners" attitude. For example, former justice minister Ayelet Shaked was fired in June despite still being an electoral asset for Likud, leading many to believe that Sara was responsible given her accusations that Shaked had been disloyal to her husband. Even apart from the election's highly personal stakes for Netanyahu, unconditional loyalty is in his party's DNA; after all, Likud and its precursor have had just four leaders since 1949.

Indeed, the specter of succession may wind up working in Netanyahu's favor next month. He has worked hard to make himself politically indispensable to Likud, and without an obvious successor, party members seemingly prefer to keep him in office for the next cycle. Several senior party officials even suspect that Liberman may try to integrate Yisrael Beitenu with the Likud post-election, perhaps even angling for a rotating premiership that would position him for succession despite his disavowals of that strategy. Accordingly, some officials speculate that Likud may be better off trying to split Blue-White's leadership after the elections in the hope of preventing Liberman from triggering internal succession. Notably, Netanyahu already tried to pry Benny Gantz from his fellow Blue-White leaders after the April vote, to no avail.

## **CONCLUSION**

Much of Netanyahu's past success lay in his ability to maintain loyalty among his right-wing base and allied parties during election campaigns, then reach over the aisle to centrist factions afterward in order to configure viable coalitions. The circumstances seem different this year, however. In April, he was hemmed in by his legal challenges. Today, Liberman's seemingly growing mathematical leverage will make it harder to form a purely right-wing coalition, as Netanyahu did in 2015. As for the prospect of entering a national unity government with him, both Liberman and Blue-White have said they will not do so under the current circumstances.

Yet Netanyahu thrives when he believes his back is against the wall, and Likud officials seem receptive to the idea of rallying their base as their leader's room for maneuver shrinks. Alternatively, some observers have speculated that he may try to cross the aisle and team up with new Labor Party chief Amir Peretz, who has been trying to woo the Mizrachi voters who normally support Likud. Peretz denies this speculation, but such rumors hint that Netanyahu could play any number of wild cards before and after the election.

*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 soon-to-be-published book Be Strong and of Good Courage: How Israel's Most Important Leaders Shaped Its Destiny (PublicAffairs/Hachette).*