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‘Settler Champion’ Netanyahu Can’t Even Get the Settlers to Vote for Him

[David Makovsky](#), [Basia Rosenbaum](#), and [David Patkin](#)

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The prime minister delivers for West Bank settlers at great cost internationally, but election results show they don’t pay him back at the ballot box.

Ever since Avigdor Lieberman [denied](#) Benjamin Netanyahu the coalition he sought in late May, Israel’s prime minister has believed he can hurt Lieberman by calling him a “[leftist](#),” which triggered a war of words between them. Yet, as Israel gears up for yet another election campaign following Netanyahu’s failure to form a government, it is worth pointing out that—despite huge efforts by both to demonstrate their right-wing bona-fides—settlers themselves aren’t voting for Netanyahu or for Lieberman.

Perhaps each should draw conclusions from the last election results and look for voters elsewhere. After analyzing official election returns involving 125 settlements in the last four Knesset elections (2009, 2013, 2015, and 2019), it is clear that settlers stopped voting for Lieberman a long time ago.

Today Lieberman gets less than a third of the settler vote compared to his results a decade ago in the West Bank, and his party is now essentially off the map (1.67 percent of settler votes in 2019 versus 5.66 percent in 2009). Even in his own hometown settlement of Nokdim, he trailed in fifth place in the last elections with only 9.3 percent of the vote. Therefore, it is not surprising that Lieberman is now making clear that he would not rule out joining a government led by the Kachol Lavan centrist party, and is focusing less on settler issues and far more on his longtime campaign to be the acknowledged champion of secular Israelis against ultra-Orthodox demands and social restrictions.

Lieberman is not the only one who gets little from the settlers. But Netanyahu—Israel’s first premier with an MBA—apparently hasn’t yet realized he also doesn’t get much return on his investment in West Bank settlements.

Netanyahu has made huge rhetorical and policy efforts that should have gained the support of settlers both inside and outside of the security barrier. He has come a long way from May 2011, when he publicly declared in the Knesset that he would only represent the national consensus of settlers who live in the main settlement blocs—meaning, not settlements over the security barrier—or in 2009, when he said he would support a Palestinian state. Now Netanyahu has banished the term “blocs” just as he no longer says “Palestinian state.”

He had already sharply shifted his position by 2016, when he got cold feet considering a national unity government with Labor party head Yitzhak Herzog, whose chief policy demand was no building outside settlement blocs. Since then, Netanyahu has persuaded Trump not to publicly criticize him on settlements, even if the U.S. president publicly urged Israel to “[hold back](#)” on further settlement building in his very first White House meeting with Netanyahu in February 2017.

Despite all this, settlers have not supported Likud in commensurately, or sufficiently, large numbers. Efforts by Netanyahu to avoid alienating settlers at the ballot box just have not worked.

Likud is not the biggest party in the Israeli-occupied West Bank. United Torah Judaism is the largest party, almost entirely due to support in two major Haredi settlements—Modiin Illit and Beitar Illit. In the entire West Bank, Likud won 20.65 percent in 2019. This compares to 18.5 percent in 2009. In other words, for all Netanyahu has done for the settlers, he can only show a grand gain of about 2 percent over the last decade.

Moreover, Netanyahu is trounced outside the security barrier by voters who don’t belong to the ultra-Orthodox community as well. He is viewed as a poor imitation of the “authentic” settler Right, and not as the original.

In the 2019 elections, right-wing, non-Haredi parties beat Netanyahu’s Likud by a whopping 3-1 margin: those right-wing parties outpaced Netanyahu outside the barrier by a 58.9 percent to 20.2 percent margin. That is double the margin of a decade ago. These settlers do not trust Netanyahu’s ideological purity when it comes to settlements.

The same picture emerges inside the security barrier. While it is true that populous Beitar Illit and Modiin Illit tend to skew the vote largely for the Haredi parties, the fact remains that Likud no longer outpaces its more right-wing

rivals even inside the barrier.

Again, look at the trends: inside the barrier in 2009, Likud received 25.2 percent, and its non-Haredi right-wing competitors Habayit Hayehudi and National Union were at 20.9 percent. In 2019, Likud was 20.7 percent and its right-wing competitors—Union of Right-Wing Parties, Yemin Hehadash, Israel Beiteinu and Zehut—were at 24.98 percent.

Why does Netanyahu's declining performance in the West Bank settlement demographic matter? Perhaps the lesson is that Netanyahu does not have to pander to the settlers, especially those living outside the barrier, as he has in the last few election cycles. The results show that regardless of Netanyahu's bids to appeal to the settler right, other right-wing parties always prevail with them, particularly more firmly ideological settlers outside the security barrier. Moreover, the settlers will join a Likud coalition no matter what—and never to any party to its left.

The settlers may not support him sufficiently, and Netanyahu's support for settlers (especially outside the barrier) has been very costly internationally in terms of bipartisan support for Israel in the U.S. and among younger liberal American Jews. In 2017, a Pew survey found that only 17 percent of American Jews think that continued settlement-building helps Israel's security. The 2018 AJC survey of American Jews found that 59 percent of American Jews think that Israel should dismantle some or all settlements, compared to 39 percent of Israelis.

Now, the emerging annexation issue could exacerbate this split between domestic political calculations versus the international price of support. Netanyahu's sudden decision to [mention annexation](#) two days before the April election—after not mentioning the word for 13 years as prime minister—was viewed by most Israelis as cynical political expediency.

If so, it was a marked success: he pulled the rug out from two competitors by coopting their pro-annexation argument—Naftali Bennett's Yemin Hahadash and Moshe Feiglin's Zehut, who both failed to cross the 3.25 percent threshold to enter the Knesset. On the other hand, Netanyahu's comments created a firestorm in the U.S. about Israel's intentions in the West Bank.

Interestingly, while Netanyahu's comments on annexation drew votes away from other right-wing parties, it was not political rocket fuel for him among the settlers. Nonetheless, his takeaway from this past election might be to double down on his annexation bet in September. No doubt the settlers will want Netanyahu to deepen his comments to extend Israeli sovereignty in the West Bank beyond his remarks on the eve of the April election.

What began as a political tactic could entangle Netanyahu further, to the extent that he feels he needs to say more on annexation just to stay in place—without regard to further damaging bipartisan support for Israel in the U.S. Bipartisanship sounds like an abstraction to Netanyahu, and an issue irrelevant to his immediate political needs, so long as he has Trump's support here and now.

If he remains in power, Netanyahu will pay a longer-term price for adopting an undifferentiated view of the West Bank, in comparison to his relatively more restrained view when he only spoke of formalizing Israeli control over settlement blocs. But even in the short-term, he is getting little for his investment. The settlers have not delivered the goods for Netanyahu, even as he keeps delivering for them.

David Makovsky is the Ziegler Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute and helped create its interactive mapping tool [Settlements and Solutions: Is It Too Late for Two States?](#) Basia Rosenbaum and David Patkin provide research support to the Institute's Project on Arab-Israel Relations.