

Political Stalemate: Israel's Voters Endure Fourth Election in Two Years

Note: This is the first of a two-part story.

On March 23, Israel will hold its fourth national election in two years. This is a result of political stalemate and politicking that's placed Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu against most other parties, with his Likud party showing one of its lowest polling projections in the past three elections.

It is not the first election since the pandemic, but the pandemic will play a more significant role than the previous election a year ago.

In addition to the pandemic, there are several other issues that make this election and the potential outcome unique. This analysis will explain some of the main issues so that after March 23, you'll understand better whether Israel will be able to form a stable government and move forward, or be doomed to an unprecedented fifth election later this year.

How Israel's System Works

Israel is a parliamentary democracy. This means that Israelis vote for a party, not a candidate. Each party has its own way of determining the leader of that party, and their respective list of candidates. Some employ a democratic primary, and others through appointments by the head of the party. Factions made up of two or more parties with common interests and have joined forces for their mutual interests, decide their lists based on internal agreements allocating these positions.

The parliament, Knesset, has 120 members who are determined by a proportional representation of seats based on the number of

votes received. Parties must win at least 3.5% of the total votes (the threshold) to enter Knesset. After the election, Israel's president consults the leaders of all the parties that passed the threshold for their recommendations as to who should form the government. Usually that's the head of the party with the most votes, but not always, depending on who has the best probability to form a government from among the rest of the incoming Knesset. In order to form a government, one requires at least 61 Knesset members to vote in favor, typically as a coalition of a few to several parties.

Israel has no early voting or absentee ballots. As most Israeli adults have been vaccinated, on election day, Israelis will line up to vote in person, in a socially distanced way, and place a paper ballot inside an envelope, and place that envelope inside a second. Shortly after the polls close there will be a good sense of the overall shape of the Knesset, but actual numbers won't be sure until a day or two later when the ballots of soldiers voting on their bases are counted, and the final numbers and percentages are determined.

The Parties

There are some three dozen parties running for the 24th Knesset, more parties than Baskin Robbins has flavors. Most will not receive the required 3.5%. Yet with Israelis suffering election fatigue, it's possible that there could be a surprise "protest vote" not (yet) represented in the polls that catapults a fringe party into prominence, and a place of influence. The main parties estimated to pass the threshold and enter Knesset, in general order of their current polling positions are:

- Likud: The long-standing party founded by Menachem Begin that's been one of Israel's leading parties since the 1970s is right of center and represents much of the wide diversity of Israel's population. It is headed by incumbent Prime Minister Benjamin "Bibi" Netanyahu, the longest serving prime minister

in Israeli history.

- Yesh Atid: This party has been on the scene for most of the past two decades, is considered to be center-left, is headed by former TV personality Yair Lapid who has served in past coalitions with Netanyahu as prime minister, but who now is one of the leaders of the “anyone but Bibi” camp.
- New Hope: This is a new party established last year by former Likud member and previous minister Gidon Sa’ar who is considered to the right of Netanyahu. While Sa’ar was once close to Bibi, they have long been at odds, and Sa’ar has placed all his chips and future career on replacing Netanyahu.
- Yamina: This is a right of center party that’s gone through a variety of incarnations, breaking away from a wider national religious group, merging back and running on its own. It is headed by former government minister Naftali Bennett who was also once close to Netanyahu and is now challenging him to be prime minister, and the head of the right of center nationalist camp.
- Yisrael Beiteinu: This is a party headed by another former Netanyahu confidant and government minister Avigdor Liberman that combines right of center policies with liberal social and often anti-religious views. It typically attracts Russian immigrants.
- Joint List: Three Arab parties merged to form this faction to succeed collectively and not have any one of them slip below the threshold. In recent elections they have won enough votes to be the third largest party in the Knesset.
- Shas: This is an ultra-Orthodox Jewish party made up by and representing mostly Sephardic Jews, whose families are from predominantly Arab countries of north Africa and the Middle East.
- United Torah Judaism: This is an ultra-Orthodox Jewish party

made up by and representing mostly Ashkenazi Jews, whose families are from predominantly eastern European countries and specific rabbinic dynasties decimated by the Holocaust and rebuilt in Israel.

– Labor. From Israel's founding until the late 70s, Labor and its predecessors were the predominant political force in Israel. Since then, Labor not only has not won more than a handful of elections, but its representation in Knesset has waned, nearing extinction. It is left-wing socially and politically. Labor has been led by 10 different people in the past 20 years, a product or symptom of its waning influence.

– Blue and White. This party was formed before the last election and is headed by former chief of staff and retired general Benny Gantz. They formed a unity government with Likud last spring which quickly unraveled as the government fell apart. It is now polling just above the threshold.

– Religious Zionists: This party is a right-wing nationalist-religious faction that's the merger of two parties. They are controversial in having a person on their list who is widely derided as racist and not qualified to serve but seen as a potential key partner of a Likud-led government.

– Meretz. This is a far left party that espouses controversial positions considered pro-Arab and anti-Israel by some, that is polling just below the threshold. Meretz could be a key element to having enough seats to form a government, but hard to imagine right of center Sa'ar and Bennett sitting in a government with them.

– Ra'am. This is an Arab Islamist party that, until this election, was part of the Joint List. It broke away over the Joint List sweeping rejecting any government plans, including the heralded Abraham Accords, and not representing the interest of Israel's Arab citizens. It is polling just below the threshold but, if it passes, could become a key player in

supporting the establishment and maybe being part of the next government.

Budget

Officially, the previous government fell apart over the failure to pass a state budget. Yes, Israel has not only entered 2021 with no budget, but we still don't have a budget for 2020. This is a legal issue that some believe Netanyahu played deliberately, not allowing his Likud Finance Minister to bring a budget for a vote, knowing that it would force the dissolution of the government and a new election. It's a bit third world for a country to operate without a budget, especially during the pandemic. This has created real hardships and challenges for wide sectors of society to be able to plan, purchase, or even fulfill existing obligations. It may become a key issue that comes back to bite Likud, guilty of obsessive political maneuvering at the detriment of nine million Israelis, many of whom remain unemployed or suffering significant hardship as a result of the pandemic.

Netanyahu's Legal Issues

Over the past two years, legal allegations and the indictment of Netanyahu have been a recurring issue. Unlike last year, legal proceedings have begun, and Netanyahu has appeared in court. Despite the bad optics and weakening support, polls show him remaining "most qualified." It's unclear how much of that is intuitive, after all a man holding the same position for over a dozen years has qualifications that nobody else does. Or is it an indication of remaining strong support. There will be no more public court appearances before the election so how much more, if at all, this will be a factor is probably limited.

Unemployment and the Economy

A year ago, Israel's economy was strong and unemployment in low single digits. Today, the economy is much weaker, and

unemployment hovers around 20%, with 1 in 5 Israeli adults out of work. Israel's had a token bailout, and while the majority of Israeli adults have been vaccinated at least once, we seem all vaxxed up with no place to go. The economy is opening again, including hotels, restaurants, cultural and sporting events, and more. But there are many fewer Israelis who can afford dinner out or going to a movie.

It's unclear how much the hope of things opening up further will be incentive to reward the government under Likud with people's votes, or how much Israelis struggling through three lockdowns and more, whether this will be a major deciding factor in a vote for change. One key element of this is that despite the success in vaccinating so many, a pillar of the economy is tourism which has been decimated. There remains no end in sight as to when tourists will be allowed back to fill the buses, hotels, shops and tourist sites, giving people who have been out of work for a year the opportunity to earn a living.

NOTE: Jonathan Feldstein and the Genesis 123 Foundation will host a webinar about the election on March 18 at 2:00 p.m. Eastern/11:00 a.m. Western. Please be in touch at firstpersonisrael@ for more information about these issues or to follow the outcome. {eo}

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