

Israel's Knesset Election, 2019

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On April 9, 2019, Israel voted to elect the twenty-first Knesset. The elections were held at a time when Israel is engaged in violent confrontations with the Palestinians on the Gaza Strip and with Iran in Syria. Since March 2018, clashes between Palestinians and IDF troops have increased and took a serious turn in October-November. Amidst the worsening situation, Egypt, Qatar and the UN helped negotiate a ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hamas in November. Unhappy with this development, Israeli Defence Minister Avigdor Lieberman had resigned from his post accusing the Benjamin Netanyahu government of [“surrendering to terror.”](#) The decision significantly weakened the coalition government led by Netanyahu, who was left with only 61 members in 120-seat Knesset. An attack on December 9, outside the Ofra settlement in the West Bank, in which seven Israelis were injured, including a seven-month pregnant woman, landed the government further in a spot. Continued dissatisfaction on several issues, including compulsory conscription for the ultraorthodox Haredi community, weakened the coalition government and the prime minister decided to prepone the elections, which were due in November 2019. Several analysts believed that the decision was based on calculations of the corruption investigations against the prime minister and members of his

family. It has been argued that the government wanted elections [“before the attorney general decides whether to follow police recommendations to indict him.”](#)

Pre-Election Developments

Israel follows multi-party proportional representational electoral system. The formation and disbanding of new parties is common during election season. Political realignments and formation of new parties began from the day Knesset elections were announced. On December 29, 2018, Naftali Bennett, Ayelet Shaked, and Shuli Mualem made it clear that they will depart from the Jewish Home Party and form a new party called the [New Right](#). Orly Levi, who had resigned from the Yisrael Beiteinu in 2016, announced the formation of a new party Geshet. Former IDF Chief of Staff, Benny Gantz, formed the Israeli Resilience Party on December 27. Similarly, Brigadier General (Retd.) Gal Hirsch launched the Shield of Israel and Gad Haran and Motti Ashkenazi formed the Social Justice Party.

The emergence of these of new parties vying for the votes of a diverse electorate had made it difficult for established parties to maintain their dominance. Netanyahu, who has been the second-longest serving prime minister of Israel after the founding premier David Ben-Gurion was significantly challenged due to the increased appeal of the smaller

parties. The merger between the centrist, Israeli Resilience Party and Yair Lapid's Yesh Atid created a new bloc (Blue and White) that [challenged the Likud's dominance](#). More importantly, corruption cases against Netanyahu and his family emerged as a major talking point. Netanyahu faces charges in three cases and the Israeli Attorney-General has said that he intends to charge Netanyahu with bribery, fraud and breach of trust in all three cases. If convicted, he will be imprisoned for up to 10 years on charges of bribery and up to three years for fraud and breach of trust.

Prior to elections, it seemed that Netanyahu might not find it easy to convince the right-wing conservative parties to support a Likud-led government since they are unhappy with the government for several reasons, including the proposal for compulsory conscription for ultra-orthodox Haredi community. Additionally, the decision of going for a ceasefire with Hamas created distrust among the hard line nationalist electorate. In such a situation, convincing smaller parties which have a significant support-base to join the coalition government, seemed little difficult challenge for Netanyahu.

Opinion Poll Predictions

Since the day the Knesset elections were announced, the popularity of individual candidates had seen ups and downs. Despite corruption charges, monthly surveys project Netanyahu's Likud Party being ahead of others. However, the rapid rise in Gantz's popularity since the formation of the Blue and White bloc, was notable. Many media polls projected that Gantz would emerge as Netanyahu's

key opponent in the elections. Pre-election opinion polls showed that the Blue and White bloc could give a tough fight to Likud by securing 31-33 seats while Likud might remain confined to 28-33 seats. Clearly, the small parties were considered to play a vital role in government formation. Smaller parties, such as the Kulanu, Shas, Meretz, United Torah Judaism, Parties of Joint List and Arab Parties, were seen as likely to emerge as significant players in deciding the next government.

Election Results

The election results were more or less close to the projections made by pre-election surveys. The turnout in the elections was 68.41 per cent. Likud emerged the largest party securing 36 seats, while, the newly formed Blue and White bloc secured 35 seats. Since the two major parties won more than half the seats, many smaller parties saw a drop in their fortunes. Shas and United Torah Judaism secured [8 seats each](#), while Hadash-Ta'al and Labour won 6 seats each, Yisrael Beiteinu and United Right secured 5 seats each and Meretz, Kulanu and Ra'am–Balad won 4 seats each.

Netanyahu needs support of 61 MKs to form government. There are less possibility of unity government, as it has been ruled out by the Blue and White bloc. Under such circumstances, Likud is left with the only option of forming a coalition government with the right and ultra-Orthodox parties. [Avigdor Lieberman](#) (Yisrael Beiteinu), who was a key player in weakening the Netanyahu's previous government, has said that he can join a government led by Netanyahu with some compromises. It is expected

that President Reuven Rivlin will invite Netanyahu to form the next government. Once Rivlin declares his decision, Netanyahu will be having [28 days to form a coalition government](#). Though Netanyahu has won the elections, the looming threat of conviction in corruption charges poses a challenge to retain his pole position in Israeli politics.

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