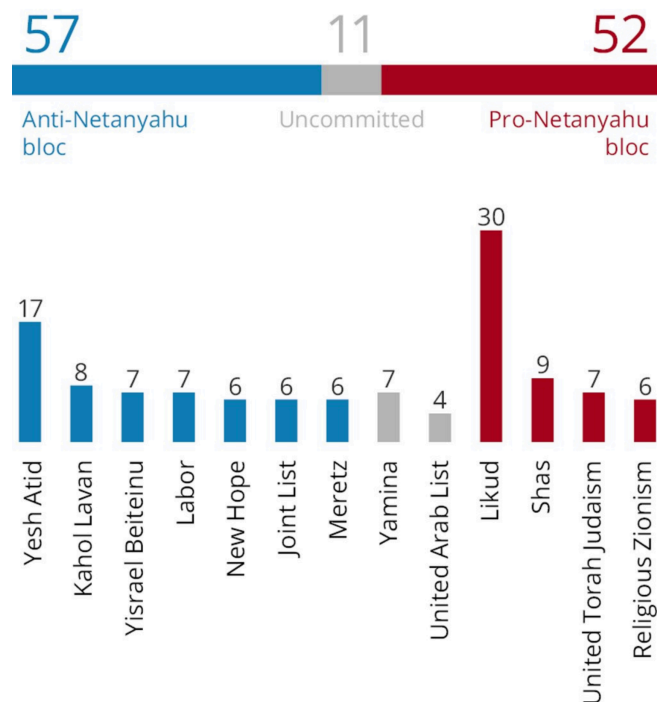


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Israel Elections, March 23rd 2021

Israel's recent elections, the fourth in two years, have produced yet another splintered and inconclusive outcome. The 120 seats in the Knesset are now sprinkled across thirteen parties or party lists, with no party able to command the 61 seats needed to form a coalition government.



Despite circumstances that should have worked in his favour, including the much-trumpeted Israeli vaccine programme, Benjamin Netanyahu (*Likud*) again failed to achieve a decisive victory. Knowing that, thanks to his history of deceit and betrayal, previous coalition partners would refuse to work with him this time, he allied *Likud* with a number of ultra-right wing religious parties but still failed to secure a majority for his camp. In fact, his *Likud* party lost 300,000 votes and six seats compared to the election a year ago. His alliance with two Jewish religious parties and the extreme right so-called *Religious Zionists* means he can count on 52 seats. Netanyahu now faces the prospect of seeing the premiership slip from his grasp and into the hands of his former ally, Naftali Bennett (*Yamina*) or current leader of the opposition, Yair Lapid (*Yesh Atid*).

The newly-elected MKs are split evenly into two camps: those who support Netanyahu (*Likud*, *Shas*, *United Torah Judaism (UTJ)* and the *Religious Zionist* party) and those who oppose him, albeit for very different reasons, the so-called 'Change Bloc' (*Yesh Atid*, *Kahol Lavan*, *Yisrael Beiteinu*, *Labor*, *New Hope*, *Joint List* and *Meretz*). Even with the support of Bennett's *Yamina*, Netanyahu would still be two seats short of a majority.

'With President Reuven Rivlin set to begin meeting the heads of political parties on Monday to hear their recommendations for prime minister, no party leader has been able to garner the support of a majority of 61 lawmakers. ... Yesh Atid leader Yair Lapid might be able to present the president with

recommendations from 50 MKs, including the members of his party as well as Kahol Lavan, Yisrael Beiteinu, Meretz, and possibly Labor and the largely Arab Joint List. Meanwhile, Yamina leader Naftali Bennett has between 7 and 13 MKs who will recommend that he be tasked with forming the new government if Gideon Sa'ar's New Hope decides to support him, along with members of Bennett's own party.' (Haaretz: 4.4.21)

Israel Election Results: April 2019 to March 2021					
Party	Party Leader	April 2019	September 2019	March 2020	March 2021
Likud	Benjamin Netanyahu	35	32	36	30
Yesh Atid	Yair Lapid				17
Shas	Aryeh Deri	8	9	9	9
Kahol Lavan (Blue and White)	Benny Gantz	35	33	33	8
Yamina	Naftali Bennett, Ayelet Shaked		7	6	7
United Torah Judaism	Moshe Gafni, Yaakov Litzman	8	7	7	7
Yisrael Beiteinu	Avigdor Lieberman	5	8	7	7
Labor	Merav Michaeli, Avi Gabbay	6			7
(Labor - Gesher - Meretz)	Amir Peretz			7	
(Labor - Gesher)	Amir Peretz		6		
New Hope	Gideon Sa'ar				6
Hadash - Ta'al	Ayman Odeh	6			
Joint list	Ayman Odeh		13	15	6
Meretz	Nitzan Horowitz, Tamar Zandberg	4			6
Democratic Union	Nitzan Horowitz		5		
Religious Zionism	Bezalel Smotrich				6
United Arab List (Ra'am)	Mansour Abbas				4
Ra'am-Balad	Mansour Abbas	4			
Kulanu	Moshe Kahlon	4			
Union of Right Wing Parties	Rafi Peretz	5			
		120	120	120	120

The only thing certain is that this Knesset will be even further to the right. Nearly 80 of the 120 members in the new parliament are rightwingers, and the non-rightwingers are overwhelmingly centrist. Representation of the Jewish left is minute, consisting only of *Meretz's* 6 seats. *Meretz* is the only faction in Israeli Jewish political life to take a strong position on the occupation the West Bank.

With the election of six MKs from Bezalel Smotrich's *Religious Zionism* party, formed from a merger with the anti-LGBT *Noam* and the Kahanist *Otzma Yehudit (Jewish Power)* factions, the Knesset has now admitted members of a fascistic, theocratic movement once barred as racist. *Otzma Yehudit*, led by Itamar Ben-Gvir, is the ideological descendant of the outlawed *Kach* party. Benjamin Netanyahu advocated and encouraged the merger and, last month, signed an agreement with *Religious Zionism*, promising positions in government in exchange for support.

Netanyahu's fate may now lie in the hands of Mansour Abbas, leader of the *United Arab List* or *Ra'am*. In February *Ra'am* broke away from the *Joint List*, despite its unprecedented success in the 2020 elections, when it gained 15 seat. Abbas, who sees common ground between the outlook of his conservative, Islamist constituency and the views of Jewish religious voters, has recently advocated pursuing an alliance with Netanyahu and held some provisional talks with him earlier in the year.

Far-fetched though it might seem, Netanyahu, who as recently as 2019 was issuing dire warnings against his political opponents trying to establish support among non-Zionist, Arab-majority parties - like *Ra'am* - in this campaign, went out of his way to woo Israel's Arab electorate. He insisted that he had been misunderstood when he warned his supporters, on election day in 2015, that the Arabs were heading to the polling stations 'in droves', and that his only concern had been that Arabs were voting for the non-Zionist, Arab political parties when they should have been voting for his *Likud*. He even installed an Arab candidate, Nail Zoabi, on *Likud's* slate, and promised Zoabi ministerial office in the next coalition.

'On the campaign trail at least, candidate Netanyahu was willing to pay public attention to his [Abbas's] demands. In a bid to break the political impasse that has dragged on for two years, the right-wing Israeli premier made a concerted bid to woo the Arab vote ahead of the latest election, visiting vaccination centres in Arab towns to highlight his effective handling of the health crisis and touting Israel's diplomatic agreements last year with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan.

Netanyahu and Abbas also found common campaign cause in an anti-crime drive in Arab communities that have experienced rising violence. Weeks before the polls, Netanyahu's government approved a 150-million-shekel (\$45 million) crime-fighting proposal for Arab communities, including expanding police stations and creating a new dedicated unit.

The Likud leader's Arab outreach – including his embrace of the nickname "Abu Yair" [father of Yair], following the Arab custom of referring to parents as the father or mother of their eldest son – drew snickers from the leftist politicians and older Palestinians who bear the scars of Israel's onslaught on their land and people.

"He can wear a galabiya [traditional tunic] and call himself Abu Yair from now until the election," Ahmed Tibi, a leader of the Joint List coalition of Israel's Arab parties, told [The Economist](#) earlier this month. "Whoever believes him, deserves him." (France 24: 25.3.2021).

Unfortunately for Netanyahu, Bezalel Smotrich has ruled out joining a coalition in any way supported by Ra'am. 'A right-wing government will not be established that is based on Mansour Abbas's Ra'am party. Period. Not from within, not from outside, not through abstaining, and not through any other Isra-bluff. Terrorism supporters who deny the existence of the State of Israel as a Jewish state are not legitimate partners for any government.'