



## 2019 Israel Elections Snapshot

*Updated February 6, 2019*

Elections in Israel will be held on April 9, 2019. As always, under the Israeli system, the public will elect the full 120 members of the Knesset. In turn, the new members of Knesset will elect a governing coalition from its ranks, including a prime minister.

### **Overall Expectations**

- There is a general, wide-spread consensus that current Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will win the elections and continue to serve as prime minister. Netanyahu has said that he would like to form a coalition comprised of the same parties that currently make up the government.
- If Netanyahu wins, it will be his fifth (fourth consecutive) term as prime minister. Netanyahu, who first served from 1996 to 1999, was elected again in 2009, 2013, and 2015. If he is reelected this April, he will become the longest serving Prime Minister in Israel's history, surpassing Israel's first leader, David Ben-Gurion.

### **Blocks**

- For a period of close to ten years we have seen election results and poll figures that change dramatically, with the fortunes of various parties rising and falling. Nonetheless, breaking down the results into blocks (essentially, the right vs the left), consistently generates an almost identical outcome, with the right- left split being around 55%-45% respectively.
- In other words, the (often significant) moves that we have seen, have mainly been within blocks. For example, according to recent polls, the Labor Party's numbers are currently down, but the votes the party has lost have moved to other center-left parties such as Yair Lapid's Yesh Atid. The same occurs on the right with votes flowing between Likud, Habayit Hayehudi, Shas and others within the same block.
- This situation means that Netanyahu will most likely form the new government. There is a small chance that Netanyahu could form a more centrist government of Likud together with some or all of the following parties: Yesh Atid (Yair Lapid), Israel Resilience (Benny Gantz), The New Right (Naftali Bennett), Kulanu (Moshe Kahlon), Yisrael Beteinu (Avigdor Liberman) or others.
- One Israeli political commentator has referred to these elections as being similar to American midterms. The comparison is that the Prime Minister (equivalent to the U.S. President in the analogy) remains the same, and the elections really just determine what sort of Knesset/ Congress he will need to deal with.

### **Likud**

- Of course these elections are being held under the shadow of the investigations into the Prime Minister. However, surprisingly, this will probably not have a major impact. Netanyahu has in fact painted the investigations as a "witch hunt" while he continues to claim his innocence. This plays well for his base.
- The attorney general has said that he will announce whether or not he will indict Netanyahu before the elections. By law, the Prime Minister is entitled to a formal Pre-Indictment Hearing before a final decision is made. Such a Hearing would almost certainly not take place before elections. Likud's current (and potential future) coalition partners have said that they would not refrain from joining a Netanyahu-led government before a Hearing takes place.

- In the Likud primaries, that are used to determine the party's list of candidates, there were few surprises. Gidon Sa'ar – who is often mentioned as Likud's most likely leader in a post-Netanyahu era – has made a successful comeback and fared well in the voting. On the other hand, current Member of Knesset Oren Haza, who was often an embarrassment to the party and the prime minister, did not secure a realistic slot. Other leading figures at the top of the list including current speaker Yuli Edelstein and Ministers Yisrael Katz, Gilad Erdan and Miri Regev. Former Jerusalem mayor Nir Barkat also won a top slot.

### Other Current Coalition Partners

- Habayit Hayehudi (The Jewish Home) has split into two, with its popular leaders, Naftali Bennett and Ayelet Shaked leaving to create their own party, known as the New Right. Unlike the original, the new party is aiming to attract both religious and non-religious voters.
- While the New Right remains popular, the original Jewish Home also maintains a highly committed base of traditional supporters. Nonetheless, the original party is in some danger of not making it over the electoral threshold (in Israel, any party that does not win at least 3.25% of the votes is automatically disqualified and the votes that it did win are discarded), meaning the party would not be in the next Knesset. To avoid this scenario, Bayit Yehudi is examining combining with one or more smaller parties on the far right (such as Eli Yisha's Yachad Party).
- United Torah Judaism (UTJ), the haredi Ashkenazi party, looks to be overcoming its significant internal problems. The party's two factions, Degel HaTorah and Agudat Yisrael, remain divided, but have announced an agreement to continue to run together on one united list.
- Shas, the Sephardi Haredi party, is also in a difficult position, with leader Arye Deri once again being investigated on corruption charges. Many polls show the party on the edge of the electoral threshold, which could mean that they will not make it in to the next Knesset. Some have suggested that UTJ and Shas may possibly run together as one united haredi party.
- Moshe Kahlon's Kulanu is also in a difficult position. With massive price rises of late, the success of his four years as finance minister is being questioned. Similarly, Avigdor Liberman's Yisrael Beiteinu has weakened. Both of these parties are in some danger of not reaching the mandated threshold.

### Opposition

- Former IDF Chief of Staff Benny Gantz has formed his own new party, called Israel Resilience, and he remains a popular figure. Polling shows strong results for him, but not strong enough to beat the Prime Minister. Gantz has joined forces with former Likud defense minister, Moshe (Boogey) Ya'alon.
- Avi Gabbay, the relatively new leader of Labor, has seen his party's polling numbers plummet. In a move that took all commentators by surprise, Gabbay essentially "fired" his coalition partner, Tzipi Livni live on television last month. Livni's Hatnua Party had formed a joint electoral list with Labor before the previous elections. Most polls show that Livni's stand-alone party will not cross the electoral threshold.
- With the Labor Party polling only around 6-7 seats, down from its current 24, 5 Labor MKs have announced that they will not seek reelection.
- Yair Lapid remains a strong leader on the center/left, but he too has not managed to significantly improve his polling numbers to a degree that could potentially see him beating Netanyahu.
- Speculation continues that Lapid and Gantz will join forces to create a much larger party, but the issue of which of the two would lead the unified group remains unresolved. Gabby Ashkenazi, another popular former IDF Chief of Staff, has indicated that he is interested in entering the political arena, but would only join a party that unified both Gantz and Lapid. Polls show that a large party such as this could come within striking distance of Netanyahu and Likud.
- MK Orly Levy, who left Avigdor Liberman's Yisrael Beiteinu party a few years ago, is also polling well. Her new party, Geshet, (named after the party of her father, former Likud foreign minister David Levy) is focused on social welfare issues, and could likely join a government of either the right or the left.

