Understanding Israel’s Election Results

Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's longest-serving prime minister, is set to return to Balfour Street with the support of an ascendant party of far-right Jewish supremacists, who for the first time are rising from the margins of politics to the corridors of power.

Summary

Understanding the Results:

- Prime Minister Yair Lapid's outgoing coalition (Yesh Atid, Meretz, Labor, Ra'am, Yisrael Beiteenu, National Unity) ran against Benjamin Netanyahu's right-wing, Haredi bloc (Likud, United Torah Judaism, Shas, Religious Zionism). Predominantly Arab Hadash-Ta'al and Balad belonged to neither bloc.
- Netanyahu's bloc won 64 Knesset seats, Lapid’s bloc 51, and Hadash-Ta’al 5.
- Voter turnout was 70.6%. Turnout in Arab communities was 55%, higher than expected.
- Netanyahu’s new government is expected to be the most right-wing and religious in Israel’s history.
- Meretz and Balad missed the 3.25% electoral threshold, wasting 288,789 votes.
- High turnout in right-leaning cities and among Haredim also boosted Netanyahu’s bloc.
- Outside of Netanyahu's bloc, Ra'am, Hadash-Ta'al, Labor, and Yisrael Beiteenu all flirted with the threshold. Netanyahu avoided this risk for his bloc by successfully facilitating party mergers.

Understanding the implications:

- Netanyahu will rely on Religious Zionism, a union of Bezalel Smotrich's Tkuma, Itamar Ben Gvir's Otzma Yehudit, and Avi Maoz's Noam, which grew from 6 seats to 14.
- Ben Gvir and his party are the ideological successors of Meir Kahane, a Jewish supremacist who advocated for expelling Arabs from all Israeli-held territory.
- Ben Gvir calls for deporting leftists and Arabs for disloyalty and allowing the IDF to use live fire against Palestinian protestors.
- The expected incoming coalition has called for a judicial overhaul that if passed will eliminate the Supreme Court's oversight of the Knesset, make Supreme Court appointments more political, and extricate Netanyahu from his criminal indictments by eliminating fraud and breach of trust as crimes.
- The parties in Netanyahu's bloc oppose Palestinian statehood and are expected to enact policies that will expand Israel's presence in the West Bank, potentially including de jure annexation and application of Israeli sovereignty.
2022 Israeli Election - Final Results

Balad and Hadash-Ta'al did not align themselves with either political bloc. The parties made up the Joint List until their recent split.

Israeli Election Final Results by Political Blocs

Netanyahu Bloc
Anti-Netanyahu Bloc
Hadash-Ta'al
Background

On Tuesday, November 1, 2022, Israelis headed to the polls to vote in elections for the 25th Knesset. The competition pitted sitting Prime Minister Yair Lapid, the centrist leader of the outgoing coalition of left-wing, right-wing, and centrist parties that made history as Israel’s first to include an independent Arab party, against Opposition Leader and former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his right-wing, Haredi bloc.

Heading into the elections, most polls predicted that Netanyahu’s bloc of parties would win between 59 and 61 seats, the latter number being the minimum required to form a coalition. Lapid’s bloc was polling in the mid-50s and had no realistic chance of attaining a majority. The predominantly Arab Hadash-Ta’al party, not part of either bloc, was projected to earn four. After five elections in over three years, a series that has largely been viewed as a referendum on Netanyahu, many were expecting the deadlock to persist.

Election Results

The four parties in Netanyahu’s bloc attained a 64-seat Knesset majority in the elections. Lapid’s bloc fell to 51, with Hadash-Ta’al returning to the Knesset with 5. 70.6% of eligible voters voted in the elections, including 55% of Israel’s Arab citizens.

President Isaac Herzog is soon expected to hand Netanyahu the mandate to form a government. Given that all parties outside his bloc have remained adamant in their opposition to joining a Netanyahu-led government, this government is expected to be the most right-wing and religious in Israel’s history.

Succumbing to the Threshold

The decisive factor was Meretz failing to garner the 3.25% of the vote (four Knesset seats) necessary to enter the Knesset—the electoral threshold. The Arab nationalist Balad party also fell short of the threshold, as was predicted by all polls prior to the election. The two parties collectively wasted 288,789 anti-Netanyahu votes as a result. Approximately 100,000 votes went to other parties that didn’t cross the threshold, including Ayelet Shaked’s Jewish Home. On the other hand, Netanyahu’s bloc was boosted by high turnout in Haredi communities and right-leaning municipalities.
As shown in the above chart, if Meretz and Balad had run with other parties, Netanyahu would have been denied his 61-seat majority. Even though Balad and Hadash-Ta'al were not part of Lapid's bloc, their votes are counted here along with those of the outgoing coalition parties as anti-Netanyahu. If Netanyahu's bloc had not attained a majority of seats, Lapid would have retained the premiership as the incumbent.

Lapid's bloc was not expected to perform as poorly as it did in terms of seats, although many warned that such an outcome was possible because so many anti-Netanyahu parties—Ra'am, Hadash-Ta'al, Labor, Meretz, and Yisrael Beiteenu—were polling close to the electoral threshold (or, in the case of Balad, below).

The Rise of Ben Gvir

The rise of the Religious Zionism party and its likely entry into Israel's next government have sparked serious concern in many quarters, both inside and outside Israel. The tripartite alliance of Bezalel Smotrich's far-right Tkuma, Itamar Ben Gvir's Kahanist Otzma Yehudit (Jewish Power) party, and Avi Maoz's homophobic Noam party was midwifed by Benjamin Netanyahu prior to the previous elections in an effort to consolidate the far right. The party has grown from six seats in the 24th Knesset to 14, becoming Israel's third-largest party and an essential component of Netanyahu's incoming coalition.
Ben Gvir and his colleagues in Otzma Yehudit are disciples of the late Rabbi Meir Kahane, a far-right Jewish extremist and member of Knesset who advocated for stripping Israeli Arabs of their citizenship and the expulsion of Palestinians from the West Bank. Ben Gvir has been convicted for incitement to racism and for his support of Kahane's Kach movement, which was banned as a terror organization under Israeli law. In recent years, Ben Gvir has superficially softened his anti-Arab ideology to skirt Israel's anti-racism laws and avoid being banned from the Knesset. He has removed from his living room mantle a picture of Baruch Goldstein, the Kahanist terrorist who slaughtered 29 Palestinians in the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron in 1994, and has inveighed against “terrorists” rather than using his previously explicitly racist rhetoric targeting Arabs as a group. In this way, he succeeded in bringing Kahanism back into the political arena upon his entry into the Knesset in 2021 as Otzma Yehudit's sole representative on the Religious Zionism list. As a result of Religious Zionism's meteoric rise, due in most part to Ben Gvir's newfound popularity, Otzma Yehudit will now have six members of Knesset.

Despite this tactical moderation, Ben Gvir and his party's policy positions remain extreme and challenge Israel's democratic character, as do those of his allies in Religious Zionism. He advocates for deporting leftists and Arabs for showing insufficient loyalty to the state, changing the IDF's rules of engagement to allow for the unrestricted use of live fire against Palestinian protestors, and the annexation of all of the West Bank—including the Palestinian cities—without
the extension of any civil rights to the Palestinians. The Religious Zionism party as a whole advocates for Israel becoming a “halachic” state and holds views hostile to non-Orthodox streams of Judaism and the LGBTQ community.

There are several factors that propelled Ben Gvir and his ideology to national stardom since he first entered the Knesset in March 2021. The ethnic riots in Israel’s mixed Jewish-Arab cities during Operation Guardian of the Walls in May 2021 exacerbated fears among Israeli Jews of Israeli Arabs as a threat. Many were also repulsed by the Bennett-Lapid government’s inclusion of Mansour Abbas and his Islamist Ra’am party, who Netanyahu and the right wing constantly accused of supporting terror, despite Abbas’ recognition of Israel as a Jewish state. Voters of Naftali Bennett’s staunchly right-wing Yamina party, many of whom were members of the Dati Leumi (national religious) community, felt betrayed by his decision to join with Ra’am and the left. Positioning themselves as tough on terror and as champions of Israel’s Jewish character, Smotrich and Ben Gvir earned the support of many former Yamina supporters as well as many outside the classic religious Zionist demographic.

The Justice System

Judicial reform was a hallmark issue of the Netanyahu bloc during the campaign. Long seen as a bastion of leftism and a burdensome check on the settlement movement, the Haredi monopoly over religious affairs, and other right-wing priorities, the incoming Netanyahu coalition is united in its commitment to curbing the power of Israel’s Supreme Court. The new government is expected to pass an override clause allowing a simple Knesset majority to overturn Supreme Court decisions and change the makeup of the Judicial Selection Committee so it has a majority of politicians rather than judges and independent legal experts. The other key issue at play is Netanyahu’s corruption trial, in which the Likud leader is defending himself against the charges of bribery, fraud, and breach of trust. Netanyahu is seeking to cancel his trial at all costs and his new coalition is expected to deliver that result, either through the so-called French Law that grants the prime minister immunity from prosecution or by annulling the law against breach of trust altogether. All of these developments would significantly erode the checks and balances in the Israeli political system and weaken Israeli democracy.

The Palestinian Issue and the Two-State Horizon

In a moment of growing unrest in the West Bank and a weakened Palestinian Authority, the incoming government’s policies toward the Israeli-Palestinian arena will likely exacerbate these trends. The most right-wing in Israel’s history, this government will likely promote settlement construction, retroactively legalize illegal outposts, and further de facto, if not de jure, West Bank annexation. There are also well-founded fears about the continued erosion of the status quo on the Temple Mount, as Ben Gvir and others support open Jewish prayer at the site that will likely lead to an increase in clashes and religiously motivated violence.
The Future of Israeli Democracy

The incoming government of Likud, United Torah Judaism, Shas, and Religious Zionism will likely carry out policies that erode liberalism in favor of nationalist and right-wing populism—by damaging the country’s independent judiciary, furthering a one-state reality of permanent Israeli rule over the West Bank with no rights for Palestinians, undoing recent progress in gender equality and LGBTQ rights, emphasizing Israel as the state of its Jewish citizens and them alone, and undermining religious pluralism.