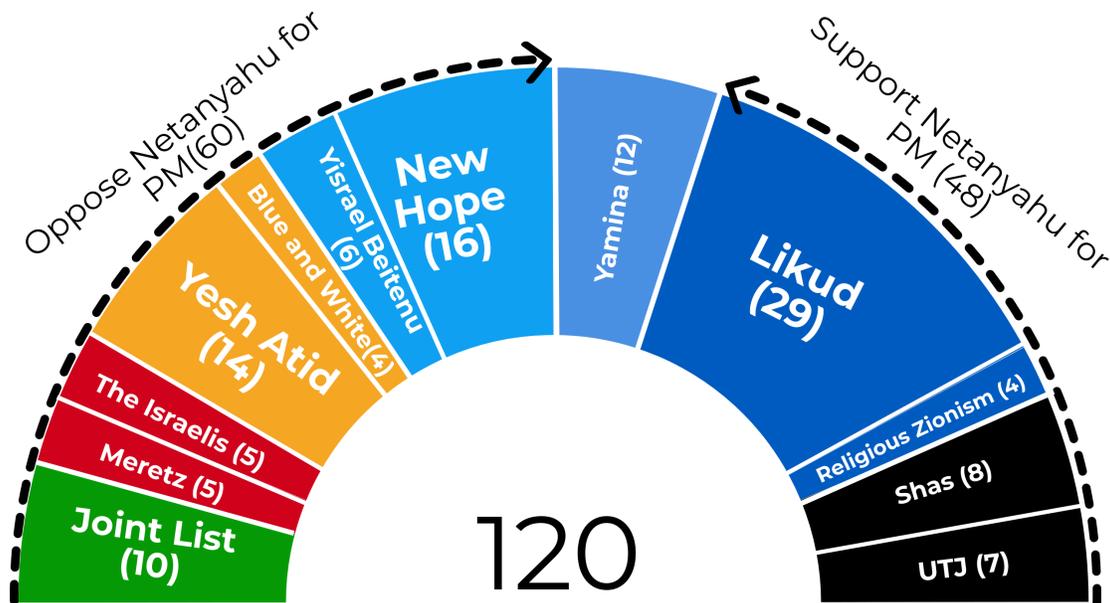


Israeli Election Bulletin | January 15

On 23 December 2020 the Knesset was automatically dissolved after the national unity government failed to pass a 2020 state budget. The election will be held on 23 March 2021. For more background on the collapse of the coalition, [watch BICOM Director Richard Pater](#) and read this [BICOM Morning Brief](#).

BICOM's Poll of Polls Aggregate Polling January 5-15



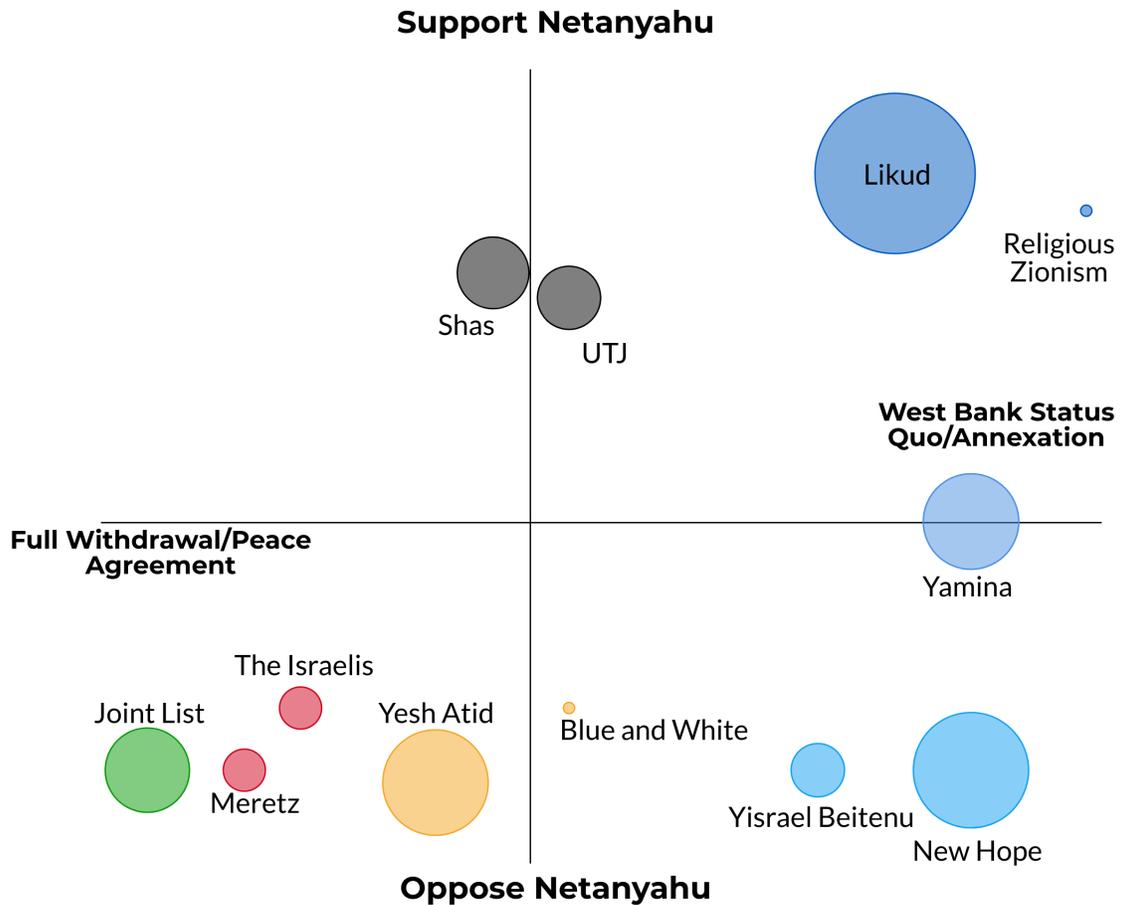
Many parties such as Momentum, Labour, Veterans, New Economy and Telem are polling under the electoral threshold

Two others, Blue and White and Religious Zionism, are polling very close to the threshold (4 seats). If either of them were to fall under it, it would significantly affect the ability of Netanyahu or his opponents to form a coalition

Splits, Mergers and Acquisitions

We are now in the first stage of the election process. Over the coming three weeks, politicians will start jockeying for their places ahead of the formation of the party lists that need to be submitted by 4 February.

Party size and where they stand on major political issues



Political Cartoons



Maariv 23.12.20
Santa delivers ballot boxes and



21.12.20 Yediot Ahronot
The new mutation. A two headed Gideon Saar and Naftali Bennett chase Gantz and Netanyahu

Israel Hayom 24.12.20
"The clothes have no emperor," the briefcase says Blue and White, looking on former number 2 and 3 in the party. Justice Minister Avi Nissenkorn who quit shortly after the government fell to join the Ron Huldai's the Israelis Party and Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi who will see out his role but not stand in the coming election.



23.12.20
From election to election - the Gantz Mutation
April 2019 - March 2021

The disintegration of Blue and White.

The Blue and White party won 33 seats in the March 2020 election, the second largest behind the Likud. When party leader Benny Gantz agreed to form a unity government with Benjamin Netanyahu, 16 members of the Yesh Atid-Telem faction remained in the opposition – leaving the Blue and White with 15 MKs, with support from Derech Eretz's Zvi Hauser and Yoaz Hendel, and Labour's Amir Peretz and Itzik Shmuli. Since the Knesset dispersed, Gantz's party has disintegrated. The two members of the Derech Eretz faction have now joined Gideon Saar's New Hope Party. Former Justice Minister Avi Nissenkorn (along with Einav Kabla) quit the party to join Ron Huldai's new Israelis Party, former Minister for Social Equality Meirav Cohen has joined Yesh Atid and a slew of other ministers and MKs have announced that they will not be seeking re-election, including the party's number two Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi and Science Minister Izhar Shai (who has since joined Moshe Yaalon's Telem). So far Benny Gantz has remained committed to leading Blue and White. If he remains an MK, he technically could still become prime minister in November in the extreme scenario of another stalemate.

The party's collapse has created a vacuum in the centre-left, whose constellation needs to be settled before the February 4 deadline otherwise the opposition will lose thousands of votes (and a substantial amount of Knesset seats) with parties coming under the electoral threshold. With Gantz's latest call for unity, he appears open to a range of potential mergers. Even if his political stock is depleted, his party still represents an attractive partner as they bring with them significant campaign funds. Gantz's former partner-come-head of Opposition, Yair Lapid, sees himself as the natural candidate to lead the Centre-Left opposition. At least, according to a recent (non-scientific) readers' poll in Maariv, he was clear favourite among people who defined themselves as centre-left.

What's new on the Left

The newest challenger is veteran Tel Aviv Mayor Ron Huldai, now 76-years-old and the longest serving Mayor of Tel Aviv having first been elected in 1988. Before that, Huldai was an air force fighter pilot (leaving the army as Brig. Gen.) and went on to be headmaster of the prestigious Herzliya Gymnasium school in Tel Aviv. He has declared that he will remain as mayor until he is sworn into the Knesset. He is joined on his 'Israelis' list by Avi Nissenkorn and four women: former Blue and White MK Einav Kabla, information scientist Prof. Karine Nahon, educator Karen Tal, and Adi Tzabari, who serves as the general director of Tel Aviv's municipal education and culture company. Huldai launched his party's campaign with the slogan, "There are only two leaders in Israel, make your own pick," pitting himself directly against Netanyahu. However, while his party is polling single digits, he could still merge with others that stand a slim chance of crossing the electoral threshold.

Potential partners could include Ofer Shelach, who left Yesh Atid after growing frustrated under Lapid's shadow for the last eight years, has formed a new party called 'Momentum' and partnered up with Roei Cohen, the president of the Israel Federation of Small Business Organisation. They will focus on a dual ticket of promoting peace with the Palestinians and supporting working families. Yaron Zelkha, a former accountant general in the Finance Ministry, has created the 'New Economy Party,' presenting a promise of sound financial management. Mohammad Darawshe, a veteran campaigner for coexistence, has formed a new Arab-Israeli party called 'Ma'an,' which is looking to partner with Centre-Left Zionists.

24.12.20 *Yediot Ahronot* "Total Loss" Labour leader Amir Peretz



04.01.21 *Yediot Ahronot* Merav Michaeli, (one of three) current Labour Party MKs and the only one who refused to join a Netanyahu government, standing on top of the extinct Labour Party says "(Yalla) Let's go, primaries."

14.01.21 *Yediot Ahronot* Netanyahu drives a bulldozer having demolished Blue and White heads towards the Joint List, with Ahmed Tibi and Ayman Odeh



What's left of the Left

Meretz will most likely run independently, hopeful that their brand loyalty keeps them above the threshold. They are also looking to position themselves as a joint Jewish-Arab party, placing two Muslim candidates in their top five. The Labour Party's fate is still open-ended, as the courts are set to rule if they can hold a primary following party leader Amir Peretz retiring from politics. Presumably the party will then look to merge with other ideologically compatible parties, as most polls up to now have predicted that they will fail to enter the Knesset on their own. The Arab Joint List currently remains together, despite internal tension with the United Arab List faction leader Mansour Abbas objecting to be classified as Left, preferring to identify instead with conservative and anti-liberal positions. He has also developed a fascinating working relationship with Prime Minister Netanyahu, further straining relations with his current partners.

New Hope challenges Netanyahu

In every election campaign Netanyahu's main challenger has emanated from the centre-left. Never has he been so brazenly challenged by one of his own. He has had many former underlings compete (Dan Meridor in 1999, later Avigdor Lieberman, Naftali Bennett, Ayelet Shaked, Moshe Kahlon), but former Likudnik Saar genuinely threatens Netanyahu's crown as he has vowed to form a government without his former boss.

They have known each other for close to 30 years and Saar served as his cabinet secretary back in 1999, before he became a professional politician. By the time Netanyahu was re-elected ten years later, Saar was placed second on the Likud list (he remained there in 2012 too) and was appointed Minister of Education. In Netanyahu's third government he served as Interior Minister, but in September 2014 Saar left political life. He announced his return in 2017 but lost his challenge to Netanyahu for the Likud leadership in an internal primary in 2019. In turn, Netanyahu did not give him a ministerial appointment last year. Saar is a shrewd political operator, learned in all the machinations, and he successfully engineered the vote to bring down the current interim government. He is also committed to the traditional ideology of the Likud, both in nationalist and liberal ideals.



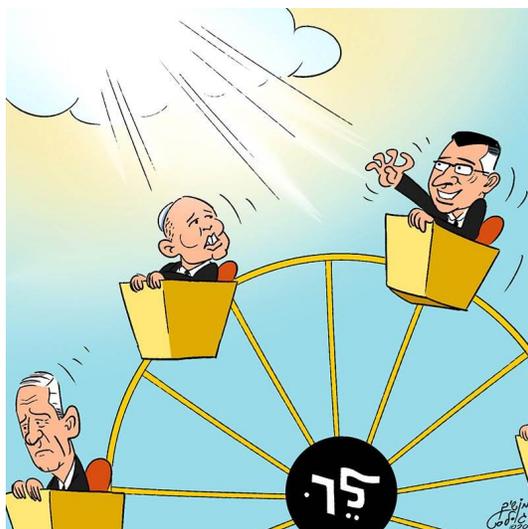
28.12.20 *Maariv*

Facing off again Netanyahu is the combined forces of the extreme right wing, right values, religious right, centre-right, liberal right, secular right, modern right. The miniature cowboy represents 'the left' and he says, "together we will win".



25.12.20 Haaretz

Saar is leading his highest political asset former Netanyahu loyalist Zeev Elkin (with the hose – his position in the last government was Minister for Water + Higher Education). [\[Listen here for a short analysis on the significance of Elkins move\]](#) Behind Saar is MK Yifat Shasha-Bitton also from the Likud (formerly Kulana), who had served as the Knesset’s coronavirus committee’s chairwoman. She earned the wrath of her Likud colleagues (and public popularity) last summer, when she reversed the government decision to close public pools and gyms because of coronavirus. Following her are the two ideologically compatible MKs from Derech Eretz (formerly part of Telem faction within Blue and White) Zvi Hauser and Yoaz Hendel, behind them are two more former Likud backbenchers Sharren Haskel and Michal Shir. Note on the bottom right former IDF Chief of Staff Gadi Eizenkot, who are after much speculation decided not to enter politics at this juncture. Waving goodbye top left is Defence Minister Benny Gantz and Gabi Ashkenazi who will serve out his time as Foreign Minister but will not be running either this time. Looking on (l to r) are the other party leaders, Minister Litzman (UTJ), Aryeh Deri (Shas), Avigdor Liberman (Yisrael Beiteinu). Yair Lapid (Yesh Atid) Ayman Odeh, (Joint List), Naftali Bennett (Yamina). The final figure is Ofer Shelach, formerly Lapid’s loyal number two who has now formed his own Momentum Party.



27.12.20 Israel Hayom

Three leaders site on the big wheel (an allusion to Ariel Sharon’s famous advice there will be ups and down but never get off the wheel) in the middle the logo of the anti-Netanyahu protest “Go”. Gantz has missed his chance, Bennett looks back, Saar reaches....

To Netanyahu's Right

Bezalel Smotrich, leader of the National Union faction (now rebranded the Religious Zionism Party), has split off from Naftali Bennett's Yamina Party. Efforts are now underway to see if Smotrich will ally with the hard Right Jewish Power Party. Smotrich takes with him a network of religious institutions and yeshivas that can help the national-religious movement maximise their voter base. It is certainly in Netanyahu's interest that a hard Right religious party, that will endorse him as prime minister, make it over the threshold. Bennett, who endorsed Netanyahu to form a government last time around, was left out of the government. This time he has not yet committed himself to the pro or anti-Netanyahu camp. His announcement that he intends to run for prime minister was overshadowed the same evening with the more exciting news that Ze'ev Elkin was leaving the Likud to join Saar.

In the anti-Netanyahu right-wing camp remains Avigdor Lieberman's vehemently secular and hawkish, Russian immigrants party, Yisrael Beiteinu. Newly independent Telem, led by Moshe Yaalon has presented his party which includes Professor Hagai Levine, a former chairman of the Israeli Association of Public Health Physicians, prominent anti-Netanyahu activist and former Shin Bet agent Gonen Ben Itzhak, former science and technology minister Izhar Shay, and Karin Meir Rubinstein, president of the Israeli Association of Advanced Industries.

The Likud bloc

In normal times the Likud proudly holds open primaries where their 130,000 membership choose the party slate. Due to coronavirus restrictions, Likud primaries will not be possible this time. Instead, the party has agreed that Netanyahu can insert six candidates of his choosing in the top 40 positions. To compliment his latest charm offensive, there are even suggestions that Netanyahu is considering putting an Arab candidate in a realistic slot. The Likud campaign will again highlight Netanyahu as a senior world leader competing against petty politicians. He delivered four new peace treaties and vaccines for the whole country, and now he is looking to peel away Arab voters.

The last vestiges of his natural allies, the two ultra-Orthodox parties Shas and United Torah Judaism, so far remain loyal to Netanyahu. Their leaders, however, are on good terms with both Saar and Elkin and know how to work together.

What has Netanyahu worried is the apparent coordination among his rivals, as seen in the surplus vote agreements (SVA). Usually these are confirmed much closer to the elections, but this time New Hope and Yamina signed one on the same day that Yesh Atid and Yisrael Beiteinu announced their SVA. The deals mean that after the votes are counted and divided by 120, the surplus remaining votes the parties receive are combined to give one of the parties an extra seat. These deals could leave the Likud without anyone to sign such an agreement.

What is this election about?

If the previous elections in 2019 and 2020 have already been a referendum on the suitability for Netanyahu to remain in office, this time around it is even more pronounced. The evidentiary stage of his trial is now delayed due to coronavirus but could still start during the campaign. The anticipated images of a sitting prime minister in the defendant's dock will stir emotion on both sides of the debate. The failure of Gantz's gambit to join a government with Netanyahu has added to the growing momentum for a coalition without the Likud that could succeed in bridging otherwise ideologically untenable partners.

Beyond Netanyahu, the fallout and consequences of the coronavirus pandemic will feature heavily. Netanyahu is certainly hoping that the vaccination campaign will be completed around election time and he will reap a dividend for having delivered them so quickly. Parties will present their economic platforms on how to best reenergise the economy, whilst looking after the small businesses and others who have suffered over the last year.

There are a range of issues, bubbling under the surface that may galvanise some but are unlikely to be the decisive factor, however weighty their significance. Within the context of Netanyahu's trial and beyond, various degrees of judicial reform are also on the agenda.

A recurring theme in Israeli politics are issues of religion and state, including public transportation and shops opening on Sabbath, ultra-Orthodox service in the army, and arrangements for non-Orthodox streams of Judaism at the Western Wall.

This time around, issues of foreign policy and diplomacy enjoy a broad consensus support, for example the ratification of the Abraham Accords was backed unanimously besides the Joint List. With relative quiet in the West Bank, the Palestinian issue has also been relegated to the side-lines.

How to get to 61

Right-wing bloc. If a combination of Likud, Shas, UTJ and the Religious Zionists, often referred to "Netanyahu's natural partners", get over 61 or if they are able to entice Yamina to join, they could form a relatively homogeneous right-wing religious government. This is Netanyahu's dream scenario.

Anti-Netanyahu bloc. In this scenario the combined forces of New Hope, Yamina, Yesh Atid, Yisrael Beiteinu, Blue and White and the Israelis are able to reach 61, they could form a government. This would stretch from Right to Left but would not rely on Meretz or the Joint List, which would be a bridge too far. Theoretically Saar could serve a prime minister, Bennett as defence minister, Lapid as foreign minister, Lieberman in the treasury and Huldai in education or justice.

Stalemate. If neither bloc is able to reach 61 or the anti- Netanyahu bloc fail to reach a consensus candidate to lead them, the country could face the prospect of another election later in the year.