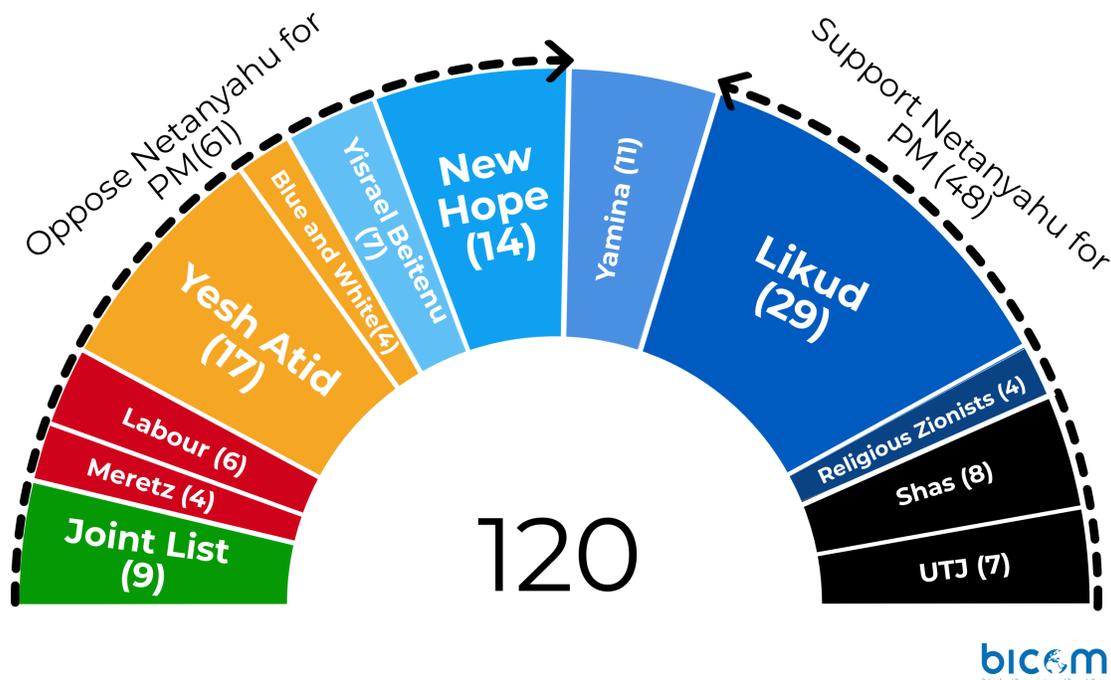


Israeli Election Bulletin | February 12

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](#), read this [BICOM Morning Brief](#), and our [January 15 Election Bulletin](#).

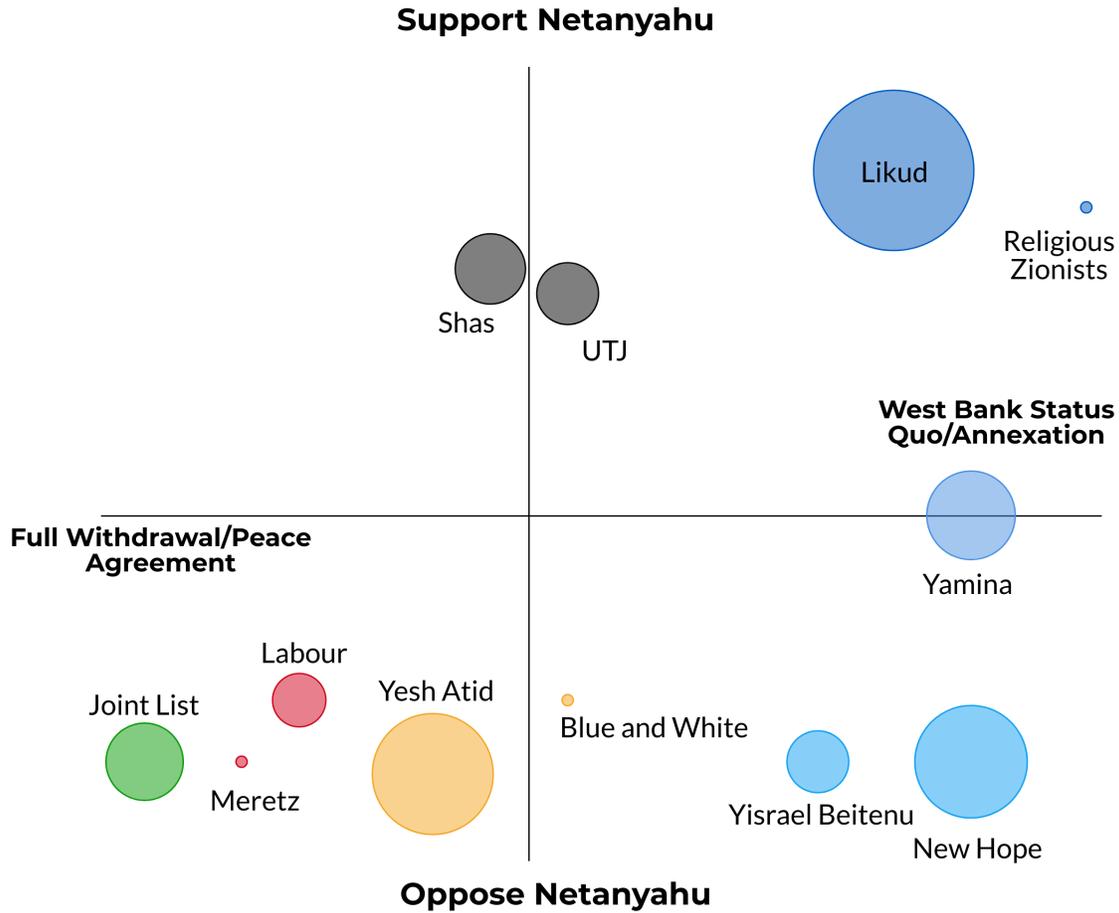
BICOM's Poll of Polls

Aggregate Polling February 4-11

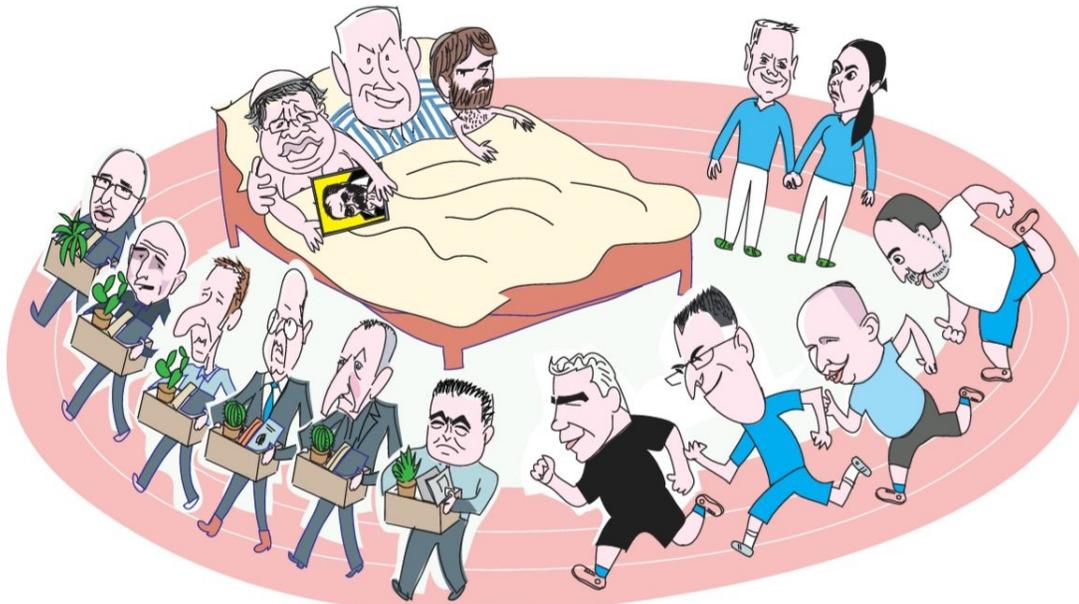


The parties have now submitted their list to the Central Election Committee and while parties can still drop out of the race no more mergers are allowed. The committee will now review the lists and hear any petitions to disqualify lists or individuals before approving the final party lists on February 21.

Party size and where they stand on major political issues



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05.02.21 Haaretz

Netanyahu is in bed with Itamar Ben-Gvir (holding a photo of Jewish extremist Meir Kahana) and Betzalel Smotrich. Clockwise, Nitzan Horowitz, the leader of Meretz and Meirav Michaeli the Labour leader hold hands and wearing identical outfits. In the race, the leaders of the other parties; Avigdor Lieberman, Naftali Bennett, Gideon Saar and Yair Lapid. Leaving politics / going home, former Labour leader Amir Peretz, Ron Huldai, Moshe Yaalon, Itzik Shmuli (Labour MK who was also a minister in the outgoing government), Ofer Shelach and Avi Nissenkorn

On the Right

According to all the polls, the Likud maintains its overall position as the largest party but will struggle to form a government. The Likud campaign messages appear to have moved the party to a more conciliatory position (note Prime Minister Netanyahu's charm offensive among Israeli Arabs) as they focus on the message of solidarity and unity. The party has also been using the tag line, "many politicians, one leader" highlighting Netanyahu's personal leadership traits, delivering vaccines and four peace agreements in the last year. However, in almost every campaign announcement Netanyahu has continued to push the message that only a vote for Likud can deliver a "full-on" right-wing government.

17.01.21 Shilo

Netanyahu driving the "Likud" bus, (in the colour and font of the national bus company Egged) with his ministers Amir Ohana and Miri Regev as passengers. The bus is headed to the Israeli Arab towns of Taibeh and Nazareth. MK Mansour Abbas, the leader of the United Arab List says to his former partner Ahmed Tibi, "he really does love us, he cancelled a state visit to the courthouse and came to us..."



With the impressive speed of the coronavirus vaccine rollout, Netanyahu had hoped that an economic revival and significant drop in the number of COVID-19 cases would pay dividends by election day. However, the emergence of mutations, (ironically partially imported by Israeli tourists returning from Dubai) has dented those hopes. Perhaps to counter this setback, Netanyahu along with his Finance Minister Israel Katz recently unveiled a plan to reinvigorate the economy. The plan includes offering grants to families and businesses, making it easier for businesses to receive bank loans, offering unemployment benefits for the self-employed, easing regulations, and large investment in high-tech and infrastructure. Yet it has been dismissed by political rivals and economists as playing election economics. Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit also warned against an “electoral economic plan”.



Yediot Ahronot 31.01.21

Netanyahu reads the election polls and ask: “so what do the numbers say?”
Behind him the screen shows the news: “over 4,700 dead from corona”.

Maariv 31.01.21

"In preparation for the day it become clear the vaccine will not relieve us from the corona crisis."

Netanyahu accuses the syringe:
“Left wing!”

"First (privileged) Israel, trying to bring down a sitting prime minister!"

“Receives donations from the New Israel Fund!”



One of Netanyahu's favourite power plays is manipulating other parties in splits and mergers. As in previous elections, he recorded some success when the extreme right-wing Jewish Power Party (which already included the ultra-Orthodox, nationalistic, homophobic Noam Party) merged with MK Bezalel Smotrich's Religious Zionists Party. Smotrich had previously been a partner of Bennett's Yamina Party but had failed to reach an understanding over presenting a joint slate. With Bennett now non-committal in his support for Netanyahu, it was of supreme importance for Netanyahu to ensure that a viable right-wing option would pass the threshold. Such a scenario ensures no wasted ballots on the right, and crucially, more recommendations for Netanyahu to form the next government. This merger also significantly raises the prospect of the extreme right having representation in the next Knesset. Smotrich is considered to have a strong network among religious institutions across the West Bank.



Yediot Ahronot 18.01.21

In Netanyahu's pocket; on the right is iconic Israel rock musician Aviv Gefen, generally associated with left wing values (he just met with the prime minister, who agreed on an aid package for performing artists struggling during the coronavirus pandemic). He is greeted by MK Bezalel Smotrich, the leader of the Religious Zionists who says to him "Shalom Haver" – "welcome friend". (It was this iconic phrase that also means "Goodbye my friend" that President Clinton ended his eulogy to slain Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin). Next to Smotrich is Mansour Abbas, the leader of the United Arab List, who spilt from the Joint List (he has cooperated with Netanyahu and Likud on certain issues). Sweating next to him is Interior Minister Aryeh Deri, the leader of Shas, Netanyahu's closest coalition partner.

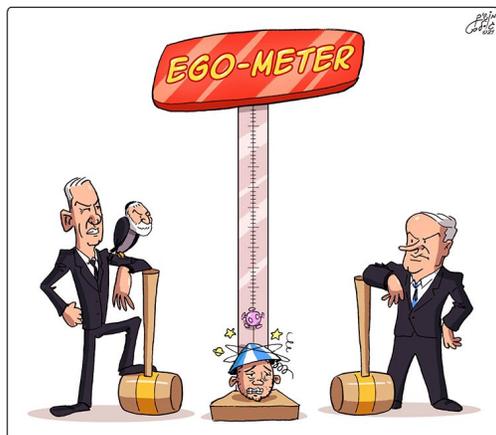
Yediot Ahronot 05.02.21

Netanyahu arrives dressed in the familiar vest of a popular food delivery service and announces “on the house!” As he presents leader of Religious Zionists Bezalel Smotrich with Itamar Ben-Gvir, the leader of Jewish Power. As leader of Jewish Home Hagit Moshe looks on (despite the pressure, she decided not to join this merger).



The Likud usually prides itself on its internal democratic process, being one of the few parties that hold open primaries. Yet the party decided that due to the coronavirus restrictions this would be inappropriate. The party apparatus thus agreed to keep the same list as the last election, but gave Netanyahu discretion to make several personal appointees. At his behest, author and journalist Galit Distel was placed on the 10th slot, Geshar MK Orly Levy Abekasis number 26 and MK Ofir Sofer at number 28. Sofer was part of the deal to incentivise the Smotrich-Ben-Gvir merger as he will rejoin the Religious Zionist Party once he is sworn into the Knesset. As Netanyahu promised, he also reserved a slot for an Israeli-Arab Muslim for the first time. Educator Nael Zoabi was given 39th place on the list, which according to the latest polls will not be enough to be elected. However, with the implementation of the Norwegian Law (in which ministers resign from the Knesset to allow parliamentarians from the list to take their place) he could ultimately take a spot in parliament.

The Likud's tactics will be to paint Yair Lapid as his main rival, as this is a tried and tested methodology to pit the Likud against what they will label 'the left'. Lapid's Yesh Atid is growing in strength but hasn't broken his perceived 'ceiling' of 20 seats. Netanyahu will try and ignore the challenge from Gideon Sa'ar, who will seek to outflank the Likud from the right. The Likud may be wary of targeting Bennett directly (as they have done in previous elections), lest they need him the day after to help Netanyahu form a coalition (no poll shows Netanyahu getting to 61 without Yamina).



07.02.21 Israel Hayom

Stand off in the current government. Prime Minister Netanyahu competes again Defence Minister Gantz who appears to have attorney-general Mandelblit sitting on his shoulder. They appear to be battering the regular Israeli citizen.

Maariv 18.01.21

New Labour leader Meirav Michaeli meets new the leader of Jewish Home Hagit Moshe, both leading their elderly parties, (both parties trace their roots back to the founding of the State) ask, "So, have you found us any connections?" Published a week before the lists closed. For Labour despite talks with the Ron Huldai and Ofer Shelach, Michaeli decided Labour would run alone, both have subsequently pulled out of the election. Jewish Home decided in the end not to run, but have endorsed Bennett's Yamina Party, if they enter the government, she has been promised a cabinet portfolio.



On the Left

The Labour Party is feeling somewhat rejuvenated under the new leadership of MK Merav Michaeli. In 2020 Labour ran as part of an amalgamated left-wing list (Labour-Gesher- Meretz combined won seven seats), which returned only three MKs of their own. With the formation of the unity government, party leader Amir Peretz and Itzik Shmuli both accepted ministerial portfolios as part of Blue and White's allocation. Michaeli remained alone in the opposition. This principled approach now seems to be paying off. While some had already consigned the party to history, polls are showing a resurgence in popularity.

Michaeli is part of the new club of party leaders who have remained true to their word. She joined Labour in 2012 and was elected to the Knesset in 2013 as fifth on their list. Like Yair Lapid and Nitzan Horowitz, Michaeli started her career in the media, first on Army Radio and then in television and radio, becoming one of Israel's most recognised feminist voices. Before entering politics, she created Ezrat Nashim, an organisation for survivors of sexual assault.

Haaretz 31.01.21

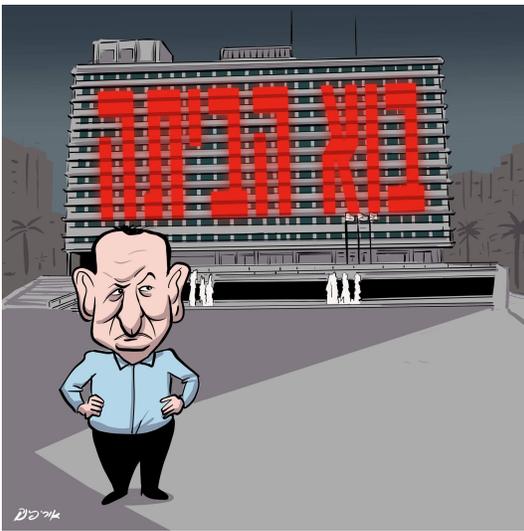
Merav Michaeli stands proudly under the “Labour” flag, drowning; Benny Gantz, Itzik Shmuli, Ron Huldai and Amir Peretz.



After sealing her victory Michaeli made two significant moves: The first was to demand that Labour ministers — Trade and Economy Minister Peretz and Welfare Minister Shmuli — immediately resign from the government or leave the party (they left); second, she opened the party to new members, and 8,000 people signed up. Labour were then one of two parties (Balad, part of the Joint List being the other) that successfully held an open primary. The vote produced a list which included Omer Bar-Lev, a former MK and formerly head of the elite Sayeret Matkal (SAS) commando unit, as number two. Following Bar-Lev were new candidates Emilie Moatti, Gilad Kariv, (the leader of the Reform and Progressive Judaism movement, which is yet to have a representative elected to the Knesset) and Efrat Rayten. Ram Shefa left Blue and White and secured sixth place on the list. However, there is controversy over seventh place Ibtisam Mara’ana. She is on record expressing anti-Israel sentiment on social media and as such is subject to petition by Labour Party activists to have the Central Election Committee remove her from the list.

There was speculation that Labour may merge with Huldai’s party, but the latter’s collapse in the polls rendered any merger insignificant. Michaeli could have offered Huldai, or even MK Ofer Shelah, who has his own party, one of the top slots, but decided in the end to stick with her list. These parties, along with Moshe Yaalon’s Telem and Danny Yatom’s Pensioners Party, have subsequently dropped out of the race.

The revival of Labour does pose a problem for the ‘anti-Netanyahu bloc’ as the list directly challenges Meretz, and now risks them not making it over the electoral threshold. Commentators have noted almost identical policy positions of the two lists that pits the parties in direct rivalry, despite their amicable ties.



Maariv 01.02.21

Ron Huldai, stands in front of the Tel Aviv municipality building lit up it says "Come home".

The building often lights up to show support and solidarity to significant events.



@MotiHeler 05.02.21

The ball says "Bibi", the four skittles are politicians he has knocked out of politics, to his left clockwise: "Shmuli" - Labour Party, welfare minister, considered the future of the party only last year, taking a time out from politics. He was the first MK to become a surrogate father in a same sex relationship.

"Yankelevich" - Blue and White, minister for the diaspora, the first ever female ultra-Orthodox MK. Due to her background and right wing views she had been a target to defect to the Likud, in the end she quit.

"Boogie" - a former defence minister under Netanyahu, he became Lapid's number two when Blue and White joined the government. He quit to lead his independent list Telem. They pulled out of the race before the deadline to register.

"Nissenkorn" - served loyally alongside Benny Gantz as Blue and White's justice minister and protected the legal system from any interference. When in December in a last ditch tempt to avoid elections (and the only chance for Gantz to eventually become PM) at Netanyahu's behest Gantz considered limiting Nissenkorn's responsibilities. The manoeuvre failed and the government fell, but having been undermined, Nissenkorn quit the ministry and the party. He joined Ron Huldai's Israelis party as number two and then quit from that too, all within a month.

Elsewhere on the centre-left, Blue and White continue to insist they will run until the end. Despite their poor showing in the polls, Gantz believes that he can increase his party's strength before the election.

The Joint List will run this time without Ra'am (United Arab List), which has decided to go it alone after deep disagreements over religious issues and whether the List should seek to cooperate with Netanyahu. In April 2019, the last time the Joint List ran as two separate lists, Ra'am-Balad barely scraped by with 3.33 per cent of the vote. It is thus a risky move, especially as the party is currently polling under the threshold.

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