



What Israel's elections signify

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In Israel's latest national elections on Tuesday, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu succeeded in securing a decisive electoral victory despite early returns that indicated he and his conservative Likud party were behind in the polls. In truth, however, Netanyahu's victory was always more likely than not.

That's because Israel's political system relies on proportional representation, with the party that secures the most mandates at the polls gaining the power to build a ruling coalition made up of a majority of the 120 seats in Israel's legislature, the Knesset. In this arrangement, smaller parties that successfully surpass the 3.25% vote threshold can serve as kingmakers, helping the dominant faction cobble together a more-or-less durable political bloc.

In Tuesday's election, Netanyahu's Likud and the center-left Kachol Lavan (Blue and White) coalition headed by his chief rival, retired general Benny Gantz, initially secured 35 seats apiece (a recount since has given Likud a one seat advantage). But Netanyahu's party was far better positioned to form a ruling government, and by Wednesday the writing was on the wall: The sitting prime minister had managed to secure another term in office.

In terms of public opinion, too, Netanyahu's victory was propelled by a number of noteworthy political trends.

The primacy of security — The old adage holds that “familiarity breeds contempt,” and this is undoubtedly true in Israeli politics. Netanyahu, who is now closing in on former premier David Ben Gurion's record as the longest-serving Israeli prime minister, has accumulated no shortage of animus from the country's electorate during his four non-consecutive terms in power. Calls of “anyone but Bibi” (as Netanyahu is colloquially known) have become ubiquitous, fueled in no small measure by active investigations now underway against the Prime Minister for bribery and breach of public trust. This sentiment, in turn, helped propel Gantz's Kachol Lavan forward at the polls.

But even Netanyahu's detractors are forced to admit that he has done an excellent job in navigating the country through numerous contemporary crises and raising its international profile. That pedigree is significant, because national security and foreign policy consistently rank as top tier issues for Israeli voters, given the country's complicated regional position and the incipient threats facing the Jewish state from hostile neighbors. At the end of the day, the electorate simply seemed to feel more comfortable with Netanyahu as a steward of Israeli security than with any of his rivals serving in the same role.

U.S.-Israeli ties — In many ways, this week's election served as a referendum on the incumbent prime minister's management of Israel's most important foreign-policy relationship: its decades-old strategic partnership with United States. On the campaign trail, Netanyahu's close personal bonds with President Trump played heavily in the political messaging on both the left and the right. Netanyahu himself sought to play up his ties to the U.S., even going so far as to commission a massive billboard depicting himself with President Trump as a not-so-subtle visual reminder. Gantz, meanwhile, staked out an opposing position, ridiculing Netanyahu for being out of touch with voters because of his extensive ties to America, and suggested that he himself was the more genuine Israeli article.

But the reinvigorated U.S.-Israeli relationship of the Trump era has yielded unquestionable dividends for Israel, most prominent among them the formal transfer of the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem last year, and President Trump's recent recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights. Even though there is now widespread trepidation over the particulars of President Trump's soon-to-be-unveiled peace plan, which has been dubbed the “deal of the century,” Israeli voters on the whole seemed more comfortable with Netanyahu's ability to keep this delicate relationship on course.

A rightward political march — The larger, and largely unspoken, story of Israeli electoral politics over the past several years has been the precipitous decline of the Israeli left as an organizing force. In the last Israeli elections, back in 2015, the country's Labor party secured 19 mandates, buoyed by a partnership with former Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and her Zionist Union faction.

This week's electoral results, however, marked a nadir for Labor, which managed to snag just six Knesset seats — a showing that relegates the once-powerful party to the country's political sidelines for the foreseeable future. By contrast, the size of the vote in favor of both Netanyahu's conservative Likud and Gantz's centrist Kachol Lavan demonstrate unequivocally that the center of gravity in Israeli politics is now squarely on the center-right.

No countervailing strategy — Gantz's coalition scored an uncharacteristically robust showing for a new political grouping, indicating a significant Israeli appetite for a new face in national politics. But Gantz and his political partner, former television host Yair Lapid, were long on rhetoric and short on practical policy prescriptions, failing to lay out a clear path to political victory or even to articulate the principles that would animate their ruling coalition if they did win.

Netanyahu, by contrast, did just that. In the weeks ahead of Tuesday's election, he made some public — and deeply controversial — moves to cobble together a durable right-wing bloc for his future government, thereby showing that he was thinking well beyond this week's polls.

Where does all this leave Israel's national scene? In the aftermath of the election, Netanyahu's political mandate — and his projected coalition, which now spans 66 seats — is broader than ever before. But victory at the ballot box doesn't spell the end of the Prime Minister's domestic legal troubles, and that's something his opposition is banking on.

In his concession speech on Wednesday, Kachol Lavan's Lapid signaled that his party was keeping an eye on the ongoing investigations against Netanyahu, and that it was organizing in case legal troubles succeed in bringing down the government in the coming year.

That may simply be wishful thinking. Then again, as Israel's notoriously unpredictable politics have proven time and again, just about anything can happen in the Middle East's only real democracy.

In the meantime, Netanyahu's political opposition has hit upon a new agenda: Making trouble for the Prime Minister and his new government. "We didn't win in this round," Lapid has proclaimed, but "We will make Likud's life hell in the opposition." So much, it seems, for the prospect of national unity.

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