

Netanyahu, Gantz, and Five Scenarios for the Israeli Election

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If the final polls on the Israeli election are to be believed—by law, there will be no more revealed before the voting begins, on Tuesday morning—things are looking better for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud Party than for Blue and White, the new centrist party led by the former military Chief of Staff Benny Gantz. The two continue to run neck and neck in the race for a plurality in the Knesset—with about thirty seats each, out of a total of a hundred and twenty. But both are running with a bloc of smaller parties, and Netanyahu's bloc seems more likely than Gantz's to win a sixty-one-seat Knesset majority.

The President typically bestows a mandate to form a government on the leader of the party that wins a plurality—except in cases where a bloc of parties led by someone else wins a clear majority. That is how Netanyahu won in 2009, and it's why the polls still favor him. A majority of voters are now either hoping that he will remain in office, or are bracing for it. In a recent Channel 12 poll, fifty-eight per cent of respondents said that Netanyahu will be the next Prime Minister. But only thirty-six per cent *wanted* him to be.

Given the quirks of the Israeli electoral system, though, the polls may prove misleading. The margin of error is around four per cent, which means that it may be impossible to divine the fates of the all-important smaller parties. Each must win three and a quarter per cent of the total vote in order to enter the Knesset; a vote for a party that does not clear that threshold is simply wasted. Fully seven parties—two in Gantz's potential bloc, five in

Netanyahu's—have been polling close to extinction at various points in the campaign. Moreover, according to an April 2nd poll, more than eight per cent of voters are still undecided.

So Gantz's bloc could squeak out a win. Or Netanyahu's could win in a landslide. Or either leader could win a plurality for his party, but not a majority for his bloc. In fact, the polls reveal little about the serious difficulties that either of them, even with a clear win, will face in forming a government. Consider the head-spinning possibilities:

Gantz wins outright—and his problems begin. For Blue and White to win a plurality, a significant number of secular, formerly right-of-center voters will have to support it. So will a significant number of young first-time voters. This is a tall order: to most Israelis, the business sector seems strong, as does the deterrence of enemies, and Netanyahu gets credit for both. So even young Israelis tend to [skew right](#). A poll conducted by the Israel Democracy Institute shows that among Israelis aged sixty-five and older, Gantz beats Netanyahu fifty-three per cent to thirty-five; among voters aged eighteen to twenty-four, Netanyahu beats Gantz sixty-five per cent to seventeen.

Gantz and his allies have been courting these secular, security-minded voters, promising to provide a hard line on security—three of the four senior leaders of Blue and White are former generals—and that he will form a government only with Zionist (read: non-Arab) parties. He is also stressing the importance of the rule of law, [warning](#) of Netanyahu's alliance with messianists and proto-fascist followers of the late Rabbi Meir Kahane—of the danger that Netanyahu is turning Israel into an authoritarian theocracy, as Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has done in Turkey—and promising to force ultra-Orthodox Haredi schools, which focus on religious studies, to also teach such basic subjects as math and English. He is presenting himself as a

return to an eclipsed, progressive Israeliness.

Blue and White's winning a majority bloc is another matter, however. For that, it will have to hold its own without luring (even more) voters away from Zionist allies in its block—the Labor Party and the left-wing Meretz Party—who will have to perform at least as well if not better than expected. More important, Gantz will need the Arab vote to be substantially higher than it has been, both to elect more Arab Knesset members—who would block Netanyahu's rightists—and to raise the electoral threshold, thus sinking marginal rightist parties. But the polls anticipate a [decline in the Arab vote](#), putting one Arab party at risk of dropping below the Knesset threshold.

So Gantz would be trapped. He'd need support from secular-left and Arab parties to get the Presidential mandate. He'd then have forty-five days to form a government. But, to form a government only with Zionists, he'd need not only Labor and Meretz but also some combination of rightist parties, including some of the ultra-Orthodox and rightist zealots whom he's been running against.

According to *Haaretz*, Gantz has [hinted](#) which of those parties he'd court. He's reportedly planning to approach United Torah Judaism, a veteran Haredi party that is traditionally hostile to secular Zionism, but never mind; the Haredim have schools and rabbinic sinecures to protect, and would therefore, at least notionally, be willing to join any government. Gantz is also courting two small parties that grew out of the Likud. First, there is the populist Kulanu ("All Together"), which appeals primarily to Mizrahi Jews, of Middle Eastern descent, who do not see returning to an older Israel, run by descendants of European pioneers, as a plus; Kulanu's leader, [Moshe Kahlon](#), is currently the finance minister. Then there is Zehut ("Identity"), which espouses a strange mix of libertarian rhetoric—chiefly, in support of the legalization of weed—and a mystical religious attachment to the

settlement movement and to the goal of building a Third Temple on the Temple Mount. Any of these parties might be willing to join a coalition in exchange for being awarded key ministries, which would likely upset promises made to the leftist parties.

Gantz seems to be counting on eating his Zionist cake while depending on those who would not have it. (One Arab party, Hadash-Ta'al, has already announced that it will support him.) If the rightist parties decide not to join him, he would have to form a minority government with Labor and Meretz, with the Arab members of Knesset provisionally voting with them from the back benches. (This was the arrangement that Yitzhak Rabin lived with during the Oslo process, before he was assassinated by a rightist zealot.) Gantz's senior ally at the head of Blue and White, Yair Lapid, has dismissed this prospect out of hand. But the party may have no other choice, except to find some kind accommodation with the Likud, about which more presently.

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Netanyahu wins outright—and saves himself. Netanyahu is facing

indictments. The fact that his bloc is still in the lead is a tribute to his campaign—and to his desperation. He seems to have grasped that swing voters have been looking not for sophisticated policy initiatives or democratic scruples but toughness. Opponents with a comparatively stronger military background, particularly Blue and White's generals, could have been a problem; so Netanyahu's campaign has used social media, aided by timely leaks, to warp Gantz's record, depicting him as indecisive, weak, possibly compromised by a hacked phone—and, in any case, beholden to Arab voters. (An Israeli watchdog group has [uncovered](#) a network of hundreds of social-media accounts, many of them fake, used to smear Netanyahu's opponents.)

Netanyahu has meanwhile flaunted his personal relationships with [Donald Trump](#), who, in effect, made a [campaign video](#) for him, and with Vladimir Putin; brought the new, autocratic Brazilian President, Jair Bolsonaro, to Jerusalem; announced Trump's recognition of Israel's Golan Heights annexation; and called up reserves, ostensibly to attack on the Gaza front, while suggesting a behind-the-scenes deal with Hamas. He's projecting indispensability. Ideally, from his perspective, he would have a five- or six-seat cushion in the Knesset, so that none of the smaller parties could threaten to bring him down or extort too much from coalition negotiations.

Netanyahu would have another incentive, however, to coddle the most extremist of those parties, who, in turn, could play on his legal problems to gain access to power. His hearings are scheduled for July and, if he is not cleared, which seems likely, he will be forced to stand trial; according to precedent and Supreme Court rulings, ministers who are indicted must resign. Netanyahu's way around this is to form a coalition that will urgently pass two laws. The first, already [pending in various versions](#), would give the Knesset the right to overturn, by a simple majority, any Supreme Court decision that strikes down an existing law as unconstitutional; the second

would make it illegal to indict a sitting Prime Minister, as opposed to an ordinary minister. In effect, Netanyahu would be putting himself above the law. Only the various ultra-nationalist and Kahanist [parties](#) have signalled that they would go along with this plan; Netanyahu is their ticket into the government, and they already regard the Supreme Court as their nemesis.

Pandering to their voters, Netanyahu promised on Saturday that his next government would apply Israeli law to virtually all West Bank settlements—in effect, annexing large swaths of Palestinian territory. Arguably, this is his most audacious move so far. The promise may unsettle some wavering voters, and, ironically, if it draws more rightist voters to the Likud, Netanyahu may gain his plurality at the cost of a smaller rightist party's failure to pass the threshold, thus weakening or even endangering his bloc's majority.

Netanyahu wins narrowly—and faces a Likud revolt. If Netanyahu's bloc does win only a bare majority, his ability to form a government won't be much better than Gantz's. Smaller, extremist parties would have the leverage to demand being put in charge of key ministries. They could also preëempt any consideration of the Trump peace plan, which is expected to make some gestures toward eventual Palestinian sovereignty, however reduced in scope.

In either case, senior Likud leaders—for example, Gideon Sa'ar, the former education minister who has tangled with Netanyahu in the past—would not be pleased with the idea of ceding power to the smaller parties. Moshe Kahlon, whose support Netanyahu may need again, has, for his part, always protected the Supreme Court. Either man might inherit the Likud's leadership if Netanyahu were forced out. The former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, an experienced veteran of similar negotiations, has privately indicated that he doubts senior Likud ministers would be ready to sacrifice

their political futures, and give up so many senior positions in the cabinet, just to save the Prime Minister for the few months until his hearings may force him to face trial.

A unity government is negotiated. This is a radical possibility that may appear less so as the post-election dust settles. If Netanyahu's pending indictments were not a stumbling block, the conundrum facing both leading parties would militate for a government of national unity, which would keep out the ultra-rightists and the Kahanists, and could expand to include, say, Labor and Kulanu. Indeed, in ordinary years, such a government would seem irresistible. It might entail a rotation agreement—as Labor and Likud had in a unity government established in [1984](#)—with one leader holding the Prime Minister's job for the first two years of a four-year term, and the other for the last two.

The President, Reuven Rivlin, concerned about the integrity of civil society and its judicial institutions, is reported to be [entertaining](#) this idea. It's hard to believe that a vast majority of voters for both parties wouldn't see it as a relief. Gantz's animus for Netanyahu is real. But he was secretly recorded saying that "the door is closed but not locked," regarding [joining with the Likud](#) in a unity government—if Netanyahu's criminal proceedings don't get in the way. This might be interpreted as wanting to wait until the hearings determine, finally, whether the Prime Minister will be indicted. Other arrangements might become plausible as the most obvious options narrow. Blue and White leaders might break away and join Netanyahu without Gantz, or various Likud leaders might join with Gantz without Netanyahu. Rationalizations, from both sides, would not be wanting.

A unity government is installed. Netanyahu's proceedings *are* in the way, however. And it is hard to see how any unity government—any leaders other than Netanyahu sycophants in the Likud and right-extremists—will agree to

hand Netanyahu new laws that tamper with basic constitutional law. The only way that he could be moved aside is if Rivlin, who has long been alienated from him, consults with all parties, concedes a virtual tie, and turns to a third member of the Knesset—say, a veteran Likud rival such as Sa’ar—and asks that member to assemble a coalition. The move would be unprecedented, and it would have to be coordinated with Gantz, but he has already made it clear that he would [go for a coalition](#) with the Likud sans Netanyahu—if only to keep the Kahanists out.

There is much to learn from this campaign, none of it reassuring. Like Trump’s supporters, Netanyahu’s often seem to so deeply identify with his everyman posturing, his regional bullying, and his nationalist resentments that democratic institutions can be made to appear as just another élitist preoccupation. The Passover Haggadah, which will be read in a couple of weeks’ time, says that the “simple son” is answered with shows of strength. Netanyahu has grasped the lesson.