

Left and Right in dead heat with most votes counted

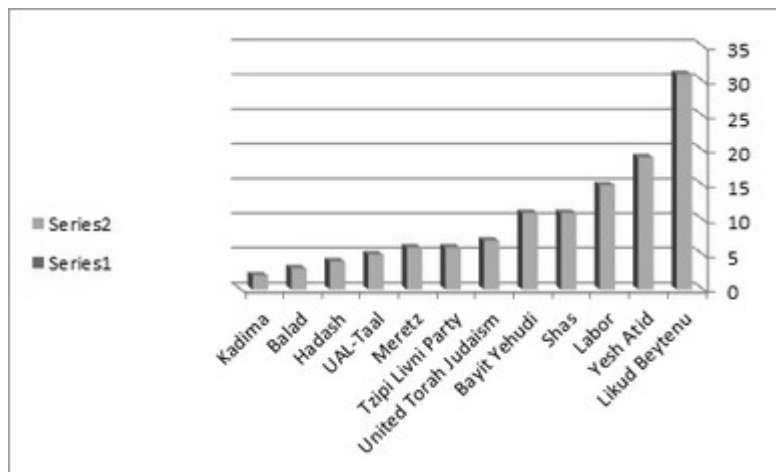
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By GIL HOFFMAN

With 99.8% of votes tallied, Right and Left blocs tie with 60 seats each; voter turnout 66.6%; Likud-Beytenu receive 31 seats, Yesh Atid 19, Labor 15, Bayit Yehudi, Shas 11, Livni, Meretz 6 each, UAL-Taal 5, Hadash 4, Kadima 2.

Netanyahu visit Western Wall after voting, Jan. 22, 2013 Photo: Marc Israel Sellem

With the polls closed and the majority of votes tallied, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's Likud Beytenu list appears to have done even worse in Tuesday's election than public opinion polls predicted last week, winning 31 seats - 11 fewer than the 42 the two parties held in the last parliament.

In a clear shift away from the Right, the Center-Left bloc, which won only 55 seats in the 2009 election, had risen to 60 seats to bring it at an even split with the Right.



The 19th Knesset show 31 seats for Likud - Beytenu, Yesh Atid as the second biggest party with 19, Labor in third at 15, with Shas and Bayit Yehudi at 11 seats each, the Central Elections Committee announced.

United Torah Judaism received 7 seats, and the Tzipi Livni Party and Meretz received six seats each.

For the Arab parties, UAL - Taal received 5, Hadash 4, and Balad 3.

Kadima just passed the threshold with two seats.

Netanyahu tried to make the best of the results, saying he viewed them as an endorsement of his leadership and vowing to immediately start working on forming a coalition that would include parties on the Right, Left and Center. He immediately

called Yesh Atid chairman Yair Lapid, who won an unexpected 19 seats, and asked him to cooperate with him in his next government.

“The exit polls clearly indicate that the citizens of Israel want me to continue to serve as prime minister of Israel and form the widest possible government,” Netanyahu wrote on Facebook. “The results are a great opportunity to make many changes for the benefit of the citizens of Israel.”

But other officials in the Likud said in closed conversations that Netanyahu had proven that he was no longer “king of Israel,” as he had been crowned by Time magazine in May. They said he could expect a challenge to his leadership in the Likud.

Likud officials also blasted Netanyahu for brokering an unsuccessful deal with Yisrael Beytenu chairman Avigdor Liberman, and religious Zionists for joining Likud en masse but then voting for Naftali Bennett’s Bayit Yehudi party.

Yesh Atid will be the second- largest party in the Knesset according to the exit polls, and likely the second-largest in the coalition. Likud officials said Lapid could be foreign minister if the Finance portfolio were held for Liberman pending the resolution of his legal troubles.

The Education portfolio could end up going to Lapid’s No. 2, Rabbi Shai Piron, who runs a nonprofit organization focusing on education.

Labor chairwoman Shelly Yacimovich called on Lapid not to join a Netanyahu government and to instead join her in trying to form an alternative coalition focusing on socioeconomic issues. Yesh Atid officials said they would not hurry to make a decision.

One of the biggest losers in the race was Tzipi Livni's party, which the exit polls predicted would win only six or seven seats, far short of providing an alternative to Likud Beytenu as Livni promised.

She vowed to remain in politics and said she was glad that the Center-Left had grown.

But Labor’s No. 2, MK Isaac Herzog, blasted Livni, saying that if she would have accepted overtures from Yacimovich to join Labor, the party could have won more than 30 Knesset seats and formed the next government.

During the campaign, Lapid ruled out entering the next coalition without another Center- Left party. If Kadima does not pass the two-percent threshold, as the TV exit polls indicated, the most likely coalition is seen as Likud Beytenu, Yesh Atid, Bayit Yehudi, Shas and The Tzipi Livni Party.

The Shas triumvirate was divided over whether it could sit in a coalition with Yesh Atid. While Arye Deri said reluctantly that he would not rule it out, MK Eli Yishai answered affirmatively without hesitation.

“If Lapid wants to sit in a stable government that will make compromises, we can sit with him,” Yishai said. “If he wants to continue with political spin, it won’t happen.”

Deri expressed satisfaction and optimism with his party’s exit poll results, and promised to protect the weak sectors of society whom Shas has campaigned for in the next government.

Deri called for Netanyahu to form a national-unity government with Labor, rather than with Yesh Atid.

The turnout in the election was higher than expected, in part because of the sunny weather. The Central Elections Committee said turnout was 66.6%, numbering some 3,767,000 people, an increase over the 64.7% of the 2009 election.

The high turnout raised the number of votes needed to cross the 2-percent electoral threshold. The television exit polls indicated that neither Kadima nor Strong Israel would cross the threshold.

If Kadima does not make it into the Knesset, it would be a historic downfall for a party that won 28 seats in 2009 and formed the government in 2006.

One of the big winners on Tuesday was Meretz, which doubled in size from three seats in 2009 to six or seven, according to the exit polls.

If the exit polls hold true, more than half of the MKs who served over the past four years will not be coming back.

US Ambassador Dan Shapiro tweeted his congratulations to Israelis soon after polls closed Tuesday night.

“Mazal tov to the Israeli people on their just completed elections! Always inspiring to see democracy in action!” he wrote. He later posted that the United States “looks forward to working closely with next government of Israel.”

In Washington, Rep. Eliot Engel (D-New York), ranking member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, released a statement praising Israel’s democracy.

“Israel demonstrated once again that it is the only flourishing democracy in the Middle East,” he said.

Engel went on to congratulate Netanyahu for his firstplace finish but said that the “US Congress stands shoulder to shoulder with the State of Israel” across its political spectrum.

He added, “We in Congress will always defend Israel. This commitment is ironclad, a pledge made by Democrats and Republicans alike.”

Hilary Leila Krieger contributed to this report.