

## QUICK POLICY INSIGHT

# A tied 19<sup>th</sup> Knesset

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Although Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's Likud-Beitenu narrowly confirmed its leading position in the Israeli Knesset, the substantially changed composition of the assembly may signal impasses and changes ahead. New members will assume 53 of the legislature's 120 seats.

The European Parliament should monitor the coalition that will be formed, as its composition and impact on policies of real interest to the EU is far from obvious.

### Final results

The voter turnout was the highest since 1999.

Some 5.7 million eligible Israeli citizens were invited to cast their ballots to elect the 19<sup>th</sup> Knesset. As the last elections were held in February 2009, the outgoing, 18<sup>th</sup> Knesset completed its full session — unusual in Israel, where calls for early elections are common. The overall voter turnout in was 66.6 %, up one and a half points from the 2009 elections and the highest since 1999.

With 99.5 % of the votes counted, the right-wing/Orthodox bloc maintains half of the seats (60 of 120) in the new Knesset. This is fewer than the 65 they held in the outgoing Knesset.

The outcome of the elections is a Knesset split down the middle: right-wing parties hold 60 seats, exactly the same number as the centre-left (including parties representing the Palestinian minority).

Support for Likud-Beitenu, the joint right-wing list of Netanyahu and the former Minister for Foreign Affairs Avigor Lieberman, plunged (down eleven seats to 31). Ultra-right nationalist Naftali Bennett's Jewish Home (*Habayait Hayehudi*) party, which is associated with the settler movement, won 11 seats – less than most polls had predicted. Among the Orthodox Jewish parties, Shas came away with 11 seats and United Torah Judaism with 7.

The former TV journalist Yair Lapid and his new, centrist party Yesh Atid scored very well, coming in second place with 19 seats. Kadima, the biggest single party in the 2009 elections, barely exceeded the 2 % electoral threshold, retaining two seats in the new Knesset. Hatnuah, former (Kadima) prime minister Tzipi Livni's new party, obtained six seats.

The elections marked the reappearance of the Jewish left on the Israeli

The Palestinian minority did not to fully exercise their voting rights.

Efforts to form a coalition government may prove long and difficult.

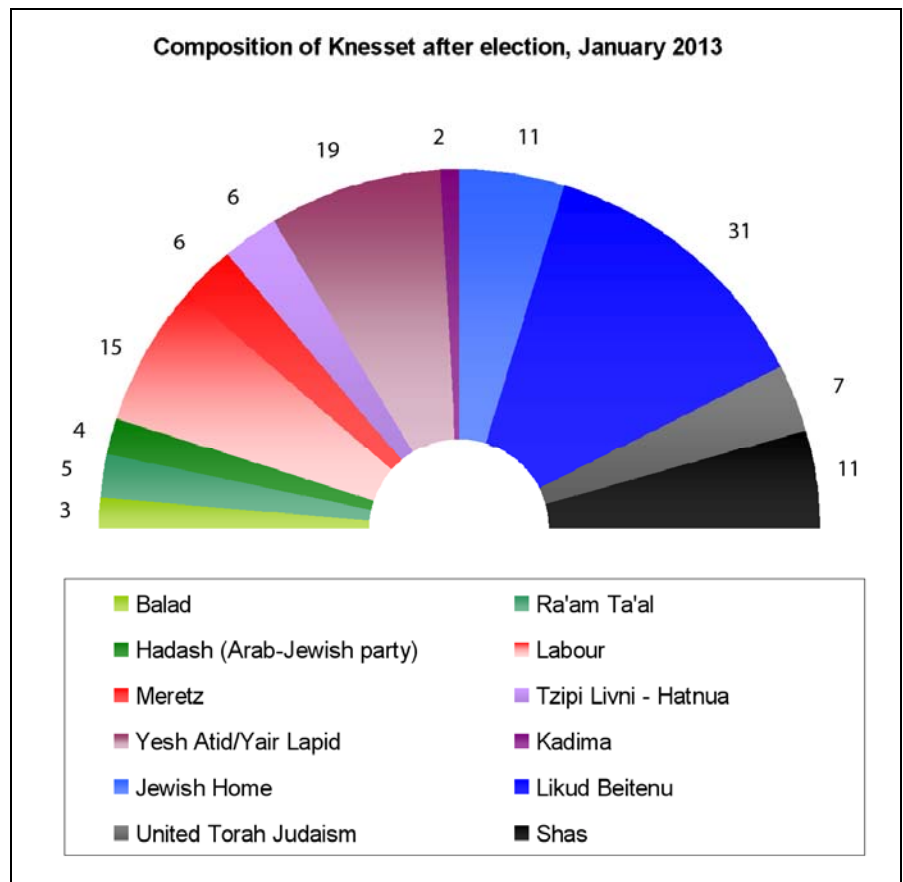
political scene: the social-democratic Meretz party doubled its strength to six seats, while Labour also nearly doubled its hold: with 15 seats, Labour becomes the third-largest party in the new Knesset.

Participation of Israeli Palestinians, who represent about 20 % of the country's population, was weak. Three groups obtained fewer than 10 % of the seats in the new Knesset: Ra'am Ta'al (5), Hadash, a Palestinian-Jewish Party (4) and Balad (3). Many Palestinian political leaders in Israel have expressed regret with the fragmentation within the Palestinian minority and the low turnout among their potential supporters, calling it 'a lost chance' to change Israeli politics.

The results are expected to pose impediments for Netanyahu as he seeks to form a coalition. The Prime Minister's victory speech shortly after midnight included his vow to form as broad a coalition as possible. Aside from the Likud's natural partners, he said, Yesh Atid represented a 'true partner'. As the leader of the Knesset's second-largest party, Lapid is not likely to refuse an invitation to join the coalition.

The Labour party chairwoman Shelly Yachimovich, who has excluded any coalition with Likud-Beitenu, has interpreted the results as a substantial change in the balance of power and warned that there is 'a high probability of a political upset' in Israel.

**Figure 1:**  
Composition of Knesset after the election



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