Israel's politics in the run-up to the elections

In December 2014, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called early national elections, scheduled for 17 March 2015, after dissolving the coalition arrangement underpinning the government formed after the January 2013 elections. Differences on Palestinian issues and budgetary matters, between Netanyahu, of the right-wing Likud party, and centrist parties in his coalition, reportedly contributed to the decision. Israel's positions on a host of regional security and socioeconomic issues could be influenced by the election results.

Political landscape

Israel is a parliamentary democracy with a single legislative chamber, the Knesset. The Prime Minister, usually leader of the largest party, is head of government, and leads the cabinet in whose hands executive power resides. The outgoing Prime Minister is Benjamin Netanyahu. The President is a largely ceremonial head of state. The current President, Reuven (Ruvi) Rivlin, took office in July 2014 for a seven-year term.

Israel does not have a written 'constitution'. Instead, the Basic Laws of Israel lay down the rules of government and enumerate fundamental rights. Israel has an independent judiciary, with a system of magistrates' courts and district courts headed by the Supreme Court, which acts as an important check on the government as it can invalidate provisions of Knesset laws which it has found to be inconsistent with a Basic Law. Since May 2003 the Knesset's Constitution, Law and Justice Committee has been working on a 'draft constitution'.

Debate in the election campaign has focused on a Netanyahu-supported, quasi-constitutional Basic Law that would define Israel as the 'nation-state of the Jewish people', with opponents asserting that such a bill could undermine Israel's commitment to democratic principles vis-à-vis its Arab population.

The political spectrum is highly fragmented, with small parties exercising disproportionate power due to the low vote threshold (of at least 3.25% of the vote for entry into the Knesset), and larger parties seeking small party support to form and maintain coalition governments. The average lifespan of an Israeli government has been about 23 months. The Knesset recently tightened the conditions for bringing down a government.

Parliamentary system

The Knesset (Hebrew for assembly) is the Israeli parliament, located in western Jerusalem. The Knesset has *de jure* parliamentary supremacy and can even amend the Basic Law in its capacity of Constituent Assembly, in accordance with a plan adopted in 1950. It is elected by universal suffrage for four-year terms (subject to dissolution). The **unicameral parliament consists of 120 lawmakers**, known as Knesset members or MKs, each chosen to represent their respective political parties. The Knesset can pass any law by a simple majority, even one that might arguably conflict with the Basic Laws of Israel. The Knesset is presided over by a Speaker and Deputy Speaker. As the legislative branch, the Knesset passes all laws, elects the President, approves the cabinet, and supervises the work of the government through its committees. It also has the power to waive the immunity of its members, remove the President and State Comptroller from office, and to dissolve itself and call new elections.

Electoral system

Israel has a multi-party system delivering coalition governments. It uses the closed list method of party-list proportional representation: citizens vote for their preferred party not for individual candidates. This means that voters elect nationally registered political factions — not local candidates. Each faction therefore 'receives representation in the 120-seat Knesset (parliament) proportional to how many votes it gets'. Factions must now **meet a threshold of at least 3.25% of the national vote to qualify for seats** in the

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Knesset, which are assigned using the D'Hondt method. The voting age for Israeli citizens is 18, and to stand for election is 21 years old. Elections are overseen by the Central Elections Committee and are held according to the Knesset Elections Law. The Committee is currently led by Israeli-Arab Supreme Court Judge, Salim Joubran. Parties are permitted to form electoral alliances enabling the alliance as whole to gain enough votes to meet the threshold and thus be allocated seats. Official results are published a day or two after polling day. The President then consults the leaders of all the parties to be represented in the Knesset. Within about a week, he will formally invite the party leader he considers most likely to be able to form a government to attempt to build a coalition with a 61-seat majority.

Main political parties

Likud (centre-right/right): Founded in 1973. It emphasises a national security policy based on a strong military response when Israel is threatened. Its suspicion of Arab intentions, however, has not prevented it reaching agreements, such as the 1979 peace treaty with Egypt. Likud's willingness to enter into mutually accepted agreements with the Arabs is related to the formation of other right-wing parties. Likud's leader is Benjamin Netanyahu.

Zionist Union (centre-left): An electoral pact since 2014, between the Labour Party, led by Isaac Herzog, and Hatnuah, led by Tzipi Livni. They accuse the right of extremism which polarises and isolates Israel. It combines a socioeconomic agenda with calls to advance diplomacy and improve Israel's standing.

Jewish Home (right-wing): Founded in 2008 and led by Naftali Bennett, the party represents religious-Zionists and territorial nationalists, including settlers, but has broader appeal due to its young, populist leader. Members adhere to the belief that Jews are divinely commanded to retain control over the Land of Israel and the party is staunchly opposed to a Palestinian state.

Yesh Atid (centre): Founded in 2012 with a diverse list, it is led by TV anchor and former Finance Minister Yair Lapid. It came second in 2013, winning 19 seats in the Knesset. Yesh Atid seeks to represent the secular middle class, and to push economic and social reforms, e.g. on housing and living costs.

Kulanu (centre-right): Founded in 2014, this party is led by former Likud Communications Minister Moshe Kahlon who is known for his support for egalitarian economics and for issues affecting the middle classes. The main focus is on tackling 'monopolies', but Kahlon has also recruited high-profile security and diplomatic candidates.

Yisrael Beitenu (centre-right): A Jewish nationalist party, founded in 1999, led by Avigdor Lieberman. The party's base has traditionally been secular, Russian-speaking Israelis, although it has also attempted to expand its appeal to a broader Israeli public. It is trying to appeal to centrist voters, proposing a peace plan.

Joint Arab List: Also referred to as United Arab list, it took its current form in 2015, although founded in 2006. It is led by Ayman Odeh, head of the new United Arab Party comprised of Balad, Ra'am-Ta'al, Hadash and the Islamic Movement. A deal was struck on 23 January 2015 whereby Israel's Arab political parties banded together for the first time ever, hoping to boost turnout and help unseat Netanyahu. It is a merger of diverse and often fractious Arab parties, forced by the raising of the election threshold to 3.25%.

A poll of Israeli Arab voters found more than 60% in favour of the Joint Arab List joining Israel's next government. It could boost Arab participation to historic levels in the forthcoming elections, increasing Israeli Arab representation and possibly change the political landscape in the Knesset significantly.

Smaller parties

United Torah Judaism (**Yahadut Hatorah**): An alliance of Degel HaTorah and Agudat Israel, two small Israeli Haredi (Ultra-Orthodox) parties, founded in 1992. It is led by Yaakov Litzman and Moshe Gafni.

Shas: Founded in 1984 and led by Aryeh Deri, is a Sephardi ultra-Orthodox party weakened by the death of its spiritual leader and internal splits.

Meretz: Founded in 1992 and led by Zahava Gal-On, it is the only self-identifying left-wing Zionist party.

Yachad: Founded in 2014 and led by Eli Yishai, the party was established following a rift between Shas leader Aryeh Deri and Eli Yishai. It agreed to run a joint list with Otzma Yehudit in the 2015 elections.

Recent polls show Likud and Zionist Union are very close in the battle to become the biggest party in the Knesset.