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Multipolar Israeli Race Boosts Netanyahu's Electoral Chances

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Israeli parties are placing a premium on capturing marginal votes within their blocs rather than competing across the left-right spectrum, and this status quo is working to Netanyahu's benefit.

Israeli election polls have been fairly stagnant in the lead-up to the March 17 parliamentary vote, despite a plethora of campaign tactics to shake up the race. Some fluidity has been seen within the wider political blocs, but little if any between them. Socioeconomics, geography, and ethnicity have reinforced the current blocs, making wild swings unlikely. Typically, Israel's upper-middle-class, secular Ashkenazi (European origin) voters tend to focus on the high cost of living and concerns about the country's potential isolation in Europe, making them more likely to vote center-left. In contrast, Sephardic (Middle East origin) voters with more traditional and humble socioeconomic roots tend to focus on security threats and are therefore more likely to vote right. The clear segmentation of the political spectrum has led to a variety of mini-races rather than one overarching race.

NETANYAHU LOOKS RIGHTWARD FOR VOTES

Polls suggest that 54% of Israelis oppose Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's plan to address the U.S. Congress on March 3. In the United States, such high disapproval could be decisive, but not in Israel. Currently, Netanyahu's Likud Party is expected to garner 20% of the vote, or twenty-five seats in the 120-member Knesset. If one adds the far-right Jewish Home Party voters, his tally could rise to around 30%, or thirty-six seats. Most of the 54% who disapprove of his upcoming congressional speech fall on the other side of the political spectrum and are largely irrelevant to his plans for wooing voters to his right. For similar reasons, the just-released comptroller's report on his personal household expenses is unlikely to change any of the race's underlying dynamics, particularly since it lacks a smoking gun that might spur criminal charges. Netanyahu believes he can use other factors to reach certain religious or centrist voters in postelection bargaining, but for now he has other priorities. This approach is counterintuitive to voters in America, where presidential candidates tend to moderate during general elections in the hope of appealing to the most voters.

Netanyahu's campaign schedule reinforces his intentions. For instance, he has very rarely visited West Bank settlements during his time in office, but just recently he visited the "non-bloc" settlement of Eli, far beyond the pre-1967 boundary. He also plans to make an appearance in Hebron -- whose citizens typically vote for the Jewish Home -- and a third as-yet-unidentified settlement. Jewish Home leader Naftali Bennett has publicly complained about the prime minister's campaign strategy, saying he should look to the center for voters.

Netanyahu may have several reasons for this rightward tilt. First, Israeli president Reuven Rivlin is tasked with deciding which party will receive a postelection mandate to configure a new coalition, and Netanyahu has publicly stated that Rivlin will base this decision on which party has the most votes. Rivlin's office has denied this, stating it will consider which party has the best prospect of configuring a stable government, but Netanyahu seems skeptical. There is longstanding enmity between him and Rivlin, so he is taking nothing for granted. With polls showing the Likud neck-and-neck with the Labor Party (now called the Zionist Union), he may believe this is the most urgent task at hand.

Netanyahu has an odd advantage that he did not have in 2013 -- he is not the presumptive frontrunner. To be sure, his path to the required sixty-one seats seems clearer given the proclivities of ultraorthodox parties; after he announced this week that he would eliminate criminal penalties against ultraorthodox Jews who evade the new military draft legislation, ultraorthodox leaders reportedly decided that they will endorse him in postelection consultations with Rivlin. Nevertheless, uncertainty about his prospects has helped him close ranks within his own party throughout the campaign. Because so many expected a Likud victory in 2013, Likud voters felt free to distribute their votes among a variety of parties. This year, however, Netanyahu has told his party's supporters that they cannot distribute their votes without risking the rise of Labor. In doing so, he has appropriated the "us or him" slogan previously used by his center-left rivals Isaac Herzog and Tzipi Livni.

Netanyahu's strategy has also hurt Bennett, who began the campaign expecting to win at least seventeen seats and perhaps even eclipsing the Likud. Yet current polls show his party at eleven seats, indicating that he has only

consolidated his religious base rather than winning over secular right voters. When he ran in 2013, Bennett was proud of being a high-tech success story whose party identified with Jewish tradition. Today, however, Jewish Home is defined more narrowly, as voters believe the party -- particularly Housing Minister Uri Ariel -- is prioritizing West Bank settlement expansion.

Although Bennett publicly acknowledged that he and Netanyahu declared a ceasefire at the start of the campaign, any lingering rift between them could have postelection implications. The main question is whether Netanyahu would keep the Jewish Home out of his government as he did in 2009 -- though the settler party won significantly fewer seats that year. Several people intimately familiar with Netanyahu's thinking say that he prefers a unity government with Labor over a narrow right-wing government, if only because placing moderates in prominent positions could help insulate Israel from expected international pressures.

TWO SWING PARTIES THAT HAVE NOT SWUNG

When the campaign began, pundits wondered if two smaller parties could hold the balance of power between Likud and Labor: Avigdor Liberman's Yisrael Beiteinu (Israel Our Home) Party, and Kulanu (All of Us), a new party formed by Moshe Kahlon, a minister in Netanyahu's 2009 government credited with deregulation of the cell-phone industry and the subsequent drop in consumer costs. Initially, some predicted the two parties could garner a combined twenty-five to thirty seats. Yet current projections indicate they may not even attain half of that.

This is largely due to two factors impeding Yisrael Beiteinu: an ongoing police investigation alleging corruption, and the broader difficulty of remaining a Russian immigrant party twenty-five years after the main wave of immigration. Early polls predicted up to fifteen seats for the party, and Israeli media was rife with reports that Liberman could be the kingmaker or even the next prime minister. The party's numbers have since plummeted to six seats, however. Most of Liberman's prospective supporters appear to be returning to Netanyahu, with whom he ran in a joint Likud/Yisrael Beiteinu list in 2013. Liberman's ability to play a swing role seems to have been eliminated as well; Likud officials told Russian voters that he might take right-wing votes to a center-left government, and as his numbers dropped, he was apparently forced to announce that he will not join a center-left coalition.

If one adds Liberman to Netanyahu and Bennett's polling data, the projections for right-wing parties are virtually identical to those seen in the 2013 election. Combined with the ultraorthodox votes, this would give Netanyahu enough for a majority of the Knesset -- an outcome he would cite as important leverage in any postelection bargaining with Labor.

For his part, Kahlon has yet to catch fire and seems stuck at seven seats. Those seats appear to come at the expense of Finance Minister Yair Lapid's Yesh Atid (There Is a Future) Party, which won nineteen seats in 2013 but is now polling at eleven to twelve. Both parties focus on socioeconomic issues such as the high cost of living. While Lapid attracts upper-middle-class Ashkenazic voters from north Tel Aviv, Kahlon draws in more Sephardic voters from the Tel Aviv metropolitan area. One can expect the competition between them to heat up in the next month.

POTENTIAL X FACTORS

If any movement occurs between rival blocs, it would likely result from Labor chairman Isaac Herzog's effort to reach "Likud lite" voters. These voters are often influenced by an upsurge in terrorism or other perceived security threat. Since 1996, Likud has gained electorally whenever a security incident unfolds on the eve of an election. Therefore, Netanyahu has put the spotlight on terrorist attacks in Copenhagen and Paris and publicly talked about ISIS and the Iranian nuclear issue. Yet one potential security threat could benefit Likud's rivals this time around: an upsurge in attacks from Gaza, where Netanyahu claims to have solved the Hamas issue last summer.

A campaign debate between Netanyahu and Herzog could also shift the projections. In the 1996 election, then opposition leader Netanyahu benefited from the debate and squeaked out a victory by less than one percent. Yet he refused to debate an opponent in 2009 and 2013 -- and won both races.

Finally, Labor is hoping that the undecided vote will break for Herzog, since it catapulted Lapid's party to the second biggest tally in 2013. The question is whether that phenomenon can be repeated. Labor supporters cite polls that show many of the undecideds are dissatisfied with Netanyahu's performance, leading them to believe an electoral surprise is indeed possible.

CONCLUSION

The multipolar nature of Israeli parties has made it more difficult for one overarching issue to dominate the campaign. To the contrary, it has put more of a premium on capturing marginal votes within the blocs, as the parties count on identity politics and demographics to keep their overall structure steady a month before the elections. So far, the status quo is working to Netanyahu's benefit.

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