LFI Focus: To Bibi, or not to Bibi

Earlier this summer, Benjamin Netanyahu became Israel's longest-serving prime minister. His days in the premiership may, however, now be limited.
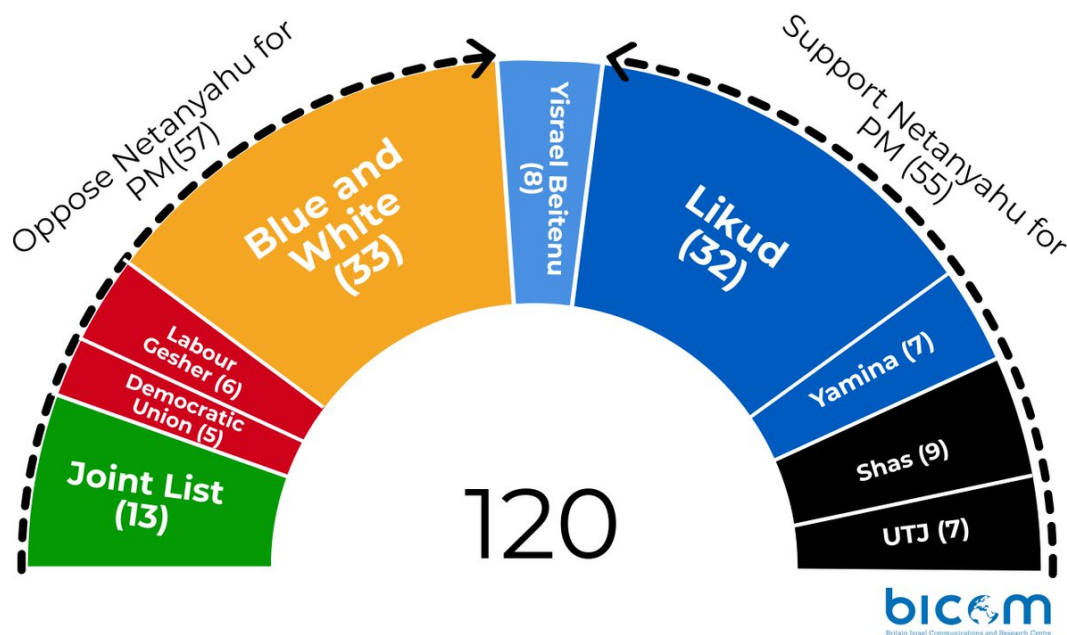
April's general election ended in a stalemate when Netanyahu's former ally and defence minister, Avigdor Liberman, refused to enter the new right-wing coalition the prime minister had assembled. The leader of the nationalist Yisrael Beitenu party objected to a key demand of Netanyahu's ultra-Orthodox partners to reverse a planned watering-down of exemptions from military service for Haredi young men.

Netanyahu then gambled: instead of allowing Benny Gantz, the leader of the next biggest party, the opportunity to form a government, he persuaded the Knesset to dissolve itself, thus triggering new elections.

That gamble didn't pay off for the prime minister. Five months later and Israelis have elected another apparently deadlocked Knesset – with Liberman once again finding himself in the role of kingmaker. Crucially, however, Netanyahu and his Likud party emerged from the general election on 19 September rather weaker. Having been just one seat short of winning a majority in the 120-member Knesset after April's poll, the prime minister came out of this election down by six.

So, what happened and what happens next?

The results

Oppose Netanyahu for PM(57)

Support Netanyahu for PM (55)

Blue and White (33)

Yisrael Beitenu (8)

Likud (32)

Labour Gesher (6)

Democratic Union (5)

Joint List (13)

Yamina (7)

Shas (9)

UTJ (7)

120

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Unlike in April, when the two parties fought each other to a draw, Gantz's centrist Blue and White alliance managed to narrowly edge ahead of Likud by 33 to 32 seats.

Together, Netanyahu's potential coalition partners – the ultra-Orthodox Shas and United Torah Judaism parties and pro-settler Yamina party – took the right's total to 55 seats.

On the left, the Democratic Camp – which was launched by former Labor prime minister Ehud Barak, the left-wing Meretz party, and joined by Labor defector Stav Shaffir – won five seats. Labor won six; holding its own but not clawing back any ground after its worst-ever performance in April's poll.
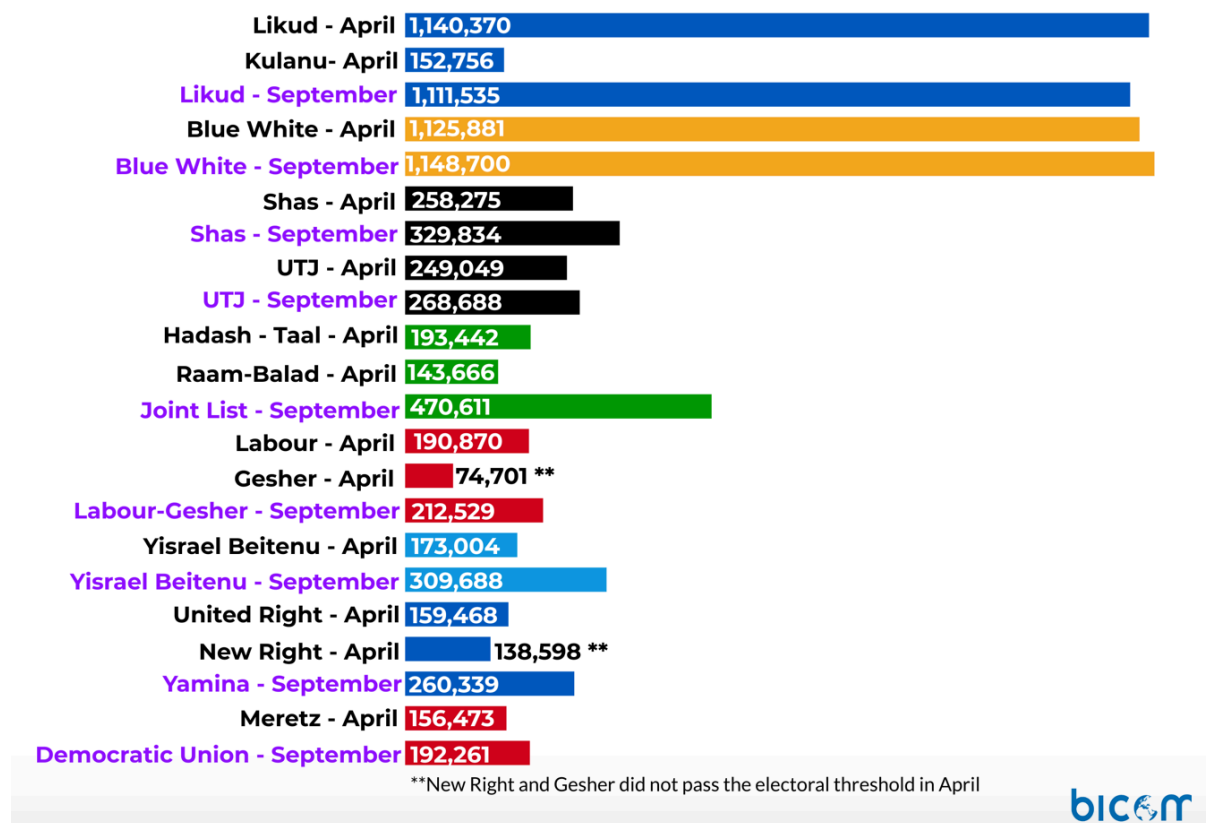
The Joint List of Arab parties, which won 13 seats, became the third largest group in the Knesset after Blue and White and Likud.

Yisrael Beitenu was, alongside the Joint List, the big winner of the night – adding three seats to the five it won in April.

Despite predictions of a breakthrough, the far-right Otzma Yehudit polled only 1.87 percent of the vote, falling considerably short of the 3.25 percent threshold required to enter the Knesset.

Once you add in Yisrael Beitenu, around 54 percent of Israelis voted for parties opposed to Netanyahu.

Fragmentation on the right

Party	Votes
Likud - April	1,140,370
Kulanu- April	152,756
Likud - September	1,111,535
Blue White - April	1,125,881
Blue White - September	1,148,700
Shas - April	258,275
Shas - September	329,834
UTJ - April	249,049
UTJ - September	268,688
Hadash - Taal - April	193,442
Raam-Balad - April	143,666
Joint List - September	470,611
Labour - April	190,870
Gesher - April	74,701 **
Labour-Gesher - September	212,529
Yisrael Beitenu - April	173,004
Yisrael Beitenu - September	309,688
United Right - April	159,468
New Right - April	138,598 **
Yamina - September	260,339
Meretz - April	156,473
Democratic Union - September	192,261

**New Right and Gesher did not pass the electoral threshold in April

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In 2015, when Netanyahu defied the polls and pulled off a surprise election win, he did so by deploying two complementary strategies: the so-called "gevalt" – or alarm – campaign and cannibalising the support of other right-wing parties. The former relied on him issuing dark warnings of the dangers that would ensue from not re-electing him; the latter sought to drive right-wing voters away from smaller parties and into the Likud camp. In 2015, he notoriously warned on polling day about a surge in Arab Israeli voters. Netanyahu mimicked such scaremongering in this campaign by making spurious allegations of voter fraud by Arab Israelis.

But both of these strategies appeared to falter on this occasion. As David Makovsky argued: "Like the boy who cried wolf, he had used this tactic too many times in the past, and voters ignored his pleas."

In fact, Netanyahu's tactics may even have backfired. The smears directed against Arab Israelis appear to have provoked a reaction; the Joint List's strong performance rested in part on a jump in turnout among Arab Israeli voters. While overall turnout rose marginally from 67.9 percent five months ago to 69.4 percent, among Arab Israelis – eight in 10 of whom vote for the Joint List – it leapt by about 10 percent. This gave the Joint List an additional three seats and thus helped to weaken Netanyahu's right-wing bloc.

Even the red meat that Netanyahu tossed to the right – a promise to annex the Jordan Valley which echoed similar pledges in April about West Bank settlements – also appeared not to

have worked their electoral magic. Voters have become used to Netanyahu making – and breaking – such hardline pre-election promises too many times previously.

Moreover, the prime minister's effort to paint Gantz – a one-time IDF commander who leads a party whose leadership includes three other former generals – as a dangerous leftist and a danger to Israel's security appears not to have cut through.

Indeed, Netanyahu's lack of progress since the April elections is demonstrated by the apparent failure of the deals he struck with the self-styled "sane right" Kulanu party and the libertarian Zehut party. Under its leader, finance minister Moshe Khalon, Kulanu won four seats in April (down from 10 in 2015). In May, Kulanu and Likud formally merged, with Netanyahu crowing that "with Kahlon we will win 40 seats" – an accurate reflection of the pre-merger combined strength of the two parties. Instead, Likud won 31 seats.

Netanyahu's failure is even starker given the agreement he reached with Zehut in August, by which the party – which, though it did not manage to enter the Knesset, polled 180,000 votes in April – dropped out of the elections in return for the promise of a ministerial post and a pledge by the prime minister to advance its signature policy of cannabis legalisation. Together, the three parties won a combined 1,411,157 votes in April. In September, that dropped to 1,111,535 – indeed, Likud managed to win 14,000 more votes than that alone five months ago.

An analysis of six cities – three Likud strongholds, and three which lean to the centre-left – by the Times of Israel illustrates the shifts since April. In all six cities, Likud's share of the vote held steady or dropped slightly, despite the merger with Kulanu. Yisrael Beitenu picked up votes across all six cities, while Labor gained support in the Likud bastions and the Democratic Union made progress in the cities – such as Tel Aviv – where Meretz has its base.

Overall, Blue and White outperformed Likud in most central Israeli towns surrounding Tel Aviv, with Netanyahu's party beating its rival in the south of the country. In the north, Blue and White did best in large cities such as Haifa, while Likud won the smaller so-called "periphery towns".

However, while Netanyahu did best in southern Israel, his party's support both there and elsewhere slipped compared with April's poll. In the south, he likely suffered due to continued rocket fire from Gaza. Previous Likud strongholds, like Netanya, Bat Yam, Naharia, and Acre all saw a several percentage point drop from the last election. Together, these local dips hit Likud hard nationally.

These former Likud voters are believed to have dispersed to a variety of parties, including Yisrael Beitenu, Labor, Blue and White, as well as the ultra-Orthodox Shas party.

Liberman the kingmaker

But it is Liberman who probably did Netanyahu most damage. His decision not to accede to the demands of the ultra-Orthodox parties after April's elections, and his subsequent assault

on Likud's reliance on them, attacks on "religious coercion" and calls for a "national-liberal" unity government excluding Shas and UTJ helped to reshape the nature of the campaign.

While the ultra-Orthodox parties represent only around one-tenth of Israel's population, they have traditionally exercised outsize influence as a vital building bloc in coalition governments. At one time, they worked with governments of right and left – their demands are less ideological than driven by sectoral interests. But during the Netanyahu years they have become increasingly associated with the right.

That association now appears to be costing Netanyahu politically, shifting the political debate from the security agenda – long his electoral trump card – to more contentious issues around religion and state which divide his base.

As AP's Aron Heller wrote of the ultra-Orthodox parties: "They use their political clout to sustain a segregated lifestyle centred on prayer and study, and raising large families on taxpayer-funded handouts. They also run a network of schools that often teach little math or English, and have blocked legislation to require their community to serve in the military, like most other Jewish citizens."

At the same time, Heller continued: "On top of carrying the military and financial burden, the secular majority resents having the ultra-religious encroach upon their lifestyle and civil liberties. The ultra-Orthodox establishment prevents public transportation and most commerce on the Sabbath and wields a monopoly over matters of marriage, burials and conversions. In recent years, they've also delayed infrastructure projects and architectural digs over religious concerns."

These divisions were starkly illustrated by the election results from Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. The former – young, liberal and cosmopolitan – overwhelmingly backed centrist and left-wing parties and shunned the right. Blue and White took 42.7 percent of the vote in the city and the Democratic Camp 14.4 percent. By contrast, Likud won the backing of less than one-fifth of voters.

In Jerusalem, with its large ultra-Orthodox population and more conservative outlook, UTJ topped the poll with 24.9 percent of the vote, with Likud winning 23 percent. Blue and White won just 11.8 percent.

Overall, argued Shmuel Rosner of the Jewish People Policy Institute, Liberman's rise underlined the disquiet, even among many right-wing voters, over the power wielded by the ultra-Orthodox parties. "There is a large group of regular Israelis in the middle," he suggested. "This is what they said for a second time: we want normalcy."

Having reaped rich electoral and political dividends from the polarisation between the ultra-Orthodox and secular majority, there is little sign of Liberman moderating his stance. Instead, he is insisting he won't back either Netanyahu or Gantz unless they agree to deliver a raft of legislation designed to provoke fury among the prime minister's ultra-Orthodox allies. The measures include a law that would conscript religious seminary students into the army; a requirement that ultra-Orthodox schools teach a national curriculum or lose state funding; and the overturning of a prohibition on shops from opening on the Sabbath.

The anti-Bibi camp and future coalitions

In the wake of the inconclusive election results, President Reuven Rivlin met formally with each of the parties to ask them who they wish to nominate as prime minister. Based on these discussions, Rivlin asks the party leader with the best chance of building a 61-seat majority to form a government. That candidate has 28 days (plus the option of a two-week extension) to form a coalition. If that candidate fails, the president is expected to demand they return that mandate to him so he can ask another party leader to form a government, thus avoiding a repeat of what happened in April when Netanyahu initiated a vote to dissolve the Knesset.

After Rivlin's discussions, Netanyahu had a narrow 55-54 MK edge over Gantz in terms of recommendations. Liberman opted not to nominate either Gantz or Netanyahu, but instead reiterated his call for a unity government. Significantly, for the first time since they recommended Yitzhak Rabin in 1992, the Arab parties made an endorsement. The Joint List told Rivin that their preferred prime minister was Gantz. (Three MKs of the Islamist Balad party – a part of the Joint List – did not join the endorsement).

Given the deadlock – and in order to avoid a third election – Rivlin requested Gantz and Netanyahu to begin talks about forming a unity government. In such a scenario, the two men would likely rotate the premiership. There is a precedent for such an arrangement: Labor and Likud formed a unity government after the 1984 elections, when neither emerged victorious. Shimon Peres became prime minister for the first two years of the government's term, with Yitzhak Shamir taking the helm for its second half.

But, after the failure of Gantz and Netanyahu to initially agree to a national unity government, Rivlin gave the Likud leader first shot at getting to the 61 seats necessary for a majority.

Having previously rejected any talk of a unity government with Blue and White, Netanyahu has reversed course. Some believe his warm noises are simply a ploy designed to ensure that Likud does not get the blame if new elections are called. But with the attorney general likely to decide within weeks if he will face multiple corruption charges, Netanyahu is desperate to hang on to the premiership. While Israeli law requires indicted cabinet ministers to step down, a prime minister can remain in post until the judicial process is complete. If he is to face a trial, Netanyahu would clearly prefer to do so while maintaining some hold over the levers of power (and potentially trading his resignation down the line for a pardon from the president).

In the current talks, Netanyahu is also insisting that he is negotiating on behalf of all 55 parties in the right-wing bloc, including the ultra-Orthodox parties.

The talks present an acute political dilemma for Gantz. As Lahav Harkov of the Jerusalem Post explained, for the past decade, the Israeli political field has been organised into a pro-Netanyahu camp on the right and an anti-Netanyahu camp on the left. "Whoever is considered to be the most likely candidate to replace Netanyahu will end up leading that anti-Bibi camp," she suggested. "So we've had Kadima, Yesh Atid, Labor/Zionist Union, and now Blue and White." After its strong performance in 2015, however, Labor went into steep

decline when its then leader, Isaac Herzog, toyed with joining Netanyahu's coalition (Herzog appears to have been close to striking a deal with the prime minister which would shifted the government to the centre and committed it to engage with the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative).

Gantz will thus be highly aware in the manoeuvring to form a government which now lays ahead of Blue and White's position as the head of the anti-Bibi camp. Moreover, he has repeatedly pledged that he will not serve in any government with Netanyahu while the latter remains under the threat of indictment.

The potential gridlock is further exacerbated by the fact that Netanyahu says he won't go into coalition without his right-wing allies, including the ultra-Orthodox parties. This, however, represents a huge hurdle, both because of the antipathy between the Haredi parties and Gantz's co-leader, the liberal Yair Lapid, and Blue and White's secularist agenda (which echoes that of Liberman).

Against this backdrop, some believe Gantz was <u>relaxed</u> about Netanyahu having first dibs on the formation of a government. He will hope that conditions may be better for him to assemble a coalition once the prime minister has tried and failed. In particular, by this point Netanyahu may be formally under indictment. "Likud MKs, being urged by Gantz a few weeks from now to join him in a coalition without Netanyahu, might be more likely to do so," wrote the Times of Israel's David Horovitz. "The Likud fared relatively poorly this time, and Blue and White will be asking them, do they really want to sentence Israel to yet another round of elections, and under a leader who may be about to go on trial."

Likud is genetically loyal to its leaders and a coup against the prime minister would be unprecedented: including Netanyahu, the party has had only four throughout its entire history and none of his predecessors have been removed from their post.

It appears unlikely that the prime minister will be able to gather the six additional seats he needs and political analysts <u>believe</u> his MKs' loyalty may eventually fray if Netanyahu can't form a government. "They backed him after the last election; they stayed with him even after he disbanded the Knesset. But they won't stay on the Likud-Titanic."

A no-deal third election?

Nonetheless, a third election early next year cannot be ruled out. Indeed, one Israeli political journalist has likened it to a "no-deal" Brexit. "Third elections are still considered unthinkable and politically toxic. Nobody wants it to happen. Everyone wants the parties to reach 'a' coalition deal, but no single actor can force it," Eylon Aslan-Levy has <u>suggested</u>. "President Reuven Rivlin said he will do all he can to avoid third elections, but it is not up to him. If Prime Minister Netanyahu stood aside, the path to a national unity government between Netanyahu's Likud and Benny Gantz's Blue and White would be clear. But if neither Gantz nor Netanyahu can form a government, and if a third 'write-in' candidate subsequently fails as well, then third elections are simply the legal default and will happen automatically."