

LFI Focus: Israeli elections

September 2019: Who's on the field?

On the right

Likud-Kulanu

Leader: Benjamin Netanyahu

Current seats: 39

Current polling: 37 seats

Profile: Right-of-centre party, hawkish on security issues, pro-free-market and tax cuts. Backed two-state solution since 2009 but some on the right wing continue to oppose. Don't expect dramatic moves in negotiations with the Palestinians from the ultra-cautious Netanyahu. Merged ahead of September's elections with the centre-right Kulanu party.

Key fact: Traditionally seen as "security party" but its leaders have on occasion pulled off surprises. The first Likud prime minister of Israel, Menachem Begin, negotiated Camp David Accords and peace with Egypt. Ariel Sharon oversaw unilateral Israeli withdrawal from Gaza in 2005, which led to a split in the party.



Yisrael Beiteinu

Leader: Avigdor Liberman

Current seats: 5

Current polling: 7 seats

Profile: Right-wing nationalist party, but secular in nature. Hawkish but pragmatic on peace process and supports two states. Traditional voice of Russian immigrants. Served in Netanyahu coalition 2016-18. Liberman's signature issue is death penalty for terrorists, also favours some Israeli-Arab communities close to West Bank being integrated into future Palestinian state.

Key fact: Liberman's refusal to cave into the demands of the ultra-Orthodox parties that a law reducing exemptions for Haredi young men from military service be watered down led to the collapse of Netanyahu's coalition talks and new elections.



New Right

Leaders: Naftali Bennett and Ayelet Shaked

Current seats: 0

Current polling: 6 seats

Profile: Hard-right, opposed to Palestinian state. Favours Israel formally annexing key parts of West Bank.

Key fact: Bennett and Shaked served in Netanyahu's government as Jewish Home ministers. They formed this new party to break free of their former party's association



with religious right and some in the settler movement in order to win secular, middle-class voters to the right of Likud. Their gamble narrowly failed in April – the New Right was 1,500 votes from clearing the threshold to enter the Knesset – will it pay off in September?

Union of Right-wing parties

Leader: Rafi Peretz

Current seats: 5

Current polling: 6 seats

Profile: A union of the hard-right Jewish Home and National Union parties, it was joined in February by the far-right Otzma Yehudit party. Opposed to Palestinian state and favours Israel annexing key parts of the West Bank. Closely allied to the settler movement.

Key fact: URWP leaders say the New Right took a “dangerous gamble” by running on its own in April and are calling for an alliance of all parties “to the right of Likud”.



On the left

Labor

Leader: Avi Gabbay

Current seats: 6

Current polling: 4 seats

Profile: Centre-left party. Supports two-state solution and social welfare reforms. 2015 election saw best performance in a general election since Ehud Barak's victory in 1999 with the party coming close to dislodging Netanyahu. Despite Gabbay's play for the centre ground, the party plunged to its worst-ever defeat in April's elections, sparking talk of a merger with Meretz or Blue and White. It will hold elections for a new leader before September's poll.

Key fact: Traditionally seen as leader of Israel's “peace camp”. Pushed Oslo peace process under Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres.



Meretz

Leader: Tamar Zandberg

Current seats: 4

Current polling: 4 seats

Profile: Left-wing, dovish party. Pro-two states, supports withdrawal from West Bank and an end to settlement-building. Socially liberal with a greenish tint.

Key fact: Major coalition partner in Yitzhak Rabin's government and highly supportive of Oslo peace process, also joined Ehud Barak's administration in 1999.



In the centre

Blue and White

Leader: Yair Lapid and Benny Gantz

Current seats: 35

Current polling: 33

Profile: Former IDF chief Benny Gantz entered politics last December, forming the Israel Resilience party. It performed well in the polls and he quickly emerged as the strongest opposition challenger to Netanyahu. Blue and White was formed when Gantz merged his party with Yair Lapid's centrist Yesh Atid. The addition of two other

former heads of the Israeli armed force, Moshe Ya'alon and Gabi Ashkenazi, fed hopes that Blue and White could neutralise Netanyahu's reputation as "Mr Security".

Key fact: Gantz came closer than any of Netanyahu's challengers over the past decade to defeating the long-serving premier. He'll have another shot at toppling him come September.



Ultra-Orthodox parties

Shas

Leader: Aryeh Deri

Current seats: 8

Current polling: 7 seats

Profile: An ultra-orthodox religious party representing Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews. It has no official position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, though in practice takes a right-leaning stance.

Key fact: Since its formation in 1984, it has almost always formed a part of governing coalitions, led by both Labor and Likud. Deri – who has previously served time in prison for corruption – now faces fresh fraud charges.



UTJ

Leader: Yaakov Litzman

Current seats: 8

Current polling: 8

Profile: An alliance of two ultra-orthodox parties – Degel HaTorah and Agudat Yisrael – that represents the interests of Haredi Jews. It has no official position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and favour greater social welfare provision.

Key fact: Primary goal is to secure additional funding for ultra-Orthodox institutions and interests, as well as higher welfare spending for large families.



Arab parties

Ta'al-Hadash/ Balad-Ra'am

Current seats: 10

Current polling: 7

Profile: As the Joint List, this coalition of Israel's Arab parties was the third-largest grouping in the Knesset after the 2015 elections. In April the Joint List splintered into Ta'al-Hadash and Balad-Ra'am. The former represents left and Arab nationalist parties which support a two-state solution and the dismantling of all West Bank settlements; the latter includes the Islamist Ra'am party. Balad MKs have often made incendiary comments about Israel and the IDF. Amid falling turnout, the two Arab parties saw their combined strength in the Knesset drop from 13 to 10 seats.

Key fact: Netanyahu once again attempted to exploit anti-Arab sentiment in this year's elections by suggesting any Gantz government would be at the mercy of Arab lawmakers. His slogan: "It's Bibi or Tibi", a reference to Ahmed Tibi, the most high-profile and popular Israeli-Arab MK.

