

## LFI Focus: Third time lucky?



On 2 March, Israel held its third general election since last April – an attempt, once again, to break the deadlock which has paralysed the country politically for nearly a year.

The election appears to have failed in that task – already sparking talk that Israelis will be forced back to the polls for a fourth election later this year.

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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 Beiteinu 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 elected another 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 the September election down by six.

Nonetheless, Netanyahu was given the first shot at cobbling together a government after he won the backing of parties representing 55 members of the Knesset. Gantz – whose centrist Blue and White party narrowly led Netanyahu's Likud party by 32-31 seats in the election – won the endorsement of 54 MKs. Liberman – enjoying his kingmaker status and attempting to exert maximum pressure in any coalition negotiations – opted not to recommend either man. Significantly, most MKs representing the Arab-Israeli Joint List also backed Gantz's bid to become prime minister, marking the first time since they supported Yitzhak Rabin in 1992 that the Arab-Israeli parties have been willing to give a recommendation to the president.

After Netanyahu once again tried and failed to assemble a coalition, Reuven Rivlin, Israel's president, invited Gantz to form a government. This was the first time since 2006 that an individual other than Netanyahu had been invited to do so.

But the opposition leader also failed to herd enough MKs into a majority backing him. Gantz was essentially caught between Liberman's demands, his own pledges and Netanyahu's determination that he would not succeed. Liberman insisted throughout that the only government his party would be willing to join was one that partners with both Likud and Blue and White. He refused to join any coalition involving the ultra-Orthodox parties.

At the same time, Netanyahu and his religious and right-wing allies proved solidly loyal to one another throughout the process. The prime minister refused to accede to demands from Liberman and Gantz that he ditch them when entering coalition talks. The right-wing and religious parties, in turn, stuck with Netanyahu and thus denied Gantz the opportunity to peel any of them – for instance, Naftali Bennett's Yamina party – away.

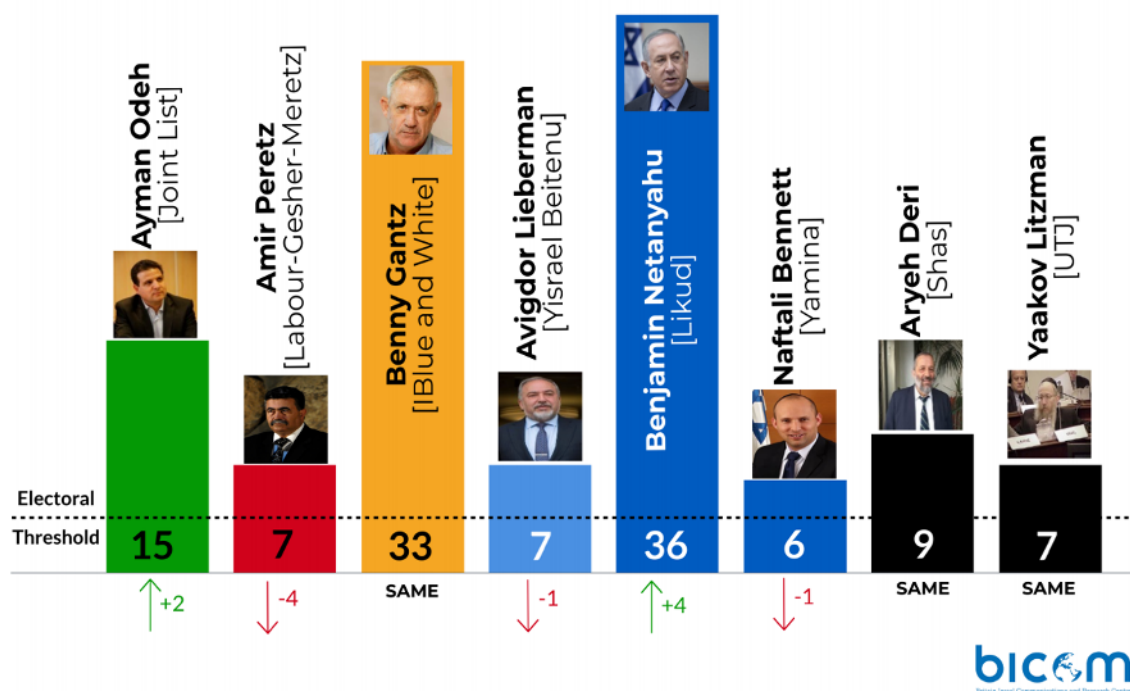
Finally, Gantz had repeatedly pledged that he would not sit in any government while Netanyahu remained under threat of indictment. In order to avoid new elections, Rivlin attempted to push a compromise which would have seen Netanyahu and Gantz “rotate” the premiership as Shimon Peres and Yitzhak Shamir did during the 1980s when Labor and Likud formed a unity government. However, Netanyahu's insistence that he should serve as prime minister first and his refusal to accept that he should stand aside if he was indicted, scuppered this proposal, together with Gantz's evident queasiness about it. In the end, the prime minister was formally charged with bribery, fraud and breach of trust in late November, just as Gantz was preparing to give up on his efforts).

It was thus against the unprecedented backdrop not only of two failed attempts to form a government, but of a sitting prime minister facing a criminal trial, that March's election was triggered.

## The March 2020 results

Blue and White appeared to gain momentum during the campaign, with polls indicating at points that a potential Gantz alliance of Blue and White, left-leaning parties and the Joint List were close to winning a majority. Moreover, even another effort by Donald Trump to help push him over the electoral line (the US president had made barely concealed attempts to assist the prime minister before both the April and September elections) – the unveiling of his much-delayed “peace plan” – did not appear to give Netanyahu the expected political windfall.

### How the parties shaped up



Final March 2020 results compared to September 2019 results

### Netanyahu's bloc

However, the exit polls and early results on election night appeared to suggest that Netanyahu has scored a remarkable comeback. Having been pipped at the post by Blue and White in September, the prime minister's Likud party managed to gain four seats, leading its principal rival by three. At 29.48 percent of the vote, it was Likud's strongest performance at the ballot box in 17 years and its best under Netanyahu's leadership.

Although that result did not prove sufficient for the prime minister and his allies to win his coveted Knesset majority, it was remarkable nonetheless.

As Anshel Pfeffer has suggested the 237,000 votes and four seats which Likud gained since September appear to have come from three sources.

First, Netanyahu managed to win back so-called “soft right” voters who had opted for Blue and White or Liberman’s Yisrael Beiteinu at the previous election but came “home” to Likud in March. Many were won over by Likud’s relentless pounding of Gantz’s character and his credentials to be prime minister. “Netanyahu ran the most ruthless, sleazy, deceitful and dishonest election campaign in Israeli history, which was also the most precise and lethal,” suggested Haaretz’s Chemi Shalev. “He assassinated his rival Benny Gantz’s character with doctored videos, sexual innuendo, malicious rumours and deliberate distortions. His success will whitewash his dirty campaign, which will be scrutinised, dissected and admired throughout the populist, nationalist world.”

Other voters appear to have backed Netanyahu less out of love for the prime minister but because they wanted to end the instability and “get the elections done”.

Second, Netanyahu snatched a seat off of Yamina. The party – an alliance of the Jewish Home, New Right and National Union parties – has had a turbulent 18 months. In December 2018, two of Jewish Home’s leading lights – Bennett and Ayelet Shaked – quit the party in order to form the New Right. Their aim was to shake off some of the settler party’s negative associations with the religious-right and make a play for secular, pro-Likud voters. At the instigation of Netanyahu, the rump of Jewish Home, together with the National Union, then formed an alliance with the far-right Otzma Yehudit party. The prime minister was desperate not to see any right-wing votes wasted on parties that might fall under the 3.25 percent electoral threshold and was deeply concerned that Jewish Home – one of the mainstays of his coalition – might itself fail to win any seats in the Knesset. In April, running under the guise of the Union of Right-wing parties, this unholy alliance brokered by Netanyahu managed to win five seats, while Shaked and Bennett’s New Right fell at the first hurdle and failed to get into the Knesset. By September, the Union of Right-wing parties had dumped Otzma Yehudit and teamed up with the New Right, allowing the Yamina alliance to win seven seats. In March, however, Yamina fell one seat to six seats.

Finally, Netanyahu’s wooing of the far right and the settler vote probably bagged him another seat. Thus Yamina saw its support in the settlements drop from 24.4% in September to 22.8 percent in the latest election, while Otzma Yehudit plummeted from 6.96 percent of vote in the last election to just 1.6 percent this month.

Yamina’s English outreach director and polling expert, Jeremy Saltan, has also speculated that Likud gained another seat by boosting turnout among its supporters. Indeed, voters showed little sign of election fatigue, with turnout rising from 69.8 percent in September to 71.3 percent in the most recent poll.

Netanyahu’s promise to annex Israeli settlements and the Jordan Valley on the back of Trump’s plan, appears to have encouraged Likud supporters to the polls. “The Trump peace plan also seemed to help him on different levels,” argues David Makovsky. “Politically, it diverted headlines from his ongoing corruption indictments and allowed him to tout his ability to shape international decisions in Israel’s favour. His pledges to declare Israeli sovereignty over West Bank settlements won him higher support from settler parties than ever before.”

However, it's also worth noting that, while Likud support rose in settlements in the Jordan Valley, it also increased in areas near Gaza. This suggests, believes Makovsky, that many voters in the border area approve of Netanyahu's attempts to secure a defacto truce with Hamas.

While Netanyahu happily cannibalised Yamina and Otzma Yehudit for votes, he was more careful when it came to the ultra-Orthodox parties who are reliable coalition partners. Shas, the Mizrahi ultra-Orthodox party, and Likud shared their electoral databases; a decision from which both parties benefited. The former held its nine seats and saw its vote rise from 7.44 percent to 7.7 percent. As Pfeffer noted, this was some achievement in a country where the Mizrahi ultra-Orthodox proportion of the population is itself much smaller than seven percent. Although its vote fell, the Haredi UTJ managed to hold its seven seats, potentially as a result of some defectors from Otzma Yehudit.

### **Gantz and Labor**

While Blue and White faced initial disappointment when the exit polls were published, it managed to hold its own, winning 33 seats as it did in September and pulling in an additional 66,000 votes.

This came despite a somewhat lacklustre campaign from Gantz. "Gantz, for his part, ran a largely reactive campaign," argued David Horovitz, the editor of the Times of Israel, in the wake of the election, "hurriedly denying each damaging allegation as it was raised by Netanyahu and his supporters, rather than taking the offensive. Rockets rained in from Gaza last week. But Gantz failed to take political advantage of even this Netanyahu vulnerability."

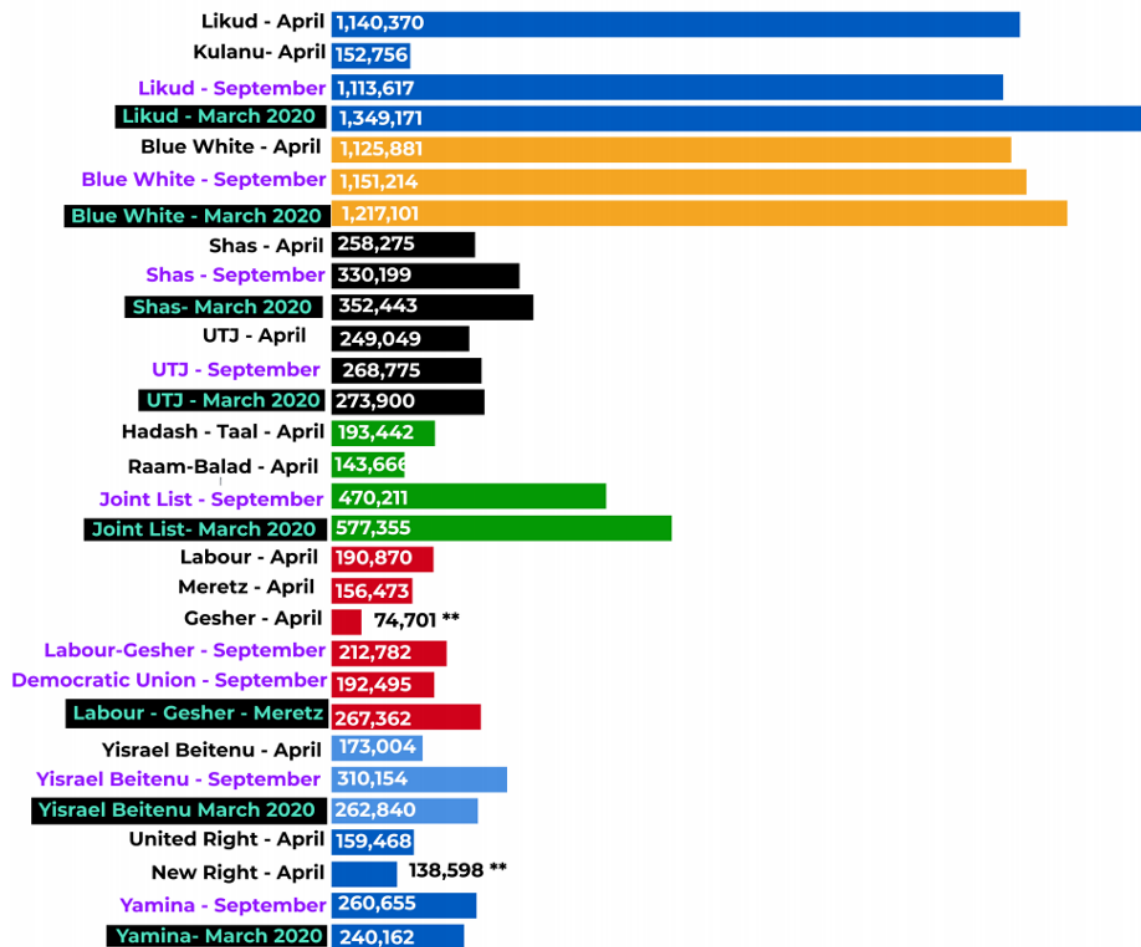
Former Labor MK Einat Wolf drew a sharp contrast between Netanyahu and Gantz's campaigns: "There is no doubt that in this round Netanyahu had fighting spirit that helped mobilise his supporters. He clearly fought for his life... the Blue and White leaders themselves clearly did not exhibit the same level of desperation to win as Netanyahu."

In the end, Blue and White held its ground – but failed to advance – by swapping the votes it lost to Likud with support it took from Labor-Meretz. "The map of Kahol Lavan's strongholds confirms what we already saw in 2019," argues Pfeffer. "If it still needs to be said, Kahol Lavan is the new Labor: a centrist party with strong security credentials capable of attracting the widest swath of voters – from the soft right to left-wingers who prefer to vote for the only viable alternative to Likud."

The damage done to Labor was unmistakeable. Running separately in September, Labor and Meretz won a combined total of 11 seats. But the two parties – which united for the campaign – saw that total drop to just seven seats on the back of six percent of the vote. Such a result would be the worst-ever for Labor. As recently as 2015, Labor secured 24 seats when, in alliance with former foreign minister Tzipi Livni's Hatnua party, it ran as the Zionist Union. (Adding in Meretz's share, the left parties won 29 seats with a combined 22.6 percent of the vote). For historical perspective, when Rabin was elected in 1992, Labor and Meretz won 45 percent of the vote and 56 seats. For now, at least, Labor leader Amir Peretz's hope of reaching out to working-class Mizrahi Jews – a bulwark of the Likud vote – on the basis of economic issues appears to have come way up short.

# Total Votes Per Party

April 2019 vs September 2019 vs March 2020



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

## Arab-Israelis' revenge

Amid a campaign by Netanyahu to demonise them and suppress turnout, Arab-Israeli voters surged to the polls last month. Last April, turnout among Arab-Israelis, who make up 20 percent of the population, was under 50 percent. It jumped to 60 percent in September, and, in the most recent election, equalled those of Jewish Israelis at 70 percent. This sharp increase in turnout was also fuelled by anger at the Trump peace plan proposals to cede Arab-Israeli towns and villages in the so-called "Triangle" to a future Palestinian state. The plan was fiercely opposed by the Joint List (as well as by Labor and Blue and White) and by the Israeli government itself, although there are suspicions that the idea may initially have been floated with the Americans by Netanyahu himself. The increase in turnout allowed the Joint List to secure 15 seats – a record for Arab-led parties in the Knesset. The alliance is a mixture of social democrats, hardline Arab nationalists and anti-Zionists, Islamists and pragmatic centrists: Hadash, its largest component, was formed from groups including the old Arab-Jewish Israeli Communist party and it remains officially a cross-community party. Under its popular leader, Ayman Odeh (who also chairs the Joint List), it has stressed the need for Arab-Israelis to integrate, participate in the political system and exert influence. Hadash has also shown an increasing willingness to cooperate with left-wing Zionist parties

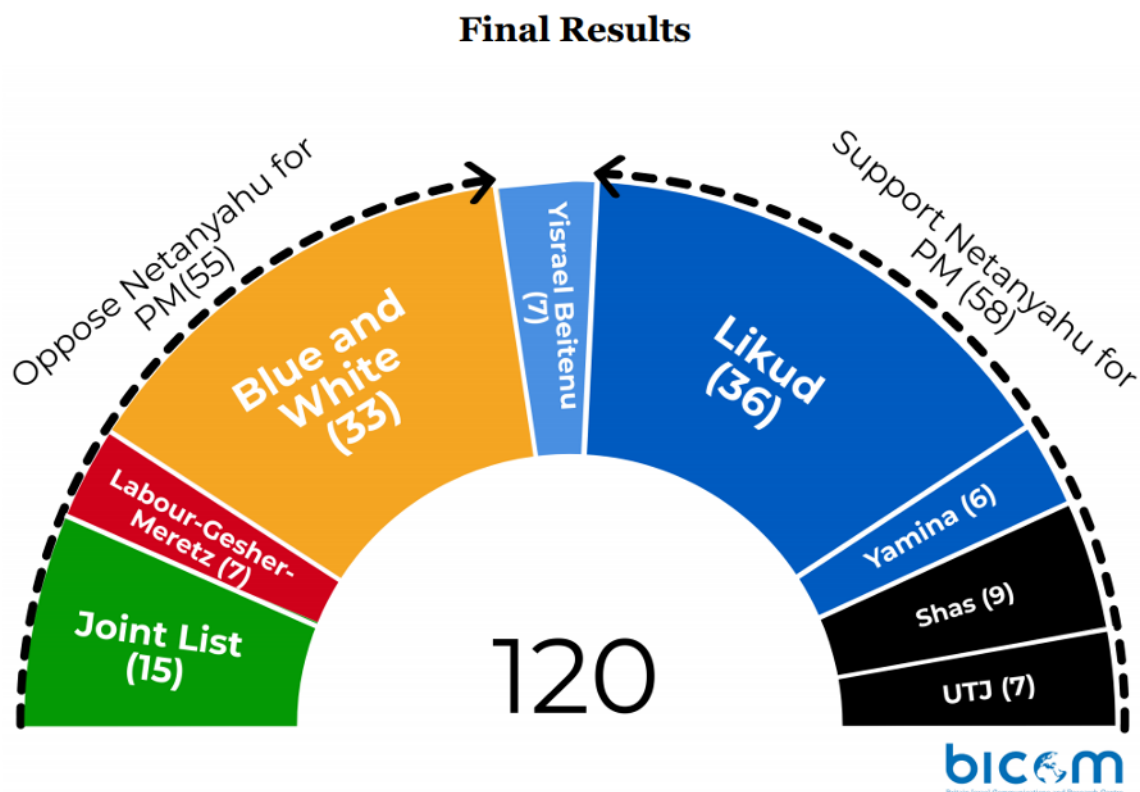


(although in 1992 it also offered, from outside the government, crucial parliamentary support to Yitzhak Rabin's Labor-Meretz administration).

The Joint List's success may also have been due to support from Jewish voters – roughly 20,000 Jews, double the number that supported the party in September, are estimated to have backed it on 2 March – attracted by Odeh's willingness to reach out to them. "He has really opened the door," Louis Fishman, a professor at New York's Brooklyn College, who studies the Joint List, suggested. Those 20,000 votes are thought to have made the difference between the alliance winning 14 and 15 seats. Critically, the rise in Arab turnout, although not alone the cause, is believed to have played a major role in preventing Netanyahu's bloc from winning a Knesset majority.

## Where next?

While the exit polls accurately predicted Likud's strong showing, they over-estimated the overall strength of Netanyahu's bloc of right-wing and religious parties, initially appearing to show them on the verge of gaining a Knesset majority. The final results, however, showed that it had fallen short, winning 58 seats. The bloc of centre, left and Arab parties opposed to Netanyahu slid from 58 seats in September to 55 seats.



As in April and September, therefore, Liberman's Yisrael Beiteinu finds itself in the role of kingmaker.

However, unlike in the election in September, when he refused to do so, Liberman opted last week to make a recommendation when Rivlin formally consulted party leaders on who should be called first to attempt to form a government. The former defence minister's choice of Gantz provided the key votes the Blue and White leader needed to ensure that he received the mandate from Rivlin. That mandate provides him with 28 dates to assemble a coalition, with the possibility of a further 14-day extension.

Other crucial votes for Gantz came from the Joint List. In September, its most hardline component, Balad, did not join the rest of the Arab-Israeli alliance in recommending Gantz to Rivlin and its three MKs were, once again, expected to abstain. However, on the eve of the Joint List's meeting with the president, Balad leader Mtanes Shehadeh said it was recommending Gantz "in order to topple the leadership of the largest generators of incitement against the Arab society and its leadership".

That decision was critical because of the surprise decision by Orly Levi-Abekasis to effectively abandon the Labor-Meretz slate upon which she had been elected and refuse to back Gantz. Levi-Abekasis, a former Yisrael Beiteinu MK-turned-independent, had founded her Gesher party in the run-up to the April 2019 election. The centrist party, with a left-wing social and economic agenda, tried to team-up with Gantz's new Israel Resilience party (which later formed part of Blue and White) but, when negotiations broke down, it ran alone. Having failed to enter the Knesset, Gesher then joined Labor in the September elections on a joint slate. Levi-Abekasis remained allied to the party when Labor joined with Meretz for the 2 March election. Despite having stated in the election campaign that she, like Labor and Meretz, would back Gantz becoming prime minister, Levi-Abekasis subsequently reneged on that pledge, saying she couldn't support any government backed by the Joint List. Her decision sparked fury and cries of betrayal on the left and calls for her to resign. Levi-Abekasis is now seeking to formally break with Labor and Meretz in terms of sitting separately from them in the Knesset.

Levi-Abekasis' defection is one of a series of challenges facing Gantz as he now tries to form a government. For a new administration to take office, it requires a plurality of votes in the Knesset, although were he to assemble sufficient votes for a minority government, Gantz would be aided by the fact that an absolute majority – that is, 61 votes – is required to unseat such a government. So what obstacles lie ahead for Gantz?

**Netanyahu's unity ploy** – the prime minister says that there should be an emergency unity government to tackle the coronavirus, but insists that he leads it. He proposes it would either come to an end after six months or continue in office with Gantz becoming prime minister for the second half of its term. In order to break the political deadlock in September, Rivlin tried to encourage Blue and White to form a unity government. The premiership would be "rotated" between Netanyahu and Gantz in the manner that occurred between Shimon Peres and Yitzhak Rabin when a Labor-Likud unity government was formed to break the stalemate after 1984's inconclusive general election. Before handing Gantz the mandate, Rivlin again tried to encourage Gantz and Netanyahu to come to an agreement. However, such an arrangement continues to run up against Gantz's refusal to serve under Netanyahu while he faces corruption charges and the prime minister's determination that he should take the first "half" of the rotation (in other words, that he should remain in office even as he stands trial). The deep mistrust of Netanyahu among



opposition politicians has been exacerbated by the manner in which interim justice minister Amir Ohana last week used the coronavirus outbreak to shut down the courts – a decision which flew in the face of advice by the Health Ministry - 60 hours before the prime minister's trial was due to begin, pushing it back to 24 May

**The solidity of the right-wing bloc** – For the past year, the right-wing bloc has remained steadfastly loyal to Netanyahu. Its leaders refused to be picked off individually by Gantz when he tried to form a government last autumn and grimly stuck to the line that only Netanyahu could negotiate on their behalf. Since Gantz received the mandate from Rivlin, Netanyahu's allies in Yamina, Shas and UTJ have declined his invitations to meet.

**Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelstein delaying tactics** – led by Blue and White, the opposition is seeking to replace Likud MK Yuli Edelstein as speaker in order to advance legislation which would prevent somebody facing criminal charges from forming a government. The opposition is also considering legislation which would introduce term limits on prime ministers. There has also been speculation about reintroducing the direct election of prime ministers – a system with which Israel experimented in the 1990s – but barring anyone under a criminal indictment from running. Together, these measures would effectively disqualify Netanyahu from office. Edelstein has sought to frustrate and delay these moves by refusing to schedule a vote to elect a speaker and using the coronavirus restrictions on Israel – which prevent gatherings of more than 10 people – to effectively shut down the Knesset. Edelstein's actions have earned a public rebuke from the president and appear designed simply to buy Netanyahu time.

**What's Liberman's goal?** – Liberman appears determined to use his parliamentary muscle to evict Netanyahu from office. However, the Yisrael Beiteinu leader, who has been accused of anti-Arab racism in the past, is likely to be queasy about participating in a minority government backed by the Joint List. A fierce secularist, he's also refusing to sit in a government with the ultra-Orthodox parties, but his real intention may be to force Likud to change its leader so that he can return to his more natural allies in the right-wing bloc.

**Blue and White splits** – Within Blue and White itself, two rebels MKs – Zvi Hauser and Yoaz Hendel – say they will oppose a government which is brought to power with the votes of the Joint List. At the same time, the leaders of two of the alliance's constituent parties – the liberal Yair Lapid and more right-wing Moshe Ya'alon – are adamantly opposed to any unity government deal with Netanyahu. Hauser and Hendel may not support Gantz, but opting to defect to Netanyahu (alone, they would not provide enough votes to bring down a Gantz minority government) would carry a price for them. Defectors are barred from serving as ministers and cannot run on their new party's slate in a subsequent election.

Nonetheless, a determination to bring Netanyahu's decade in power to a close led a most unlikely alliance – stretching from Jewish nationalists such as Liberman to the anti-Zionists of Balad – to nominate Gantz for the premiership. Whether the prime minister's determination to cling to office, or his opponents' desire to remove him, ultimately proves stronger will shape the future of Israeli politics in the weeks, months, and possibly, years ahead.