

THE BATTLE TO OUST BIBI: ISRAEL'S 2026 ELECTIONS

LFI POLICY BRIEFING

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The logo for Labour Friends of Israel (LFI) consists of the letters 'LFI' in a bold, white, sans-serif font. The letters are partially cut off on the right side. Above the letters is a horizontal blue line, and below them is another horizontal blue line.

LABOUR FRIENDS OF ISRAEL

WORKING TOWARDS A TWO STATE SOLUTION

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FEBRUARY 2026

INTRODUCTION: ISRAEL'S 2026 ELECTIONS

Israeli voters will go to the polls this year, with elections due by October 2026. Set against the backdrop of the traumatic events of 7 October 2023, and the ensuing conflicts in Gaza, Lebanon and Iran, Benjamin Netanyahu – who has served as prime minister for all but 18 months of the last 17 years – is vying to become one of the world's longest-serving leaders of a democracy.

But Netanyahu's coalition – which took office in December 2022 and includes far-right and ultra-religious parties – is the most unpopular the prime minister has led – and, in the wake of the 7 October attacks, polls have consistently shown it failing to win re-election.

WHAT'S UP FOR GRABS?

- All 120 seats in the Knesset – Israel's sole legislative chamber – are up for grabs. Voters make their choice using PR and vote for a party's list. Normally, some parties, such as the ruling Likud party and the Labor party (forerunner of the new Democrats party), assign slots on their list via primary elections.
- Parties must clear a threshold of 3.25 percent of the national vote in order to win seats in the Knesset. If a party doesn't clear that bar, its votes are effectively wasted.
- The highly proportional system makes it near-impossible for any party to win a majority: since its first general election in 1949, Israel has always been ruled by coalition governments. The electoral system also makes it easier for new parties to suddenly emerge, rapidly shifting the political landscape.

ASSEMBLING A COALITION

- A government needs to win a simple majority – 61 seats – in the Knesset. Coalitions are normally formed by the largest party after weeks of horse-trading with the smaller parties. For its first 30 years, the centre-left Labor party invariably led Israel's governments, backed by one or two smaller parties.
- Since 1977, the right-wing Likud party has more often been in the driving seat. It's been in government for the entire period except for four brief periods – 1992-1996 and 1999-2001 when Labor's Yitzhak Rabin and Ehud Barak captured power; 2005-9 when the centrist Kadima party led the government; and 2021-2 when the “change bloc” ousted Netanyahu – although Labor has on occasion participated in national unity governments during this time, too.
- Throughout much of Israel's history, the key competition was between two rival blocs – a national-religious bloc led by Likud, and a centre-left bloc led by Labor. However, this picture has been increasingly confused in recent elections by the rise of centrist parties – Yesh Atid in 2013, Kulanu in 2015, and, in the four closely fought elections between 2019-21, Blue and White – which have scrambled the arithmetic.

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

- After an unprecedented three inconclusive elections during 2019 and early 2020, the country appeared headed for a period of political stability when a “unity government” was formed in summer 2020. It brought together Netanyahu and the centrist Blue and White party of former IDF chief Benny Gantz, which had fought the prime minister’s Likud party to a virtual draw on each of the three occasions Israelis went to the polls.
- But the uneasy coalition – which included not just Likud and Blue and White, but Netanyahu’s habitual ultra-Orthodox party allies – appeared shaky from the outset. Amid the prime minister’s failed efforts to have the Knesset grant him immunity from prosecution on multiple corruption charges, it collapsed in December 2020, triggering new elections in March 2021. Those elections saw Likud lose seats, allowing an ideologically eclectic coalition – led by Yesh Atid’s Yair Lapid and Naftali Bennett of the right-wing Yamina party – to form a coalition.
- The new “change government” – which also included Labor, the left-wing Meretz party, Blue and White, Avigdor Liberman’s populist Yisrael Beiteinu and was backed by the conservative Islamic Ra’am party – was principally united by a desire to end Netanyahu’s time in power. It notched up a number of achievements, adopted a markedly more cooperative relationship with the Palestinian Authority, and saw a relatively harmonious relationship between Bennett and Lapid, who “rotated” the premiership. However, the government’s wafer-thin Knesset majority disappeared with the defection of a right-wing MK to the opposition. Days later, a caretaker administration led by Lapid was formed, with elections held in November 2022.

NETANYAHU’S RETURN

- The elections resulted in a virtual draw between the right-wing bloc and the anti-Netanyahu forces (who polled 49.5 percent of the vote). However, with Meretz and the Israeli-Arab Balad party falling beneath the electoral threshold (thus “wasting” nearly 300,000 votes), Netanyahu was able to assemble a coalition of 64 seats.
- Controversially, his government included two far-right parties – Bezalel Smotrich’s Religious Zionism and Itamar Ben-Gvir’s Otzma Yehudit. Even before the government took office on 29 December, polls showed 52 percent of Israelis were dissatisfied with the election results.
- The new government spent much of its early months in office engaged in an attempt to drive through a “judicial reform” package which, critics said, threatened the fierce independence of the Israeli judiciary and the country’s Supreme Court. The measures were strongly opposed in the Knesset by opposition parties, including Labor and Yesh Atid, and provoked massive protests on the streets of Israel.
- The government was opposed by a civic society coalition, which included reservists, trade unionists, top former security service officials, and tech and financial firms, and concerns were expressed by President Isaac Herzog, the head of the Supreme Court and the attorney general. In the face of a general strike backed by unions and business groups, the government was forced into a retreat. Although it later succeeded in passing elements of the original package, the measure was later struck down by the Supreme Court.

THE IMPACT OF 7 OCTOBER AND THE WAR IN GAZA

The events of 7 October significantly reshaped the public policy debate in Israel, thrusting new issues into focus and altering the salience of others.

One of the most immediate impacts of the Hamas-led attack, however, was a steep decline in the popularity of Netanyahu's ruling coalition. Polling data collected in the first week after the massacre showed Netanyahu's Likud party had lost 30 percent of the support it enjoyed in pre-attack polls. Gantz's Blue and White leapt to 41 seats, more than double the number of seats projected for Likud. When asked who they preferred as prime minister, poll respondents were recorded as preferring "someone else" to Netanyahu by a ratio of three-to-one. Nevertheless, in the intervening two years, the prime minister has managed to gradually claw back lost popularity. When matched against top contenders for the premiership, he now earns an emphatic plurality of support.

Despite Netanyahu's improved personal status, the overall standing of his coalition remains weaker than that of the opposition, and its handling of several war-related issues has generated broad discontent. The unprecedented length of the war in Gaza marked a deviation from longstanding Israeli military doctrine, which emphasises short wars aimed at minimising the social and financial costs to reservists, who form the backbone of the military. Demands for greater burden-sharing quickly focused on reversing draft exemptions long enjoyed by the country's ultra-Orthodox population. Although the government argues it is working to expand Haredi conscription, the legislation it is advancing is widely regarded as inadequate and a surrender to the interests of Netanyahu's ultra-Orthodox coalition partners.

"Most Israelis believe a rigorous investigation into the strategic and operational failures that led to 7 October is necessary."

"Conceptzia" (roughly, security doctrine) has emerged as a dirty, accusatory term in Israel's post-7 October national lexicon. To many on the right, it is emblematic of a deep naivety, laid bare by the events of 7 October, that Israel can deter its enemies or that anything short of the proactive, decisive use of force can assure Israel's safety. To many on the left, the word describes a prevailing pre-7 October attitude that treats the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as something to be "managed" rather than resolved.

Most Israelis believe a rigorous investigation into the strategic and operational failures that led to 7 October is necessary. Over half of the public, including a plurality of Likud voters, supports a state commission of inquiry into 7 October rather than a government-appointed probe, the option preferred by Netanyahu's coalition. Moreover, revelations that multiple Netanyahu aides allegedly received payments from Qatar to promote Doha's interests have provided Israel's opposition with powerful political ammunition and intensified calls for a state commission of inquiry.

A TIGHT RACE AHEAD

Israel's political left has experienced a largely steady decline in influence over the past two decades. At the 2015 general election, Labor and Meretz stood at 19 and five seats respectively. Following Israel's most recent elections in 2022, Meretz fell short of the electoral threshold, and Labor scraped by with just four seats. Two years later, the Democrats was formed as a merger between the two parties. Yair Golan, a former senior IDF officer who served as a Meretz MK and minister in the 2021-3 "unity government", became head of the new party.

Viewed as Netanyahu's most credible challenger in the months after 7 October, Gantz and his Blue and White party are now expected to fall below the electoral threshold. Meanwhile, the re-entry of Bennett into political life has transformed the former prime minister into Netanyahu's foremost rival. Holding the highest projected support among opposition parties, Bennett hopes to determine the platform and personalities that will define a new government.

"The reentry of Naftali Bennett into political life has transformed the former prime minister into Netanyahu's foremost rival."

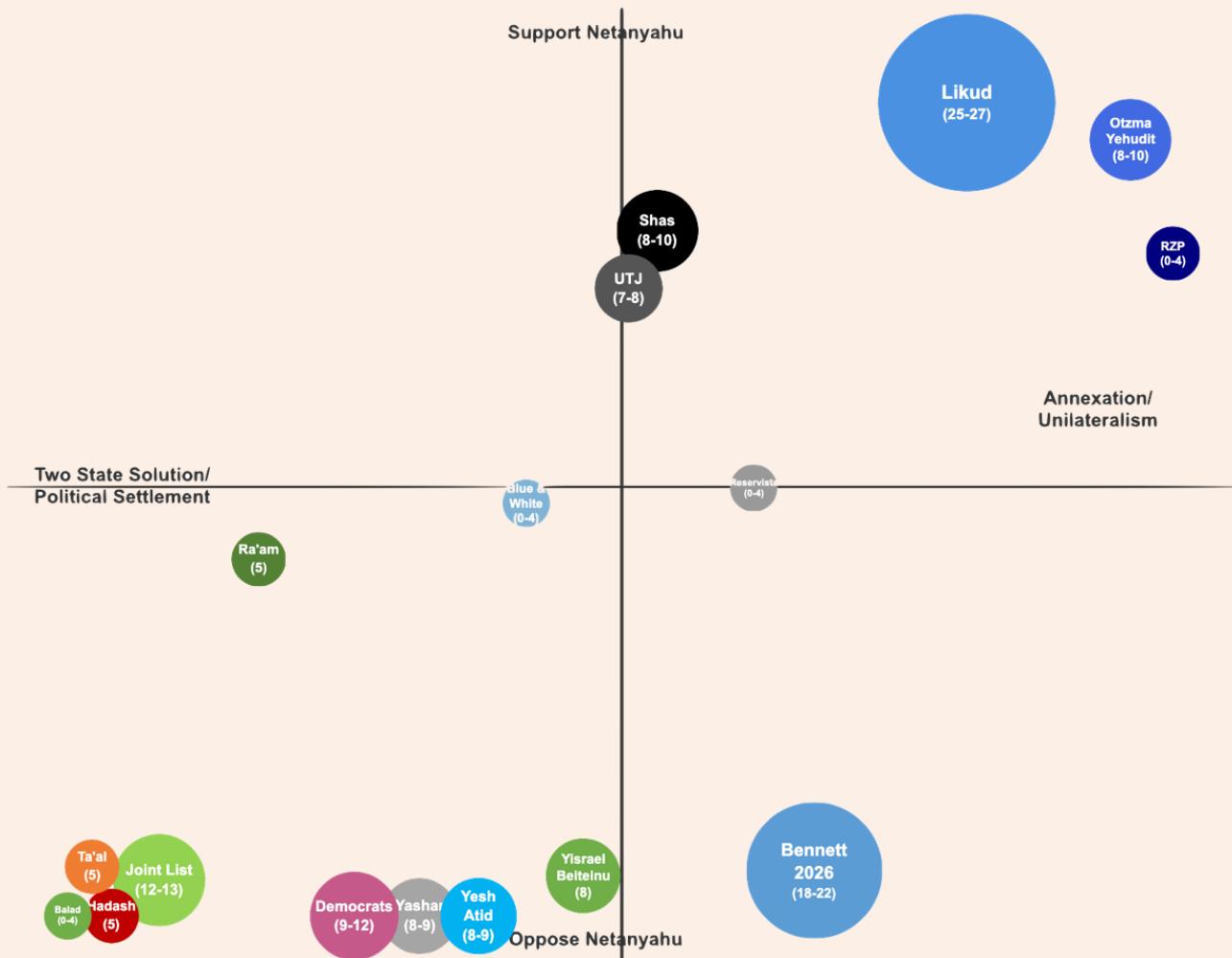
Bennett has described his proposal to expand benefits for military reservists while eliminating those enjoyed by non-draftees as the "flagship law of the next government". Support for this bill will be held by him as a condition for partnership in forming a new government. The former prime minister and two other opposition parties – Yesh Atid and Yisrael Beiteinu – have largely dismissed the idea of cooperating with one of the Arab-led parties to establish a new government.

Still, polls suggest that unless the opposition joins forces with an Arab-led party, it will fall a few seats shy of the 61 seats necessary to create a new government. On the other hand, some figures within the opposition have suggested that unspecified political manoeuvres, possibly involving the abstention of Arab parties in the vote of confidence for creating a new government, could allow it to launch a new government without the formal backing of Arab parties. Meanwhile, Mansour Abbas, head of the Ra'am party, appears to be moving to soften opposition to cooperation by inviting Jewish-Israeli candidates to join the party.

One of the most closely watched prospective mergers within the opposition involves the Yashar! Party, launched by former Gantz ally Gadi Eisenkot in late 2025. Both Yesh Atid and Bennett are vying for Eisenkot's party to join their slates.

While unforeseen developments are likely, the current state of play suggests that both the opposition and the coalition have gaps to close before the election to secure a clear path to victory.

THE PLAYERS ON THE FIELD



Key Information:

Circle size represents projected seats in Knesset (larger = more seats)

Current Coalition: Likud, Religious Zionism, Otzma Yehudit, Shas, UTJ

"Change Bloc" (Opposition): Bennett 2026, Democrats, Yesh Atid, Yisrael Beiteinu, Yashar, Blue & White

Arab-led parties: Joint List, Ra'am, Hadash, Ta'al, Balad

Note: Joint List is a coalition agreement between the four Arab-led parties (signed January 2026)

THE RULING COALITION

Likud (founded in 1973)

Ideology: Right.

Platform: Judicial reform; no Palestinian state; hostility to Palestinian Authority; accommodation of religious nationalism.

Possible coalition alliances: Current coalition parties, Blue and White, Bennett (the latter two would likely only partner with Likud without Netanyahu as prime minister).

Notable figures: Benjamin Netanyahu; justice minister Yariv Levin; defence minister Israel Katz.

Polls: 25-27 seats projected.

Otzma Yehudit (founded in 2004)

Ideology: Far-right.

Platform: Settling Gaza and promoting the “voluntary emigration” of its residents; annexing the West Bank; death penalty for convicted terrorists.

Possible coalition alliances: May merge with the Religious Zionist party. Current coalition parties.

Notable figures: National security minister Itamar Ben Gvir.

Polls: 8-10 seats projected

Religious Zionist party (founded in 2021)

Ideology: Religious far-right.

Platform: Advancing de facto West Bank annexation policies; legalising settlement outposts; weakening the Palestinian Authority; institutionalising conservative religious values; significantly shifting power from the judiciary to the government.

Possible coalition alliances: May merge with Otzma Yehudit. Current coalition parties.

Notable figures: Finance minister Bezalel Smotrich.

Polls: 0-4 seats projected.

Shas (founded in 1984)

Ideology: Sephardic/Mizrahi ultra-Orthodox.

Platform: Resisting conscription of ultra-Orthodox; promoting Jewish religious law; preserving the influence of Israel's rabbinic establishment; funding social services; flexible posture on Palestinian issue. Quit the government last summer in opposition to planned changes to conscription affecting ultra-Orthodox, but the party still backs the coalition in the Knesset.

Possible coalition alliances: Current coalition parties.

Notable figures: Party leader Aryeh Deri.

Polls: 8-10 seats projected.

United Torah Judaism (founded in 1992)

Ideology: Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox.

Platform: Resisting draft of ultra-Orthodox; flexible on security matters; funding religious institutions; preserving the power of the rabbinic establishment. Quit the government last summer in opposition to planned changes to conscription affecting ultra-Orthodox, but the party still backs the coalition in the Knesset.

Possible coalition alliances: Current coalition parties.

Notable figures: Party leader Yitzhak Goldknopf, former housing and construction minister.

Polls: 7-8 seats projected.

THE “CHANGE BLOC”

Bennett 2026 (Naftali Bennett is the only party candidate yet to be made public, founded in 2025)

Ideology: Centre-right.

Platform: Big tent issues; negotiating Palestinian autonomy, no state; rejecting tribalism and extremist rhetoric; rehabilitating Israel's international status; rapidly enlisting 20,000 ultra-Orthodox; practising liberal social and economic policy.

Possible coalition alliances: Expressed ambition to run on a shared ticket with centrist parties; regarded as a key figure within the “change bloc”—a broad alliance of opposition parties working to unseat Netanyahu; reportedly rejects partnership with Arab parties, despite previously including one in his 2021-2022 administration.

Notable figures: Naftali Bennett, former hard-right politician turned centrist prime minister; Nir Novak, Bennett's chief of staff; Yotam ben Yitzhak, Bennett's spokesperson; Shalom Shlomo, advisor and former cabinet secretary.

Polls: 18-22 seats projected. Previous polls predicted the party would surpass Likud.

HaDemocratim (The Democrats, founded in early 2024 through a merger of the left-wing Meretz party and the centre-left Labor party)

Ideology: Centre-left.

Platform: Implementing unilateral moves toward a resolution of the Palestinian issue; opposition to West Bank annexation; elimination of draft exemptions for Ultra-Orthodox.

Possible coalition alliances: Sought merger with Yesh Atid; belongs to “change bloc”.

Notable figures: Yair Golan, party leader.

Polls: 9-13 seats projected.

Yesh Atid (There is a Future, founded in 2012)

Ideology: Centre.

Platform: Supporting PA control of Gaza and conditioning reconstruction of the Strip on Hamas concessions; revoking voting rights for draft evaders and lowering the exemption age of ultra-Orthodox from 26 to 21.

Possible coalition alliances: Part of the “change bloc”. Wants a partnership with Zionist parties.

Notable figures: Yair Lapid, leader of the opposition and former prime minister.

Polls: 8-9 seats projected.

Yisrael Beiteinu (Israel is Our Home, founded in 1999)

Ideology: Centre-right.

Platform: Supporting confederation between Jordan and the Palestinians, transferring control of Gaza to an international entity; opposed to West Bank annexation, stopping the slide toward one-state reality; opposing the link of religion and state (voter base consists of Soviet Jewish émigrés); revoking voting rights for draft evaders; hawkish war policy.

Possible coalition alliances: Party leader Avigdor Liberman is a fierce critic of Netanyahu and is part of the “change bloc”. Rejects partnership with Arab parties, the Ultra-Orthodox, and Netanyahu.

Notable figures: Avigdor Lieberman, party leader and former defence minister.

Polls: 9 seats projected.

Yashar (Straight, Onward or Honest, founded in 2025)

Ideology: Centre-left.

Platform: Expanding PA civil autonomy; gradually increasing the draft of the Ultra-Orthodox; opposing West Bank annexation.

Possible coalition alliances: Part of “change bloc”. May merge with Bennett or Yesh Atid.

Notable figures: Gadi Eisenkot, former member of the Blue and White party and IDF chief of staff; former religious affairs minister Matan Kahana; economist and former INSS director Manuel Trajtenberg; Shir Segal, daughter of former Israeli hostages Keith and Aviva Segal.

Polls: 7 seats projected.

Kahol Lavan (Blue and White, founded in 2019)

Ideology: Centre-right.

Platform: Stopping slide into one-state reality; improving socioeconomic conditions in the West Bank; gradually increasing the draft of the ultra-Orthodox.

Possible coalition alliances: Part of “change bloc” but has not publicly disavowed the possibility of sitting in a coalition with Netanyahu.

Notable figures: Benny Gantz, party leader and former IDF chief of staff.

Polls: 0-4 seats projected.

The Reservists (HaMiluimnikim, founded in 2025)

Ideology: Centre-right.

Platform: Addressing concerns of military reservists; universal conscription, only veterans allowed to serve in the Knesset; state commission of inquiry into events of 7 October.

Possible coalition alliances: Willing to join coalition with ultra-Orthodox, Arab parties and Netanyahu, provided each faction supports “building Israel and the army.” Open to mergers. Assumed to prefer a non-Netanyahu government.

Notable figures: Yoaz Hendel, former communications minister under Bennett and Netanyahu.

Polls: Projected to fall short of the electoral threshold. Previous polls predicted between five and seven seats.

THE ARAB-LED PARTIES

The Joint List (Founded in 2015, may relaunch in 2026)

Ideology: Non-Zionist.

Platform: Reducing crime in the Arab sector; closing Arab-Jewish socioeconomic gaps; opposing settlement construction, Israeli military action; supporting the two-state solution.

Possible coalition alliances: Ra'am, Hadash, Ta'al and Balad signed an agreement in January 2026 pledging to reconstitute the Joint List, which became the third-largest Knesset party after the 2015, 2019, and March 2020 elections. The List’s constituent parties may again split apart to pursue different agendas following elections.

Polls: 12-13 seats projected.

Ra'am (United Arab List, founded in 1996)

Ideology: Socially conservative, politically left.

Platform: Reducing Arab-Jewish socioeconomic gaps, promoting Islamic values, evacuating settlements, and achieving a two-state solution.

Possible coalition alliances: Joint List (see above); joined the Bennett-Lapid-led 2021-2022 government, the first Arab-led party to make such a move in decades. Has indicated willingness to have Jewish Israelis stand as candidates.

Notable figures: Mansour Abbas, party leader.

Polls: 5 seats projected.

Hadash (Currently merged with Ta'al, founded in 1977)

Ideology: Far-left.

Platform: Arab-Jewish politics; return of all occupied territories; strongly backing ICC and ICJ cases against Israel.

Possible coalition alliances: Joint List (see above).

Notable figures: Aymen Odeh, party leader; Ofer Cassif, firebrand Hadash MK.

Polls: 5 seats projected.

Ta'al (Currently merged with Hadash, founded in 1996)

Ideology: Socialist.

Platform: Evacuating all settlements; two-state solution; opposing the link between religion and state.

Possible coalition alliances: Joint List (see above).

Notable figures: Ahmad Tibi, party leader.

Polls: 5 seats projected.

Balad (Home/Nation, founded in 1996)

Ideology: Secular Arab nationalist.

Platform: Turning Israel into a state of “all its citizens” and establishing a Palestinian state; opposing the link between religion and state; evacuating all settlements; declaring Israeli-Arabs as a national minority with collective and national rights.

Possible coalition alliances: Joint List (see above), although its leaders reportedly viewed Ra'am's leader, Abbas, as too moderate; refused to petition former President Reuven Rivlin to grant Gantz the opportunity to form an alternative government to Netanyahu, in contrast to other Arab parties.

Notable figures: Sami Abou Shahadeh, party leader.

Polls: Projected to fall short of the electoral threshold.

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