Israel's October 27 Election: Early Results and Coalition Scenarios

I write this as Israel's Central Elections Committee has released the tabulation of 91% of the votes cast. With the remaining votes, we can expect only minor movements (perhaps one or two additional seats for Netanyahu's camp, given that many of the uncounted ballots are the double-envelope votes of IDF soldiers, who tend to be politically to the right of the general population, and which are counted last). I begin by describing the competing camps, then turn to what we already know about the election outcome, and finally to what I view as the most plausible coalition-building scenarios.

In short: neither bloc can form a government on its own. Eisenkot will most likely get the first shot at forming a coalition, but his path is narrow. The most plausible outcome is a Netanyahu-led "unity government" that includes Eisenkot's party. That scenario is not a forgone conclusion.

The camps

The election pitted two blocs of Jewish voters against each other, alongside two Arab parties that are unaligned with either bloc. The two Jewish Zionist blocs hold opposing views of the nature of Israel as a Jewish state.

The Change bloc

The first group (the "Change bloc") is best described as liberal. It is predominantly but not exclusively secular (Bennett is Modern Orthodox). It is predominantly but not exclusively Ashkenazi (Eisenkot, for example, is Mizrahi), and it is, on average, more highly educated. Its voters are oriented toward Western liberal democracy. For members of this group, there was a strong sense that if Netanyahu won the October election, the country would have no future as a liberal democracy, which means it would cease to be a country worth fighting for. The bloc, however, spans a very wide ideological spectrum: from the moderate left (the Democrats, the former Labor and Meretz Parties, led by Yair Golan), to the center (Eisenkot's Yashar party and Bennett's Be'Yachad party), to a relatively moderate right-wing party (Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu).

Palestinian rights and self-determination have not been a main concern of this group, which does not share a vision of how to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Instead, the bloc has been united by four major concerns:

1. **Growing authoritarianism** of the Likud and its far-right coalition partners, which seek to diminish, in particular, the independence of the courts and the Attorney General's office.
2. **The growing dominance of religion in public life**, manifested in its expanding influence in the IDF, higher education, the public school system, and beyond.
3. **An unequal burden of basic civic duties**: working, paying taxes, serving in the military.
4. **A growing rift between Israel and Western democracies.** The concern here is that Israel is becoming a pariah state. Change bloc voters commonly express the desire for Israel to return to being a "normal country," one that hosts international music festivals, international sporting events, and so on.

This group's fear going into the October 27 election was that these dynamics – growing authoritarianism, religious encroachment, unequal civic burden, and discord with the West – would intensify if Netanyahu's bloc were re-elected. Talk of emigration in the event of electoral defeat has

been ubiquitous. With 91% of votes counted, the four Jewish Zionist parties that make up the Change bloc are projected to have won 48 of 120 seats.

Netanyahu's bloc

The second group can best be described as Netanyahu's bloc. It consists predominantly, but not exclusively, of Mizrahi Jews who tend to be more traditional (Likud voters), religious-nationalist voters (who support either Ben Gvir's or Smotrich's hawkish parties), and Haredi Jews (who vote for one of two Haredi parties, though a growing share of Haredi voters now cast their ballots for hard-right parties). Historically, the Haredi parties were unaligned "kingmakers" that could join a coalition with either the center-left or the right. Over the past decade, however, they have joined Netanyahu's bloc as their voters became more hawkish and as Netanyahu secured ever more benefits for their constituents.

It is common among liberals in Israel to describe Likud supporters as tribal, voting against their material interests. I'd argue that this description is incomplete and cannot explain the very high turnout of this group on October 27. Instead, it is helpful to take seriously the existential-threat discourse that prevailed among Israel's hard right before the election. For this group, one unifying belief is that Hamas's October 7 attack demonstrated that Israel must either be Sparta or cease to exist. Many voters in Netanyahu's bloc believe that the liberal opposition craves Western Europe's legitimacy and acceptance so badly that it fails to fully internalize the danger of appeasing those intent on Israel's destruction. In this reading, only Netanyahu has the guts, the moral compass, and the international stature to do whatever it takes to eliminate threats from Israel's many enemies, be they Iran, Hamas, Hezbollah, or the Houthis. For the hard right, only Netanyahu can stand up to an increasingly antisemitic Europe and to what they view as increasingly confused "woke" liberals in the United States, and assert Israel's right to defend itself by whatever means it sees fit. Netanyahu's bloc is currently projected to have won 53 seats: Likud 26, the two Haredi parties 14, Ben Gvir 7, and Smotrich 6.

The Arab parties

The two Arab parties – Ra'am and the Joint List (technically three parties that banded together to ensure none falls below the 3.25% threshold) – clearly oppose Netanyahu's governing coalition, but that does not necessarily make them members of the Change bloc. The Joint List, projected to have won 11 seats, is explicitly non-Zionist. It advocates that Israel stop privileging Jewish over Palestinian identity and that the country be defined as the home of all its citizens rather than as a Jewish state. Mansour Abbas's Ra'am, by contrast, projected to have won 8 seats, is a conservative Arab party that advocates for minority rights and greater equality in sectoral budget allocations, and downplays the question of Palestinian identity. This helps explain why Ra'am was a coalition partner in Bennett's short-lived government. The Joint List, however, has never been seriously considered a "legitimate" partner by large swaths of Jewish voters. Although the two Arab parties may lose one or two seats in the final tally, it is important to acknowledge that October 27 was a historic election in terms of Arab turnout, which has traditionally lagged Jewish turnout by about 10 percentage points.

What we know

First, Netanyahu's right-wing bloc, which held 68 seats on the eve of the election, has shrunk to 53, which means it cannot form a "full right" government as is. Netanyahu has no path to a stable coalition without breaking the Change bloc. Indeed, the six opposition parties together won a majority of seats. While mainstream pollsters somewhat underestimated the Likud's strength (it is projected to have won 26 seats, against polls of roughly 20–22), this is not the unambiguous Netanyahu victory he has tried to

portray since Tuesday night. Netanyahu's bloc had polled at 50–54 seats for months; the only surprise was the distribution of votes within his bloc, not the bloc's overall strength.

Second, the Change bloc underperformed both its polling average and the election-day exit polls of the three major TV channels by about five to six seats. Even so, the four parties that make up the bloc never polled above 54–55 seats. The bloc's trifecta of "no's" – no to a coalition that relies on Arab parties' support, no to a coalition with Netanyahu, and no to another election if the October vote proved indecisive – never made much political sense, because there was no plausible scenario in which these parties could form a coalition on those terms. They never polled anywhere near 61 seats.

Third, and this is key to understanding why Netanyahu holds a strong hand in coalition negotiations: the October 27 results are **arguably as good as the opposition could hope for**. If neither bloc manages to form a coalition and Israel heads to another election – a rather unlikely scenario – I doubt that Arab voters will turn out in such numbers again. Furthermore, an estimated 70,000 Israelis living abroad flew in to vote on October 27; I doubt many of them will spend thousands of dollars to return for another round in just a few months. And, unlike in 2022, more right-wing votes this time were lost to parties that failed to cross the 3.25% threshold. In short, 66–67 seats is as good as it gets for the opposition (the Change bloc plus the two Arab parties). Going to another election is not in their interest.

Scenarios

Eisenkot's first-mover advantage

The one advantage Eisenkot has is that he will most likely receive the first mandate to form a government from President Isaac Herzog. By law, the president must task the Knesset member with the best chance of forming a government, and by convention this is the person recommended by the most party leaders – who may or may not be the head of the largest party. Notably, Eisenkot's lead in recommendations depends on the Arab parties recommending him, the very support that much of the Jewish public considers an illegitimate basis for a coalition. Once tasked, Eisenkot will have 28 days (with an optional 14-day extension) to form a government, giving him a first-mover advantage.

A Change bloc–Ra'am coalition

In recent months, I have often been asked whether the Change bloc would form a coalition with Ra'am if, together, they won 61 or more seats. I thought they would, notwithstanding Avigdor Lieberman's vow not to join a coalition reliant on Arab parties' support. I assumed Lieberman was raising the price of his acceptance and would eventually cave to pressure. This scenario is no longer relevant: the Change bloc (48 seats) and Ra'am (8 seats) together still fall short of a majority.

A coalition backed by both Arab parties

Can Eisenkot form a coalition based on the support of both Arab parties? While normatively appealing, this is a low-probability scenario. First, I doubt the Joint List will accept the terms Eisenkot has said he would require of anyone joining a coalition he leads, one of which is explicit support for Israel's right to define itself as a Jewish state. Second, Netanyahu has been very successful in casting the Arab parties, and especially the Joint List, as illegitimate coalition partners. A majority of Jewish voters have accepted this (racist) premise, including many voters in the Change camp – a sad irony, given that the Change camp's main rallying cry has been the need to defend Israel as a liberal democracy.

It is here that the fact that the (Jewish) Change bloc won fewer votes than Netanyahu's bloc becomes most consequential. The prevailing view among Israel's Jewish majority is that Eisenkot did not receive a

mandate from Jewish voters to form whatever government he sees fit, precisely because he "lost the vote that matters" – that is, the Jewish vote – to Netanyahu. We cannot know this for sure, but I suspect that had the Change bloc won more seats than Netanyahu's bloc, as the pre-election and exit polls suggested, Eisenkot would have found a way to form a government with the support of the Arab parties. I can't see how he does so now. Technically, the Joint List need not join the government formally; it could support a minority government from the outside. But beyond being inherently unstable, a minority government sits in some tension with the Change bloc's commitment to democracy, and would certainly violate some of the (politically unwise and morally questionable) promises the camp's leaders made to voters.

Peeling off Shas

Could Eisenkot instead persuade one of the Haredi parties to defect from Netanyahu's bloc? The most likely candidate is Shas, a Mizrahi ultra-Orthodox party with 7 seats, which Eisenkot has courted for months and which may find it appealing to help install Israel's first-ever non-Ashkenazi prime minister. I believe the likelihood of this scenario is also low. It is hard to imagine a coalition with Lieberman and Golan on one side and Shas on the other, given Lieberman's and Golan's commitments to compel ultra-Orthodox enlistment in the army, eliminate many ultra-Orthodox subsidies, and, more generally, restore the country's more secular character. Still, it is not a zero-probability event. And since the Change bloc has 48 seats and Shas has 7, such a coalition would still require Ra'am to join, or Likud backbenchers to defect. Good luck with that.

To be clear, even if Eisenkot cannot form a government, once the new Knesset is sworn in, he will have enough votes to unseat the current Likud speaker, install a speaker from his own party, and use the votes of all 67 opposition members to roll back some of the Netanyahu government's worst laws. Or he could use that threat to lure in Shas. The point is that while Eisenkot's path to a government is narrow, it is not zero.

The most plausible outcome: a Netanyahu-led unity government

The most plausible scenario, however, is that Netanyahu forms a "unity government" with at least parts of the Change bloc, most likely Eisenkot's party. I doubt that Bennett's party (12 seats) will be invited to join, given that Sara Netanyahu vehemently dislikes Bennett, though he might be asked to join at a later stage to stabilize the coalition. I'm rather doubtful that Lieberman would join such a coalition, because Netanyahu is not going to throw the Haredi parties (14 seats) under the unity bus. Golan and the Democrats (8 seats) will certainly not be invited (too "radical left"), but I suspect that neither will Ben Gvir (7 seats). Ben Gvir will be sacrificed to signal to Eisenkot that Netanyahu is genuinely seeking to re-engage Western democracies, and perhaps moderate Arab states – which is especially important to Israel as Trump's term winds down. Smotrich (6 seats) will almost certainly be invited to join a unity government, because Netanyahu won't leave the main settlers' party out of his coalition, and because he very much likes Smotrich, who has been a reasonably effective finance minister.

Eisenkot's spokespeople have been leaking to the media that he is not interested in joining a unity coalition and that he still believes he has a path to forming a government. I would not take these deliberate leaks too seriously. In any case, nothing will happen until the final votes are tallied, the president consults with all the parties, and a leader – likely Eisenkot – begins the arduous and treacherous work of trying to assemble a coalition.