October 2026

country report

Country Office Israel

KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG



Guests at the KAS-Election Night in Tel Aviv, observing the first Exit Polls on Election Night / 27.10.26 / @Chen Galili

One Winner, Many Losers

Assessment of the Knesset Election Results

Dr. Michael Rimmel, Pascal Franz

For months, Israelis had been talking about one thing above all else: Election Day. The fierce campaign revolved around political responsibility for the Hamas attack of October 7, the prospect of mandatory military service for the ultra-Orthodox, the war against Iran, and for some, even the future of Israeli democracy. Nearly 78 percent of eligible voters cast their ballots. The result is surprising.

The election day started as usual. On election day, Israelis can cast their ballots only in person. Postal voting is permitted only in exceptional cases, primarily for diplomats and soldiers. Most polling stations are open from 7:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. and are located in schools or community centers. Outside the polling stations, political parties set up booths in a final effort to persuade undecided voters.

The first notable feature of Election Day was the exceptionally high voter turnout. Approximately every two hours, the Central Elections Committee published updated turnout figures. At every stage of the day, turnout exceeded the levels recorded in the previous election. At certain points, participation rates reached levels not seen since the 1977 election. By the close of voting, turnout stood at 77.7 percent, the highest since 1999. This increase was driven primarily by the successful mobilization of Arab voters.[1]

At 10:00 p.m., the polling stations closed and the major television networks released their first exit polls. Contrary to expectations, Likud emerged as the largest party with 25 seats, ahead of Gadi Eisenkot's Yashar, which was projected to win 21-22 seats, and Naftali Bennett's B'Yachad, with 13-14 seats. This was particularly surprising given that almost all pre-election polls had projected Yashar as the strongest party. At the same time, Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition appeared to fall short of a majority, with the Zionist opposition holding 53 seats to the coalition's 50. Despite Likud's first-place finish, a change of government with the support of the Arab party Ra'am seemed possible.

As vote counting continued throughout the night, the exit polls gradually gave way to the official election results.

Reactions from Israel

Opposition parties interpreted the first exit polls on election night as a mandate for political change. Gadi Eisenkot (Yashar) initially spoke of a “massive loss of trust” in the Netanyahu government and later told supporters that the public had voted against a “coalition for failure.” He called on Netanyahu to accept the voters’ “vote of no confidence” and announced that he would work to form a new government. Yair Golan (Democrats) likewise described the result as a clear rejection of Netanyahu, stating that Israelis had “fired” him and Likud. Naftali Bennett (B’Yachad) spoke of a mandate to “rebuild” the country. Representatives of the Arab parties also expressed hope for a change of government. Avigdor Lieberman (Yisrael Beytenu), while initially urging patience, later called on Likud members to rebel against Netanyahu and enable the formation of a “true right-wing government.”[2]

Representatives of the governing parties struck a combative tone on election night. Itamar Ben-Gvir (Otzma Yehudit) thanked his supporters, highlighted the achievements of the government, and warned against a national unity government without his party, describing such a scenario as a “terrible mistake.” Bezalel Smotrich (Religious Zionism) criticized the opposition’s premature declarations of victory and insisted that the government had “not lost.” At the same time, he reaffirmed his commitment to expanding settlements. The ultra-Orthodox parties reacted more cautiously. Aryeh Deri (Shas) refrained from commenting, while Yaakov Asher (UTJ) declared that “the Torah has won,” though he urged observers to await the final count before speculating about coalition arrangements.[3]

At 3 a.m., as it became increasingly clear that Likud would remain the largest party while the opposition bloc lacked a majority, Prime Minister Netanyahu addressed his supporters. He stated that the right-wing bloc had won the election and announced his intention to form a strong, national right-wing government that would not depend on “anti-Zionist Arab parties.” He argued that Israel had a historic opportunity during the next two years under U.S. President Trump to eliminate “the Iranian threat” once and for all. Netanyahu emphasized that Israel had always been able to defeat its enemies and would continue to do so in the future.[4]

The Official Election Results

In the 26th Knesset, the current governing coalition holds 53 seats (previously 64). Of these, 27 belong to Likud (previously 32 seats), 6 to Shas (previously 11), 7 to UTJ (previously 7), 7 to Otzma Yehudit (previously 6), and 6 to Bezalel Smotrich's national-religious party (previously 7).

The opposition holds 48 seats. Of these, 21 belong to Gadi Eisenkot and his party Yashar, 12 to Bennett's B'Yachad (the Yesh Atid party, part of the joint list, previously held 24 seats), 8 to the Democrats (previously 4), and 7 to Yisrael Beytenu (previously 6).

The Joint Arab List will be represented in the next Knesset with 11 seats (previously 5), while the Ra'am party will hold 8 seats (previously 5).

Several aspects stand out and deserve attention. Neither of the two major blocs was able to secure a majority. The pre-election polls had already pointed in this direction; however, in almost all surveys the opposition bloc led by Eisenkot was ahead of the governing coalition. That Netanyahu succeeded in emerging as the leader of the largest party and placing his bloc ahead of the opposition is one of the major surprises of this election.

One of the reasons why Likud, as well as the Arab parties, performed so successfully is the enormous level of voter mobilization. In absolute numbers, Likud received more votes than in 2022 (1,111,500 in 2022 compared to 1,157,000 in 2026) and nevertheless lost six seats. Within the opposition, only the Arab-Israeli parties were able to achieve a similar level of mobilization.

It is also noteworthy that the ultra-Orthodox parties were unable to mobilize their voters. Normally, voter turnout among the ultra-Orthodox is above average; in this election, however, it was below the national turnout rate. This was due primarily to Shas, which recorded its worst result since the 1999 election. The exact reasons for this are still being debated.

The parties of the far right, Otzma Yehudit and Mafdal HaTzionut HaDatit, also failed to grow. Their participation in government, as well as their appearances and decisions, some of which also received attention in the German media, did not improve their electoral performance.

The newly elected Knesset differs significantly from the parliament of the previous legislative term. Even before the election, it was known that at least 30 of the 120 seats would be filled by new members, as the incumbent parliamentarians did not seek re-election. Fifty-nine of the 120 members were not part of the previous Knesset, 87 members are male, 48 describe themselves as secular, and two are Druze. In addition, three parties that were established in their current configuration only within the last four years will be represented in the new Knesset: Gadi Eisenkot's Yashar, Naftali Bennett's Bennett26, and the Democrats. The Zehut party, although founded in 2015, will also enter the Knesset for the first time. The list of nationally known members of parliament who will no longer be part of the legislature is equally noteworthy. Yuli Edelstein and Avi Dichter (formerly of Likud), former Knesset Speaker Micky Levy (Yesh Atid), Merav Michaeli (Democrats), Benny Gantz (Blue and White), and others will leave the Knesset.

What Trends can be identified in the Election Results?

The data available so far show that no party succeeded in convincing voters from the opposing bloc. The geographical distribution also follows familiar patterns: the Zionist opposition parties were strong in the center of the country, Likud performed particularly well in the periphery, while the Arab parties were strongest in the north and parts of the Negev. The polarization of Israeli society was also a decisive factor in this election. The observable voter shifts took place within the blocs. Some former voters of the far right voted for Likud in this election, while some former Yesh Atid voters cast their ballots for Eisenkot.

Equally important is the mobilization already discussed above. In Arab communities, voter turnout was in some cases 30 percent higher than in the 2022 election, while mobilization in other parts of society did not increase compared to 2022, a development that is reflected in the election results.

Also noteworthy is the growing number of figures within the opposition who are associated with traditional security policy. Until now, the leader of the opposition had been Yair Lapid. Within his bloc, however, Lapid has now been overtaken by the two former defense ministers Naftali Bennett and Avigdor Lieberman, and above all by former IDF Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot.

Looking ahead

The result makes the rapid formation of a government unlikely, as no bloc has secured a majority. Lengthy negotiations, ultimately followed by new elections, could be the consequence. The current government will remain in office as a caretaker government until then, although its ability to act is nevertheless limited.

Three scenarios are conceivable: a government of national unity, a government of the opposition and the Arab-Israeli parties, or new elections.

Netanyahu may succeed in forming a coalition and establishing a new government with at least 61 seats. His current coalition does not command a majority on its own, meaning that Netanyahu must either bring additional parties into his coalition or replace existing coalition partners with new ones. A national unity coalition consisting of Likud and Yashar, supported by additional parties, would reach the required majority. Given the enormous polarization, this scenario appears unlikely, but it cannot be ruled out. Should Netanyahu form a coalition in which far-right parties are not represented, this would also facilitate the further development of German-Israeli relations. Such a scenario would be welcomed by many international partners.

A coalition between the opposition and the Arab-Israeli parties also remains a conceivable scenario. Since the opposition bloc commands fewer seats than Netanyahu's bloc, the support of the Arab-Israeli parties, or at least parts thereof, would be required in order to secure a parliamentary majority for Eisenkot as prime minister. During the election campaign, only the Democrats expressed openness toward such cooperation, while the other opposition parties categorically ruled it out. Nevertheless, the opposition together with the Arab-Israeli parties would, in purely mathematical terms, command a majority in the Knesset. It is therefore not surprising that some political actors, most notably Democratic Party leader Yair Golan, have begun exploring possible frameworks for political cooperation.[5] Whether such cooperation can be translated into sustainable political

agreements may become apparent on 10 November, when the newly elected Knesset is scheduled to convene for its inaugural session and elect a new Speaker, fourteen days after the election.[6] Should the opposition parties and at least one Arab party list vote jointly in support of a Speaker candidate, this would indicate that Eisenkot is capable of negotiating and implementing agreements with Arab parties. At the same time, such an arrangement would entail considerable political risks and raise serious questions regarding the long-term stability of the coalition. For this reason, the formation of such a government currently appears unlikely. Internationally, a government excluding Netanyahu's Likud and its far-right coalition partners would likely generate substantial expectations among Israel's partners. At the domestic level, however, such a coalition would be expected to face significant political tensions and questions of legitimacy among parts of the electorate. Consequently, a change of government would not necessarily translate into an improvement in Israel's relations with the international community.

In light of the polarization and the distribution of seats, it is equally possible that no bloc will be able to secure a majority in the Knesset. Within seven days of the publication of the official election results, President Herzog will task a member of the Knesset with forming a government. This is likely to be Gadi Eisenkot, provided that a majority of the parties represented in the new Knesset recommend him for the position. The designated individual has a maximum of 42 days to form a government; otherwise, the mandate will formally be transferred to a second candidate, who in turn has 28 days. If both fail, 61 members of the Knesset must, within 21 days, propose a candidate who must then form a government within 14 days. If no government exists at the end of this process, the Knesset dissolves itself and new elections are held within the following 90 days. This would be no later than April 2027.[7] Under this scenario, Israel would be only limitedly able to enter into reliable international agreements. Issues relevant to Germany and other international partners, such as the future of the Gaza Strip and the EU Association Agreement, would receive only limited attention. This scenario would therefore likewise not be in Germany's interest and would not help advance progress in Israel's relations with the international community.

[1] JPost, Arab voter turnout surges past 2022 figures as haredi strongholds lag behind, 27 October 2026, online: https://www.jpost.com/israel-election-2026/article-913061 (accessed 28.10.2026).

[2] Times of Israel, Eisenkot and Netanyahu each vow to form next coalition, even as exit polls predict stalemate, 28. October 2026, online: https://www.timesofisrael.com/eisenkot-and-netanyahu-each-vow-to-form-next-coalition-even-as-exit-polls-predict-stalemate/ (accessed 28.10.2026).

[3] Times of Israel, Eisenkot and Netanyahu each vow to form next coalition, even as exit polls predict stalemate, 28. October 2026, online: https://www.timesofisrael.com/eisenkot-and-netanyahu-each-vow-to-form-next-coalition-even-as-exit-polls-predict-stalemate/ (accessed 28.10.2026).

[4] Times of Israel, Eisenkot and Netanyahu each vow to form next coalition, even as exit polls predict stalemate, 28. October 2026, online: https://www.timesofisrael.com/eisenkot-and-netanyahu-each-vow-to-form-next-coalition-even-as-exit-polls-predict-stalemate/ (accessed 28.10.2026).

[5] Times of Israel, Golan Repeats call to work with Arab Parties, says undemocratic to discount them out of hand, 30 October 2026, online: https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/golan-repeats-call-to-work-with-arab-parties-says-undemocratic-to-discount-them-out-of-hand/ (accessed: 30.10.2026).

[6] Ynet, Israel Elections 2026: What happens after polls close and when will we know who won?, 27 October 2026, online: https://www.ynetnews.com/article/bytladcnzg (accessed 28.10.2026).

[7] Stuttgarter Nachrichten, So geht es im Machtpoker um die Knesset weiter, 28. October 2026, online: https://www.stuttgarter-nachrichten.de/politik/nach-der-wahl-in-israel-so-geht-es-im-machtpoker-um-die-knesset-weiter-79619559.html (accessed 28.10.2026).

Konrad Adenauer Foundation

Dr. Michael Rimmel and Pascal Franz
Israel Office
European and International Cooperation Department
www.kas.de/israel

As of: October 30, 2026

The text of this publication is published under a Creative Commons license: “Creative Commons Attribution- Share Alike 4.0 international” (CC BY-SA 4.0), https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/legalcode