



Israel election guide: How 120-seat Knesset vote works, key candidates, and what's at stake for Gaza

Israelis vote on October 27 under a system where no party has ever won a majority alone. Here is how the Knesset vote works, who is in the race and how a government is formed.

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Pedestrians pass an election campaign billboard featuring Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, left, and his main rival, opposition candidate Gadi Eisenkot, with a Hebrew message reading "If it's not Gadi, it's Bibi," in Ramat Gan, Israel. (Photo: AP)

Israelis vote on Tuesday, October 27, in the first election since the Hamas-led attacks of October 7, 2023 and the wars that followed in Gaza, Iran, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen. Polling published on Friday shows Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in a tight race with Gadi Eisenkot, a former head of the Israel Defense Forces. The polls suggest neither side will win a majority in the 120-seat parliament, known as the Knesset, so the winner may not be clear for weeks or months.

Here is how the vote works and what happens after it.

HOW THE KNESSET VOTING SYSTEM WORKS

The Knesset has 120 seats, so a government needs 61 to hold a majority. Israel uses proportional representation, which means parties win seats in line with their share of the vote. For that reason, every Israeli government has been a coalition of several parties.

How Israel elects its government

Israel Elections 2026: How it works

1 THE PARLIAMENT

120 Knesset seats
Israel's parliament

120
SEATS

61 seats: majority Remaining 59 Halfway line

2 THE MAGIC NUMBER

61 seats
Majority needed to govern

61

0120

A party or coalition needs a majority.

3 AFTER THE VOTE

ELECTION RESULT



Majority secured

Coalition negotiations lead to government formation.

61+ seats

Government formed



No majority

Parties negotiate; a minority government or fresh election may follow if government formation fails.

Minority government

or fresh election

Source: The Knesset

Express InfoGenIE

Created by Aniruddha Dhar

If no bloc can reach 61 seats, a minority government is possible. If that fails too, new elections can be called, and Netanyahu would stay on as interim prime minister until then.

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WHO IS IN THE RACE

Eisenkot formed his Yashar Party only last year, and part of his appeal is his military record and his status as a newcomer to politics. His son, a soldier, was killed in the first months of the Gaza war. Eisenkot sat in Netanyahu's war cabinet until he resigned in 2024 over how the

war was handled, and his campaign calls for accountability over the failures that led to October 7.

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Other opposition leaders include former prime minister Naftali Bennett and Avigdor Lieberman, both right-wingers with hardline views on security, and Yair Golan, a former general who leans left. They could work with Eisenkot to remove Netanyahu.

Netanyahu leads the most right-wing government in Israel's history. To stay in power, he will probably need some of his far-right partners. Some of them want Israel to annex the West Bank and call for the "migration" of Palestinians from Gaza, which could amount to forced removal of civilians.

About one-fifth of Israelis are Arab, and many call themselves Palestinian citizens of Israel. Two Arab party blocs are running and could hold the balance of power, but all but one of the leading Jewish parties have ruled out working with them.

WHAT THE VOTE IS ABOUT

Security has dominated the campaign. Netanyahu's challengers criticise the failures that led to October 7, when nearly 1,200 people were killed, and 251 were taken to Gaza as hostages. Netanyahu again presents himself as "Mr Security" and points to Israel's gains in the wars since 2023.

Other main issues are:

- **Military service:** Ultra-Orthodox men in full-time religious study have long been exempt, and the rule has become more divisive since the war began.
- **Judicial reform:** The government still plans changes to the courts. Critics say they would weaken the courts' independence and threaten democracy.
- **Cost of living:** Food and housing costs have risen steadily.

The result will also shape life for Palestinians. A year after the Gaza ceasefire, Israel still carries out near-daily strikes and controls more than half of the territory. The Hamas-run health ministry says more than 74,000 people have died in Gaza since October 7, 2023, and the UN considers its figures reliable. In the West Bank, UN records show settler attacks at a record high, and settlements, which are illegal under international law, are growing fast.

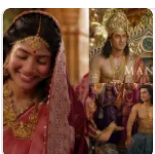
Eisenkot's position on Gaza is close to Netanyahu's. He has promised to end Hamas rule within 18 months, through a US-led peace plan or, if needed, by force. He backs settlements in general but opposes the E1 project, which would split the West Bank in two. He also wants action against extremist settlers, and has spoken of "autonomy or a state-minus" for Palestinians under Israeli security control. None of the leading Jewish parties is campaigning for a two-state solution.

WHEN RESULTS COME AND HOW A GOVERNMENT IS FORMED

Israeli broadcasters will publish exit polls at 10pm local time (8pm GMT) on election day. These can be well off the final result, and Friday's polls suggest a clear winner is unlikely. Preliminary results are due the next day, and official results are due on November 4.

President Isaac Herzog will then talk to party leaders and invite the one he thinks has the best chance of forming a government. This can take more than a month. If that leader fails, Herzog may ask another. If that also fails, Knesset members can ask him to let a third leader try, and if that fails, new elections are called. Israel held five elections between 2019 and 2022 because parties repeatedly could not work together.

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