Netanyahu claims giant victory; updated polls show majority slipping from reach

OPPOSITION'S LAPID SAYS HE'LL TRY TO BUILD 'SANE GOVERNMENT'

Likud chief phones his likely partners, urges them to join 'a strong, stable right-wing government'; potential kingmaker Bennett says changes afoot but coy on who he will back.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's supporters wave Likud party flags after first exit poll results for the Israeli elections at his party's headquarters in Jerusalem, Tuesday, March. 23, 2021. (AP Photo/Ariel Schalit)

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu claimed a "giant victory" after initial exit polls gave his Likud party over 30 seats in Tuesday's elections and predicated a bare majority for his right-wing religious bloc — with the support of Yamina.

However, it was too close to call the election for either side, and updated exit polls early Wednesday gave a boost to anti-Netanyahu factions, with the premier's bloc and Yamina together slipping below 61 seats, short of a majority in the 120-seat Knesset.

Opposition leader Yair Lapid of Yesh Atid said he too would try to build a coalition — to "create a sane government for Israel."

"Israeli citizens, thank you," Netanyahu said in a statement. "You gave a huge win to the right and Likud under my leadership. Likud is the biggest party by far… It's clear most Israelis are right-wing and want a strong, stable right-wing government."

Likud said Netanyahu phoned the "leaders of the national camp," urging them to

join a right-wing government he leads. A statement from the party did not specify which party heads he spoke to.

One of the calls was to Interior Minister Aryeh Deri, whose Shas party is projected to get up to nine seats in the Knesset, making the ultra-Orthodox party the second-largest faction in a potential Netanyahu-led governing coalition.

Netanyahu congratulated Deri and the two planned to continue a discussion on the election results later in the evening, the Shas head's spokesman said.

Shas chief Aryeh Deri addresses supporters on election night at party headquarters in Jerusalem, March 23, 2021. (Noam Revkin Fenton/Flash90)

The Likud chief also spoke by phone with Religious Zionism head Bezalel Smotrich and congratulated him as well, according to a Religious Zionism spokesman. The far-right party was projected to get 6-7 seats.

Additionally, Netanyahu phoned Yamina leader Naftali Bennett, who told the premier he will only be ready to get down to brass tacks once the actual results are in, a Yamina spokesman said. Bennett added that his decisions will be guided by what's best for the country.

Bennett, now in the potential role of kingmaker, refused to say if he will grant Netanyahu key support, instead telling supporters only that "what was will not be." Speaking at Yamina's election party, he called for national healing and said "a real right-winger doesn't hate, he unites."

In the anti-Netanyahu bloc, Yesh Atid chief Lapid spoke with Nitzan Horowitz, head of the left-wing Meretz party, with the two agreeing to speak again soon.

"At the moment, Netanyahu doesn't have 61 seats but the change bloc does. We'll wait for the final results but as it stands there won't be a government based on the votes of the racists and homophobes. I've started speaking to party leaders and we'll wait for the results but we'll do everything to create a sane government in Israel," Lapid said at a Yesh Atid event.

Yesh Atid party leader Yair Lapid casts his ballot at a voting station in Tel Aviv on March 23, 2021. (Tomer Neuberg/Flash90)

Former Likud minister Gideon Sa'ar, meanwhile, vowed his New Hope party would not join a government led by Netanyahu after exit polls indicated it collapsed to five to six seats.

According to Hebrew media reports, Sa'ar and Lapid spoke and agreed to work together after the elections.

As the night wore on it appeared that Netanyahu's claim of victory may have come too soon.

All three channels updated their exit poll results to correlate with actual results coming in and showed Netanyahu losing his possible majority.

An updated exit poll from Channel 12 news had Likud dropping to 30 seats, with Netanyahu's bloc together with Yamina falling to 59 seats. The centrist Yesh Atid held steady as the second-largest party with 18 seats.

While the results gave the anti-Netanyahu bloc 61 seats, it was far from clear if these parties could come together to form a government, as they range from the right-wing Yisarel Beytenu and New Hope factions to the majority Arab Joint List.

In the updated Channel 13 and Kan news exit polls, Netanyahu's bloc and Yamina dropped one seat to 60.

Yamina supporters at the party headquarters in Petah Tikva, on election night, on March 23, 2021. (Avi Dishi/Flash90)

The exit polls, which have in the past been off the mark, were being continually be updated throughout the night as votes are tallied. Final results could take two or more days, with the count complicated by hundreds of thousands of absentee ballots.

Along with Likud, Shas, and Religious Zionism, Netanyahu's bloc also includes the

ultra-Orthodox United Torah Judaism party. The factions opposed to Netanyahu are Yesh Atid, New Hope, Yisrael Beytenu, Labor, Joint List, and Meretz.

According to the Central Elections Committee, 67.2 percent of eligible voters cast ballots in the election, down from previous years, but slightly improved from poor turnout results throughout the day.

The figure was the lowest since 2009 when 64.7% voted.