

AP Explains: Israel's upcoming vote, its 3rd in under a year



Blue and White party leader Benny Gantz, delivers a statement to the media in Ramat Gan, Israel, Sunday, March 1, 2020. Israel heads into its third election in less than a year on Monday, March 2nd. (AP Photo/Ariel Schalit)



People walk next to election campaign billboards for Likud Party, shows Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, right, and the Blue and White party, the opposition party led by Benny Gantz, left, in Bnei Brak, Israel, Sunday, March. 1, 2020. Israel heads into its third election in less than a year on Monday, March 2nd. (AP Photo/Oded Balilty)

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israel is holding its third election in less than a year on Monday, with over 6.4 million eligible voters set to cast their ballots for the 23rd Knesset, or parliament. With the actors all the same as the last round in September and pre-election opinion polls predicting similar results, weary Israelis are still hoping to see an end to the year-long deadlock that has paralyzed national politics.

Here is a closer look at what to expect:

THIRD TIME'S A CHARM

The March 2 vote is Israel's third parliamentary election in under a year, an unprecedented situation for the 71-year-old country. The third election was called after neither Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu nor his main rival, former army

chief Benny Gantz, succeeded in forming a governing coalition following the Sept. 17 election. The Knesset voted to dissolve itself and send the country to yet another election. A similar deadlock followed elections last April.

THE BIG NAMES

Netanyahu, who has been prime minister for over a decade, is seeking what would be his fifth term overall, including an earlier stint in the 1990s. In July, Netanyahu secured a place in history as the country's longest-serving prime minister, surpassing Israel's founding father David Ben-Gurion. He faces tough opposition from Gantz, whose Blue and White party seeks to replace Netanyahu's long-dominant Likud.

VETERAN VS. CLEAN SHEET

For the third time running, the main contenders remain Netanyahu and Gantz. Netanyahu has campaigned on his experience and diplomatic accomplishments, pointing to his opponent's inexperience. Gantz has stumped on Netanyahu's inability to serve under the shadow of a looming trial on corruption charges.

Netanyahu was indicted on fraud, breach of trust and bribery charges in November. He had sought immunity from prosecution from parliament but later rescinded his request. His trial is scheduled to begin on March 17, just two weeks after election day.

Netanyahu has denied wrongdoing and says he's the victim of a witch hunt by police, prosecutors and the media. The election is widely seen as a referendum on his character and ability to govern while facing criminal charges.

THE CONTENDERS

All 120 seats in the Knesset, Israel's parliament, are up for grabs. Twenty-nine parties are competing, including the large front-runners, ultra-Orthodox religious parties, Arab factions and fringe movements.

But only a handful are expected to garner the 3.25% of the vote necessary to break the electoral threshold and earn the minimum four seats in parliament.

TURNOUT AND FATIGUE

Israeli elections tend to have robust turnout. Election day is a national holiday, a measure aimed at encouraging participation.

In both of last year's elections, turnout was about 69%, slightly below the 72% figure in the 2015 vote.

But with voter fatigue high after the repeat elections, it remains to be seen whether parties' efforts to get out the vote will succeed.

ROUND FOUR?

No Israeli party has ever won an outright majority, which forces the larger parties to form blocs with smaller allies.

After the election, Israel's president will meet with party heads and select the party he believes is most capable of forming a coalition. That party, which is usually but not always the largest faction, then has four weeks to form a coalition. A new government will be given a four-year term, but disagreements between coalition parties often result in early elections.

Preelection polls point to a similar outcome as September's election, suggesting Likud and Blue and White could both struggle to form a coalition. Whether the two parties can agree to form a unity government — something they couldn't do after the last election — remains a remote possibility to break the year-long political deadlock.

Recent opinion polls have indicated softening support for Blue and White, giving Netanyahu a remote chance of claiming victory.

Another key player could be the secular, ultranationalist party Yisrael Beitenu, whose leader, Avigdor Lieberman, has refused to commit to either side. The predominantly Arab Joint List is also expected to make a strong showing. While an Arab-led party has never served in a government, the Joint List could provide external support to push Gantz over the top.

Another possible outcome is that there is once again no clear winner and Israelis will head to the polls for an unprecedented fourth vote.

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