



Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his wife Sara attend the Ethiopian Sigd festival in Kibbutz Ramat Rachel in Jerusalem, marking the Ethiopian immigration to Israel. Flickr photo

Israel Votes: Is Bibi the Only Grown-up in the Room or the Devil Incarnate?

Gil Troy

Israeli elections are never about small issues. The current campaign, fraught with overheated rhetoric, oversized characters and last-minute alliances, is really about one question: Is Benjamin Netanyahu's era at the helm of Israel over? Respected political historian Gil Troy reminds us that the one larger-than-life idea that is bigger than Bibi, win or lose, is Israel itself.

Two videos frame the upcoming Israeli elections on March 17. The first, released by the incumbent Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party, sets up Netanyahu as a kindergarten teacher, casting his rivals as squabbling pre-schoolers. The second, released by *Eretz Nehedaret* (It's a Wonderful Land), Israeli television's leading satirical show, casts the various opposition candidates as characters in *Star Wars*. All

seek to unseat the evil Caesar from Caesaria. Netanyahu has a vacation home in Caesaria, an ancient Roman city now surrounded by lavish beach houses. The campaign, with multiple parties and overheated rhetoric, is often playing as a mystery series that will reveal whether Israeli voters believe Netanyahu is the only grown-up in the room or the devil incarnate.

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In truth, while pundits and spinmeisters the day after will probably use such black-and-white rhetoric to proclaim misleadingly clear conclusions, the results seem destined to be more muddled.

For starters, Israel's hyper-democratic political system is famously fragmented, and, it seems, only getting more so. The electoral fight is for a 61-vote majority in the 120 member Knesset. No party has ever won a majority on its own in Israel's 67-year history. Still, whereas the leading parties used to get 40 or even 50 seats, the polls show the two leading parties averaging between 22 and 26 seats, which makes the parties and the eventual prime minister hostages to the whims of minor parties while guaranteeing muddled results.

Moreover, so far, this has been a most uninspiring campaign, a campaign of big egos not sweeping ideas, of postures not principles. Stav Shaffir, a firebrand from the opposition Labour Party, recently lamented that under Netanyahu, Israel's sweepingly optimistic anthem, *HaTikvah*, which means The Hope, will soon be *HaYeush*, which means The Despair.

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So far, the hottest campaign issue has been Netanyahu's planned address to the United States Congress, and the resulting blowback from President Barack Obama and some Democrats. Characteristically, despite the prime minister's stated intention to jumpstart a conversation about Iran, the focus in Israel has been on how much damage insulting Obama might cause and how much of Netanyahu's motivation stems from the mid-March election.

Netanyahu, known by friends and foes alike as “Bibi,” has been prime minister since March 31, 2009, and also served for three years a decade earlier, from 1996 through 1999. Having also served as ambassador to the United Nations, foreign minister, finance minister, and opposition leader, he has far more governmental experience than any of his rivals. Netanyahu has been the defining leader of this decade, and of Israel's third generation—not the David Ben-Gurion and Golda Meir founders, not the Yitzhak Rabin and Moshe Dayan fighters, but the post-1948 heirs, born in a free, democratic Jewish State—and tasked with shaping Israel in the 21st century as a stable, maturing, sophisticated high-tech center still committed to its Jewish mission of preserving tradition and inspiring the world.

In many ways, Netanyahu represents Israel's two sides. Especially as finance minister, he modernized the economy and helped Israel become the Start-Up Nation, inventing modern-day miracles and attracting nearly a billion dollars in venture capital in 2014 alone. But in his suspicion of the world, in his sensitivity to anti-Semitism, in his fears of the future, he also represents the scarred Jew, the persecuted Jew, the Jew who has not

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Steeped in Jewish history and Jewish suffering by his historian father, reinforced in that anguish when his charismatic older brother, Yoni, was murdered while heroically freeing dozens of Israelis from the hands of German terrorists in the famous 1976 Entebbe Raid, Bibi Netanyahu has good reason to worry. Outsiders may mock his constant warnings about Iran going nuclear, but the 20th century has taught Jews—and most sentient human beings—that totalitarian dictators calling for a people's destruction and seeking weapons of mass destruction must be taken seriously.

And while outsiders may only see Israel's military, economic, and social strengths, he and his people are well aware of Israel's vulnerabilities, with an Arab Spring that quickly turned gloomy, with a Palestinian national movement still more committed to destroying a Jewish state than building a Palestinian state, with ISIS spreading terror throughout the Middle East, Syria enmeshed in civil war, Lebanon dominated by Hezbollah, Jordan often worried about Islamist upheaval, and Egypt still traumatized by its bout of Muslim Brotherhood leadership.

Despite growing criticism in Europe and on the far left, most Israelis understandably feel burned by previous concessions made to the Palestinians. Until someone explains—or better yet, Palestinians show—why a new round will produce the peaceful results Oslo, the Southern Lebanon withdrawal and the Gaza disengagement failed to achieve, most Israelis will share Netanyahu's peace process pessimism.

In such an environment, it takes an extra effort to hope, and the headline remains that, faced with such foes, Israel remains democratic, optimistic, dynamic.

Still, election campaigns often pick at national scabs, with various parties offering differing Band-Aids. According to the latest polls, the opposition leader, Yitzhak Herzog, has convinced a majority of Israelis that Netanyahu is tired, that his ideas are stale, that it's time for new blood. As of this writing, Netanyahu's party is averaging about 25 seats in the polls, which means less than a quarter of the electorate wants him back. But Herzog so far has failed to convince a majority of Israelis that he and his party are the answer.

When Netanyahu first called the election, Herzog was looking strong. He struck a deal with Tzipi Livni to have

his Labour Party and her HaTnua Party run together as the Zionist Union. Voters approved of the marriage, and the two parties together polled far more seats than they each had individually. However, Livni's political dowry—a rotation agreement if they win whereby she would serve two years after Herzog's two years—reinforced many fears that Herzog is too nice and too weak for Israel's tough domestic politics and tougher neighborhood. In the *Star Wars* spoof, Herzog as Luke Skywalker waves around his light saber—only to see it go limp when he joins with Livni.

Other players on the scene represent other tribes of Israel. HaBayit HaYehudi (The Jewish Home), led by Naftali Bennett, is the party of the national religious and the settlers. He is to Bibi's right but also is Bibi's closest ideological ally. Recently, seeing those voters as the easiest to woo, Netanyahu has been targeting Bennett and his party, desperate to boost his vote totals. Avigdor Lieberman of Yisrael Beiteinu (Israel's Our Home), represents the million plus Russian Jews who moved to Israel, once freed from Soviet totalitarianism.

The great hope of the last election, Yair Lapid, of Yesh Atid, (There Is a Future),

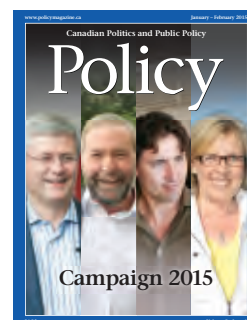
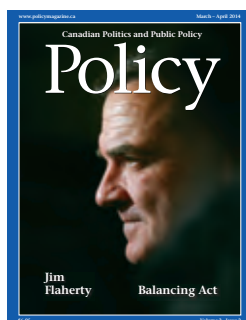
is looking a bit stale, and the once-heralded newcomer of this election, Moshe Kachlon of Kulano (All of Us), has not attracted the same critical mass of voters Lapid attracted last time. Two other groups are also represented—Israeli Arabs and ultra-Orthodox Jews. Together, all these parties reflect Israel in all its multi-dimensionality and complexity. But trying to put a coalition together to reach 61 seats may require the kind of miracles Moses relied on when crossing the Red Sea or drawing water from a rock.

The true miracle, of course, will be on Election Day itself. If all 19 previous elections are any indication, the day will be peaceful. The participation will be extensive—still averaging two-thirds. And Israeli democracy will continue not only to survive but to thrive. Israel, the day after, will neither be “Bibi's Israel” if he wins nor “No longer Bibi's Israel” if he loses, just as Canada after the elections will be neither “Stephen Harper's Canada” nor “Justin Trudeau's Canada,” but a diverse, pluralistic, delightfully messy mix. **P**

Contributing Writer Gil Troy is a Professor of History at McGill University. His 10th book, Moynihan's Moment: America's Fight Against Zionism as Racism, recently won the J.I. Segal Award for Best Jewish Non-Fiction Book for 2014. gil.troy@mcgill.ca

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