

# Israel's Arab parties make historic gains as election support surges

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## Joint List alliance capitalises on backlash against Netanyahu by taking 15 seats in Knesset

Arab politicians are set to make historic gains in the Israeli election, taking more seats than ever before and solidifying their position as the third-largest force in the Knesset, the country's parliament.

After 99% of the votes were counted, the Joint List alliance, a merger of politicians predominantly representing Palestinian citizens of [Israel](#), had 15 out of 120 Knesset seats.

Boosted by a backlash to [racist campaigning](#) by Benjamin Netanyahu, Arab candidates also capitalised on anger towards the prime minister's ally, Donald Trump. The US president's recently-released "peace plan" included a [a highly-controversial clause](#) that could strip some Arab-Israelis of their citizenship.

The country's approximately 21% Arab minority, mostly descended from Palestinians who remained on their land after Israel's creation in 1948, broadly support the Palestinian cause and have often boycotted previous elections.

Since the 2015 election, Netanyahu has [warned](#) his supporters that the minority could vote en masse to block him from power. Five years later, it appeared they might have succeeded.

In Monday's vote, Arab turnout surged to 64.7%, according to estimates from the Israel Democracy Institute thinktank.

"We know that the Arabs came to the polling stations in droves," said the chairman of the Joint List, Ayman Odeh, in comments that [mockingly mirrored Netanyahu's derogatory language](#) from 2015. "It was clear to everyone that the Joint List was leading the battle against any rightwing government," Odeh added.

While no Arab party has ever served in an Israeli governing coalition due to ideological differences, any Joint List gains will serve to dampen Netanyahu's chances of leading the next government. While his Likud party won the most votes of any faction, Netanyahu's alliance with ultranationalist and religious allies is still short of two or three seats to secure a clear majority.

"As far as we are concerned, we've already done our part. We've stopped Netanyahu's far-right government," said Dean Issacharoff, a spokesman for Ayman Odeh.

Unless Netanyahu can persuade other opposition politicians to defect, Israel's political stalemate will almost certainly continue, with the possibility of another complete breakdown and a fourth election.

In last April's election, Arab candidates, including communists, Islamists, secularists and Palestinian nationalists, claimed 10 seats. After they unified into the Joint List alliance in September, they pushed that figure up to 13, promising better services but also to present a bulwark against anti-Arab policies.

This time, the Joint List also sought to win votes from progressive Jewish Israelis, some of whom are dismayed with traditionally leftwing Jewish candidates, who have seen their influence plummet as domestic politics lurches rightwards.

Meretz, a small Zionist party that opposes the occupation of the [Palestinian territories](#), appeared to have lost voters to the Joint List after it joined forces with the less vocal Labour party. It made the move to risk disappearing from the Knesset altogether, but alienated some supporters.

"A lot of leftwing voters were disillusioned or disappointed," said Issacharoff, adding that the Joint List estimated it had doubled its support from Jewish people. "We've never been in a place that is so influential."

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## **Oliver Holmes**

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