Israel has its own version of late-night comedy shows, and they have been having quite a time with the upcoming election. Recently they offered this commentary:

Why Vote for Blue and White? “Well,” Blue and White says, “because we deserve a government that is ‘parve,’ lackluster, colorless, ho-hum, devoid of both bells and whistles.” Despite this less than exciting description, more than a million Israelis will vote for them.

Now you may be confused. Didn’t Israel just have elections? You are correct. Israel had elections for the Knesset in April, and, somewhat like our own 2016 election, the polls were not predictive. Also like our election of 2000, it was months until the real outcome was clear; in Israel’s case, however, the outcome was . . . no outcome.

Benjamin Netanyahu, whose party Likud tied with the Blue and White opposition party, was unable to create a coalition to reach the threshold of 61 votes in the Knesset necessary for a government to be formed. Avigdor Liebermann and his right-wing Russian party, Yisrael Beiteinu, Israel our Home, was unwilling to join a coalition with the Orthodox parties, whose concessions impacted his constituents. Pundits also pointed to the animosity between Liebermann and Netanyahu as a factor. In any case, in order to avoid the moving forward of his three indictments, Netanyahu dismissed the newly elected Knesset and called for new elections.
Let’s review for a moment. Israel has a parliamentary government in which citizens vote for a party list rather than a particular candidate. Depending on how many votes a party gets, they get a corresponding number of seats in the Knesset. The head of the party with the most seats is usually invited by Israel’s President, a largely symbolic figure, to form a government. Since no party ever receives a majority of seats, coalitions are always necessary, and so parties with 10-15 seats in the Knesset can play an oversized role in Israel’s political life. Usually these are the Orthodox parties, but recently the right has fractured into several parties, and the Arabs, by joining all their parties into one Arab bloc, also have the potential with their approximately 15 seats to play a larger role.

One other thing to consider is the parallels between Israel’s upcoming elections and some US concerns. The first parallel is the issue of voter suppression and voter fraud. Likud has made accusations of voter fraud, and in the last election the party brought cameras to polling places in Arab neighborhoods, ostensibly to prevent fraud, but really with the intention of depressing the Arab vote. This was indeed the outcome, though other factors may also have been involved. Investigations into voter fraud found only one instance of fraud, and that was committed by the Likud party. In addition, the courts and the Knesset were unwilling to support Likud in instituting the same policy this time. The attempt to suppress the Arab vote and Netanyahu’s racist 2015 appeal that “The Arabs are voting” have prompted an American-style get out the vote effort in the Arab community, which constitutes almost 20% of the voting public. It has also increased Arab representation in non-Arab parties and even influenced some Israeli Jews to announcing their intention to vote for the Arab party, though we
do not yet know how widespread that will be. It remains an open question whether any center left coalition would include or depend on the Arab parties in order to block Netanyahu.

Accusations against journalists and attempts to influence the media, as well as inappropriate material on social media, have also marked the Israeli election. Netanyahu favors a Triumphant, dismissive approach to journalists. The Israeli Foreign Ministry has acknowledged interference in the election, as has the highly regarded Israel Security Agency, Shabak, which went public with the news of foreign intervention. In addition, a transcript was released in which Netanyahu ordered his appointee, the director of the communications ministry, to issue regulations benefitting a particular media mogul who had done favors for Netanyahu. Finally, just this week Netanyahu’s campaign was thrown off Facebook for making hateful remarks.

This is the first time that Israel has had elections twice in the same calendar year, so you may wonder, with the two elections so close together, what will be different this time?

One difference, as we noted, is that after having run successfully as an Arab list in 2015 but not in the April election, the Arab parties have once again unified under a relatively moderate Ahmadiyya Arab community leader from Haifa. It has been suggested that issues of the treatment of Arabs within Israel, such as Netanyahu’s nation state law, have emerged as even more important to this community than the Palestinian issue, for which they have typically boycotted Israeli elections.
A second difference is that the very right wing Kahanist party, which had previously been prevented from running and last spring, under Netanyahu’s direction so as not to lose their votes, had joined with another party, is now running on its own. It seems possible that it might get over the 3% threshold needed to get a seat in the Knesset.

Finally, there is the question of whether Netanyahu is stronger or weaker going into this election. In addition to his left-wing opponents, there are young Likud leaders waiting to take his place. He prides himself on his relationships with foreign leaders such as Trump and Putin, but are there signs that these friendships are weakening. The intermittent shelling has also taken its toll on his image as the protector of Israel, particular after a recent incident which resulted in video footage of Netanyahu having to run off stage at an election rally in Ashkelon.

The bottom line though remains the same. Netanyahu is desperate to win so that he can prevent his own conviction in these various scandals. He presents himself as the only one who can protect Israel from Iran. The Blue and White party continues to run as an “anybody but Netanyahu” party, without a clear definition of its position. They have merged with Yesh Atid (There Is a Future), the formerly popular party of Yair Lapid, who would seem more center left, at least on social issues, but perhaps more to the center on security, which remains the average Israeli’s prime concern.

I thought it might be valuable to take a moment to review the parties and then just for fun, to hold our own election among those here this evening. (The results:
A Northern California coalition of Blue and White and Meretz controls the government.)