

ANALYZING VOTER TURNOUT AND BEHAVIOR IN LEBANON

POLITICAL CHANGE IN TIMES OF CRISIS

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ABSTRACT

In May 2022, Lebanon is hosting its first parliamentary elections since the popular uprising of October 2019, when massive protests took place to denounce the current ruling elites. This research looks at voter turnout and behavior on the eve of the elections and examines the will for political change. It argues that in the current Lebanese context, there needs to be further political awareness-raising, and campaigns should be more inclusive of women and the queer community. Independent campaigns should focus on developing strong governing capacities that voters can trust, and create further space for civic and political engagement on the local and national levels.

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Cover photo: A graffiti in Beirut, Lebanon. On the wall, is written Arabic for: political imagination is a form of resistance, Beirut on 20 April 2022. © Dana Abed / Oxfam

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Nesrine Mitias, 40, uses a candle to light her kitchen during a blackout in Beirut on August 18, 2021. © Sam Tarling / Oxfam

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In May 2022, Lebanon will hold its first parliamentary elections since the popular uprising of October 2019. During the uprising, more than two million people took the streets calling for better living conditions and blaming the ruling elites for the deteriorating situation in the country. Many staggering events followed the protests: the default of the Lebanese government on its Eurobonds payment in March 2020, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in the same month, the Beirut Port explosion in August 2020, and the compounded financial and economic crises that continue to worsen in 2022. To date, no effective measures have yet been deployed by the Lebanese government to alleviate the suffering of the country's residents, as there is no political consensus on what policies would be adequate. The May 2022 parliamentary elections are viewed by many as an opportunity that might bring an end to the ongoing economic and financial crises, ease the political deadlock, and bring new faces to Parliament.

This research explores the voting behavior of citizens across three different regions—Beirut I and II, Shouf and Aley, and Tyre and Zahrani—to further understand the reasons for voter inclination, and, consequently, to reveal the factors necessary for creating political change in a complex and deteriorating context. It employs a mixed methodology, in which more than 4,670 people were surveyed and 15 in-depth interviews were conducted.

Turnout is affected by the feeling of hopelessness and disappointment that reigns in the country, with only 54% of respondents saying that they are willing to vote in the 2022 elections. More than half of those believe that no promising candidates are running, and more than 40% say they will not vote due to the economic situation.

However, when it comes to voting for change, hope is not completely lost. More than 48% of those who will vote stated that they are, in fact, are looking to vote for independents. When asked about the reasons behind their voting choices, those who will vote for independents believe their preferred candidates will be able to solve the economic crisis (62%) and will improve living conditions (61%). They believe that they are not corrupt (55%) and that they reflect the people's demands (58%).

Contrastingly, **the main reasons stated for voting for ruling elites were grounded in tradition: half of those who will vote for traditional parties will do so for historic reasons and out of habit, showing that political literacy still needs**

cultivating in the country. Moving forward, independent candidates seeking to bring about change in Lebanon must focus on enhancing political literacy and developing strong governing capacities that can be trusted by voters.

Despite women making up a larger percentage of those who want to vote for independents, efforts to include them in the electoral process are almost entirely absent. **Campaigns must focus on the development of a comprehensive plan to ensure women’s participation in political life. They should include providing adequate spaces for advocacy, evidence-generating activities that focus on women’s demands,** and capacity-building on gender and women’s rights.

Similarly, members of the queer community continue to be absent from Lebanon’s political discourse. Campaigns demanding change should **ensure queer representation among their committees and organizers, and the inclusion of queer rights in their political platforms. Proper and safe spaces must be allocated for queer members to come together to organize for and beyond elections.**

Interestingly, not all those who will vote for change participated in the protests. This opens up a discussion about political expression and protest methods, as it seems that taking to the streets is not the preferred strategy of all those who oppose the ruling elites.

Independent candidates are using door-to-door, grassroots campaigning methods, trying to advance a message that is anti-confessionalism and anti-clientelism. Those methods should continue post-election, specifically to create local spaces for civic engagement. However, the fact that the electoral law requires the formation of lists in voting districts is obliging independents to join forces, creating an unhealthy, black and white dynamic of “with” or “against” traditional parties. This binary limits the expression of candidates who have different political ideas, who may espouse right-wing or left-wing ideologies. **Moving forward, it is essential to revise the electoral law to allow further space for political expression based on agendas and beliefs, rather than forced unity.**

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Moving forward, independent candidates seeking to bring about change in Lebanon must focus on enhancing political literacy and developing strong governing capacities that can be trusted by voters.

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A man walks past solar powered lights during a blackout in Beirut, on August 18, 2021. © Sam Tarling / Oxfam

1 CONTEXT REVIEW

In May 2022, Lebanon will hold its first parliamentary elections since the popular uprisings of October 2019. Many staggering events followed the protests: first there was the default of the Lebanese government on its Eurobonds payment in March 2020; then there was the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in the same month; then the Beirut Port explosion in August 2020; and, not least, the compounded financial and economic crises that continue to worsen in 2022. According to the *Lebanese Economic Monitor* report by the World Bank, the Lebanese financial and economic crisis is likely to rank in the top 10—possibly the top three—of the most severe crisis episodes globally since the mid-nineteenth century. Real GDP growth is estimated to have contracted by 20.3% in 2020, on the back of a 6.7% contraction in 2019.¹ To date, no effective measures have yet been deployed by the Lebanese government to alleviate the suffering of the country's residents, due to the absence of political consensus over which policies would be adequate. The May 2022 parliamentary elections are viewed by many as an opportunity to bring an end to the ongoing economic and financial crises, ease the political deadlock, and bring new faces to Parliament.

THE LEBANESE POLITICAL SYSTEM AND VOTER TURNOUT OVER TIME

Participation in elections is a fundamental act of democracy. From a theoretical perspective, people's decision to vote is based, among other factors, on a cost-benefit analysis, the candidate's ethical approach,² and a moral obligation to vote.^{3, 4} On the empirical level, studies have stressed economic, sociodemographic, political, and institutional factors that predict voter participation, but these have mainly been conducted in well-established Western democracies. Very few have been carried out in young democracies, and even fewer in authoritarian and Arab countries. Lebanon is one of the few democracies in the Middle East where political organizations with sectarian orientations play a crucial role in meeting the basic needs of the population, and compete to mobilize as many of the voters to attend the polls as they can.⁵

Confessionalism was present in Lebanon throughout Ottoman rule and became part of the Lebanese electoral framework following the National Pact of 1943 and the Ta'if Accord of 1989. It is based on power-sharing between different religious communities and means that religion is the primary

determinant of representation in the country's political, educational, and civic organizations.⁶ The Ta'if accord, which came after the Lebanese Civil War, reexamined each sect's role and established a new *modus vivendi*, providing the basis for new cooperation between different confessions.⁷ The agreement also called for gradual phasing out of political sectarianism. Nonetheless, the postwar period has witnessed more sectarianization of electoral contests that has reinforced the political control of sectarian elites,⁸ who have developed extensive clientelist networks. Each group of sectarian elites serves their own community through their control over public sector jobs and services, hence increasing citizens' dependency on their political leaders.⁹

The first postwar parliamentary election took place in 1992. The number of seats increased from 108 to 128, as per Law 154 of 1992. Malapportionment was applied in a way that distorted the electoral results and favored economically developed districts at the expense of less developed ones.¹⁰ Gerrymandering was also used to channel votes in order to favor specific political/sectarian groups, with the size of electoral districts being modified several times between 1992 and 2009. Eligible voter turnout was only 30.34%.

Turnout in the 1996 parliamentary elections was higher than in 1992. It increased to 46.32%, with the highest rate of participation taking place in Tyre (67.23%). Turnout in Beirut did not exceed 37.64%. In Aley it was 48.39% and in Shouf district 53.16%. These elections took place according to electoral law number 587, which was based on amendments made to the 1960 electoral law.

The 2000 and 2005 parliamentary elections were based on a new electoral law (number 171), which included amendments to the 1996 law mainly related to the size of electoral districts. These amendments were made in order to preserve the position of certain political parties and to marginalize others, especially in the parliamentary elections of 2000.¹¹ Despite the decrease in turnout from 46% in 1996 to around 43% in 2000, the later election was highly competitive. In Beirut, turnout varied between 32.51% and 40.35%, while in Aley it was 48.67%, in Shouf it was 52.02%, and in Tyre, 45.80%. In an opinion survey conducted by Statistics Lebanon, 75.52% considered voting to be a national duty, while 41.97% participated in supporting a particular candidate.¹²

Religious and sectarian mobilization was the common factor that characterized the 2005 parliamentary

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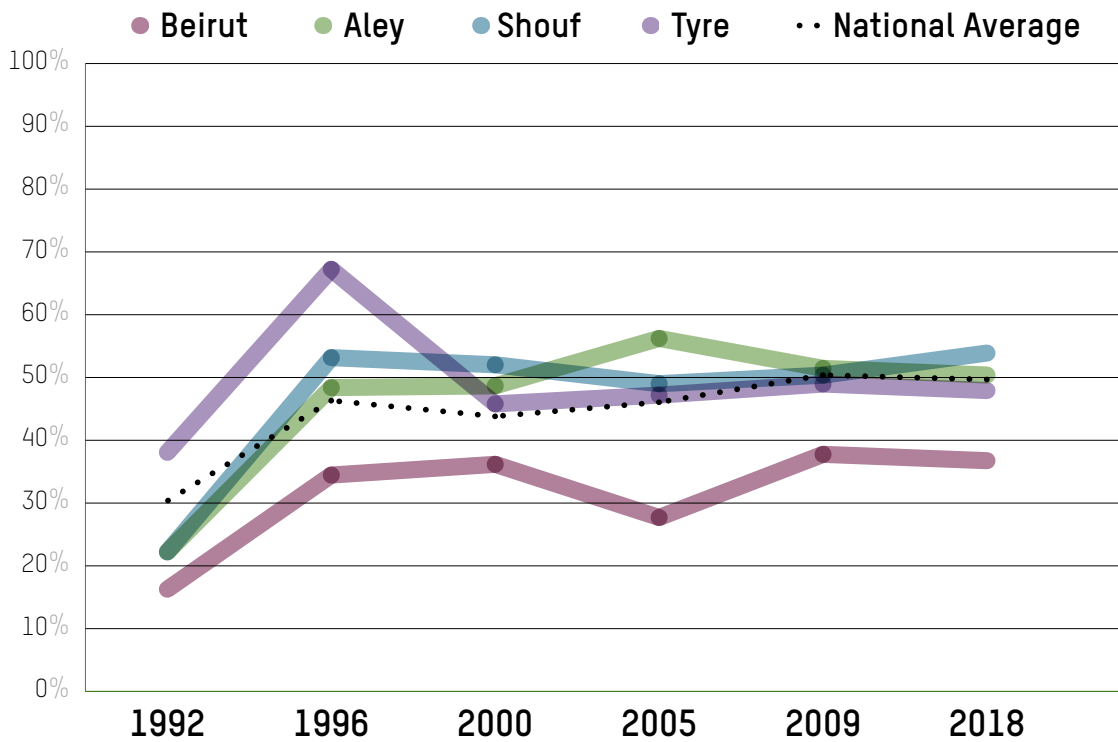
Campaigns must focus on the development of a comprehensive plan to ensure women's participation in political life. They should include providing adequate spaces for advocacy, evidence-generating activities that focus on women's demands, and capacity-building on gender and women's rights.

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elections.¹³ The assassination of PM Rafik Hariri, and other major upheavals, divided the country into two camps: the March 14 Alliance and the March 8 Alliance.¹⁴ Turnout in Beirut was low and did not exceed 30.52%. It was 56.22% in Aley, 49.01% in Shouf, and 47.19% in Tyre.

The 2009 parliamentary elections occurred after an 18-month political crisis that ended with the signing of the Doha agreement in May 2008. The elections took place along the lines of the midsize electoral districts of the 1960 law. It is rumored that around 120,000 expatriates returned to Lebanon to vote, with their travel expenses covered by political parties (approximately 80,000 were brought in by the March 14 Alliance and another 30,000 by the March 8 Alliance).¹⁵ Turnout varied in Beirut between 29.25% and 45.18%. In Aley, turnout was 51.45%. It was 50.37% in Shouf and 48.96% in Tyre.

TURNOUT RATES PER DISTRICTS 1992–2018 ^{16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24}



On May 6, 2018, Lebanon held its first parliamentary elections in nine years, following three illegal self-imposed parliamentary extensions. Members of Parliament (MPs) extended the parliamentary term, which was against the constitution, citing the inability to agree on a new electoral law as the primary reason not to hold elections.²⁵ A new electoral law, passed in 2017, was based on proportional representation and allowed expatriates to vote for the first time in their country of residence. The law passed in 2017 (Law no.44/2017)

is preferential by nature, and has reduced the electoral districts from 26 to 15; however, the law adversely dissected districts into sub-districts, and introduced the “preferential vote,” which is limited per sub-district. The law also introduced “lists” as opposed to “individual running,” meaning citizens can only vote for a list without being able to mix and match from different lists, as used to happen up to 2009. This has forced the creation of alliances to form lists. A proportional system is considered to increase the probability of voters going to the polls in the belief that their vote might make a difference.²⁶ Such a system increases competition at the district level,²⁷ which gives parties more incentive to campaign everywhere and to be better linked to different groups in different districts. Independents and civil society organizations participated in the Lebanese parliamentary elections to challenge the hegemony of the traditional political parties. Nevertheless, they were not able to obtain more than one seat out of 128 in Parliament.²⁸ Turnout was only 49.7% for residents and 56% for registered voters among the diaspora.²⁹ The percentage of voters who are expatriates was 2.51% (46,799 out of a total 1,861,203).³⁰ Turnout in Beirut 1 was the lowest, with only 32.5% of registered voters participating, and 41% in Beirut 2. Beirut 1 district had a high degree of confessional fragmentation, and it is where civil society won its only seat in parliament on the basis of more confessionally diverse supporters than other candidates.³¹ In Aley and Shouf districts, turnout was 50.39% and 53.89%, respectively. In Tyre, turnout was 47.92%.

The 2018 parliamentary elections witnessed a higher rate of participation by women and older voters in comparison with men and youth. The lower youth turnout may have been due to a feeling of disenfranchisement. Political leaders also targeted them less with vote buying.³² According to the Lebanese Public Opinion Survey (LPOS) conducted in October 2018, which had 1200 respondents, occupational status and political party affiliation were strong determinants of voter turnout. Results of the LPOS 2018 also showed that turnout varied across socioeconomic characteristics, such that unemployed voters and those with lower socioeconomic status were actually more likely to vote.³³ This result corroborates the mobilization effect, in which voters suffering from economic adversity participate more in elections during economic hardship to manifest their discontent with the government’s policies.³⁴ Nevertheless, this is not reflected at the country level. The slowdown that the Lebanese economy witnessed over the period 2009–2018 should have led to an increase in the general turnout rate. Since that was not the case, this vulnerable group had probably been targeted by vote buying.³⁵



Protests in the evening of Lebanon's 76th Independence Day celebration in Martyr's Square, Beirut © Nadim Kobeissi

Regarding the participation rate per religious affiliation, the highest turnout rate was observed among Shiite (54%), Druze (53%), and Maronite voters (52%). Voters were more inclined to vote when they had a political candidate in their district from their own confession. Religion is considered to be a powerful mobilizing agent that persuades individuals to rally behind a cause and to channel various forms of collective action, including political participation.³⁶

According to Garrote Sanchez (2021), the reduction in voter turnout between 2009 and 2018 was mainly due to a) an increase in first-time voters who had a lower propensity to vote; b) a decline in the turnout of particular religious groups (Sunni and Alawite) as a means of expressing their discontent with their main co-sectarian political party groups; and c) less vote buying, especially in the increased number of confessionally mixed voting centers where voter monitoring is reduced.

A panel data study was conducted by Sawaya (2021) to assess the effects of different economic, sociodemographic, institutional, and political factors on the turnout rates in 26 administrative districts during the 1996, 2000, 2005, 2009, and 2018 Lebanese parliamentary elections. The findings suggest that Lebanese voters tend to exhibit habit-formation, given that citizens who vote in the current election have a high probability of placing a vote in the next election. Voters participate more when the margin of votes between competing parties is small, since each vote can have a decisive impact on the outcome. Cox and Munger (1989) and Shachar and Nalebuff (1999) argue that the positive effect of close elections is due to the mobilization effects of political parties and candidates to persuade unconvinced voters to cast their votes.^{37, 38} As for the effects of the economy on turnout, the results suggest that the worsening of economic conditions discourages Lebanese voters from participating in elections.



These results are in line with the withdrawal effect, whereby voters pay more attention to their wellbeing than politics.³⁹

VOTING BEHAVIOR AND NEW EMERGENT POLITICAL GROUPS

The study of voting behavior allows a better understanding of electoral systems, outcomes, and public opinion. The literature on economic voting behavior is extensive and consistently finds that economic factors, particularly unemployment and inflation, impact electoral results and voting behavior. The relevance of party identification in voter behavior is also well-established in the literature. Studies show that party identification is often closely tied to that of one's parents.⁴⁰ Moreover, it has been demonstrated that the social profiles of political candidates, namely their religious affiliation, significantly affect levels of partisan voting.⁴¹

Most of the existing literature focuses on Western democracies, where consolidated democracies with secular states prevail. Analyses of countries where religion polarizes society, and violent events are frequent, are very scarce. Few studies have been conducted in Lebanon, where the traditional political parties have been sharing power in Parliament since the end of the Civil War through a confessional system. Political, religious, and social factors have been advanced by researchers as important in explaining Lebanese voting behavior. According to Harik (1980), confessionalism, education, and exposure to media explained differences in voters' political attitudes in the elections that took place between 1943 and 1974.⁴² A candidate's educational level and ability to provide development services to an electoral district were indicated as the most important criteria in Lebanese voting behavior, based on the results of the LADE opinion poll conducted in 2014.⁴³ This phenomenon is not exclusive to Lebanon's landscape, as evidence shows that, in fact,



A general view of rooftop water tanks from a private delivery truck in Beirut, Lebanon, on August 19, 2021 © Sam Tarling / Oxfam

clientelism tends to increase as a country moves from low to intermediate levels of democracy and development.⁴⁴

Over the course of parliamentary elections taking place between 1996 and 2009, religious factors were found to be strong predictors of parties' vote share. Namely, the percentage of voters belonging to specific religious sects are particularly relevant for explaining the vote shares of the Amal Movement, Hezbollah, the Progressive Socialist Party, and the Independents of the March 14 coalition.⁴⁵

Despite expectations that the new proportional electoral law would bring new faces to Parliament, the voters re-elected the same political leaders and parties on May 6, 2018. Such a strong degree of party affiliation was in line with the LPOS 2018 results, which showed that 90% of respondents cast ballots for the same political party in both the 2009 and 2018 parliamentary elections.⁴⁶

66 candidates from the newly emerged civil society groups ran in 2018 elections and formed lists in nine electoral districts under the Kuluna Watani coalition. Other independent candidates also ran outside of the Coalition, namely in Beirut, South, and Shouf and Aley. They were advocating for a new political discourse around secularism, citizenship, and human rights. Nonetheless, they performed relatively poor and only managed to win one seat.⁴⁷

The majority of independent candidates aimed to establish a secular state, overcome clientelist culture, and implement the constitution.⁴⁸ They shared similar views on economic reforms, and the reinforcement of safety nets. Regarding the fiscal system and tax policy, they called for higher taxes on capital and bank revenues, and an increase in public investment in infrastructure and the productive sectors, in addition to a review of the public debt service.⁴⁹

However, they faced several challenges. Besides the difficulties in forming lists, which led to the withdrawal of many candidates, they did not have the same means to finance their campaigns as the traditional political parties. They relied on social media, door-to-door canvassing, and street campaigning. They were not capable of reaching out to a sufficient number of people, especially with the clientelist nature of Lebanese politics based on vote buying and providing services to electorates.⁵⁰

THE AFTERMATH OF THE 2019 POPULAR UPRISINGS AND THE MULTIPLE CRISES IN LEBANON

On October 17, 2019, a planned increase in gasoline, tobacco, and WhatsApp taxes triggered nationwide protests in Lebanon against the ruling elite for their failure to provide for the population's basic needs. Protestors were calling for political and economic reforms, the resignation of the cabinet, and early parliamentary elections.⁵¹ A few days later, Prime Minister Saad Hariri resigned, and Hassan Diab was appointed to form the new government.^{52, 53}

During the protests, banks closed for weeks and imposed informal capital controls on small depositors, while people with influence were able to transfer their deposits abroad.⁵⁴ By the time the popular uprisings erupted, the Lebanese economy was slowing down. Economic growth was 0.21%, and real GDP stood at \$42bn at the end of 2019. At the fiscal level, public debt had reached \$91.6bn and the budget deficit was at \$5.8bn. The deficit in the flow of foreign currencies continued to grow, leading to a \$5.8bn deficit in the balance of payments.⁵⁵

The trade and current account deficits stood at \$15.5bn and \$11bn billion, respectively.⁵⁶ These imbalances, coupled with a sudden halt in capital inflows, plunged the economy into a severe financial and economic crisis. The cessation of the flow of foreign capital depleted Banque du Liban's foreign reserves and widened the gap between the official exchange rate and the parallel market rate.⁵⁷

In March 2020, the government defaulted on its foreign denominated debt for the first time in the nation's history. A few days later, the government imposed a COVID-19 lockdown which contributed further to the economic collapse. In May 2020, the Government of Lebanon formally requested the assistance of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to bail out the economy as it continued to tailspin. However, these discussions stalled amid differences between the government and the Banque du Liban on debt, losses, and the restructuring of the banking sector.⁵⁸

On August 4, 2020, a deadly blast struck Beirut as 2,750 tons of improperly stored ammonium nitrate exploded at the city's port. More than 217 people died, while 7,000 were injured and 300,000 displaced, in addition to the massive destruction and damage of buildings and properties.⁵⁹

The explosion at the port aggravated the economic situation significantly, obstructing a major lifeline for an import-oriented country. Prime Minister Diab's government resigned on August



Rescue workers and security officers work at the scene of an explosion that hit the seaport of Beirut, Lebanon, August 5, 2020 © AP Photo / Hussein Malla

10, 2020 as an outraged public returned to the streets and demanded accountability for the catastrophe.⁶⁰ By the end of 2020, the Lebanese pound had lost around 80% of its value and the Inflation rate stood at 84.9% (year-on-year).⁶¹

During 2021, crisis conditions continued to be driven by monetary and financial turmoil. The unemployment rate skyrocketed because businesses had shut down. The economy continued to suffer shortages in foreign reserves, which deteriorated more quickly than the exchange rate. Imported goods such as fuel and medicine became scarce. Inflation reached 131.9% during the first six months of 2021, and real GDP fell by 37.1%.⁶² In politics, politicians remained locked in wrangling over seats in a new government. After 13 months of a vacant executive office, Najib Mikati finally took office as prime minister, with a focus on conducting parliamentary elections in the spring of 2022.⁶³

The socioeconomic context has changed dramatically since the 2018 elections. The staggering events that have unfolded since then have revealed the failure of the ruling elite in securing the basic needs of citizens. The current circumstances might create an opening for new political groups to shift the political balance of power in Parliament. This requires these new groups to run as a unity coalition and form one alliance across Lebanon.⁶⁴ They also need to have a clear vision and a clear political program, and offer concrete solutions to the current economic crisis.⁶⁵

2 PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

On the eve of the 2022 elections, this research explores the voting behavior of citizens across three different electoral districts: Beirut I and II, Shouf and Aley, and Tyre and Zahrani. It looks at variables such as gender, age, socioeconomic status, and education. The aim of the research is to help readers understand the reasons for voter inclination and the factors necessary for creating political change in a complex and deteriorating context. The research will also help inform activists on the ground of the best methods to enable political change, and educate stakeholders about the factors that determine the voting choices of the general population in Lebanon.

3 METHODOLOGY

QUANTITATIVE METHODOLOGY

A structured quantitative survey was developed as a data collection instrument. It included 20 questions split across three sections: Demographics, Turnout, and Behavior. The Demographics section inquired about the respondents' personal profile in terms of identity and socio-economic status. The Turnout section asked about respondents' propensity to participate in the election. The Behavior questions inquired about their specific choices and actions. Respondents were surveyed by means of Computer Assisted Telephone Interviews (CATI), and their responses were immediately recorded on a computer. A stratified simple random sampling with a preset proportionate allocation throughout the three districts of interest was generated using the list randomizer technique: for every pick, a number (K) would be randomly generated to pick every Kth phone number following the preceding number. The database was designed using Open Data Kit (ODK), which is a free, open-source suite of tools that allows data collection using Android mobile devices and data submission to an online server, even without an internet connection or mobile carrier service at the time of data collection. A total of 4,675 people were surveyed for this study.

QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY

In parallel, 15 one-hour-long key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted with candidates, campaigners, and elections experts across the three districts (Beirut, Shouf

and Aley, and Tyre and Zahrani). Participants came from both traditional parties and independent and emergent campaigns. Structured interviews were developed, which included questions about turnout enablers and disablers, campaign tactics, and inclusion of women and minorities. The data was transcribed and thematically analyzed.

QUANTITATIVE SAMPLE DISTRIBUTION

SAMPLE DISTRIBUTION BY GENDER (AND THEN BY REGION, AGE, ETC)



52%

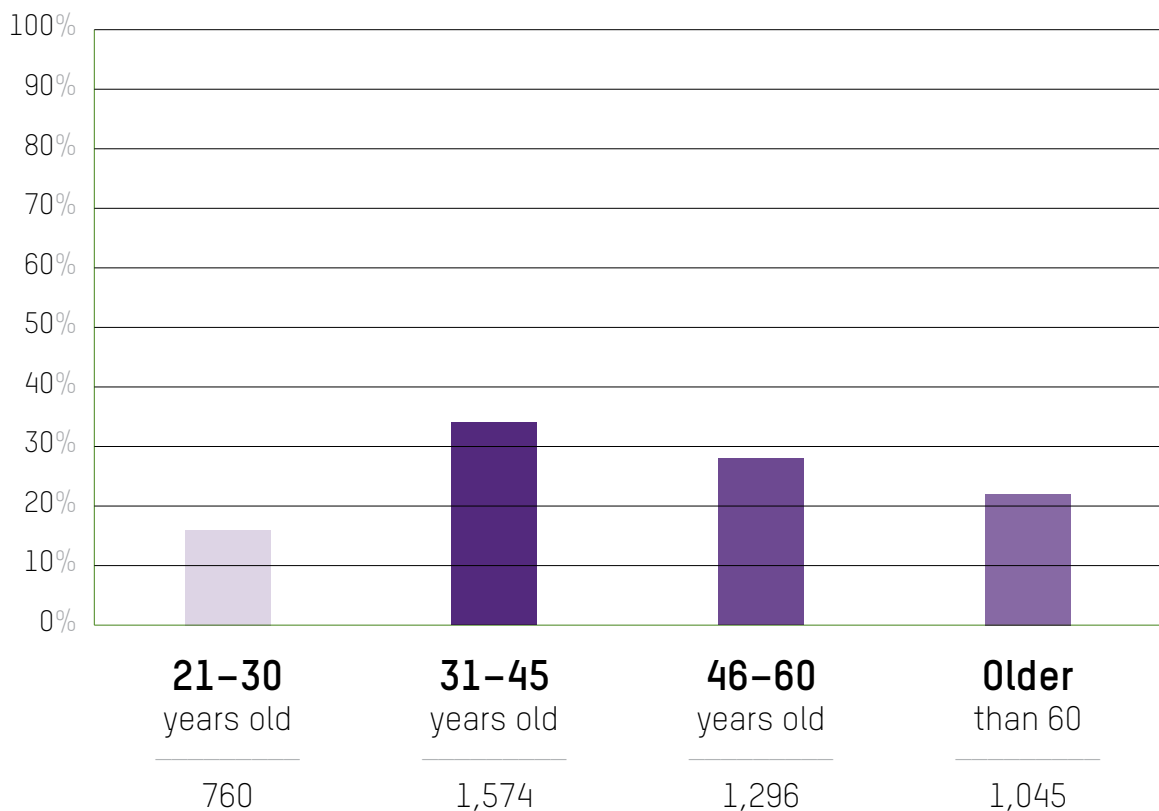
Men



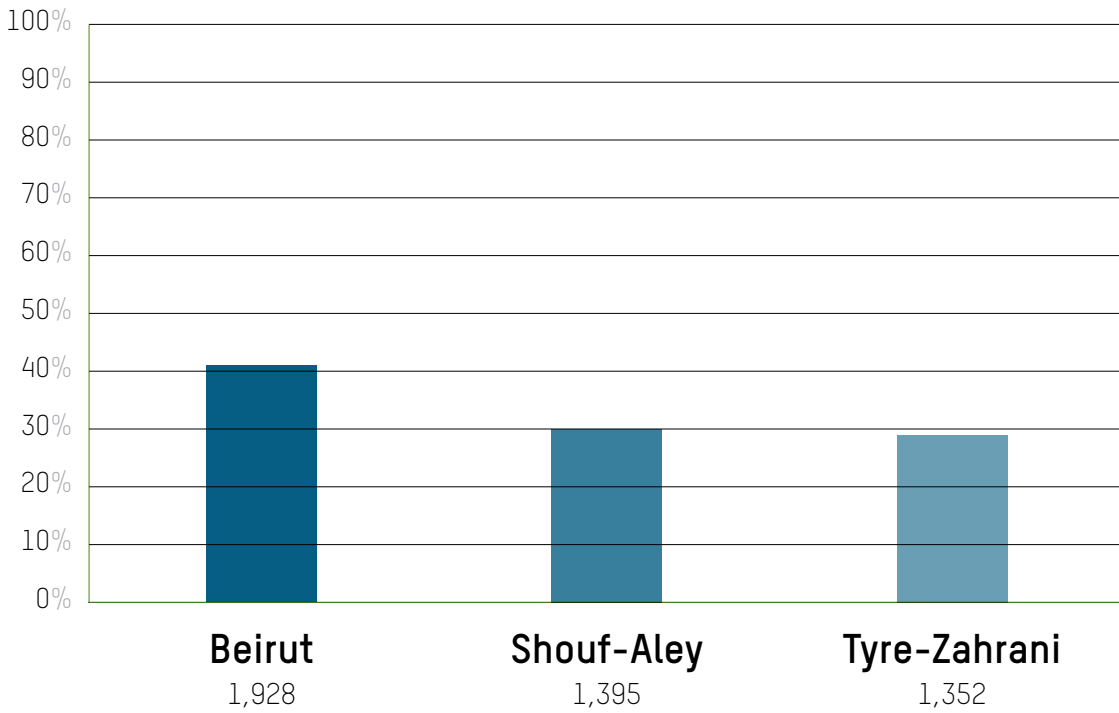
48%

Women

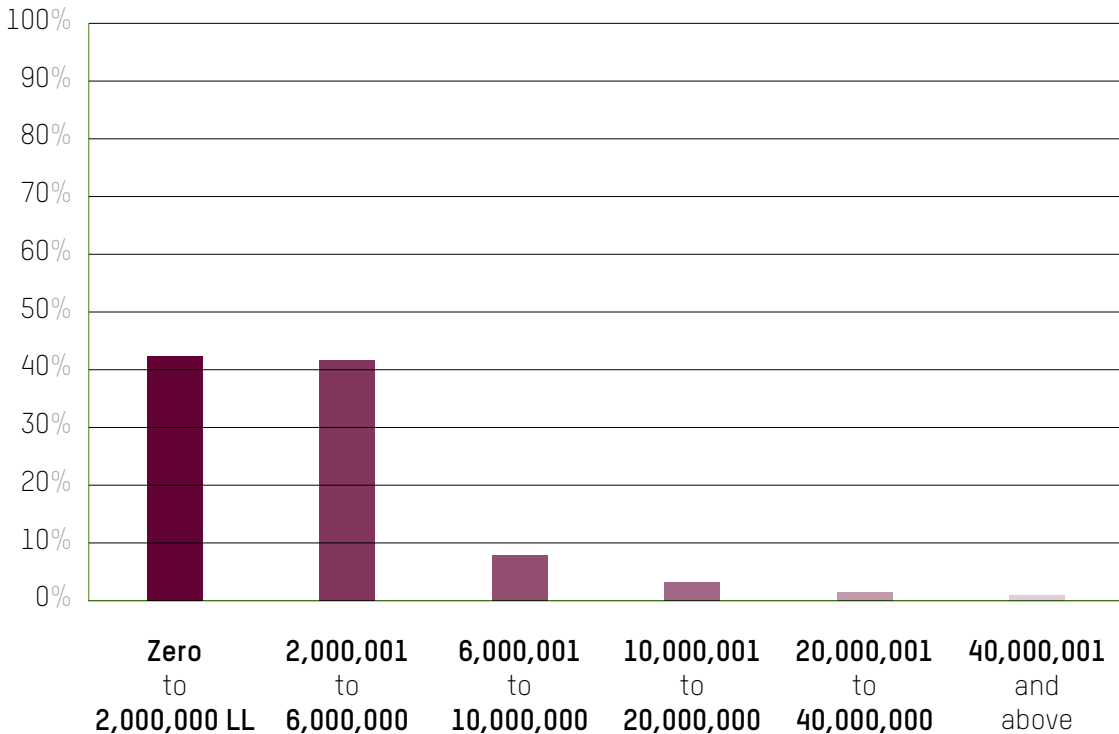
AGE DISTRIBUTION



REGIONAL DISTRIBUTION



INCOME DISTRIBUTION



In Lebanese pounds—LL

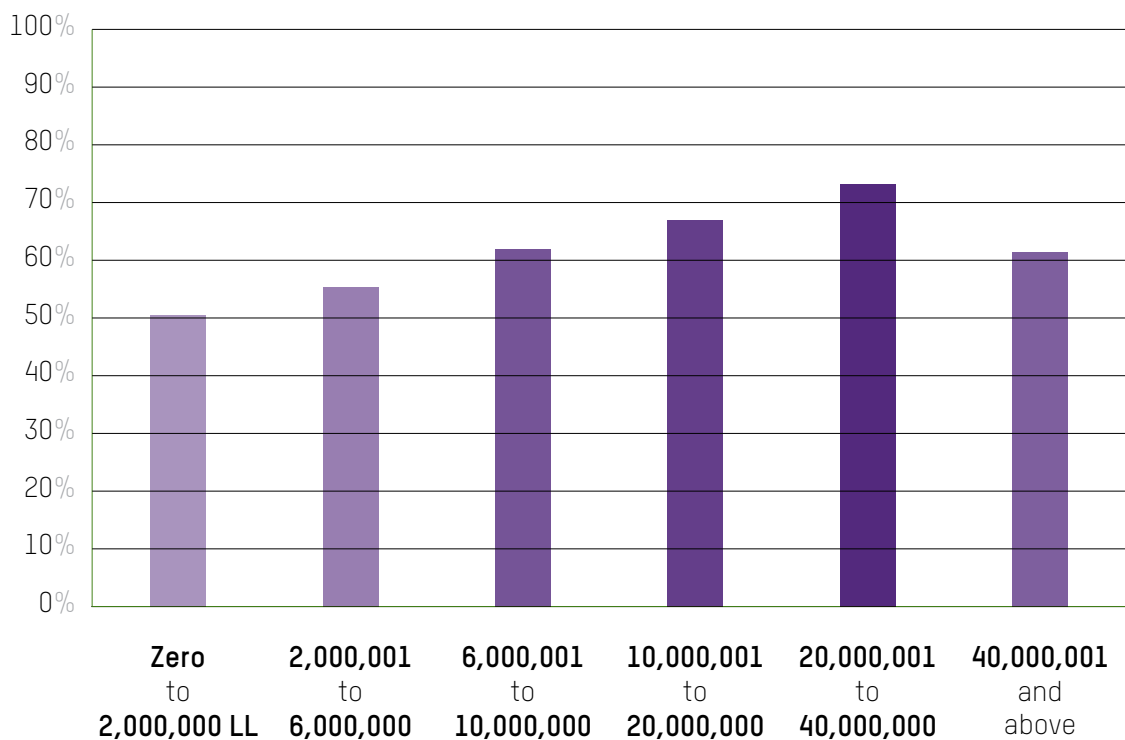
Exchange rate at the time of data collection averaged at 23,000 LBP to the USD

4 FINDINGS

VOTER TURNOUT

Around 54% of the total sample said that they will vote in the elections. The highest voter turnout potential was spotted in Shouf-Aley (57%), followed by Beirut (54%), and Tyre-Zahrani at 51%. There was a higher percentage of men who said that they would vote (56%) than women (52%). The percentage of those who will vote differed significantly according to socioeconomic status, with the percentage steadily increasing vis-à-vis income up until the second-highest category, and then dropping for those making 40,000,000 LL and above.

PERCENTAGE OF VOTERS IN THE ELECTIONS PER INCOME GROUP

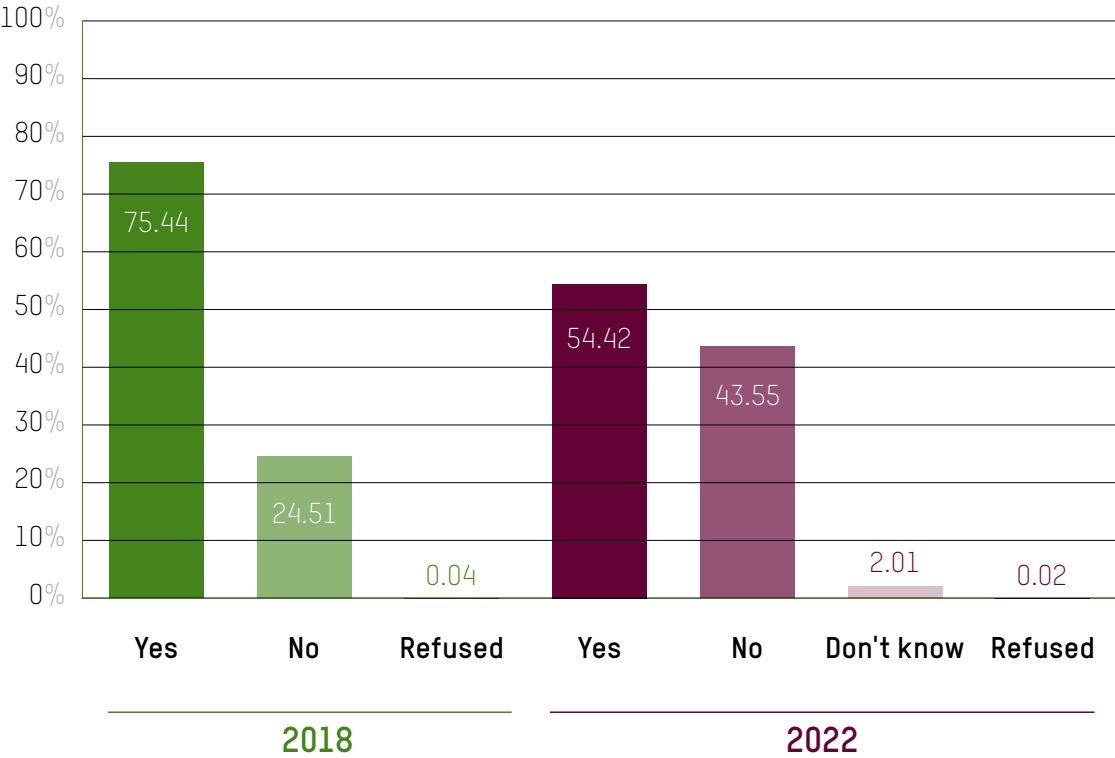


When it comes to religion, the percentages of those who stated they will vote in the elections varied between different sects, with the highest percentage going to Christians and Druze. While there is no official demographic census in Lebanon, it is estimated that the Muslim community constitutes 58% of the population, while Christians make up 35%, and Druze around 5%.⁶⁶ This could potentially explain the drive to vote as being a desire to survive, in order to ensure that the Christian and Druze representatives in Parliament are voted for by members of

the community, and not by the Muslim majority, given that seat distribution is by religion, but voting is not segregated.

Another notable observation was the potential drop in turnout between 2018 and 2022. More than 75% said that they had voted in 2018, versus 54% who said they were willing to in the coming 2022 elections. The relatively low amount of people stating that they will vote in the 2022 elections is possibly due to an overwhelming feeling of disappointment and hopelessness. It is expected that turnout will decrease, as people are dissatisfied with the performance of the Lebanese government. They no longer believe that any change is possible from within the system. Even worse, they are not convinced by the alternative proposals. Most of the interviewees agreed that the general disappointment of the population will lead to abstention in elections. A few thought that the consecutive cabinet resignations would discourage people from voting, especially with the presence of non-state armed groups in the cabinet and parliament.

2018 ELECTIONS TURNOUT VS POTENTIAL TURNOUT IN 2022 ELECTIONS



REASONS BEHIND REFRAINING FROM VOTING IN THE ELECTIONS

More than half of those who said they did not want to vote in the elections, cited “not having promising candidates” as at

least one of their reasons. The other two top reasons were the difficult economic situation (40%), with more women (44%) stating this reason than men (37%), and disappointment with the candidates they voted for in 2018 (20%). More men than women said that their reason for not voting is that they are not interested in politics (18% of the men and 15% of the women).

Another important reason for the potentially low turnout is the economic situation in the country. A withdrawal effect, whereby voters suffering from economic adversity would care less about politics, was perceived by most of the interviewees as the main reason behind why people might refrain from participating in the elections. The economic crisis and rising levels of poverty are expected to increase people's dissociation from political life. For instance, the increase in transportation costs could prohibit people from going to the polls.

On the other hand, different arguments were advanced to explain why Lebanese voters might participate more in the 2022 elections compared with the 2018 elections. These factors ranged from political to the economic and social. For instance, a higher turnout is expected in some districts such as Beirut, where people aim to hold the establishment accountable for their responsibility for the blast, in addition to the country's corruption. For some traditional parties, the political discourse of affects the choices of the middle-aged and older generation. This category of voters will be driven either by their support for the resistance, or their opposition to it. As for the younger generation, their participation will be driven by the dream for change that new candidates could contribute to. The message that most independents and CSOs are working on aims to convince voters that alternatives exist. According to a campaigner, this requires four elements: a strong list, trustworthy individuals, a strong and uniform program, and TV appearances where candidates and programs can reach the voters. Some voters are still clinging to their old political party based on sectarianism, which is an overwhelming factor in Lebanon. According to campaigners from political parties, traditional voters will participate in elections regardless of any external factor. A traditional political party campaigner stated: "Those affiliated with political parties have undergone what is known as 'political nerve pulling' and will vote".

“ According to a campaigner, this requires four elements: a strong list, trustworthy individuals, a strong and uniform program, and TV appearances where candidates and programs can reach the voters. ”

VOTING BEHAVIOR AND CAMPAIGN TACTICS

Emergent candidates that are independent and act as the opposition to the current ruling parties are paving their own way with their campaigns in all three

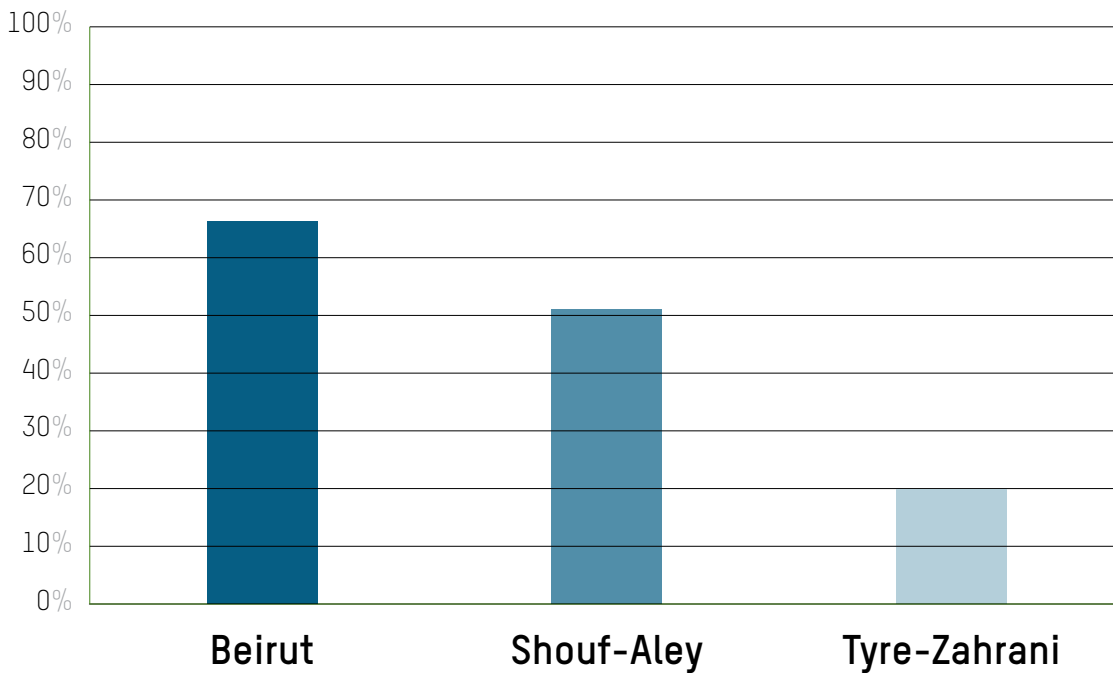
regions: Beirut, Shouf and Aley, and Tyre-Zahrani. Following the popular uprising in October 2019, the overall political scene in Lebanon has shifted, with further space being occupied by opposition groups.

Data collected through the surveys shows that overall, more than 48% of the people surveyed said that they will vote for independents. This finding varied by region, with region reported as least likely to vote for independents being Tyre-Zahrani. More women than men said they will vote for independents (51.8% vs 46.3%). Those who witnessed the Civil War (aged between 31–60) were more likely to vote for traditional parties than those who are between 21–30 and above 61 years old.

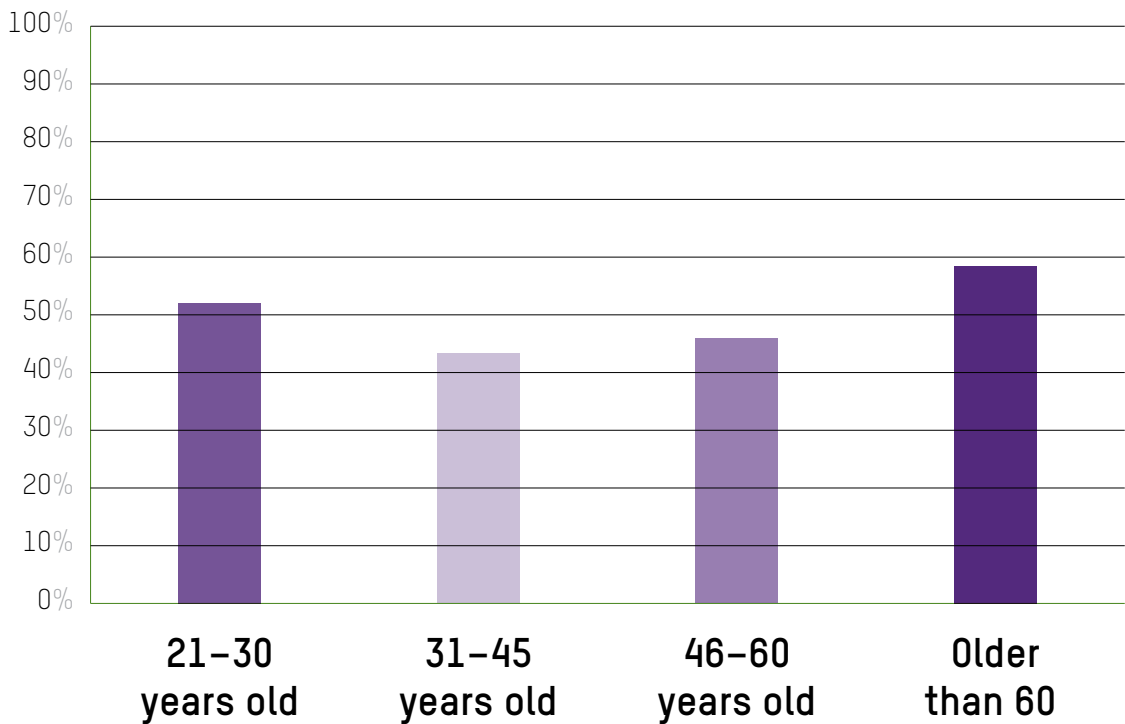
PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE WHO SAID THEY WILL VOTE FOR INDEPENDENTS BY GENDER



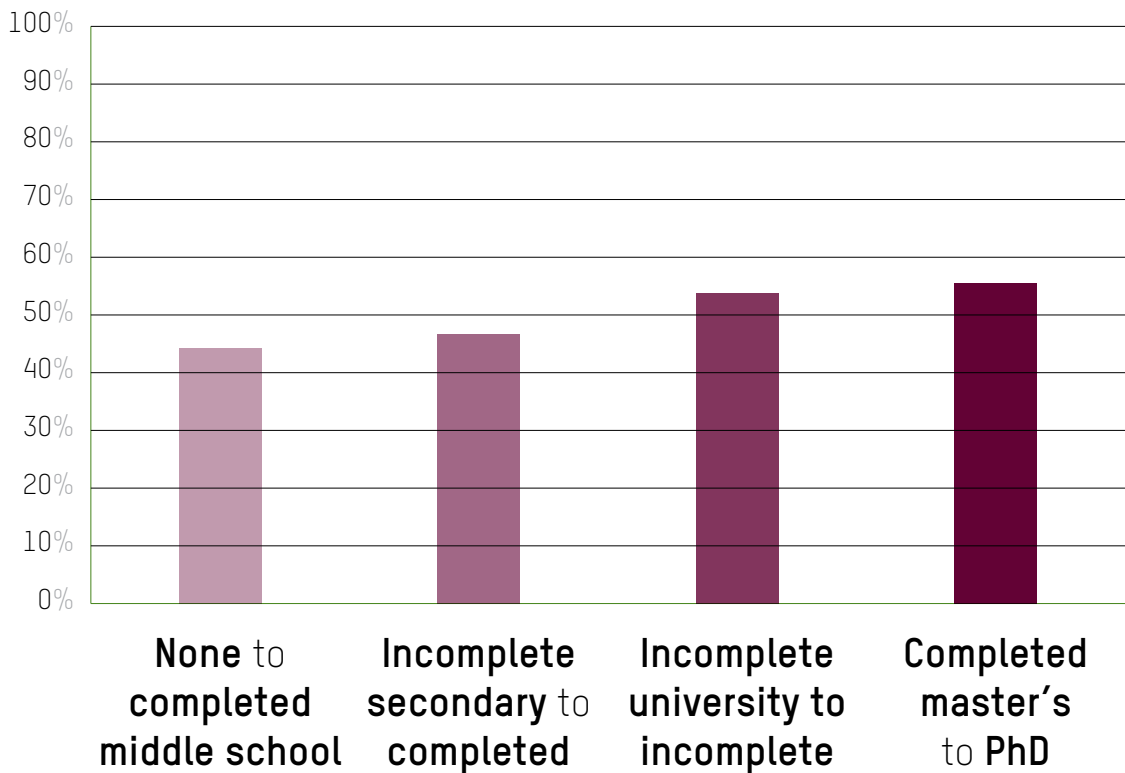
PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE WHO SAID THEY WILL VOTE FOR INDEPENDENTS BY REGION



PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE WHO SAID THEY WILL VOTE FOR INDEPENDENTS BY AGE



DISTRIBUTION OF PERCENTAGES OF PEOPLE WHO STATED THEY WILL VOTE FOR INDEPENDENT CANDIDATES BY EDUCATION



Both independent candidates and traditional political parties are using very similar tactics to reach voters. These include, but are not restricted to, meetings, door-to-door canvassing, and even one-to-one conversations. The interviewees said that it has been proven that working closely with people is the most efficient way to disseminate political programs and to approach constituents. The affinity of the young generation with the change movement is challenging traditional political parties. More effort is required on behalf of these parties to target youth within those families traditionally affiliated with them.

General assemblies and large-scale gatherings that traditional political parties rely on to promote their candidates are not within the reach of independents. The latter are mainly counting on small meetings where they discuss their programs and raise awareness. Focused targeting is the practice carried out mostly by independents in all of the districts. Even so, some of their supporters have difficulty attending their campaigning events due to the high cost of transportation, and the limited financial resources that independents have to cover these costs.

In addition to meetings and door-to-door activities, social media is undoubtedly central in campaigning for both independents and traditional political parties. Although traditional media is crucial in voicing candidates' ideas and programs, it is deemed very expensive, since popular Lebanese TV stations require a fee to appear on TV. Some independents are carrying out their social media campaigns themselves. Others have been able to guarantee TV appearances through the support of political platforms in the country.

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“We are focusing on one-to-one more than door-to-door. Some families have been affiliated to the Progressive Socialist Party [PSP] for many years. However, within these families, some members will not vote for the PSP, some will vote for the independent candidates, and others will abstain from participating in elections. There is a generation issue. This is why we are working one-to-one.”

A campaigner from PSP

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At the organizational level, there exist discrepancies between traditional parties and independents; traditional political parties are undeniably better organized and present in every city, village, and town. Being organized into committees and sub-committees gives them an advantage over independents in reaching both partisans and neutral voters. Although some of the opposition movements possess the status of registered political parties, they are still new to the scene.

As stated by a candidate affiliated with Mouwatinoun wa Mouwatinat fi Dawla,⁶⁷ an opposition campaign with candidates across all three districts: “We are considered to be a relatively new political party where our activities are mainly centralized and do not reach the regions well.”

VOTING BEHAVIOR: CASTING A BALLOT FOR TRADITIONAL PARTIES, OR FOR CHANGE?

34% of our survey participants took part in the popular uprising of 2019. Of those who answered yes to having participated in the uprising, only 30% will vote for traditional parties, while 65% will cast their votes for independent candidates. Interestingly, 40% of those who reported not having participated in the uprising will vote for independent candidates as well. This opens up a discussion about political expression and protest methods, as it seems that taking to the streets is not the strategy preferred by all those who oppose the ruling elites.

Interviewees shared a general perception that is almost unanimous among traditional parties, which is that the October uprising failed to achieve its objectives due mainly to an inherent defect. The revolution is seen as lacking integrity, setting double standards while being hostile to the country’s other political factions, as one traditional parties campaigner implied. Even one independent candidate voiced critique of the October revolutionaries for diverting away from the mission they had advanced at the outset.

A major challenge that faces opposition groups is the inability to present a unified, strong political discourse that makes them a serious alternative to the current ruling elites. Almost unanimously, all traditional party campaigners and candidates deem the opposition weak. The opposition is fragmented enough to give traditional parties an advantage during the upcoming 2022 elections. This is a situation that is not denied by opposition groups, who admit the heterogeneity of their platform. This is leading to undesirable consequences and casts doubt on the capacity

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The October revolution cultivated trust among people, yet later people either stepped back or joined the traditional political forces again.

An independent candidate in Shouf

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A man carries a bottle filled with gasoline in Beirut © Sam Tarling/Oxfam

of independents to limit their candidacies to one or two lists at most and hence secure the electoral quotient. However, the lack of a united discourse on behalf of independents favors some traditional parties in substantiating their anti-independent stance. As such, the candidacy of independents does not yet pose a threat to traditional competitors, but it is still creating some uncertainty for them.

Arguably, forcing independent candidates to create one list emphasizes a binary system of “with” or “against” the ruling elites. This is not necessarily reflected in reality, given that independent candidates belong to a spectrum ranging from the far-left political schools to the far-right. This difference in political discourse is often marginalized to prioritize unity for the sake of list formation.

On the flip side, independent candidates have failed to promote a strong political program deemed worthy of being an alternative to the current ruling parties. This may be one of the reasons voters refrain from choosing independents as their preferred candidates, despite losing trust in the current ruling elites. **An overwhelming majority, 98%, thought that the performance of the ruling elite was bad (79%) or average (19%), with only 1.5% ranking it as good. 72% of those who answered “average” when asked about the performance of the ruling elite, and 40% of those who answered “bad,” are planning to vote for the same traditional parties. Only 55% of those who answered “bad” will vote for independent candidates.**

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It’s hard to have homogeneous lists with all the interested parties and candidates in Lebanon.

An independent candidate in Aley

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A flare illuminates a group of passionate Lebanese protesters © Jessica Wahab

Despite some traditional parties expressing no worries regarding the emergent political candidates, many of the independent candidates cited political pressure as a challenge they are facing. Independents said they suffered from general pressure exerted ubiquitously by traditional parties. One particularly acute example pressure is felt in those regions where the Shiite duet⁶⁸ have a presence, namely in the South, intimidation being salient. This is engendering a sense on the part of voters that change might be denied, and in turn might lead to either a reduction in turnout or a distortion in voting behavior. In the same vein, accusations of treason are being borne by independents. In sum, all of this might lead to unfavorable voting behavior towards them.

However, it has become evident that these are not the only challenges that independent candidates face in their campaigning. A major challenge that impedes their campaigns is finance. While traditional political parties have multi-millionaire candidates and heads-of-parties, independent opposition campaigns rely on crowdfunding to finance their campaigns. This has negative consequences for their outreach activities and their ability to hold major rallies. There is a common underlying feeling among opposition groups that they are expected to bring about change while being short of the financial resources required for successful outreach.

“The first challenge we face is that there is no funding. All platforms that provide funding have their own agendas. It is also hard to raise funds from the people when we don’t have full lists and [a] program.” (Independent candidate in Aley)

INCLUSIVE CAMPAIGNING, OR THE LACK THEREOF

Despite traditional parties proposing a few laws in Parliament relating to women's rights in the past four years, the topic of women's rights and women's political participation is still relatively insignificant in these elections, including in campaigning. As an independent campaigner noted: "Organizations that already deal with the marginalized are targeting women yet I do not consider that there exist enough efforts being exerted in this respect."

The strategies that many independents are following consist, among other tactics, of raising awareness on women's rights, campaigning for the 50% women quota in the parliament, including women within their organizations, and tailoring timings of their meetings so that women can attend.

The internal regulations of a few traditional political parties stipulate diversity on committees. Some have specific committees for women. For a few others, women's rights are part of their policy platform. It has also been noted that women's participation in political life is becoming more salient. As cited during the interviews with traditional parties, women are able to occupy influential positions in political organizations and thus are becoming increasingly active.

It is noteworthy that many independents and CSOs have been making the effort to include women candidates on their lists. They are trying to ensure women's participation even without a quota. For instance, Mouwatinoun and Mouwatinat have 25 women candidates out of 65. In some districts like the south, where religious ideology is dominant, the inclusion of women candidates is important, as stated by an independent candidate. However, these efforts have not achieved their aims. There is still a visible imbalance in women's participation in the electoral process, despite data showing that women are more likely than men to vote for independent and opposition groups.

It has been noted that many traditional political parties will either have one, two, or no female candidates on their lists. As stated by some of the emergent political campaigners, selecting women to run has been a challenge, primarily due to the relatively low number of women who wish to run in comparison with men. This comes as no surprise, since women continue to face systematic discrimination in Lebanese society, leading in most instances to feeling demotivated about participating in traditional political life.

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[All of our] campaign managers have now left the country for a better life. This is challenging because we had a team that was dedicated for [all of] 2018. We are starting with people that are trying their best. Last time we had more funding and more resources and even personal assets are not accessible now [due to bank restrictions].

An independent candidate in Aley

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A voter's envelope during the Lebanese parliamentary elections in 2018 © www.dailystar.com.lb

“ Organizations that already deal with the marginalized are targeting women yet I do not consider that there exist enough efforts being exerted in this respect.

An independent campaigner

Many differences have been identified in the ways that political parties, both traditional and independent, are approaching minorities and the LGBTQ community. In general, various political factions are more frequently acknowledging the rights of this community. In particular, they are calling for the abolishment of the articles in the penal code used to criminalize homosexuality. Many interviewees are calling for equality of rights among all citizens. Some independents have expressed their determination to call for rights for the queer community, especially in Beirut, where some of neighborhoods continue to be very conservative. These campaigns attempt to provide a safe environment for people to express their thoughts. Others have reflected this stance within their electoral program. For instance, an independent candidate has highlighted the need to recognize the rights of the queer community, especially in the civil status law. The electoral program of a traditional political party has also highlighted the need to respect individual, reproductive, and sexual rights.

Among those who recognize that the LGBTQ community is being marginalized, most consider it to be an inconvenient time to tackle this. Instead, they want to give priority to the economic situation and the hard living conditions in Lebanon, because people are living in an emergency state and in survival mode.

On the other hand, many traditional political parties and a few independents do not agree with targeting the queer community in their campaigning. For them, this would be discriminatory and harmful to the community's cause.

DRIVE TO VOTE DOMINATED BY CONFESSIONALISM AND CLIENTELISM

When it comes to the reasons behind voting choices, the data shows a significant difference between the motivations of those who will vote for traditional parties versus those who will vote for independent candidates. For instance, those who will vote for independent candidates stated that they will do so because they believe independents will solve the economic crisis (62%), and will improve living conditions (61%). They believe that they are not corrupt (55%) and that they reflect the people's demands (48%). A very small minority stated reasons such as family or historic ties behind their voting choices.

Half of those who will vote for traditional parties (50%) will do so for historic reasons and out of habit. 40% will do so out of respect for district/village ties and 37% for family ties (note that each participant was given the choice to provide multiple reasons).

Some think that the confessional rhetoric in the country is already obsolete, and that people are beyond it, despite evidence to the contrary. However, they still consider there to be no alternative to fill the gap. This creates a group of voters who are swing voters, who will not vote for traditional political parties yet do not believe in the message presented by independent or secular candidates.

To counter that idea, many of the independent campaigns focus on linking the confessional system with clientelism, saying that public services should be guaranteed through a secular state rather than a confessional system. In a way, they are promoting a shared sense of solidarity, i.e. all residents of Lebanon are impacted by the crisis, and Lebanese people should face it united and not divided by sect or religion. Another way is to highlight the flaws in a confessional system, showing how dividing political interest by sect has led the country to the crises it is struggling under to today. This is done through reasoning with those who have questions on the topic.

53% of those who will vote for traditional parties, and 41% of those who will vote for independents, reported knowing of bribes being distributed in their neighborhoods, which shows that clientelism and vote-buying methods are still predominant. Raising people's awareness has been identified as the main tactic used by many independents against vote buying. Their message emphasizes how vote buying strips people of their freedom and agency, turning them into obedient clients for leaders and political parties. They are trying to sensitize voters to the limited

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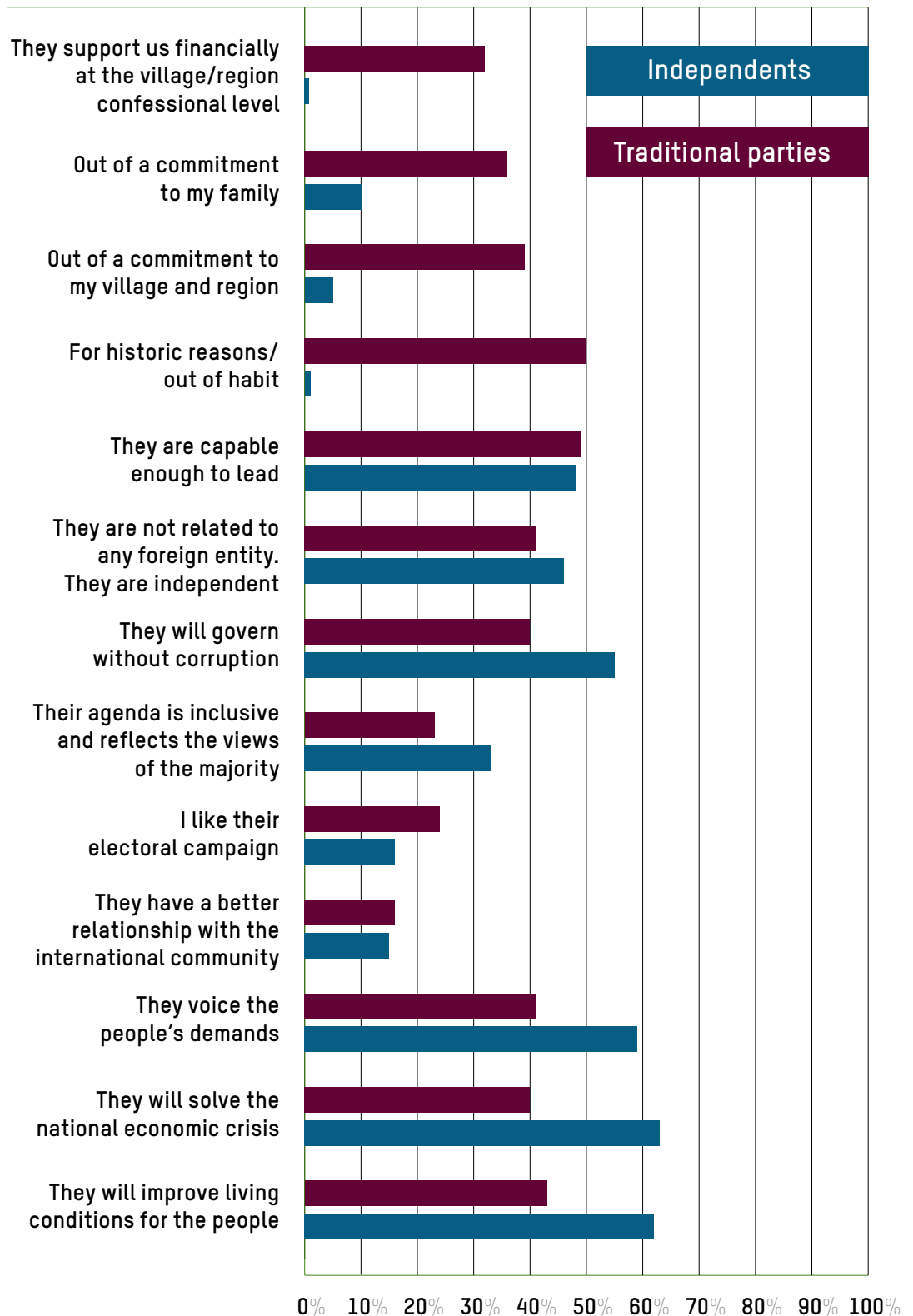
“[All of our] campaign managers have now left the country for a better life. This is challenging because we had a team that was dedicated for [all of] 2018. We are starting with people that are trying their best. Last time we had more funding and more resources and even personal assets are not accessible now [due to bank restrictions].”

An independent candidate in Aley

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impact that vote buying brings, notably how it deprives them of their rights in decision making. They are trying to convince voters that an alternative exists and it would lead to change. They want people to recognize that it is their right to access public services.

REASONS BEHIND VOTING BEHAVIOR SEGREGATION BASED ON VOTING CHOICE (MULTIPLE ANSWERS)



A few independents are approaching family organizations and syndicates because of their influence on their members, particularly in terms of voting behavior. They succeed in some instances and fail in others. Some independents are calling on municipalities and NGOs to work on projects that advance the fight against vote buying. They also call for a social safety net to counter clientalism, through which public services are provided to society.

Almost without exception, traditional parties considered political literacy to be lacking on the part of voters. It is believed that no literacy exists at a deep level, and nor does it exist when it comes to understanding the constitution. One traditional campaigner said that even politicians, media figures, and educated people lack such literacy, in order to highlight the significance of the problem. Interestingly, there is a common perception that those advanced in age lack literacy due the circumstances of the Civil War and the postwar era. Youth are perceived to be interested in politics and open to cultivating further knowledge, because the October revolution cultivated their political curiosity and raised their awareness. Election experts that were interviewed had a similar impression with regards to political literacy; however, they think that understanding how elections work, coupled with having candidates that are trustworthy, are two factors that can potentially lead to participating in the elections .



2018 Lebanese elections © Jamal Saidi | REUTERS

5 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

GRASSROOTS CAMPAIGNING

- 1 / Political literacy remains a major impediment to catalyzing change in Lebanon. Campaigns should conduct activities that raise awareness of civic duties, including electing representatives that focus on policy-making, to counter clientelism and vote buying.
- 2 / Independent and opposition groups are yet to be perceived as alternatives to the rule of traditional political parties and as capable of leading the country. Independent groups should focus on developing strong governing capacities that can be trusted by voters, through a realistic political agenda that voters think can be implemented in both the short and long term.
- 3 / Community organizing at the level of neighborhoods and villages remains the most efficient tactic in political campaigning in Lebanon. Campaigns should focus on the creation of local civic spaces and build the capacity of citizens and residents to organize within their communities at the local level, not only during election seasons, but during the parliamentary cycle as well.

CLIENTELISM AND CONFSSIONALISM

- 4 / National and communal solidarity remains a farfetched ambition in the face of the confessional rhetoric adopted by the ruling elites. Independent campaigns must continue their efforts in changing this rhetoric by focusing on the need for service provision through strong civic mechanisms rather than confessional clientelism.

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN POLITICAL LIFE

- 5 / Despite there being a larger percentage of women than men who want to vote for independent campaigns, efforts to include women in the electoral process are almost completely absent. Campaigns must focus on the development of a comprehensive plan to

ensure women’s participation in political life. This should include providing adequate spaces for advocacy, evidence-generating activities that focus on women’s demands, and capacity building on gender and women’s rights.

INCLUSION OF THE QUEER COMMUNITY

6 / Members of the queer community continue to be absent from the country’s political discourse. Campaigns should redouble their efforts in inclusion with strategies and on-the-ground participation to ensure proper representation. Opposition groups and campaigns must ensure queer representation among their committees and organizers, and the inclusion of queer rights in their political platforms. Proper and safe spaces must be allocated for queer members to come together to organize for and beyond elections.

THE ELECTORAL LAW

7 / It has become clear that list formation—mandated by law—is a challenge that imposes a binary choice, obliging all independents to join forces despite having differences in political ideas. A national workshop must be held immediately after the elections to rethink the electoral law, so it can ensure political participation based on agendas and beliefs, rather than forced unity.



2019 Lebanese protests © Shahan books

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69 This is the average turnout in Mount Lebanon.



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