Voter Turnout and Mobilisation in Lebanon's Local Elections:
Lessons for Women Candidates

Contents

Executive Summary

Against the background of an acute economic crisis rooted in a complete lack of trust in the political system, Lebanon faces municipal elections at some point in late 2023 or 2024 (delayed from May 2023). Despite growing mobilisation of grassroot advocacy from 2015 onwards, and the appearance of new political leaders and movements, Lebanon suffers from steadily decreasing participation in elections at all levels. This research investigates the main drivers of low participation in local elections in Lebanon. It pays particular attention to the challenges and opportunities informing young and women voters' decision to participate, as well as the determinants of their choice of candidates, particularly women. The research is based on six focus groups with a total of 40 voters from different socio- economic backgrounds, genders, regions and age groups, complemented with semi-structured interviews with decisionmakers, candidates for election, experts on the ground, and desk research.

Our research finds that respondents are generally pessimistic about the overall situation in the country and their municipalities, especially regarding the economy. This pessimism and uncertainty about the future is most deeply felt by younger respondents. At the municipal level, security, street hygiene and infrastructure, electricity and water are key concerns across all groups. Women of all cohorts tend to perceive security, especially lack of street lighting, as a primary concern. Men, especially younger respondents, tend to identify the economic crisis, including local unemployment and decaying infrastructure, as primary causes of concern. Older respondents, especially from the Beqaa region (bordering Syria), express concern regarding the presence of refugees in relation to security and economic insecurity.

An overview of perceptions across age, gender and locality shows that the perceived strength of the traditionally dominant national political parties generally replicates at the local level. However, other national and local forces, independents and others, can compete locally too. In smaller villages, a handful of families tend to dominate.

These traditionally dominant parties all experience a significant legitimacy crisis, marked by deep mistrust and disaffection across all respondents. In general, established political parties are perceived as groups that promote their own narrow interests, instead of the general interest of local communities. Older respondents linked corruption to other issues such as defective electoral rules, an unclear decentralisation model, sectarianism and clientelism, especially in small municipalities. Several respondents, especially younger ones, reported political parties trying to bribe voters or threating opposition members with violence to accomplish electoral success. This has created a large gap between society, political parties and politicians at the local level.

Therefore, we detected widespread disenchantment with national and local political systems across all groups of respondents, a situation that prompted several to abstain or cast blank votes in previous elections. However, political disaffection is also facilitated by the presence of legal, logistical, and political barriers to vote. The current electoral law, and the way in which it is implemented, means that many people are required to register to vote at their ancestral village rather than their place of residence and may need to travel long distances to vote as a result. Many of these voters feel detached from local politics, while others find it logistically difficult to travel to the place in which they are registered, especially if they lack economic resources. Politically, the role of dominant families or sectarianism results in many voters feeling that they do not have much choice of candidates. Some voters, especially women, reported experiencing family pressures to vote for a specific list, while young voters reported intimidation or having been offered money to vote for a party.

Against this pessimistic backdrop, there is some optimism regarding the potential for change in municipal elections but significant variety in terms of the types of change or extent of change that people think is possible. Some younger respondents expressed optimism that there may be more progressive independent candidates as seen in the last parliamentary election. While others, especially first-time voters, were more pessimistic and felt a complete overhaul of the system was needed. Those who voted in previous municipal elections also had mixed views. Some are satisfied with the candidates they elected, especially if they perceived them to have delivered what they promised, whereas others wish to change the system from within, by voting for new faces and programmes.

Given this, respondents across the board expressed a preference for practical, pragmatic solutions to local problems, set apart from what are seen as more ideologically charged struggles that characterise national elections. Younger respondents seemed more open to the potential for change at the next elections, and the election of more women itself was seen as a possible driver of this change. Women tended to feel that municipal governments were not doing enough to keep them safe – again, highlighting the potential for women candidates to explain what they would do differently if elected. But, across the board, respondents of all ages and genders said that they would judge a candidate most on their ability to deliver practical solutions and positive change above all else. For women candidates who are running

for the first time, this means demonstrating how they have shown leadership and their credibility to deliver practical solutions to the local problems people face, regardless of their gender.

At the same time, women candidates can face real risks of harassment, intimidation and violence when running for election in Lebanon. While there is a strong preference from all respondents for forms of face-to-face campaigning, women candidates need to make sure they take extra care in planning for this and always campaign as part of a team. A range of different public spaces for voter engagement can be considered – and this should be used not just to promote an individual candidate but also to raise more general awareness on the importance of voting, the process to vote and required documentation.

In light of this, our report suggests some practical recommendations for future candidates:

- Presenting yourself as a candidate: Candidates should aim to offer practical, pragmatic ideas to address the problems identified locally. These can be tailored to different groups – for instance, women might want to hear about what you will do to improve their safety whereas younger groups want to hear about how you will help bring about positive change. Try to provide your personal story – how can you demonstrate your experience and credibility to provide these solutions and to bring about change?
- Communicating your campaign: Overall, there is a strong preference for clear communication styles, although different preferences in terms of the form of communication. Older voters are keen to read programmes, although they should not be lengthy, while younger voters engage better with audio-visual content and social media engagement. Campaigns should be balanced in terms of communication channels and there is a strong preference for face-to-face engagement, including door-to-door campaigning. Public meetings and engagement should also be used to disseminate information on how and where to vote as part of a general strategy to increase overall voter turnout.
- Women candidates need to take extra care: Women candidates face additional risks of harassment and intimidation and this should be taken into account in any campaign strategy. While face-to-face campaigning is important, it should always be conducted as part of a team, and candidates should plan for additional measures to protect themselves, for instance from the risks of online harassment.
- Working on barriers to vote: As much as possible, all candidates should aim to facilitate the mobilisation of voters, through increasing awareness of the voting process and its requirements (such as required documentation). Candidates can also highlight those organisations and helplines that can be used to report intimidation or attempted bribery at election time.

Introduction

Lebanon is facing an acute economic crisis which has deep political roots. The political system established after the civil war is facing a legitimacy crisis, as large segments of the population are disenchanted with politics and politicians. Economic, political, and social mismanagement has led to rising inflation and directly to the Beirut port explosion of 2020.[1] Amongst other long-standing issues of corruption, neglect, and economic decline, sectarianism amongst the political class can be cited as a primary cause of these crises.

The traditional political system has been challenged by Lebanese civil society, with the active participation of youth and women, who have mobilised in the streets and protested for change. Some emerging leaders have made efforts to organise alternative political vehicles such as platforms, new parties and change movements, which often emerged as grassroots groups, active in protests over the course of the last decade. Although these movements increased the expectation of a unified electoral alternative to the establishment, in practice they remain fragmented and saw limited success during the parliamentary elections of 2022. In total, parties considered as part of these change movements obtained only 13 out of 128 MPs.

Lebanon suffers from decreasing participation in elections, with turnout decreasing from 54% of registered voters casting a ballot in 2009, to 49% in 2018, finally reaching 41% in 2022.[2] AAt 48.5 % electoral turnout, the municipal election of 2016 remained in line with the national trend. We were unable to find aggregate data on municipal electoral turnout in previous elections, however, the case of Beirut is very telling of its historical low levels in the capital, in which only 18.1% casted a vote in 2010, and 20.1% voted in 2016.[3]

More women vote in national elections than men, and pre-election turnout analyses[4] ahead of the national parliamentary election of 2022, indicated that youth groups sympathise with independent candidates[5], yet many young people choose to abstain. However, efforts to increase turnout in the country seem limited.

Objectives and methodology [6]

This research investigates the main drivers influencing voting behaviour in local elections in Lebanon, including low electoral participation. It pays special attention to the main challenges and opportunities informing young and women voters' decision to participate in local elections, as well as their electoral preferences when it comes to their selection of candidates, particularly women.

This research is based on six focus groups with a total of 40 voters from different socio- economic backgrounds, genders, regions and age groups. It also involved wo semi-structured interviews with experts on the ground, two semi-structured interviews with former and current women candidates, one semi-structured interview with a high-ranking decision-maker from the Ministry of the Interior and Municipalities, as well as desk research. Please see the technical appendix for more detail.

Discussion of Findings

The Communities and the issues facing them

Unanimously, respondents in our focus groups and expert interviewees agree on the notion that things are going in the wrong direction in their local community. This is related to an overall pessimism about the state of the country. Within this shared negative view of the state of the country and the municipality, we detected more pessimism and hopelessness amongst younger respondents.

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[1] The link between the Beirut port explosion of 2020 and its relationship with mismanagement and corruption has been thoroughly investigated by Human Rights Watch. Their report can be accessed at:
Human Rights Watch,' They Killed Us from the Inside. An Investigation into the August 4 Beirut Blast',2021.
[2] Reuters, accessed at:
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[3] Accesed at: .
[4] The Lebanese "change movements" are defined by a recent study published by Democracy Reporting International, as "those groups that are not part of the current political establishment, did not partake in the civil war, and have not contributed to the present collapse of the state. These groups are reform-focused, have partaken in and/or derive from the movement ignited in the summer of 2015 and escalated on 17 October 2019, and thus tend to have emerged in recent years. Finally, these groups are seeking to achieve their political goals by working to bring key people into political office". Democracy Reporting International, "The Political Metamorphosis of Lebanon's Civil Society: Mapping the Change Movements", 2022.
[5]   , 2022.
[6] Our research faced several methodological challenges, including the lack of availability of aggregate data on voter turnout at the municipal level.

In a mixed group of 21- and 22-year-olds, most respondents considered that nothing was positive, and some expressed particularly negative ideas such as: "we have reached a point in which everything is missing, our goals are now gone", "we are deprived of everything"[7]. Respondents expressed fears about the future, including worries about rising inflation, a deepening economic crisis and greater unemployment, while others expressed fears of war and displacement. Older respondents in different groups expressed pessimism but also emphasised that things have not always been this way (and possibly were more optimistic about the scope for change). A woman in her forties remembered: "Ten years ago, our city was clean, the streets had lighting, we had sidewalks and we had public gardens. We just want to get back to how it was before".

Women of all ages voiced perceptions that their municipal governments were not doing enough to keep them safe[8]. One recurring concern is the lack of stable lighting in the streets, which makes women feel insecure to drive or walk, especially at night. As expressed by a woman respondent in her early thirties, "there is no safety for anyone to walk alone on the streets of Nabaa". Several women across groups also expressed the need to improve street hygiene, including rubbish collection and the sorting of recyclable and non-recyclable waste.

Men respondents expressed more concerns about the perceived incapacity of municipalities to deal with the local manifestations of the economic crisis, including unemployment and decaying infrastructure, especially roads. A man in his mid-twenties expressed, for example: "regarding the economic problems, municipalities can help by controlling the prices, issuing fines and providing data". It is worth noting that, especially amongst young men, there were strong views regarding the need to change local political leaders, because of the perception that no policy problem would be solved under the current, dysfunctional, leadership. Older men and women respondents, especially in the Baalbek region which borders Syria, discussed the issue of refugees[9]. Syrian refugees are perceived, by several respondents, as a problem for municipalities, for different reasons, but the most recurring ones are safety and jobs.

Regarding the strength of political parties at the local level, it seems that, with local variations, traditional parties in the national arena preserve a high level of dominance at the local level. It is worth noting that, although several respondents mentioned independent candidates, change movements and platforms, most respondents expressed a level of historic disappointment with their performance. Younger voters expressed that they had had great hopes for independent candidates that emerged from the activism of civil society, after the revolution of 2019, but were disappointed that they had not been able to present a unified platform for the parliamentary elections of 2022. Finally, we should not underestimate the weight that families carry in municipal elections, especially in peripheral areas. In these cases, parties have to compromise with local families. As was expressed by a high-ranking decision-maker, many times "political parties participate in municipal elections under the guise of families and independents".

A young woman respondent expressed, for example: "Before the parliamentary elections they [independents] could not unite on a specific list. During the revolution, we saw that they were defending the same issues and demands, but after the revolution, most of them had personal goals". Another young woman respondent agreed: "I am not sure that they [independents] will have the ability to convince members of their municipalities, if they decide to run in the municipal elections. They, at the country level, could not agree on unified ideas, [how can they] agree on actions related to the villages… This makes me feel lost and despairing". Older respondents in two other groups referenced initial optimism for the Future Movement, founded in 1995 but that "hope was lost because it proved to have the same defects as traditional parties".

Furthermore, there is an almost unanimous feeling of mistrust and political disaffection towards both national and local level politics. Men and women young respondents tended to view political parties as only focused on the narrow interests of their members. Regarding established political parties, young voters expressed ideas such as: "no party thinks about our problems, they only think about themselves". Other young voters expressed a further level of concern about the fragmentation of the political system, which forecloses any hope of consolidating national unity in the country: "Lebanon will not become a country if the parties stay [in their current form] because they are fragmented".

Corruption was mentioned by several respondents across gender, class and age categories as a key factor undermining trust in political parties at local and national levels. In a mixed group of women, several

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[7] Accessed at:
[8] A recent analysis by risk and security consultancy Control Risks, based on government data, shows an increase of 260% of theft and 210% in robberies, between 2010 and 2022. The analysis can be accessed in:
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Risks, 'Economic crisis to continue to negatively affect Lebanon's security environment, October 2022.
[9] Lebanon hosts the highest number of refugees per capita in the world, with the government estimating that 1.5 million Syrian refugees reside in the country, of which just over 855,000 are registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. World Refugee & Migration Council Research Report, 'The Economic Impact of the Syrian Refugee Crisis in Lebanon: What it means for Current Policies', 2021. The article can be accessed at:

respondents referenced the perception that politicians used the system to steal from the country and were willing to rig elections. As was stated by a woman respondent in her mid-twenties, "Elections are not fair, even if we want to elect a good person, they rig the election to secure the victory of whomever they want to win". Older respondents in this group mentioned, ironically, that the intentions of politicians are clear by the fact that they all refer to each other as "thieves"[10], followed by a blunter assertion by a fellow respondent, highlighting that politicians "came, looted and stole". In a similar group of women respondents, most mentioned their complete loss of trust in all political parties.

In a group of older men and women respondents, corruption was once again linked to the lack of trust in political parties and willingness to vote, but other factors were also mentioned, including the presence of defective electoral rules, an unclear decentralisation model, clientelism and sectarianism. An older man stated, for example, "The main problem is that voters don't live in the same region [in which they vote], so they don't see and don't care about what's happening. [In addition], the mayor has partners and those are the council members". Another man expressed: "Mayors and elected assemblies don't know their rights or even the roles and tasks that they need to fulfil… in my region, one party is in control of everything and nothing has been delivered". Several respondents, particularly older ones, expressed that municipalities, especially the small ones, are based on personal relations and the strong influence of a reduced number of families[11].

In some extreme cases, as was reported by several young respondents, parties attempt to pay supporters in exchange for their votes or try to keep opposition forces out of their space by using violence. Several respondents (including young women) mentioned that, in the previous parliamentary election, they witnessed political parties offering payment in exchange for votes and intimidating voters and candidates. This statement falls in line with the results of the 2022 Parliamentary Elections Observation Report, carried out by the Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections (LADE), in which a representative survey of women candidates identified that 51% of them experienced some kind of violence or intimidation during their campaign[12].

There is thus a growing gap between parties and voters at both national and sub-national levels. Independent candidates, change movements and platforms have tried to fill this gap, but there is a level of disenchantment with their lack of unity, which make voters suspicious of history repeating itself. To an extent, these gaps have been partially filled by Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). Several younger respondents expressed that they are the "only ones working on the solution of [municipal] problems", including the provision of jobs. Some respondents had had the opportunity to work for NGOs at some point in their careers. An older woman respondent mentioned her experience providing some services such as planting trees and flowers, as her organisation saw that the municipal government abandoned this role. There is, however, a shared understanding that NGOs cannot fully play these roles. And some highlighted possible unintended consequences too: "I believe that when NGOs and individuals work a lot in a certain region, political parties double their efforts to make sure they stay strong".

Local elections
Given the aforementioned lack of trust in parties and politicians, which causes disaffection amongst respondents, it was not surprising to find out that close to half of those who were old enough to vote in the last municipal elections either abstained or casted a blank vote. There are logistical, legal and political barriers to participate in local elections too, which partially explain this trend.

Logistically, some respondents struggled with long distances, facing "a long road to reach" the municipality in which they vote. The problem is not merely about living far away from the voting station, but also relates to transportation costs. A respondent mentioned that she wanted to vote in the last local election but found it difficult because nobody provided her with transport, and her "financial circumstances would not allow [her]" to travel. Another respondent mentioned that, because of her divorce, she did not have the appropriate identification to vote. A woman respondent had never voted in municipal elections because she lives in a different region and has no connections or sense of belonging to where she is registered. When asked about what would make her vote, she said: "Let me vote in Beirut, this is where I live". The combination of an economic crisis and difficulties when it comes to commuting were highlighted by the high-level decision-maker that we interviewed, as "the most important factor affecting voter participation in municipal elections".

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[10] The respondent's opinion falls in line with several analysis highlighting how the sectarian lines cuts across the country's bureaucracy. This gives way to a situation by every time someone accuses a civil servant of corruption, they rebook by seeing it as a sectarian attack, followed by a counterattack, mostly in the form of accusing other sects of corruption. An interesting analysis has been recently carried out by the New York Times, which can be accessed at: .

[11] Ziad Abu-Rish carried out an interesting analysis of the powerful role of families in municipal politics, especially in the elections of 2016. Ziad Abu-Rish, @Municipal Politics in Lebanon, 2016', MERIP, N 280, Fall 2016. Accessible at:
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[12] Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections (LADE), '2022 Parliamentary Elections Observation Report', 2022. LADE interviewed 88 out of the 157 females who submitted their candidacy. Respondents came from various political, sectarian and regional affiliations.

Turning to political barriers, respondents also mentioned that they perceived a lack of pluralism in the lists, and candidates failing to communicate their proposals effectively. Other voters faced different types of pressures: a woman respondent cast a blank vote because her husband pressured her to vote for a candidate, but she did not consider the candidate suitable. Other women respondents also reported pressure from their families to vote for specific candidates. A respondent expressed, "we do not know all the candidates, parties ask us to vote in the municipality, but they do not choose good [candidates]". Finally, several young respondents expressed that they experienced intimidation or attempts of bribery, which threatened to distort their electoral preferences or alienated them from the system altogether. We detected more enthusiasm about voting in those who were too young to vote in the last municipal elections but were old enough to vote in the last parliamentary one. This was the case, to a large extent, because of the presence of young independent candidates in national elections, seen by many as agents of change. In a group of people who will be old enough to cast their first vote in the upcoming municipal election, we detected mixed attitudes, ranging from outright rejection of the entire political system, to a desire to take part, provided some profound changes take place in the system. On this point, young respondents expressed opinions such as: "I vote on the condition that tangible solutions are given, setting realistic and achievable [solutions], not words on paper", "I suggest changing the list of candidates, the same people, [elected periodically], they do nothing", or "I propose to nominate young people, no older than 50 years old, young people work better, try us and see".

Turning to those who did participate in previous municipal elections, attitudes ranged from those supportive of their local candidates to those wanting more radical change. Some respondents were more positive in terms of the appeal of an individual or a list of candidates, or perceived good performance by the candidate of their choice. Others were optimistic about the previous parliamentary elections, because there was seen to be a wide range of independent candidates who could bring about change. They hoped for similar choices at the local level, but their decision to vote or to cast a blank vote would depend on their perception of the presence of candidates willing to change things for the better.

When asked why respondents would vote for a particular candidate, they tended to highlight the candidate's offer and her or his characteristics. Regarding the electoral offer, and the way it should be presented to the public, we identified a general preference for pragmatic local solutions, set apart from what are perceived as ideologically charged struggles which characterise national elections. Within this general trend, there were some variations.

Younger respondents tend to be interested in policy proposals, but not necessarily in long manifestos. A young woman respondent expressed, for example: "Personally speaking, everything visual excites me…a…candidate should present me the problem or the project that he/she intends to do in a visual way. [A good way of doing this would be] showing pictures of the situation before executing the project and after completing it". A male respondent in the same group expressed: "None of us is interested in reading electoral programmes anymore. The citizen wants to see realistic projects that motivate him or her to vote and elect the appropriate candidate". Similar answers from young respondents highlighted the need for "logical solutions, away from slogans", while other respondents mentioned specific policies aimed at tackling unemployment, children's education, and recreation, as well as street lightning.

Older respondents also showed a predilection for pragmatic solutions, but they placed emphasis on the need for a classic electoral programme. Older women respondents in two groups mentioned unanimously that the electoral programme is the main factor influencing their choice of candidate. Two of these women respondents mentioned the importance of presenting the programme to the community and of sticking to the promises of a manifesto. Older men respondents, and a woman respondent in another focus group, mentioned that an electoral programme is "a must" for them to decide who to vote for, although this programme should be clear and describe the ways in which it will be implemented.

When it comes to the type of candidates that would prompt respondents to vote for a list, we identified a demand for pragmatic can-do candidates. However, again there are interesting variations between younger and older respondents. Younger respondents expressed interest in candidates who are "not idealistic", who are able to "implement their electoral project" and are closer to the community, who communicate with its members and are engaged with the projects they implement. These younger voters, moreover, expressed that this pragmatic outlook is not enough, several mentioning that the candidate of their choice should show 'a new face', someone who "can work more to introduce reforms", "someone who is not a member of a well-known party", even a "non-partisan candidate". Several younger respondents expressed that they were even willing to vote for someone with a different ideology, because "the important thing is change".

Older women respondents in two groups also expressed, almost unanimously, that they were willing to vote for someone who is not a member of their preferred party if "the candidate works". While some respondents expressed an interest in voting for "new people", several highlighted the importance of a candidate's experience, showing preference for a combination of a candidate's "programme, background

and achievements". An older man respondent mentioned: "He must have a track record in his hometown. Our previous mayor was traveling most of the time instead of taking care of the community".

Regarding the means through which candidates should communicate their messages, respondents are aware of the need to tailor the use of these to different audiences. Young respondents, a cohort that one would expect to overemphasise the use of social media, expressed a balanced view. As stated by a man respondent in his mid-twenties, a candidate can get closer to the community by "making leaflets and distribute them amongst voters, carrying out visits or through social networking programmes". A woman respondent of a similar age mentioned that candidates could benefit from "holding meetings to introduce themselves, their educational level and ideas". Older men and women respondents also highlighted the importance of having public gatherings and workshops with people, meetings in which candidates can create awareness about "the importance of participating in elections", "the importance of municipalities as potential vehicles for change", and training about "how to vote", besides the promotion of their candidacies. Older respondents were very much aware of the role played by social media in the last parliamentary elections, suggesting there is scope to develop similar strategies at local level too.

Women in local politics
We asked respondents if they would rather vote for a woman or a man in municipal elections. Significantly, the dominant opinion across age cohorts and genders is that the key factors are the leadership skills and other characteristics of the candidate, rather than their gender. We identified a segment of women respondents of all ages who consider women intrinsically better positioned than men to lead a municipal government. Some men respondents agreed, feeling change is necessary to accomplish equality in political rights. Other men highlighted intrinsic characteristics that women's leadership might bring into politics, such as greater tolerance or resilience.

In a mixed group of 21- and 22-year-olds, we found an almost unanimous convergence of opinions around the notion that the selection of a candidate will depend on the characteristics of the person, rather than their gender. Most respondents highlighted the attribute of being "energetic" as the characteristic that would define their ideal candidate. A mixed group of respondents in their early thirties agreed, mentioning that the most important attributes of candidates were his or her "competence, honesty and programme", as well as "good communication skills". In a group of women of different ages, opinions were more divided. A respondent in her mid-20s and one in her mid-50s rejected the notion of feeling more represented by women candidates, and women from different ages emphasised: "What is the point of voting for a woman if she will not be doing her job right?".

We identified an interesting contrast in the answers of men respondents regarding their stated preference for voting for a woman instead of a man, Several men respondents in a mixed group of older men and women expressed ideas such as: "I would choose to vote for the woman because we need to change and we never tried women", "women have leadership skills", or, "in my line of work the women component has proved has proven their strength administrative matters more than men because they have a higher tolerance and perseverance than men". However, these opinions contrasted with a unanimous rejection of the idea of preferring to vote for a woman over a man, in a focus group made of only men, mostly in their thirties, which at the same time are members of political parties.

Beyond the personal preferences of respondents for electing women, there is a predominant perception across groups regarding the need to encourage women to participate in politics more generally. Almost all men respondents across groups showed this encouraging attitude, with several highlighting the quest for "equality of rights" or "empowerment" as arguments for more women's participation. However, we also identified patronising opinions from some men respondents, who stressed, for example, [women]"need to be supported by her own family", as if this would not be relevant for men candidates.
Later in our research, we asked respondents if women candidates should do something different than men candidates in running their campaigns. In general, most respondents mentioned generic points that are applicable to any candidate running for office, mostly focused on the need to communicate ideas and proposals "in a sound manner". However, some women respondents highlighted that, beyond the particular campaign to be run by each candidate, women in politics should aim at creating general awareness of the presence of women in municipal governments. On the other hand, a men respondent mentioned that women candidates should not "run a campaign on a feminist platform, because this could affect her negatively. Rather, the campaign platform should be global".

Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions

This research aimed to examine voter preferences and behaviours (including low participation) in Lebanese municipal elections. We placed particular attention on the main challenges and opportunities informing young and women voters' decision to participate in local elections, as well as their motivations when it comes to the election of candidates, particularly women.

Our main findings are that respondents are generally pessimistic about the future, with security a key concern for women and the economic crisis a primary concern for men. This reflects national level politics with patterns of sectarianism, patronage and corruption repeated at local level. While there is some optimism about the municipal elections as a potential vehicle for change, there is significant variety in terms of expectations of the levels of change possible.

Given this, there are some consistent views on how candidates should operate in these elections, with respondents consistently emphasising the need for pragmatic and practical solutions, clear communication and face to face engagement. Women candidates will be judged more on what they say and do than their gender, but they face additional challenges such as the risk of intimidation, family pressure, or particular judgements about the intrinsic characteristics of women and how much they should target women voters.

Local candidates need to show the importance of local politics to bring about change, especially because there is a positive attitude towards the involvement of more women in politics which is itself perceived as a driver of change and political innovation. Women candidates should therefore aim to develop a comprehensive campaign platform, pointing at the fact that running the country in times of crisis needs the active participation of all citizens, and that this job starts at the local level.

All candidates need to cultivate their personal message – what motivates them and their experience, and develop a programme of voter engagement that allows for a range of forms of communication (in person, social media, written) repeated over a period of time.

There is also a need to tackle some of the structural barriers to voting, including calling for reforms to where people can vote and drawing attention to potential electoral fraud and intimidation.

Recommendations

Given the analysis above, our recommendations focus on how to tackle the structural barriers to voting and on key priorities for all candidates, with a particular focus on women candidates as part of this. We also identify potential avenues for further research.

Presenting yourself as a candidate

Our research shows a generally positive attitude towards the presence of more women in politics. This is seen as a positive sign of change and as a move in the direction to build a fairer society. For all candidates, respondents emphasised the need for candidates who focus on the delivery of pragmatic, practical solutions to local problems, given wider pessimism about the state of national politics.

Given this, all candidates should consider:
» Most voters want candidates to offer practical, pragmatic solutions to local problems. Where possible, candidates should try to showcase their experience and demonstrated leadership in addressing local problems – highlighting where there is scope for change, in spite of the wider challenging context.
» Where possible, candidates should aim to tailor these solutions and ideas to the concerns of different voters. For example, women are particularly concerned about security in the streets, including street lighting and the state of the roads. Men tend to be concerned about the local manifestations of the economic crisis; older men tend to be concerned about the decaying infrastructure, while younger men are worried about unemployment. Different ideas can be presented to these different groups, reflecting their interests.
» All candidates should aim to present a personal story – demonstrating how their life experiences demonstrate their understanding of local problems and ability to deliver change. Women candidates, especially those running for the first time, can emphasise how they will do things differently if elected and what additional skills and ideas they bring.
» Any campaign should aim to target a range of concerns to maximise appeal; for example, while more women entering politics is generally viewed positively, above all else voters want to see that a candidate can credibly deliver positive change so all candidates need to demonstrate their ability to do so.

Presenting your offer

There is a strong preference for clear communication and face to face communication across all groups. Candidates should aim for a balanced strategy – older voters still appreciate written political programmes, while younger voters prefer more visual content and greater use of social media (including using young endorsers where relevant).

Above all else, all voters appreciate face to face communications. Candidates should look for opportunities to present their programme in town halls, parks, school gates and similar spaces. There was a lot of emphasis on having public gatherings and workshops in which candidates can present their campaign but which can also create awareness about the importance of participating in elections and the potential of municipalities as vehicles for change. Public meetings and engagement can also be used to share information on how to vote, what documents are needed and so on – with the overall aim of increasing voter turnout.

Women candidates should take extra care

In interviews with previous and current candidates, the challenges of door-to-door campaigning for women candidates were highlighted, including risks of harassment, intimidation and violence. This means that women candidates should take extra care in planning for door-to-door campaigns, for instance ensuring they are always part of a team when carrying out visits which could include campaign staff, volunteers and men allies if possible.

Women candidates should also consider other potential areas of risk – such as the risks of online harassment if a campaign is using social media. There may be particular training support that can be accessed to help with this, as well as considering what these risks might be and how candidates can protect themselves in advance of any campaign.

Tackling structural barriers

Women candidates could try to create a platform to lobby the electoral authority and municipal governments to commit to efforts to facilitate the mobilisation of voters from their place of residence to the place where they vote. This might entail longer voting periods, transport subsidies, voting stations or mega-centres, at least in the largest cities. The measures adopted should be universal in nature so every citizen can access them, if they wish to do so, and should be officially organised by the state to avoid such routes to voting being commandeered by political parties.

In their campaigns, women candidates should also aim to increase awareness of voting laws and procedures, including information about the roles and functions of municipalities, how to register to vote and the importance of identification documents, amongst other requirements.

Where relevant, women candidates should also remind voters of the existence of LADE's observatory of instances of political intimidation and attempts of bribery in local elections. The observatory has a helpline which to voters can use anonymously. The Ministry of Interior and Municipalities also runs a hotline (1766), which deals with complaints about instances of vote-buying and intimidation.

Avenues for further research

Further research could aim to:
- » Better understand the social drivers and political determinants of young voter's disaffection. This is an important area to investigate, given the fact that we identified higher levels of pessimism, political apathy and even cynicism amongst younger voters, a worrying trend for the future of political representation in Lebanon.
- » Related to the above, it would be very helpful to explore the distribution of responsibilities between different layers of government. This would mean clearly mapping the responsibilities of municipal governments, to guide awareness raising on what kinds of change can be achieved at municipal level. Linked to this, research could further explore examples of innovations and success at addressing voter concerns at municipal levels, to identify the key factors contributing to these successes and the key elements that might be replicable elsewhere. This would particularly help future candidates to understand what they can feasibly offer to voters and how they can best achieve positive change.
- » Future research could also track potential risks for women candidates specifically, to monitor the range and types of threat they face and help ensure future candidates receive sufficient support to address these; it could also scope the feasibility of reforms to voter registration and anti-corruption efforts.

	Category	Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2	Focus Group 3	Focus Group 4	Focus Group 5	Focus Group 6
Gender	Men	0	0	1	3	3	4
	Women	10	7	4	5	3	0
Age	20-25	1	0	3	8		
	26-30	4	0	2	0		2
	31-40	2	1	0	0	2	2
	41-50	0	6	0	0	3	
	51 +	3	0	0	0	1	
Region	Baalbek El Hermel	8			7		
	Beqaa	2			1		1
	Mount Lebanon		4	5		4	1
	North Lebanon		3			1	
	South Lebanon					1	1
	Nabatiyeh						1
Total	40	10	7	5	8	6	4

Acknowledgements

Authors

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About the Project

"Winning with Women" is a project lead by Global Partners Governance Foundation (GPGF) with its local partner The Lebanese Organization for Studies and Trainings (LOST) and is funded by Porticus Foundation. The project aims to support and empower women's political participation at the Lebanese local governments by: providing trainings to equip potential women candidates with the necessary technical skills and political knowledge, organizing workshops about gender responsive policy making and allyship which aim to build bridges between potential women candidates and influential men in the Lebanese political stage, enhancing dialogue and stimulating support for women's political engagement, mentoring, and conducting researches that would act as toolkits for the women candidates.

WINNING WITH
WOMEN

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