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Lebanon and Syria

SUNNI VOTING TRENDS

2022 Lebanese
Parliamentary Elections



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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	3
A SOCIO-ECONOMIC OVERVIEW OF THE SUNNIS IN LEBANON	4
A Brief History	4
The 2019 Lebanese Crisis.....	6
Hariri’s Withdrawal	6
THE 2022 ELECTION AND THE SUNNI VOTING TRENDS	7
Registered Voters	7
Turnout	9
Sunni Compared to Christian Turnout.....	11
Sunni Compared to Shiite Turnout	11
Analysis of the Sunni Low Turnout.....	12
New MPs’ Entry to the Parliament.....	13
Void and Blank Votes	14
The General Population	14
Among the Sunnis	15
Analysis.....	16
Sunni Political Voting Trends	17
General Sunni Affiliations	17
Saida.....	18
Tripoli	20
CONCLUSION.....	23

INTRODUCTION

The voting trends of the Sunni community played a crucial and multi-layered role in shaping the balance of political power in the 2022 Parliament. This paper will explore how the Sunnis voted, their turnout, their political affiliation, and the factors that impacted these trends.

This research is part of a series of in-depth research papers on the 2022 parliamentary elections, led by the Electoral Lab at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) at the American University of Beirut, with the support of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation Lebanon (FNF).

The analysis and insights of the numbers and data presented in this paper have been produced by the Data Liberation Project (DLP), in collaboration with FNF, to convert, reorganize and cross-link the results of the Lebanese elections in years 2022, 2018, 2009, 2005, 2000, and 1996, into a machine-friendly and open excel format, thus making the data easily, freely and publicly available.

This paper starts with a historical, social, and political overview of the Sunni community, followed by an exploration of the general registration and turnout numbers with a focus on the Sunni population, thoroughly analyzing its trends and offering a possible explanation of the results.

The paper analyses the entry of new MPs to the Parliament, and the number of blank and invalidated ballots, in the general population and among the Sunnis. The paper also overviews two main cities with a majority of Sunni population and the community's voting trends.

A SOCIO-ECONOMIC OVERVIEW OF THE SUNNIS IN LEBANON

A BRIEF HISTORY

The Sunni community is one of the three main sects in Lebanon, along with the Shias and the Maronites. The Sunnis form around a third of the population. Politically, they enjoy a strong influence on the state, controlling 27 MPs, the Prime Minister, and a significant share of top administrative and military positions. Historically, the verbal power-sharing agreement between the Maronite leader Bechara Khoury and his Sunni counterpart Riad Solh and their subsequent alliance formed the political basis of Modern Lebanon.¹

Geographically, the Sunni community is dispersed. They inhabit the three main cities on the Mediterranean Sea; Beirut, Tripoli, and Saida, with a presence further inland in the northern hinterland of Akkar and Minnieh-Dinnieh. They are also spread around smaller population centers in the Iqlim, south of the Chouf mountains, with several additional Sunni cities and villages scattered around the country, mainly in the West Bekaa, Ersal, and Hasbaya in the South.²

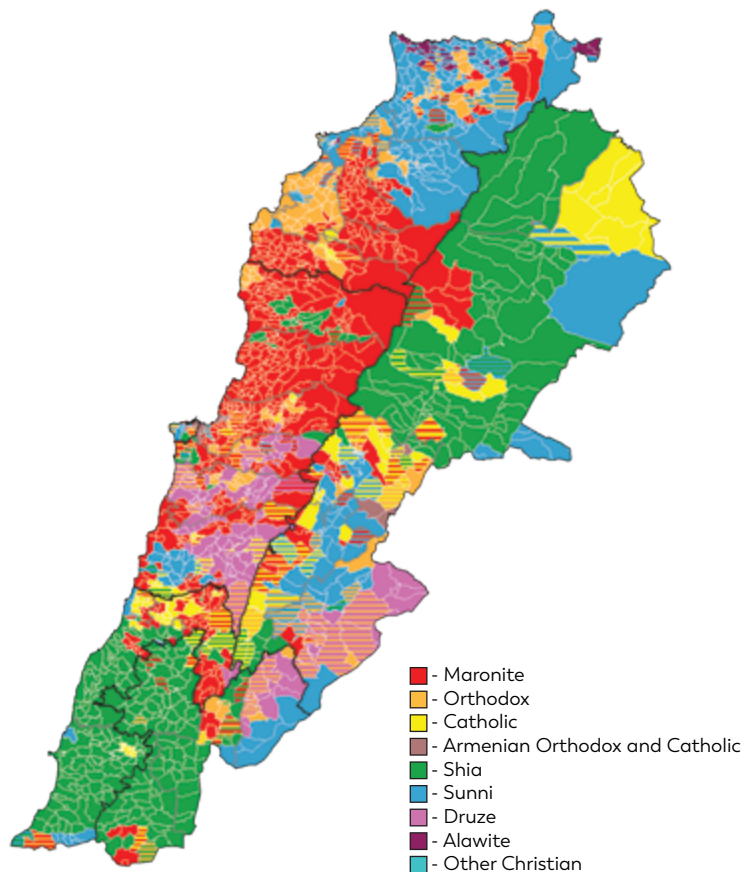


Figure 1: Lebanon Sectarian geographic distribution, Wiki Commons

This dispersal has made it hard for the Sunnis to create a unified national political party or leader, leading instead to the emergence of several locally prominent political families like the Karamé in Tripoli, Salam and Yafi in Beirut, and Bizri and Saad in Saida. It was only Rafik Hariri who was able to change that fact and unite the Sunnis, after his death.

Socially, most Lebanese Sunnis have been and still are city dwellers, working as traders, shop owners, and white-collar workers. Indeed, they have been historically considered peaceful, moderately religious, tolerant, and financially savvy merchants.³ At the same time, the Druze and Maronites lived as farmers inhabiting Mount Lebanon, fighting against each other and the Ottoman Empire, while the Shia were persecuted and forced to shelter in the periphery.⁴ Whether under early Islamic rule or later under the Ottoman, the Sunnis were usually part of the majority of the large 'Umma⁵, protected and encouraged to expand and participate in

1 Krayem, AUB <https://web.archive.org/web/20181015080935/http://ddc.aub.edu.lb/projects/pspa/conflict-resolution.html>

2 <https://today.orientlejour.com/article/1298296/mapping-lebanon-i-an-interactive-map-showing-registered-voter-data-by-district.html>

3 Sunni Mapping study, Ibrahim Jouhari, 2019 Berghof

4 Modern History of Lebanon, Kamal Salibi, 1993

5 Umma is the larger community of Muslims, transcending borders and ethnicities.

local politics. In other words, the state was on their side, if not theirs outright; a fact that will play a significant role in understanding the current Sunni political void.

In the early 20th century, the Sunni struck a bargain with the Maronites and agreed to share power in an unwritten 'National Pact' document, forming the basis of a small new country called Lebanon, supported by the French.⁶ Since independence, the Sunnis have fared well, became more educated, and solidified their power with a surging demography, increasing their share of the economic pie that the Maronites were able to build with the help of their French patrons. Several large Sunni institutions were established, like the Makassed⁷ (schools and hospitals), Dar el Fatwa that opened a series of schools and formation centers, and the Beirut Arab University, established with the help and support of Egypt. Additionally, the Gulf and other Arab states opened their arms to the well-educated Lebanese youth, who amassed fortunes, returned to their country, and helped it prosper.⁸

However, with the rise of Arabism and Abdel Nasser and a growing demographic imbalance, the Sunni and the Shia started asking for an equitable share of power⁹, leading -among other causes- to the civil war. The war ended in 1990 with a constitutional amendment, tweaking the Lebanese power-sharing formula in favor of the Muslims, weakening the prerogatives of the Maronite president, and distributing his power among the Prime Minister and the Council of Ministers. Meanwhile, the parliament sectarian ratio was changed from 6 to 5, favoring the Christians to being equally divided between Muslims and Christians. The Taif Agreement¹⁰ enshrined these gains in the constitution, and Rafik Hariri came back to lead a promised new golden age of Lebanon.

The Syrian post-Taif hegemony reinstated a feeling of being protected by another Muslim power, and the preeminence of Rafik Hariri restored part of the political clout and dreams of a unified leadership that always eluded the Sunnis.¹¹ However, those aspirations never came to fruition and regional peace didn't materialize, as several wars and endemic corruption, facilitated by the Syrian regime, derailed the post-war revival.

In early 2000, a lackluster economy and a heavier Syrian hegemony soured the Sunnis' relationship with the Syrians, and these feelings exploded with the assassination of Rafik Hariri in 2005¹². The assassination proved a crucial turning point when the Sunni population took to the street in a rare protest movement and stood with the Christians, Druze, and part of the Shias.¹³ This popular movement, dubbed '14 March' pushed to get the Syrian army and political control out of Lebanon.¹⁴ Saad Hariri, the son of Rafik Hariri, picked up the mantle of leadership of a majority of Sunnis and tried to propel them and their pro-western March 14 alliance to the top of the political scene in Lebanon.

But this didn't last. Armed with their historical grievances and weapons, the two main Shia parties, Amal and Hezbollah, slowly built up their control and alliances, internally and externally. A full-blown confrontation with Israel in 2006, followed by a civil strife in 2008, solidified their control of the Lebanese political scene. The influx of 1.5 million Syrian refugees on top of the hundreds of thousands of already present Palestinians further complicated the situation.

Furthermore, the ousting of Saad Hariri from power in 2011¹⁵, the Syrian civil war, and Hezbollah's involvement against the Syrian Sunnis increased the Lebanese Sunni community's feeling of oppression, powerlessness, and abandonment.¹⁶

In late 2016, the Syrian war was winding down, and Hezbollah increased its control over Lebanese politics following its 'victory' in Syria. The Gulf, mainly KSA and the UAE, felt disappointed by the inability of their Lebanese allies to counter Hezbollah. The tension with the Gulf escalated when the former became involved in the Houthis' campaign against the KSA and when the missiles provided by Iran and allegedly guided by Hezbollah fell on Jeddah and Saudi urban centers.¹⁷

The Saudi and GCC general disinterest in Lebanon culminated with a total halt to most financial and political aid, leading the preeminent Sunni leader Saad Hariri into a Faustian deal with General Michel Aoun, opening the doors of the presidential palace to the latter.¹⁸ Unfortunately, this new partnership didn't lead to the promised prosperity that promised to implement badly needed reforms and curb endemic corruption. On the contrary, the situation worsened, and a trifecta of economic, monetary, and fiscal crisis exploded, which led to a popular uprising involving a large part of the Lebanese population and part of the Sunnis in what was soon to be called the Lebanese Revolution or 'Thawra'.¹⁹

6 The Communal Pact of National Identities: The Making and Politics of the 1943 National Pact, Farid Khazen

7 Factional Politics in Lebanon: The Case of the «Islamic Society of Benevolent Intentions» (Al-Maqāḍid) in Beirut, Michael Johnson

8 <https://www.mei.edu/publications/lebanese-migration-gulf-1950-2009>

9 From 1943 till the 1990 the balance of power in the parliament was 5 to 6 in favor of the Christians

10 Civil and uncivil violence in Lebanon, Samir Khalaf

11 Daniel Meir, 2 The Sunni community in Lebanon: from "Harirism" to sheikhism" <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/302026912.pdf>

12 Crisis Group, "Lebanon's politics: the Sunni community and Hariri's future current"

13 Stephan, Maria J. and Rudy Jafaar. "Lebanon's Independence Intifada: Dynamics, Achievements and Shortcomings." 2006 Meeting of the American Political Science Association. 31 Aug - 3 Sept, 2006: 18-19.

14 <https://theArabweekly.com/11-years-lebanons-march-14-movement>

15 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-hariri-resignation-idUSTRE70B26A20110112>

16 Spillover of the Syrian Conflict into Lebanon https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/j.ctt1287mhx.11?seq=6#metadata_info_tab_contents

17 <https://www.csis.org/analysis/iranian-and-houthi-war-against-saudi-arabia>

18 <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/lebanons-hariri-presents-cabinet-proposal-president-aoun-2021-07-14/>

19 <https://www.reuters.com/markets/rates-bonds/lebanons-financial-crisis-how-it-happened-2022-01-23/>

THE 2019 LEBANESE CRISIS

Since 2019, the Sunnis, like most Lebanese, have been in the midst of a “deliberate depression” suffering from a severe multifaceted economic meltdown. Indeed, the World Bank pointedly warned that “Lebanon’s financial and economic crisis is likely to rank in the top 10, possibly top three, most severe crises episodes globally since the mid-nineteenth century”.²⁰ It has indeed happened on top of a worldwide pandemic with devastating consequences and the catastrophic explosion in the port of Beirut that destroyed parts of the capital.

The Lebanese currency has lost over 95% of its value, dropping from LBP 1,500 to a dollar to more than LBP 50,000, while inflation is at a 240% high.²¹ People’s wages are worthless, and the crisis is still growing, reaching catastrophic proportions. According to the World Bank, Lebanon’s economy shrunk by 10.5% in 2021, in addition to -25.9% in 2020 and -6.9% in 2019. Meanwhile, more than 45% of the Lebanese population has fallen under the poverty line (defined as receiving less than 3.1\$ per day), with 22% being considered below the extreme poverty line, while the jobless rate has soared.²² An even more worrisome fact is that Tripoli and the North, where more than a third of the Lebanese Sunnis²³ live, have been hit harder by the crisis, and in Tripoli, 74% of households live below the poverty line.²⁴

Facing a crisis of such magnitude, the main sectarian political parties have rushed to help their constituencies, providing them with the basic necessities. Walid Jumblatt in the mountains has started providing his Druze community with food parcels, seeds, cattle, and tractors to grow sustenance. Jumblatt publicly admitted that “It started. Every chief of a tribe, every chief of a community, is trying to satisfy his people.”²⁵ In turn, the Lebanese Forces and Hezbollah are doing the same, focusing on their supporters in their respective regions.

Meanwhile, the Sunnis, especially in Tripoli, have lost their primary source of revenue as trade and commerce dried up and collapsed.²⁶ The Sunni middle class lost most of its bank savings and couldn’t withdraw its wealth when the banking restrictions were implemented following October 2019 events. Their feeling of abandonment increased as their local political elites either lacked the resources or was unwilling to help, while their regional patrons, the Arab Gulf states, were entirely absent.

HARIRI’S WITHDRAWAL

In addition to their economic hardships and relative feelings of deprivation compared to others from different sects, the Sunnis have lost their sectarian “Za’im”. Indeed, on January 24th 2022, Former Prime Minister Saad Hariri announced that he and his political party – the Future Movement - would refrain from running for the elections and will stop any political activities.²⁷

Saad Hariri’s withdrawal, the assassination of his father in 2005, and the perceived Sunni defeat in the Syrian civil war have cemented the Sunni feelings as an oppressed minority persecuted by a majority and abandoned by their regional patrons and friends²⁸. Meanwhile, the state, which is supposed to be ‘theirs’, protecting and defending them, has turned against and is oppressing them. This situation is even more pronounced for the more conservative and religious-leaning Sunnis living in the periphery (Akkar and the Bekaa), as they feel under suspicion and crushed by a heavy security hand. The latter feeling is identified as ‘mazlounieh’, or deep injustice, among the Sunnis.²⁹

The above-described facts have left the Sunni community in greater disarray than the rest of the Lebanese sects, especially when the few remaining local za’ims, like Najib Mikati in Tripoli, Fouad Siniora, or Nohad Mashnouk in Beirut, haven’t been able to recast their image given the October 17 revolution that accused all politicians³⁰ of corruption and called for their removal. Meanwhile, no new Sunni leader has emerged, leaving the Sunni street waiting for a new flag bearer that will get the backing and support of the KSA, fix their economic woes, and bring prosperity back to the community and the country.

20 <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/lebanon/publication/lebanon-economic-monitor-spring-2021-lebanon-sinking-to-the-top-3>, p.21

21 <https://blog.blominvestbank.com/43040/lebanons-inflation-rate-reached-239-68-by-january-2022/>

22 <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/474551606779642981/lebanon-economic-monitor-the-deliberate-depression>

23 According to the numbers from 2018 elections, around 230,000 voted in Tripoli and the north out of almost 500,000 Sunni voters in Lebanon, compiled through the DLP project

24 <https://www.refugeesintowns.org/all-reports/tripoli>

25 <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/lebanon-crisis-druze-leader-walid-jumblatt-warns-of-hunger-revolt-1.1022491>

26 <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/04/world/lebanon-crisis.html>

27 <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/86243>

28 <https://theArabweekly.com/saudi-arabia-shows-little-interest-lebanons-political-crisis>

29 The Regression of the Salafis of Lebanon in Post-2011 Period, Fnf publications, Abbas Assi

30 Following the oft repeated chant of “kelon yaani kelon” or ‘all means all’ politicians

THE 2022 ELECTION AND THE SUNNI VOTING TRENDS

The Lebanese 2022 parliamentary elections took place on the 15th of May 2022, based on a proportional law with a single preferential vote in 15 local districts that were further divided into Qazas in a non-uniform manner.³¹

Lebanon's general turnout has been falling since 2009, when it topped at 53.37%, then dropped to 49.68% in 2018, and to 49.19% in 2022. As previously discussed in the Expatriate Voting Analysis paper, published by the Electoral Lab, the voter registration in Lebanon is passive, which could explain the low turnout numbers. Indeed, all Lebanese above 21 years of age are automatically registered on the permanent voter roll, updated once a year, regardless of whether or not elections are taking place. Voter lists are compiled by the Directorate General of Civil Status (DGCS) of the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities based on civil status records.³²

Unfortunately, the registration system is slow to correct the main lists, which usually include deceased individuals, or many who have left and are no longer in the country, and other similar cases. It is estimated that the 'real' number of currently residing voters is around 80% of the complete ballot list. Thus, 49% or even 53% might seem deceptively low, but could effectively indicate a possibly higher actual turnout.³³

Nevertheless, the number of registered voters is the most accurate number describing the Lebanese population above 21 that is available, except for a complete official census. Unfortunately, as Lebanon is based on a power-sharing agreement linked to demographic balances, a census is a very politically-charged operation. The last official census was organized in 1932.³⁴ Thus, to understand the demographic balance in Lebanon and the place of the Sunni sect, it is necessary to analyze the registered numbers, followed by an overview of voter turnout per sect.

REGISTERED VOTERS

In terms of absolute numbers, the Christians' overall share of registered voters has been dropping steadily, while the Muslims have been increasing due to the difference in the population growth rate. Indeed, the Christians grew with an average of 0.56% per year, growing from 1,272,745 in 2009 to 1,345,384 in 2018 and 1,372,541 in 2022. Meanwhile, Muslims grew by 1.80% annually, from 1,987,214 in 2009 to 2,401,362 in 2018 and 2,594,967 in 2022. Thus, the share of registered Christians in the total population declined from 39.07% in 2009 to 34.59% in 2022. The Muslims' share rose from 61.01% in 2009 to 65.41% in 2022.³⁵

Interestingly, the only sectarian group with a shrinking population has been the Armenian Orthodox. The latter are losing 9.64% on average per year of their people, dropping from 92,132 in 2009 to 86,163 in 2018, and 84,028 in 2022.

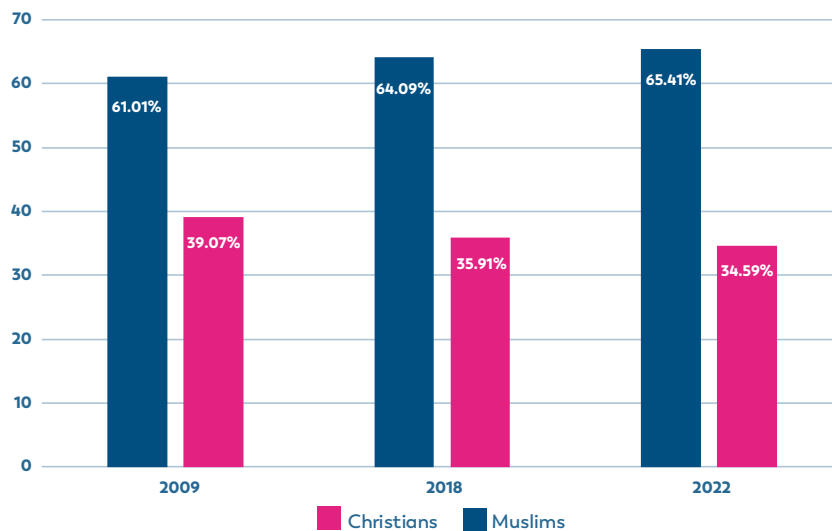


Figure 2: Share of total registered voters

31 Some districts did have any sub-districts like Beirut 1 and 2, and others had four like North 3

32 European Union Election Observation Mission LEBANON 2022, Final Report page 17

33 <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1289855/will-the-dead-vote-in-mays-legislative-elections.html>

34 <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/lebanon-census/>

35 It is important to point out that the specific sectarian turnout is limited to the local vote, excluding the expatriates vote, which does not have a sectarian or gender segregation. Meanwhile, registration numbers include both expatriates and residents.

The sectarian share of total registered voters looks as follows: from 27% each in 2009 to 29.5% for the Sunnis and 29.3% for the Shias in 2022, at the expense of the Christians' share of registered voters that dropped from 39% in 2009 to 34.5% in 2022.

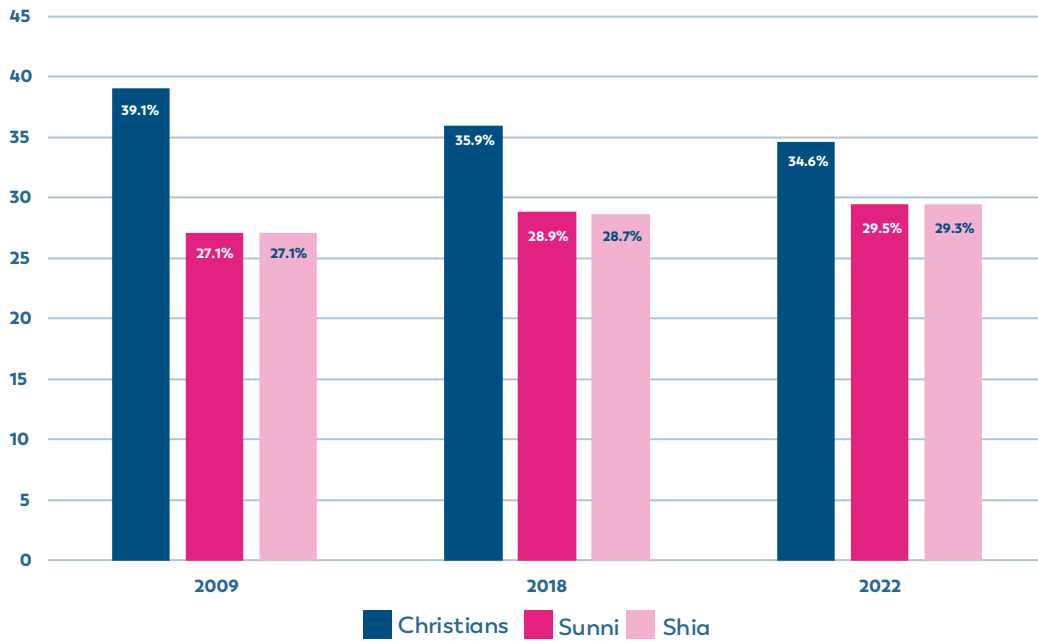


Figure 3: Sectarian share of total registered voters

Despite all appearances, the Sunni population growth has been steady, keeping up with the Shia community growth and maintaining the Sunnis as the largest population group in Lebanon. However, rural or periphery Sunni populations are growing much faster than the main Sunni-majority cities. This has been reflected in an increase in registration numbers in Akkar (a rural Sunni majority region) by 9%, Tripoli by 7.2% and Saida by 6.95%; whereas in Beirut registration numbers only increased by 4.94%. This imbalance between population growth and registration has been mostly reflected in Beirut, the center of political power, thus weakening Sunni's hold over the capital and its political and parliamentary representation. In other areas with Sunni majorities, the political impact of lower registration isn't as significant as it is in Beirut, given the presence of other large communities.

Indeed, comparing registered numbers in Beirut, the Sunni share of registered voters grew from 57% in 2009 to 63.7% in 2022, but the Shias almost doubled from 12.5% in 2009 to 22.5% in 2022. Both Muslim sects have been growing, while the Christians have been falling significantly from 24.8% in 2009 to 13.6% in 2022.

The latter is an important aspect and could explain the Sunni feelings of impotence and loss of political clout in national politics. The power of the Sunnis in the capital is falling, while the Shia power is growing. Beirut is very symbolic and is at the heart of Lebanese politics. It is worth remembering that the Syrian regime didn't allow Rafik Hariri to support candidates and expand his political base to the periphery Sunni areas, especially the North and the Bekaa. Nevertheless, his control of the Beirut electoral district gave him a lot of political clout and weight. Thus, a weakening of Sunni's dominance in Beirut 2 district, the 11 seats it controls and its symbolic nature is very significant.

However, the problem is not limited to registered voters. It is even more pronounced in the voter turnout. The Sunni general turnout has been dropping significantly, seriously affecting their political power, especially in sectarian mixed areas like Beirut and Saida. The Sunni turnout will be fully explored in the next section.

TURNOUT

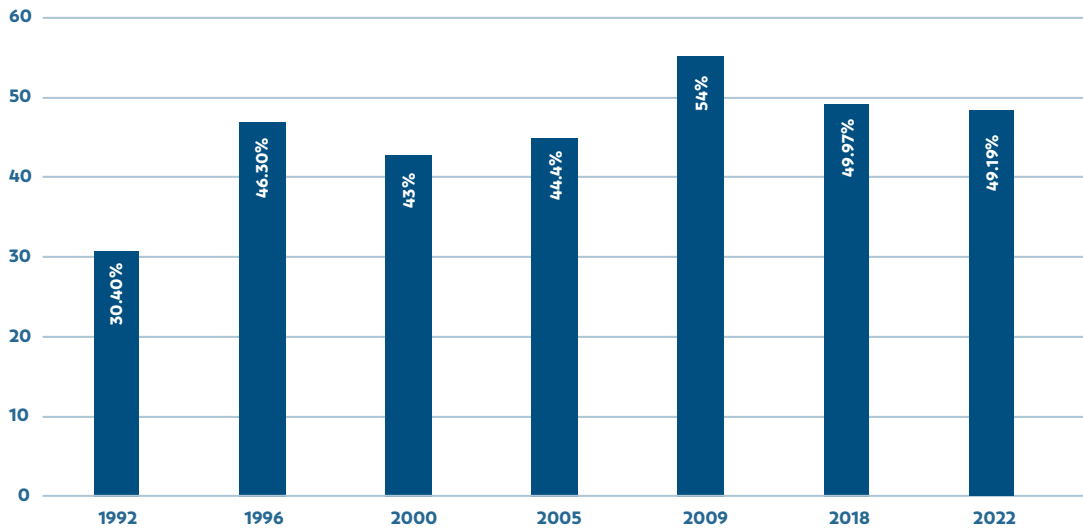


Figure 4: Turnout

Turnout rates in Lebanon have historically hovered around 45%, except for 1992, when it dropped to 30%, and 2009, when it rose to 53%. The two dates are unique as in 1992, the country was just out of the civil war, and there were widespread calls for a boycott by most Christian forces, who opposed the electoral law and the imprisonment or exile of their prominent political leaders.³⁶ General Michel Aoun was in exile in France since 1990, while the pro-Syrian Lebanese regime imprisoned Samir Geagea until 2005.³⁷

On the other hand, the 2009 surge in turnout, especially among the Sunnis, was a reaction to the Hezbollah military campaign against the Sunni areas of Saida and Beirut. The Sunni participation in Saida in 2009 rose to 73.7%; an unprecedented number that probably represents full participation! Beirut 3 and the North also witnessed an increase in turnout, reaching 37.7% and 50.4%.³⁸

In 2009 elections, the districting was different, and Beirut was divided into three districts. Beirut 3 was the Sunni majority district roughly equivalent to Beirut 2 in the 2022 elections.

In 2022, the turnout rate dropped locally, and the Sunni majority regions like Saida, Tripoli, and Akkar witnessed a significant drop, while Beirut 2, hovered at the same 2018 rates.

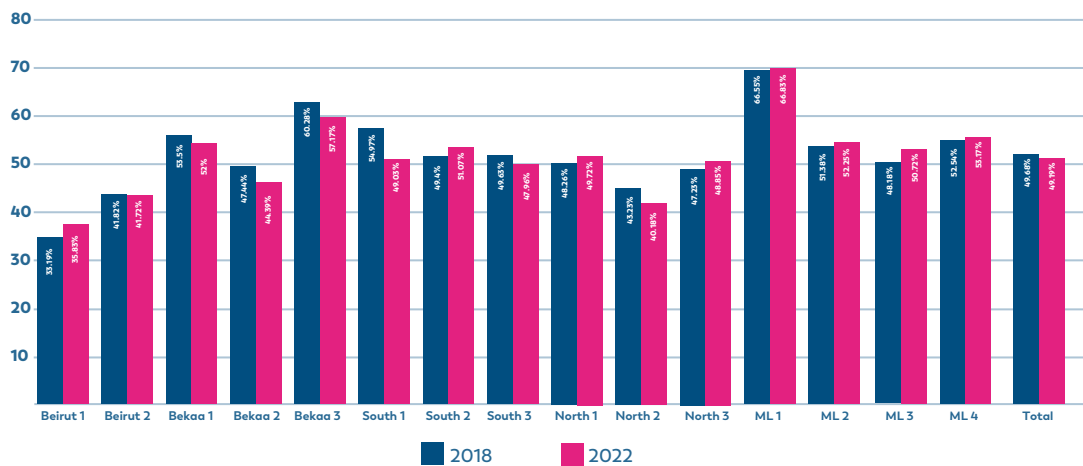


Figure 5: Turnout by Districts

When it comes to resident-only turnout, numbers dropped by a significant 2.8 points in 2022 compared to 2018. This held out in most districts, with slight deviations except for a few outliers.

On the other hand, South 2 and Beirut 1 had the lowest drop in resident turnout by -0.2% and -0.6%, while South 1 had the highest drop by -8.6%.

36 Lebanon's Divisive Democracy: The Parliamentary Elections of 1992, Judith P. Harik and Hilal Khashan
 37 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2005/5/18/lebanons-aoun-seeks-ex-foes-release>
 38 Expatriates Voting Analysis, Ibrahim Jouhari, https://www.aub.edu.lb/ifi/Documents/_Expatriates%20voting%20analysis%20.pdf?fbclid=IwAR0cTA4G_jkZW1wSSNemx3syddZytWozbY-DQ7By6peIQE4BMdRI_Zd_PcPLQ

Surprisingly, North 1 was the only district with an increase in resident turnout; up by 0.6%. This positive turnout is viewed as an odd exception, which doesn't follow the common trend of a lower resident turnout, nor the Sunni lower participation rates across the country (-8.6% in Saida, to -3.3% in Beirut 2, and -4.8% in North 2).

The reasons are hard to pinpoint, but an influx of votes in certain areas in Akkar bucked the trend. On the other hand, there were rumors and reports from various media outlets of large-scale vote buying and "buses bringing in votes by the hundreds from across the Syrian border."³⁹

Indeed, the Sunni turnout drop is so significant that it affected the Sunni's total share of voters, especially in mixed areas, like Beirut and Saida. However the Sunni demographic growth has been keeping pace with the Shia, their overall share of registered voters has been growing in the past few years on pace with the Shia, as discussed in the previous section. However, the Sunni voters have been falling behind other sectarian groups.

In total, the Sunni voters were equal to the Shia voters in 2009, with 29.2% for the Sunnis and 29.4% for the Shias. Yet, that percentage of Sunni voters has been on a steep downward trend, falling to 25.9% in 2018 and 22.9% in 2022, while the Shia share has been holding steady at 29.4% in 2018 and 29.2% in 2022. Similarly, Christian voters have also been losing, from 35.1% in 2009 to 29.9% in 2018 and 27.2% in 2022.⁴⁰

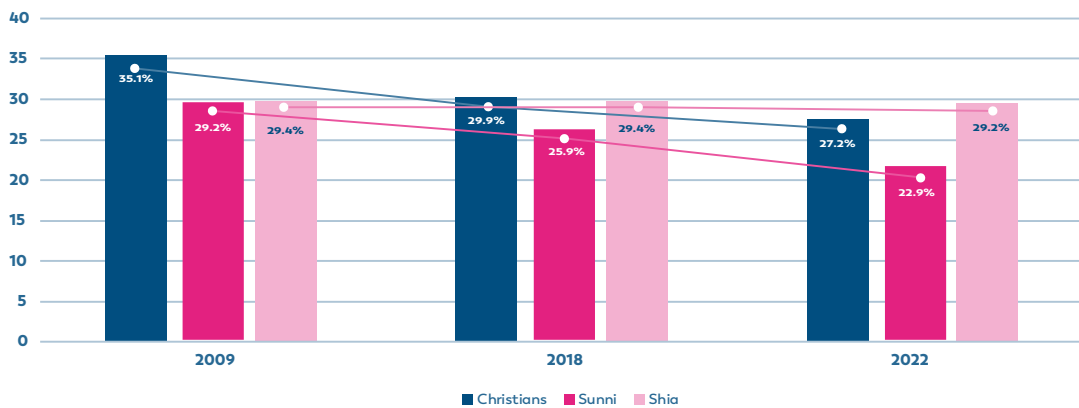


Figure 6: Sectarian share of total voters

This is a significant finding that compounds the slow erosion of the Sunni political power in mixed areas, covered in the previous section. Indeed, the imbalanced demographical growth of the Sunnis and their reluctance to vote has severely weakened their ability to elect Sunni MPs in mixed areas and reduced their national political influence.

In Beirut 2, for example, Sunni voters in 2009 formed 73.8% of the capital electorate, which dropped to 66.9% in 2018 and 54% in 2022. Meanwhile, the Shia part of the electorate grew from 14.8% in 2009 to 20% in 2022. This translated with Amine Chirri, Hezbollah's candidate, coming first in both 2018 and 2022. Chirri won in 2018 with 22,961 votes, coming first in front of Saad Hariri, who won with only 20,751 votes. As for 2022, Chirri won with 26,363 votes compared to the second winner, Ibrahim Mneimneh; the independent candidate, who got 13,281 votes.

To better understand the Sunni voting trend, this paper has also compared the turnout rate of the Sunnis to the Shias, Christians, and the general population.

39 Al Modon, <https://bit.ly/3QTpwoi>

40 It is important to point out that the voters share in 2018 and 2022 do not take into account the expatriates vote. This might shore up the numbers of Sunnis and Christian voters but significantly, as our 'Expatriate Voting Analysis' paper has shown, the two Shia parties were able to grab around 13% of total votes, indicating that the Shia also benefited from the expatriates' votes.

SUNNI COMPARED TO CHRISTIAN TURNOUT

Compared to the Christian turnout rate, the Sunnis have followed suit, significantly dropping while starting from different points. Indeed, the Sunni turnout fell from a high of 54.11% to 44.54% in 2018 and an even lower 38.33% in 2022. Meanwhile, the Christian turnout fell from 45.70% to 41.43% and 38.69% in 2022.

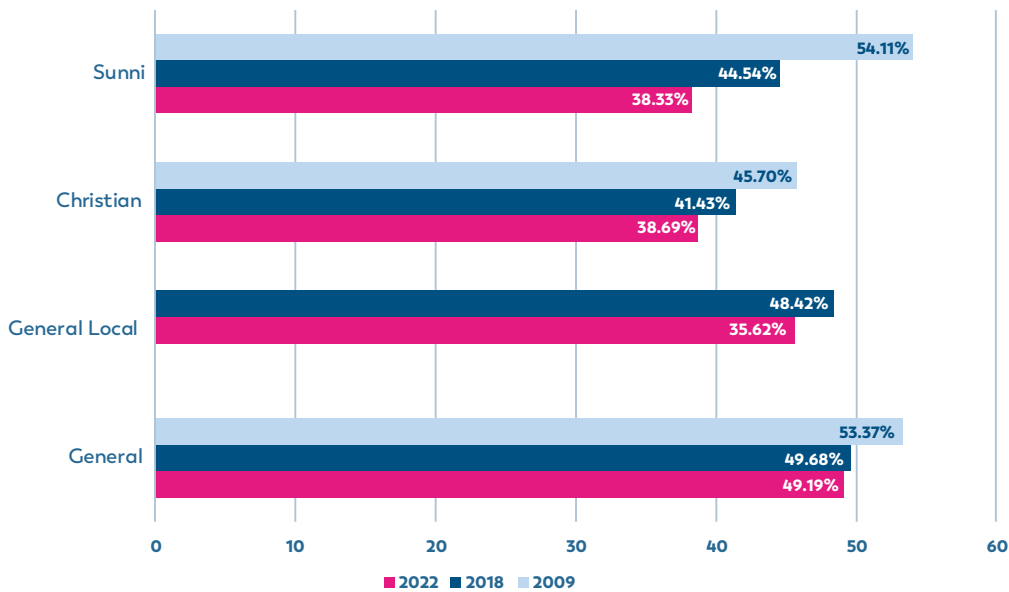


Figure 7: Sunni vs Christian Turnout Comparison

It is very interesting to highlight that the drop in the Christian turnout has been much milder and less steep than the Sunni turnout drop. From 2009 to 2018, the general turnout dropped by 3.69 percentage points and a further 0.49 points from 2018 to 2022. Meanwhile, the Sunni turnout fell by a significant 9.57 points between 2009 to 2018 and by an additional 6.21 points from 2018 to 2022. On the other hand, the Christian turnout fell by 4.27 points from 2009 to 2018 and a more limited 2.74 points from 2018 to 2022.

With the latter numbers in mind, even if we compare the turnout trend of the Sunni population to the general local population (excluding expats), the Sunni turnout is still significantly lower, and its trend is much steeper.

SUNNI COMPARED TO SHIITE TURNOUT

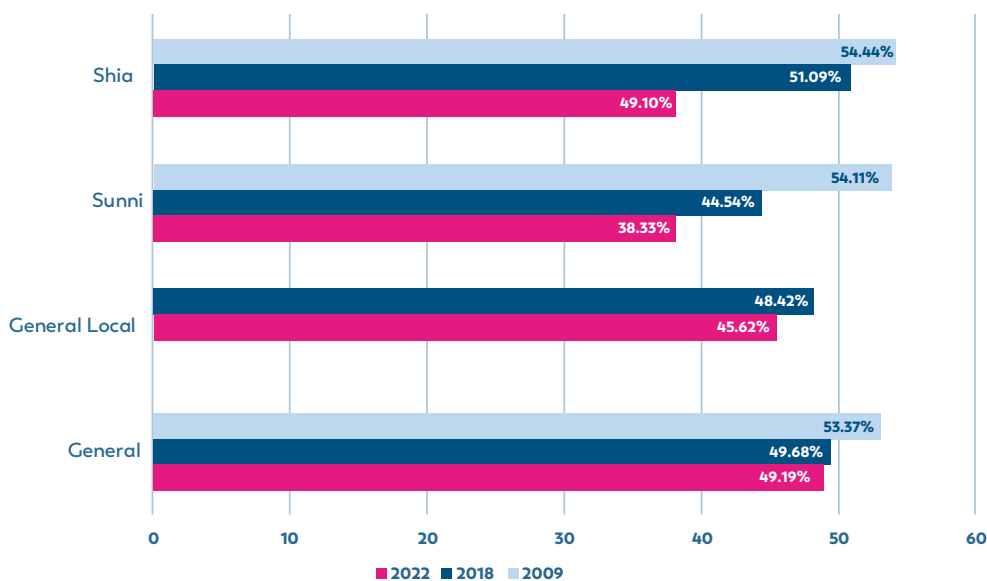


Figure 8: Sunni vs Shia Turnout Comparison

In this section, the previously observed trend of the sharply falling Sunni turnout is replicated compared to the Shia turnout. The Shia turnout has dropped from 54.44% in 2009 to 51.09% in 2018 and then to 49.10% in 2022, in parallel with the general turnout that fell from 53.37% in 2009 to 49.68% in 2018 and finally to 49.19% in 2022. On the other hand, the Sunni turnout fell at a much steeper rate from 54.11% in 2009 to 44.54% in 2018 and 38.33% in 2022.

With these numbers in mind, even if we compare the turnout trend of the Sunni population to the general local population (excluding expats), the Sunni turnout is still significantly lower, and its trend is much steeper. At the same time, the Shia turnout has outperformed the local turnout in percentage while paralleling it in the trend line.

This fact is significant because there were indications that the Shia expatriate voting was less considerable than other sects' voting (please refer to our 'Expatriates Voting Analysis' paper for more on this finding), especially when it comes to voting for traditional parties. As most expatriates voted for emerging parties and independents, "The data is unequivocal, a solid plurality of the expatriate voters of 30% opted for change, choosing whether independents or emerging parties, amounting to more than 40,000 votes. Additionally, these expatriates' votes were mainly from the UAE, France, Canada, and the UK."⁴¹

ANALYSIS OF THE SUNNI LOW TURNOUT

The Sunni turnout has been dropping significantly since 2009. The different factors that affected this turnout will be discussed in this section. All other sects and the general participation rate have dropped, especially if we look at the local participation rate, which dropped from 48.42% in 2018 to 45.62% in 2022. However, the Sunni participation has fallen at a much higher percentage and a steeper rate. This resulted in the Sunni participation dropping below the historically lower Christian turnout during the last three elections, reaching 38.33% in 2022, just below the Christians at 38.69% in 2022.

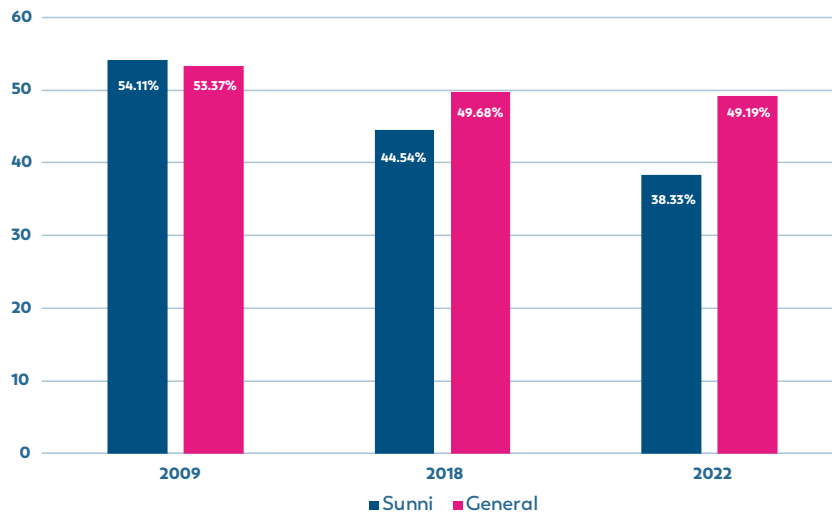


Figure 9: Sunni vs General Turnout Comparison

This paper has identified many reasons for that precipitous fall in turnout and will discuss the main ones as follows:

First is the Sunni general feeling of defeat, losing their preeminent position of power and leadership in the Lebanese power-sharing framework. The different defeats the Sunnis feel they have suffered have led to a profound lack of aspiration, coupled with the feeling of oppression and victimization; a 'mazlounieh' caused by the defeats and circumstances previously discussed in the introduction. Additionally, with the unbalanced demographic growth in Beirut 2 and lower turnout trending lines, these feelings have created a negative feedback loop. Since 2009, the Sunnis feel that they are losing, that they are less numerous, and that the Shias are not only winning locally and regionally, but they are becoming more powerful electorally, especially in Beirut 2; the seat of Sunni power. On top of all that, the Sunnis lost their main political movement and sectarian Za'im, when Hariri withdrew before the 2022 election, compounding their feeling of loss and withering political power.

Second is Hariri and the Future Movement's withdrawal. Although it is very hard to quantify how much each of the currently-discussed factors affected the Sunni turnout, it is clear that Hariri's withdrawal had a negative impact. However, this factor is less impactful than the first one. Indeed, the downward trend in the Sunni turnout started in 2018 when the Future Movement was fully engaged in the election. If the Future Movement had been the main factor, its effect would have been uniform among all districts. However, this had not happened in 2022 when the fall in turnout wasn't nationally uniform, and it impacted certain districts much more than others (for example, Saida was the most negatively impacted, while Beirut 2 turnout was barely affected by the Future Movement's withdrawal.)

Third and what made the situation much worse was the inability of any other political force to fill this void. Although there were several organized efforts to fill the void at least partly, they did not pan out. The Saudi-led efforts in cooperation with former PM Fouad Siniora and the Lebanese Forces couldn't reinvigorate the Sunni street. There were many reasons why these efforts fizzled out, mainly because of their rushed nature and the fact that the Saudi efforts didn't start until a few weeks before the elections.

41 Expatriates Voting Analysis, by Ibrahim Jouhari, Electoral Lab IFI and FNF.

Moreover, other efforts like Bahaa Hariri's (Saad Hariri's brother) bid to run in the elections in several districts were unsuccessful. Bahaa Hariri's efforts failed mainly because he was unwilling to come to Lebanon to oversee the electoral campaign personally and ultimately didn't run himself. However, he led and funded an expensive campaign through Sawa Loubnan (an NGO he founded) to serve as an electoral platform with its own media outlet (Sawt Beirut International). Despite these efforts, his initiative died out a month before the elections, when most of its potential candidates walked away, and none of its remaining candidates got any significant votes.

Meanwhile, a few other Sunni candidates, such as Omar Harfouch and other newcomers, were failures, as they couldn't convince the public of their seriousness, commitment, and professionalism despite spending millions of dollars.

Fourth, a few fresh young independent Sunni candidates emerged from the fray and were able to attract the national spotlight. Such candidates would have been able to reenergize the Sunni street and bring them back to the political arena. The only possible exception to that was Ibrahim Mneimneh, using his long experience in running for office (he headed the anti-establishment Beirut Madinati municipal list in 2016 and came very close to breaking through against a united front that encompassed all traditional political parties).⁴²

Mneimneh has launched a strong and courageous personal brand based on secularism, supporting civil marriage against the Sunni religious establishment; a position that caused him to be systematically vilified by religious figures during the elections.⁴³ Yet, Mneimneh is only one MP from Beirut and hasn't been able to use his popularity to increase the appeal of emerging parties among Sunnis and transform the disjointed alliance into a political party that could enjoy significant and widespread popularity among the Sunnis.

Finally, among all contending political and sectarian forces during the 2022 elections, the Sunni alone ended up with a meager field of disunited candidates, weak contenders, and no strong party that can speak in their name. This has been made clear with the number of new Sunni MPs, which was the highest among all other sects, as this paper will show in the next section.

NEW MPS' ENTRY TO THE PARLIAMENT

The political void and lack of incumbent Sunni MP candidates has led to an influx of first-time MPs; although the number of new MPs in 2022 was only 57 compared to 64 in 2018, which witnessed a large number of new MPs caused by the adoption of a new electoral law with different techniques of choosing the winning candidates.

Among the 57 new MPs, 17 were Sunni out of a total of 27 Sunni MPs. Meanwhile, only 5 new Shia MPs entered the Parliament out of 27 MPs. The Christian MPs also witnessed a significant renewal, with 31 new MPs out of 64.

Nevertheless, in terms of percentages, the Sunni topped the field with 63%, compared to 48% for the Christians, and only 18.5% for the Shia, with 44.5% new MPs in total. This was a significant change from 2018, when the total number of new MPs was slightly larger, topping 50% of the Parliament, with only 44% of new Sunni MPs. On the other hand, more Christian and Shia MPs were new.

	Full Parliament	Sunni	Shia	Christian
Percentage of new MPs in 2018	50%	44%	37%	61%
Percentage of new MPs in 2022	44.5%	63%	18.5%	48%

It can be concluded that the significant increase of new Sunni MPs, close to 63% or a full 17 out of 27, is another reflection of the effects of the political void left by the Future Movement; especially when we consider that the high numbers of 2018 were caused by the change of the electoral law, the Sunni community should have followed the drop in new MPs' percentages that the other sects witnessed (the rate of new Christian MPs dropped from 61% to 48%, and the Shia from 37% to 18.5%). Thus, we should have witnessed at most 5 to 7 new Sunni MPs rather than the 17 new MPs elected in 2022.

⁴² Some experts blame Charbel Nahass candidacy in the municipal race that robbed Beirut Madinati of the few thousands votes it needed to win.

⁴³ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/06/newly-elected-mps-bring-back-debate-about-civil-marriage-lebanon>

VOID AND BLANK VOTES

The void and blank votes are very important statistics in elections, especially when there are sectarian or regional discrepancies and differences.

THE GENERAL POPULATION

Among the general population, the percentage of void votes has sharply risen following 2009, from 0.74% to 2.09% in 2018 and 2.74% in 2022. In contrast, the blank vote remained stable at 0.8% in 2009 and 2018 and witnessed a slight uptick to 0.93% in 2022.

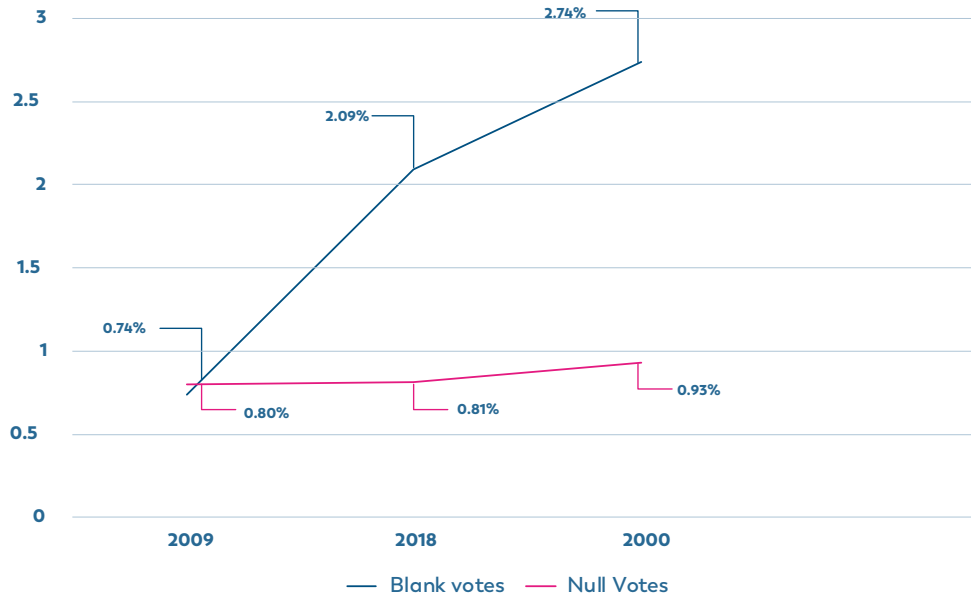


Figure 10: Change in null and blank votes percentage of total votes

The latter numbers aren't surprising. In fact, in 2017, a new proportional law was implemented and used for the 2018 and 2022 elections. This law was a complete change from all previous elections that used a majoritarian list system that allowed voters to pick and choose their list and vote for several candidates that differed from district to district, ranging from 2 in the city of Saida to 10 in Baalbek Hermel and 8 in Tripoli. There were no preprinted ballots, and voters relied on political parties to provide them with printed lists and amended them as they saw fit, striking or adding candidates' names.⁴⁴

In 2018 and 2022, the Lebanese voters were limited to choosing a single list among several and had only a single preferential vote from that list. Striking out names of politicians they hate, a widespread Lebanese electoral habit, nulled the ballot.⁴⁵

However, in 2022 there was a significant rise in invalid ballots from 2.09% to 2.74%. Going through another election using the same law should have, by all measures, reduced the number of mistakes and by consequences, the percentage of nulled votes. Indeed, it wasn't the first time Lebanese voters used this law and its different mechanisms.

Unfortunately, as discussed in the Expatriate Voting Analysis paper, there was a substantial lack of training for the general population on voting before 2022. More specifically, the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities (MOIM) didn't adequately train the heads of poll stations and other poll officials. The officials who were supposed to guide voters, oversee the electoral process, count the votes and adequately fill the official results had limited to no knowledge in the process. They weren't given explicit instructions nor had any hands-on experience. The MOIM just sent them a short 5-minute video explaining the general procedures.⁴⁶ On the contrary, in 2018 poll officials were trained several times and had adequate support and help.

In addition, the high number of invalid ballots revealed inadequate knowledge and awareness of voting among the general population (the responsibility of the Supervisory Commission on Electoral Campaigns SCEC). Reports by the Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections (LADE) and the EU Observation Mission noted that heads of polling stations and official staff weren't always familiar with the electoral process. The latter situation is of concern given that these people have a responsibility to help voters cast their ballots and play a crucial role in counting votes and reporting the results to the Judges.⁴⁷

Another possible explanation is that some voters actually spoiled their ballots as a protest vote. Yet, there were no sustained public campaigns to encourage such behavior, and the voting process is complicated and costly (with the need to travel long distances); consequently, only a few would go through all those efforts to put in a spoiled ballot. The percentage of blank votes is a clear indicator of this trend. Very few Lebanese brave the hardship of voting just to put in a blank vote. Thus, it should be the same for null ballots.

44 NDI final observation report on the 2009 election: <https://www.ndi.org/node/23416>

45 NDI 2018 election observation report [https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Lebanon%202018%20Parliamentary%20Elections_Final%20Report%20\(v.3\)_0.pdf](https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Lebanon%202018%20Parliamentary%20Elections_Final%20Report%20(v.3)_0.pdf)

46 2022 EU Observation Mission final report.

47 LADE report on the head of polling stations voting, <https://bit.ly/3Qogj3z>

AMONG THE SUNNIS

However, there was a significant trend concerning the null ballots among the Sunni community. The Sunni voters had the most significant percentage of invalid votes, and the percentage of the number of spoiled ballots compared to the number of voters of each sect was much higher than the national average and any other sectarian group.

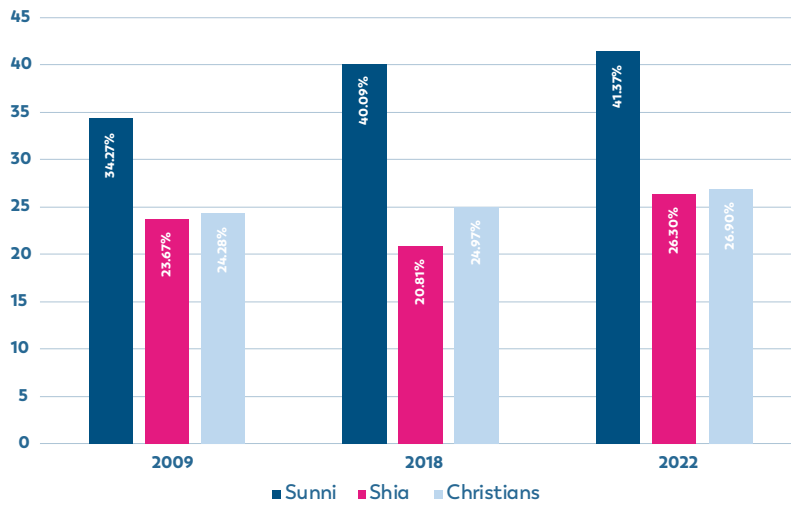


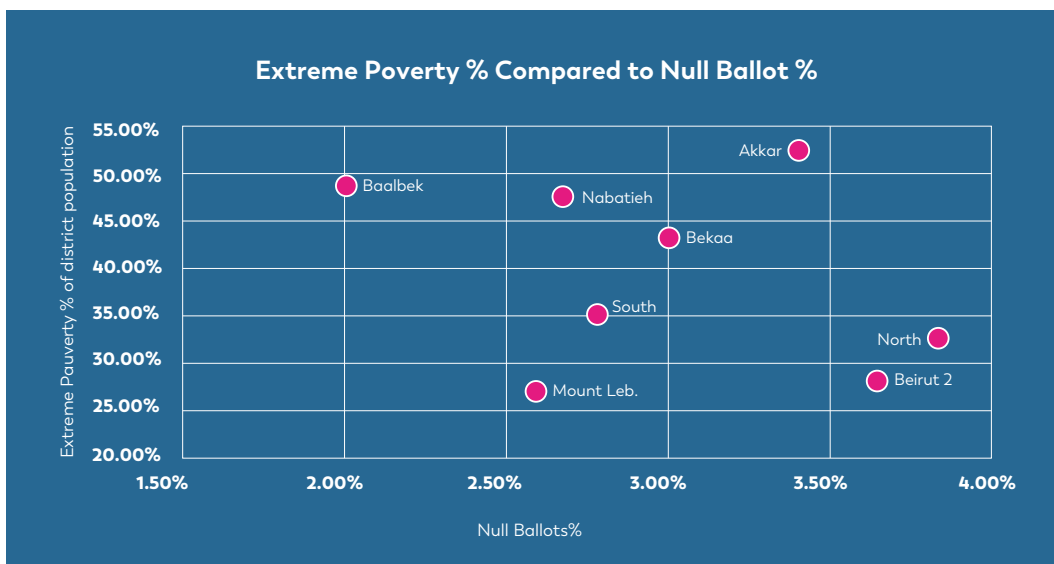
Figure 11: Share by sect of total votes

Moreover, as shown in the below analysis, the rate of null ballots isn't linked to urban vs. non-urban or center vs. periphery variables. Indeed, in Akkar, a non-urban district with a Sunni majority, there were only 0.63% null ballots in 2009, 2.58% in 2018, and 3.41% in 2022. Meanwhile, in Tripoli, a large city with an above-than-average poverty level with a Sunni majority, there were 1.14% null ballots in 2009, 3.91% in 2018, and 5% in 2022. On the other hand, in Beirut 2, the Sunni part of the capital, the null rate was 1.61% in 2009, 2.69% in 2018, and 3.75% in 2022.

Thus, Beirut 2, with a better socio-economic situation and higher education levels, had more invalid ballots than Akkar, a poor periphery area. Additionally, Saida, another city with good socio-economic conditions, had more invalid ballots than Akkar and was at 1.03% in 2009, then 3.14% in 2018, and up to 4.43% in 2022. We can conclude that null ballots aren't linked to the periphery or urban vs. non-urban factors.

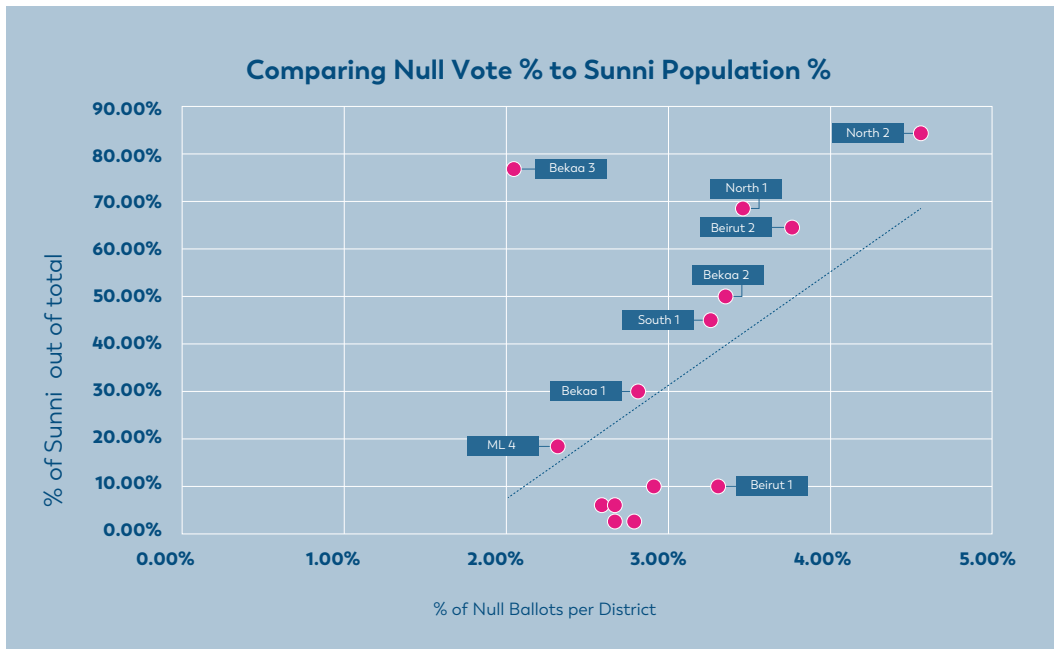
With urban and non-urban factors removed from the equation, this paper further tested the relation between the percentage of invalid ballots in a district against several factors, such as extreme poverty and how much of the population was Sunni, to ascertain which variables were the most impactful, and to better understand the factors that might affect the percentage of null ballots in districts.

Thus, this paper has found no correlation between extreme poverty⁴⁸ and the underlining lower literacy caused by it, with the percentage of null ballots in a district. The scatter plot below shows no clear trend lines or definite correlation between the two phenomena.



48 Poverty data from <https://www.unescwa.org/publications/multidimensional-poverty-lebanon-2019-2021>

It is important to note that poverty data in Lebanon is complex, and the geographical divisions don't coincide with electoral districts. This paper has also analyzed different factors such as unemployment and other poverty measures, but the results were inconclusive, with no apparent correlation found.



Finally, the only clear correlation with invalid ballots was the percentage of Sunni majorities in the different districts. The larger the majorities, the more null ballots there were. The graph above clearly illustrates that relation. In terms of the Sunni majority, the top three districts held the most significant percentages of null votes. The cluster of dots around 3% are the Shia and Christian majority districts that were within the national average.

This is reinforced with a districts-to-districts comparison. The main Sunni cities and regions have been found with the most significant percentage of invalid ballots and consistently in the top five districts with the highest invalid percentage. In contrast, Tripoli has been the district with the largest percentages of null votes in the last two elections.

2009	2018	2022
Beirut, 21.61%	Tripoli, 3.91%	Tripoli, 5.01%
Tripoli, 1.14%	Marjeyoun, 3.22%	Minnieh, 4.59%
Chouf, 1.13%	Saida, 3.14%	Saida, 4.34%
Beirut, 1.05%	Minnieh, 3%	Zgharta, 3.81%
Saida, 1.03%	West Bekaa, 2.74%	Beirut, 3.75%

ANALYSIS

Therefore, it is important to understand this discovery and to know particularly why the Sunnis have the most significant percentages of null ballots. This paper can point to several possible factors:

First, in 2022, no centralized national Sunni party was organizing elections and educating its voters and party monitors on how to vote and guide voters, as the Future Movement withdrew from the elections. Moreover, no other Sunni party had the logistics and national spread to reach all districts. Thus, unlike other sects, with traditional political parties active all over the country, educating their supporters and encouraging them to participate, the Sunni community was practically left on its own. However, this only explains the high percentage of voided ballots among Sunnis in 2022. In 2018 the trend was lower, but the Sunnis still had a large share of the total null ballots among all other sects.

Second are local specificities. Tripoli and Saida had the highest percentages of null ballots in all three elections. Both are majority Sunnis cities (with more than 80% Sunni registered and voters.) Although this paper established that there are no overall links between poverty and null ballots percentages, it is worth noting that Tripoli is considered one of the most impoverished cities in Lebanon and has the lowest educational and literacy levels. Indeed, in 2021 Tripoli had a 32% poverty rate, according to a UN-Habitat-ESCWA report, significantly higher than the general Lebanese average of 26%, and the highest among the main cities. For example, Beirut was at 25%, and Saida was at 19%. It is only the farthest and most peripheral areas with larger Syrian refugee presence that ranked higher.⁴⁹ Whether the latter fact played a role, it will need further targeted qualitative and quantitative studies; but it is clear that Tripoli is a particular case, and many factors affect its percentage of null ballots.

Meanwhile, Saida has a better socio-economic profile than Tripoli, but it still ranked high in the percentage of voided ballots during the last elections. However, concerning null ballots, it is well known that the polling station with the highest invalid percentages is where the newly naturalized come to vote. In Saida, as in a few other peripheral Sunni districts, a sizable number of population groups were naturalized by the pro-Syrian Lebanese political and security apparatus in early 1990s. They were registered in different districts in a bid to interfere in the elections. These groups live in the Bekaa and some in Syria, and local traditions speak of the possibility for industrious and wealthy candidates to buy these votes. Most of them are illiterate and have no experience in voting, relying on their 'handlers' guidance, which could explain why Saida is among the highest cities in invalid ballots percentage.

Nevertheless, it is clear that the Sunni community has an endemic lack of voter education, causing the loss of many votes. The latter fact is further weakening the political clout and power of the community and its ability to elect its candidates and strengthen the feeling of proper representation of a population that is feeling more and more oppressed and disenfranchised.

SUNNI POLITICAL VOTING TRENDS

In order to better understand the Sunni community's political affiliation after the withdrawal of Saad Hariri from political life, this paper has analyzed how the Sunnis voted overall, grouping the many lists into clear political categories. The paper then focused on two main cities; Saida and Tripoli, to explore the local difference in political trends.

GENERAL SUNNI AFFILIATIONS

In 2018, the Future Movement received 57% of all Sunni votes, while Hezbollah and its allies received 16.8% and 22.4% of the votes went for the independent. With the withdrawal of Saad Hariri, the Sunni vote splintered among many different political forces.

Nevertheless, the former Future Movement lists still came first with 20% of the total vote, with the major change groups in second with 15% (or at 19% if we also add minor change groups), and then surprisingly, Hezbollah and FPM allies with 7% and 6%. Najib Mikati, Ashraf Rifi, and Fouad Sinioura followed with 6% and 5% each respectively.

Additionally, despite many reports highlighting the growing radicalization in the Sunni community, this paper's analysis shows that the religious extremist Sunni parties (Ahbash and Muslim Brotherhood) received only 6% of the total Sunni vote, compared to the progressive change parties that received 19%.

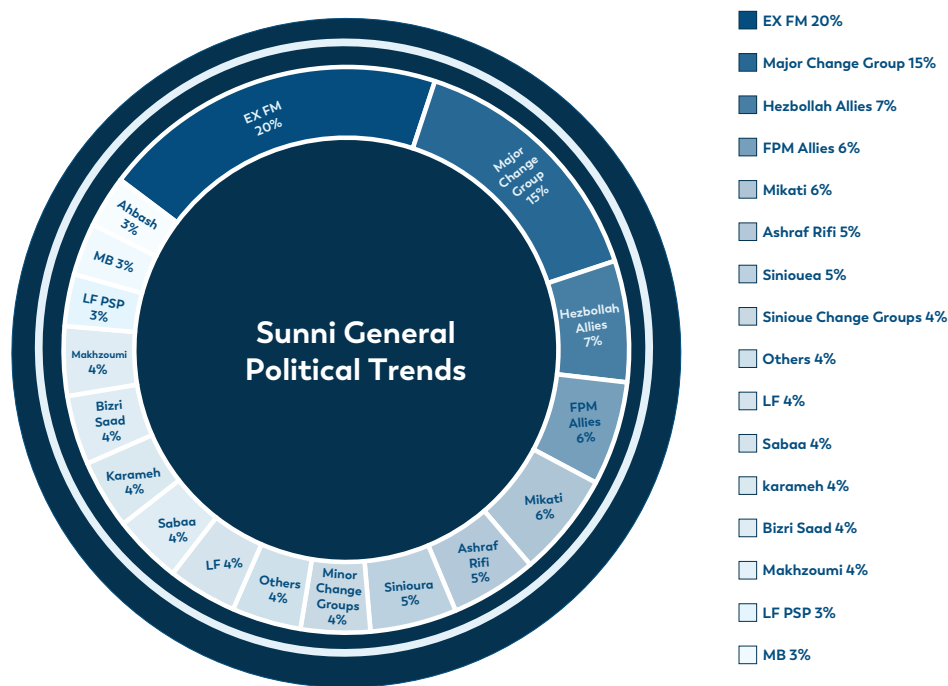


Figure 12: Sunni General Political trends

This analysis shows that despite his withdrawal and the general weakening suffered by his party, former PM Hariri still has the largest support base among the Sunnis. If he chooses to reenter the political fray in the near future, he would still hold the strongest position among all other political parties and figures. Nevertheless, PM Hariri's political clout needs his presence and an active political party in power. This situation is critical, because the Lebanese political power, specifically the Sunni, is closely linked to the clientelistic relationship with its sectarian groups. Thus, any party that stays outside the corridors of power and the clientelistic circle of favors given for votes will soon diminish and weaken. In the current economic crisis, the different sectarian groups are feverishly looking for favors and financial help from their political and sectarian patrons. If the Future Movement is not providing such aid, its supporters will look elsewhere. The latter is already happening, with many reports talking about Hezbollah's

social assistance in Akkar before the elections. Incidentally, it is Akkar's Sunni vote for The Free Patriotic Movement and Hezbollah allies that gained them three seats in a district that was the stronghold of the Future Movement.

SAIDA

Saida is the smallest of the three major Sunni cities, situated 40 km south of Beirut, with a population of around 170,000. Historically, Saida was a traditional conservative Sunni-majority city focused on trade, mainly with northern Palestine and Acre. Demographically, it is a Sunni island surrounded by a Christian stronghold to the east and a sizeable Shia population to the south. The closest Sunni presence to Saida is farther to the North in the Chouf mountain in Iqlim Kharoub. It used to have a sizable Christian minority that vanished after the civil war and still has a small Shiite presence. Additionally, Saida is home to Ain El Helweh, the largest Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon.

Demographic realities have shaped Saida's political landscape, tempering many Sunni extremist drifts and pushing its politicians to maintain good relations with the neighbors, mainly the Shia to the south, for political and economic reasons. Saida's main strong point is its geographical position as a midway on the main artery from the south to Beirut, benefiting as a transit and primary market of the south.

Politically, the city was led by a few influential and well-off families, usually landowners, like the Bizri, Zaatari, Bissat, and Hammoud families. A nascent Nasserist and leftist movement emerged in the '60s, headed by Maruf Saad, representing the workers and poorer classes, running against the more affluent Dr. Nazih Bizri, representing wealthy families. The elections were usually razor thin, and the margin very close, hence the two leaders alternated as the MPs of Saida and Dr. Bizri even became the Health Minister.

It wasn't until after the civil war and the advent of Hariri that this dynamic was changed. The mantle of representing the wealthy families and the middle class passed from the son of Nazih Bizri (Abed Rahman) to Rafik Hariri's sister Bahiyya Hariri, who ran and won the seat. At times, Abed Rahman Bizri was the ally of the Hariris, while at others, he went against them and became the mayor. However, Oussama Saad (related to Marrouf) was unwavering in his hostility to the Hariris, always running against them. On the margins, there are usually several religious parties, such as the Muslim Brotherhood. Recently, a few smaller Sunni parties that are beholden to Hezbollah came into being, like 'Qwat el Fajr' and the infamous 'Saraya el Mouqawama.' Meanwhile, even more extremist parties, like the Sheikh Ahmad Assir movement, emerged in Saida and, for a certain time, enjoyed the support of many of the city's inhabitants.

The economic crisis has hit Saida hard. After the Assir debacle a few years ago, many Shia started boycotting Saida, pushing the city into an economic downturn. Meanwhile, the bankruptcy of Saudi Oger⁵⁰ was another hard blow, pushing thousands into unemployment, with a large part of their dues unpaid.

The Thawra reached Saida too, and its Sunni population had a good showing in its early days, spearheaded by disenfranchised youth, disgruntled ex-FM, an active participation of Oussama Saad, Bizri, and the Muslim Brotherhood. However, with a rapidly deteriorating economic situation, hundreds of small businesses have gone out of business, and unemployment and poverty have risen rapidly.

The only saving grace is that the socio-economic makeup of the city, with the old well-off and land-owning families, is still around, although diminished. Through social NGOs like Mouassat, Ahlouna, and several free schools, help has been distributed to those in need. Unfortunately, the unprecedented nature of the crisis has reduced the middle class' access to their funds and reserves in the bank, making it harder for them to continue living at the same level and help others. Thus, there are only a few positive outlooks unless reforms and massive aid take place at the state level.

⁵⁰ Saudi Oger was the multi billion dollars crown jewel of Hariri's commercial empire, the contracting company that made the fortune of his father

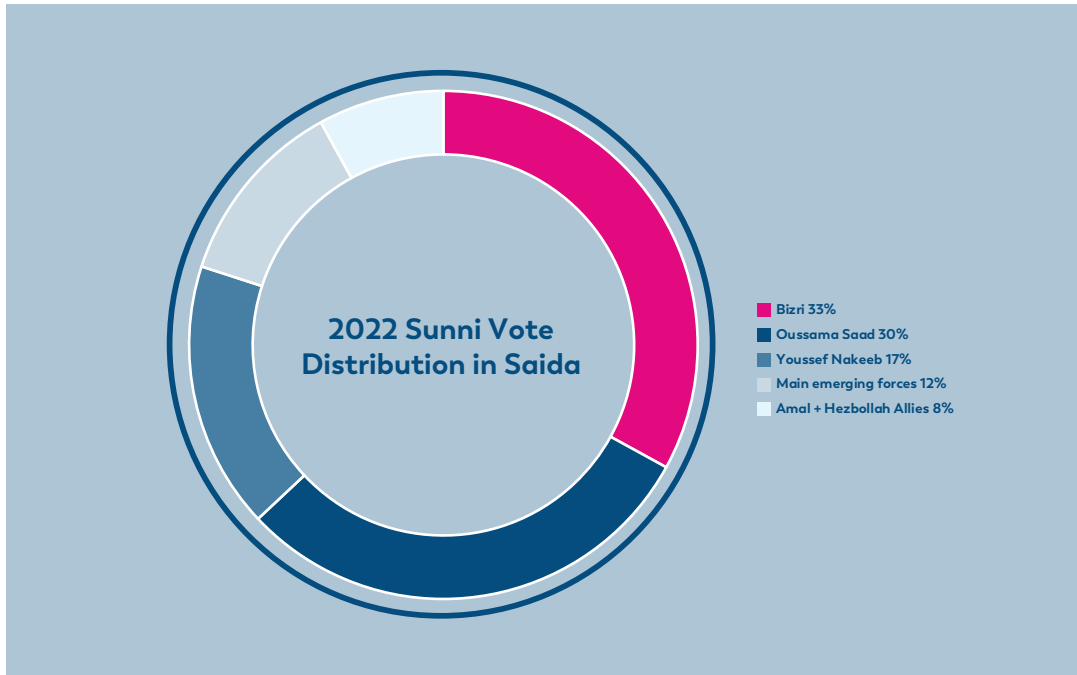


Figure 13: Sunni General Political trends

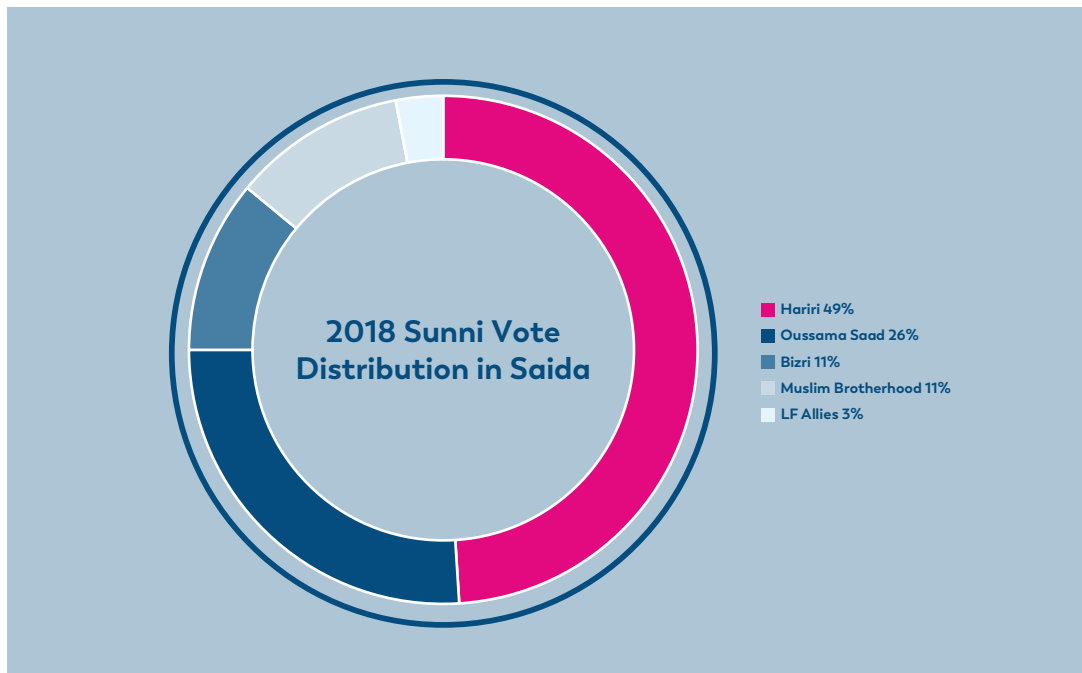


Figure 14: 2018 Sunni vote distribution in Saida

Saida had one of the lowest turnout rates! As discussed earlier, it is probably caused by MP Bahia Hariri’s political stature in the city. Nevertheless, around 24,000 Sunni voted in Saida.

First observation is that despite trying to catch the Future Movement’s vote Youssef Nakeeb, an old ally of former MP Bahia Hariri failed to stoke the enthusiasm of the movement’s Sunni supporters. Thus, Nakeeb only got 17% out of the 49% Bahia Hariri was able to win in 2018.

Second, Abed el Rahman Bizri was able to triple his support, catching a lot of the Future Movement’s supporters. Indeed, as previously explained, many Hariri supporters used to vote for the Bizri political family in the 1970s. Once the Future Movement withdrew from the political life, many of its supporters poured their votes back into Bizri and propelled him to the number one position in Saida. Bizri is the new up-and-coming Sunni politician and could play a much more significant national role. Yet historically, the problem with Saida’s politicians is their inability to form larger parliamentary blocs to solidify their political claims at national positions.

Third, Oussama Saad lost his Shia backing as he distanced himself from Hezbollah after the Thawra. Nevertheless, he maintained his support base (although the graph saw a 4% increase because the total Sunni vote was lower.) Saad has proved that he has a solid political base, and his rebranding efforts have partially succeeded. A few voters from the young generation have chosen to offer him their support, preferring to vote for emerging parties instead. Despite the latter, Saad still has an interesting position in the Sunni community.

Finally, Bahia Hariri has proved that she still controls a sizable number of voters, easily allowing her to win if she runs. However, the next elections are four years away, and maintaining this level of support without the levers of power and stature that come with the office will be a challenge. The municipal elections in 2023 would be a litmus test. If Bahia Hariri recuses her party, it will be much harder to return in 2026 and run for Parliament.

TRIPOLI

Tripoli is the second largest city in Lebanon, after Beirut, with a primarily Sunni population and approximately 20,000 Palestinian refugees⁵¹, much less than Saida's Ein el Helweh. However, what differentiates Tripoli is the surrounding hinterlands, inhabited mainly by Sunnis. Tripoli enjoys what is referred to as a deepness or 'oumoq' that gives its political elites confidence and support to take more radical Sunni positions, with less regard for inter-sectarian compromises. This has led to the rise of more radicalized and conservative religious parties in Tripoli that aren't present in Saida. For example, al-Ahbash (a Sufi movement close to Syrian intelligence)⁵² have a strong presence in the city, and several radical sheiks have built small groups of supporters around them, and Hezb el Tahrir and the older and almost defunct Haraket el Tawhid. There is also a significant Alawi presence in Tripoli, historically supported by Syria and Hezbollah, leading to recurrent clashes and even some massacres during the civil war.⁵³

Historically, Tripoli has always been more closely linked to the Syrian economic and political ecosystem, playing the role of the main port of Syria. Indeed, the people of Tripoli had more relations and visited Homs and Tartous more than Beirut and the rest of Lebanon. During the civil war, Tripoli was entirely controlled by the Syrians, and at one point, when the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) remerged after that, then after an intense fight with the Syrian army, the PLO were kicked out of Tripoli. They were fiercely fought and defeated by the Syrians. Thus, it was only natural that Tripoli and the North welcomed hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees⁵⁴ when the Syrian civil war started.

Up until the assassination of Rafik Hariri and the withdrawal of Syrian forces, Tripoli and the North were closed off to Lebanese political parties from Beirut or Mount Lebanon. Rafik Hariri wasn't allowed to campaign, run candidates, or even foster any political influence in what was perceived by the Syrian as their own backyard.

Like in Saida, several wealthy families competed for political preeminence in the city, such as the Karame, Mikati, the Jisrs, and several others. After 2005, Saad Hariri exploded into the northern Sunni scene and reinforced his national stature by gaining the support of a large majority of Sunnis from Tripoli and Akkar, allowing him and then-March 14 movement to win a majority in the 2009 parliamentary elections. Hariri then strategically coopted some of the old families of Tripoli and struck alliances with them, most notably the Jisr family, forging a more entrenched majority.

Meanwhile, Mikati, with his immense family fortune, was slowly building a strong presence in the city, using his close and direct relations with Bashar Assad, but never fully committing to politics, constantly wavering between focusing on his business and, at times focusing on attaining the premiership. Karame had always stayed on the side of the Syrians and Hezbollah. Consequently, when the Syrian army withdrew in 2005 following Rafik Hariri's assassinations, his popularity diminished, especially when Omar Karame died, leaving the leadership to his son, Faisal.

Even though at least a third of Lebanese Sunnis live in Tripoli and Akkar, the region hasn't been the focus of the Lebanese government's development efforts. Even PM Mikati's government, hasn't deployed any additional help to his city. Moreover, a significant minority of Alawites in the city that are politically closer to Syria and Hezbollah have been a constant source of tension and a hot spot of sporadic violence. Throughout the years, Tripoli has become one of the poorest cities in Lebanon and "synonymous with poverty, misery, and deprivation."⁵⁵ The current crisis has only exacerbated this fact.

Indeed, Tripoli has been heavily hit, increasing its already high poverty level and status as the poorest city in Lebanon.⁵⁶ The presence of thousands of Syrian refugees and a worsening economic situation have pushed hundreds of Lebanese to try their luck and illegally immigrate to Cyprus. The number of boats trying to ferry irregular immigrants to Europe has been steadily increasing, and in the last few months, there have been a number of serious incidents that resulted in hundreds casualties.

51 OCHA, "Lebanon: Tripoli Governorate Profile", 11.5.2014, available at <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/20140811-TripoliGovernorateProfile.pdf> [last accessed 16.02.2016]

52 <https://carnegie-mec.org/2014/04/15/roots-of-crisis-in-northern-lebanon-pub-55305>

53 Amnesty International, "Amnesty International Calls for Inquiry Into Reported Massacres by Syrian Military and Syrian-Backed Forces in Lebanon," March 12, 1987

54 https://civilsociety-centre.org/sites/default/files/resources/ls-car-nov2016-tripoli_0.pdf

55 Hilal Khashan, "Lebanon Islamist's Stronghold", Middle East Quarterly, 2011, p. 87

56 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/coronavirus-lebanon-protests-lockdown-hunger-tripoli-a9500946.html>

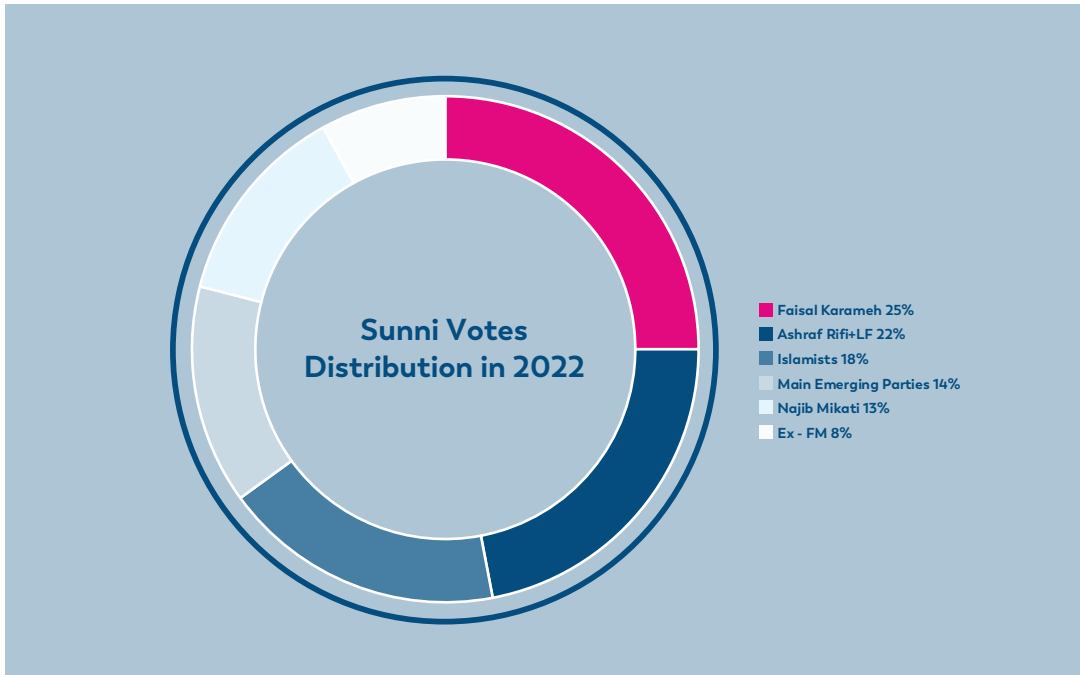


Figure 15: Sunni Votes distribution in 2022

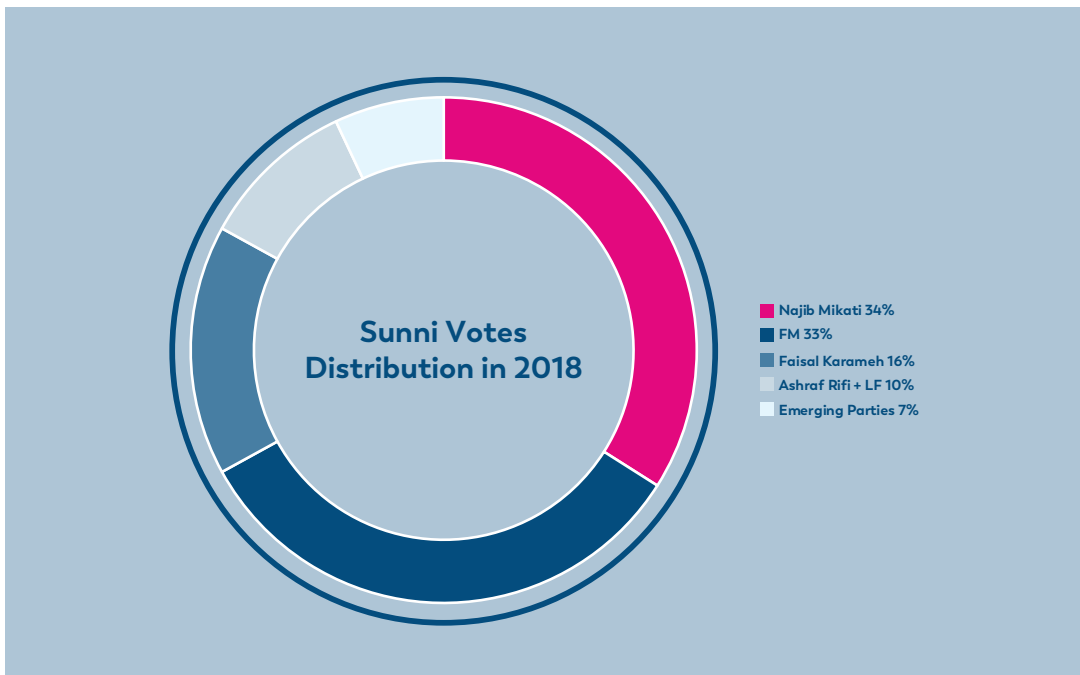


Figure 16: Sunni Votes distribution in 2018

In Tripoli, the analysis of the political distribution of Sunni votes shows a few interesting trends. **First**, with its withdrawal from political life, former Future Movement candidates have been unable to energize their supporters, and their share of the votes dropped from 33% in 2018 to 8% in 2022. Meanwhile, Najib Mikati, who didn't run for elections himself, also lost much of his support, dropping from 34% to 13%. Moving forward, it will be hard for the Future Movement to claim back the larger share of support they controlled in 2018, especially if the party of former PM Hariri stays out of politics and sits out the upcoming municipal elections. On the other hand, Mikati is currently the caretaker Prime Minister of Lebanon and one of the leading contenders for the post. Thus, his political clientelistic machine is still up and running, and it would be much easier for him to claim back the share of votes that he lost in 2022.

Second, although Karame's share of Sunni votes increased, due to the electoral law's specificities, he couldn't win a seat as the sectarian quota was being filled. Nevertheless, his list increased its share of the Sunni votes from 16% to 25%. However, most of the allies of Syria in Lebanon have fared poorly in the elections. If Karame is interested in increasing his chances in the future, a rebranding effort would be necessary. Interestingly, before the elections, Karame started such an effort and was seen visiting Turkey twice to increase his appeal among the Sunnis.

Third, the main winner has been Ashraf Rifi with his alliance with the Lebanese Forces, more than doubling from 10% in 2018 when he failed to win any seats to 22% in 2022. The former Internal Security Forces' General has good relations with the KSA and the Lebanese Forces. However, he needs to improve his national image, considering that he was vilified by the Future Movement for his alliance with the Lebanese Forces.

Similarly, the emerging parties also doubled their share from 7% to 14%. They could have fared much better if they were united, and their performance in the upcoming months during the campaigning for the municipal elections will showcase if they have learned anything from the mistakes during the parliamentary elections.

In Tripoli, it is clear that a large part of those who voted for the Future Movement and Mikati have directed their votes towards Ashraf Rifi, who was taking a tough stance on Hezbollah and its weapons, which has certainly gained him a lot of additional votes. Meanwhile, Islamists have always been attractive in Tripoli, and without the two main political parties (Mikati and the Future Movement), many conservative votes went to Islamists. Finally, youth, progressive Future Movement and Mikati voters, and many of those fed up with traditional politicians have poured their votes into the emerging parties. Whether Mikati or Karame can rebrand their image and showcase a more appealing brand that could attract some of the protest votes will be the central question for the next elections.

CONCLUSION

This paper has illustrated in demographic, turnout, and invalid ballot numbers the oft-talked-about malaise of the Sunni community in Lebanon. Their feeling of abandonment, both local and regional, of the loss of political clout and impact, or being the leading players in the Lebanese political sphere, are increasing. Indeed, the electoral process and even the system has amplified these feelings in a negative feedback loop. Former PM Hariri's withdrawal has come as the last straw in a series of defeats. The Sunni turnout rate reflects that perfectly. Thus, with each electoral cycle, the Sunni turnout drops, and their political influence wanes, worsening their situation and pushing even more of them to boycott the elections. And when they vote, they suffer the most invalidated ballots.

Moreover, the banking and economic crisis has hit them particularly hard. In contrast, the abandonment of their regional patron, contrasting with the never-ending support of Iran to the Shia, has only increased their political disorientation and apathy.

Meanwhile, the Future Movement's continuous withdrawal from political life and the community's inability to present a new national leader or at least a few strong local ones is further accelerating this feedback loop that might push the Sunnis into political irrelevancy, much similar to Iraq's Sunnis.

This is extremely dangerous. In the Middle East, communities that feel disenfranchised and politically unrepresented often turn to violence and extremism. Lebanon has been built on a delicate power-sharing formula that delicately balances the power of the different sects. Any sudden shift could lead to catastrophic consequences.

It is time for renewal and international and regional reinvestment in the Sunni community in Lebanon. The window of opportunity is short and narrow. Local Sunni leaders can no longer stand on the sidelines. They either politically reengage their community and shoulder their responsibilities or they should make way for the new generation.

ABOUT THE REPORT

The Electoral Lab is a new research initiative launched by the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) at the American University of Beirut with the support of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation (FNF) Lebanon. The lab aims to raise awareness about political discourse around elections both in content and form in Lebanon and the region. It seeks to highlight important thematic subjects that are rarely discussed during the electoral cycle and increasing public awareness of the importance of public data, especially electoral results. This initiative focuses on three main themes: conversation and dialogue with different political stakeholders, deep thematic analysis, and spreading awareness and availability of open electoral data.




ABOUT FNF

The Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom (FNF) is the German Foundation for Liberal Politics. Established in 1958 by Theodor Heuss, the first President of the Federal Republic of Germany, FNF promotes liberal values; above all the freedom of the individual in their pursuit of happiness. FNF promotes liberal thinking and policies in cooperation with its local partners through civic education, international political dialogue, and political counselling.

In Lebanon, our main objective is to support Lebanese start-ups, civil society organizations and liberal political parties while raising awareness about political education, female empowerment and durable development.

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The Institute aims at bridging the gap between academia and policymaking by conducting high quality research on the complex issues and challenges faced by Lebanese and Arab societies within shifting international and global contexts, by generating evidence-based policy recommendations and solutions for Lebanon and the Arab world, and by creating an intellectual space for an interdisciplinary exchange of ideas among researchers, scholars, civil society actors, media, and policymakers.

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