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ALL ABOUT POLITICS IN LEBANON, WITH A FOCUS ON ELECTIONS!

US ELECTIONS: LESSON LEARNED FOR LEBANON

BY IBRAHIM JOUHARI

The new US president has been elected, sworn in, and his new administration is up and running. After an 'eventful' election night that stretched into a week, a long counting period, unending litigations, ending with an attack on the US capitol. Personally, it was very interesting to follow the electoral process, from polling to projections, the ups and downs that accompanied the elections, and the inner working of a modern democracy, and how it resists authoritarian creep. What made it even more captivating was how the elections results and a new US administration will impact Lebanon, the region, and the world.

This series of articles will try to apply the lessons learned from the US elections to Lebanon's upcoming 2022 parliamentary elections! The first article will explore the importance of improving turnout by making it easier to vote, while at the same time ensuring a fast and transparent electoral process to increase legitimacy and fairness while decreasing any rejection of the results and possible violence!
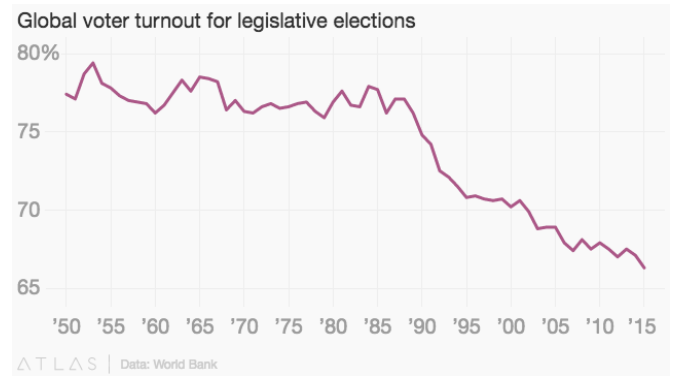

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The second article will discuss three additional aspects that I observed during the US elections that could be applied to Lebanon, focusing on increasing youth and women participation in all the different aspects of the electoral process, from running and organizing campaigns, to candidacy, voting, and the counting process.

MAKING IT EASY TO VOTE!

If voting is easy, people WILL vote, and massively vote! Individuals may be apathetic, and youth might not be uninterested in politics, as many are turned off by the corruption and scandal surrounding politics, but if voting is made as easy as most daily chores, or even easier, turnout rates will significantly increase!

From this, it is possible to infer that the slow erosion of turnout in western countries[1] should not solely be blamed on apathy or the disinterest of the population, but on their governments that have not been able to innovate and find new methods using modern technology, to make it easier for people to vote. deed, even in previous elections, when enthusiasm level among American citizens is very high the turnout usually hovered around 60%. For example, in 2008 when a lot of Americans were excited about Barack Obama's candidacy, the turnout only reached 61.6%. However, in 2020 the turnout shot through the roof, reaching 66.3%[2]!

Global voter turnout for legislative elections

Was this election more crucial? Definitely. Were the Americans even more fired up, probably? But there is a third and a much more influential factor, because of the COVID19 pandemic, most states made voting much easier, increasing early voting time, by days and even weeks, and a large majority was allowed to vote by mail. Thus, making it easy to vote and people will vote! Indeed, several studies have reinforced these findings, and showed that removing hurdles that complicate the voting process, such as long and complicated registration requirements[3], long queues to vote, few voting centers requiring longer travel, would increase turnout[4]!

Although, contrary to widely held believes making it universally or nationally, easier to vote does not favor any single party or ideology[5]. Indeed, in the 2020 elections voting was made much easier, as previously mentioned, however, both parties' share of the vote increased. Indeed, the republican, as well as the democrat's turnout rates increased, following the national trend. If it wasn't for Mr. Trump falling approval ratings among certain subgroups, especially women, his chances would have been much higher!

The major hurdle in Lebanon for the ease of voting is that Lebanese vote where their ancestral families are registered, not where they are currently living! This is problematic because it forces the inhabitant of major cities, like Beirut, to travel to their ancestral villages to vote. Meanwhile, traditional and well-established political parties offer their supporters free transportation, food, and even lodging.

Thus, citizens, especially women and youth, who are against established parties and supporting new progressive parties, will face many hurdles, from travel expenses to family and peer pressure, and even intimidation in their ancestral more conservative villages. Indeed, when you go back to your village as a youth, you would be hard-pressed to go against your parents' and larger family's wishes and vote for civil society or progressive party.

One of the solutions to this issue is the establishment of 'mega voting centers'[6], a solution that was proposed in the electoral law of 2018 but was not implemented by the Ministry of Interior, due to budgetary and timing issues. These centers would be established in major urban centers (mainly Beirut, Saida, Tripoli, and Zaheleh), with ballots for all 15 districts, "allowing voters to cast their votes near their homes, rather than having to return to their families' historic villages where they were registered[7]." Of course, the best solution would be to allow people to vote where they live. Unfortunately, due to demographic and sectarian balancing issues, this would very hard to implement in the short or even medium term.

It is also worthy to note, that increasing the ease of access to voting centers for the elderly and people with disabilities would be also another important factor for increasing turnout and participation, and the inclusion of groups that have been historically marginalized and kept out of the political and voting process.

SECOND, INDEPENDENT ELECTION OVERSIGHT

One of the major issues that plagued the US elections and allowed some factions to cast doubt and uncertainties on the results, was the long and complicated counting process.

One of the major issues that plagued the US elections and allowed some factions to cast doubt and uncertainties on the results, was the long and complicated counting process. Thus, it is imperative that the electoral process and the publishing of results is fast, professional, transparent, and predictable! Surprises are anathema for elections integrity and transparency! Additionally, there also should be a possibility for an independent review that allows all the different parties, especially weaker ones to object and have their concerns looked at fairly and seriously.

In Lebanon, it is the Ministry of Interior that has the main responsibility of supervising the election. Yet, recently an independent electoral commission was established. Unfortunately, in the 2018 election, the commission prerogatives were not clearly defined, and its budget and prerogatives were tied in bureaucratic hurdles up until a few weeks before the e-day[8]. Thus, the commission role and powers must be clearly set, well in advance of the election, and it should have a yearly budget and a constant stream of income to enable it to do its job throughout the full electoral mandate of four years, and not just six months before the elections. Moreover, the appointment of most of the electoral commission positions should not be in hands of the political establishment and the current government, indeed civil society and other independent factions should have a say in these appointments. Finally, it is inconceivable that current ministers and high political appointees in charge of overseeing the election are also candidates! There is historical precedence in Lebanon, in the 1992 and 2005 elections[9], an interim government was appointed with a clear stipulation not allowing its members to be candidates in the parliamentary election. This paper strongly supports such a scheme for the upcoming 2022 election.

THIRD, OPEN DATA AND TRANSPARENCY

I was astounded by the ease and availability of raw electoral and even census data in the US. It literary took a few clicks to have access to the detailed, raw, and unaltered electoral results in every county in the US. On the other hand, the more opaque the electoral process is, and the harder to get information and data on the results and the proceedings is, the less credibility the elections will have and the more rejected it will be. Unfortunately, Lebanon greatly lacks in this regard. Access to any form of public data is severely limited if not totally absent. Even election results were only published a week after E-day, in a static unconvertable format. Thus, open data policies are crucial, especially in raw results publishing. The results should be published in a machine-readable format, openly and freely accessible, and available to the public at large. This would have a direct positive impact on the legitimacy, acceptance, and fairness of the election.

Here, it is worthy to mention a few very important open data projects that are having a very positive impact on the Lebanese public data sector. There is the Gerbal Initiative that has pioneered the open publishing of public data of the budget, to municipalities information, and recently land registry. There is also the Open Data Lebanon Initiative that works as a hub to centralize all publicly published data. Finally, there is my own Data Liberation Project that works on transcribing, cleaning, and publishing raw electoral data of previous parliamentary elections in Lebanon.

FOURTH, LOWERING THE STAKES

Elections in the US are held every two years, thousands upon thousands of positions are filled, from president, senate, and house, both national and state, down to municipal positions, sheriffs, judges, school principals, and even parent committees. Indeed, American democracy is deep[10], this allows people to easily accept losses, allowing ambitious people to learn how to run campaigns while running in lower intensity races and gain the necessary political experience. Additionally, these multitudes of chances to elect officials, increase legitimacy, national belonging, and the level of representation and participation. The best visual to showcase the large numbers of these elected offices in the US, is the long ballots in each election!

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Thus, it is important to hold elections regularly and more often, while increasing the number of open public positions to be filled. This would have a direct and measurable effect of lowering the intensity and the stakes of the elections, thus reducing the probability of electoral tensions and violence. In Lebanon that would be harder to implement, barring any major law changes. But it is important to note that the constitution already mentions the creation of a senate and de-secularizing the parliament[11]. Nevertheless, it would beneficial to make it making it mandatory for all lists running in the elections to hold state-observed primary elections, increasing accountability, transparency, and the democratic nature of Lebanese political parties.

Additionally, municipality and mayor mandate should be reduced from six to four years, alternating it with the parliament (thus having elections every two years). Meanwhile, more public positions should be included in the electoral process (governor, public school administrators, allowing the parents to choose them). This has the additional benefit of removing more appointments from the hands of the political elites, lowering their clout and the possibility of corruption, clientelism, and nepotism while increasing accountability, public interest, and participation in politics and public discourse. This would enshrine and reinforce the democratic tradition of voting as the only way to solve political issues and conflicts of ideas. Additionally, it will decrease the stakes of elections, strengthen democratic traditions and make it much harder for elections to be postponed like what happened in 2013, 2014, and 2017.

In conclusion, the voting process should be simplified and made as easy as buying groceries. Elections should be held regularly, involving many positions at all levels, while the electoral process should be completely transparent and fully auditable, with its data published openly and, in a machine, readable format.

[1] https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publicati ons/voter-turnout-trends-around-the-world.pdf
[2] https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020 /elections/voter-turnout/
[3] https://fortune.com/2020/10/08/youth-voter-turnout-2020-election/
[4] https://onlinepoliticalsciencedegree.eku.edu/insi delook/what-causes-low-voter-turnout-united-states
[5] Universal vote-by-mail has no impact on partisan turnout or vote share https://www.pnas.org/content/117/25/14052
[6] https://www.lbcgroup.tv/news/d/breaking-news/340467/report-what-are-the-mega-centers/en
[7] NDI 2018 Election observation report, page 10, https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Lebanon%202018%20Par liamentary%20Elections_Final%20Report%20%28v.3%29.pdf
[8] https://www.transparency.org/en/press/ineffecti ve-election-monitoring-in-lebanon#
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[10]https:/journals.openedition.org/poldev/pdf/1699
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