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Beirut's 2016 Municipal Elections: Did *Beirut Madinati* Permanently Change Lebanon's Electoral Scene?

Jad Chaaban, Diala Haidar, Rayan Ismail, Rana Khoury and Mirna Shidrawi
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Beirut's 2016 Municipal Elections: Did *Beirut Madinati* Permanently Change Lebanon's Electoral Scene?[*]

Series: Case Analysis

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[*] The authors are all founding members and/or activists within the *Beirut Madinati* Municipal Elections Campaign. Views expressed here reflect the personal opinions of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the official position of Beirut Madinati or any other entity the authors are affiliated with.

Table of Contents

Introduction

In an article published by *The Economist* on May 11 2016, the magazine predicted that Lebanon's political newcomer "Beirut Madinati's impressive share [in municipal electoral votes] may be enough to give it momentum to make next year's general election a lot more interesting.[2]" Although legislative elections are different in both form and in content from municipal ones *Beirut Madinati* made change possible, which could well impact national elections. This hope for a snowball effect, however, must not be taken for granted and the gains of Beirut Madinati should not be limited to an illusion of change. For this reason, the results of the municipal elections should be studied so that actual gains might be made, and a way forward identified.

Lebanon's Municipal Elections Take Place in Context of Local and Regional Turmoil

Lebanon's post-war politics left a tenuous political legacy. This is characterized by perpetual discord, accommodation between dissenting factions that have exposed the country to foreign meddling, hardened sectarian identities and entrenched modes of political mobilization.   Such a political quagmire means political parties have transgressed state institutions instead of building them, and political elites have managed to exploit a weak yet centralized state in order to maintain entrenched clientelist and neopatrimonial networks that penetrate all public and private spheres. Political elites have co-opted labor unions and syndicates, penetrated civil society organizations, designed electoral laws that reproduce the status quo, and built a lopsided rentier economy that consolidates the socioeconomic and political power of the sectarian system and sustains its patronage network.

Whenever the private interests of the ruling elite or those of their regional backers compete with conflicting priorities, the country is driven into complete political paralysis until a political settlement is reached with regional backing. The resulting overlap of

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[2] "Beirut shocks its old guard", *The Economist,* May 11, 2016, http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21698599-established-leaders-are-jolted-party-protest-beirut-shocks-its-old-guard

domestic and regional contests—particularly in the wake of the Arab uprisings reaching Syria and Hezbollah—put the country in an even tighter political gridlock.[3]

Hezbollah's decision to enter the Syrian conflict on the side of Bashar al-Assad exacerbated Lebanon's already precarious sectarian tensions, with pressures mounting during alleged security threats. These gave two consecutive opportunities for Lebanon's members of parliament to extend their powers in a stark breach of the constitution. Partially as a result of these extended mandates the parliament has failed to elect a new president for the Republic. This has left the cabinet paralyzed, and unable to effectively respond to any of the country's proliferating challenges. The most notorious of these is the nation's rubbish crisis, with mismanagement of waste sites seeing actual mountains of garbage grow on the streets of Beirut, provoking a three-month protest movement in Beirut during the summer of 2016.

Municipal Elections: A Chance to Change the System from Within

In the context of Lebanon's political impasse and its citizens' growing disenchantment with a faltering system, municipal elections appeared as an opportunity. Scheduled to take place in May 2016, actors hoped to use the elections to re-launch the constitutional processes and save the remnants of a functioning democracy that was put on hold.

Municipalities, their role and jurisdiction, came under the spotlight after the summer garbage crisis and the utter failure of the cabinet to address the problem with a national strategy. What emerged out of that failure was a re-evaluation of alternative options, which in turn led to an assessment of what other actors might step in to remedy the situation—municipalities seemed a viable option. The Municipal Act of 1977 gave municipalities financial and administrative independence, setting them up as legal entities responsible for all the local activities and provision of public services that fall within their jurisdiction. However, although municipal councils were endowed with this power, the electoral law and the power-sharing arrangement among the sects curtailed their ability to act on many occasions.

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[3] The military wing of Hezbollah –which is part of Lebanon's parliament and cabinet—decided to intervene militarily in Syria to prop up the Assad regime.

Lebanon follows the simple majoritarian electoral system in all forms of elections. Candidates run for seats and not as part of a list system. In the Lebanese parliamentary elections for instance, seats are distributed according to confessional quotas yet at the same time elected by universal suffrage, i.e. the Lebanese regardless of their sect vote for whoever is running in their district, even if they are not from the same sect. Candidates under the parliamentary system run for an allocated confessional seat. In contrast, the law governing the candidature of municipal council members does not stipulate that the council seats are distributed according to confessional quotas. However, safeguarding confessional representation has become a convention in order to quell anxieties over sectarianism. Compounding the issue is the fact that Lebanese citizens vote in their district of family origin and not in their place of residence where they pay municipal taxes and are mostly affected by the work of the municipality. This was a huge factor in the elections outcome in Beirut, for example, which is inhabited by almost 1.5 million citizens out of which less than half a million can vote.

The vote casting process in Lebanon is also a problem. Preprinted ballots do not exist, and voters scribble names on a white piece of paper, or cast ballots prepared by political parties and candidates. The lack of official preprinted ballots undermines the secrecy of the vote, a right stipulated in the international human rights charter. Using political parties' prepared ballots allows parties to track the voting process, using small variations like font type and size, the order of the names, or some hidden code that only the political parties can decipher to tally who voted for whom. Privacy is further violated because polling stations are segregated, dividing voters by confession, family, and gender. During the counting process, candidates as well as party representatives can see each ballot, allowing them to track the number of ballots distributed against the number cast at the booths. If properly safeguarded, the ability to vote anonymously might allow Lebanese voters to freely cast their ballots with no fear of reprisals from the current political elite.

The continued use of this problematic system results in the reproduction of the sectarian elites, and makes competition nearly impossible. There is no opportunity to challenge the policies of dominant political actors, and Lebanese warlords and current political elites (who constitute the largest political parties in Lebanon and the ruling majority) remain in power as a result. As these actors are keen to suppress minority groups and opposition voices, and keeping them out of local governance, the system seems unlikely to change.

It was amid these institutional and political challenges that Beirut Madinati ("Beirut, My City") emerged. An independent and non-sectarian electoral campaign, the group contested the May 2016 municipal elections and decided to run for the municipal council of Beirut. The list garnered around 40% of the popular vote, a staggering percentage for a volunteer-led campaign launched eight months before the vote. How and why did this campaign pose such a serious challenge to the sectarian system?

The Electoral Politics of Beirut Madinati

The Beirut Madinati campaign was led by a group of independent, non-partisan, and non-sectarian citizens who aimed to elect a municipal council of qualified, technocratic, and independent candidates. It pledged to implement a people-centered program that prioritized the wellbeing of all those who live or work in the nation's capital. The campaign hoped to affect change from within municipal institutions, bringing back the importance of local governance and reinstating trust between citizens and municipal councils, as the people's most direct form of representation. Most importantly, by choosing to confront the aggressive sectarian system in Beirut, the capital of Lebanon, Beirut Madinati set a precedent that caused reverberations on the national level and inspired other cities and villages in the country.

In adopting a communication strategy based on credible and achievable alternatives, instead of a reactionary and denunciatory discourse, the campaign set a further precedent. Its electoral platform was established after consultation with experts including urban planners, transport engineers, waste management experts, economists, environmentalists, and activists. These experts consulted with the reports and policies put forward by earlier campaigns and civil society initiatives working to safeguard Beirut's livability. The electoral program highlighted key objectives, from increasing greenery and public space, affordable housing, an integrated solid waste management strategy, and a commitment to social justice alongside socioeconomic development. Most important, however, was the commitment to local-level constructive dialogues and face-to-face conversations with all neighborhoods of the city. This allowed the campaign to integrate people's needs and expectations, and to engage voters to take part in the decision-making process for everything relating to their livelihood and public welfare.

To reach out to potential voters and recruit volunteers, the campaign relied on both conventional and innovative tactics. In addition to the traditional press conferences,

door knocking, street canvassing, and phone calls to potential voters, the campaign developed a mobile application to register volunteers and potential voters. It also maintained a strong social media presence and created an innovative website to introduce the campaign, its electoral program, and candidates. It was the first electoral campaign in Lebanon to rely on crowd funding through online and offline donations. Money was accepted solely from individuals, and donations were capped so that no individual donation could exceed 10% of the budget. In the run up to the elections, the campaign organized weekly open houses at its headquarters, breakfasts at a traditional restaurant in Beirut, and open communal debates in different city neighborhoods.

The campaign was keen to engage city dwellers in the re-imagining their city and made sure to select a list of candidates representative of the city's diverse socio-economic fabric. Architects, urban planners, a fisherman, a painter, an educator, and a filmmaker were just some of the profiles among the 24 candidates for municipal council. For the first time in Lebanon's history, an electoral list achieved gender parity among candidates, and religious diversity was also taken into consideration.

The campaign led by its dedicated volunteer activists, experts, and candidates changed the electoral scene in the capital. It presented itself as a serious opportunity for change, for redefining politics so they were practiced in a way that reflected the primacy of the public good, social justice, transparency, collaboration, and citizen empowerment. Its positive and pro-active political discourse restored a sense of public ownership over the city. The campaign showed that practicing politics at the local level meant that citizens, who know their needs and priorities, could and should take part in the decision-making process and determine the priorities of all local projects, planning, and public resources management, as well as have the ability to monitor public spending.

The presence of Beirut Madinati had a visible impact on the elections campaign. This was manifested firstly in pushing a number of lists to work on electoral programs that emulated Beirut Madinati's professional campaigning and communication strategy. The Beirutis List was perhaps the most impacted, and its candidates from both March 8 and March 14 political camps –brought under the auspices of the Future Movement— adopted a campaign style strikingly similar to the Beirut Madinati approach. The campaign can thus already be seen to have revitalized elections and endowed Lebanese politics with new meaning, launching it out of the sectarian polarization and political stalemate.

Rocking the Boat: Results of the 2016 Municipal Elections

On Election Day fewer than 97,000 of 476,000 registered voters cast their ballots in Beirut, not much higher than 20%, virtually unchanged since the last municipal elections in 2010, and significantly lower than the turnout peak of 1998, the year of the first municipal elections following the end of the Civil War. The low rate of voter participation in the nation's capital on May 8, 2016 might be attributed to several factors (Figure 1). First, many of those registered to vote in the capital do not actually reside there (or even in Lebanon). Some estimates put the emigration rate from the capital at a high of 25-30%, meaning a significant number of registered voters might not even live in the country. Estimates also put the number of deceased voters still registered at 5-10% of the voting list, an anomaly linked to potential electoral fraud tactics. Finally, low electoral participation is linked with discontent over the current ruling regime, and disbelief in any real potential for change in the status quo.

Figure 1: Voter turnout in Beirut's municipal elections, 1998-2016
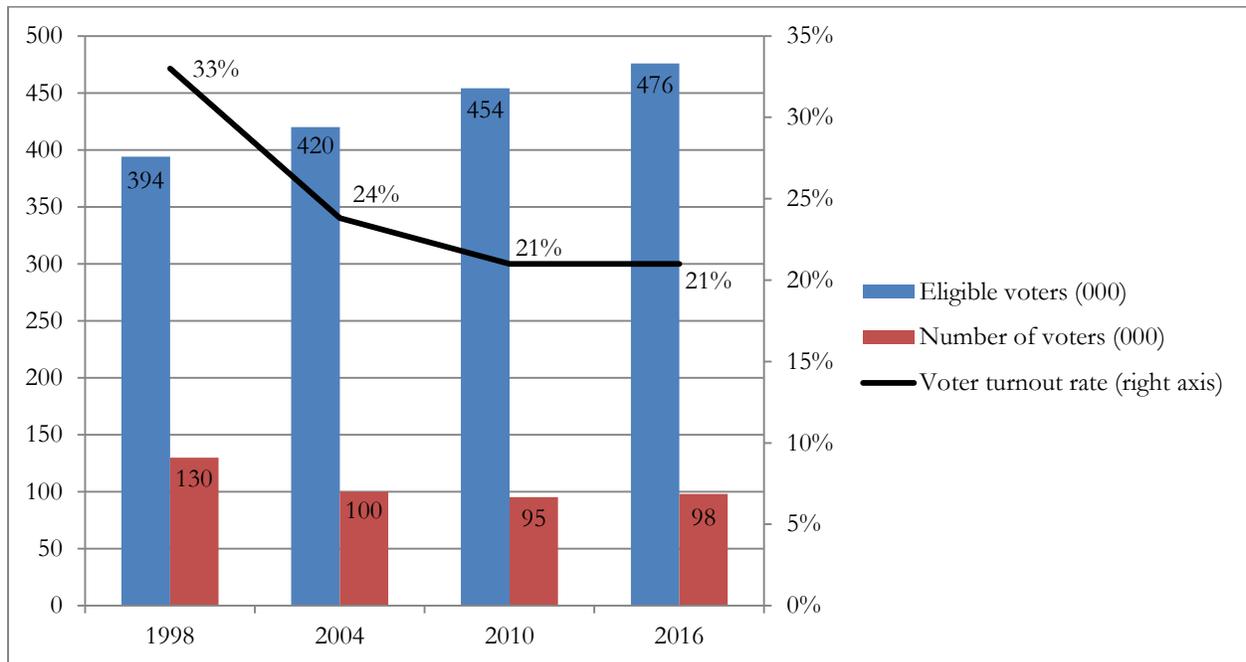
Data sources: Local newspapers archives; 111101 Project (Fabrika – Naji Zahar)

Historically, voter participation rates in Beirut's municipal elections have been linked to effective electoral competition between parties and organizations, so when there is fierce competition more ballots are cast. Effectiveness of voter mobilization efforts,

mainly undertaken through the political patronage networks of the city's political leaders and more specifically among the Sunni registered voters, is also a significant factor. In effect, Sunnis constitute almost half of registered voters in the capital, and whether or not they come out to vote depends much on the cue of the late PM Rafik Hariri's political movement. Since 1998 most of Lebanon's ruling parties, even those locked into competition on the national level, ran on the same electoral list in the capital, under the patronage of the Future Movement, which would nominate Sunni candidate to head the list (the leadership of Beirut's municipal council is traditionally reserved for Sunnis). This coalition of ruling parties, which systematically brought together all the patronage and voter mobilization networks of the various parties, offered very low hope for contenders to effectively pose any real threat.

Candidates in the Beirut 2016 elections, beyond Beirut Madinati, provided little competition. There were a total of 93 candidates, down from a high of 121 in 1998 and five main lists, two complete and three incomplete, which included:

- **The Beirutis List**: The list of the political establishment, a coalition comprising the Future Movement, the Amal Movement, the Free Patriotic Movement, the Lebanese Forces, the Phalanges Party, the Tashnag, and other Armenian parties. Only Hezbollah decided to stay out of this coalition and not present any candidate for municipal positions (the party did not boycott the various elections for positions of Mukhtar—a position which is a mix of alderman and notary—and which is parallel to the municipal council). This list garnered 48% of the votes, with an aggregate of 43,000 votes.

- **Beirut Madinati List**: A complete 24-member list of politically unaffiliated candidates representing the volunteer-led campaign. The list obtained 32% of votes (almost 40% if blank and disqualified votes are not counted), with an average of 29,000 votes.

- **The Association of Islamic Charitable Projects (Ahbash):** Nominated one candidate (Mohamad Mashaqa) as its sole candidate. He obtained more than 13,000 votes.

- **The Mouwatinun wa Mouwatinat fi Dawla List**: A four-member list, headed by former minister Charbel Nahas, who obtained almost 7,000 votes.

- **The Beirut List**: A list of 19 members who presented a platform pushing for more equitable representation of Sunni candidates in the municipal council. The list head Imad Wassan obtained almost 4,000 votes.

- **The Al-Beiruti List**: A list of nine members, headed and backed by the Najjada party. The most voted member of that list obtained a little more than 1,200 votes.

**Table 1: Candidate characteristics, Beirut municipal elections**

	1998	2004	2010	2016
Number of candidates	121	115	94	93
Number of lists	3	4	3	5
of which closed complete lists	*2*	*1*	*1*	*2*
Share of votes winning list [a]	40%	41%	69%	48%
Share of votes runner-up list	25%	12%	13%	32%

Data sources: Local newspapers archives. [a] Share of votes computed based on the top vote gainers in the first and second lists.

What made Beirut Madinati's campaign historic, was that it gained the highest share of votes of any opposition movement since 1998, almost tripling the proportion of votes secured by the first runners up in 2010 (Table 1). Even when looking at absolute average vote numbers, Beirut Madinati achieved the highest average voter figures since 1998 (almost 50% higher). While the main drivers behind voter choice remain to be explored (notably through scientifically representative opinion polls and surveys), it can

safely be argued that the political tactics of Beirut Madinati played a significant role in securing these positive results, despite low participation rate.

Figure 2: Elections results for the top lists, 1998-2016, average votes (in 000)
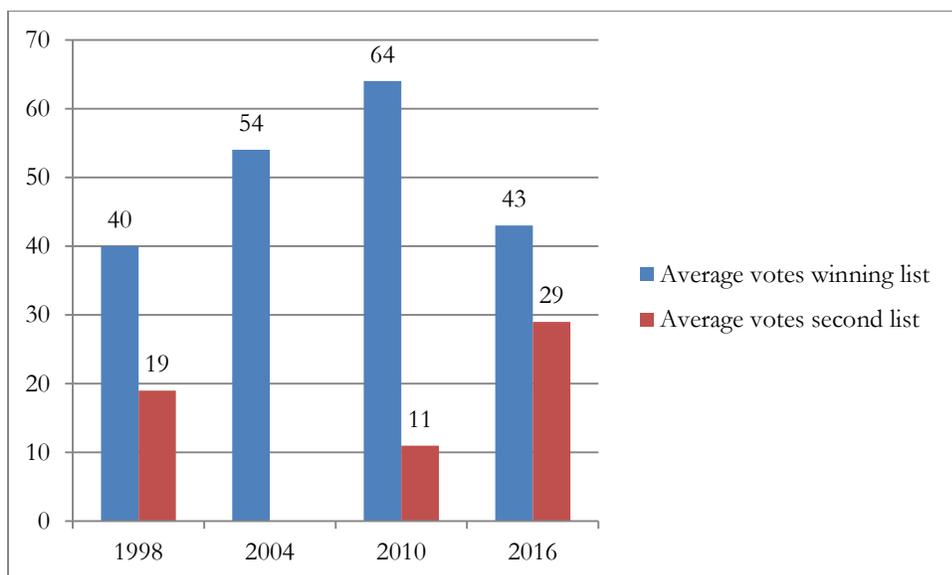
Data sources: Local newspapers archives; 111101 Project (Fabrika – Naji Zahar). Some missing data from 2004.

The other achievement of Beirut Madinati comes from the serious threat it posed to the ruling establishment list, which resorted to all sorts of tactics to counter the rising

popularity of the new electoral platform. This competition manifested itself in the very low difference in votes between the last candidate on the Beirutis list (39,000 votes) and the top candidate on the Beirut Madinati list (32,000 votes), thus a difference of only 7,000 votes. The difference in 2010 was 48,000 votes, and in 2004 30,000. The only exception was 1998, where the opposition list managed to get one candidate elected with 32,000 votes (Figure 2). This was largely due to a massive reshuffling of candidates on ballots as voters did not stick to the official lists, mainly due to sectarian considerations.

Had the municipal elections been governed by a system of proportional representation, the results would certainly have been different. Based on a proportional system, one possible composition of the council would have been as follows:

- 11 seats for the Beirutis list

- 8 seats for Beirut Madinati

- 5 seats for other candidates running as part of incomplete lists

This simulation assumes that the total number of list votes would have been equal to that of the highest number of votes received by the candidates of each list. Using that as a list total, the Hare's quota formula (the simple quota formula used in the largest remainder method of the party-list proportional representations calculations) was applied (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Elections results for the top lists, 1998-2016, first and last candidates (in 000)
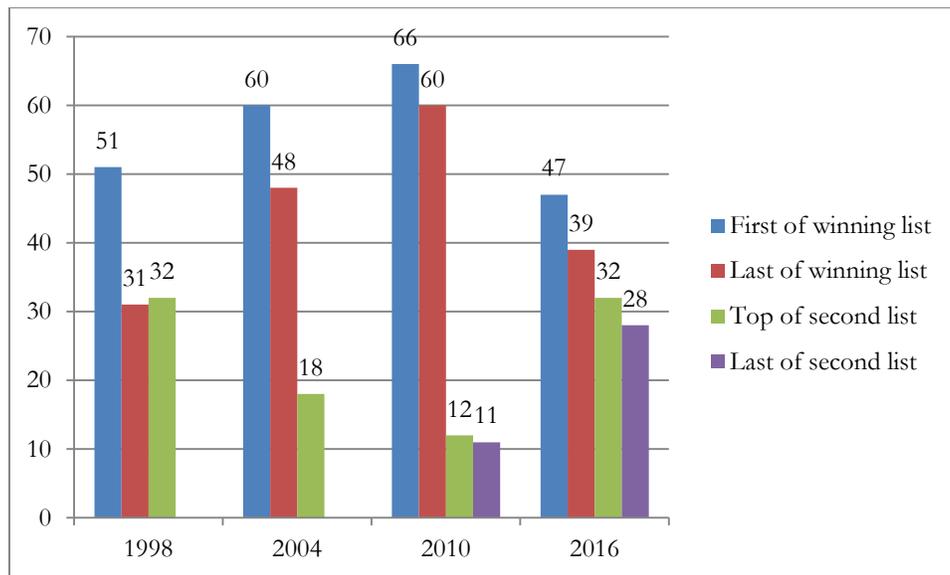
Data sources: Local newspapers archives; 111101 Project (Fabrika – Naji Zahar). Some missing data for 2004.

Statistical analysis of the vote's outcome in the 12 districts of Beirut allows a somewhat refined exploration of the drivers behind the differences between the voting results for the top two lists. Sectarian and gender factors seem the most immediately valuable assessment tools, as more detailed assessments require in-depth studies of the results by polling stations and/or via city-wide surveys. The statistical analysis of the determinants of the margin between the votes obtained by Beirut Madinati and those obtained by the Beirutis List reveals the following main trends (Appendix 1):

- The margin for Beirut Madinati decreases significantly in districts with a larger Sunni population. Beirut Madinati gained greater support than the Beirutis List among Shia'a voters, yet the overall trend was not significant.

- The largely Armenian districts gave a clear advantage to the Beirutis List, as the main Armenian political parties mobilized their voters to successfully support the list of which they were a part.

- Christian voters were more inclined to support Beirut Madinati, and the districts with a Christian majority tended to support lists opposing the establishment, in a clear

departure from the "directives" of the traditional Christian parties' political leadership (Free Patriotic Movement, Lebanese Forces, and Phalangists).

- Gender did not seem to play a significant role in the margin obtained by Beirut Madinati, and women did not disproportionately vote for Beirut Madinati.

Analysis on these factors implies that Sunni voters in Beirut either chose to abstain from voting (as many feel disenfranchised by the current Sunni political leadership) or to vote primarily for the ruling class list backed by the Future Movement. Shi'a voters, in the absence of a clear directive from Hezbollah, distributed their votes across various lists. The Armenian voters stuck to the directives of their leadership, though (non-Armenian) Christian voters who elected to cast a ballot chose to break with the establishment's pressures.

Repercussions and Implication of the Electoral Breakthrough

In an article he wrote for Al Jazeera English, Rami Khouri said, "If change is ever to come to stagnant Arab political systems that have long lumbered beneath the control of sectarian and other entrenched forces, historians may look back on the Beirut municipal elections held Sunday as a turning point.[4]" Beirut Madinati's efforts may not have spilled over into the Arab World, but within Lebanon the group initiated a new spirit of political hope and determination.

Not long after the Beirut Madinati campaign was officially launched in March 2016, several independent lists were inaugurated in different regions of Lebanon. Some have even taken the "Madinati" label and adapted it to their city. This spillover and the identification of the campaign as a movement of national interest and not only a local municipal one, is due to at least three key factors. First, the strategic choice of leading an electoral campaign in the nation's capital brought the efforts of the volunteers well beyond a local eye; launching a campaign in the capital of the country, the cultural, economic and political hub, automatically attracts popular attention. Almost half the population of Lebanon is concerned with Beirut, whether directly or indirectly, making

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[4] Rami G. Khouri, "Do Beirut elections mark the birth of new Arab Citizens"? *Al Jazeera English,* May 10, 2016, http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2016/05/beirut-elections-mark-birth-arab-citizens-160510115006301.html

the campaign a focal point for the country. For many of the same reasons, political consideration for Beirut is much higher than for other cities in Lebanon. If the "old guards" allied on one list, they would risk losing in the capital, which would send a strong message nationally.

Given national concern for the elections, media attention to the "Battle of Beirut" gave Beirut Madinati more exposure and airtime, allowing the campaign to build momentum. This has opened the door for the campaign to surpass limitations on communication within the city, and to address a wider national audience.

Moving Forward

The 40% of votes garnered by Beirut Madinati should be a source of pride for independent political groups, but must also be taken in their wider context. Momentum built in the Lebanese "trash crisis", the weakness of opponents, popular anger and the uniqueness of the Battle of Beirut are all significant factors that shaped the outcome of this round of voting, and would have to be taken into consideration in future campaigns. This by no means undermines the creativity invested by Beirut Madinati to attract voters, or the ability of volunteers to create a new approach to politics, which they did.

For a grassroots movement to sustain itself battles must be fought not only in the lead-up to elections. Efforts must be sustained between each battle, to forge a model for new and attractive political discourse that can be adopted by the public. Volunteers and activists must prepare for "a marathon, not a sprint", even though the absence of an electoral fight deflates popular motivation.

A recent article in *Foreign Policy* says it well: "Groups like *Beirut Madinati* show that, politically, the Middle East's youth and new political leaders are slowly coming of age. Their path forward will be long and arduous. But the onus is now on them to turn their recent achievements into a sustainable political movement."[5]

The aftermath of the Beirut Municipality elections will pave the way for important changes on the Lebanese national politics scene. The results will make all political

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[5] Kim Ghattas, "Beirut's Lovable Losers", *Foreign Policy,* May 26, 2016, http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/05/26/beiruts-loveable-losers,

parties question current alliances, with now slim margins between the leading list and the opposition. Indeed, results proved that the coalitions of the major political parties of Beirut stood only 7000 votes ahead of Beirut Madinati; a mere 1.5% of the city's voters. The results created trust issues between the ruling coalition, and internal investigations were initiated against several partisans while others were expelled from their parties.

The aftermath of Lebanon's municipal elections demonstrate a distinct shift in the political atmosphere of the nation, which is no longer polarized along the lines of the infamous March 8 and March 14 coalitions. In fact, in Beirut, like in many other cities and villages—like Zarate, Baalbek, and Far Rouman, to name a few— opposition was split between both new and traditional players. The election put an end to the previous dichotomy and, if leveraged correctly, could see the introduction of new political parties and groups into the Lebanese political scene.

Even more than a shift in the political geography, the elections - before and after polling day—changed even the hot topics of discussion, and forced all citizens into a reformulation of their political rhetoric. No longer will Lebanese politics be held hostage by discussions of the International Tribunal for Rafic Hariri, Hezbollah's weapons, or other regional and international issues. The shift means that Lebanon's population can now focus on internal issues, issues that matter to Lebanese citizens, like health, employment, education and security. Discussion of these local issues brought up wider concerns about corruption, the need for new leadership, equality, and socio-economic solutions.

The new coalitions and the new discourse that have resulted from the elections will increase media exposure for such issues and the leaders who champion them. Media channels will no longer be able to sustain themselves on propaganda for the traditional political parties. This will certainly have more positive implications in the long run, and help sustain developing political conversations.

The new landscape and the pressure to conform to it will force the traditional sectarian politicians into a tactical redeployment. They can either severely amplify their rhetoric of fear creating more dangerous lines between sects, or they can rally and digest the changes that came with the latest results. No moderate move will lift the political deadlock and the three years of stagnancy so radical shifts will be required to continue forward momentum. The trajectory of the future will largely depend on how both the new and traditional political players move and countermove to deal with changed

dynamics, and strategic thinking is necessary on all fronts if a positive way forward is to be found.

Appendix

Simple correlation between margin for *Beirut Madinati* and confessional shares

Share Maronite

R² = 0.2292

Share Catholic

R² = 0.1878
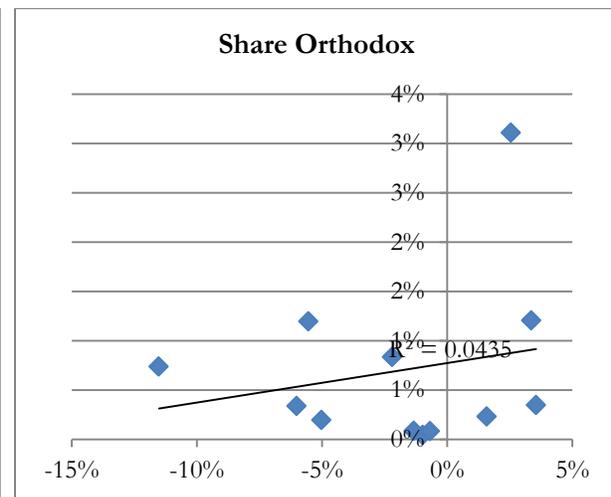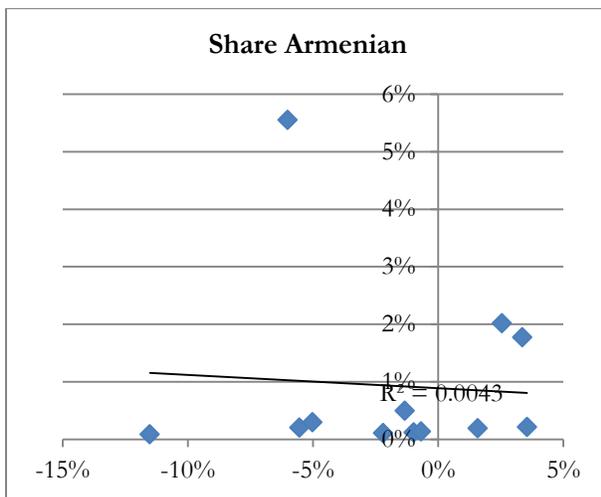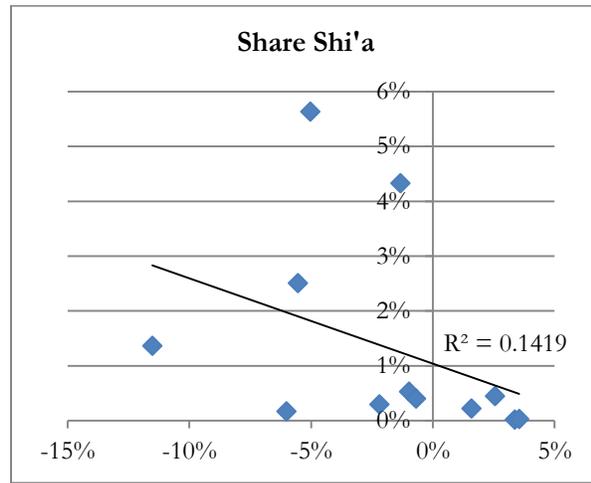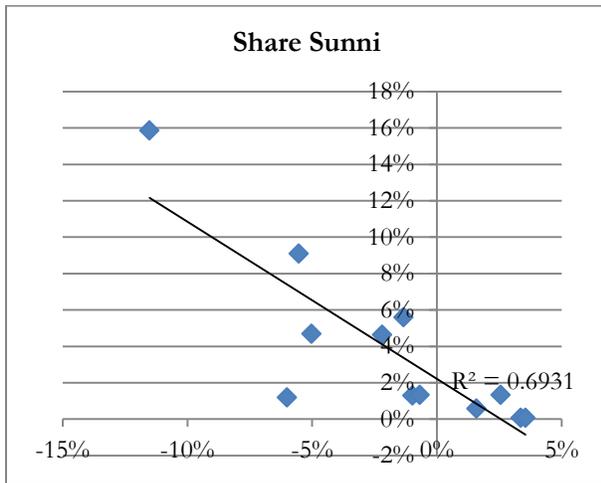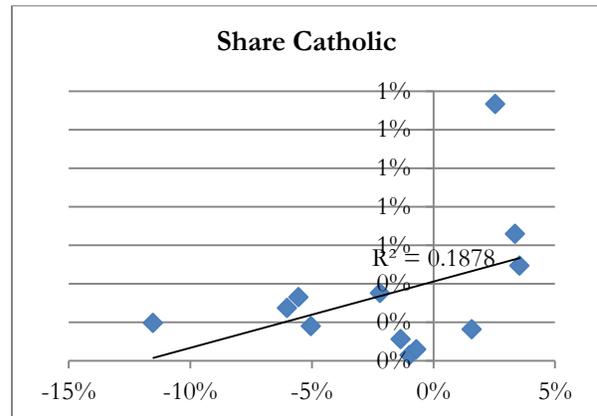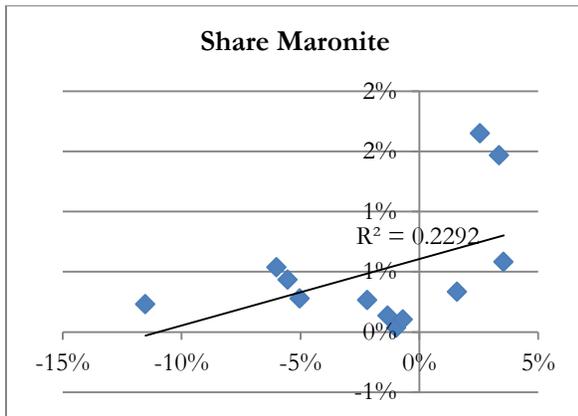
Notes: The Y-axis margin was obtained by Beirut Madinati over the Beirutis list, in % adjusted (weighted) for the size of the voters in the district. X-axis represents % of voters from given sect in the district, adjusted for number of voters.

Correlation between margin for *Beirut Madinati* and women voter margins

R² = 0.1081
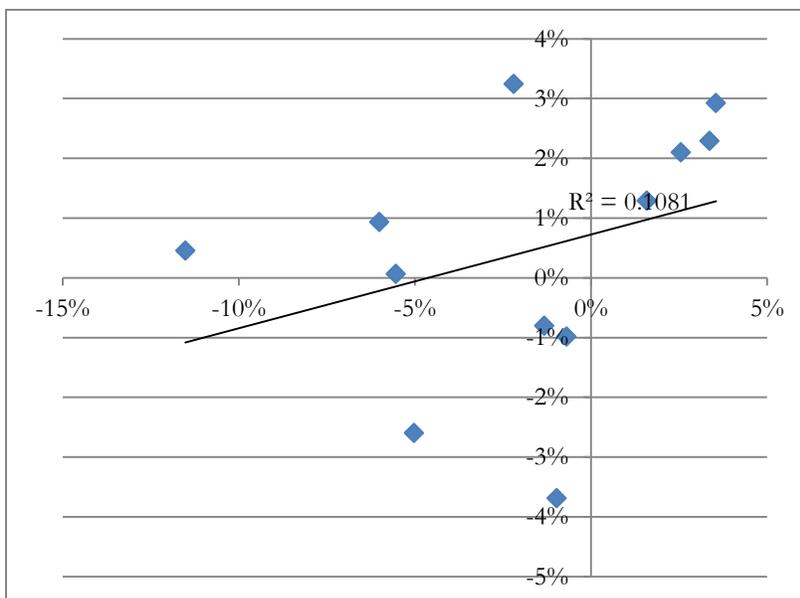
Regression estimates for the main determinants of *Beirut Madinati* margin

	coef	se
Sunni	-0.818***	0.097
Armenian	-1.375***	0.296
Maronite	3.475***	0.916
_cons	0.008	0.008
note: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1		

N=12, R2=0.92