

Electoral Impact in Times of Economic Crisis: Lessons from the Lebanon 2022 Parliamentary Elections

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Executive Summary

In 2022, Lebanon had a general election on the back of a severe economic and financial crisis. Based on a qualitative study of 17 interviews with candidates who ran on platforms with a large economic reform component, also called “Change Candidates”, and political experts, we found the following results:

Impact of the economic crisis on voters. The economic and financial crisis augmented with Covid-19 and the shortage of fuel, made Lebanese residents more dependent on politicians for the delivery of basic services. The crisis increased the need for clientelism to access healthcare, education and gas. Established political parties used their influence in the public sector to offer services in exchange for votes and their large financial means to transport voters to the polls and provide them with “fresh dollars”. In fact, most Lebanese live around Beirut while they vote in their distant villages. On the other hand, voters who have a certain degree of financial independence such as Lebanese expatriates and the educated elite, and voters who associated the crisis to the traditional political parties such as depositors and youth, represented the main voting bloc for change.

Role of economic policies in the campaign. The main differentiating factor for the “Change Coalition” platform was their emphasis on the need to address deeper economic issues, especially relating to people’s lost deposits in banks, constraints in public institutions, and corruption. They advocated economic reform related to diversifying the economy, restructuring of the banking sector, capital control, tax reform, accountability, anti-corruption policies, governance, independence of the judiciary, human capital, and women empowerment. Some political parties tried to adopt the change slogans and promised to fight corruption as well. However, the platform of traditional parties ran mainly on the sovereignty question where one side demanded the removal of weaponry outside the state while the other side argued against the influence of Western embassies.

Determinants of election results. Most losing candidates from the Change Coalition considered that economic policies had no or very limited impact on election results. Some of them believed that only 15% voted based on economic policies, which might explain why the change coalition only won 10% of the seats in parliament. Other factors such as sectarianism, protection, fear of instability, the electoral law, and lack of trust in new faces also played in favor of established parties. Some Change Candidates integrated sovereignty in their campaign, but they were less convincing than traditional parties, the same way traditional parties were less convincing on reforming the economy and fighting corruption.

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Introduction

Lebanon has been ruled by the same political elites since the end of the civil war in 1990 and until 2022. The parliamentary elections of 2022 were a breakthrough in Lebanese politics after the “Change Candidates” were able to seize a significant number of seats with more than 10% of the 128 parliament members (MPs) coming from the “Change Coalitions”. Despite the limited power that such a coalition can utilize, the breakthrough was a distressing incident to traditional political parties that have ruled with negligible competition for over three decades. This change, however, was not coincidental. It has occurred after a severe economic and financial crisis has hit the country, where according to the World Bank, Lebanon has been witnessing one of the three worst economic crises in the last two centuries¹. Further to its economic crisis, the country has also been facing multi-faced crises due to Covid-19 pandemic and the Port of Beirut blast.

This research aims at understanding the relationship between the economic crisis, its use in the candidates’ platform, and the results of the elections. The qualitative study builds on a set of semi-structured interviews with candidates and MPs who ran on platforms with a large economic reform component representing all geographic regions of Lebanon, as well as with experts from the political economic arena.

To understand the relationship between the economic circumstances and the elections’ results, the study looks at the different perspectives relating to voters’ behavior, impact of suggested reforms, strengths and weaknesses of Change Coalitions, as well as other factors that could influence the results of the elections. The following sections will discuss: i) the research methodology; ii) the impact of the economic crisis; iii) factors affecting voters’ behavior; iv) strengths and weaknesses of Change Coalitions; v) impact of suggested reforms; and will conclude with the vi) effects of the economic dialogue on elections’ results.

International Review

The literature provides abundant evidence on the effects of economic and financial crises on elections results. However, the effects were diverse across different regions. In Europe, economic crisis, defined as negative growth, showed large effects on the elections². Positive economic growth, on the other hand,

¹ World Bank, 2020. Lebanon Economic Monitor: Lebanon Sinking to the Top 3.

² Dassonneville, R., Lewis-Beck, M. Macroeconomics, economic crisis and electoral outcomes: A national European pool. *Acta Polit* 49, 372–394 (2014).

had little electoral impact. Other reviews on Europe argue that the impact of political aftershocks of financial crises have been severe since 1870³. The latter study looks at 20 countries with more than 800 general elections over 140 years to show that voters are more attracted to politics after a financial crisis. The change, however, is in favor of far-right parties, and are triggered more by financial crises rather than by macroeconomic crises.

In Latin America, a study of almost all countries in the region shows that economic factors have been detrimental in electoral behavior, especially in times of crises⁴. The evidence from Latin America demonstrates that despite the significant impact of economic factors in times of crises, political factors still are equally significantly effective. Political factors include prior vote, party strength, political climate and others.

When focusing on countries more similar in context and climate to Lebanon, Bosco and Verney (2012) study the political impact of the economic crisis of 2011 on Southern European countries⁵. The research looks at elections in Italy, Greece, Portugal, Spain, Turkey, Cyprus, and Turkish Cypriot. The in-depth study investigates patterns of abstention, incumbent punishment and opposition success, including the rise of regional, anti-party, far-right and racist parties. However, the results were diverse across countries. In Turkey, the economic crisis strengthened the incumbent due to the absence of challengers. Only in Turkish Cypriot, the president was voted out of office due to the elections. In Spain, traditional parties were weakened in the elections following the economic crisis, mainly due to the emergence of new regional parties. In the remaining countries, the economic crisis had a clear spillover effect as the leading political parties eventually were overthrown by other traditional political parties.

In Lebanon and the Middle East, little literature has been executed on the relationship between economic crises and electoral results. Furthermore, this study shows that the effects in Lebanon are not in line with other global regions. The difference in voters' behaviors could be attributed to different factors. In particular, the last civil war in Lebanon could have made citizens more risk-averse in demanding change.

³ Manuel Funke, Moritz Schularick, Christoph Trebesch, Going to extremes: Politics after financial crises, 1870–2014, *European Economic Review*, Volume 88, 2016, Pages 227-260

⁴ Echegaray, Fabian, *Economic Crises and Electoral Responses in Latin America*, University Press of America, ISBN 978-0-7618-3274-4, October 2005.

⁵ Anna Bosco & Susannah Verney (2012) Electoral Epidemic: The Political Cost of Economic Crisis in Southern Europe, 2010–11, *South European Society and Politics*, 17:2, 129-154, DOI: 10.1080/13608746.2012.747272

In addition, the engrained sectarianism and clientelism in the country could have made the response to crises less elastic than the rest of the world.

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research method approach, in which seventeen MPs, “Change Candidates” and experts were interviewed. The rationale for choosing a qualitative study is to understand the behavior of voters from firsthand experience. To this end, and to ensure that the list of interviewees encompasses different perspectives, the candidates were identified from all governorates in Lebanon. This selection criteria allowed the understanding of the different factors that could have influenced the voters’ behavior, due to different sociopolitical determinants.

The diversification of interviewees’ regions proved to be efficient, which was reflected in the distinct answers and the verification in the factors provided. While analogous answers prevailed within regions, diverse responses arose across regions. On another hand, the similarity in answers within regions strengthens the rational of respondents, while the diversity of answers across governorates demonstrates the different sociopolitical factors among regions.

An interview protocol was developed, undertaking a semi-structured basis which would adapt to the respondent’s answers. The main questions revolved around the following topics: i) relation between the economic crisis and voter’s choice; ii) factors influencing voting behavior; iii) role of campaigns and suggested policies; iv) strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to the Change Coalitions; and v) impact of suggested economic policies on the elections’ results. The following sections summarize the main observations under each discussion topic.

Impact of the economic crisis

The impact of the economic crisis on the voters’ behavior was a controversial matter among respondents, where some considered it as a “two-edged sword”. While most interviewees highlighted the negative effects of the crisis, influencing citizens to vote for traditional political parties, other candidates and experts described how the crisis positively persuaded people to vote for Change.

With respect to the negative impact of the crisis, the financial distress made citizens more dependent on politicians. “When people are hungry, they cannot be free”, according to one parliamentary candidate, describing how Lebanese expats were the ones mainly voting for change due to their independence from

political parties. Other respondents associated the economic crisis with the increasing need for clientelism in order to access social services such as health and education. The Covid-19 and fuel crisis were examples of how connections with political parties allowed citizens to access certain services.

Furthermore, the economic crisis allowed political parties to provide protection via “fresh dollars” in times when citizens’ personal and financial securities were at risk. Political parties also triggered the “fear from the other”, according to interviewees who emphasized the role of incitement speech during electoral campaigns.

Additionally, given the distance between residence areas and voting areas for most Lebanese, political parties used their access to transportation tools, “fresh dollars”, and fuel, to facilitate and encourage citizens to transport and grant them their votes. Moreover, given the dire financial situation of citizens in times of crisis, it was a common practice in several regions to witness vote buying especially among the poorest segments of society.

On the other hand, the economic crisis was perceived as a trigger to certain segments of society who decided to vote for Change for the first time. In particular, “Change Candidates” described citizens who were most affected by the crisis, especially who lost their deposits in banks, as being more inclined to vote for Change. In addition, Lebanese expats who are least dependent in their income and services on political parties voted more to Change. Another segment of population that voted to Change, according to the interviewees, was the “elites” and highly educated individuals who associated the crisis to the traditional political parties.

Main factors affecting voters’ behavior

Despite the multiple crises facing the country, the majority of citizens voted for the traditional political parties who were ruling during the preceding period. According to candidates and experts, the main reasons for this behavior are sectarianism, clientelism, electoral law, protection, social dynamic and lack of trust in new faces.

The effects of the civil war and years of conditional peace have left citizens with a feeling of belonging to sectarian protectors - represented in sectarian political parties- who can also afford employability opportunities and other services. With traditional political parties controlling the employment in the public sector, many citizens have resorted to politicians for recruitment opportunities, and were offered

their request conditional on unquestioned loyalty. This debt by citizens has committed them to vote for traditional parties to avoid the risk of losing their jobs.

This relation between political parties and citizens developed into social ties, in which political parties utilize to “re-ignite dynamic sectarianism” before the elections. In addition, Lebanese citizens have adapted to a comfort zone in which peace is above all priorities, and a threat to the status-quo by Change Coalitions is believed to disturb the balance of power and lead to security threats. Coupled with the lack of trust in the ability of Change and independent candidates to make significant reforms, many voters decided not to take the Change “risk”.

On the other hand, a minority of the population is believed to have voted for economic policies. While responses varied across regions, from believing that none of the voters voted based on economic policies, others believe that a minority of no more than 15% voted due to economic concerns. Those who voted based on the economic dialogue are believed to be those who lost their deposits at the banks, youths, middle class, expats, and some of those who participated in the Thawra movement in October 2019.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Change Coalitions

Weaknesses

The weaknesses of the Change lists were discussed more extensively by “Change Candidates”, reflecting the need for a more unified approach and more synchronized efforts. In particular, some candidates have highlighted the lack of solidarity and team work (diversity in vision and campaign), lack of experience, lack of resources, and limited media access.

The lack of unified lists and campaigns have led, according to candidate and experts, to split the votes between the different Change lists. In certain areas, the presence of multiple Change lists led to a lack of trust by the citizens in the Change Coalitions. In some regions, candidates criticized the presence of “not two Change lists, but five!”.

Another major issue that arose was the lack of financial resources. Some “Change Candidates” explained that they “had less than 1% of what the political parties had”. In addition to finances, “Change Candidates” suffered from little-to-no exposure in the media and social media, especially when compared to the air time that candidates from political parties had access to.

In their self-critique, “Change Candidates” described that having limited experience in the political arena and in running for elections was a determinant factor in losing votes. The limited experience was demonstrated in some regions where the candidates did not have electoral teams to monitor the elections process as well as the vote counting process. Having little political experience led, according to a candidate, to “working for personal goals rather than encompassing projects”.

An external factor that negatively affected the results of Change lists, according to the candidates, was the present electoral law.

Strengths

The main strengths highlighted by the “Change Candidates” were their “clean background” and having no corruption records. The stainless record of “Change Candidates”, coupled with the new discourse they provided has presented them in an accountable image to citizens desperate for change. Being “young, diverse in religion, educated, and new” demonstrated to citizens that new faces can provide new and professional solutions to current national problems.

While the regular media was not abundantly available to “Change Candidates”, social media was a strong tool to some of them. Having access to social media across regions and targeting youth segments allowed “Change Candidates” to indulge in direct dialogues with citizens. Social media allowed candidates to provide evidence to support their qualifications, as well as evidence that condemn the political parties with corruption. Such evidence was critical in attracting median voters who were critical with their judgement of candidates.

Lebanese diaspora was one of the deciding factors in the success of some “Change Candidates”, adding to their strength points. Lebanese diaspora voted for the Change lists due to the failure of political parties over thirty years, while ““Change Candidates” come from people’s pain”.

Opportunities and Threats

After succeeding in seizing 13 seats in the parliament, Change Coalitions are now faced with critical opportunities and threats. In terms of opportunities, candidates and experts emphasized the importance of demonstrating a unified vision across different Change pillars. Additionally, it is crucial for the Change platform to initiate their work for the next election from now, which can be done through forming committees across regions. Interacting with diaspora was also raised as a breakthrough for Change to expand its presence and support base.

Threats on the other hand were critical, risking the chances of re-election if not tackled. In the first place, respondents raised the grave impact that would result of a weak performance of elected candidates. Weak performance by Change MPs will reduce trust in the “Change Candidates” in future elections. The threat is magnified if Change MPs did not show solidarity among them.

Electoral Campaigns and Economic Policies

Interviewees were asked about the campaigns and suggested policies raised by political parties versus the ones raised by Change Coalitions. In addition, MPs and candidates were asked about the economic agendas they advocated for in their electoral campaigns.

In many areas, political parties adopted change slogans, in which they promised to fight corruption and prosecute the corrupt. Sovereignty was another major slogan raised by the political parties that was common across the different regions. Under sovereignty, political parties demanded the removal of weaponry outside the state. Other political parties raised slogans against foreign intervention and the influence of Western embassies. According to “Change Candidates”, few political parties addressed economic issues such as taxes and deposits. However, despite using such slogans, most political parties in fact used incitement speech, according to the respondents. Interviewees reported religion-based discourse, March 8 and 14 dialogues, and other sectarian speeches in the interaction between political parties and citizens.

Change Coalitions, on the other hand, also raised sovereignty issues in their electoral campaign, but more importantly emphasized the need to address deeper economic issues, especially relating to people’s lost deposits in banks. The Change platform also addressed the constraints in public institutions, corruption, and weakness of the legislative body.

On the economic policies, “Change Candidates” advocated for economic reform, tax reform, accountability, anti-corruption policies, governance, independence of the judiciary, restructuring of the banking sector, capital control, human capital, and women empowerment. Economic reform, represented in diversifying the economy was a common theme across different areas. “Change Candidates” advocated for strengthening productive sectors such as agriculture and tourism, rather than keeping a rentier state economy.

Capital control and restructuring of the banking sector were also major themes across Change lists. In such themes, candidates addressed the main concerns of citizens who lost their life savings in banks. In

this regard, “Change Candidates” addressed corruption linking it to political parties that have ruled for over three decades. To this end, electoral campaigns demanded reforms in the judiciary sector, asking for independence of the judiciary from political parties.

Despite the policies suggested by Change Coalitions being addressed to citizens’ lively concerns, the electoral impact was minimally affected by those policies. According to the candidates and experts, people were more attracted to the populist speech that build on emotions and sectarianism. While some respondents linked this lack of effect to the irresponsible type of citizens who “do not read”, others believed that indeed it made the difference for 10-15% of voters who saw that their pain is reflected in the voice of Change.

Impact of Economic Policies on Election Results

International experience shows that economic crises have a decisive impact on the elections. Economic policies are utilized by running parties to attract voters and promise reform and growth. However, in the case of Lebanon, this study demonstrates that most Lebanese voters were less inclined to follow-up with the economic suggestions and stucked with traditional political parties. The research actually shows that due to the economic crisis, many citizens were under the mercy of traditional political parties that had the financial resources to attract voters, as well as the capacity to provide social services.

Nevertheless, the Change Coalitions had an unprecedented penetration into the parliament, with 10% of seats seized. The Change platform relied on addressing the economic pain of the citizens, building on their clean record in corruption to gain credibility and support. The young generation and the large Lebanese expat community was less influenced by sectarian and populist speech and more attracted to reform propositions.

Lessons from the 2020 General Elections

Election results show that economic policies alone are not enough for the Change Coalition to obtain a majority in the parliament. The numbers from the latest elections demonstrate that the votes going to all “Change Candidates” combined were the second largest cluster of votes (over 300 thousand). This portion of votes could have led to a bigger coalition inside the parliament had the votes not been split between different Change lists. Therefore, following lessons might be useful for future elections:

Lesson 1 – Unified Program: Change Coalitions need to show more unity in their vision and programs. Unity has to be demonstrated across regions as well as within regions. The ununified campaigns and lists led to two negative outcomes. First, voters had less trust in the capability of a divided opposition to implement real change, hence abstaining from voting for them. Second, voters who still voted for Change, were lost between Change lists, leading to division of votes and abating the ability of successful breakthroughs in spite of the current electoral law.

Lesson 2 – Visibility: “Change Candidates” need to start their next electoral campaign from today. According to experts, one source for the lack of trust in “Change Candidates” was the absence from the political scene prior to the elections period. Organizing well-designed programs to interact with citizens over the next four years in different electoral districts is crucial for a larger impact in the next elections.

Lesson 3 – Key Constituency: It is important to keep the communication with the Lebanese diaspora and the youths. Lebanese expats and youths were the determinant factor in the successful breakthrough of Change MPs. Their independence from political parties in the job market and access to services made expats vote for economic agendas rather than basing their votes on populist and sectarian campaigns.

Lesson 4 – Social Media: “Change Candidates” can take advantage of the access to social media and utilize other communication tools. With the limited financial resources, social media grants the “Change Candidates” an easily accessible communication platform that requires negligible monetary costs.

Lesson 5 – Record: Change MPs need to show accountability and credibility in front of the voters. Committing to their electoral campaigns is both an opportunity and a risk for the opposition coalitions. Demonstrating their commitment to economic and political reform would incentivize the segments of the population that was hesitant or backed away from voting to Change due to lack of trust. On the other hand, if Change MPs allied and collaborated with traditional political parties, they would then lose their advantage in having a clean record compared to corrupt politicians.

The presence of Change MPs in the parliament is a life proof of the capability of change despite the constant efforts by an experienced political elite that has clenched power and influence pillars in the country for decades. Accumulating and utilizing political experience can significantly empower the Change platform in future elections, especially when more coordinated efforts are in place within regions and across regions.