# Virtual Campaigns, Real Results: The Power of Social Media in Lebanon's Political Landscape

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9th June 2024

**Abstract**

*This study aims to analyze the impact of social media on the outcome of the last parliamentary elections in Lebanon which took place in May 2022.*

Lebanon did not get a lot of luck in the past few years. Indeed, the economic depression which started in October 2019 was only the beginning of a sequence of chaotic and unfortunate events, including the Covid-19 pandemic, political instability, the explosion in Beirut's port, the devaluation of the Lebanese Pound by 95%, not to mention the series of Israeli attacks targeted on the country for several months now. In addition to these catastrophies, Lebanon has been struggling with its political dynamics which have led to a persistent cycle of the same individuals or their descendants being elected in legislative elections. As a result, elections have been only fueling endless cycles of status quo where the interests of a select few are prioritized over the growing needs of the broader population. Social media, and Facebook in particular, are huge factors that maintain the same individuals on the same chairs. The latest round of parliamentary elections in Lebanon took place on the 6th and 8th of May for voters abroad and on the 15th of May 2022 in Lebanon. The results were naturally highly anticipated.

Lebanon's political system has historically been influenced by religion; the deputy chamber has 128 seets distributed within 15 multi-member constituencies which are usually religion-oriented. This system intended to ensure representation and prevent sectarian conflict, has instead entrenched political elites and perpetuated corruption. Political dynasties have dominated the scene, with typically their descendants repeatedly elected to power. This has led to a stagnant political environment where the interests of a select few are prioritized over the needs of the rest of the population. The historical sectarian aspect

of these elections is detailed in Rahaf Zaher's paper 'The 2022 Lebanese Parliamentary Elections: Between Traditional and Alternative Politics'. [1]

In the last parliamentary election in 2018, only 49.2% of the electoral body participated in the elections, reflecting a lack of faith in the majority of the voters that the candidates will make a change. However, the sequence of crises the country has faced between 2018 and 2022 led to increasing demands for change in the civil society. Protests arose in October 2019, asking for an end to corruption and resource mismanagement. Even the youth generation like high-school and college students seemed to be involved in the elections as they are tired and unhappy with the current situation. These protests are driven and fueled from social media campaigns which revealed a growing influence of digital platforms on the public opinion.

To understand the profound impact of social media on the 2022 Lebanese legislative elections, it is essential to apply relevant political and communication theories. One such theory is the **Agenda-Setting Theory**, which states that while the media may not dictate what people should think, it significantly influences what they think about. In the context of Lebanese elections, social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter set the agenda by orienting the community's attention to dramatic issues such as economic reform, corruption, and sovereignty that need to be changes. Additionally, the **Framing Theory** is employed by parties. This theory suggests that the way information is presented, or "packaged," affects how the audience interprets it. Political parties and candidates in Lebanon used social media to frame issues in ways that would elicit emotional responses and align with their narratives.

Politicians and political parties make use of social platforms like Twitter and Facebook to directly communicate with voters, bypassing traditional media channels that may be biased or censored. Facebook, with its vast user base in Lebanon, serves as a primary platform for disseminating political messages and organizing massive events. In addition to that, Facebook Ads are employed to target specific demographics, enhancing the reach of campaign messages. These ads can be tailored based on users' interests, locations, and behaviors, ensuring that political content reaches the most relevant audiences. The interactive nature of social platforms also allows for real-time feedback and rapid adjustments to campaign strategies based on voter responses. The other way around, it allows people to have access to real-time content and have exposure to the political sphere when big media like CNN or MBC or often biased in the sense that their audience sees what these broadcasting giant companies want them to see.

According to the 2021 Hootsuite report[2], Lebanon had approximately 5.3 million internet users, of which 4.37 million were active social media users. These numbers suggest

a significant proportion of the population active on social media like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and more and more nowadays, Tiktok, which makes them essential tools for communication across the country and for attractive political campaigns. In particular, the Lebanese Forces party's Facebook page experienced a 150% increase in engagement in the final month before the elections, reflecting the heightened political activity and interest. Their leader Samir Geagea employed a well-tailored social media strategy to engage with voters. Their campaign focused on issues such as sovereignty, economic reform, and anti-corruption measures. Through a series of well-produced videos, infographics, and live Q&A sessions, they were able to mobilize significant support, particularly among the youth. As William Christou wrote in the article "Lebanese Forces Launch Campaign as Lebanese Elections Approach" published in *The New Arab* journal[3] two months before the elections, Geagea told a crowd of supporters, "We do not have elections, we have a battle to save Lebanon from militias and the mafia." By underscoring the urgency of the situation, he uses strong words to stress voters to opt for his party, but does not concretely explain how he plans to put an end to the issues the country is facing.

In their article "From Liberation to Turmoil: Social Media and Democracy," Tucker et al. discuss the dual role of social media in both empowering democratic movements and being exploited by authoritarian regimes to stifle dissent. They highlight how social media platforms, initially seen as tools for democratic liberation, have been increasingly used for censorship and propaganda by authoritarian actors[4]. Defamation and propaganda played significant roles in some of the Lebanese campaigns which involved spreading misleading information or exaggerated claims to undermine opponents through edited images, out-of-context quotes, and unverified reports, which were widely shared and often believed in the electoral body. Another notable example is the campaign of Hezbollah. Despite being banned on Facebook and Twitter due to its terrorist designation in the USA, Hezbollah managed to disseminate its narratives through a network of supportive pages and accounts. Their social media presence was indeed strategic and highly coordinated. Hezbollah used Facebook and Twitter to emphasize their resistance credentials and counteract negative media coverage. Their campaign included a combination of patriotic messaging, religious appeals, and social welfare promises, all tuned to resonate with their core supporters. One can notice one of their massive movement two days before the elections in the picture below.

Another challenge posed by social media in elections is the creation of **echo chambers**, where users are exposed primarily to information and opinions that reinforce their existing beliefs. Algorithms on platforms like Facebook and Twitter prioritize content that aligns with users' past behavior, leading to a polarized electorate that is less likely to encounter diverse perspectives. This can establish long-lasting political divisions and reduce the potential for constructive dialogue across different political groups. The **digital**



**Figure 1:** People with Hezbollah flags at the Hezbollah political party rally on May 13, 2022, in Baalbek in Bekaa Valley, Lebanon.
Photo: Ramzi Haidar/AFP/Getty Images

**divide** is also a significant issue. In Lebanon, not all citizens have equal access to the internet and social media, which can lead to unequal participation in the political process. Rural areas and the most touched by the financial crisis who might have less access to digital technologies especially given that electricity is getting more scarce and hardly accessible in the country. As a result, their voices are being underrepresented in the online political sphere which reinforces social inequalities as the right to vote should be the same for all citizen. Indeed, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) reported that districts with higher social media activity saw increased voter turnout[5]. For instance, in Beirut, where social media penetration and activity were the highest, voter turnout was recorded at 55%, compared to a national average of 49%.

To assess a voter's point of view, a survey by the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies (LCPS)[6] found that 68% of respondents who were active on social media reported that their voting decisions were influenced by what they saw online. This influence was particularly pronounced among younger voters aged from 18 to 35 years old, who cited social media as their primary source of political information. Internet users are often unaware of why they are being shown specific ads or who is funding these campaigns, leading to concerns about manipulation and hidden agendas. Indeed, the lack of transparency in how political ads are targeted and funded can undermine public trust in the electoral process. According to the EU Election Observation Mission (EOM) for Lebanon 2022[7], 'There is no law regulating online speech in Lebanon.' Several countries have implemented regulations to address these issues. For example, the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the United States' Honest Ads Act aim to control transparency in digital political advertising. One could think Lebanon should learn

from these more developed countries by implementing similar regulations. However, in third-world countries it is easier said than done; as we mentioned previously, the deputy chamber is divided into 15 subsections, not to mention the dependence on religion. So the first step which is to come up with a law proposition is already very hard to achieve. Then, assuming it is done, it is even harder to get the whole Lebanese population who was mainly lived in instability to follow these laws.

Political actors and their supporters extensively used hashtags and coordinated messages to polarize the online space, with one in four posts containing negative content aimed at discrediting opponents. Social media Monitoring findings detailed in the EU EOM final report [7] revealed that 21% of the discreditation posts targeted Hezbollah, while 18% targeted the Lebanese Forces, and that includes a large amount of derogatory speech and other violations. The report notes that 69% of the social media violations documented during the monitoring period were related to slander and defamation. This included over 100 comments (on a sample size of 6500) containing insults, accusations of corruption, murder, and treason, as well as personal attacks, including sexist remarks. Such content can significantly polarize the online space and influence voters' opinions based on false or misleading information. Zaher details more on the targeting and hate speech in his working paper about the results of the elections.[1]

The power and over-presence of social media in the realm of politics raises questions about its long-term effect on democracy and the integrity of electoral processes. There seem to significant risks that social media might just worsen existing political problems until it goes out of hand and who knows what this could lead to. A solid first step to progress would be to educate people about the responsible use of social media and make them aware of misinformation and propaganda with a focus on their application in politics. Indeed, being aware of the algorithms and laws behind the contents we read and watch on our screens helps developing awareness and criticism spirit. Next, data protection is critical to preventing misuse of personal information for for targeted political advertising without users' consent. Another step forward would be to promote inclusive access to the online side of the political conversation; measures aimed at improving internet infrastructure in rural and under-served areas can ensure that all citizens have the opportunity to participate in the digital political discourse. This already reduces the bias in the elections outcome. Finally, an optimal long-term strategy would rely on connecting with Lebanese professionals around the world in such a way that the Lebanese will begin producing successful projects and helping each other grow economically, and counteract the negative influence of social media.

Despite the extensive role of social media in the campaigns, it is important to note that some political leaders have blind and deep-rooted support from the confession they rep-

resent. For example, the shiite community tends to show profound admiration to Hassan Nasrallah who leads Hezbollah and Nabih Berri who leads the Amal movement. More on that, the Christian community is divided into the Lebanese Forces led by Geagea and the Tayyar party led by former president Michel Aoun; each would truly love their respective party leader. The brainwahsing was even so powerful before the existence of social media and the political affiliation are inherited from one generation to another. Therefore, social media would impact more the youth generation and the independent candidates than one's original political fanatism for these longstanding communities that have been going on for more than 50 years. One can hope that social media may eventually help to attenuate this framed entanglement and to raise a sense of awareness and mind-opening. Voter turnout in the 2022 Lebanese parliamentary elections was on par with the 2018 elections, according to *L'Orient Today* turnout figures[8], which says a lot about the stagnation in electoral process and we wonder if the population's call for change will be answered.

On the whole, our analysis has investigated the deep influence of social media, particularly Facebook, on the 2022 Lebanese legislative elections. Social media platforms have reshaped the political landscape by drawing a continuous line of communication between candidates and voters, allowing for targeted and interactive campaign strategies. The use of targeted Ads, emotional appeals, and strategic content framing played significant roles in shaping voter behavior and mobilizing support. As the role of social media consistently grow in daily life, its role in political processes will likely expand. This underscores the need for effective regulations and ethical guidelines to ensure that these platforms are used responsibly. As the country moves forward, it is crucial to ask: How to balance the democratizing power of social media with the need to protect the ethics in its political systems? Will social media be used in appropriate extents so that everyone can be on the same wavelength? The future of democracy in Lebanon may well depend on how its government and people will answer these questions. We will know when the elections outcome can no longer be exactly predicted with data from the past.

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