# NO MORE POLITICS-AS-USUAL: Lebanese Unite Behind Major Reforms

Key Findings of Quantitative and Qualitative
Public Opinion Research in Lebanon

September 2021

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# 1.
# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Lebanon is in the midst of a series of concurrent crises that would challenge any government but are especially damaging for a country that relied on a caretaker government for over a year. This follows the upheaval of the October 2019 protests, which highlighted the dissatisfaction people felt towards the government and the politicians running it and was an unexpected stage on which some new political voices emerged. To assess the current state of politics and possibilities for reform during such a critical time, the National Democratic Institute (NDI or the Institute) conducted quantitative and qualitative public opinion research between March and June 2021, that examined the legacy of the protest movement, how people feel about the government, political parties, and politicians, who citizens trust to represent their needs, and what people see as the best possibilities for reform. The survey and focus group research were conducted by InfoPro Research, a Beirut-based firm that conducts local and regional political and market research for non-governmental organizations, media companies, political parties, and private companies.

The report findings can be used by Lebanese politicians, decision makers, civil society activists, international community organizations, and other interested parties to better understand current political dynamics in the country, how citizens assess political parties and politicians' actions, what political parties and other institutions must do to rebuild trust and garner support, and what opportunities are available for citizens and civil society organizations to influence public policy and gain political influence.

The key findings and themes that emerged from the research are:

## Trust in Institutions. Citizens do not trust or feel represented by political and governing institutions.

There is a pervasive lack of trust of politicians and officials at all levels of government and of political parties in general, as well as a lack of trust in what citizens see as a biased media ecosphere controlled by the political parties. During focus group discussions, they expressed that both the national and municipal levels of government are characterized by dysfunction, corruption, and cronyism and described a culture wherein politicians win office and then use their position to benefit themselves, family members, friends, and patrons, rather than their actual constituencies.

In fact, very few institutions are trusted or seen as unaffected by the corruption that affects the political system as a whole. People do not turn to traditional institutions to seek political guidance or discuss opinions, eschewing both the media and religious institutions as credible sources of information. Most prefer to consult

family and friends, with more than 50 percent of survey respondents expressing that both the media and religious institutions are untrustworthy. One institution that garnered expressions of admiration was the army, and respect and trust for the army was higher than for any other institution. On average, only four percent of survey respondents said that the army was untrustworthy. During focus group discussions, it was repeatedly expressed, regardless of the respondents' location, religion, or other demographics, that the army is a model for how things can be organized in a non-sectarian, merit-based, mission-focused way and was specified as a systemic model that the government and politicians could learn from.

## Policy Priorities. Economic assistance and structural reform are urgent policy priorities.

Economic stability, job opportunities, and availability of essential goods and services are major concerns for people in Lebanon as the value of the Lira has plunged, consumer prices have risen, and subsidies have been cut on products such as fuel. People want policies enacted that will stimulate job growth, reduce inflation, deliver support to vulnerable families, and maintain subsidies on wheat, fuel, and medicine. However, even more than such quality of life indicators being improved, people expressed that the most urgent reform priority is for a new election law. As expressed during one focus group discussion, there is a desire for a "change of the whole system and the laws. Within this, there will be a change and the whole formula that is set now will be finally gone. For example, if the government can be elected with disregard to the Christian/Muslim division in the parliament, things would work out." (Female, Christian, Beirut)

## Cross-Cutting Systemic Change. Meaningful change will not come from the ballot box; people want the system to change.

In the survey, 45 percent of respondents said they would not vote in the upcoming parliamentary elections. If the elections were held today, no party would garner more than single-digit levels of support and more than 40 percent of people said they would not vote. However, 25 percent of respondents said they would cast a ballot for civil society candidates emerging from the protest movement and nine percent said they would cast a blank paper or protest vote. So among those who would participate, many would expect to vote differently than they have before, reducing the level of support for traditional parties or established politicians. During focus group discussions, people noted that the name on the ballot does not matter; they feel that regardless of the specific candidate, the policies and tactics of the political parties will remain the same and needed reforms will not be enacted. As one participant noted, "I believe that...we should change the electoral law. The current electoral law is designed in a way that elects the same people each time, and if not the same people by name, the same political background. In addition to that, I believe that for Lebanon to develop, then religion must be separated from the state." (Female, Christian, Mount Lebanon) Such a feeling that the problem is systemic, rather than that of any particular party or politician, is indicative of citizens' desire for fundamental changes to take place.

## Impact of the Protest Movement. The 2019 protests did not result in change but did show how change could be catalyzed.

People have mixed opinions about the October 2019 protests and what was accomplished. Many felt that the protests began with positive aims and the chance to make an impact, largely because they were being driven in non-partisan, non-sectarian ways as an expression of people's frustrations and desire for change. However, people feel that the initial momentum behind the protest movement was quickly overtaken by political parties, who inserted their own supporters and sectarian considerations into the dynamic in ways that changed the non-partisan intent. The result is that many people feel that the motivation behind the protests was corrupted and they ended up not having a significant impact on the political environment. Reflecting upon the protests, some focus group participants noted that a major consequence was in demonstrating that there is some unity among Lebanese people and that the political divisions are not the result of citizens' actual opinions as much as they are of the system they must deal with. One participant stated that, "[t]he first few days, I participated in these protests. Things were great; people were from different areas and religions. It all started against the whole group of politicians without exceptions." (Female, Christian, Beirut) Other participants confirmed that viewpoint, with one adding that "[t]he revolution was very positive at first, and everyone was motivated to be a part of it; however, it unfortunately did not continue with the same impact it had, because it started dividing people based on political affiliations and religion." (Female, Sunni, North)

## Pathways for Reform. Civil society, especially women and youth, will be instrumental to reform.

Overall, there was almost complete support for greater participation by youth and women in the political and civic sectors, with respondents noting that it is a person's qualifications and ideas, rather than their age or gender, that should matter most. Some felt that many women and youth have excelled in civil society roles but have had problems finding avenues to official political roles, which could be holding them back. Others expressed a belief that women and youth have more opportunities in civil society and can have more of an impact in that sector, given the problems that plague the political sector. The young generation (53 percent of survey respondents) and Lebanon's diversity (15 percent of survey respondents) were two of the top three survey responses to the question about Lebanon's greatest asset, reinforcing the view that a mixed population does not need to result in a siloed political system. Though people still express some reluctance to take part in civic exercises, such as town hall meetings or reaching out to an elected representative, they do recognize the value of Lebanese society overall and express optimism in what may result if they can harness civic action to push for systemic change.

# 2.
# RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

## 2.1 RESEARCH CONTEXT

Lebanon is currently enduring a unique concurrence of events that would challenge the most well-established political system. It is ironic, then, that while politics are active in Lebanon, its government is not; since the resignation of Hassan Diab following the port explosion in August 2020, a caretaker government has overseen the country. While contending with a debilitating currency crisis, rising prices, and shortages of fuel, food, and medicine, the caretaker government has repeatedly enacted short-term measures to stave off potential crises while being unable to undertake major legislation or reform. Protest marches in Beirut recently marked the one year anniversary of the explosion and echoed the themes and sentiments of the nationwide protests in October 2019: anger at politicians, who citizens feel have evaded accountability, and dissatisfaction with a political system that they see as corrupted and fundamentally flawed in its sectarian composition.

While the October 2019 protests may have initially seemed as if they would mark a low point in people's trust in the government and politics, events since have proven any such assumptions false. The protests were followed by an escalating series of crises with negative consequences that continue to accelerate. Governmental upheaval began when Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri and his cabinet resigned amid the protests in October 2019, leading to Diab's appointment, subsequent resignation, and the current caretaker government. Long-term governmental financial mismanagement and unsustainable monetary policies resulted in currency devaluation and an economic situation that the World Bank recently characterized as something most often associated with war or conflict, which has resulted in more than 50 percent of the population living below the poverty line. In an attempt to rein in spending, the caretaker government has reduced electricity production and raised prices on commodities such as bread while attempting to subsidize imports of fuel and medicine. Limited fuel supplies have resulted in miles-long lines of vehicles at gas stations and dangerous power shortages at locations relying on generators, including hospitals. The emergence and persistence of the COVID-19 pandemic is straining the already weak health system and further exacerbating economic difficulties, contributing to the rising costs and scarcity of medicines and treatments.

Throughout all of this the political parties have failed to make meaningful progress in negotiations to form a new government, preventing the implementation of policies that could address some of these crises and add a sense of stability and functionality to politics. It is no wonder that, when asked, 95 percent of people surveyed stated that the country is going in the wrong direction. In such a fractious environment, that is one thing on which people almost universally agree.

There is another theme that emerges when looking at the research: people have an unwillingness to accept short-term solutions and politics-as-usual. They feel that politicians should be held accountable and that the political system is fundamentally flawed due to its sectarian composition. Their political frustrations stem from the legacy of poor policy and poor results, as well as from dissatisfaction with the corruption and bias that they perceive as endemic to the system as constructed. Such broad-based agreement on what ails the political system can be built upon by non-sectarian, non-political groups to spur demands for reform and increase citizen influence with parties, the government, and in the policy-making process.

## 2.2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To gauge in-depth local views towards the subject matter at hand, this research employed a mixed method research approach. The report is based on a telephone survey of 2,400 adults (18 years old and above), with a representative sample determined by governorate and then by sect within each governorate (based on population distribution statistics from the most recent Central Administration for Statistics Labour Force and Household Living Conditions study in 2018/19), also reflecting age and gender demographics. The survey sample was distributed equally between age groups ranging from 18 to 64 years old (15 percent for each group), with the exception for the age ranging between 25 and 34 years where it is represented by one quarter of the tested sample.

The survey was conducted between March 10 and April 6, 2021, and has an estimated Margin of Error (MoE) of +/- 5.0 percent. Due to COVID-19 preventative measures, face-to-face survey interviews were not possible. To field the survey, InfoPro used a national database of household information for landline and mobile phone users compiled combining the three major service providers: Ogero (landline), Alfa (mobile), and touch (mobile), that included demographic and geographic information to ensure a representative sample.

**Table 1: Representative National Sample by Governorate**

| Governorates | Population | Percent of Total | Sample distribution (2400) | Actual Sample |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Beirut | 341,700 | 7% | 168 | 385 |
| Mount Lebanon | 2,032,600 | 42% | 1,008 | 451 |
| North Lebanon | 961,900 | 20% | 480 | 412 |
| Bekaa | 542,700 | 11% | 264 | 400 |
| South Lebanon | 584,400 | 12% | 288 | 375 |
| Nabatieh | 379,100 | 8% | 192 | 383 |
| Total | 4,842,500 | 100 % | 2,400 | 2,406 |

**Table 2: Representative National Sample by Sect**

| Representative National Sample by Sect | | |
|---|---|---|
| Sects | Distribution | Sample Distribution |
| Sunni | 27% | 648 |
| Shia | 27% | 648 |
| Maronite | 22% | 528 |
| Orthodox | 8% | 192 |
| Druze | 6% | 144 |
| Catholic | 5% | 120 |
| Armenians | 3% | 72 |
| Other (Minorities) | 2% | 48 |
| Total | 100% | 2,400 |

In addition to the survey, 10 focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted between May 25 and June 8, 2021 via video with five groups each for women and men nationwide, including groups from the South, North, Beirut, Bekaa, Mount Lebanon, and Nabatieh, and reflecting age and sectarian differences. The FGDs engaged a sample of 75 respondents. Each group included eight participants (with the exceptions of two groups of six participants and one group of seven participants) and were conducted by a single moderator using a discussion guide developed by NDI. The guide included questions covering general attitudes towards politics and political actors, the effectiveness of the government at the national and municipal levels, opinions about the protest movement and emerging political groups, perceptions about civic participation among youth and women, and attitudes towards the media and other information sources.

**Table 3:** Socio-demographic breakdown of FGD participants

| FGD # | Location | Gender | Religion | # Participants |
|-------|----------|--------|----------|----------------|
| 1 | Beirut | Female | Christian | 8 |
| 2 | Beirut | Male | Sunni | 8 |
| 3 | Mount Lebanon | Male | Christian | 6 |
| 4 | Mount Lebanon | Female | Druze | 6 |
| 5 | North Lebanon | Female | Chrisitan | 8 |
| 6 | North Lebanon | Female | Sunni | 8 |
| 7 | Bekka | Male | Druze | 8 |
| 8 | Bekka | Male | Shia | 8 |
| 9 | South Lebanon | Female | Shia | 8 |
| 10 | Nabatieh | Male | Shia | 7 |

It is important to note that since this research was conducted at the height of the COVID-19 epidemic in Lebanon, and as such, NDI and InfoPro had to respond to the situation on the ground accordingly to ensure the safety and security of research participants, survey enumerators and FGD facilitators, and InfoPro staff in Beirut. For example, telephone interviews replaced the originally intended household survey methodology. This affected the nature and length of the survey as NDI and InfoPro had to account for a telephone survey, typically 15–20 minutes, and not a face-to-face interview, typically 45 minutes. The selection of respondents also varied. Instead of using a three-stage cluster sampling for the households' survey, InfoPro relied on a list-based sampling for the households' selection.

# 3.
# RESEARCH FINDINGS

## 3.1 TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS. CITIZENS DO NOT TRUST OR FEEL REPRESENTED BY POLITICAL AND GOVERNING INSTITUTIONS.

*"In my opinion, I think each politician should be working for everyone. But unfortunately, our politicians work for their religions, and the discrimination starts. No one represents me."*

(Male, Sunni, Beirut)

People from all parts of Lebanon feel frustration, cynicism, and, in some cases, resignation at the state of politics, economics, and society. More than just feeling that the country is moving in the wrong direction, people from all areas, confessional groups, ages, and genders expressed disappointment over political dysfunction that they feel has left the country in a desperate, but not necessarily hopeless, situation. They lay the blame largely at the feet of politicians, who they feel have exploited the sectarian-based system to their own enrichment, while ignoring the needs of citizens. However, during focus group discussions, citizens also examined their own actions and admonished fellow citizens and themselves for repeatedly voting for the same politicians and participating in the same flawed system, regardless of past failures and controversies and despite knowing the limitations and shortcomings of the system. When asked who was responsible for the current crises in the country, one focus group participant stated that it was the responsibility of the "leaders and the citizens. The citizens are the ones voting for the same people." (Female, Shiite, South)

*"Nothing has changed. ... We can only say that whoever would come now as government wouldn't change anything because the corruption was already there. ... With the economic situation, the Coronavirus, the explosion, no one really cares about the government. The people's concern is only how to survive."*

(Male, Sunni, Beirut)

"There is not anything going in the right direction. This situation does not allow you to feel secure and I do not know what to do next. You do not know what will happen next."

(Male, Christian, Mount Lebanon)

"Definitely things are going the wrong way. The country is facing political chaos and the people are the victims. Because our politicians only want to make profit for themselves and the people are barely living. … Belonging to political parties isn't something good, because the people can't stop the politicians from making the situation worse."

(Male, Shiite, Nabatieh)

"Even during the Lebanese Civil War, things were not that bad. The reigning political system is the worst and not only on the economic level. The country should reach a point where a new group of rulers takes the place of the current corrupt politicians. … People are becoming corrupt because of the corrupt politicians and the people they hire with them."

(Male, Sunni, Beirut)

"The parliament is not working for us but they are stealing for themselves."

(Female, Shiite, South)

"They [politicians] do everything that benefits themselves, not the country or people."
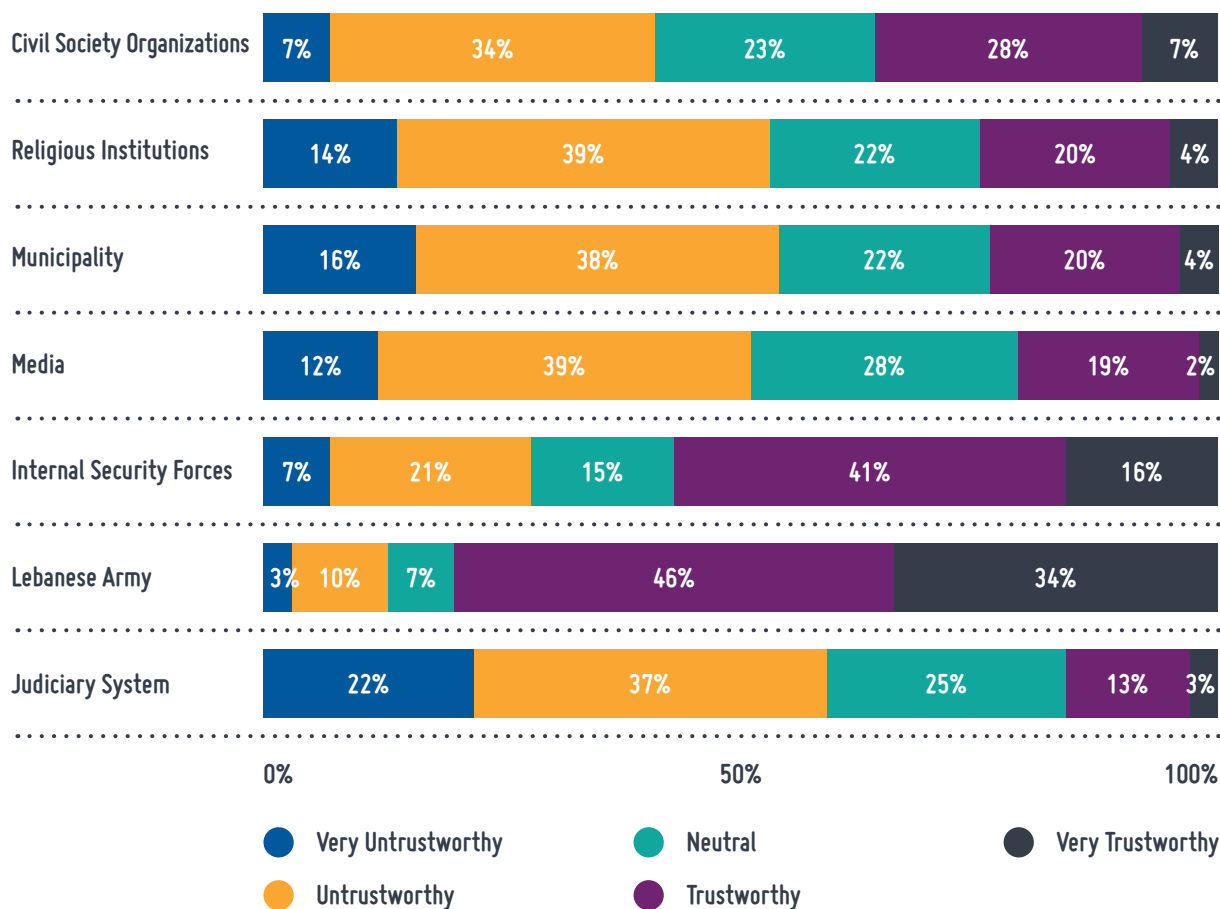
(Female, Shiite, South)

"We are trying to move away from anything related to politics."

(Male, Christian, Bekaa)

"I do not think there is still someone that wants religious people to represent the after all what we passed through and saw."

Female, Shiite, South)

## Trust in Institutions

| Institution | Very Untrustworthy | Untrustworthy | Neutral | Trustworthy | Very Trustworthy |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Civil Society Organizations | 7% | 34% | 23% | 28% | 7% |
| Religious Institutions | 14% | 39% | 22% | 20% | 4% |
| Municipality | 16% | 38% | 22% | 20% | 4% |
| Media | 12% | 39% | 28% | 19% | 2% |
| Internal Security Forces | 7% | 21% | 15% | 41% | 16% |
| Lebanese Army | 3% | 10% | 7% | 46% | 34% |
| Judiciary System | 22% | 37% | 25% | 13% | 3% |

0%                         50%                         100%

● Very Untrustworthy        ● Neutral        ● Very Trustworthy
● Untrustworthy             ● Trustworthy

Citizens' distrust extends to the local level, with less than one quarter of respondents expressing any trust in their municipality. During focus group discussions, participants expanded on this view by noting that some municipal governments are subject to the same negative forces hindering national politics, namely: corruption and mismanagement. Participants expressed that municipal officials consider political parties to be their main clients and that they look out for those related to or affiliated politically with them, rather than serving constituents. Culturally, survey results also indicate that people have lost trust in religious institutions as well. More than 50 percent of respondents indicated a lack of trust in religious institutions, while in separate questions, respondents indicated they are most likely to seek out family and friends to discuss politics and policies. The negative impact of political affiliations is seen by people in religious institutions, with one

participant responding to which institutions they trust by saying, "Definitely not the religious figures. They're almost like or worse than the political parties. Because in Lebanon, if not the political leader will help in corruption, then the religious figure will." (Female, Christian, Beirut) Overall, civil society organizations are considered more trustworthy than religious institutions, the media, and municipalities.

**"Corruption started from municipalities. Corruption should be excluded from all governmental and public entities starting from municipalities, reaching the president."**

(Male, Christian, Bekaa)

**"The mayor wouldn't be chosen unless he takes part in a political party and belongs to the same religion of the municipality's religion. No, I do not trust any municipalities. Especially the municipality of Beirut, of the richest, did not offer anything."**

(Male, Sunni, Beirut)

**"Municipalities are becoming as bad as the government. ... Some heads of municipalities don't even have a degree and use their position to benefit themselves and the people close to them."**

(Female, Christian, Mount Lebanon)

**"I am against all the parties. They are strengthening the sectarianism among the citizens and they are ruining the country."**

(Female, Shiite, South)

**"I personally do not support any political party, and I highly believe that political parties definitely do not help in the process of making Lebanon more stable and peaceful. In fact they are currently doing the opposite."**

(Female, Christian, Mount Lebanon)

"I do not know how much we can still give political parties chances. ... There are political parties that are established for a reason such as war by now they are not doing anything to change the situation."

(Male, Christian, Mount Lebanon)

"Not only the political parties by the citizens are also to be blamed. We, the people who voted for them. But we should learn from our mistakes and change them in the upcoming elections."

(Male, Christian, Bekaa)

"If we get rid of all of these parties and stop the cronyism, for example each gets a job based on the qualifications and degree, things would work out in our country."

(Female, Christian, Beirut)

In fact, the Lebanese Army is the most trusted institution, with 80 percent of respondents indicating that they trust it either somewhat or strongly. The reasons for this level of trust in the army were discussed during the focus groups. While it may seem odd to think of the military as being the highest form of democracy in a country, that was what many expressed, citing the army's structure, leadership, and overall organization as an example of a non-partisan, non-sectarian body that operates successfully and as a model that should be used to move politics away from its sectarian divisions. "I respect the Lebanese army. Our army protects our land, the borders, and doesn't belong to any political party, nor has participated in the elections. I feel the army is kind of neutral." (Male, Sunni, Beirut) Such an expression of faith in a non-sectarian system could serve as a reprimand to politicians or parties who insist that there is no alternative to the sectarian system currently in place.

"I trust the Lebanese army because it is founded from the people and all the religions. And even if you try to deal based on religion within the army, it would cause its complete separation."

(Female, Christian, Beirut)

The overall lack of trust in institutions is compounded by distrust of the media and other information sources. Only 36 percent of survey respondents express trust in the media, with 64 percent indicating a lack of trust in sources such as TV, radio stations, newspapers, and online news sites. Instead, as indicated during focus group

discussions, if people consume media for news, they look at it as unobjective and biased, citing the political affiliations of many outlets as a reason for skepticism of the information shared. Focus group participants indicated they were more likely to determine their opinions on the basis of discussions with friends and family or by considering multiple, often opposed, news sources to try to find balance in coverage. As one participant noted, "Each channel is related to a political party. So, you have to listen to all the channels to know what is right." (Male, Christian, Mount Lebanon) Another stated that, "I do my own personal analysis from the provided information. None in Lebanon can be considered trustworthy." (Female, Shiite, South)

### In general, do you trust the Lebanese media (TV, radio stations, newspapers, and online sites)?
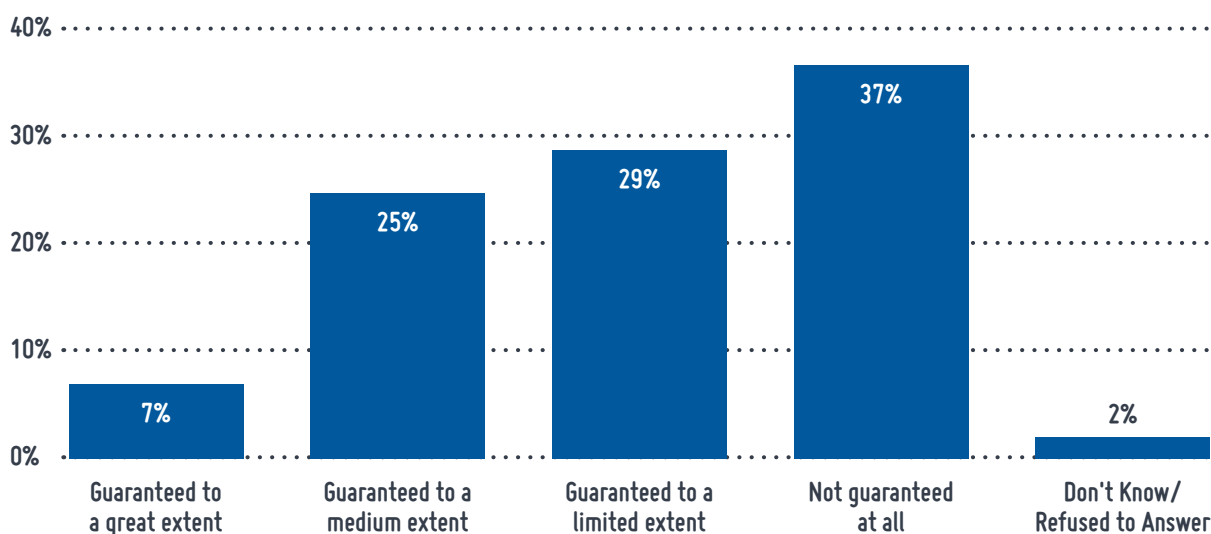


- 36% Yes
- 64% No
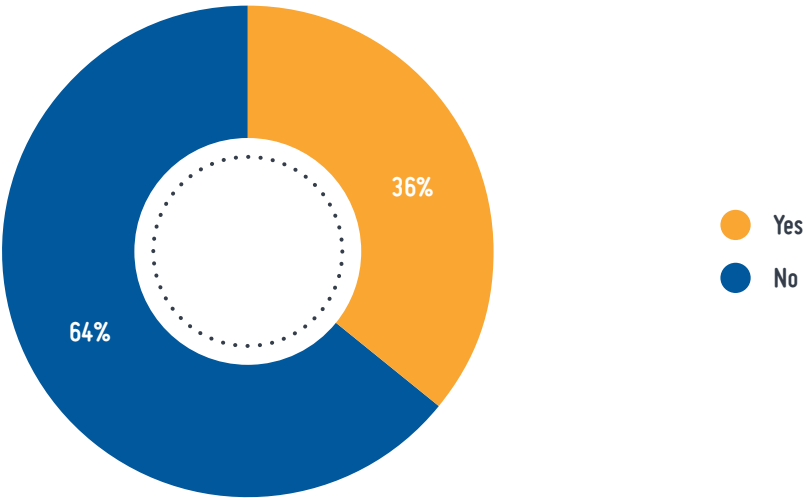
This lack of trust in media is coupled with the belief by close to two-thirds of survey respondents that the freedom of the media to criticize government actions is only guaranteed to a limited extent or not at all. If people believe that the media outlets are all controlled by political interests, they would see little chance for objective criticisms to be shared. In focus group discussions, some participants shared examples of times when, even on social media, they felt that their political opinions had been censored or had caused them problems. "The media system is related to the political system. ... And no one is allowed to create a new and independent news source. Reporters don't have the freedom to speak freely either on TV or their private social media." (Female, Christian, Mount Lebanon) Some participants noted times when their posts had been deleted without their knowledge or that they felt parties had turned online attacks against them for expressing a contrary opinion. Though anecdotal, this indicates people's caution and concern about expressing their opinion even in the relatively anonymous online space, which could have a chilling effect on political discourse overall.

**Freedom of the Media**



- Guaranteed to a great extent: 7%
- Guaranteed to a medium extent: 25%
- Guaranteed to a limited extent: 29%
- Not guaranteed at all: 37%
- Don't Know/ Refused to Answer: 2%

## 3.2 POLICY PRIORITIES. ECONOMIC ASSISTANCE AND STRUCTURAL REFORM ARE URGENT POLICY PRIORITIES.

**"They should fight the corruption and the political people and parties. They should get specialist ministers and they will do the job right."**

(Male, Shiite, Bekaa)

When asked which policies would have the most benefit if enacted, respondents indicated that the economy and political reform are of major importance. People are looking for policies that stimulate job creation, reduce inflation, assist vulnerable families, and improve healthcare. However, respondents felt that the most benefit would come from a new electoral law, with 36 percent of respondents noting that as a top three priority. This reflects a view also discussed during focus groups: that if changes are made to the election process, new leaders could be voted in and political change and reforms could result. Thus, a new electoral law, which focus group respondents overwhelmingly expressed wanting to eliminate sectarian considerations, is the way to enact structural reform and lead to a different political calculus that could usher in economic, social welfare, and other reforms. One focus group participant summed up this viewpoint, saying, "I believe that, for us to change these people, we should change the electoral law. The current electoral law is designed in a way that elects the same people each time, and if not the same people by name, but the same political background. In addition to that, I believe that for Lebanon to develop, then religion must be separated from the state. This way, groups will be elected based on their programs and not their religion." (Female, Christian, Mount Lebanon)

Further bolstering the support for structural reform, 11 percent of respondents want policies to separate religion from the state to be a priority. Conversely, only three percent of respondents would see a benefit from policies to maintain sectarian balance, the lowest level of support of any possible policies, with less support than policies related to banking or investigating the port explosion.

This priority is underscored by responses when participants were asked to rate the importance of reforms put forward by the protest movement. More than 70 percent noted that a government of experts instead of party loyalists is either important or very important and approximately 65 percent felt that adopting a civil status state and removing sectarian quotas in elections were important or very important.

## Policy Priorities

| Policy | Percentage |
|--------|-----------|
| New electoral law | 36% |
| Reduce inflation | 21% |
| Return the embezzled funds | 20% |
| Job creation | 19% |
| Keeping the subsidies on basic commodities | 18% |
| Support the most vulnerable | 17% |
| Capital control law | 16% |
| Healthcare | 16% |
| Retrieve money from the bank | 12% |
| Civil state | 11% |
| Removal of the subsidies | 10% |
| Security | 10% |
| Law on illicit enrichment | 8% |
| Forensic audit of all institutions | 8% |
| Forensic audit of the central bank | 6% |
| Port blast Investigation | 6% |
| Stimulate access to basic commodities | 4% |
| Maintain sectarian balance | 3% |

"First, they have to stop the corruption. ... You cannot remove the corruption, but you have to remove the political parties from public institutions."

(Male, Sunni, Beirut)

"I am with the change of the whole system and the laws. Within this, there will be a change and the whole formula that is set now will be finally gone. For example, if the government can be elected with disregard to the Christian/Muslim division in the parliament, things would work out."

(Female, Christian, Beirut)

## Reforms Put Forward by the Protest Movement

| | Government of experts | Lifting bank secrecy | Adopt a civil state | Remove sectarian quotas | Voting rights for military |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Very Important | 39% | 40% | 32% | 28% | 20% |
| Important | 34% | 34% | 33% | 36% | 40% |
| Neutral | 7% | 7% | 13% | 15% | 14% |
| Not Important | 18% | 16% | 18% | 17% | 21% |

Legend:
- Very Important
- Important
- Neutral
- Not Important
- Not Important at All
- Don't Know
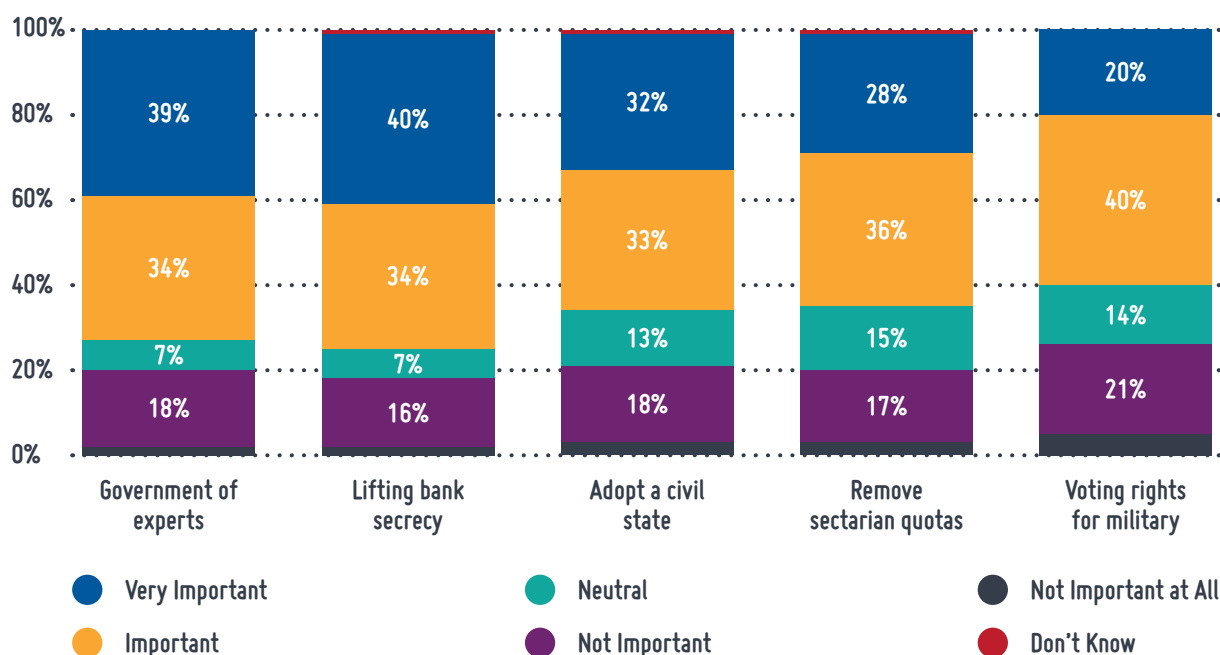
## 3.3 CROSS-CUTTING SYSTEMIC CHANGE. MEANINGFUL CHANGE WILL NOT COME FROM THE BALLOT BOX; PEOPLE WANT THE SYSTEM TO CHANGE.

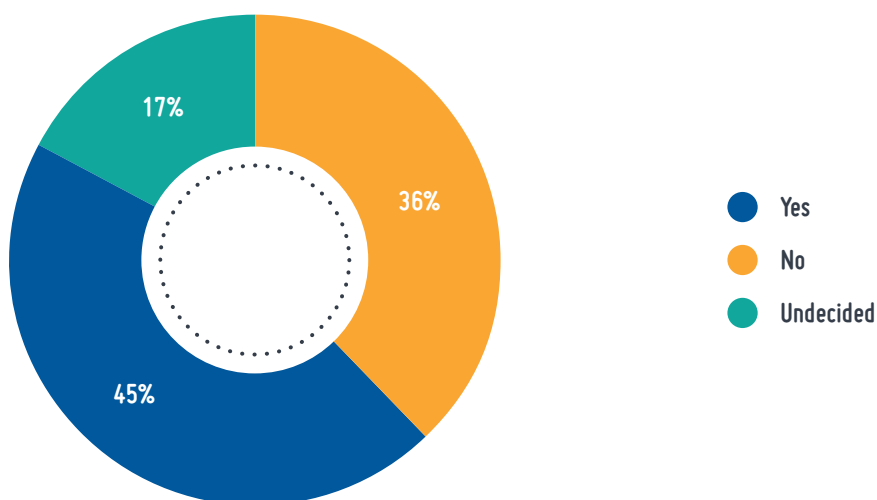**"Even if we elect a whole new set of leaders, things will stay the same because of the religious distributions in the country and the ministries. ... The whole system is wrong. When the system changes ... things would change."**
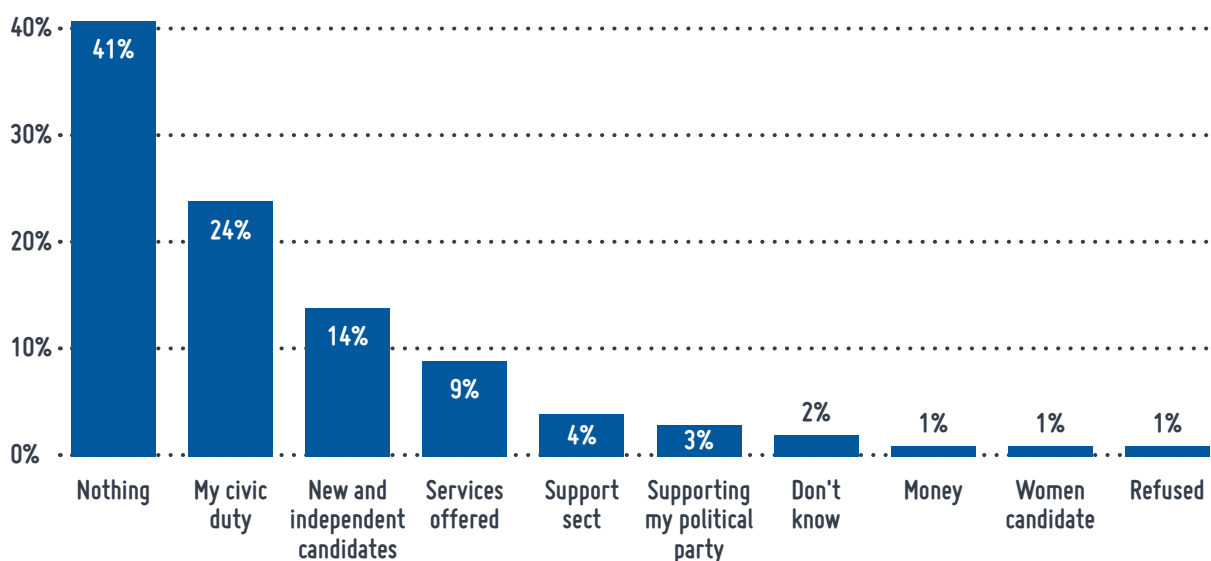
(Female, Christian, Beirut)

People's frustration with the system and their belief that elections do not change things is reflected in the fact that, when asked if they would vote in the upcoming parliamentary elections, only 38 percent of respondents said they would. Though 17 percent are still undecided, 45 percent of respondents do not intend to vote. This points to a huge challenge to be overcome by any candidate, party, or movement looking for success: how to reach out and encourage those who are not intending to vote to cast a ballot on election day?

This reflects the high level of frustration people expressed with the political system and the belief that elections do not change things. There is little motivation to vote if you believe it is simply a repeat of past, failed processes. When looking for motivations to vote, some people want to support new political figures. When asked which party or candidate they would vote for if elections were held today, 25 percent of respondents noted that they would vote for civil society candidates associated with the protest movement or lists. More than 40 percent indicated they would not vote and close to 10 percent said they would cast a blank, or protest, ballot, which is a higher percentage than any single party would garner, according to the survey. However, more people will vote out of a sense of civic duty (24 percent) than will expressly vote for any specific party, platform, or policy, at this point.

### Are you going to vote in the upcoming parliamentary election?



- **Yes** (45%)
- **No** (36%)
- **Undecided** (17%)

## What would motivate you to vote?

| Category | % |
|---|---|
| Nothing | 41% |
| My civic duty | 24% |
| New and independent candidates | 14% |
| Services offered | 9% |
| Support sect | 4% |
| Supporting my political party | 3% |
| Don't know | 2% |
| Money | 1% |
| Women candidate | 1% |
| Refused | 1% |

"We have seen several revolutions and changes led and done by youth abroad. We as Lebanese youth should adopt these strategies and use them to influence the decision makers here. ... Plus, I think we are the only country in the world that undergoes elections based on religion. Such acts enhance sectarianism."

(Male, Christian, Bekaa)

"The political and economic situation is wrong. The country situation will not work anymore. They have to change the sectarian system. They have to do a new political system. All our problems are from the political situation. They have to fix it in order to fix our economic situation."

(Female, Shiite, South)

"Even if we elect a whole new set of leaders, things will stay the same because of the religious distributions in the country and the ministries. ... The whole system is wrong. When the system changes and the decisions are made collectively, things would change."

(Female, Christian, Beirut)

"I wish all these politicians that represent different religions would be replaced by atheist leaders. Honestly, the way they have joined religion to politics has ruined everything. They are playing on our instincts. … Even wars originated because of such religious differences and it is the people's loss."

(Male, Sunni, Beirut)

## 3.4 IMPACT OF THE PROTEST MOVEMENT. THE 2019 PROTESTS DID NOT RESULT IN CHANGE BUT DID SHOW HOW CHANGE COULD BE CATALYZED.

"If we observe what has happened through the past couple of years, there is only one positive thing that has happened. The protests and the revolution have showed that our people can finally express their needs and speak out."

(Male, Shiite, Nabatieh)

Though the October 2019 protests were a major event that highlighted political demands, their legacy has been less impactful. There was no universally agreed-upon leader that emerged from the protest movement, and though the government of Saad al-Hariri resigned in response to the protests, the subsequent months have been dominated by first a largely ineffectual government and then by the current caretaker government, ultimately leading to the precipitous downward economic spiral the country is currently facing. Meanwhile, the political corruption and desired reforms that the protests meant to highlight have not yet been addressed.

Many focus group participants saw the protests as a disruption more than a force for change, pointing out the closed streets, traffic challenges, and violent incidents that resulted. Overall, many respondents believe that unless protests directly threaten those in charge, they will not result in significant reform and expressed concern that, even if a new leader or movement emerged, it would be vulnerable to corruption by existing political parties.

## Did the protest movement bring about change in Lebanon?

23%

77%

● Yes

● No
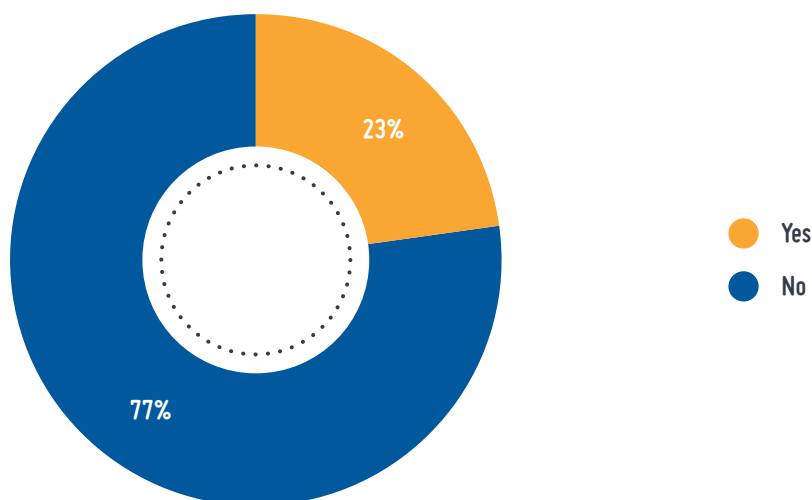
## Did the protest movement change political discourse in Lebanon?

38%

62%

● Yes

● No
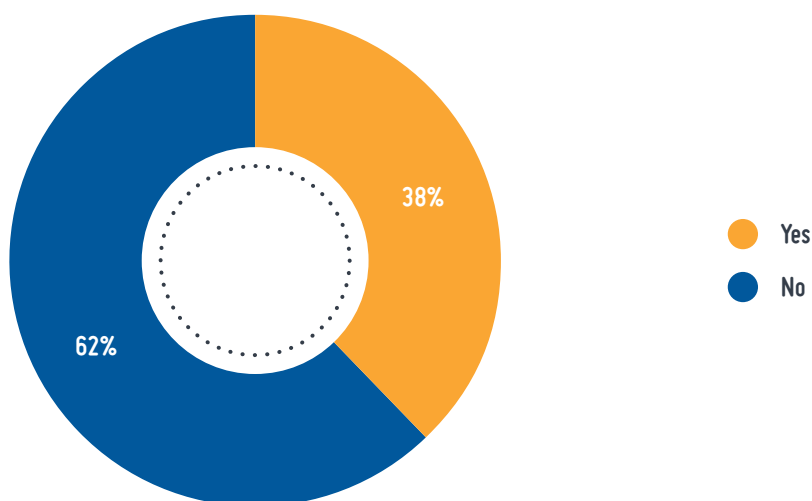
However, despite expressed disappointment in the lack of concrete results following the protests, people did see some ways in which they were a more hopeful indicator of where politics could go in Lebanon. Of the 23 percent of respondents who did think that the protests brought about change, approximately 45 percent cited the delegitimization of political leaders and the increase in people's political awareness as positive outcomes. Another 21 percent of respondents cited increased awareness of corruption among political leaders as a positive outcome of the protests. Focus group participants noted that, when focusing on the start of the protests and their initial aims, there were positive outcomes. "The most positive thing these protests have done is that people have expressed themselves freely. In addition, after the revolution there are discussion groups that lead discussions and tell the world using the media about how bad the politics are in our country," stated one

participant (Male, Shiite, Nabatieh). Another expressed praise for the protests for what they exposed: "The protests proved that the political parties failed to do their job. They are also shameless. They are not doing anything to fix the situation." (Male, Christian, Bekaa)

**"The revolution is the only thing in this country that has done a good job in representing issues I care about."**

(Female, Sunni, North)

**"The positive is that people started to talk about their needs and ask for their rights."**

(Female, Christian, North)

**"I think the first two days [of the protests] it was not related to political parties and it was very good, but later it deviated toward the political party and it stopped being good."**

(Female, Shiite, South)

**"All the Lebanese people wanted the goals of the protest whether they are with or against the protest. The protest failed because none of the things requested during it was achieved."**
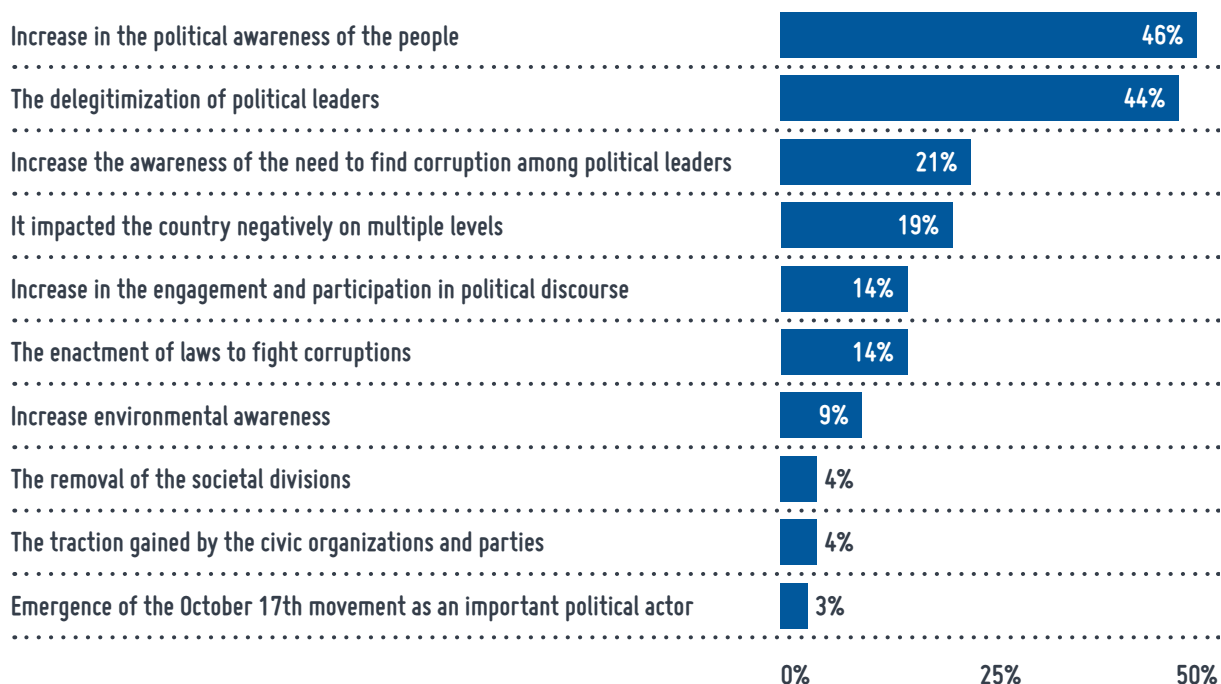
(Male, Christian, Mount Lebanon)

**"On the first few days they were all united under the same motto. Unfortunately, things did not last and people couldn't keep it away from religion and politics."**

(Male, Sunni, Beirut)

## What were the important changes from the protest movement?

| | |
|---|---|
| Increase in the political awareness of the people | 46% |
| The delegitimization of political leaders | 44% |
| Increase the awareness of the need to find corruption among political leaders | 21% |
| It impacted the country negatively on multiple levels | 19% |
| Increase in the engagement and participation in political discourse | 14% |
| The enactment of laws to fight corruptions | 14% |
| Increase environmental awareness | 9% |
| The removal of the societal divisions | 4% |
| The traction gained by the civic organizations and parties | 4% |
| Emergence of the October 17th movement as an important political actor | 3% |

0%     25%     50%

In discussing this issue in-depth with focus group participants, it becomes apparent that one positive result of the protests was the sense of unity it engendered among citizens, however briefly, in the initial days. One participant noted, "[t]he revolution was positive at first where all religions went down and protested, but politics and religion eventually divided people..." (Female, Sunni, North) The focus group discussions also demonstrated that people will consider new and emerging political movements as viable options if they see potential policy benefits and platforms being introduced. One participant noted that, "[e]veryone will support them [emerging political movements] if they work for Lebanon's benefit and for the citizens' benefit. Their work is what makes them reach." (Female, Christian, North) Another noted that, "I personally don't care about the name of the group but their principles and development programs. In addition to that, during elections, it must be more organized and should exclude sectarianism. For Lebanon to be great again, it must become a civil society." (Female, Christian, Mount Lebanon)

### "The negative is that the political parties entered to the protest."

(Female, Christian, North)

### "Disappointedly, it started and looked first as a neutral revolution, but turned out to be political. I am 100 percent sure politicians have asked the participants to join, and also asked them to stop."

(Male, Sunni, Beirut)

"All politicians have interfered in the revolution. The revolution has united all the religions and all the political groups, but after the poverty and the economic need that the people are facing now, politicians are gaining these people again by offering donation boxes."

(Male, Sunni, Beirut)

"It all started really from the people that are asking for their own rights. It all started peacefully. With time, some political groups started to invade these protests and ruined everything. They cannot see us united and making our decisions."

(Female, Christian, Beirut)

## 3.5 PATHWAYS FOR REFORM. CIVIL SOCIETY, ESPECIALLY WOMEN AND YOUTH, WILL BE INSTRUMENTAL TO REFORM.

"Political parties have shown great failure…. In the civil society there are people that deserve to participate in leading the country because they don't have any political affiliations. In addition, they believe in leading the country away from political interferences."

(Male, Sunni, Beirut)

During focus group discussions, there was widespread support for youth and women to be included and supported in seeking political office or being more involved in politics generally. Discussion participants were more interested in the quality of ideas and policies than in the gender or age of a politician, with one noting that, "I would vote for these candidates [youth and women] as long as they have a clear project in hand." (Male, Shiite, Nabatieh) Another participant stated that, "[new youth or women candidates] can succeed in case they are not related to any sect, work for the people, and show us new things. By this, they will make people trust them." (Female, Shiite, South)

"They can succeed in case they are not related into any sect, work for the people, and show us new things. By this, they will make people trust them. They provide the people with services and show us that they are there for us. The government starts from these small things. They should take people with the abilities to the positions, not the people that are related to the leaders."
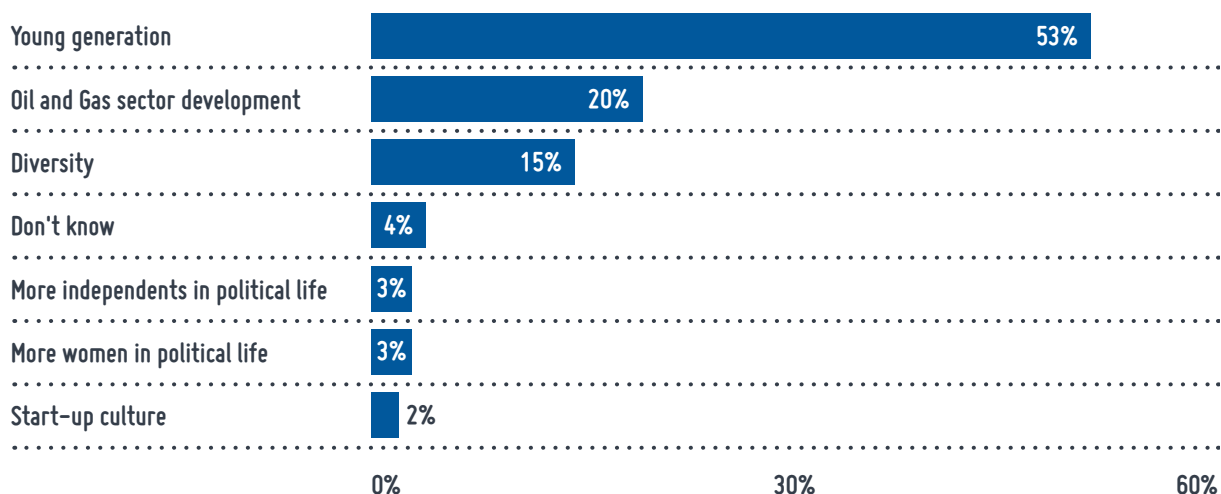
(Female, Shiite, South)

"These groups should be only for those that are purely civil and want to make change disregarding politics and religions. If the members in such groups become numerous, they can affect the elections and then all the political parties will now be aware that there is a group of people that has a power over them."

(Male, Shiite, Nabatieh)

When survey respondents were asked to choose what they see as Lebanon's greatest asset, 53 percent noted the "young generation" and 15 percent noted the country's diversity. As described above, in looking at the desire for reform to move away from sectarian-based political divisions, people see diversity and new ideas as a strength, rather than a weakness. Several focus group participants highlighted civil society as the sector in which women and youth can first make an impact, pointing out the opportunities to get involved in civil society that are not offered by political parties and noting that civil society engagement could lead away from political divisions. One participant stated, "If there is an institution that I would trust, it should be a civil one, because it would represent all the people and all the religions." (Female, Christian, Beirut)

### What do you see as Lebanon's greatest asset?

| | |
|---|---|
| Young generation | 53% |
| Oil and Gas sector development | 20% |
| Diversity | 15% |
| Don't know | 4% |
| More independents in political life | 3% |
| More women in political life | 3% |
| Start-up culture | 2% |

0%     30%     60%

"Yes, I would vote for a young candidate especially if he or she has a clear and well represented action plan that works best for the youth and their rights and ambitions in this country."

(Male, Shiite, Nabatieh)

"I believe educated youth are needed in every political party because that is the only way to guarantee change."

(Female, Christian, Mount Lebanon)

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"What recommendations should we propose to people [politicians] that are so old? What is important to us is definitely not important to them. I think it is better that we, the youth, support each other and help each other since we understand the needs of one another."

(Male, Christian, Bekaa)

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"Our problem is not in gender. However, our problem is that all of our leaders are related to political parties. This is what prevents women from reaching. Women can reach faster if she is a member of the civil society than being a member of a political party."

(Female, Shiite, South)

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"Definitely through civil society, but this will not happen [women's leadership]. She will have to be engaged in a political party in order to raise her voice. The civil society is better for everything in our country, not only the engagement of women."

(Female, Christian, Beirut)

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"If the government increases the number of women, the country will change."

(Female, Shiite, South)

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However, Lebanese citizens are still reluctant to use those tools available to them to either express their opinions or gain community support. Despite underlying support for more of a focus on civil society or new movements, there is still a need to encourage more people to take part in the process. When asked if they would attend a town hall meeting to fight corruption, more than 60 percent of respondents indicated they were unlikely or highly unlikely to do so, with only 26 percent indicating they would be likely to attend. Similarly,

50 percent responded that they would be unlikely to take part in a protest, with less than 40 percent saying they would be likely to take part. These numbers are higher than those responding that they would call or visit their MP, talk to their local political party branch, or speak with religious leaders. Nevertheless, it points to the need to get more people involved in local level civic action. This may have to come from concerted outreach to families and small community groups; in considering efforts to fight corruption or to reform deteriorating economic conditions, approximately 75 percent of survey respondents noted that they would talk with family and friends. These are clearly issues of interest to people, indicating that it could be an avenue to increase engagement and encourage more civic participation.

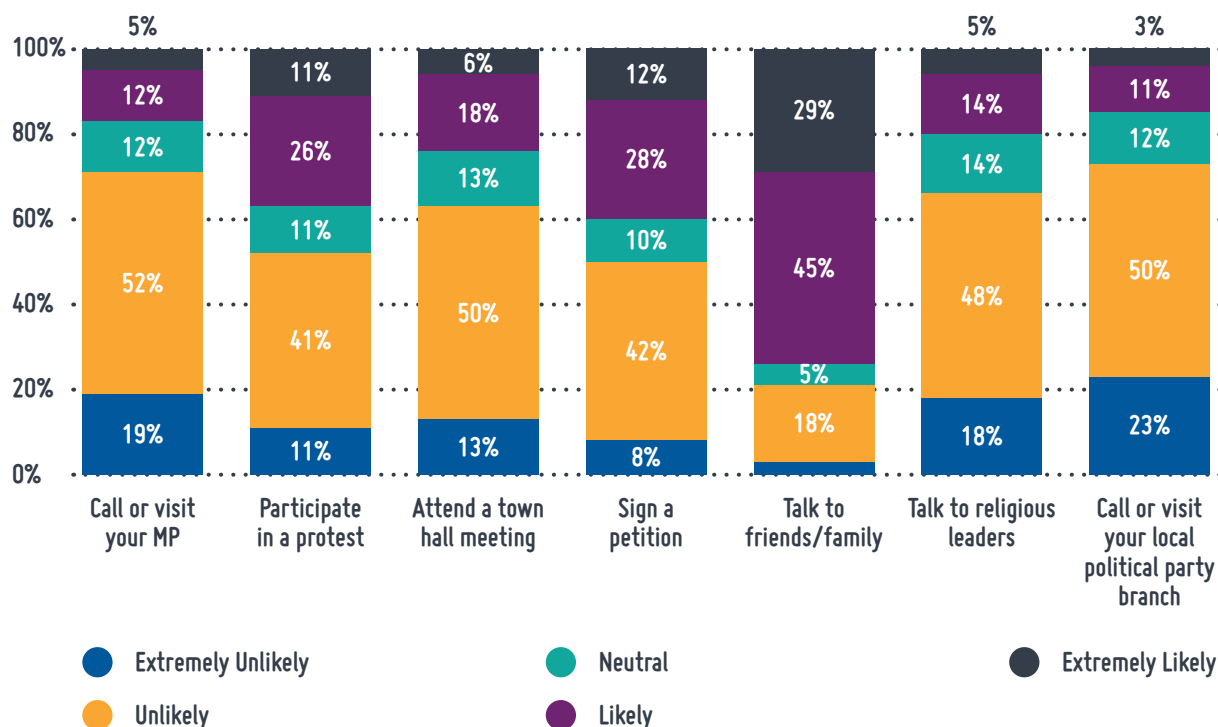### When thinking about fighting corruption, how likely will you pursue the following actions?
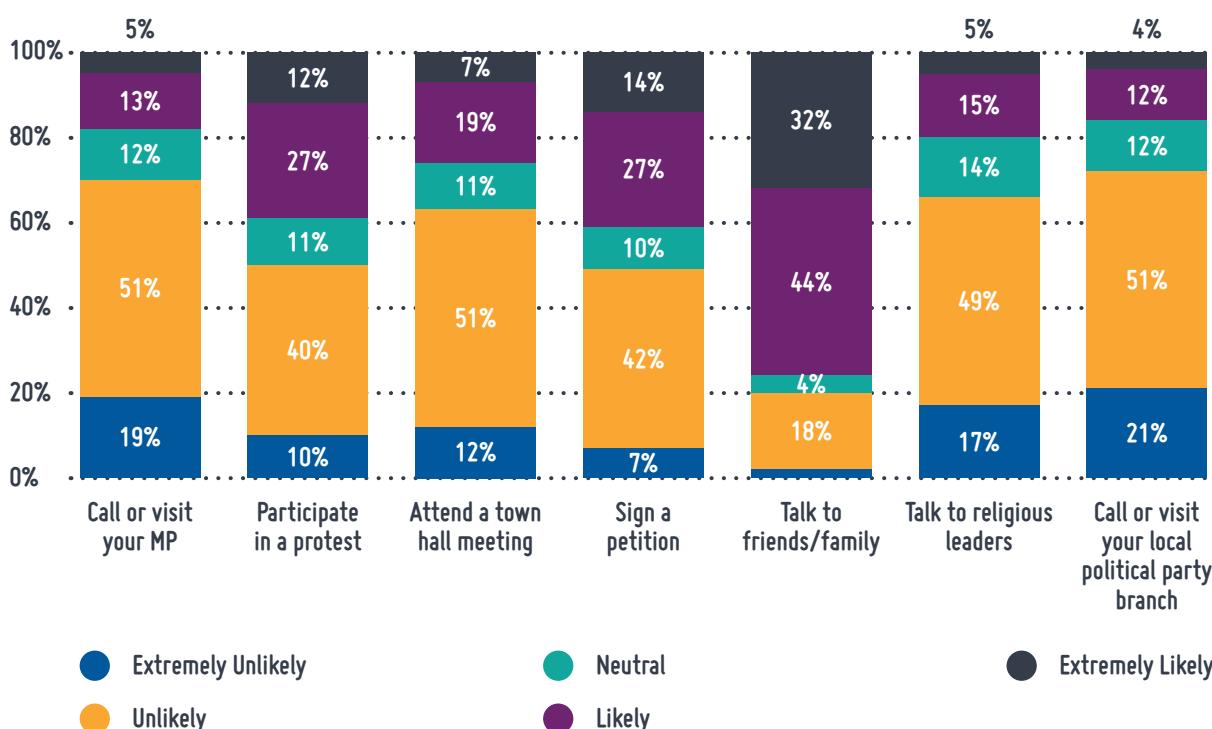


> "I believe it is better to be engaged in civil society, because political parties are manipulating the young ones' minds. They are misleading them. At the end these guys lose everything. Politicians encourage these young men to participate in wars, instead of working on building their future."

(Male, Sunni, Beirut)

**When thinking about reforming/fixing the deteriorating economic conditions, how likely will you pursue the following actions?**



Chart legend:
- Extremely Unlikely
- Unlikely
- Neutral
- Likely
- Extremely Likely

**Call or visit your MP:** 19% Extremely Unlikely, 52% Unlikely, 12% Neutral, 12% Likely, 5% Extremely Likely

**Participate in a protest:** 11% Extremely Unlikely, 41% Unlikely, 11% Neutral, 26% Likely, 11% Extremely Likely

**Attend a town hall meeting:** 13% Extremely Unlikely, 50% Unlikely, 13% Neutral, 18% Likely, 6% Extremely Likely

**Sign a petition:** 8% Extremely Unlikely, 42% Unlikely, 10% Neutral, 28% Likely, 12% Extremely Likely

**Talk to friends/family:** 18% Unlikely, 5% Neutral, 45% Likely, 29% Extremely Likely

**Talk to religious leaders:** 18% Extremely Unlikely, 48% Unlikely, 14% Neutral, 14% Likely, 5% Extremely Likely

**Call or visit your local political party branch:** 23% Extremely Unlikely, 50% Unlikely, 12% Neutral, 11% Likely, 3% Extremely Likely

"Youth should engage in civil society and not political parties. Civil societies support and represent the youth the most. Political parties do not target the youth because if they did, they would have provided the youth with job opportunities and helped in lowering the USD/Lira rate so that people can live. All they say are lies."

(Male, Christian, Bekaa)

"I think it is better to be engaged in civil society, because political parties are manipulating the young ones' minds. They are misleading them. At the end these guys lose everything."

(Male, Sunni, Beirut)

"The civil society is better for everything in our country, not only the engagement of women."

(Female, Christian, Beirut)

"Everyone will support them [emerging leaders] if they work for Lebanon's benefit and for the citizens' benefit. Their work is what makes them reach."

(Female, Christian, North)

# 4.
# CONCLUSION

Over the past two years, Lebanon has suffered through a series of crises, some global and unpreventable while others are unique to the country and the result of years of political neglect and poor policy. Struggling under financial, medical, and livelihood crises, almost everyone feels that the country is going in the wrong direction and they have stopped trusting political parties, politicians, and the government to find workable solutions.

However, Lebanese people from all parts of the country, all religious affiliations, and all demographic groups agree upon a way forward that could lead them out of the current crises and establish a better political foundation for the future. Overwhelmingly, citizens want to eliminate the sectarian basis on which political offices are currently determined, enact comprehensive electoral reform, and support emerging political leaders, civic actors, and new candidates. They want to move away from conducting politics as it has been for the last several decades and rely instead on people with expertise, policy ideas, and non-partisan affiliations.

In charting a way forward, the status quo is unacceptable to most people in Lebanon. Less than identity, what matters is the quality of the person and the ideas they can bring to politics. Though the 2019 protests did not result in fundamental political change, they did spur a feeling of unity against politics-as-usual, however brief. As Lebanese citizens look ahead, they hold that as a positive outcome and something that can be built upon. Now, the work becomes a matter of creating the conditions to take advantage of such unity so that people can achieve the quality of life improvements they want so urgently.