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Media Responsibilities in Municipal Elections



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Introduction

The election season has drawn nearer! Lebanon is preparing to hold its first municipal elections in seven years to replace the outgoing local councils that were elected in 2016. The vote should have taken place in 2022, but was instead postponed till 2023.

Therefore, it is important to prepare for the upcoming elections, in order to ensure that the outcome is beneficial to the Lebanese people, and to guarantee that they fulfill their role in electing local councilors. The latter will run the daily affairs of their respective constituencies, work for the common good, promote their development projects, and thrive to meet the needs of local residents, improve their livelihoods and living standards, and undertake wellbeing projects in their respective jurisdictions.

Given the crucial role media plays in upholding democratic life, this study sheds light on its important contributions in preserving democratic practices, such as holding elections, and in providing journalists with general guidelines about their role during local elections. This study will also take into consideration the lessons learned from the 2016 Municipal Elections' media coverage, which was marred by mistakes, to avoid replicating them.

This study is divided into two parts. The first part highlights the professional and legal principles that shall be followed during election reporting by referring to past elections' media coverage studies. The second part details the results of a survey conducted among a group of journalists to draw from their own experiences and review their needs to provide the best possible reporting during the upcoming elections.



Part I: The Duties of Journalists in Municipal Elections

1. The Importance of Municipal Elections

Electing municipal councils is an important electoral event. Municipal councils represent local authorities that enjoy considerable powers and have several functions. They are in charge of managing cities and townships, improving residents' livelihoods and meeting their needs in order to improve overall living conditions. Municipality politics are driven by political parties, local dignitaries and civil society actors that campaign for a certain development agenda and implement different projects serving local residents and society alike.

Unlike MPs and ministers, who manage national affairs and are not accessible, municipal councils manage local ones and are in direct contact with their constituents. Therefore, this type of local elections is of great importance.

The voters have the great responsibility of electing competent local representatives. They will be entrusted with the administration of local affairs for the upcoming years. The electorate shall know the candidates, examine their manifestos and read their programs for their time in office. Otherwise, they will not be able to compare options and elect who they deem fit.



The voters also have another responsibility on their hands. They ought to know the intricacies of the electoral process, the administration of voting polls and the powers of municipal councils. Moreover, they ought to understand the rhetoric of political parties and the discourse of candidates, the indications and implications of different political manifestos, and the nature of political alliances. Voters have to freely cast their votes while being fully aware of the consequences that their choices will yield. An informed vote is a prerequisite for responsibility and accountability.

Media is the medium between the electorate and the candidates. It provides a contact point and a knowledge hub to everything election related. It is an active player contributing to the good functioning of democratic systems. Media is the custodian of informed voting; therefore, journalists and administrators of media outlets have a primordial responsibility in ensuring the success of municipal elections.



2. The Role of Media in Municipal Elections

Media plays different roles in society, one of them being information sharing with the public across different fields. Moreover, the audience's level of interest in different topics will help media outlets establish their priorities and determine what type of stories is published. Based on this piece of information, media outlets develop an "audience agenda." The latter is a list of what they deem important for their viewership to understand the world and their immediate surroundings, with a special focus on daily life matters.

The same approach applies to election coverage. Media outlets have to identify the topics that are of interest to the electorate. Furthermore, the duty of raising awareness and shaping their audience into informed voters, fully aware of their civic duties and capable of elaborating constructive opinions, falls on their shoulders. They thus allow voters to choose the best candidates and hold them responsible and accountable for their actions. During the electoral process, media outlets play different roles, and bear several responsibilities, such as:

civic responsibility	Media outlets should inter alia explain the electoral system, highlight the role of the public administration in organizing elections, introduce the candidates, and review their political manifestos.
responsibility vis-a-vis the electorate	Media outlets should share news and stories, shape a public opinion, raise voters' awareness, encourage high electoral turnout, and communicate about political platforms and candidates' manifestos.
responsibility vis-a-vis the political authority	Media outlets should assume their role as the "Fourth Estate," exercise oversight, and cover the elections to ensure fairness and the proper implementation of the law.
responsibility vis-a-vis the candidates	Media outlets should publish the political platforms of opponents, rate and analyze them, publish the lists of candidates, provide a space for all candidates to express themselves, and maintain an unbiased and impartial coverage.



3. The Coverage of Elections by Journalists

All journalists play a vital part in election coverage. Indeed, they are one of the four pillars of any electoral process. The remaining three are the voters, the candidates and the organizers. Consequently, all journalists are invited to effectively perform their role, and be aware of the following:

- They should know their role and duties, what is expected from them, the scope of the coverage, how to prepare for said coverage, and the intricacies of the freedom of movement that is permitted by law.
- They should know the electoral law, the laws governing municipal councils, and the organizational matters related to the electoral process.
- They should know the political parties' manifestos, the candidates' platforms and electoral alliances.
- They should report news and deal with candidates while adhering to the ethical principles of media coverage.



4. The Importance of Voter education

Voter education is a cornerstone of democratic systems, since it helps voters cast informed votes by offering them the opportunity to know the character, background, record, vision and political platform of their potential representatives.

Voters should also be aware of the principles and laws governing the electoral process, such as the eligibility criteria to stand in as a candidate or to cast a ballot, the administrative and regulatory mechanisms, the responsibilities of all involved parties, and the requirements for follow-ups, among other things.

Article 75 (Voter education Programs) of the Parliamentary Election Law reads: “During the electoral campaign period, the audiovisual media outlets shall dedicate at least three hours per week to broadcast voter education programs that are co-produced by the relevant media outlets with the Ministry of Information and the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities.”

It goes without saying that voters need all types of media to follow the activities of candidates, political parties’ stances, and latest developments on a daily basis, in order to shape their political beliefs and make an informed decision. Media outlets promote voter education via its programs, interviews, talk shows and news bulletins. For instance:



- They explain the electoral law and process, provide information for the electorate on how to cast a ballot, detail the eligibility criteria for voters and candidates as well as the administrative and legal electoral mechanisms.
- They raise awareness about the importance of democratic competition, the voters’ responsibility, and the consequences of their electoral choices.
- They explain the mandate of the elected local authority and its responsibilities.
- They cover the election campaigns and publish the candidates’ political platforms.



Nevertheless, the work of journalists is not limited to publishing stories, covering events and presenting facts. Journalists are not only mere observers; their paramount mission is to serve society by thriving to achieve common good. Therefore, they play different roles in their quest to achieve their social mission on a national level:



- They promote electoral turnout by explaining the importance of these elections and warn the electorate about the dangers of abstention.
- They promote women participation in the electoral process by highlighting their important role in society, encourage them to take part, and urge them to uphold their rights.
- They provide a space for women to express themselves, debunk traditional patriarchal notions, and promote gender quotas to break the patriarchal grip on politics.
- They urge youth to participate in elections by voicing their interests by covering topics close to their hearts and providing them with a platform to express themselves.
- They urge other social categories, such as disabled people and minorities, to take part in these elections and defend their rights and provide them with a space to voice their concerns.



5. The Coverage of News During Elections

News coverage is different during election season from the rest of the year. During this period, the discourse of public sphere actors shifts. Self-promotion and advertising, often used to influence voters, take center stage, while rumors, fake news and misreported incidents spread. Consequently, journalists become directly or indirectly involved in election developments, and might be under pressure to modify their coverage of unfolding events.

In such situations, journalists have to double their efforts and vigilance to overcome these challenges and all kinds of pressure, in order to uphold good practices like fact checking and providing an unbiased and impartial coverage. During coverage, all journalists should:

- Deal cautiously with news communicated by media team and press representatives of the candidates and political parties, since they are seasoned communication professionals.
- Avoid taking campaign material for face value, as it is drafted with the intent of presenting the candidates under a positive light. Instead, journalists should analyze them, uncover their underlying meanings, and compare them with the candidates' track record.
- Avoid relaying the statements and remarks of candidates, without setting the context, and giving experts a chance to analyze them.
- Avoid covering political interviews, rallies and meetings, without taking the opportunity to debate, ask relevant questions and present facts, numbers and details.
- Bring up issues that candidates avoid addressing despite being relevant.
- Organize rallies to identify and listen to the voters and citizens' needs, hopes during coverage.
- Ensure that all stakeholders are represented and that no airtime is exclusively dedicated to established parties or deep-pocketed candidates.
- Contribute to the creation of a peaceful electoral environment and promote a responsible political discourse despite intense campaigning.



6. The Social Responsibility of Journalists

The paramount mission of journalism is to serve society and public interest, a mission that is deeply enshrined in the code of ethics and conduct for journalists. In other terms, journalists shall not cater for the interests of certain individuals, political parties or any given authority, nor should they aspire to achieve personal gains. They should always remind themselves of the following:



- They represent the “Fourth Estate,” which serves the public and common good first and foremost.
- They adhere to ethical standards, share factual and impartial news, and contribute to the shaping of an informed public opinion.
- They are aware of the implications of any published information, statement, speech or fact. As the saying goes: “With freedom comes responsibility.”
- They should avoid reporting false information even if it was already relayed by others.
- They should state their sources and avoid intellectual theft.
- They should avoid promoting hate speech, violence, gender inequality or racism.
- They should respect human dignity, avoid slander or offending others.
- They should respect the notion of private life and not bring up personal details unless this is fundamental background information.
- They uphold their independence and pay attention to the dangers of being too close to a given political party or candidate.
- They should put all candidates on the same pedestal. They are not party militants, nor work on behalf of a specific candidate.
- They should not accept gratuities or services from political parties and candidates, such as transportation, hospitality or any other service.
- They should always uphold their professional integrity by rejecting any improper financial compensation in exchange for reporting information or providing candidates with coverage.
- They should identify themselves as journalists and make it clear to their interlocutor that they will be recorded.



7. Election News

Electoral coverage follows the same principles of news coverage and publishing. However, journalists become subject to tremendous pressure during the election season, since the flow of news increases and coverage has greater repercussions. Therefore, all journalists are invited to be more careful to avoid any professional and ethical blunders. Therefore, they should remember:

- To fact-check any piece of information they receive to avoid publishing fake news and rumors promoting partisan propaganda. They should never rely on a single source and always crosscheck information with other sources before publishing.
- To abstain from publishing any information if they have reservations about the source of said information, its veracity, or the circumstances in which they received it.
- To ensure that any published story covers the “Five W’s”: Who, Where, When, Why and What.
- To issue a corrigendum if they ran a story containing an error or factual mistakes.
- To mention their sources, when possible. Relying on anonymous sources all the time can be suspicious.
- To keep a record of all documents, recordings and exchanges used during the publication process in case of a potential future review.
- To uphold their credibility by providing an unbiased and impartial coverage. Successful coverage relies on objectivity and a balanced approach.
- To provide a platform for all stakeholders to express themselves, including the opposing party. The right of reply must also be upheld.
- To remind themselves that they are not party militants and that they do not work on behalf of any given party. They should also always avoid showing their support for any given candidate or party by wearing their merchandise or taking part in political rallies in their private capacity.



8. The Oversight Role of Journalism

Journalism plays a crucial oversight role: that is why it is known as the “Fourth Estate” or the “Fourth Power”. Professional journalists do not jostle with their fellow colleagues to brand their microphones closer to the mouth of a politician or a candidate to simply relay their opinions. They also critically analyze statements and try to make sense of their observations. It is well known that politicians or candidates issue carefully elaborated statements to influence the public opinion. Furthermore, the general public is not always aware that they focus on their accomplishments while “forgetting” to mention past failures and unfulfilled campaign promises. In other terms, they omit details that do not suit them, present incomplete facts, or provide information under a different light to match their electoral aims and objectives.

Therefore, all journalists covering daily political affairs do closely follow the activities of political players, keep up to date with the latest developments, and crosscheck their sources. During their work, they are highly encouraged to play a dual role: the role of an observer, who closely follows unfolding events and the role of a critic, who reviews statements, asks questions, engages in debates, and brings to light facts that politicians or candidates have been trying to occult.

It is well known that journalists covering the electoral process have to visit different polling stations and engage with candidates and voters. Therefore, they become election observers by default. They will be able to detect election offenses, violations of the law, or any other infraction that negatively affects the elections. In that case, they are highly encouraged to assume their oversight role and expose said offenses.



Journalists assume their oversight and critical role by:

- Getting access to information provided by public entities, political parties, candidates, or through citizens' testimonies or investigative work. They should not be only satisfied with information made available through political parties' statements.
- Ensuring that the elections are free and fair, while reminding themselves that they do not have the authority of a judge or a law-enforcement officer.
- Shedding light on offenses detected by themselves or submitted by trusted sources.
- Covering the elections and exposing confirmed cases of bribery, voter intimidation, vote buying or other offenses.
- Exposing any discrepancies in the statements of politicians and candidates and thoroughly reviewing their political platforms to identify any mistakes or incoherencies.
- Ensuring that the law is applied and denouncing anything that negatively affects the public interest or destabilizes public safety.



9. The Rules of Election Coverage

For all of the above-explained reasons, election coverage demands from journalists a higher level of attention and scrutiny, so they can provide the public with a balanced and impartial coverage, thus ensuring a successful election.

Journalists should be aware of the great responsibility that falls on their shoulders in these times. Only by adhering to their professional and ethical standards, can they overcome all sorts of challenges and pressure. They should always remind themselves of the following:

- Ensure that they are broadcasting correct, checked, unbiased and balanced news that respects human values.
- Privilege the higher interest of the nation and the citizens above anything else.
- Provide a platform for all stakeholders from different backgrounds to express themselves.
- Present the political platform of candidates and give them an equal amount of airtime.
- Uphold impartiality and not succumb to any sort of pressure.
- Be aware of the dimensions of their coverage and its potential repercussions.



10. Coverage According to the Stages of Elections

The covered topics vary according to the election stages: nominations, electoral campaigns, electoral process and the counting and announcement of results. Journalists need to prepare for each of these stages. They shall first become familiar with the electoral law, candidates and electoral lists, electoral alliances, people's expectations and more. Journalists undertake numerous tasks during each election stage, such as the following:

During the pre-election stage:

- They collect information about parties, candidates and lists: their functioning, funding, popularity, regional distribution, alliances, programs, etc.
- They build relationships with the parties' public information officers, lists and candidates to communicate with them when necessary. Journalists are also expected to communicate with the official bodies concerned with the elections, such as the Ministry of Interior and the security forces.
- They create a list of election challenges, topics, people's demands, expectations and demands in the covered region or town.
- They respond to the electoral discourse of parties and candidates, and to the articles published by the media and various social media platforms revolving around the electoral campaign: source of information, credibility, consequences, relevance...

During the coverage of the electoral campaign:

- They explain the electoral process to the public, as well as the challenges and consequences thereof.
- They review the candidates, their programs and activities.
- They use different sources of information to avoid relying on parties and candidates only.
- They collect useful information for both the voters and the public, and interpret the candidates' programs from the citizens' expectant perspective.

During the elections:

- They monitor the electoral process and compliance with the applicable laws in the vicinity and inside polling centers.
- They communicate with electoral observers from official parties and the civil society to get a sense of the general atmosphere.
- They control administrative measures: the polling booth, the placement of boxes, the people present in the polling stations...
- They communicate with voters and opinion leaders to understand their challenges, as well as the electoral competition and progress.
- They cover the counting process, the delegates' actions and the announcement of results.



11. Some Coverage Challenges

Covering the electoral process is not always an easy task. Although journalists ready themselves for the elections, they may face difficulties and challenges during the coverage, such as how to deal with malicious or violent campaigns, hate speech, opinion polls or unconfirmed information. In addition to the use of information published on social media, which has become a major source of information for citizens and sometimes competes with the media coverage.

Discourse of Violence and Rumors

Candidates or representatives of political parties may take positions that cannot be published in their entirety due to their repercussions, such as hate speech or instigation to violence. Rumors may also have major repercussions on candidates or on the integrity of the electoral process.

As such, journalists shall use their better and professional judgment to avoid promoting such speech and rumors. They must cover the elections with high accuracy and professionalism. They can also give the speech to well-known personalities or electoral observers to evaluate the news and opinions, and to raise awareness.

Opinion Polls

Opinion polls have become one of the tools of electoral competition.

Although the main purpose of opinion polls is to gauge the public opinion and to know the trends thereof, parties and candidates can use them as a weapon to influence public opinion. In fact, some of these polls are not credible, since they are not subject to scientific rules that guarantee the validity of their results. Such polls are published for promotional purposes only. Therefore, journalists should treat them with caution. For instance:

- Caution is always a must. Opinion polls must not be considered a priority or a reliable source. This is known as the basic rule.
- Journalists must check the credibility of the source, the entity who conducted the poll and the concerned party.
- Journalists must ask questions: Is it worth talking about? In what circumstances was it conducted? Which audience was surveyed? What questions were asked to the participants?





Social Media

Social media has become a major source for the public. In fact, it provides information, and covers various events and activities rapidly. Social media is also being used as a source of news by journalists.

A journalist can sometimes use news provided by these platforms, however cautiously, since they are not subject to the professional work ethics in terms of credibility and partiality. It is also noted that they often convey shallow, quick, targeted, promotional and sometimes emotional information. Therefore, the journalist shall verify the authenticity of the news and evaluate the purpose of their articles.

12. Who Monitors Media Performance during the Municipal Elections?

Electoral laws stipulate mechanisms to monitor the electoral process, in order to guarantee its integrity and good functioning, and to ensure equal opportunities for candidates. The Lebanon Parliamentary Elections Law has provided the establishment of the "Supervisory Commission for Elections," which shall monitor said elections, including the media and advertisement.

The Lebanese Municipality Law has also stipulated in Article 16,

“The provisions of the Law of Election of the Members of the Parliament shall apply to municipal elections.” The Supervisory Commission for Elections shall monitor the municipal elections as it did during the parliamentary elections. However, this Commission was not established during the recent municipal elections. Therefore, there was no official body to monitor the performance of the media or electoral spending.



As a result, there were many gaps in the media coverage during the previous elections, and it seems necessary to find a way to implement this role by:

- To monitor electoral spending 6 months before the elections (as is the case of France).
- To ensure the right of all the candidates to use the media to introduce their projects and proposals.
- To organize electoral media and advertising campaigns to ensure equality, especially since a large part of the Lebanese media is affiliated with private companies and parties, which strengthens its association with specific candidates.
- To ensure the right of reply.
- To monitor opinion polls.
- To monitor hate speech, racist and violent discourse.
- To ensure the right of women and minorities to access the media.
- To engage the public media (affiliated to the Ministry of Information) in the voter education and the promotion of democracy by allowing candidates and lists to communicate with voters.



13. Examples from Previous Elections

Studies, which were conducted by the Maharat Foundation on media coverage during the preparation period for the previous municipal elections, flagged a set of errors and shortcomings that affected the good functioning of the elections; and deprived candidates of their freedom of expression, and the right to enjoy media coverage on an equal basis.

Based on these studies, below are the main issues that should be addressed in the upcoming elections:

Voter education

- Lack of electoral and legal education about the democratic process (less than half a percent of television coverage).
- Lack of awareness on democracy: media is supposed to participate in spreading the culture of democracy, urge voters to perform their electoral duties, explain the mechanisms and laws related to the elections, and shed light on the violations committed.
- Absence of candidates' electoral programs and the absence of a general debate about a vision on the role of municipalities in managing the daily affairs of citizens. Talk shows, as a rule, are supposed to avail airtime to candidates in order to explain their programs to the public. This will allow voters to make an informed choice and to hold accountable their candidate of choice.

Right to Appear in the Media

- Politicians had the most airtime on talk shows (39%), followed by experts and analysts (26%) then candidates (23%). Civil Society representatives received a meager 2% and independent guests had 8% of airtime. This is a clear indication that the political dimension of the campaign was more important than the developmental one. It is however known that in municipal elections, the developmental dimension should take precedence allowing candidates to present their electoral programs and projects.
- Civil society initiatives were not debated in public.
- Women were widely absent, as guests on talk shows, or as a gender topic. Lebanese women still suffer from marginalization in political sphere, in the media coverage and in terms of the reported information.
- The coverage of youth and women participation was limited.
- The voters' voices and that of the public were completely absent in talk shows. The media is supposed to offer them space to express their demands, evaluate the performance of municipalities and relay the expectations of the citizens.





Positioning of the Media

- The coverage clearly reflected the political positioning of numerous media, which actively participated in the electoral operations by focusing on the activities of some lists and attacking their opponents, as well as publishing potential results to influence voters.
- Contrary to traditions and rules followed in modern democracies, there was no “moment of media silence,” even at the voting booths.
- The media participated in the prevailing atmosphere of intimidation, by relying on exaggerated or unreliable statistics in their coverage of numerous electoral campaigns, thus weakening the competitive power and the entire democratic process.

Performance of Media Professionals

- It was noted that there is a lack of professional preparation and expertise in the field of electoral coverage. Most of the media professionals gained coverage expertise and skills from their work and their own experiences. Therefore, it is necessary to promote the idea of training on electoral coverage.
- Some news providers lacked impartiality and exploited their positions to promote parties or candidates.
- The right to access information, news and statistics, which are of great importance to citizens, was violated.
- There was a need to establish special legal immunity for media professionals while covering elections, and to work on facilitating their presence in polling and counting centers.



Part II:

Field Study: Promoting Media Coverage in Municipal Elections

A field study was conducted based on the examples drawn from the previous election coverage. Its purposes are bridging the gaps detected during these elections, and activating the media role. The study has constructed a questionnaire that tackles a range of issues, as it aims to collect the answers it seeks to highlight.

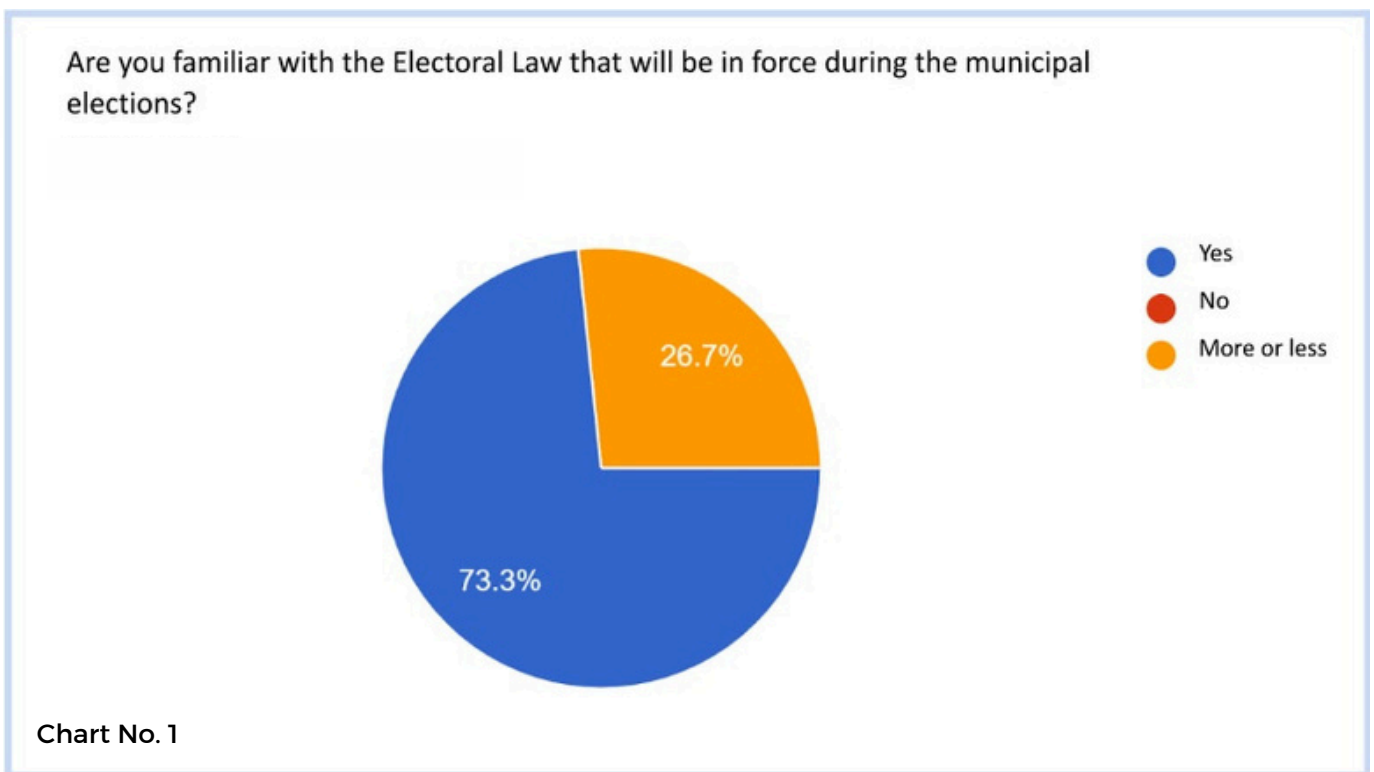
The study covers a sample of 15 male and female journalists, of which 53% are female and 47% are male. They currently work in different media outlets (TV, newspapers, news websites, alternative media, and free journalism) and have covered the last municipal elections in 2016. Therefore, their answers help detect the shortcomings of previous media coverage and allow journalists to play their effective role in the upcoming elections.

The survey's questions were designed according to the findings of the last electoral coverage, as well as the principles of professional coverage and journalism. The survey's results are the following:



- **Knowledge of the Electoral Law**

Since journalists ought to be well versed in the Electoral Law, they were asked the following question: Are you familiar with the Electoral Law that will be in force during the municipal elections? 73.3% answered that they do, while 26.7% stated that they do “more or less”. This implies that journalists are uncertain about their knowledge.



This uncertainty can also be seen in the next question: Which voting system will be adopted in the 2023 municipal elections? Is it the proportional voting system, or the majority voting system? The answers came as follows: Around 46% answered with “the majority voting system,” while 40% answered with “the proportional voting system” and 13% gave no answer. This indicates that they are not familiar with all aspects of the law, which highlights the need to deeply examine the Electoral Law that will be adopted in 2023.

¹ The survey is included in the attached appendix



Which voting system will be adopted in the 2023 municipal elections?

15 responses

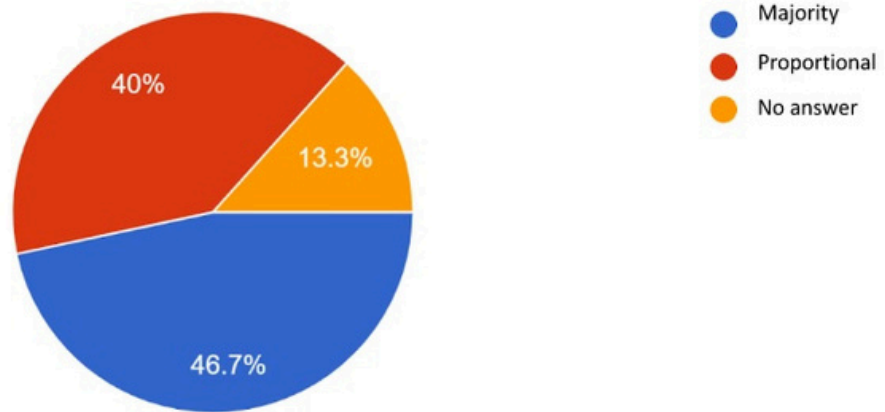


Chart No. 2

- **The Right of Journalists to Electoral Coverage**

In order to assess how well journalists know their rights in electoral coverage, the following question was included in the survey: Do you know what are the rights of journalists in electoral coverage? Those who answered yes were then asked the following question: What do you know about the rights of journalists in electoral coverage?

The answers to the first question came as follows: 67% of the respondents knew the rights of journalists in electoral coverage, while 33% knew them “more or less.”

Do you know what are the rights of journalists during the election? coverage?

15 responses

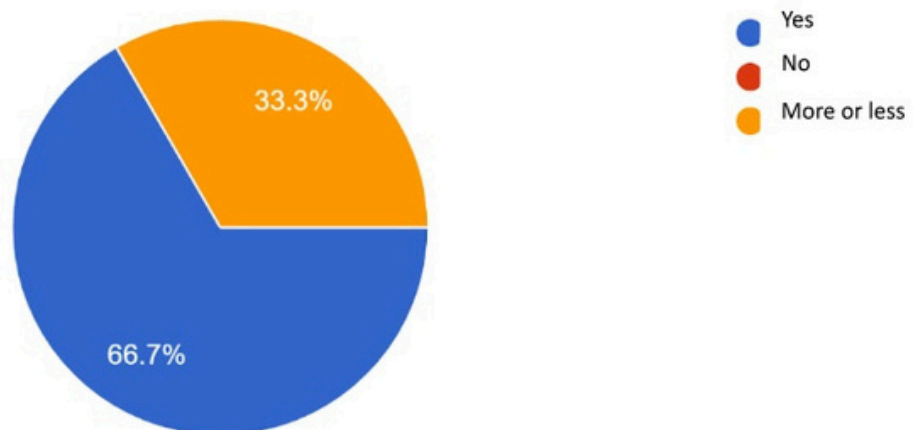


Chart No. 3



As for the answers to the complementary question, the majority of respondents answered with “The right to enter polling stations,” while 33% answered with “the right to access information.” Other answers included moving around polling stations, the right to physical protection and the right to interview voters, while around 13% did not give an answer.

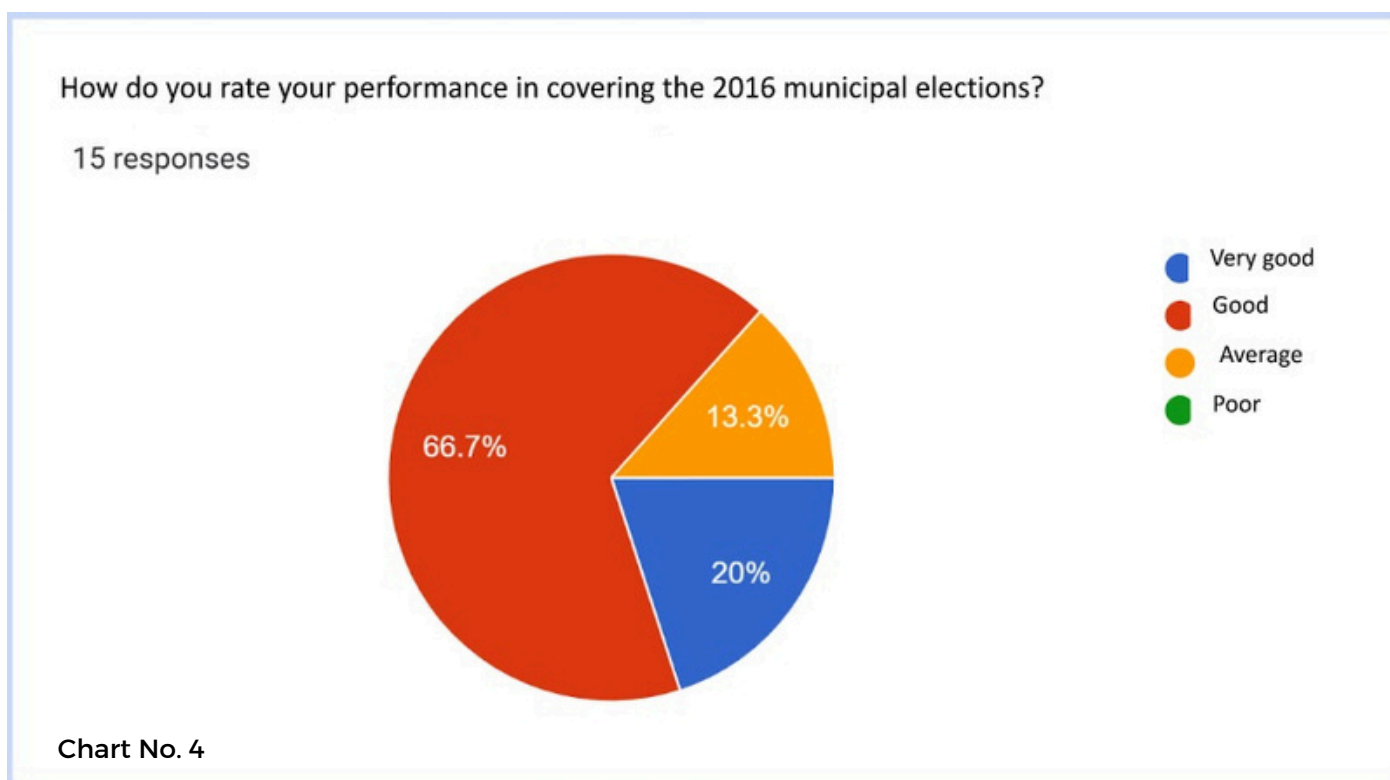
The answers to this question revealed that many journalists are not aware of their rights and that some of them lack sufficient knowledge. Therefore, it seems crucial to introduce all these rights to journalists, as they are important to obtain a successful coverage.

- **Journalists’ Performance during Previous Elections and the Challenges they Faced**

The survey addressed the sampled groups with a question on their satisfaction towards their performance in covering the previous elections in 2016, as well as on the challenges that they encountered back then.

Around 20% described their performance as very good, 66% as good, and 13% as average. This indicates that the vast majority are satisfied with their performance.

However, around 66% of respondents confirmed that they had faced several challenges during that period, while 33% of them did not refer to any challenges.



The challenges faced can be divided into two types: the first is harassment by official authorities not granting journalists the permit they need to enter polling stations or harassment by security forces. The second relates to professional challenges, such as the lack of cooperation by electoral machines, fact checking and local family tensions within municipalities.

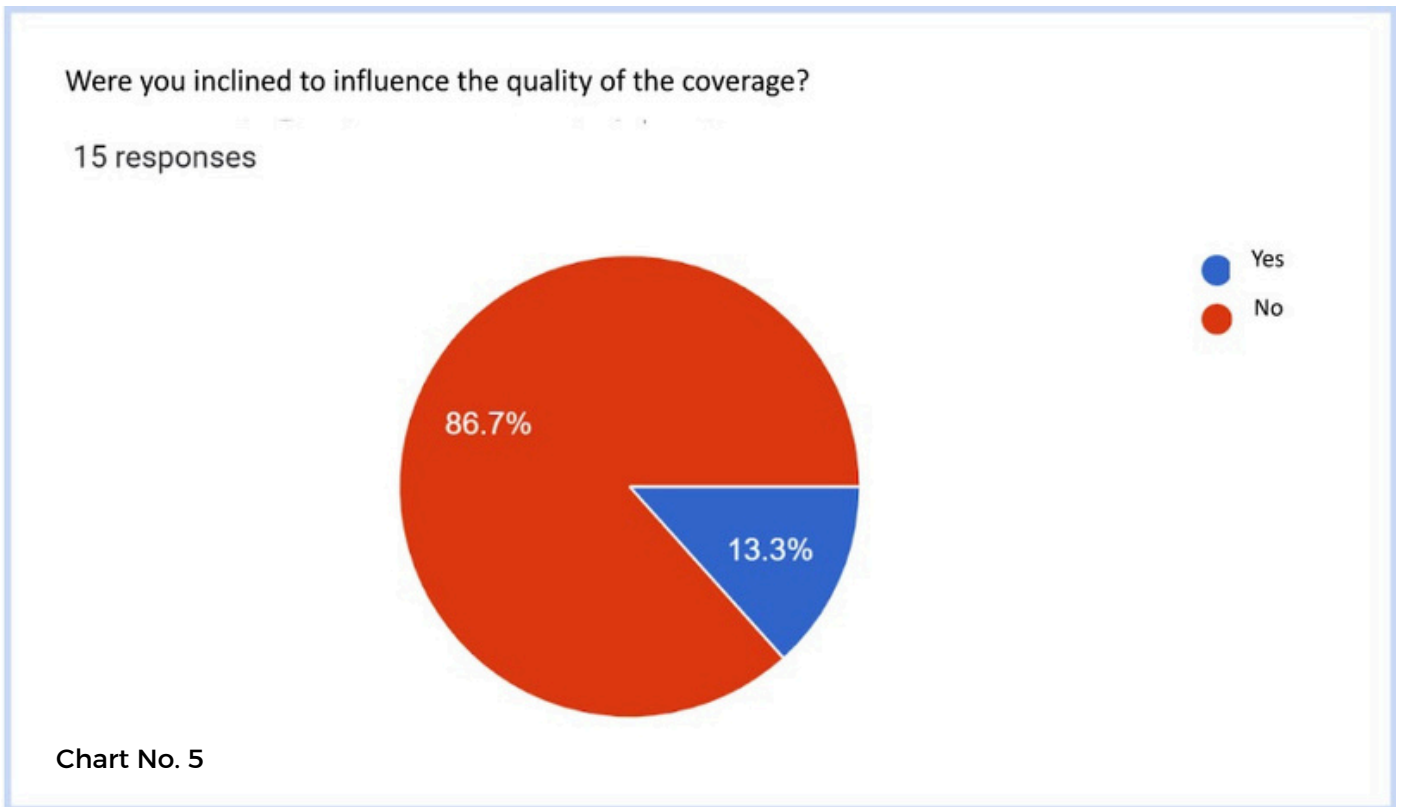
It is important to have official authorities issue the relevant recommendations, in order to facilitate the work of journalists and establish a permanent media center to communicate with them on the day of the elections and facilitate their work.

- **Facing Temptations**

Question 4 of the survey sought to reveal whether journalists faced any temptations and influence during election coverage, or not. It was phrased as follows: Were you inclined to influence the quality of the coverage? If yes, what kind of temptations were you subjected to?

The survey did not reveal many attempts to lure journalists during their coverage of the elections. In fact, 86% indicated that they did not face any temptations or influence, while only 13% stated that they did face material and moral temptations. Although the rate is very low, it shows that journalists are always exposed to temptations as an attempt to influence their opinion. Therefore, having professional ethics is extremely important in this line of work.





- **Violations Encountered by Journalists**

Given that journalists cover elections, are regularly in touch with candidates and voters and have access to polling stations, they are in direct contact with the different players of the electoral process. Accordingly, they get the chance to follow up closely on all relevant matters and flag out any organizational violations or breaches. Thus, the survey included a question on their attitude towards any violation that they may detect during the elections, and if they should voluntarily take any initiative in this regard. 93% answered with yes, which underlines the journalists' will to fulfill their role and reject any violations that could affect the electoral process.

Regarding actions journalists can take on such violations, answers were divided into two main categories: the first one involved reporting these violations to competent authorities; and the second involved reporting them, while highlighting and exposing them as well. Yet, around 13% did not provide any answer, perhaps because they do not know what to do in such a case. This emphasizes the need to link field journalists, or newsrooms in general, to an operations room, considering the crucial role that they could play as observers in the electoral process.



Do you think journalists should take any action if violations were detected?

15 responses

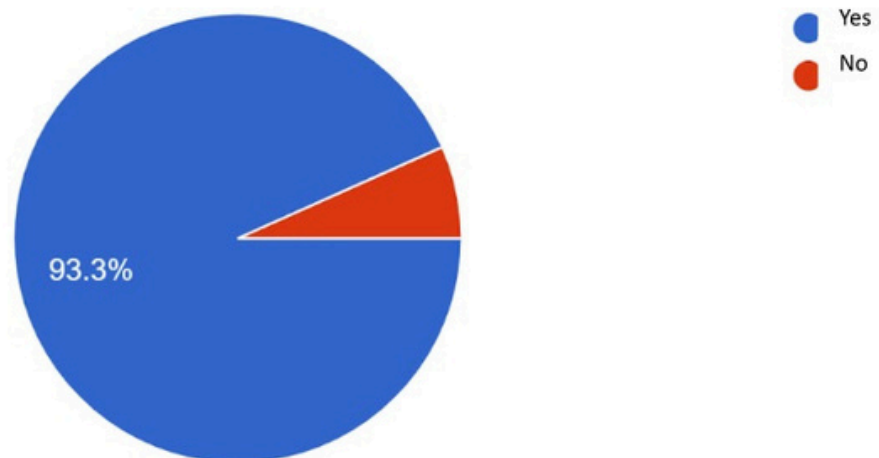


Chart No. 5

- **Are Journalists Entitled to Freedom of Movement during the Election Coverage?**

The survey sought to identify whether field journalists enjoy a sense of freedom during the election coverage, or not, knowing that they are exposed to different forms of pressure, including from the media outlet to which the reporters belong, and that could favor certain candidates or be in contact with political parties. Consequently, this would force field journalists to lose their neutrality.

The question to which around one third of the respondents (33.3%) answered with no was: Are journalists entitled to freedom of movement during election coverage? This is a very high percentage that could affect the credibility of media coverage in general.

Therefore, it is a very important aspect that requires working with editorial departments inside media outlets, in order to allow journalists to work freely. In fact, it would promote media credibility and influence, and would help distinguish between media and advertisement in the electoral process. Journalists should also have a sense of freedom in order to excel in their work. This includes freedom of access to information, freedom of movement, freedom of criticism and comment.



- **Journalism Skills during Election Coverage**

The survey attempted to discover the strengths that journalists could use as a weapon in their work. The following question was asked: What are the skills that you think a journalist needs for a successful coverage?

Answers to this question varied; however, they were divided into two main parts. The first revolved in general around knowledge: the knowledge of the law, the knowledge of the candidates, the political knowledge and professional experience. Some journalists have even requested to attend workshops in order to acquire these skills. The second part revolved around interpersonal skills, the likes of courage, bravery, independence, neutrality and courtesy.

A journalist's personality is indeed comprehensive: It includes a myriad of professional skills, knowledge and ethics. All these skills are required by the journalist in order to stand out and excel in their job. They can also be acquired through personal effort, accumulation of knowledge and ethical commitment.

- **Journalists' Role in the Election Coverage**

A journalist is tasked with several duties while covering the elections. These duties summarize the role of the media in general, from breaking the news, to forming public opinion and building public trust, among other things. In this context, the survey included the following question: What do you think is the role of journalists in the election coverage? The question's aim was to identify the work-method of each journalist.

The following answers were obtained in the form of news: conveying the picture and information, keeping up with the developments, documenting and highlighting them. Only one answer involved incentivizing voters.

In fact, voter education is one of the main roles played by the media during elections. It includes raising awareness on the electoral process, explaining democratic practice, forming a public opinion that is aware of the importance of its role, encouraging voters to fulfill their duty, encouraging women to fully play their role in society, and encouraging youth and minority groups to vote, among other things.

This role requires journalists to criticize the political power, as well as their society. The role of journalists is not only about conveying information, but also about being an active member of society and responding to the community needs.



- **Can a Journalist Influence the Electoral Process? How?**

The survey shows consensus among respondents that journalists do influence the electoral process. However, answers varied between two attitudes: a positive and a negative one. The positive attitude includes for instance incentivizing voters, raising awareness, highlighting developments and reporting facts. As for the negative one, it includes bias, lack of objectivity and targeted media campaigns.

The survey shows that the surveyed journalists are aware of the importance of both the role they play, and the position they hold in the public sphere. This urges them to assume greater responsibility and impose greater self-censorship for that purpose.

- **How Much Freedom Do Media Outlets Grant their Journalists during the Election Coverage?**

Freedom of journalists during election coverage is highly important. In fact, freedom is the groundwork of journalism, without which the work of journalists would be incomplete, for they would be unable to exercise their critical role or be neutral, which is necessary in reporting facts and providing the public with simple and balanced news.

When asked about how much freedom media outlets grant their journalists, the respondents highlighted a dilemma for media outlets, as the majority are owned by private companies or have political connections. Accordingly, these connections may affect the coverage of their journalists.

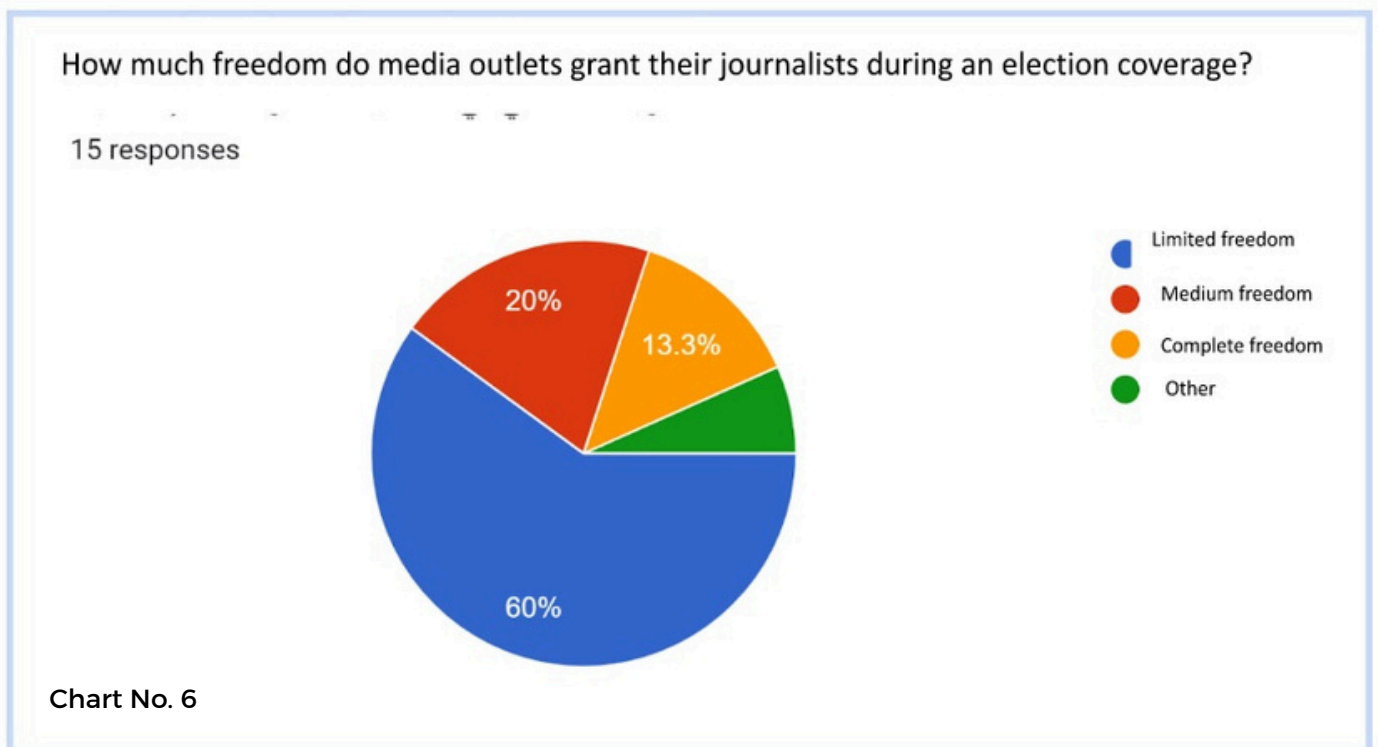
When the respondents were asked about how much freedom media outlets grant their journalists, the answers were divided as follows: limited freedom, medium freedom and great freedom. However, the majority of answers confirms that a journalist's freedom is limited, which means that he or she adheres to the instructions provided by their media outlet.

- Concerning the first option, limited freedom, around 60% of the respondents answered as follows: poor freedom, the media outlet controls the direction of the coverage, there is no freedom for the journalist, no wide freedom, freedom with many restrictions, the coverage follows the path set by the media outlet.



- Concerning the second option, average freedom, around 20% of the respondents answered as follows: average freedom, the media outlet sometimes interferes, good freedom. The answers here mean that journalists have an acceptable margin of freedom, but sometimes the media outlet may interfere with their coverage.
- Concerning the third option, great freedom, around 13% answered as follows: complete freedom.

The answers to this question show that media outlets often impose a specific editorial line on their representatives, which makes them feel constrained in their work. This does not only affect the creativity of journalists and their role in presenting a balanced and reflective coverage, but also the credibility of the media and public confidence in that media outlet.



- **How Does Money Influence Journalists and Media Outlets during the Media Coverage?**

A successful media performance requires neutrality from both the media outlet and the journalist, as well as journalists' freedom of opinion. On one hand, the money factor would however undermine the media outlet's neutrality; while on the other, the journalist would lose his/her freedom. It is known that electoral money plays an important role in every election day in Lebanon, as it is used to influence voters and the media.

In response to the question revolving around the impact of money on the media outlet and journalists during the election coverage process, about 93% of the respondents answered that money indeed plays a significant role in the process. Around 46.6% identified the impact on media outlets, while a similar percentage considered the impact to be generally significant, especially on media outlets and journalists. Only about 7% considered the effect to be "insignificant," which means that it is not absent.

These answers confirm the rumors around the interference of electoral money to influence electoral coverage, which undermines the foundations of democracy that are based on free media and free elections. This calls for the search for real solutions to control capital interference in the electoral process and to ensure media outlets' freedom and capital independence.

- **Which Laws Should Be Adopted to Improve the Journalists' Election Coverage?**

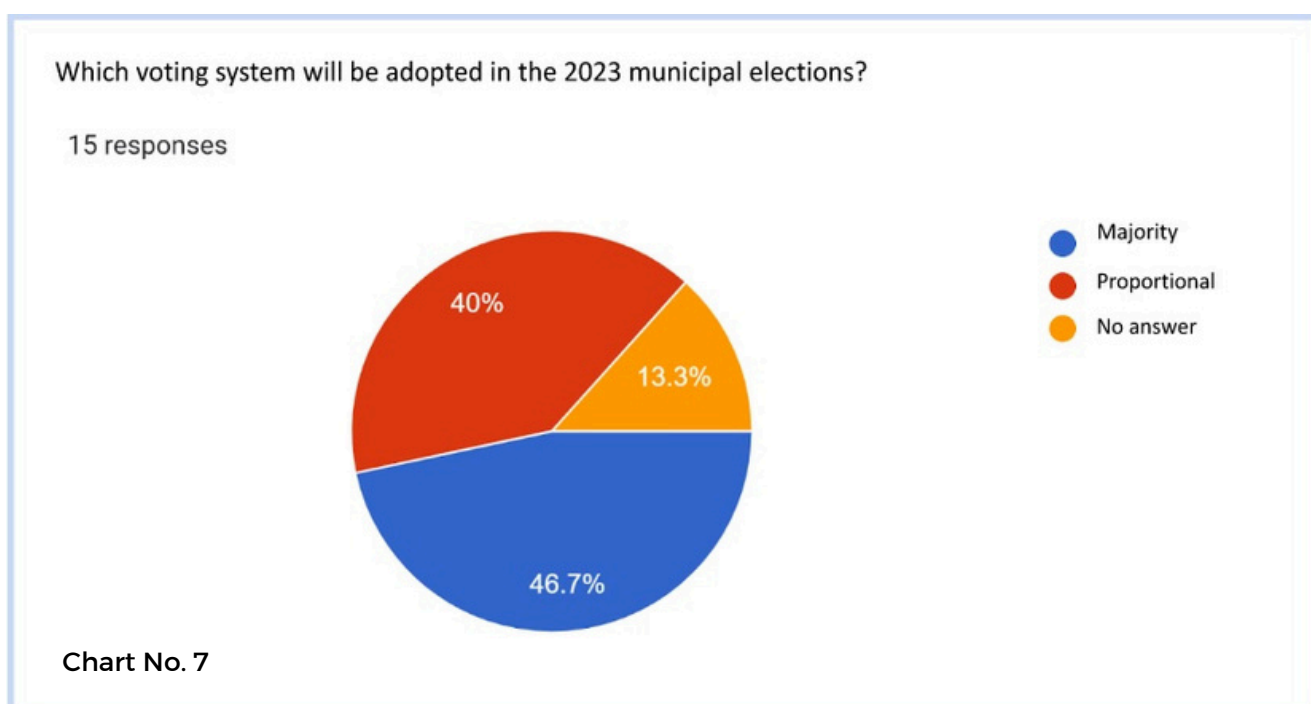
The survey asked respondents about any legal amendments they may propose to facilitate the election's media coverage. The answers were divided into the following categories:

- The first dealt with journalists' rights, such as ensuring their protection, increasing their freedom of movement during the electoral process and guaranteeing their diverse rights (about 47%).



- The second dealt with general laws, such as the establishment of a general supervisory body for elections, regulating media coverage and advertisement during elections to limit the power of money, and also upholding the law on the right to access information (about 40%).
- About 13% of the total offered no suggestions.

These answers demonstrate the journalists' concern about the weak implementation of the applicable laws related to the protection of their rights. They demanded wider freedom of movement to operate more freely. They also noted the weak implementation of public laws, such as oversight over the role of electoral money and the disregard of the law of access to information.



• How Can Journalists Motivate the Youth Engagement in the Elections?

Given the importance of youth engagement in the political life and their participation in municipal elections, the survey conducted a survey on how journalists contributed to motivating this segment of the electorate. The answers were rich in the sense that they carried multiple practical suggestions, all of which fall under the umbrella of political education, such as: highlighting the importance of municipal elections, organizing open dialogues and debates, investigating, explaining the importance of the youth's role in making a change, depicting the reality and future of youth, explaining to journalists their experiences and promoting their role as opinion leaders, among other things.



According to these answers, three main conclusions can be drawn:

- The importance of voter education in municipal elections,
- Journalists' awareness of the importance of the youth's role and the pursuit of greater engagement;
- Journalists' awareness of their role as opinion leaders and their ability to spread the spirit of change.

However, these three conclusions need to be coupled with practical proposals, namely with reference to voter education provided in the Electoral Law, while its implementation remains marginal.

- **How Can Journalists Encourage Women's Participation in the Elections?**

Women in Lebanon suffer from marginalization, both in the political life and the media coverage. Therefore, the question for the respondents was about how they contributed to strengthening women's role in the electoral process. The answers journalists gave were unanimous about their role in this field and were divided into two main fields:

- The first set of answers was about giving women a platform through the media to express their opinions and suggestions.
- The second set was about the journalists playing an important role in encouraging women by providing them with greater coverage, highlighting their key role in society, and breaking the prevailing stereotype. This falls within the framework of the voter education tasks that are expected of the media in general.

Similar to promoting the role of youth, the suggestions of journalists regarding the promotion of the role of women await practical translation into specific initiatives.



Conclusion

Based on the previous elections, and on the survey implemented with the help of a group of seasoned journalists, we can conclude that a successful media coverage of elections is a responsibility shared between three parties: the field journalist, the media outlet and the public authorities.

Duty of the journalist

First and foremost, the journalist's duty is to provide professional, ethical and responsible coverage. This requires a set of conditions:

- A specialized culture, meaning familiarity with the election law, the candidates lists, electoral programs and parties, which allows the journalist to play a critical and supervisory role.
- Awareness of their role as opinion leaders influenced by the public and able to convey the values of democracy, participation and civil peace.
- Their commitment to integrity against temptations and any offers made by any of the political parties.
- Their eagerness to offer neutral and balanced coverage and to address all types of challenges, such as propaganda, violent discourse and hate speech.
- Their educational role in addressing the public and voters of all categories and in promoting the role of women and youth.

Duty of the Media Outlet

The role of a journalist would be incomplete without that of the media outlet in which they work. Many journalists have complained about limited freedom in their media outlets. Media bias undermines the principle of democracy on the one hand, and the credibility of the media on the other.

Some of these media outlets are also often influenced by electoral spending, breaking the necessary barrier between media coverage and advertisement. Previous election studies have also shown that these media outlets do not fulfil their duty in voter education.

These irresponsible practices performed by these media outlets weaken the role of the media, which in their turn; badly reflect on these media outlets and their credibility, as well as on society in general.



Conclusion

Duty of the Public Authorities

Public authorities organize elections by applying laws and respecting the principles of justice and equality between candidates, through the implementation of the principles of democracy as set in the Constitution. Therefore, the Authority is supposed to ensure the protection of journalists and the fulfillment of their role. It also has to monitor elections through the supervisory committee stipulated in the electoral law, which is entrusted with an oversight mandate, by monitoring the media, and controlling electoral expenditure. Journalists called on the authority to ensure their security and to set up a media/security room during the elections to keep track of their tasks and receive their remarks and complaints.

Duty of the Civil Society

The study did not address the responsibility of civil society in the electoral process. However, the role of civil society media outlets is essential when action is needed against other media and public authorities, in order to achieve the aforementioned objectives, while taking into account the importance of alternative media and their relevant contribution.

Accordingly, preparing for the next electoral process requires communication with these parties, in order to examine the ways in which they can better perform their tasks.



Recommendations



Recommendations for journalists:

- Acquiring full knowledge of the Electoral Law, lists and programs of candidates, thus allowing journalists to play a regulatory and analytical role.
- Avoiding sensationalist media coverage, focusing on the abstract reporting of facts, while combatting rumors and rumor spreading, and checking facts.
- Committing to accuracy, balance and neutrality in media coverage and avoiding taking sides.
- Avoiding defamation, slander, libel and personal attacks against any candidate or list.
- Opting for a coverage that is free of any incitement or sectarian language, and adopting neutrality in reporting facts through public and private media without being influenced by electoral advertising.
- Reporting the electoral process and exposing all confirmed cases of fraud, pressure on candidates and vote buying
- Playing an educational role in addressing the public and different voter categories, as well as promoting the role of women and youth, especially given the large number of voters who will be voting for the first time in the municipal elections
- Allowing marginalized groups, such as people with disabilities, to voice out their concerns and issues, and promoting their engagement in the elections.
- Building partnerships with the civil society, namely CSOs that specialize in observing the elections, and relying on their expertise as a main source of information within their mandate.



Recommendations

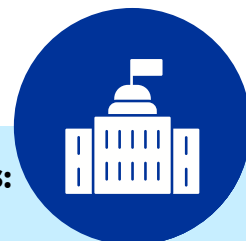


Recommendations for media outlets:

- Going beyond the traditional scope of coverage and news reporting related to municipal elections, and playing a regulatory role in exposing cases of corruption and public finance squandering in local administrations, as a means to sensitize voters on making the right choice.
- Highlighting the developmental role of municipalities without portraying municipal elections as political or familial and family issues.
- Highlighting the electoral system, introducing candidates, explaining and criticizing their programs, giving space to all candidates to express themselves, and maintaining neutrality and balance in media coverage.
- Refraining from publishing the statements of politicians and other political figures, as they could include abusive terms related to disability, when portraying their opponents due to their own shortcomings, feelings of contempt or the like.
- Refraining from using terms deemed positive in describing people with disabilities, such as people of determination, which could be in contradiction with the legal terms related to human rights as adopted by the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).
- Launching awareness and voter education campaigns through public and private media using sign language, to accommodate some marginalized groups, such as deaf or deaf-mute people.
- Launching a code of ethics during municipal elections that prohibits objectifying women and rejects violation against women in the media.
- Ensuring better representation of women as candidates and experts during media coverage of municipal elections.
- Training field journalists on electoral laws, the principles of professional coverage, fact checking and safety.



Recommendations



Recommendations for public authorities and political parties:

- Organizing elections according to the applicable laws, while observing the principles of justice and equality among candidates, pursuant to the principles of democracy stipulated in the Constitution. Ensuring that electoral laws are relevant to guarantee effective monitoring of the media, advertising and electoral spending by empowering the supervisory body as described in the electoral law.
- Promoting public communication, especially in the relevant departments, namely at the Ministry of Interior, in order to facilitate access to information and combating rumors that may arise during the elections and could undermine the democratic process.
- Protecting journalists and enabling them to play their role fully.
- Establishing a security media operating room for better coordination among media groups and security forces with regard to media coverage inside polling stations; Issuing and validating work permits for journalists seeking to enter polling stations, enabling them to partake in the voting process within the geographic area of their coverage.
- Ensuring that political parties, local prominent figures and administrations respect the work of media teams during their coverage of municipal elections.
- Promoting partnerships with civil society groups specialized in monitoring the elections and facilitating their work as a reliable source of information related to the elections.



Recommendations



General recommendations issued by the roundtable discussion entitled "Media Coverage of Municipal Elections Process amid a Political System Crisis and Paralyzed institutions: What Role and Which Responsibility?" (Held on 18 April 2023)

- Postponing the elections and not complying with constitutional deadlines deprive people of their right to political participation. This is how the media should portray such event. It also reduces opportunities of political participation that women and new political elites have and has an economic impact that the media overlooks, given the role municipalities play in local development.
- Working on finding mechanisms to monitor media, advertising and electoral expenditure in municipal elections, taking into account the fact that no supervisory body has been able to monitor more than 1300 municipalities. The role of the supervisory body in previous parliamentary elections has not proven to be useful and such body was unable to monitor media appearance and electoral expenditure.
- Media coverage on Election Days often goes off track as media ownership dictates a specific agenda. As long as media ownership lacks transparency and public media is weak, it will be impossible to speak of an independent and honest media.
- Focusing on the development role played by municipalities not on political and family turf wars that occur during municipal elections.



Recommendations



General recommendations issued by the roundtable discussion entitled "Media Coverage of Municipal Elections Process amid a Political System Crisis and Paralyzed institutions: What Role and Which Responsibility?"(Held on 18 April 2023)

- Accountability mechanisms should be enshrined in law and not solely depend on the media. Societal change, social control and accountability must intersect through social networks empowered to play such regulatory role. Such networks should rely primarily on the youth that possess the proper legal and political knowledge, as the media alone cannot be responsible for social immunity.
- Weak legal knowledge is the most prominent challenge, among experts surprisingly, candidates namely and naturally among citizens who get ostracized once the elections are over, as they ignore the power they detain to influence development decisions made by municipalities.
- The Ministry of Information can play a role in voter education. Today, it can only advise the media but it is not bound to do so.
- Focusing on the importance of regional media in covering local issues. The role of municipalities is also to contribute to the promotion of regional media.
- Marginalizing women in the media is not always intentional and there must be more channels of communication between the media and women experts in public affairs.
- Adopting a human rights language in media coverage is a necessity, especially when covering people with disabilities. Today, the Ministry of Information plays an active role in cooperating with specialized associations, particularly the Lebanese Union for People with Physical Disabilities.



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Appendix

Sex

- Male
- Female

Are you familiar with the Electoral Law that will be in force during the municipal elections?

- Yes
- No
- More or less

Which voting system will be adopted in the 2023 municipal elections?

- Majority voting system
- Proportional voting system
- No answer

Do you know what are the rights of journalists during the election coverage?

- Yes
- No
- More or less

If you answer with “yes” or “more or less”, what do you know about the rights of journalists during municipal election coverage?

How do you rate your performance in covering the 2016 municipal elections?

- very good
- Good
- Average
- Poor



Appendix

What challenges have you encountered?

Did you face any temptations that aim at influencing the quality of coverage?

- Yes
- No

If yes, what kind of temptations?

Do you think journalist should take an initiative if violations were detected?

- Yes
- No

If yes, what kind of initiative?

Are journalists entitled to freedom of movement in election coverage?

- Yes
- No

What are the skills that you think a journalist needs for a successful coverage?

What do you think is the role of journalists in the election coverage?

Can a journalist influence the electoral process? How?

How much freedom do media outlets grant their journalists during an election coverage?

How does money influence journalists and media outlets during the media coverage?

Which laws should be adopted to improve the journalists' election coverage?

How can journalists motivate youth engagement in the elections?

How can journalists encourage women's participation in the elections?





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