Monitoring and Analysis of the Second Phase of the Palestinian Local Elections

A Reading of the Digital Local Politics

April 2022

Introduction

The importance of elections lies in the fact that it establishes a democratic and peaceful process for the transfer of power; it is one of the principles for the exercise of citizenship. Furthermore, participation in elections and voting gives political legitimacy to the party who assumes power and responsibility in any system or regime of governance. It also grants individuals, i.e., the citizen, the right to express their opinion and desire to choose the official they wish to see in any particular position. The voter also has the power to penalize or punish politicians through voting or not voting (boycott), or punitive voting which is generally reflected through voting for the opposing party. Moreover, the social structure of society influences electoral behavior. In the context of Palestinian society, we need to remember that it is a communal and hierarchical society, conflict-ridden at the political level, and with many social challenges - that affect the elector's vote. This study was conducted to monitor the electoral behavior of the Palestinians in the local elections and the electoral campaigns and debates in the digital age, which are topics of concern for all Palestinians. The study will address issues such as trends and their indications, and if there is any influence of digital interactive engagement - whether through posts, comments, and participation, on the electoral process.

After reflecting on concerns and responding to the questions raised, some recommendations will be presented in the last section of the study.

Research Questions:

Level One: Content and Trends

1.1 What does the political discourse on Facebook during the Palestinian local authorities elections period reflect?

1.2 To what extend do Palestinian Facebook users support women participant in local authorities elections?

1.3 To what extent are Palestinians on Facebook content with the role of families, loyalty to political parties, and discriminatory traditions in local authorities elections?

1.4 How did Palestinians on Facebook respond to campaigns encouraging voting or calling to boycott the elections?

1.5 To what extent do Palestinians distrust the Palestinian electoral system as evident in discussions on Facebook?

Level Two: The technical aspect of electoral campaigns in the digital space including posts, comments and shares

2.1 Where on Facebook are Palestinians posting about electoral campaigns?

2.2 Is there a relationship between posts on electoral lists' pages and success[1] in the local elections?

2.3 Is there a relationship between comments on electoral lists' pages and success in the local elections?

2.4 Is there a relationship between the number of shares of posts on electoral lists' pages and success in the local elections?

Methodology of the Study

This study uses the methodology of grounded theory[2], which is a systematic methodology in the social sciences that attempts to construct theories and provide explanations through the systematic collection and analysis of data. This methodology uses inductive reasoning, in contrast to the more classic deductive hypothesis model often used in research methods. Usually, a study that adopts grounded theory begins with a direct question or data collection, which is what this study did. Researchers then review the data and extract and identify recurring patterns and ideas, which are then grouped into concepts and then into categories to form a new theory or offer explanations for the phenomenon in question. Grounded theory then departs from traditional research models where researchers choose an existing theoretical framework and then collect data to show how its theory applies to the phenomenon being investigated. Since the research in your hands seeks to explore

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(1) Success refers to reaching or exceeding a decisive percentage of the votes. According to the Palestinian Central Elections Committee, success in the electoral system for local authorities elections is defined: "each list which obtains 8% or more of the valid votes is allocated a number of seats in proportion to the number of valid votes obtained." Retrieved from the Palestinian Central Elections Committee website: https://www.elections.ps/tabid/318/language/en-US/Default.aspx

(2) See more on Grounded Theory.

and analyze the reflections of the Palestinian local elections in its second sround on social media platforms, grounded theory methdology is ideal for this endeavor whic attempts to intrepret data monitored between November 2021 and April 2022.

The data monitoring team adapted the expectations of the main researcher throughout the period of the data monitoring, gradually sharing findings with the researcher, to best enable the conception of classifications and extraction of concepts and research questions.

This study is based on monitoring posts on the Facebook platform and collection of quantitative data over three phases in four reports[3]:

First report: November 28, 2021 - March 13, 2022. See the full first report.
Second report: March 19-21, 2022. See the full second report.
Third report: March 19-26, 2022. See the full third report.
Fourth report: A summary report - based on previous results, in addition to monitoring the period until 2nd of April; namely, from March 1, 2022 to April 2, 2022 (the after-elections phase, held on March 27, 2022). See the full fourth report.

The reports analysis indicates two levels of concepts: the first level tackles the content posted, shared and commented on by the Palestinian public in the digital space; extrapolates the political and social trends that guide the elections, and provides insight on the Palestinian political reality.

The second level focused on the technical aspect of the digital electoral campaigns and relevant elements, such as posts, comments and sharing. In addition, it assesses the amount of disinformation, and the effectiveness of predicting election results through the digital space – including the use of tools and mechanisms to investigate political attitudes towards elections and relevant issues, through tracking simple Facebook reaction icons.

The monitoring reports are based on the Facebook platform given that it allows the tracking of comments and shared posts, which facilitates the monitoring process and access to the required data, and given that the Facebook platform is the most popular and widely

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(3) Reports are available in Arabic and English.

used among Palestinians, as the percentage of its us in the Palestinian Territories in 2021 reached 95.16%.[4]

Research Question	Monitoring Period	# of Posts	# of Comments	Source		
Political Discourse on Facebook	1 March - 02 Apr\ 2022	70	**1859**	Individuals' profiles Community Pages (Community Media) Independent News Pages Journalists pages and personal profiles		
Women Participation Familial relations/ Discriminatory traditions	1 March - 02 Apr\ 2022	15	**368**	Individuals' profiles Community pages (community media) Electoral lists pages		
Encouraging participation/ Boycott Calls	1 March - 02 Apr\ 2022	34	**895**	Individuals' profiles Journalists pages		
Distrust in Electoral System	1 March - 02 Apr\ 2022	35	**792**	Encouraging participation: NGOs pages Encouraging boycott: Individuals' profiles Community Media pages		
Sources of Posts	1 March - 02 Apr\ 2022	37	**912**	ndividuals' profiles Community Media Pages		
Posts on Electoral Lists Pages	1 March - 02 Apr\ 2022	Number of Individual Profiles 129 unique count		Number of Independent Media Pages 29 unique count	Number of Journalist Profiles and Pages 11 unique count	Number of Electoral Lists Pages 174 unique count
Comments on Electoral Lists Pages	1 March - 02 Apr\ 2022	10,652		Electoral Lists Pages		
Shares on Electoral Lists Pages	1 March - 02 Apr\ 2022		157,832	Electoral Lists Pages		
				Electoral Lists Pages	Sharing Average: 10.75%	

(4) ايبوك - الواقع الرقمي الفلسطيني 2021

Overall, nearly 8,000 Facebook posts and 6,847 comments outside electoral lists' pages[5] were tracked for the purpose of this study and objectively analyzed and categorized as the following list shows. Specifically, the list shows in detail the number of posts and comments tracked to examine each question, the period of monitoring and the source. The limitations of the methodology lie in the fact that it does not represent the totality of Palestinians who use the digital space. However, it represents a specific group of the public who follow the pages of electoral lists (95.16% of Palestinians use Facebook which makes it the most used among other available social media platforms, it is also better equipped to host textual discussions than other platforms such as Instagram, which is more equipped for sharing photos and videos and less so for community interaction and conversation) and those interested in discussing the topic of the elections. More than 157,832 comments were monitored as direct digital analysis responding to pages of the electoral lists. The number slightly increases when taking into account the interactions and comments on official pages, community media, independent media and discussions in the dark corners of the platform, either within closed groups or on private individuals' profiles and private direct messages. An additional limitation lies in the fact that the study is based on tracking one social media platform, which is Facebook, as it does not represent all social media platforms. Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that Facebook is the most widely used platform among Palestinians.

A concise reading of the results of the local elections in the West Bank

Palestinian Ministerial Cabinet issued Resolution No. (126/18) for the year 2021 that calls for Local Councils elections, and to hold the "second phase" on March 26, 2022 in 66 local authorities, those classified as (A) and (B) in the West Bank and 55 local authorities in Gaza Strip. Also, to include the 11 local bodies classified (C) in Gaza, which were covered in the first phase. The Elections Committee received the decision of the Minister of Local Government and the local bodies in which no electoral list was nominated in the first phase, or whose lists, totaling 61, were withdrawn; to move forward to the second phase. Accordingly, the number of the local bodies included in the second phase adds up to 127 local bodies. Thus, and according to the specified dates, the electoral campaign will be launched on March 12, 2022 and will last for 13 days, ending on March 24, 2022.

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(5) Monitoring and analysis included: individual profiles, official pages, civil society pages, independent media pages, and media pages of government opponents.

The Palestinian local elections were held in the context of Palestinian political division, held only in the West Bank, as the political forces in the Gaza Strip - the Islamic Resistance Movement - Hamas and the Islamic Jihad Movement in Palestine - opposed local elections in response to the failure of holding the Palestinian legislative elections that were to be held in May 2021. It is worth noting that the last time Palestinian local elections were held was in 2017.

At first glance, the election results indicated that independent lists were leading with 64.4%, while political parties' lists represented 35% of the total winning lists in the second round of elections held in 50 local authorities in the West Bank, with the participation of 53% of those who have the right to vote.

Nevertheless, political observers and analysts[6] point out that the results of the local elections in the West Bank did not grant a landslide victory for specific political parties; they further add that it resulted in political polarization between the two most competitive parties on the Palestinian arena (Fatah and Hamas) in large cities such as Nablus and Hebron.

Such state of polarization was the result of alliances produced by electoral participation, between the Palestinian left and "Hamas" movement under the guise of independent lists, on the one hand, and lists affiliated with the "Fatah" movement, on the other hand, under the name of "Building and Liberation", in addition to the independent nominees known for their loyalty and affiliation with "Fatah", in order to compete for the city councils of major cities.

Regarding the presence of the Palestinian left, no discussions of leftist parties were monitored in the period of the report. This can be attributed to the fact that the presence of leftist parties is not as large or substantial compared with the other competing parties, especially in villages with heavy family or tribe influence. The more obvious explanation lies in the fact that many leftist candidates ran within independent lists jointly with candidates from different political backgrounds.

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(6)   The Return of Rivalry between the Poles of Palestinian Politics.

In some cities, such as Nablus, Jenin and Ramallah, "Fatah" and its allies were tilted, as opposed to the victory of lists strongly supported by Hamas, such as Tulkarm, Hebron and al-Bireh. When this is viewed at a deeper level, it confirms that the results of the local elections perpetuate the internal division that has been going on for years. It also reflects the same disappointments with the stagnant and divided political system under the prevailing and continued occupation. This was also reflected in the turnout in the elections, described by some analysts as "low".

As mentioned earlier, this report will serve the purpose of monitoring the electronic election campaigns and the digital discourse prior to the Palestinian local elections - the second phase, in an attempt to explore the topics and trends that concern the voter, the way they were presented in the digital space, and the impact to be achieved in this respect.

Analysis of the results of the study and monitoring

1. Level one: content and attitudes/trends

The results showed that local Palestinian elections vary at three pillars, namely: the social, political, and behavioral. This was evident in the content of the posts that were circulated in the pre-election period, the attitudes, and opinions of Palestinians towards them, expressed through posts, comments, sharing, and the use of emojis that are used as a "reaction" on Facebook (Like, Dislike, Anger, or Love), which provide a fuller picture of the commentators' positive or negative attitudes.

Results revealed that the **political pillar** related to the following issues:
1. The current status of the electoral system.
2. Media coverage of the elections.
3. The elections as a cause of division.
4. Postponing the elections.

1.1 What does the political discourse on Facebook during the Palestinian local authorities elections period reflect?

After analyzing 6,847 comments the findings showed that 56.7% of the commentators were dissatisfied with the current status of the electoral system, mainly because of the way electoral lists are formed by tribal clans and families, the lack of attention to competencies, the excessive representation, and the concentration of power in the hands of political parties. 53.3% of the commentators showed a positive attitude towards the media coverage, while 12% showed a negative attitude and dissatisfaction.

As for the conviction that the electoral system deepens the division, from a sample of 232 comments, 70.1% of the commentators supported such conviction, while 46.1% feel that the elections fuel the division in the Palestinian street, as opposed to 14.2% who do not share the same feeling. It is interesting to note that 39.7% did not show any reaction, and again, preferred to remain neutral. As for postponing the elections, from a sample of 192 monitored comments, 21.9% supported this position, as opposed to 14.1% who were against it; in a nutshell, a state of negativity, unwillingness, and reluctance to participate in the elections prevailed.

As for the social pillar, the posts, reposts, and discussions that surfaced reflected the following issues:
1. Posting pictures of female election candidates.
2. Women's participation in candidacy.
3. Lists without photos of the candidates.
4. Tribalism and the impact of family relations (kinship) on voting.
5. Sincerity in voting.
6. Discriminatory traditions.

1.2 To what extend do Palestinian Facebook users support women participant in local authorities elections?

622 women out of 2,306 candidates were nominated in the local authorities' elections, constituting 72% of the candidates. With respect to the social pillar, the debate over the role of women in the public sphere, especially in the political arena, was heightened. This

was evident in the ongoing debate about the legitimacy of displaying personal photos of women candidates on electoral lists. What was intriguing about the topic was not the discussion about the legitimacy of women to participate in elections and run for office. The monitoring results revealed that women receive more support in central cities. From a sample of 231 comments, 33.8% of the comments related to the attachment and sharing of women's personal photos in electoral ads were supportive and positive towards women. The remaining reactions were divided with 14.2% claiming that the attempt to support women should not compromise the rights of men; while 9.7% expressed absolute support for women and 13% expressed concern with respect to the civil rights of all.

As for the attitudes towards women's participation in the elections, 23.4% of the commentators from a sample of 201 comments, expressed their support and approval and manifested a positive attitude, while 18.9% opposed. 57.7% chose to be neutral and did not reflect any attitude - positive or negative regarding the issue. Based on this, the silent majority who normally have the decisive say in vital issues such as the role of women, remained vague and unclear.

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While the monitoring could not reveal much information about the differences in the discussions about female candidates between different lists, it does indicate however that the main discussion among them all related to visibility in the public sphere.

In Hebron for example, under the name "Beit Ummar for All" a group of women from professional and educational backgrounds, including teachers, professionals, social workers, and legal experts co-formed a list composed of women candidates only. The lists' online activity mostly took place on a close group as opposed to a public page. Therefore, in spite of sharing their photos to the public for instance, their discussions remained "behind closed doors."

On the other hand, and as a political protest and position to express the right to equality and partnership, the "Cry for Change" list, also from Hebron, for example, made it a point not to display photos of male candidates in protest to the concealment of the photos of female candidates in some electoral lists. This step was approved by 93% of the comments in a sample of 137 comments. While 7% of the comments were negative or neutral, with half of these comments saying that the move was only a promotional trick, and the other saying that not sharing a candidate's photo is a personal decision, free of coercion, and thus is the candidate's right.

Source: Report No.1, Illustration #8

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In Al-Bireh, the "National Equality and Empowerment" list responded to the removal of their promotional banners and posters describing it as an organized act of discrimination and vandalism that aims to silence the list.

Candidates also condemned the verbal insults they received during the electoral debate. Following these insults, candidates posted announcing that they would abstain from attending future debates hosted by the "Cultural Circle of Al-Bireh Municipality." Noting that insults mainly targeted female candidates in the list.

In Qalqilya, political alliances reflected on the local authorities' elections. For instance, a voice note by a female candidate of the "Qalqilya - Hope" list was leaked, were she expressed disappointment after losing the elections, and expressed multiple insults and accusation against Fatah, describing them as "filthy, stupid, traitors, and uncivilized."

Therefore, the political discourse among the different lists, either in Hebron or Al-Bireh for instance, and especially among women candidates, was limited to visibility to the public, through sharing photos of the candidates in campaigning materials, or the legitimacy of their participation in political debates without facing insults, and tying it to a larger battle for women's rights as citizens in Palestine. The information observed in the monitoring did not include political discussions, nor reveal insight on the role of age and political background on the political feminist discussion in the context of the local authorities' elections.

The report hereby recommends conducting a specific and in-depth comparative research ion this matter, to better understand the different aspects of the feminist political discourse

during the Palestinian elections.

It is worth noting that local elections appear to be the central entry point for women to engage in the political arena. The final results of the elections, according to the Central Elections Committee (CEC) in Palestine, revealed that the percentage of Palestinian women participating in local decision making cricles was up to 18% to 21%. With this in mind, it should be noted that women's access to these positions is not only achieved through direct voting, but also by acclamation – which constitutes the 21%, representing the highest percentage of women participation (in addition to the joint mechanism of acclamation and voting) – as illustrated in the following figure:
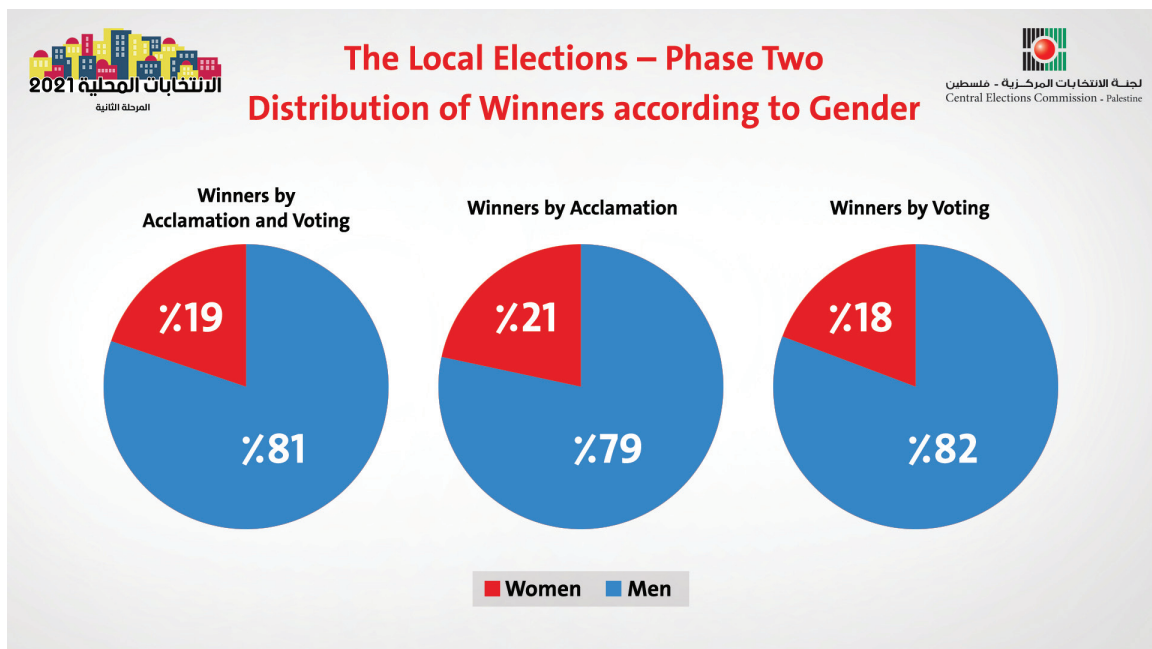
Source: https://www.elections.ps/tabid/1215/language/ar-PS/Default.aspx

1.3 To what extent are Palestinians on Facebook content with the role of families, loyalty to political parties, and discriminatory traditions in local authorities elections?

As for tribal affiliations and family relations (kinship) and its impact on voting in the local elections, From a sample of 663 monitored comments, around 35.5% of the commentators see it as positive and support it, while 23.1% view tribalism as having a negative impact on voting and thus reject it. The largest percentage of commentators, 41.4%, chose neutrality towards it.

As for what is termed "loyalty and devotion to the party", which also falls within the boundaries of social belonging and group affiliation -- the results showed that 62.2% of a sample of 270 comments look at it negatively and oppose it; while 8.8% look at it positively, and 28.4% look at it with neutrality – a percentage that is lower than that of family or clan affiliation. This may be attributed to the smooth and less complicated exit from the party or "party disobedience" as opposed to "family/clan disobedience".

As for the discriminatory electoral traditions – these are the terms, demands, or conditions that are required of candidates and that can impede their registration to run for candidacy. In Ramallah and Al-Bireh, candidates were asked to provide a "Certificate of Clearance". Candidates have objected and criticized this condition, and considered the procedures unfair, especially considering the prevailing economic hardships that is causing everyone to suffer; a candidate might not be able to pay a phone bill which is considered a violation and might be an obstacle towards obtaining the certificate of clearance and subsequently impede their registration for candidacy. It was also claimed by those who wanted to run, the processing of their requests was delayed which hindered their candidacy. The results indicated that 53.3% of a sample of 72 comments expressed their opposition to the discriminatory electoral traditions, and 23.1% expressed their support. As for Ramallah and Al-Bireh, in particular, results showed that 7.4% of the commentators view the discriminatory traditions or measures in local elections as positive and agree to them, while 38.9% reflected indifference and evasion.

This discussion reflected differently on social media, and particularly on Facebook, based on the types of accounts engaged in discussions of this issue. Accounts of government critics adopted a sarcastic tone, while personal accounts were divided between sarcastic and straight-forward and thorough criticism. The only cases monitored of support for discriminatory regulations came from one list and its followers. The monitoring also revealed, as previously mentioned, that 7.4% of analyzed comments supporting "status quo" were at the same time and in other discussions, opposed to "discriminatory tradition" in the law, evident in multiple expressions as portrayed in the following graphic:

Plea to god
1.1%

Cursing, insults
1.7%

Criticizing tribalism
1.7%

Criticizing the electoral system
4.0%

Opposing discrimination
5.1%

Supporting status quo
7.4%

Show of distaste
13.1%

Critical discussion
26.3%

Sarcasm, apathy
38.9%
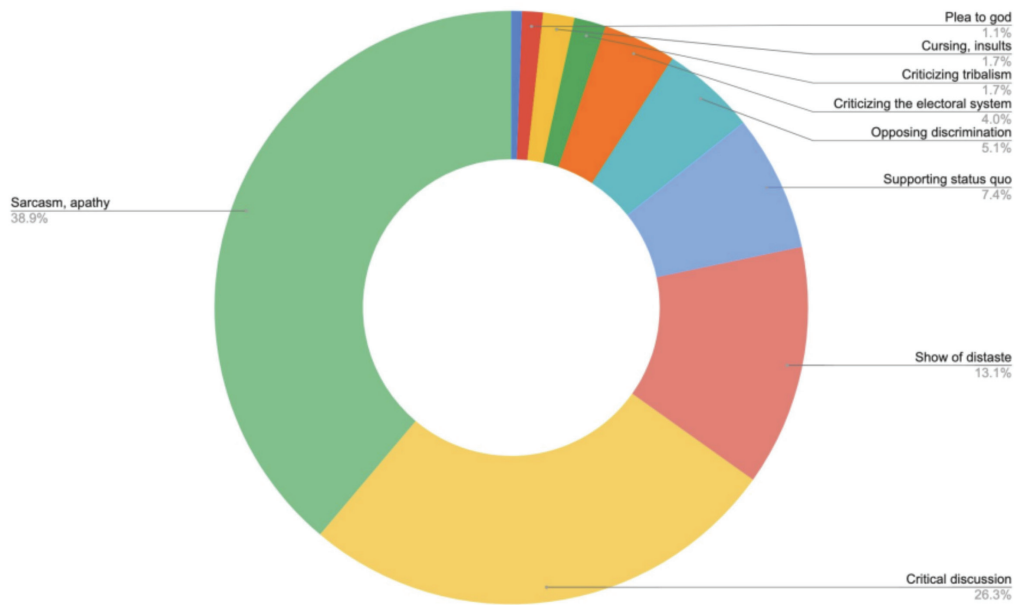
Moreover, other posts have been circulated with a tone of guidance, directing and reflecting the electoral behavior, which can be classified within the **behavioral pillar**:

1. Motivate participation and engagement in elections.
2. Boycott Fatah movement.

1.4 How did Palestinians on Facebook respond to campaigns encouraging voting or calling to boycott the elections?

With respect to motivating participation in the elections, from a sample of 462 comments, the results showed that only 8.1% of the commentators interacted with the motivational campaigns, launched by NGOs to encourage people to participate in the elections. While results showed that 29% of commentators felt positive towards the approach; and 47.6% opposed it. This could be attributed to the call for boycotting the un-institutionalized elections, and is considered as a political punishment of Fatah movement – it can also be attributed to the fact that the campaigns failed to convince voters, or that they were serving certain entities or parties. In general, the state of evasion or reluctance to participate and engage with the electoral process reflects a status of lack of interest, lassitude, and dissatisfaction with the political system, all at the same time.

The results also showed a campaign to boycott the Fatah movement as a political punishment due to the internal oppression and prevailing sense of betrayal. Consequently, the results showed that from a sample of 244 comments, 32.4% had interacted with the "make them fail" campaign targeting Fatah's lists, and supported the punishment of Fatah in the polls, urging people not to vote for its lists. This campaign was launched initially in the Gaza region, which in principle did not participate effectively in the elections; yet, this did not stop expressing opinions in the digital space, and from Hebron in the West Bank. Results showed that 33.8% of the comments and posts supported the "Make them Fail" campaign; it also activated the hashtag "#Punishment is_ getting_ closer" – and it included messages and calls for mercy and prayers for the late activist Nizar Banat, to remind of his assassination by the Palestinian Security Forces. Only 1.7% of the comments rushed to the defense of the Fatah movement in this regard.

Regarding the participation of Jerusalem and Gaza in the local elections, no public posts or discussions were monitored on Facebook during the reporting period in relation to the local elections[7], although it should be noted that the issue of participation in the elections for Jerusalemites and Gazans was heavily discussed in social media platforms in the middle of 2021 when The Palestinians were eagerly awaiting the Palestinian legislative and presidential elections.

1.5 To what extent do Palestinians distrust the Palestinian electoral system as evident in discussions on Facebook?

The results that were monitored also indicate a status of distrust towards the Palestinian electoral system; this was evident in the voter turnout, which reached only 53% - not a high percentage in terms of the current political situation and the failure to hold elections periodically. In one explanation analyzers provide to the lack of confidence in the Palestinian electoral system, which reflected in what has been described as a "low" turnout, researcher Yazan jabr[8] attributes this to "the reluctance of the young generation to participate in local elections." He defines this as a "huge defect and failure" of all forces who failed to mobilize this segment that is large, influential, and effective at all perspectives and levels.

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(7)   Note that Jerusalemites are administered by the Israeli local government and the Jerusalem municipality.
(8)   ibid.

This was clearly evident in the results, where, according to the Central Election Commission in Palestine, the age group (25-35) is the least represented, constitute around 16% and 17%, - which is also parallel and comparable to the situation of women, as more than 17% are recommended and not directly voted.

This phenomenon can also be explained by the fact that the Palestinian society is a hierarchical society and the view of politics and politicians is related to age - unlike other societies that focuses on youth and dynamics. In all cases, this point will be addressed later - in the recommendations section.

Source: https://www.elections.ps/tabid/1215/language/ar-PS/Default.aspx
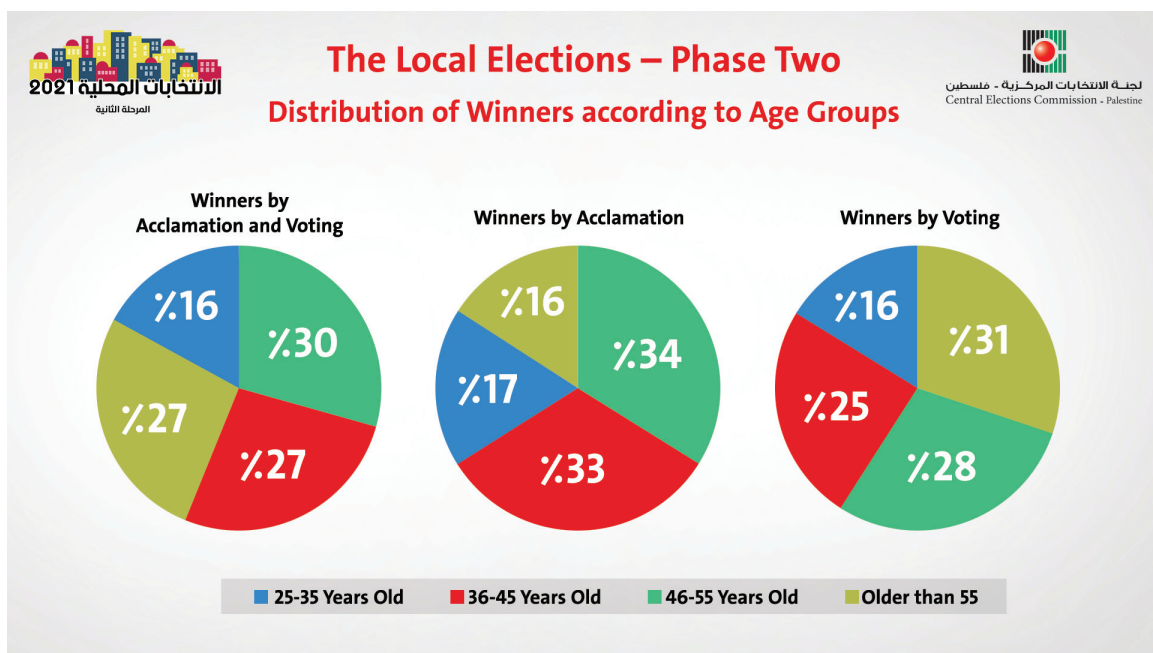
The monitoring results demonstrate the dominance of the negative attitude towards central issues that dwell in the Palestinian public opinion during the local elections, which reflect the general Palestinian public opinion. The negative attitude was monitored and assessed through posts and comments that reflected "opposition, negativity and disapproval", while positive attitudes were assessed through posts and comments that reflected "approval, positivity, and support".

As for the electoral campaigns of Fatah movement, the largest political power that controls and influence the Palestinian authority, from a sample of 1157 comments, almost 54.7% of commentators demonstrated a negative attitude towards it, while 31.1% demonstrated a positive and supportive attitude, representing the attitudes expressed by Palestinians in the digital space and especially on Facebook. This reflects the growing opposition to Fatah among Palestinians. For example, in response to the speeches made by Fatah leaders which claimed that "anyone who does not vote for Fatah is committing a sin", 61% of the comments from a sample of 551 comments were sarcastic and indifferent. While 18% expressed their dissatisfaction and that they feel insulted as they see it as an attempt to accuse them of infidelity.

Moreover, the attitude of neutrality was highly demonstrated in high percentages that can also be interpreted to reflect indifference and evasion to the elections and the political system. For example, the debate on postponing the elections, 64.1% of the commentators from a sample of 201 comments demonstrated their neutral position. Also, with respect to the participation of women, 57.7% also opted not to take a stand and remain neutral. Such results clearly reflect the dominance of the neutral-negative attitude which demonstrates a state of despair and evasion towards the electoral process, political engagement, and the process of change and modernization.

During the elections, we saw on social media some participants and candidates calling for legislative elections (local elections as a step towards holding national elections), but during the monitoring period focused on the second phase of the local elections, they were excluded due to their small number and as they mostly contained satirical content. It is worth noting that after the first phase of the local elections, there was an organized effort to call for legislative elections, and this appeared on social media platforms under the hashtag: #We_choose and #We_want_to_vote. These trends did not appear in the second phase. This can be attributed to the resolution the Palestinian leadership reached to to postpone the elections until a solution is reached in the issue of Jerusalemites' participation in the elections, which shifted the matter towards a dispute between Palestinians and Israel.

2. The second level addresses the technical aspect of the digital electoral campaign and all the related posts, comments and shared posts:

2.1 Where on Facebook are Palestinians posting about electoral campaigns?

From a sample of 162 posts, 49% of the posts that were monitored were posted from pages of personal accounts; most of the content reflected dissatisfaction with the current situation and the current electoral system; demanding change in the structure of the elections.

Whereas from a sample of 99 posts, 13.6% of posts were circulated on media platforms, independent and anti-government, reflected content related to the controversial statements made by Fatah that attracted attention for being of provocative nature. The following chart illustrates the big difference in content based on the source of the debates, namely, personal account pages and media platforms. This confirms that despite the gray picture depicted through the volume of turnout in the local elections and the silent percentages on a number of issues, yet the main interaction and engagement with respect to the election was basically over the personal pages and accounts.

Number of posts analyzed by their source
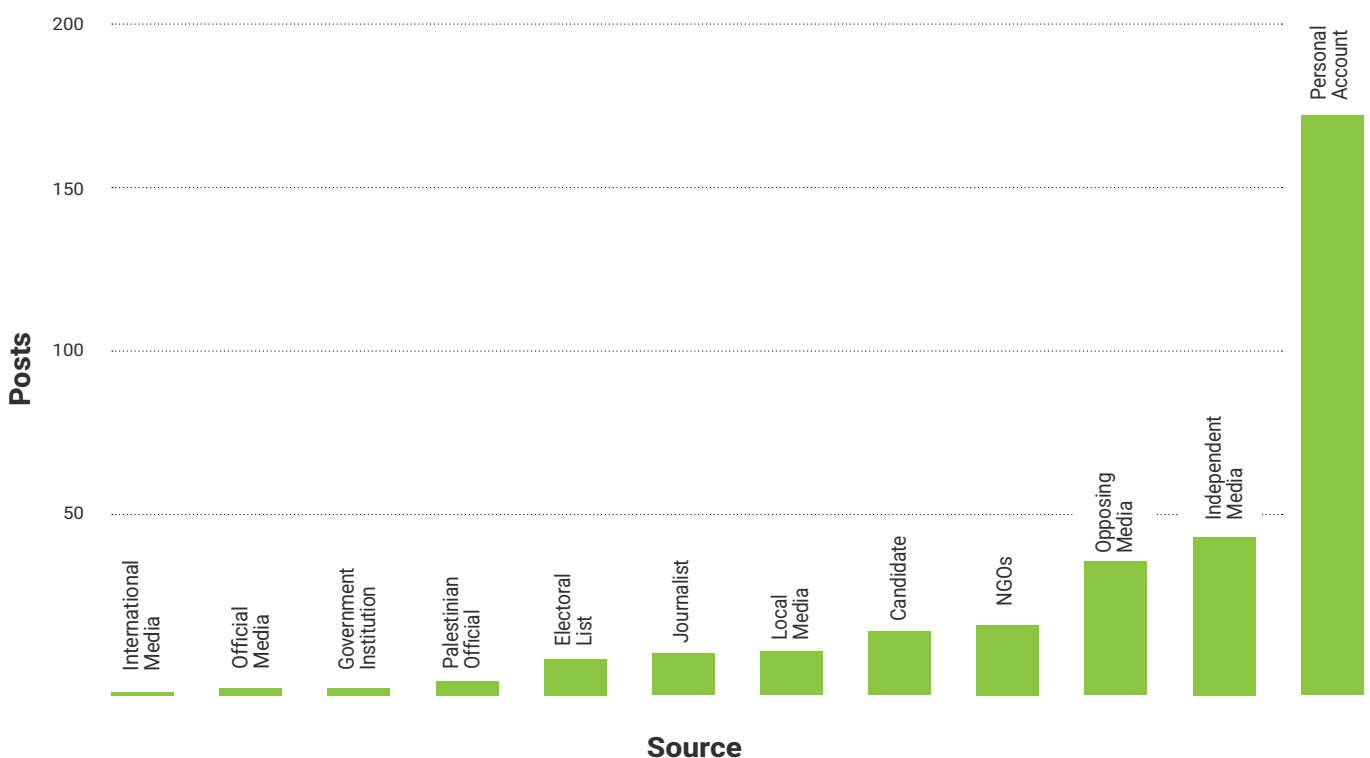
Source: Summary report, illustration #11.

2.2 To what extent does posting of pages of electoral lists contribute to the success[9] in local elections?

If we look thoroughly at the sample of 234 posts via the pages of the electoral lists that were monitored between 12 and 24 March 2022, the results show that the average posting rate was 75 posts. The lowest level of posting on pages of the electoral lists was 3 posts, the case of "sons of Halhul" list, while the highest level of posting was 585 posts, in the case of "Martyr Yasser Arafat/Yatta" list; the average rate of posting was 53 posts. The results indicate that there is no relationship between the numbers of posts on electoral list pages and success of these lists in the elections, especially when taking electoral behavior into account, which is affected by many factors such as tribal or party loyalties. Nevertheless, it is fair to mention that of the top 25 lists that posted on the page of their electoral lists, 11 lists succeeded in the elections. That is, 44% of the lists that used extensive posting during the elections managed to succeed in the local elections, as illustrated in the following table shows:

Successful Electoral List	Number of posts across the pages of the Electoral lists
List of the martyr Yasser Arafat/Yatta	585
Nablus choose	497
Loyalty to Hebron - Hebron municipal elections 2022	257
Right of Return 2022	188
The people of the Land Block	174
Building and Liberation Block - Qalqilya	166
Building and Liberation Block - Beitunia	152
Karmiyon menu	148
Al Beireh Unite Us	144
The National Loyalty for Building and Liberation Block - Sa`ir	144
Beita Martyrs List	123

Source: The Researcher, based on the Summary Report.

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(9) Success refers to reaching or exceeding a decisive percentage of the votes. According to the Palestinian Central Elections Committee, success in the electoral system for local authorities elections is defined: "each list which obtains 8% or more of the valid votes is allocated a number of seats in proportion

2.3 To what extent the comments across the pages of the electoral lists contributed to the success in local elections?

As for the comments across the pages of the electoral list, the results show that the average comments reached 862 comments, the lowest average was 429 comments, and the highest was 16,335 comments which was of the "Nablus choose" list.

As for the relation between the number of comments on the page of the electoral list and the success of the list; the results show that out of the top 25 lists that got more than the average number of comments (which amounted to 862) on their pages, 7 lists succeeded. This means that 28% of the lists whose pages were commented on and interacted with succeeded in the local elections.

Successful Electoral List	Number of posts shared on pages of Electoral Lists
Nablus choose	16,335
Building and Liberation Block - Qalqilya	6,397
Loyalty to Hebron	4,515
Karmiyon List	4,287
List of the martyr Yasser Arafat/Yatta	4,254
People of the Country Block	2,357
Al Beireh unites us	1,330

Source: The Researcher, based on the Summary Report.

2.4 To what extent the posting and engagement rate across the pages of electoral lists contributed to the success in local elections?

As for the median rate of engagement and sharing of posts and comments on the pages of the electoral lists, the results indicate that the rate of engagement amounted to 10.75 with an average of 7.42. While the highest rate of sharing reached 50. 51. If we look closer, out of the top 25 electoral lists with different rates of sharing, 4 lists succeeded in the elections. In other words, 16% of the lists whose posts and comments were shared succeeded in the Palestinian local elections.

Successful Electoral List	Median of Shared Posts
Building and Liberation Bloc	38.5
Nablus choose	32.9
Karmiyon List	29
Loyalty to Hebron	17.6

Source: The Researcher, based on the Summary Report.

Summary and recommendations:

The main summary of this report is reflected in the gray picture and the silent majority that did not participate in the elections which also did not actively participate in the discussions and debates related to the elections, even in the digital space and in particular in the Facebook platform. The main reasons to explain this phenomenon are the evasion towards political conduct, the factional and elite composition and the political structure, and the political division between Fatah and Hamas. However, it is also worth noting, that the Palestinian people, especially in the West Bank, are subject to the Cybercrime Law Regultion (2018) [10], which can criminalize digital activity and expose citizens to political persecution by the National Authority on the one hand and by the Israeli occupation authorities on the other. The most important recommendation in this respect might be to continue this research, further explore reasons behind the aversion towards the engagement and participation in the local electoral process and the heated battle/competition.

As for the interaction across the digital space, the electronic polling conducted on social media platforms has shown that it cannot be relied upon due to the randomness in voting; the voting process was monitored from accounts that repeat the same posts and comments eight times or more. Also, it is impossible to relay on digital engagement through the analysis of comments, posts, and debate videos to predict the results of the election and the winning candidates. Most of these materials are full of spam or biased to the channel or page that post the material. The posts, comments and the sharing of such posts across the pages of the electoral list show a state and level of communication between the candidates and those who have the right to vote, and despite the presence of such interaction, this also does not reflect the success of the lists. Finally, the attitudes embodied on Facebook through simple emogis, which reflect the attitude whether positive or negative, provide a clearer and deeper picture that help in identifying positions on controversial topics.

In the end, we agree that the essence of the municipal elections stems from the service provision concept, however, this might give an indication for any other elections, i.e., if

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(10) Al-MUQTAFI, Cybercrime Law for 2018, quoted from: 2018 Cyber Crime Law

legislative elections were held in the future, and in which multiple blocs were competing, the two main blocs that emerged from the results of the local elections would remain at the forefront of the Palestinian political scene. Therefore, the interaction and engagement in the digital space is an important arena available for Palestinian citizens, and it is of vital importance to transform it into a safe, accessible and efficient space for political participation and engagement, now and in the future.

Recommendations:

1. Digital awareness campaigns targeting youth and women.

1.1 Empower women in local governance by strengthening the feminist orientation, and not only relying on the feminist presence,. through targeted digital campaigns throughout the year and not only during the election period. Especially since the central debate that the study shows relates to the legitimacy of the visibility of women in the public sphere of the digital space.

1.2. The results and analysis show a bleak picture of the youth's reluctance to participate in the electoral process/battle, and this requires the need to investigate reasons for their reluctance, and to exert efforts to integrate them from today into the decision-making process as well as to engage them in political, social, syndicate, and service provision arenas. To do so, digital awareness campaigns about the meaning and importance of participation in elections could be launched targeting youth.

2. Establishing a platform: In the elections period, it is important to provide a platform for digital electoral campaigns where candidates can share their programs and engage in direct discussion with Palestinians, to shift elections beyond personal and individual discussions, and debates confined to narrow fields.

3. Despite the multiple projects run by the Central Elections Committee, which appear under "projects" on the committee's website, this report reveals a need to address the following aspects:

3.1 Organizing recorded and simplified online lectures, and sharing them on social media: The report shows strong criticism and distrust towards the local elections process. Therefore, it is important to expand the Central Elections Committee's awareness campaigns on the importance of local elections and the relationship between local government and citizens regarding responsibilities and rights. Although the official Facebook page of the Central Election Committee[11] shows extensive activities and awareness campaigns in Palestinian schools and universities, it is necessary to reach out to the entire Palestinian society – especially in marginalized areas where voters turnout was low – which requires in-depth research based on the data generated on turnout rates in this election.

3.2 Organizing joint online trainings with experts: Since the Central Elections Comittee's vision is to promote the principles of democracy and good governance through regular, free and fair elections, it is imperative to cooperate with organizations concerned with democracy and citizenship – to spark civic debates online on local elections, and strengthen trust in the election process. This should include a detailed and transparent explanation of the election process from an ethical and a practical point of view, including methods used to calculate the election results, the definition of the electoral threshold, and the adopted Sainte-Lague method .For example, 7amleh - Arab Center for the Advancement of Social Media organized a training course on "Managing Online Electoral Campaigns" with the participation of 54 active members in electoral lists in the 2022 Palestinian Local Authorities elections. The training was conducted as a Zoom webinar and the participants were able to interact with the trainer Ahmed Barakat. Such trainings and joint efforts can expand the trainees' base and enhance trust among citizens in the electoral process, and incentivize them to participate in the local elections both as voters and candidates.

3.3 Strengthening engagements between Palestinians and the Central Elections Committee: The Central Elections Committee displays rich content on its official page on Facebook, and despite its following of 146 thousand followers,[12] the dynamics of participation and interaction between followers appear to be very weak. It is therefore necessary to develop and adopt a mechanism that encourages the interaction and participation of followers with the content shared by the Election Committee.

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(11)   The Central Elections Committee Official Facebook Page: https://www.facebook.com/CECPalestine/
(12)   ibid.

Sources:

Central Elections Committee (CEC) - Palestine, Local Elections Summary: derived from:
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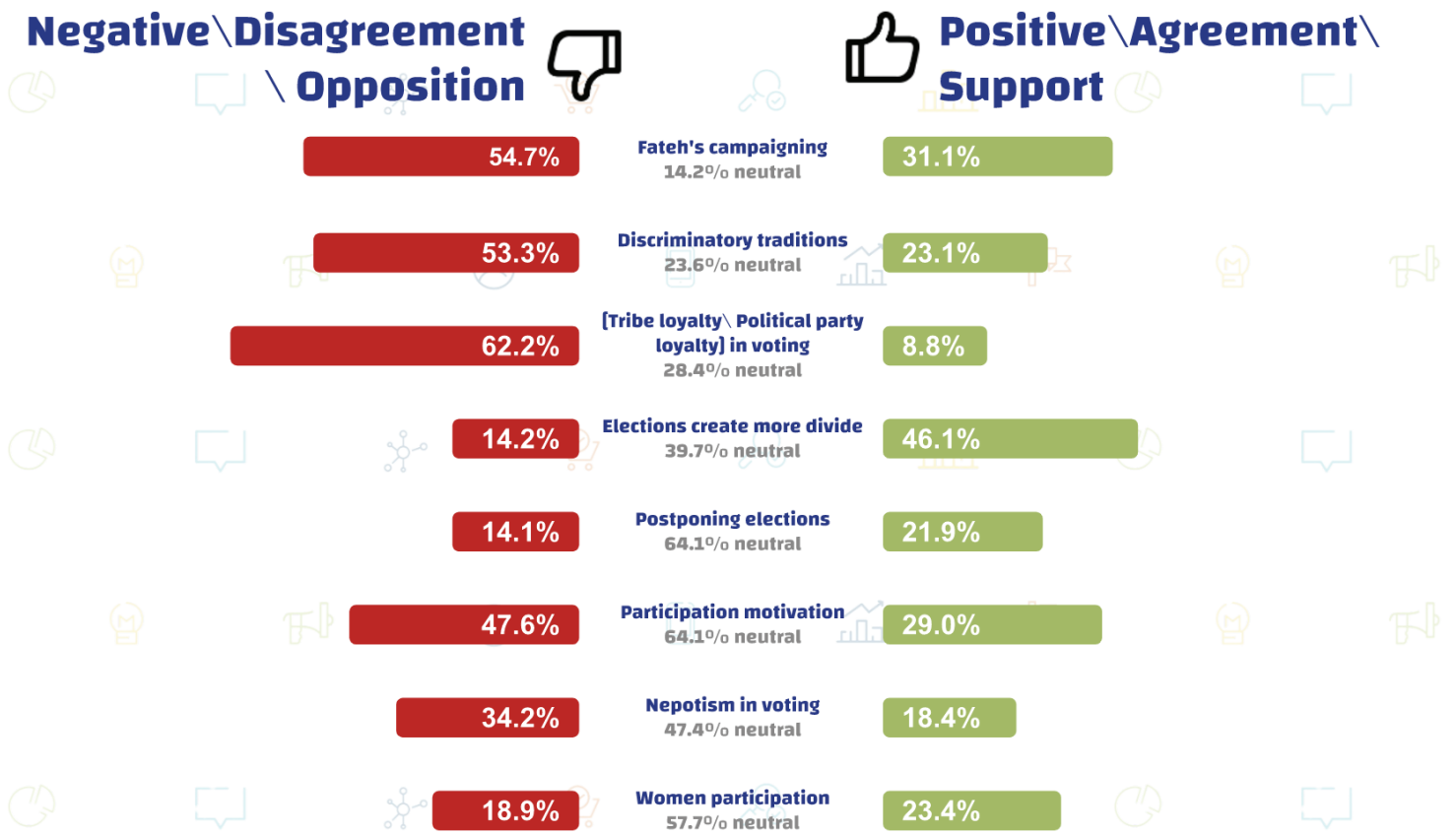
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Annex I:

1. A list of terms and words researched on the internet

Candidate	Bethlehem	Your Voice	Announce Candidacy
Candidate	Voting	Your voice makes a difference	Polling
candidates	Bigotry	Tulkarm	Punishment is getting closer
Candidate (Female)	Scattered	Tribes	Election
Candidates	Fragmented	Clan/tribal	Electoral Program
Electoral Districts	Hamas	Bigotry	Hebron
Debates	Make them Fail	Discriminatory	Electoral Campaign
Debate	Campaign	Fatah	Sinwar
Attack/Assault	Ramallah	List	Popular
Nablus	Bribes	Tribal	Lists
Nazar	Bribe	Qalqilya	Local
Commissions	Withdrawal of candidacy	Quota	The Left
Commission	The Boycott gang	Council	Elect
The Green	Vote	Village Council	Vote
		The Yellow	The Red

2. An example for Monitoring Trends/Attitudes

Negative\Disagreement \ Opposition 👎

👍 Positive\Agreement\ Support

	Negative	Positive
Fateh's campaigning 14.2% neutral	54.7%	31.1%
Discriminatory traditions 23.6% neutral	53.3%	23.1%
[Tribe loyalty\ Political party loyalty] in voting 28.4% neutral	62.2%	8.8%
Elections create more divide 39.7% neutral	14.2%	46.1%
Postponing elections 64.1% neutral	14.1%	21.9%
Participation motivation 64.1% neutral	47.6%	29.0%
Nepotism in voting 47.4% neutral	34.2%	18.4%
Women participation 57.7% neutral	18.9%	23.4%

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