

**LEBANESE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY**

The Impact of the 2019 Lebanese Multidimensional Crisis on  
Young Adults' Political Attitudes and Behavior

By

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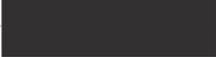
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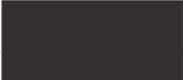
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# The Impact of the 2019 Lebanese Multidimensional Crisis on Young Adults' Political Attitudes and Behavior

Maria Issa

## ABSTRACT

How do economic crises affect individuals' political attitudes and behavior? The thesis sheds light on the impact of the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis on young adults' political attitudes and behavior. For more than two years, Lebanon has been assailed by overlapping economic and social crises, including severe economic depression, a banking crisis, currency devaluation, the Beirut Port explosion of August 4, 2020, political stalemate over the formation of a new government, and the Covid-19 pandemic. To gauge the impact of this multidimensional crisis, this study employs a qualitative analysis of focus group discussions with Lebanese young adults aged between 21 and 27 who hold a bachelor's degree or its equivalent. Findings show that the 2019 multidimensional crisis had a significant negative impact on young adults' political attitudes and behavior, affecting their affiliations, political interest, and trust. This crisis has led to an increase in political mistrust, alteration in political affiliations, and a gradual decrease in political interest.

**Keywords:** Economic crises, Political Attitudes, Political Behavior, Young Adults, Lebanon, The 2019 Multidimensional Lebanese Crisis.

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# Chapter One

## Introduction

A core belief in the political economy literature holds that economic crises provide powerful explanations for political change. Several scholars examined the impact of economic downturns, arguing that they may play a significant role in altering political attitudes and behavior (Schlozman & Verba, 1979; Nezi, 2012; Vasilopoulos & Bedock, 2015; Magni, 2015). However, there is little agreement regarding the extent to which economic shocks result in such change. In fact, economic crises trigger severe transformations on multiple levels, affecting the state socially, politically, and governmentally. Increased unemployment, economic insecurity, loss of income, erosion of health insurance, and governmental instability are just a few of the outcomes of economic crises. Furthermore, the negative effects on specific individuals caught in the downturn may be weightier than on other unexposed individuals.

A large body of research examines the impact of economic crises on young adults entering the job market during downturns. Earlier research focused on the influence of financial crises on fresh graduates in terms of employment and wages. Academic evidence shows that economic shocks tend to have an intense and long-lasting impact on the career progression and earnings of young adults (Oreopoulos et al. 2012; O'Higgins, 2010; Speer, 2016). However, the question remains: is the effect of economic crises greater on the political behavior and attitudes of young adults? How can downturns trigger political change among fresh graduates?

No study, to our knowledge, has considered the impact of crises on the political attitudes and behavior of young adults. This study contributes to the discussion by examining how political attitudes and behavior of educated youth were influenced by the 2019 multidimensional crisis in Lebanon.

For more than two years, Lebanon has been entrenched in overlapping multifaceted crises, including a severe economic depression, a banking crisis, currency devaluation, the August 4, 2020 Beirut Port explosion, the Covid-19 pandemic, and disputes over the formation of a new government, which left Lebanon without a cabinet for more than 13 months. The 2019 economic crisis in Lebanon was considered one of the top three most severe crises in modern history (World Bank, 2020). However, its effect on political attitudes and behavior has not yet been studied. Understanding the impact of this overlapping crisis is, therefore, key to a meaningful analysis of the current political landscape.

This study aims to examine the 2019 multidimensional Lebanese crisis and the impact it has had on the political attitudes and behavior of young adults holding a bachelor's degree and aged between 21 and 27. This study contributes to the overall body of work on downturns and political attitudes and behavior by tackling the influence of economic crises on young adults in an Arab multi-party system, noting that all previous research on political change during downturns has focused on Western states.

In this study, an economic crisis is defined as a situation in which the economy of the country experiences a sudden downturn in GDP. For the sake of consistency, the term "2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis" refers to the multifaceted economic, social, and political crisis in Lebanon. While this crisis is unique, it can be compared to other similar crises discussed in the

literature under various headings, such as economic crises, financial downturns, and economic shocks. It is important to note that this study uses economic crises, downturns, and shocks interchangeably as having the same meaning. Political attitudes are defined as a citizen's like or dislike for subjects relating to politics. These views can be negative, positive, or neutral. Also, political behavior is defined as the citizen's political activities and involvement in the political process. Since this study was completed prior to the May 2022 parliamentary elections in Lebanon, it does not look at how the 2019 multidimensional crisis impacted voting behavior. Hence, political behavior in this study does not involve voting behavior.

To position the study in the proper context, we must begin by examining the literature available worldwide and looking at how economic crises impact fresh graduates and their political views. The study then presents an overview of the multidimensional crisis gripping Lebanon. Later, the study introduces the research methodology, which is based on qualitative data from focus groups with Lebanese young adults. Then, the key findings will be presented and discussed to answer the research questions.

This study considers a time frame from the start of the multidimensional crisis in October 2019 until the end of 2021. It is important to recognize that the crisis in Lebanon began long before 2019 and is an enduring outcome of the 1975 civil war. In 2019, the multidimensional crisis simply became apparent — citizens were fully aware of its negative consequences. Therefore, the period from 2019 until the end of 2021 is a suitable amount of time to test how the Lebanese multidimensional crisis has affected the political attitudes and behavior of the individuals in question.

## 1.1. Research Questions

This research study seeks to answer the following overarching question: How do economic downturns affect the political views of young adults? More specifically, how were Lebanese young adults' political attitudes and behavior impacted by the 2019 multidimensional crisis in Lebanon?

In order to answer this research question, the study explores the following:

- To what extent did the 2019 multidimensional crisis contribute to political activity among young adults?
- To what degree did the level of trust in the government change among young adults due to the crisis?
- How did individuals' affiliations with existing political parties change due to the 2019 multidimensional crisis?
- To what extent did the crisis influence young adults to associate with new independent anti-establishment political parties?

These research questions are imperative if we are to gauge the impact of the current multidimensional crisis in Lebanon. Providing answers to these questions is certainly an endeavor worth pursuing, particularly given the fact that the country remains in a state of flux, with economic instability at a dangerously high level.

## **1.2. Literature Review**

The aim here is to review the literature available on the effects of economic crises on young adults, especially on their political attitudes and behavior. This chapter presents a brief overview of the literature, while the second chapter will focus solely on reviewing previous studies in a more comprehensive and detailed manner. Existing literature has examined the impact of downturns on fresh graduates by focusing on career progression and earnings. The body of research examining the impact of economic crises on political attitudes and behavior is rich in robust evidence. However, age is not considered a factor in most of these studies. This literature review provides a snapshot of the way in which economic downturns influence fresh graduates and discusses the effect of economic crises on individuals' political attitudes and behavior. Additionally, the literature review presents an overview of the 2019 multidimensional crisis in Lebanon while delving into the recent survey that was conducted to assess its impact on Lebanese individuals' political attitudes and behavior. A summary of each section is presented in this chapter; however, the following chapter will dive deep into existing studies and their contribution to the literature.

### **1.2.1. Effects of economic downturns on young adults**

Previous research examining the impact of financial crises on fresh graduates shows that economic downturns tend to have a negative influence on the working life of young adults, which can persist well into the future. Searching for a job during an economic crisis is shown to have a long-lasting effect on salaries, the possibility of facing poverty, and the tendency to experience job insecurity (Oreopoulos et al. 2012; Schwandt & Wachter, 2018; Davis et al. 2011; Stein et al. 2013). Economic shocks have a much more severe and profound impact on young

adults than on the older population (O'Higgins, 2010; Cockx, 2016; Schwandt, 2019). While a significant body of research has examined the impact of economic crises on the employment of young adults, there has been no research — to our knowledge — that has explored the effect of financial shocks on the political attitudes and behavior of the younger generation. Earlier studies have simply observed how these economic downturns have impacted the population in general, without taking age into account.

### **1.2.2. Economic crises and political behavior and attitudes**

The impact of economic shocks on individuals' political attitudes and behavior has proven to be a long-lasting preoccupation in political economy literature. Theoretically, Marxian analysts argue that economic crises eventually lead to subsequent political changes (Marx, 1904). Similarly, the Reward-Punishment theory suggests that citizens are rational voters; they will reward the people in power when the economy is doing well, yet will punish them in times of economic crisis (Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier, 2008). Scholars examining diverse electoral systems have strongly supported the theory of economic voting (Anderson, 2000; Nezi, 2012; Fraile and Lewis-Beck, 2010; Fraile and Lewis-Beck, 2012). Several studies claim that due to economic crises, individuals may shift their political support from the people in power to opposing anti-establishment parties (Vasilopoulos and Bedock, 2015; Nezi, 2012; Magni, 2015). Furthermore, multiple studies have examined the impact of economic crises on political participation, arguing that when facing a severe economic shock, people are more likely to lower their interest in politics and choose not to participate (Schlozman and Verba, 1979; Emmenegger, Marc, and Schraff, 2015).

While investigating the precise triggers of change in political attitudes and behavior during an economic crisis, two streams of literature have developed. The first highlights the micro-level link between personal economic exposure and the individual's political attitudes and behavior (Malhotra & Margalit 2010, Dancygier & Donnelly 2014, Ahlquist et al. 2018). In contrast, the second stream of research emphasizes the macro-level influence, arguing that the state of the economy and major economic transitions impact the citizens' political attitudes and behavior (Gourevitch, 1986; Rogowski, 1987; Kriesi et al., 2008; Bermeo & Bartels, 2014). However, an opposing body of research casts doubt on the effect of both micro-level and macro-level economic changes on political attitudes, stating that ideological beliefs adopted early in life are more likely to persist (Krosnick & Alwin, 1989; Redlawsk, 2002; Taber & Lodge, 2006; Bisgaard, 2015; Anderson and Singer, 2008).

As this literature indicates, most studies conducted on the effect of economic downturns have focused solely on the Western framework. Indeed, the impact of the Lebanese 2019 economic crisis — regarded as one of the top three most severe crises in modern history — has not yet been dissected (World Bank, 2020).

### **1.2.3. The Lebanese 2019 multidimensional crisis**

By the time the financial crisis erupted in the fall of 2019, Lebanon was dealing with a paralyzed economy and massive public debt, estimated at 97 billion USD (Ministry of Finance, 2021). For more than two years, Lebanon has been grappling with simultaneous crises, including a severe economic disaster, a banking crisis, currency devaluation, the August 4 Beirut Port explosion, political fallouts over the formation of a new government, and the Covid-19 global pandemic. The multidimensional crisis in Lebanon has, unquestionably, weighed heavily on the

Lebanese population, especially the young generation who — according to previous research — is greatly influenced during economic downturns. Understanding the effect of this multidimensional crisis is, therefore, key to a meaningful and comprehensive analysis of the current political landscape and will contribute to the literature on economic crises and political attitudes and behavior.

#### **1.2.4. Recent survey research on Lebanese individuals' political behavior**

This study will explore the findings of two main surveys in the following chapter. To examine the political and voting behavior of Lebanese youth, Statistics Lebanon Ltd., along with Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, conducted the first survey prior to the 2018 parliamentary elections. The second survey was conducted in 2019, a year after the 2018 elections, by USAID together with Social Impact (SI) under name of the Citizen Perception Survey (CPS).

#### **1.2.5. Gaps and limitations**

To date, most of the literature on the topic has measured the impact of economic crises on individuals' political attitudes and behavior by interpreting data from Western states. To our knowledge, there has been no study to determine how such events affect countries in the Middle East, despite the fact that economic downturns are common in the region, even more so in modern history. Taking into consideration that the political system in Arab states differs considerably from the Western political system, it is crucial to investigate the impact of economic shocks in the Arab political context. This is especially true in the case of Lebanon, with its multi-party system, where it is harder to cast blame on one party alone. Filling the gap in previous research will provide scholars with a broader perspective of the impact of financial

downturns. It will also contribute to the growing debate on the extent to which economic crises are catalysts for political change.

### **1.3. Variables**

This study aims to examine the impact of the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis on the political attitudes and behavior of young adults. Thus, the independent variable would be the 2019 multidimensional crisis in Lebanon. In this research study, we define it as the rapidly accelerating 2019 Lebanese crisis that translated into a soaring inflation rate, deterioration in the national currency, absence of meaningful job opportunities, loss of access to savings and deposits in the bank, high unemployment rates, growing poverty, and economic insecurities.

The overlapping dependent variables would be young adults' political attitudes and behavior. Political attitudes are defined as the citizen's like or dislike for political subjects; these can be negative, positive, or neutral views about politics. In this study, political attitudes can include the individual's political views, party affiliation, level of interest in politics, political orientation, and level of trust in the government.

Political behavior is defined as the citizen's political activities and form of involvement in the political process. Political behavior can include participating in the revolution/protests and volunteering in political groups. Since this study was completed prior to Lebanon's May 2022 parliamentary elections, it does not take into account how the 2019 multidimensional crisis

swayed voting. Hence, political behavior as defined in this study does not involve voting behavior.

#### **1.4. Research Methods and Data Collection**

To explore the impact of the 2019 multidimensional crisis on young adults' political attitudes and behavior in a comprehensive manner, this study conducts a qualitative analysis. The analysis consists of focus groups with university graduates aged between 21 and 27 years old. The focus groups allow elaborative and in-depth discussions with the participants, where they were able to recount their experiences and express their views in detail.

The representative sample is equally divided between men and women, and all participants are holders of a Bachelor's degree or its equivalence. The sample comprises data gathered from graduates of three different universities in Lebanon: Lebanese American University (LAU), Lebanese University (LU), and Holy Spirit University of Kaslik (USEK). These universities were selected to incorporate both public and private institutions — with medium to high tuition fees — ensuring that the sample is representative of fresh graduates from a wide spectrum of social and economic backgrounds.

The study is based on three focus groups of six members each, making a total of 18 participants. Noting that it was not feasible to interview every young adult in Lebanon for the purpose of this study, internal generalizability has been applied. The results of the focus groups conducted with the 18 participants have, thereby, been extended to draw conclusions about young adults in Lebanon with similar characteristics.

The focus groups were conducted via Zoom due to the global Covid-19 pandemic and the Omicron outbreak in Lebanon. The researcher (myself) did not, under any circumstance, ask participants to disclose personal information, including their names or addresses. Only their ages and educational backgrounds were provided for the purpose of this research.

The data collected from the focus group discussions have been analyzed and interpreted in three main phases: transcription of audiotapes, identification of major themes, and interpretation of the data. The data collection and analysis methods are examined more thoroughly in chapter three.

## **1.5. Thesis Outline**

This introductory chapter discussed the objectives, significance, and research questions of the study to lay the groundwork for the chapters that follow. It has offered an overview of the thesis while addressing how it will contribute to the literature on the subject.

Chapter two consists of the literature review, which is divided into four main sections that include the effects of economic crises on fresh graduates, the impact of downturns on individuals' political attitudes and behavior, an overview of the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis, and the recent survey research on Lebanese individuals' political behavior. This chapter also tackles the gaps in and limitations of the literature review, as well as explains how this study aims to fill the void and contribute to the overall body of research.

Chapter three presents the methodology used to conduct and analyze the focus group discussions. It examines, in detail, the criteria used to select the participants, collect the data, and analyze the responses. This chapter also presents demographic information relating to the

respondents, including age, gender, employment status, if they are actively searching for a job opportunity, if they experienced job loss at any time post-October 2019, and their perceptions regarding the prospect of finding employment.

Chapter four reviews the responses that were received from the 18 participants during the focus groups. It organizes the responses thematically based on patterns that emerged and relays key statements made by the participants. This penultimate chapter also relates each theme to the literature review and recent survey research in Lebanon.

Chapter five brings this thesis together by focusing on answering the questions set out in chapter one, presenting the major findings of the study and reaching significant conclusions. In this chapter, the main contributions of this study are identified while acknowledging its limitations. Furthermore, the final section puts forward suggestions on future avenues of potential research that could be conducted on the impact of economic downturns.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Political Change in Times of Economic Crisis**

This chapter aims to review the literature available on the effects of economic crises on young adults, especially on their political attitudes and behavior. Existing literature has examined the impact of downturns on fresh graduates by focusing on career progression and earnings. While the body of research examining the impact of economic crises on political attitudes and behavior is rich in robust evidence, age is not considered a factor in most of these studies. Therefore, this literature review is divided into four main sections. The first discusses the influence of economic downturns on fresh graduates. The second section presents literature of a contrasting nature in reference to the effect of economic crises on individuals' political attitudes and behavior. This section also looks at the impact of financial crises on different aspects of political attitudes and behavior, including political participation, trust in political institutions, and party affiliations. The third section provides an overview of the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis. The fourth and final section explores the recent survey research conducted on individuals' political attitudes and behavior in Lebanon. This chapter intends to outline the context in which the impact of economic crises on young adults has been previously studied and explains how this paper contributes to the literature.

## **2.1. Effects of economic downturns on young adults**

Previous research examining the effect of economic crises on fresh graduates mainly focused on career progression and earnings. Academic evidence shows that economic crises tend to have a negative impact on the working lives of young adults, and this effect can last for an extended period. Seeking employment during an economic crisis is shown to have a lasting effect on salaries, the possibility of facing poverty, and the likelihood of experiencing job insecurity (Oreopoulos et al. 2012; Schwandt & Wachter, 2018; Davis et al. 2011; Stein et al. 2013).

While examining the rate of unemployment during the 2007-2009 Great Recession in the European Union, Canada, and the United States, O'Higgins (2010) stated that the increase in the number of unemployed individuals during an economic crisis is significantly higher among young adults than for those over the age of 30. According to O' Higgins' study, the effect of unemployment during economic downturns was more likely to persist, with young people struggling to find work for a long period of time. Fresh graduates entering the job market during an economic crisis were likely to experience continuous reductions in their salaries, lasting up to 10 years (Speer, 2016; Schwandt & Wachter, 2018). In his study, Speer (2016) analyzed the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth in the United States from 1979 until 2010. After his analysis, he estimated a 16 percent decline in the average wage, a 28 percent drop in working hours, and a 45 percent decrease in first-year earnings. Fresh graduates who entered the job market after an economic crisis were more likely to suffer from low earnings and a higher likelihood of unemployment (Oreopoulos et al, 2012; Cockx, 2016). Using a Canadian longitudinal university-employer-employee dataset from 1976 to 1995, Oreopoulos, et al. (2012)

argued that graduating in an economic downturn might cause a decline in earnings lasting up to 10 years.

More importantly, Schwandt (2019) analyzed cross-sectional data sets (Vital Statistics and Census Bureau data) from the United States and found that individuals graduating during a financial crisis were at a greater risk of death when they reached middle age. These increased rates were largely attributed to diseases related to unhealthy behavior, such as drinking, smoking, or unhealthy eating habits. Furthermore, individuals who completed their education in times of economic crisis were more likely to die as a result of a drug overdose or another “death of despair” (Schwandt, 2019). Surveying a sample of 222 young adults from the United States in 2012, Stein et al. (2013) also found a direct relationship between economic pressures and psychological well-being. Young adults who had to make economic changes due to the crisis reported more acute levels of depression and anxiety (Stein et al. 2013). According to this study, young adults with a high level of depression even viewed the economic crisis as a punishment from God (p. 207).

A large body of research has explored the effect of economic crises on the employment status and prospects of young adults. However, no studies have been conducted, to our knowledge, to examine how downturns affect the political attitudes and behavior of the young generation. Previous studies have reported how the population, in general, has been impacted by economic crises, regardless of age.

## **2.2 Economic crises and political behavior and attitudes**

The effect of economic shocks on individuals' political attitudes and behavior is a long-lasting preoccupation in the political economy. Political economy literature often assumes that downturns offer compelling explanations for political changes. Several scholars have agreed that economic shocks can play an active role in the nation's politics. However, there is little agreement on what that role is and to what extent it can influence political views and behavior.

Theoretically, Marxian analysts explain that economic crises eventually lead to subsequent political changes (Marx, 1904). Marxists claim that economic downturns are significant catalysts when it comes to change in citizens' political consciousness. According to the Reward-Punishment theory, citizens are rational voters — they will reward the people in power when the economy is performing well, but they will punish them in times of economic crisis (Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier, 2008). When financial downturns and economic slumps prevail, individuals immediately blame the government, while prosperity predisposes the same citizens to reelect those in power. Scholars examining different nations and electoral systems have strongly supported the theory of economic voting (Anderson, 2000; Nezi, 2012; Fraile and Lewis-Beck, 2010; Fraile and Lewis-Beck, 2012).

Several scholars claimed that economic crises may cause voters to shift their political support from the people in power to opposing parties. Using the case of the 2014 European election results in Greece and Italy, Vasilopoulos and Bedock (2015) concluded that in extreme situations when the country's economy is failing, individuals were more likely to follow radical parties. Klapsis (2014) also examined how several economic crises across time pushed individuals to become more radical and resulted in a rise in political extremism. First, the Great

Depression of the 1930s had a remarkable impact on individuals' political behavior, which manifested itself in a greater number of radical regimes (Klapsis, 2014). Once again, in 2008, the global financial crisis in Europe greatly swayed citizens' political behavior, pushing many toward anti-establishment parties with radical and anti-liberal ideologies. The 2014 European parliamentary elections also offer strong evidence of the rise in political radicalism among citizens post economic crisis (Klapsis, 2014). Another study investigating the economic downturn in Greece, referencing the elections of 2004 and 2009, suggests that when a recession hits, the party in power loses supporters and has no chance of winning elections (Nezi, 2012). The ruling party should only expect allegiance from its long-term loyal followers. In the case of Britain, analyzing the 2005-2010 British election panel, Magni (2015) also found that economic crises increase support for anti-establishment political parties. Citizens become unwilling to collaborate with entrenched political parties and find it hard to believe their endless promises. Using empirical evidence of political change in the United States from 1900 until 2017, Frieden, Lake, Nicholson, and Ranganath (2017) concluded that economic shocks set in motion succeeding political changes. Downturns do not create a sharp break in political settings but a more gradual — nevertheless noteworthy — change in politics (Frieden, Lake, Nicholson, & Ranganath, 2017).

Studies have also looked at the manner in which economic crises affect individuals' trust in the government and its institutions. Based on 23 Eurobarometer surveys covering all state members of the European Union, Foster and Frieden (2017) suggested that economic factors are crucial in determining the change in trust in governments. Economic crises have a tremendously negative impact on citizens' confidence in governments and political institutions. Using the case

study of the 2008 financial crisis in Spain, Caïs, Torrente, and Bolancé (2021) also affirmed that financial factors, particularly economic downturns, explain the decline of trust in authorities. Similarly, using a survey conducted in 2004 in the United States, Uslaner (2010) argued that economic crises lead to a marked decrease in trust in economic and governmental institutions. According to his study, during economic downturns, greater inequalities lead to less confidence, which later prompts a lack of willingness to cooperate to attain a higher public purpose. Following the same line of thought, after analyzing the European Social Survey from 25 states in Europe, Kroknes, Jokobsen, and Gronning (2016) stated that economic downturns reduce citizens' confidence in authorities, especially in countries where the national economy is noticeably battered.

Similarly, Obydenkova and Arpino (2017) used the European Survey and Transparency International from 2002 to 2013 to analyze the relationship between corruption and the distrust in governmental institutions. This study found that during economic crises, corruption was an obvious source of mistrust in political institutions. The study conveyed that nations experiencing higher levels of corruption were more likely to display signs of low confidence in government among its people. A rise in corruption during a financial crisis is linked to a decline in trust (Obydenkova & Arpino, 2017). Similarly, using survey panel data in 2012 and 2013 from Spain and Portugal, Torcal (2014) argued that a negative perception of political authorities being unresponsive in times of economic crisis had an adverse impact on individuals' confidence in political and governmental institutions. A steady decline in governmental and institutional trust is a product of citizens' belief that the government and political elites are not responsive and are,

in parallel, corrupt. According to Torcal (2014), two main factors affect citizens' distrust of political institutions and elites: lack of responsiveness and corruption.

Multiple studies have also tackled the effect of economic crises on political participation. Schlozman and Verba (1979) suggested that when faced with a severe economic shock, people were more likely to lower their interest in politics and abstain from any kind of participation. Similarly, using panel data from the Netherlands, Emmenegger, Marc, and Schraff (2015) confirmed that citizens experiencing economic shocks were more likely to lose interest, becoming less politically involved and investing little time in activities related to politics. Magni (2015), however, asserted that economic crises could also push individuals to become more politically active. The effect of anger regarding the economic crisis depends on individual efficacy and the citizen's perception of his/her political power (Magni, 2015). Frustration toward an economic crisis can decrease political engagement among individuals with low efficacy, but it can increase political participation among those with high efficacy (Magni, 2015). People who no longer believe in their ability to bring about change to the current political or economic crisis tend to lose interest in politics and decide to disengage entirely. In contrast, people who believe they can impose political change often feel motivated to take action during an economic crisis; they become more politically active and aim to influence the situation for the better.

While investigating the precise causes of change in political attitudes and behavior during an economic crisis, two streams of literature have emerged. The first emphasizes the micro-level link between personal economic exposure and the individual's political attitudes and behavior

(Malhotra & Margalit, 2010; Dancygier & Donnelly, 2014; Ahlquist et al., 2018). A significant body of research offers solid evidence supporting the role of personal economic conditions on political behavior and attitudes (Monroe, 1979). Using survey data from the United States during the Recession in 2009, Hacker, Rehm, and Schlesinger (2013) propounded that the personal experience of economic shocks, especially economic insecurities, had an effect on citizens' political attitudes regarding the role of the government. In their analysis, they identified economic insecurity as the reflection of intersecting risks caused by the financial crisis, including major losses driven by employment, medical, family, and wealth changes. Individuals value their financial stability, and in times of crisis, they build political expectations depending on their personal experiences and the experience of their surroundings. In the case of Poland, Ahlquist, et al. (2018) surveyed citizens prior to the 2015 elections and showed that individuals who were exposed during economic shocks were more likely to be politically attentive and demand changes than the unexposed.

A major theoretical approach links political attitudes and behavior to individuals' costs and benefits of economic and governmental policies (Kramer, 1971; Downs, 1957). Individuals' political attitudes and behavior reflect considerations related to their exposure vis-à-vis the risk of unemployment, their position in the job market, and their expected earnings (Meltzer & Richard 1981, Iversen & Soskice 2001, Mares, 2006). When an economic crisis alters their financial situation, their political preferences are expected to change accordingly.

Several studies have shown that citizens who experience job loss during an economic downturn are likely to grow more supportive of increasing government spending on social welfare. These studies employed data from different countries, including Denmark, the United States, the Netherlands, and Sweden. In Denmark, Alt et al. (2017) conducted a panel survey in

the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. In the United States, Owens and Pedulla (2013) analyzed panel data from the General Social Survey (GSS) in 2006, 2008, and 2010. In the case of the Netherlands, Naumann et al. (2015) used data from the Dutch Longitudinal Internet Studies Panel during the global economic crisis from 2008 to 2013. Finally, in Sweden, Martén (2019) analyzed a survey panel from the Swedish National Election Studies from 1985 to 2010. These studies, from four different countries, concluded that economic crises affect individuals' political attitudes, especially their views on government spending.

In fact, several scholars have noticed a correlation between the levels of unemployment and growing mistrust toward political authorities and institutions (Roth, Nowak-Lehmann & Otter 2013; Morlino & Quaranta 2014; Guiso et al., 2017). Using quantitative data from 11 European states from 2003 to 2013, Muro and Vidal (2017) argued that changes to one's financial situation — especially the lives of those facing unemployment — deeply influence political attitudes, causing distrust. Algan et al. (2017) used survey data from 2002 to 2017 in 25 European countries to examine the effect of unemployment shocks on political trust. They found that a 5 percent increase in unemployment was linked to a 3.6 percent drop in political trust (Algan et al., 2017).

Besides unemployment, the effect of economic shocks on political behavior is less significant and diverse. Using a panel study carried out over four years (2007-2011) in the United States, Margalit (2013) showed that a partner losing his/her job or increased risk of being laid off had less of an effect on individuals' political attitudes than unemployment.

The second stream of research observes the macro-level influence, arguing that the state of the economy and major economic transitions influence the citizens' political attitudes and behavior (Gourevitch, 1986; Rogowski, 1987; Kriesi et al., 2008; Bermeo & Bartels,

2014). After reviewing studies of survey data in the United States, Feldman (1981) stated that individuals' political attitudes and voting behavior were influenced by the state of the economy and the government's ability to handle the crisis, not by their personal economic well-being. Furthermore, this study found that individuals consider economic well-being based on their actions, therefore, political behavior is independent of personal economic conditions. Personal conditions influence political attitudes only when there is a perception of governmental responsibility for financial health.

However, an opposing body of research calls into question the influence of both micro-level and macro-level economic changes on political behavior, asserting that ideological beliefs adopted early in life are more likely to persist (Newcomb, 1967; Krosnick & Alwin, 1989). Several studies have emphasized the role of ideological dispositions and denied the influence of economic crises on individuals' political attitudes and behavior. Drawing on the 1952 and 1956 American presidential elections, Campbell et al. (1960) concluded that political preferences are shaped by a set of long-established beliefs and principles, which tend to endure resistance to changing conditions. People are inclined to shut down information that is inconsistent with their prior values and embrace new concepts that reinforce their beliefs (Redlawsk, 2002; Taber & Lodge, 2006). Therefore, economic crises or changes in personal economic conditions are likely to have a marginal impact on individuals' political attitudes and behavior. Bisgaard (2015) also related the psychological theory to individuals' political perceptions. Using monthly survey data collected before and after the British economic crisis of 2004 to 2010, Bisgaard (2015) found that more than 40 percent of citizens supported their party so strongly that they found other explanations for who/what was to blame for the economic crisis. The psychological approach

also explains how citizens perceive the nation's economy differently (Bisgaard, 2015). If the individual's preferred party is in power and he/she is asked about the state's economy, he/she tends to think that everything is fine. After collecting empirical data from the European Social Surveys conducted in 2002-2003 in 20 different European countries, Anderson and Singer (2008) argued that the political attitudes and behavior of citizens were influenced differently depending on their ideological identities. People with varying ideological backgrounds have differing experiences during an economic crisis. Using survey data from 2002 to 2014 in Spain, Jurado and Navarrete (2021) concluded that the impact of economic crises greatly depends on the citizen's ideological identity.

Several studies examining the effect of economic crises on political attitudes and behavior surprisingly found a much smaller impact than anticipated (Fiorina, 1978; Klorman, 1978; Wides, 1976; Sigelman and Tsai, 1981). Titled "The Surprisingly Weak Effect of Recessions on Public Opinion," the study reviewed opinion surveys for four decades in the United States and found no evidence of change in political attitudes toward the government after several economic downturns (Kenworthy & Owens, 2011). Schlozman and Verba (1979) also conducted surveys in the United States in 1979 and compared them to extant surveys of the Great Depression in the 1930s. They argued that economic crises and sudden spikes in the rate of unemployment had little impact on political choices and attitudes. For Schlozman and Verba (1979), the effect of unemployment during economic crises could be explained by people's support for policies designed to improve the current situation but not for changes in social ideology or political beliefs. There is no link between personal unemployment and political attitudes; while the unemployed may look to the government for aid, they will not question their ideological political views (Schlozman & Verba, 1979).

As this literature indicates, most of the studies exploring the effect of economic downturns have focused on the West. Although the Lebanese 2019 economic crisis has been described as one of the top three most severe crises in the world since the mid-nineteenth century (World Bank 2020), its effect on political attitudes and behavior has not yet been studied. The following section in this literature review will thus present an overview of the multidimensional crisis in Lebanon.

### **2.3. The 2019 Lebanese economic collapse and multidimensional crisis**

By the time the financial crisis engulfed Lebanon in the fall of 2019, the small Mediterranean country was already dealing with a paralyzed economy and massive public debt, which was estimated at 97 billion USD (Ministry of Finance, 2021); the collapse became a question of when not if. The 1975 Lebanese civil war lasted 15 years, leaving behind thousands of casualties, a weak sectarian system, poor infrastructure, and corrupt ruling elites that piled up public debt with little justification for their overspending (Youssef, 2020). The Lebanese consociationalism and the sectarian elites undermined nation building in favor of sectarian privileges and community fragmentations. Indeed, this sectarian polarization left Lebanon politically unstable, resulting in multiple political fallouts which left the country without a president for more than two years (2014-2016). Consecutive post-war governments borrowed money under the misleading guise of rebuilding the nation. Hiding behind their sectarian lines, politicians burdened the Lebanese economy with sovereign debt. Today, the public sector has borrowed the equivalent of 170 percent of GDP, ranked among the highest in the world (World

Bank, 2020). The excessive public debt and policy failures of successive weak governments have left little room for government spending on basic social needs. Lebanon's infrastructure is one of the worst in the world, and the dysfunctional electricity system compels citizens to pay extra fees for private generators. In 2018, Lebanon ranked the fourth worst country in quality of electricity supply (World Economic Forum Report, 2019) and one of the worst countries in terms of its road quality (the Global Economy, 2019).

In 2019, the flawed economic system and shortsighted political maneuvering pushed Lebanon to the brink of total collapse. The political elites' practices and decisions were based on sectarian and personal interests rather than ensuring good governance of the nation state (Salamey, 2021). On October 17, thousands of Lebanese took to the streets to protest against institutionalized corruption, the economic meltdown, high levels of unemployment, and the government's failure to provide its citizens with basic needs, such as electricity and water. Lebanon witnessed its largest post-war protest, with hundreds of thousands gathering in central Beirut and beyond, blocking roads all over Lebanon (Chehayeb & Sewell, 2019). These uprisings, which many considered a "revolution," resulted in the resignation of Saad Hariri's government. In January 2020, Lebanon's former minister of education Hassan Diab was appointed prime minister and a new cabinet was formed. However, Diab and his team faced the tough challenge of finding solutions to overlapping crises in the country while the ruling class stayed in power.

For nearly two years now, Lebanon has been marred by multidimensional crises, including a severe economic depression, a banking crisis, currency devaluation, hyperinflation,

the August 4 Beirut Port explosion, political bickering, and the Covid-19 pandemic. According to the World Bank (2020), Lebanon's economic crisis ranks as one of the three most severe in the world since the mid-nineteenth century.

The Central Bank of Lebanon became a conveyor belt to fund the government and the ruling regime through local banks, which left many banks technically bankrupt. The banking system has lent over 70 percent of its assets to the Lebanese state (Gardner, 2020). Banks offered double-digit interest rates to refinance public debt, lending to the state, retaining local deposits, and attracting non-resident capital. This so-called "financial engineering" trapped dollar bank resources and led to extreme losses for the Central Bank of Lebanon (Khallouf, 2020). Most Lebanese banks lost liquidity, and the central bank issued unofficial capital controls to avoid complete bankruptcy. Depositors were only allowed to withdraw a fraction of their savings in Lebanese pounds. "Fresh" dollar withdrawals could not be made, and international money transfers were limited.

Due to the economic collapse, a foreign exchange black market emerged, and the Lebanese pound experienced rapid devaluation, losing 90 percent of its value on the black market. The Lebanese pound reach a record low of 30,000 to the US dollar in January 2022, compared to the official exchange rate of 1,515, which it maintained from 1997 until September 2019. Currency devaluation led to delays in imports; supermarkets, pharmacies, and hospitals faced extreme shortages in food, medicines, and essential products. There were also significant delays in fuel imports, which resulted in a greater number of power outages and forced people to wait in line for hours to refuel their vehicles. The currency crisis and extreme shortages of

essential products and services drove Lebanese citizens to the edge. Lack of electricity also forced countless Lebanese hospitals to limit their medical services. Inflation caused the price of food to skyrocket by 400 percent, with many unable to afford bread and other basic items (Khraiche & Goyeneche, 2021). The dire situation led to the closure of thousands of businesses, thus pushing unemployment rates to the peak. Employed citizens were also struggling to provide for their families as most salaries remained at the official exchange rate of 1,515, while supermarkets were pricing products at the black-market exchange rate. The percentage of Lebanese living in poverty rose from 28 percent in 2019 to more than 55 percent in May 2020, with approximately 23 percent considered extremely poor (UN, 2021). The Lebanese suicide hotline reported double the number of calls, from around 300 to more than 600 calls per month in 2020 (Durrant, 2020). As a result, Lebanon suffered a heavy depletion in its human capital as well. High-skilled labor, including healthcare workers, grabbed well-paid opportunities abroad, resulting in a long-lasting social and economic loss for Lebanon.

On August 4, 2020, the capital Beirut experienced one of the most powerful non-nuclear explosions in history. More than 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate, which had been unsafely stored at the Port of Beirut, exploded. The blast claimed more than 200 lives, injured 6,000 people, and displaced more than 300,000 in and around the capital (WHO, n.d). The World Bank and the United Nations estimated the damage caused by the explosion to be somewhere between USD 3.8 and USD 4.6 billion, with losses to financial flows of USD 2.9 to USD 3.5 billion (World Bank, 2021). While the country was already unraveling, the blast had a catastrophic impact on Lebanon's healthcare system, causing huge devastation to Beirut's hospitals, many of which were unable to tend to the wounded in the aftermath of the explosion due to structural

damage. Furthermore, the city's fragile infrastructure, its schools, and heritage buildings were all casualties of the explosion.

In the wake of the devastating August 4 explosion, the state continued to fail in its obligations. Instead, the Lebanese youth led the clean-up efforts, helped by international aid groups. On August 10, six days after the explosion, the government of Hassan Diab resigned in the midst of public outrage. Both Mustafa Adib and Saad al Hariri respectively struggled and failed to form a government. After 13 months of governing with a caretaker cabinet that had limited constitutional power, Najib Mikati finally succeeded in forming a new Lebanese government on September 10, 2021.

The 2019 multidimensional crisis in Lebanon has, unquestionably, affected the Lebanese population, especially the young generation who, according to previous research, is highly influenced during economic downturns. Understanding the effect of this crisis is therefore key to a meaningful analysis of the current political landscape and will contribute to the literature on economic crises and political attitudes and behaviors.

#### **2.4. Recent survey research on Lebanese individuals' political attitudes and behavior**

Prior to the 2018 parliamentary elections, Statistics Lebanon Ltd., along with Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, conducted multiple interviews to examine the political and voting behavior of

Lebanese youth. The sample size was 1,200 participants, equally divided between males and females and aged between 21 and 29 years old. Remarkably, this survey found that most young adults (76 percent) intended to participate in the 2018 elections. A total of 83 percent of those interviewed indicated that they had chosen their list of candidates ahead of the elections based on their former affiliations. Notably, most of the respondents (66 percent) indicated that they would vote for an entrenched political party, 26 percent would vote for the list containing their preferred candidate, and only 6 percent planned to vote for the list of the civil society. It is interesting to note that prior to October 2019, this survey found that only 6 percent of the 1,200 youth participants said that they would vote for the civil society. Similarly, according to the survey, 88 percent of participants intended to vote for their political party even if the electoral list contained other parties that they opposed. When asked about the factors influencing their political choices, the participants' responses included services offered (69 percent), affiliation/political party (66 percent), family (60 percent), and the media (47 percent). According to the Statistics Lebanon Ltd. 2018 survey, family remains a significant factor in influencing youths' political orientations, steering them away from independent choices.

In 2019, a year after the 2018 elections, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and Social Impact (SI) conducted the Citizen Perception Survey (CPS). A total of 8,091 people from all Lebanese governorates and districts participated in the study. However, it is important to note that the sample did not only consist of young adults — it included both youth and non-youth subjects. During the time, 90 percent of the participants believed that the Lebanese economy was bad, and 79 percent reported that it had worsened over the last five years. The CPS revealed deep dissatisfaction with the present government among

Lebanese citizens; three out of four participants believed that the government would be less effective in tackling challenges in the country compared to former governments. Notably, citizens' confidence in ministers and members of the parliament was exceptionally low; a whopping, 81 percent of participants reported that governmental authorities did not efficiently meet citizens' needs (USAID, 2019). Moreover, two-thirds of the participants indicated that their trust in the Lebanese parliament and government had decreased over the previous five years. In total, 66 percent of respondents stated that their confidence in the council of ministers had decreased in the last five years, while 65 percent said the same about the parliament (USAID, 2019). The CPS reported that the only authorities witnessing an increase in trust were linked to the country's security (Lebanese Armed Forces, Internal Security Forces, and the general security). When asked about the main priorities that should be tackled by the present government, respondents stated the Lebanese economy, corruption, and the lack of employment. For youth, especially those with a higher level of education, corruption was the greatest concern (USAID, 2019). Similarly, participants reported that the ultimate obstacle to efficient public service in Lebanon was corruption; in fact, 79 percent believed that corruption was the primary hurdle, followed by government ineffectiveness (49 percent), and absence of accountability (46 percent) (USAID, 2019).

## **2.5. Gaps and Limitations**

To date, most of the literature examines the impact of economic crises on individuals' political attitudes and behavior by interpreting data from Western countries, including the United

States, the United Kingdom, the European Union, Sweden, Denmark, and the Netherlands. To our knowledge, no study to date has analyzed this topic by focusing on Middle Eastern countries, even though economic downturns are common in this region, especially in modern history. Taking into consideration that the political system in Arab countries is noticeably different from that of the West, it is important to examine the impact of economic shocks in the Arab political context, especially in Lebanon, with its multi-party system that makes it much harder to blame one party alone.

Previous studies discussed the impact of downturns on individuals' political attitudes and behavior, regardless of their age. Indeed, age was not considered a factor while examining this topic. However, another body of research explored the effect of economic crises on young adults by focusing simply on career progression and earnings. This literature has shown that economic downturns are more likely to impact fresh graduates' employment status and wages. The question, therefore, remains whether this is mirrored in the political attitudes and behavior of young adults.

To our knowledge, this is the first study that aims to explore the effect of economic crises on young adults' political attitudes and behavior, especially in the case of Lebanon. Filling the gap in previous research provides scholars with a broader view of the impact of downturns. This study also contributes to the growing debate on the extent to which economic crises trigger political changes.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter presented a brief overview of the literature on the effect of economic crises on individuals' political attitudes and behavior by focusing on young adults. Competing hypotheses have explained the impact of economic downturns on exposed individuals. Some studies indicated that financial crises have a notable effect on individuals' political affiliations, attention to politics, and confidence in the government and political institutions. However, other studies argued that economic crises do not have a long-term impact on political attitudes, since individuals' early ideological beliefs tend to persist. This chapter also explored previous survey research conducted in Lebanon to examine political attitudes and behavior. These surveys, together with the literature, will be compared to the findings of this study in the coming chapters. This study contributes to the literature by confirming some assumptions while refuting others. It also aims to find new explanations for the impact of economic downturns by studying the 2019 multidimensional crisis in Lebanon.

## **Chapter Three**

### **The Focus Groups and Participants' Demographics**

This chapter presents the methodology used to conduct the focus groups, including the data collection and data analysis methods. The study was based on three focus groups, with six participants each (18 participants in total). The data collection section explains in detail how the focus groups were conducted and how the 18 participants were interviewed. The data analysis methods focus on how the data collected was interpreted in three main phases: transcribing the audiotapes, identifying major themes, and managing and interpreting the data. Finally, this chapter presents the demographics pertaining to the 18 participants, including age, gender, degree, employment status, if they are actively searching for a job opportunity, if they experienced job loss at any time after October 2019, and their perceived prospects of finding employment.

To explore the impact of the multidimensional crisis on young adults' political attitudes and behavior in a comprehensive manner, a qualitative analysis was used. The analysis consisted of focus groups with educated young adults between 21 and 27 years of age. The focus groups' dialog allowed elaborative and in-depth discussions with the participants. They provided a deeper understanding of the phenomena being studied. Using focus groups as a qualitative research method assisted in gaining rich insights into the participants' attitudes and behavior. The open-ended questions asked during the discussions allowed the researcher to capture

insightful information. Young adults also had the chance to explain their experiences and political views in greater detail.

### **3.1. Data Collection Methods**

Ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the Lebanese American University was obtained before recruiting the participants. Morgan (1998) stated that focus groups typically comprise six to 10 participants, with smaller groups recommended for controversial topics or those in which participants are emotionally preoccupied with the topic discussed. Politics, especially in Lebanon, is one of the most divisive and contentious issues, one that has pushed the country to the brink of total collapse on countless occasions. After October 2019, politics gained more attention among young adults in Lebanon, and they became emotionally involved in this topic. Thus, smaller groups were more suitable for this study, therefore, each focus group had just six participants. The study was based on three focus groups, with 18 participants in total. The three focus groups were conducted on February 5 and February 6, 2022, and lasted 70 minutes, 55 minutes, and 60 minutes respectively.

The focus group discussions were advertised via a social media post. The post stated: “I would like to invite you to take part in a focus group about the 2019 multidimensional crisis in Lebanon, the discussion will last no longer than 65 minutes. If you are between 21 and 27 years old and you hold a bachelor’s degree, please DM me so we can set a convenient time. Your participation is much appreciated.” The volunteers were divided into groups based on their availability and preferred time.

Open-ended questions were asked, allowing participants to elaborate and aiding the researcher in gaining a deeper understanding of the participants' attitudes and behavior. The questions focused on political interests, causes of the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis, trust in the government, and political affiliations prior to and post October 2019. Each participant was given approximately one minute to answer each question. Interventions were allowed and encouraged as long as the participants raised their hands and waited for the person speaking to finish. The questions were addressed in English, as were the responses. Some participants injected a few Arabic words intermittently into the conversation.

The focus groups were conducted via Zoom due to the global Covid-19 pandemic and the Omicron outbreak in Lebanon. The focus groups' discussions began with a short introduction, whereby the researcher (myself) introduced herself, thanked the participants, and briefly explained the purpose of the study. The consent forms were distributed beforehand, and the participants were ensured that the data would be treated confidentially. In the consent form, the participants were asked if they would allow the researcher to record the session; all participants agreed except one respondent. The three focus groups were audiotaped. However, during the interventions of the participant who did not agree to being recorded, we refrained from recording, and only note-taking was employed.

The participants were not asked at any point to disclose personal information, including their name, phone number, or address. Age and educational background were provided for the purpose of the study. In the analysis, the names of the participants were replaced with

pseudonyms to protect the identities of those involved in the study. The questions that were asked during the focus group discussions are attached in Appendix A.

## **3.2. Data Analysis Methods**

The data collected from the focus group discussions were analyzed and interpreted in three main phases: transcription of audiotapes, identification of major themes, and interpretation of the data.

### **3.2.1. Transcript of the audiotapes**

The first step of the focus group data analysis consisted of reviewing and transcribing the audiotapes. After carefully listening to the audiotapes, the three focus groups were fully transcribed. The discussions were transcribed verbatim; however, minor editing was applied in light of grammatical errors, ambiguous phrases, and poorly written sentences. The spirit of the answers was respected, even if this meant that some sentences in the transcript were weakly constructed. Transcribed data were analyzed alongside the field notes taken during the discussions.

### **3.2.2. Identification of major themes**

After reading the full transcripts and the observational notes taken during the focus group discussions multiple times, major themes were identified. Patterns and ideas that emerged from the focus group discussions were identified and grouped into categories and themes to facilitate the analysis. Themes were identified by writing notes in the margin of the text in the form of

short phrases, and common patterns were highlighted. Major themes were identified based on the responses of the participants in the three focus groups. Three noteworthy themes emerged. They centered on: 1) interest in political news, 2) confidence in the government and political elites, and 3) belonging to a political party. These themes were used to identify the change in political attitudes (interest and trust) and behavior (affiliations) due to the multidimensional Lebanese crisis.

### **3.2.3. Management and interpretation of the data**

Once the themes were established, various rounds of coding were conducted to sort the data based on themes. Reading through the data while having clear themes facilitated the interpretation of the transcripts to answer the research questions. Dominant ideas emerged after grouping the data, and common responses from participants belonging to the three different focus groups were revealed. Major demographic information was tabulated, and the remaining data was extracted from its original context and re-arranged into the three appropriate themes. Some prominent quotes were cited to illustrate recurrent ideas stated by the participants. The purpose was not to analyze individual quotes but to build analytical relationships between the responses and link them to the main research questions of this study.

### **3.3. Participants and their demographics**

In total, 18 participants were enrolled in the study. Aged between 21 and 27 years, the participants were equally divided between men and women. All participants were university graduates and held a bachelor's degree or equivalent from the following universities: the Lebanese American University (seven participants), the Lebanese University (six participants), and the Holy Spirit University of Kaslik (five participants). Only Jana held a master's degree from a university in the United Kingdom, and three out of the 18 respondents were also pursuing graduate studies in Lebanon. Participants had different academic backgrounds and worked in a variety of fields. Participants' degrees included: law, engineering, business, science, arts, and social sciences.

Table 1 presents the demographic information of the 18 participants, including age, gender, degree, employment status, if they are actively searching for a job opportunity, if they experienced job loss at any time after October 2019, and their perceived prospects of finding employment.

*Table 1: Demographic Information of the 18 Participants*

<b>#</b>	<b>Fictitious name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Degree</b>	<b>Employment status</b>	<b>Actively Searching for a job</b>	<b>Experienced Job loss any time after October 2019 (them or a member of their family)</b>	<b>Perceived prospects of finding employment</b>
1	Fadi	23	Male	Law	Employed (different field from degree)	Yes	No	Low
2	John	24	Male	Political Science	Employed	No	No	Low
3	Ghadi	25	Male	Business	Employed	No	Yes	Low
4	Liza	24	Female	Law	Employed (different field from degree)	Yes	No	Low
5	Jana	26	Female	Business	Employed	No	Yes	Low

6	Alice	27	Female	Education	Unemployed	Yes	Yes	Low
7	Karen	22	Female	Computer Science	Employed	No	Yes	Low
8	Samir	25	Male	Digital Media	Unemployed	Yes	No	Low
9	Aya	23	Female	Arts	Unemployed	Yes	No	Low
10	Yasmine	24	Female	Communication Arts	Unemployed	Yes	No	Low
11	Ghassan	22	Male	Engineering	Unemployed	Yes	No	Low
12	Mazen	24	Male	Engineering	Unemployed	Yes	No	Low
13	Yara	23	Female	International Affairs	Employed	No	No	Low
14	Dima	22	Female	Law	Unemployed	Yes	Yes	Low
15	Jawad	21	Male	Business	Unemployed	Yes	No	Low
16	Karim	21	Male	Physics	Unemployed	Yes	Yes	Low
17	Imad	26	Male	Engineering	Employed	No	Yes	Low
18	Maya	23	Female	Journalism	Employed	No	Yes	Low

The following profile was identified, of the 18 participants, nine were employed, while nine were unemployed and actively searching for a job. Two employed participants were not working in their area of specialty and were searching for a better opportunity to match their educational background and experience. Therefore, 11 out of the 18 participants were actively seeking a relevant opportunity that the Lebanese labor market had failed to deliver. Some of the respondents reported that they had been job hunting for more than a year after graduation and still hadn't found suitable employment.

When asked if they were worried about losing their job (question one), few of the employed participants hinted that they were experiencing job insecurity or expressed any concern about the effect of the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis on their employment status. Most of the participants who were not experiencing job insecurity reported that the reason behind their ease was the fact that they worked for international firms, although some expressed concern about their career development prospects simply because they still live in Lebanon. Some of the unemployed young adults in the study were anxious about the possibility of not finding a decent job opportunity in the near future that would match their educational background and expertise.

Regarding the impact of the crisis on the economic standing of the respondents, seven participants reported that they, or a member of their family, lost their job because of the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis. When asked if they or any member of their family had lost their job at any time after October 2019 (question two), two participants stated that they had personally lost their job after the Lebanese multidimensional crisis. Four participants reported

that their father or sister had been made redundant due to the 2019 multidimensional crisis.

Alice, a 27-year-old unemployed female who is actively searching for a job, indicated that her sister had to leave the country to find work, while Karen, a 22-year-old employed female, expressed frustration about her father losing his job after working for the same firm his whole life.

When asked about their prospects of finding employment in Lebanon in the aftermath of the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis (question three), all 18 participants believed that their prospects were low. Respondents reported facing significant barriers to finding employment and decent job opportunities due to the Lebanese multidimensional crisis. Some participants doubted that their prospects of finding employment would improve in the near future. The respondents were disenchanted and their enthusiasm to enter the workforce had eroded.

The likelihood of experiencing insecurity about the weak labor market is also prominent among employed individuals. Employed participants expressed uncertainty about their career development prospects. Some employed young adults lacked trust in the stability of their employment status and reported that their career development highly depended on the ongoing multidimensional crisis in Lebanon. They believed that establishing a career path that would lead to their ideal job was not feasible in Lebanon. Some participants worked in different domains to support themselves while searching for better opportunities in their field of study.

As fresh graduates, most participants reported that their prospects of finding employment in a weak labor market were dim. Based on the responses, the extended periods of unemployment after graduation were marked by frustration and desperation. Participants found

themselves more vulnerable to the effects of the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis because they lacked the experience required to compete with other unemployed adults. According to some participants, the high level of unemployment during the current multidimensional crisis placed them in competition with unemployed but experienced adults for positions that did not require experience. Many participants faced prolonged periods of unemployment at the start of their transition into the workforce. Fresh graduates expressed fear that delayed entry into the workforce would affect their career development prospects and earnings.

Beyond unemployment, participants were also concerned about underemployment and the quality of labor. Youth are unable to find meaningful job opportunities that enable them to support themselves or their families. Twelve of the 18 participants reported low wages, deteriorating working conditions, and limited career progression. Respondents stated that pay packages in the job market were insufficient to cover basic needs. Samir, a 25-year-old male seeking employment, reported that all the jobs he had found had tough working conditions; the wages were so low that they wouldn't even cover his transportation fees.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter reviewed the methodology used to conduct and analyze the three focus group discussions. It presented, in detail, the criteria used to select the 18 participants, collect the data, and analyze the responses. This chapter also examined the demographic information, including basic details — such as age, gender, and employment status — and more specific

information — if they are actively searching for a job opportunity, if they experienced job loss at any time after October 2019, and their perceived prospects of finding employment.

The following chapter delves deeper into participants' responses and explores the main patterns that emerged to help answer the research questions. It also relates the key findings to the literature review and recent survey research in Lebanon.

## Chapter Four

### Results and Analysis of the Focus Groups

This chapter reviews the responses that were obtained from the 18 participants during the focus group discussions. Their responses are organized thematically based on the patterns that emerged, as such following political news, trust in the government, and identifying with a political party. Each section explores the main statements made by the participants to answer the focus group questions related to the indicated theme. The first theme — following political news — summarizes the main responses on the effect of the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis on the youth's attention to political news. The second theme — trust in the government — incorporates the responses on four significant issues, including 1) the extent to which participants believe in the government's ability to handle the 2019 multidimensional crisis; 2) the change in respondents' trust in the government as a consequence of the crisis; 3) the main causes of the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis according to the participants; 4) and the perceived role of the government and citizen in the onset of the crisis. The third theme — identifying with a political party — compares participants' affiliations prior to and after October 19, 2019. This chapter first presents the key responses then relates the emergent themes to the literature review on the impact of economic and multidimensional crises on political attitudes, as well as to the results of recent relevant surveys conducted in Lebanon. Table two, below, displays the main statements conveyed by the participants.

Table 2: The Change in Attitudes and Behavior After the 2019 Lebanese Multidimensional Crisis

#	Fictitious Name	Impact on following political news	Impact on confidence in the government	Impact on belonging to a political party	
				Before	After
1	Fadi	Increase followed by a decline	Decreased	Yes	No
2	John	Increase followed by a decline	Decreased	Yes	Doubtful
3	Ghadi	Increase followed by a decline	Decreased	No	No
4	Liza	Increase followed by a decline	Decreased	Yes	No
5	Jana	Increase followed by a decline	Decreased	Yes	No
6	Alice	Increase followed by a decline	Never had confidence	Yes	Yes (same party)
7	Karen	Increase followed by a decline	Decreased	No	No
8	Samir	Increase followed by a decline	Never had confidence	Yes	No
9	Aya	Increase followed by a decline	Decreased	Yes	No
10	Yasmine	Increase followed by a decline	Decreased	No	No
11	Ghassan	Increase followed by a decline	Decreased	No	No
12	Mazen	Decreased	Decreased	Yes	No
13	Yara	Decreased	Decreased	No	No
14	Dima	Decreased	Decreased	No	Yes (new party)
15	Jawad	Increase followed by a decline	Decreased	No	No
16	Karim	Increased	Decreased	Yes	No
17	Imad	Increase followed by a decline	Never had confidence	No	No
18	Maya	Increase followed by a decline	Decreased	Yes	No

## 4.1. Following Political News

At the inception of the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis and the October 2019 popular uprising, participants indicated that their interest in political news increased, reaching a peak, it then significantly dropped due to multiple factors, including frustration and loss of enthusiasm. When asked about how the multidimensional crisis had influenced their attention to watching or following political news (question four), 14 out of the 18 participants — seven male and seven female — agreed that their interest in political news grew out of curiosity and a desire to comprehend the political situation, however, this excitement turned to apathy after a period of time. A pattern of increased interest followed by a steady decline emerged from the focus group discussions.

Fadi, a 23-year-old employed male seeking a better opportunity in his field, reported that he became highly preoccupied with political news in the early stages of the Lebanese multidimensional crisis, especially during the October 2019 popular uprising. However, his interest greatly decreased afterward to the point that he has no interest in news and/or politics whatsoever. Similarly, Alice, a 27-year-old female, who is unemployed and searching for a job, indicated that she developed a greater interest in political news at the outset of the crisis, but lost enthusiasm after a while and was no longer interested in the daily news updates. In the same line of thought, Jawad, a 21-year-old unemployed male seeking work, pointed out that even though his interest grew at first, the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis significantly decreased his appetite for political news after a while. Jawad stated, “The 2019 crisis pushed me away from even the thought of politics in Lebanon.”

Maya, a 23-year-old employed female, also noted that when the crisis began, she was “obsessed” with political news. However, she affirmed that her interest in the latest political developments steadily declined due to the fact that such news significantly affected her mental health. Many participants agreed that their attention to political news dropped as a consequence of frustration and exhaustion. Employed in an international firm yet experiencing job insecurity, Ghadi, a 25-year-old male, noted, “I’m currently disconnected from everything; I even try to avoid hearing political news because it makes me feel condemned and overwhelmed.” Yasmine, a 24-year-old unemployed female, reiterated Ghadi and Maya’s words, stating that the situation became extremely overwhelming and “too much to handle,” which pushed her away from watching or following political news. Similarly, Mazen, a 24-year-old unemployed male who is actively looking for a decent job, conveyed that Lebanese citizens are experiencing enough stress because of the multidimensional crisis, therefore, paying less attention to political news was his way of avoiding additional anxiety and burden. Imad, a 26-year-old employed male, and John, a 24-year-old employed male experiencing job insecurity, conveyed their overwhelming feelings and fears as they prepared to leave the country. At the start of the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis, they were more engaged and attentive to news. Their interest greatly decreased, however, as they plan their future lives abroad with a feeling of exhaustion and stress.

Meanwhile, some respondents indicated that their interest in political news declined due to the recurrence of the problems facing Lebanese citizens daily and the absence of clear solutions. Ghassan, a 22-year-old unemployed male who is actively searching for a job, confirmed that at the very start of the crisis, he was extremely interested in knowing the latest

political events. However, after listening to the same problems every day, he eventually became apathetic. Similarly, Alice and Fadi agreed that hearing the same news on a daily basis with no solutions in sight left them feeling detached and disinterested. The feeling of enthusiasm was disturbed by the apathy of listening to the same problems daily. Fadi stated, “Media outlets do not discuss solutions, and that is why I lost interest. We all know that these problems exist. So, what’s the solution?” Even though at the outset of the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis, Karen, a 22-year-old employed female, felt more politically involved, she totally lost interest after a few months; the crisis lowered her sense of political efficacy. Karen noted, “There is really nothing we can do anymore; we are living day by day.”

Despite the fact that some participants became less politically involved after the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis, their political awareness increased. Dima, a 22-year-old unemployed female who lost her job due to the 2019 multidimensional crisis, stated, “I believe that as a result of the economic crisis, I have become more politically aware. I now know whether the statements being said are true or false.” Similarly, Yara, a 23-year-old employed female, emphasized that after the 2019 multidimensional crisis, she began to challenge political information, affirming that what is being said in the media is not totally accurate.

The responses obtained from the analysis of the focus group discussions confirmed the aforementioned Schlozman and Verba (1979) study, noting that citizens who face a severe economic shock are more likely to lower their interest in politics and choose not to stay updated about political events. Similarly, this study confirms the assumption of the abovementioned

Emmenegger, Marc, and Schraff (2015) study that during an economic crisis, citizens are likely to become less politically involved and dedicate less time engaging in political activities. Magni (2015) asserted that an economic crisis decreases political engagement among individuals with low efficacy but has the potential to increase political participation among individuals with high efficacy; people who do not believe that they can bring changes to the current political or economic situation lose interest in politics and decide to disengage. The responses obtained in this study suggest that the majority of youth participants lost interest in politics and political news as a consequence of the 2019 overlapping crisis in Lebanon.

However, to our knowledge, there is no study in the literature that signals a different effect on citizens' interest in politics and political news at the beginning of a crisis compared to some time later on. The majority of responses in this study (77.7 percent) suggest that at the inception of the 2019 multidimensional crisis, participants' attention to political news increased out of genuine interest and excitement as they were eager to comprehend the political situation. However, this excitement turned to apathy after a period of time.

## **4.2. Confidence in the government**

The second theme looks at confidence in the government and incorporates four main segments, including, the extent to which participants have confidence in the government's ability to handle the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis; the change in respondents' trust in the government as a consequence of the crisis; the main causes of the Lebanese crisis according to

the participants; and the perceived role of the government and citizens' in the onset of the multidimensional crisis.

#### **4.2.1. Confidence in the government's ability to handle the multidimensional crisis**

Remarkably, when asked about the extent to which respondents believed that the present government could improve the current economic situation in Lebanon (question 7), all 18 participants indicated that the present government is unable to stabilize the current economic and political situation. According to the respondents, the current government had no desire to put in the required efforts to recover from the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis. Participants had no confidence in the government's ability to handle the unfolding crisis. Mazen emphasized that the present government was unwilling to put extensive efforts and implement the required practical and efficient strategies to improve the financial situation. Further, both Dima and Imad argued that the present government is incapable of leading the country to recover from the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis; a smaller government made up of professionals with exceptional legislative rights for approximately 18 months would have been able to improve the current situation. According to Dima and Imad, unlike the present government, professionals with exceptional legislative rights could implement accurate financial strategies that would aid in economic recovery. Additionally, Jawad highlighted the fact that experts and international leaders offered Lebanese politicians countless solutions, yet none of these strategies were implemented as the Lebanese authorities were reluctant to sacrifice personal benefits and gains for the good of the country. Following the same line of thought, Ghassan and Mazen argued that if the present government was willing to improve and overcome the 2019 Lebanese

multidimensional crisis, it would have started working and implementing changes. According to Mazen, “Until now, no improvements have been made,” which indicates that the current government cannot and is not willing to implement efficient strategies to overcome the multidimensional crisis.

According to the majority of participants, the government of Prime Minister Mikati is simply a replica of previous governments in terms of its agenda and being beholden to the political elites but with new names. For the respondents, the present government is identical to the preceding governments that together led Lebanon to the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis. Respondents affirmed that the present government is incapable of recovering from this crisis since it was elected by the same corrupt political elites. “Nothing has changed except the names,” stated Ghassan, John, and Alice while arguing that the present government will not overcome the economic and political crisis. Similarly, Liza, a 24-year-old employed female seeking a better opportunity in her field of specialty, affirmed that the present government would not help the country recover from the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis. Liza stated, “Even though everyone is waiting for the elections, nothing is going to change; names may change, slogans may change, but when it comes to real work, it is the same game and same results.” Similarly, Samir, a 25-year-old unemployed male who is actively searching for a job, emphasized that even though the new politicians attempt to appear different, they have the same strategies, same tactics, and will abuse their power for personal gain. Aya and Imad also affirmed that the present authorities represent the corrupt political leaders and will continue to prioritize their personal interests. In the same line of thought, Karen and Yasmine argued that the current government is identical to the governments that led the country to total economic collapse. Karen

emphasized, “Names may have changed, but they were chosen by the same political parties and elites that got us here. We are still ruled by the same corrupt leaders that led us to the current crisis”.

#### **4.2.2. Impact on confidence in the government**

Markedly, when asked about how their confidence in the government changed following the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis (question eight), all 18 participants indicated that they had no confidence in the government and political authorities after the 2019 multidimensional crisis. Most respondents reported that their trust in authorities greatly decreased in the aftermath of the Lebanese multidimensional crisis. They currently have zero confidence in the government. A few other participants stated that the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis and the popular uprising did not affect their trust in government; even prior to October 2019 they had no confidence whatsoever. All of the participants agreed that they no longer have confidence in the Lebanese government and political elites.

Fifteen participants, eight female and seven male, noted that the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis significantly decreased their confidence in the Lebanese government, so much so that they no longer trust authorities in any manner. Ghadi reported that prior to October 2019, as an ordinary citizen, he had confidence in the government and was convinced that the people in power could lead the country. However, after the multidimensional crisis, “My confidence in the government has vanished completely. I have zero confidence in the authorities” (Ghadi, focus group 1). Similarly, Yasmine genuinely trusted the Lebanese government before the 2019 multidimensional crisis. However, after the devastating economic and political events

that happened over the last two years, her confidence in the government diminished. Similarly, Dima noted, “My confidence in the government definitely decreased after the financial crisis; any citizen’s confidence would totally disappear after seeing the value of their income tumble, not being able to withdraw their money, importers failing to buy from outside, and the lack of goods in the markets.” Furthermore, Maya reported that prior to October 2019, she had confidence in particular political authorities, genuinely believing that they had the country’s best interests at heart. However, after the 2019 multidimensional crisis, she said there was no longer trust in any political authority.

Participants reported that their confidence significantly decreased because of the inconsiderate behavior of the government, a government that did not implement strategic solutions after all the drastic events that happened during and after the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis. Mazen stated, “No solutions were put in place to improve the economic situation. Instead, politicians blame each other and don’t take responsibility for all the corruption that has led us to where we are now. Therefore, I cannot trust my government at all after everything that has happened.” Fida and Liza also emphasized that after three miserable years, the Lebanese government failed to make any improvements to mitigate the multidimensional crisis that engulfed the country in 2019; rather than finding solutions, they kept on abusing their entrusted power for personal gain. Similarly, Ghassan and Yara’s confidence drastically dwindled as no authority looked for ways to handle the unfolding multidimensional crisis, and no improvements were made from 2019 until now. For Karen, the authorities are untrustworthy since they are accountable for the citizens’ struggles and should be held liable. From institutionalized corruption to the August 4 Beirut Port explosion, Aya, a 23-year-old

unemployed female seeking employment, asserted that the government's prowess in replicating the same mistakes and its inability to stabilize the economic situation is second to none. In the same line of thoughts, Karim, a 21-year-old unemployed male who is searching for a suitable job opportunity, argued that political authorities did not only make terrible choices that led to the total economic collapse of Lebanon, "They also did not even bother to do anything to improve the economic situation, which is even worse" (Karim, focus group 3).

The remaining three participants reported that even prior to October 2019, they did not have confidence in the Lebanese government. Alice noted that the government and politicians were never trustworthy, and it is the fault of the Lebanese citizens for turning a blind eye to corruption for more than 30 years. Similarly, Samir never had confidence in the government because he used to see corruption, mismanagement, and political militias on a daily basis in Lebanon even before October 2019. Hence, all 18 participants confirmed that they had no confidence in the Lebanese government after the 2019 multidimensional crisis.

#### **4.2.3. Roots of the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis: Corruption**

When asked to state the primary roots of the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis (question six), almost all participants classified corruption as the main cause behind the current multidimensional crisis. According to the respondents, corruption and politicians' abuse of entrusted power for their personal gain weakened the country's economy and led to the collapse of the economic system. Yasmine emphasized that "corruption and the irresponsibility of political leaders" plunged Lebanon into massive debt, draining the country's economy; "Until

now, no politician has taken responsibility for what they did.” Aya also noted that the key factor behind the 2019 multidimensional collapse was corruption within political elites and stealing people’s money for individual benefits and power. Similarly, Karen stated that Lebanese politicians pursued personal gains and did not consider what would be best for the country, adding that “They stole the country’s assets and citizens’ money for personal profit.” In the same line of thought, Karim noted, “Corruption definitely led us to where we are now; political leaders made terrible plans, stole, and covered their crimes for over 30 years.” Ghassan also stated that corruption was at the root of the 2019 multidimensional crisis, since political elites placed their interests above serving their country and did solely what was best for their own profit.

Other than corruption, most participants classified the irresponsibility of the Lebanese people and their lack of political consciousness as the second key root of the 2019 multidimensional crisis. According to Fadi, Lebanese citizens played a significant role in deepening the economic collapse; however, he admitted that the Lebanese did not have power and their political choices were not transformative. Therefore, Fadi ranked the irresponsibility of the Lebanese citizens as the second main cause following the politicians’ corruption that led to the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis. Yasmine also blamed the Lebanese people for not holding any corrupt political leader accountable for their actions, which permitted politicians to take advantage and continue behaving unethically. Similarly, Liza stated that the second root cause of the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis was the irresponsibility of the citizens.

“Lebanese people cannot close their eyes all this time without having the urge to look around and see what is happening and how we can fix it” (Liza, focus group 1). Similarly, John partially blamed the Lebanese people for their irresponsible political decisions. Nevertheless, he affirmed

that political elites' corruption remains the main cause of the 2019 multidimensional crisis. Meanwhile, Alice placed a great deal of blame on Lebanese citizens, stating that they dismissed all the corruption taking place around them as long as their leaders continued to provide them with their basic needs. Similarly, Aya affirmed that even until now, Lebanese citizens have escalated the multidimensional crisis by giving up; they have shown no willpower to fight against their deplorable living conditions. Jawad, Yara, and Karim also classified people's lack of political awareness as the second key factor in deepening the multidimensional crisis. According to these three participants, citizens lacked the necessary knowledge on how to elect and hold corrupt politicians accountable and voted for the same leaders numerous times. For Imad, corruption was not only at the governmental level, stating that countless Lebanese citizens are also corrupt and elected corrupt politicians.

Besides the two main factors stated above, there are different opinions regarding the additional causes of the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis. Participants reported secondary catalysts of the multidimensional crisis, including religious elites, hatred between different sectarian groups, militias/civil wars, laws and regulations that cover politicians' corruption, the Lebanese banking system, and sectarian divisions. Nonetheless, almost all the participants stated these factors were secondary, while upholding corruption as the key cause of the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis.

#### 4.2.4. Government and citizens' role in the onset of the 2019 multidimensional crisis

The notable pattern, shared blame on the part of politicians and the people, emerged from the question of who is responsible for the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis (question five). Most participants held the political parties who led the country to the brink of total collapse and the people who kept on voting for the same corrupt political leaders accountable for demise of the Lebanese economy and its numerous other crises. John, Ghadi, Alice, Aya, and Mazen all agreed that while the ruling elites are at greater fault since they held the power, the Lebanese people are also responsible for not holding anyone accountable and supporting corruption. Liza also stated, “The politicians did a terrible job, and they are all to blame, but we should also blame the people for not changing after more than 30 years.” Following a similar line of thought, Samir and Yasmine pointed out that blame largely rests with the political leaders and elites who occupied governmental positions; however, the older generation kept on voting for the same corrupt leaders who fought in bloody civil wars that pushed the country to total collapse on numerous occasions. Similarly, Ghassan noted that during elections, voters usually hold politicians accountable for their actions and do not re-elect the corrupt leaders, yet the Lebanese people did not hold anyone accountable. Yara reported: “Many individuals have played a role in the collapse of the country, I would say, political leaders, previous governments for more than 30 years, and the Lebanese people — how they view the situation and how they elected. I think it is a combination of all of these things that led to the 2019 financial crisis.”

When it comes to political parties, almost all participants agreed that every political party should be blamed for the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis. Respondents affirmed that

every political leader and individual from all political parties who were involved in former governments for the last 30 years should be held accountable. Fadi emphasized, “We should blame every political party and politician in a high governmental position; I blame all political parties and not only parties but also every individual involved, including, for example, the head of Lebanon’s Central Bank.” Similarly, Jana, a 26-year-old female employed in an international firm, indicated that while sitting together at the same table, political leaders were all making the decisions that led the country to the 2019 multidimensional collapse, therefore, every political party and leader should be called to account.

Several participants affirmed that every political party and leader is equally responsible and should be blamed. Dima noted, “All political actions that politicians have taken through the years, from 1973 until now, have led to the destruction of our country. I believe all political parties need to take responsibility for what has happened, and we should definitely blame everyone. I blame all political parties equally, yes equally”. Jawad and Aya also admitted that all political elites and parties are equally responsible for the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis.

Controversy, despite blaming every political leader, several other participants did not find all political parties equally responsible for the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis. According to Ghadi, John, Alice, and Karim, while responsibility rests on the shoulders of every politician, some leaders were more involved than others; all political parties and elites should be blamed but not equally. Ghassan also admitted that not every political leader had the same responsibility or position in leading Lebanon to the 2019 multidimensional crisis; nevertheless, every political authority or party was involved in some way or another. On a similar note, Karen reported:

“Some politicians have caused the situation to spiral more than others, however, since they are all in a leading position of authority where they can act or do something, I blame everyone, not because they are all equally corrupt or responsible.”

Overall the findings regarding mistrust in political institutions are in accordance with results reported in the literature by Uslaner (2010), Foster and Frieden (2017), Caïs, Torrente, and Bolancé (2021), and Kroknes, Jokobsen, and Gronning (2016). The literature argued that economic downturns lead to a significant decrease in trust in governments and political institutions. Economic crises have a tremendously negative effect on citizens’ confidence in the government (Foster & Frieden, 2017). In line with previous studies, the responses obtained from the focus groups indicated that all 18 participants had no confidence in the government and political authorities after the 2019 economic crisis. Respondents had no confidence in the government’s ability to handle the unfolding multidimensional crisis. While in line with most previous studies, the responses obtained challenged the assumption made by the aforementioned Kenworthy and Owens (2011) study that found no evidence of change in political attitudes toward the government after economic downturns. In accordance with most of the literature, this study suggests that young adults’ trust in authorities greatly decreased in the aftermath of the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis.

The responses also indicated that corruption is perceived as the main cause behind the current multidimensional crisis in Lebanon. This finding is consistent with the results of the previously mentioned Torcal (2014), and Obydenkova & Arpino (2017) study, showing that corruption has a powerful negative impact on citizens’ trust in political institutions. Obydenkova

and Arpino (2017) also indicated that a rise in corruption during a financial crisis is linked to a decline in trust.

Furthermore, the obtained respondents' statements closely matched the findings of the aforementioned USAID and Social Impact's 2019 survey conducted in Lebanon under the name Citizen Perception Survey (CPS). Similar to the responses of our focus groups, the CPS found deep dissatisfaction with the present government among Lebanese citizens, where two-thirds of participants indicated that their trust in the Lebanese parliament and government decreased over the past five years. In line with the CPS findings, the responses obtained in this study suggest that the majority of participants reported a decrease in their trust in political authorities. The CPS also indicated that corruption was the top concern among youth. Indeed, youth with a higher level of education (university or college graduates) were more likely to list corruption as their foremost priority. This finding is consistent with the responses of this study, which also indicated that university graduates perceive corruption as the main catalyst of the 2019 multidimensional crisis in Lebanon.

### **4.3. Impact on Political Identification**

During the focus group discussions, two questions were asked to identify the impact of the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis on participants' political affiliations. The first question focused on participants' political affiliations with existing political parties prior to October 2019 and if their party affiliation is in accordance with their parents' allegiances (question 9). The

second question focused on the current affiliations of the participants to indicate if they still associate with the same or another political party (question 10).

#### **4.3.1. Political affiliations prior to the October 2019 uprising**

Prior to October 2019, 10 out of the 18 participants, five females and five males, were affiliates of an existing political party. Jana voted for an establishment party in the previous elections, and others affirmed that they would have voted for their preferred party in the previous elections if they were able to. Based on the Lebanese constitution, the legal voting age in the Lebanese national elections is 21 years old. Elections in Lebanon occur every four years. The last elections took place in May 2018, which indicates that 13 out of the 18 participants were not eligible to vote in the previous elections. Even though they were under the legal age, many respondents were affiliated with political parties and reported that they would have voted for them prior to October 2019. Maya, a 23-year-old female, affirmed, “I had high hopes in this party; I would have definitely voted for them in the previous elections if I could”. Similarly, Karim, a 21-year-old male, declared that he would have voted for his preferred political party if he were eligible in the 2018 elections.

While most participants affiliated with existing parties prior to October 2019, many had low political engagement with their preferred party. Several politically affiliated respondents were not highly involved in the party’s activities and did not participate in their organized political events. Liza and John both indicated that even though they were politically affiliated, they never attended political meetings or events. Similarly, Fadi affirmed that the most

engagement he had with his political party was during his first year in university when he only attended one political meeting. Hence, most participants had little to no engagement with their desired political party.

Prior to October 2019, nine out of the 10 politically affiliated youths — five males and four females — maintained the same allegiances as their parents. Only Liza had deviated from her parents' affiliations, stating that she used to enjoy another party's speeches and political ideologies. Participants' party preferences closely matched that of their parents, with six out of the nine participants having the same affiliations as both of their parents, and the other three respondents stating that they were aligned with one of their parents. Samir had the same political preferences as his parents, noting that his father fought with the political party he followed during the Lebanese civil war. Similarly, Maya reported that her family was deeply influential when it comes to party affiliation. Prior to October 2019, she affiliated with an existing political party based on her parents' guidance. In the same line of thought, Jana claimed that her family influenced her political preferences: "My parents came from two different political backgrounds and were affiliated with two distinctive parties. I had the chance to choose one of these parties, but it was not entirely my choice".

#### **4.3.2. Political affiliations after October 2019**

Remarkably, after the October 2019 popular uprising and the Lebanese multidimensional crisis, the majority of participants abandoned their former political allegiances and became unaffiliated with any political party. 16 out of the 18 participants — 10 males and six females —

affirmed that after October 2019, they did not align with any existing or anti-establishment political party. Eight respondents affirmed that they discarded their previous political affiliations in the aftermath of the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis. This crisis adversely impacted the standing of existing political parties. Most participants reported that political elites were not trustworthy, especially after the drastic events that happened after October 2019. Maya, who was politically affiliated prior to the 2019 multidimensional crisis, stated: “I’m not affiliated with the same political party nor any other party. I’m really disappointed and mad with what happened because they broke our trust; when you used to trust someone, it is harder to see them disappoint you.” Likewise, Samir who is affiliated with the same political party that his father fought with during the Lebanese civil war, affirmed that he abandoned his former affiliations. “All political parties talk and don’t act; we need someone to act in the current situation not just talk” (Samir, focus group 2). On a similar note, Fadi, Liza, Jana, Aya, Mazen, and Karim, who were previously affiliated with old-establishment parties, all affirmed that they do not associate with any political party as they believe that none are trustworthy.

Meanwhile, John was uncertain about whether or not he would revert to his initial party identity. He had an ambiguous relationship with his former party, and he was not utterly convinced it would be the right choice to vote for them in the upcoming elections. John noted: “I’m not sure if I follow them anymore, I will wait to see if they have good projects that can improve the economic and political situation, and if another party has better plans for Lebanon, I will vote for that party”.

Conversely, Alice solely had a solid relationship with her established political party, in spite of the October 2019 popular uprising and the multidimensional crisis. Of the 18

participants, only Alice affirmed that her affiliations have not altered after the 2019 multidimensional crisis and she still believes in her prior political party.

When it comes to new anti-establishment parties, Dima was the only participant out of the 18 interviewed who was affiliated with a new political party. Dima reported: “I have joined them because I believe that they have the most realistic path to a civil state; what they stand for is similar to what I stand for. The traditional media outlets are not showing the new people that actually want to work; however, some anti-establishment parties have a clear plan and accurate strategies that can improve the current situation.”

Nevertheless, the other 17 young adults had ambivalent opinions concerning new anti-establishment parties. Most participants were skeptical about the new political parties and suspicious of their intentions. For Ghadi, Jana, Mazen, John, Jawad, and Karim, anti-establishment parties, similar to old parties, are not trustworthy and do not merit their confidence. John, who is doubtful of his former affiliations, conveyed his disbelief in new anti-establishment parties, noting: “There are multitudes of parties with bad history — I’m not into them at all. I’m not going to change from bad to worse.”

Other participants had ambiguous relationships with new anti-establishment parties, stating that they do not have enough information to form a sharp opinion. Yara admitted that it is problematic to trust the new parties when she does not have a well-defined idea of what they truly stand for. Likewise, Karen and Ghassan noted that they are waiting for the list of registered candidates for the new parliamentary elections to form a concrete opinion based on the parties’ plans and strategies. Meanwhile, despite having an interest in new anti-establishment parties, Imad noted that he did not have a clear idea of what they stand for.

There is a certain level of confusion among youths regarding whether and how to participate in the political process. Most participants have confusing thoughts about who to support in the next elections, as they have abandoned their former affiliations and do not have confidence in any new anti-establishment political party. With just a few months until the May 2022 elections, several participants conveyed uncertainty about their participation in the political process. After most respondents expressed their confusion, Farid admitted: “This is a huge problem, there are just a couple of months until the elections, and many of us are not currently affiliated and still don't know who to vote for.”

The responses obtained concerning political affiliations confirm what other studies in the literature have argued about how entrenched political parties are likely to lose support after a severe economic crisis (Magni, 2015; Nezi, 2012; Frieden, Lake, Nicholson, & Ranganath, 2017). The analysis of the focus group discussions confirms the argument of the aforementioned Nezi (2012) study, noting that incumbent political parties are likely to lose supporters during an economic crisis and should only expect support from their long-term loyal followers. Similarly, the responses obtained in this study reinforce the assumption made by the abovementioned Magni (2015) that during a financial crisis, citizens become unwilling to collaborate with elite entrenched political parties and to believe their endless promises.

However, the results of this focus group challenge the assumption of the aforementioned Vasilopoulos and Bedock (2015) study that following severe economic shocks, individuals are likely to support anti-establishment political parties. Even though the responses of this study suggest that most participants abandoned their former political affiliations, they did not shift to anti-establishment parties; Instead, they became unaffiliated. According to the responses, the

majority of youth had ambivalent opinions and were skeptical when it comes to anti-establishment political parties.

More importantly, the responses obtained were not in line with previous research studies that argued that political preferences are shaped by entrenched beliefs and tend to endure resistance to changing economic conditions (Newcomb, 1967; Krosnick & Alwin, 1989; Campbell et al. 1960). The responses of this study suggest that young adults' political affiliations can alter as a consequence of an economic crisis.

The responses received on political affiliations prior to October 2019 closely match the results obtained in the aforementioned Statistics Lebanon Ltd. 2018 survey. In this study, the majority of participants were politically affiliated with entrenched parties prior to October 2019, which is consistent with the findings of the previous 2018 survey conducted by Statistics Lebanon Ltd. and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung. Similarly, their survey reported that in 2018, the majority of the respondents (66 percent) indicated affiliation with an entrenched political party that they would vote for, and only 6 percent planned to vote for the list of the civil society.

Additionally, Statistics Lebanon Ltd.'s survey indicated family as a significant factor influencing youths' political orientations, pushing them not to make independent choices. This assumption is broadly in line with the responses of our study on the influence of families on youth's political affiliations prior to October 2019. As mentioned above, participants' party preferences closely matched that of their families, as nine out of the 10 politically affiliated youths maintained the same allegiances as their parents.

However, it must be pointed out that this study goes beyond previous surveys to incorporate political affiliations after October 2019, showing that most Lebanese participants abandoned their former political allegiances after the multidimensional crisis and are currently unaffiliated with an entrenched political party. The majority of the respondents were influenced by the 2019 multidimensional crisis in Lebanon and abandoned their former political affiliations.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter presented the responses of the eighteen participants thematically to explore the main patterns that emerged which can aid in answering the research questions. Based on the responses, this chapter showed that the 2019 multidimensional Lebanese crisis had a powerful impact on young adults' political attitudes and behavior, especially in three distinctive areas: their interest in politics and political news, their trust in the government, and their political affiliations. First, a pattern of increased interest in political news and politics followed by a steady decline emerged from the focus group discussions. At the inception of the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis, participants' attention to political news increased out of interest and desire to comprehend the political landscape. However, this excitement turned to apathy after a limited period because of frustration and exhaustion. Additionally, participants' trust in governmental institutions and political authorities greatly decreased in the aftermath of the Lebanese multidimensional crisis. While classifying corruption among political elites and the ruling class as the key root of the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis, participants also

partially blamed Lebanese citizens for re-electing the same corrupt political leaders. Another impact of the 2019 multidimensional crisis was participants' abandonment of their former political affiliations and desertion of their parents' entrenched political parties.

The following concluding chapter dives even further into the key findings and explicitly answers the research questions, in addition to a brief discussion of this study's main contributions and limitations.

# Chapter Five

## Conclusion

This thesis has sought to gauge the impact of the 2019 multidimensional Lebanese crisis on young adults. It has demonstrated that this crisis had a profound negative impact on young adults' political attitudes and behavior, altering their affiliations, political interest, and levels of trust. To explore the negative impact of the 2019 multidimensional crisis, we delved into specific aspects of change in political attitudes and behavior, including changes in young adults' political interest, their trust in the government, and political affiliations with new anti-establishment parties. Three observations are warranted in light of this study's findings.

Firstly, youth's political interest increased at the inception of the 2019 multidimensional crisis; however, this interest turned into apathy after a certain time. Increased interest in politics was followed by a steady decline due to multiple factors, including youths' frustration and exhaustion. Lebanese young adults became more attentive to political news at the onset of the 2019 multidimensional crisis, especially during the popular uprising. They were eager to comprehend the transformation of the political situation. However, they lost interest in politics after a while due to disappointment and the recurrence of similar obstacles preventing progress and positive change. Indeed, with no clear solutions, disputes between political elites, sectarian challenges, currency devaluation, and economic challenges, the respondents became apathetic. This finding partially confirms the aforementioned studies arguing that economic crises lower citizens' interest in politics and push them to become less politically involved (Schlozman &

Verba, 1979; Emmenegger, Marc, & Schraff, 2015). However, to our knowledge, no study in the literature has portrayed a different effect at the start of the economic crisis compared to after the lapse of some time. This thesis sought to answer how economic downturns impact the political interest of young adults by focusing on the case of the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis. This study indicated that at the onset of the 2019 Lebanese crisis and the popular uprising, young adults' interest in politics increased, reaching a certain peak before significantly dropping.

Secondly, the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis had a negative impact on young adults' trust in the government and political authorities. The findings indicated that the youth has no confidence in the government following the 2019 multidimensional crisis. Young adults' political trust greatly decreased due to the government not implementing strategic solutions after the calamitous events that happened in the aftermath of the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis. Lebanese youth has no confidence in the government's ability to handle the unfolding crisis and stabilize the current economic and political situation. Moreover, young adults consider the political elites' corruption and abuse of entrusted power as root causes of the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis. Therefore, for the Lebanese youth, every political leader from all entrenched political parties who was involved in past governments for the last 30 years should be held accountable. These results confirm the principal findings in the literature implying that economic downturns lead to a significant decrease in trust in governments and political institutions (Uslaner, 2010; Foster & Frieden, 2017; Caïs, Torrente, & Bolancé, 2021; Kroknes, Jokobsen, & Gronning, 2016). The results also closely match the findings of the aforementioned studies indicating that corruption has a powerful negative impact on citizens' trust in political authorities (Torcal, 2014; Obydenkova & Arpino, 2017).

Thirdly, the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis had a notable effect on the political affiliations of young adults, as many abandoned their former alliances with entrenched political parties. Prior to October 2019, the majority of participants were affiliated with existing political parties, maintaining the same allegiances as their parents. After the 2019 popular uprising and multidimensional crisis, young adults abandoned their former political affiliations. However, it is important to note that youths did not shift to anti-establishment political parties; rather, they had ambivalent opinions concerning new parties and were suspicious of their intentions.

Moreover, this study indicated that there is a certain level of confusion among youth regarding whether and how to participate in the political process. These results confirm the principal findings in the literature arguing that entrenched political parties are likely to lose support after a severe economic crisis (Magni, 2015; Nezi, 2012; Frieden, Lake, Nicholson, & Ranganath, 2017). However, these findings challenge the assumption of the aforementioned Vasilopoulos and Bedock (2015) study that after severe economic crises, individuals are likely to support anti-establishment political parties. Even though this study suggests that young adults abandoned their former political affiliations, they did not shift to anti-establishment parties; instead, they became unaffiliated. In the lexicon of Western democracies, these unaffiliated individuals are referred to as “independents” or “independent voters.”

This study weights on the side of the literature that views crises as a plausible explanation for changes in political attitudes and behavior. The findings oppose arguments that political preferences are shaped by entrenched beliefs and tend to endure resistance to changing economic conditions. Hence, this study confirms the assumptions of the aforementioned studies, arguing that incumbent political parties are likely to lose supporters during a financial downturn (Nezi, 2012; Frieden, Lake, Nicholson, & Ranganath, 2017).

However, it is important to note that these findings should be considered in light of some limitations. The results were based on three focus groups with 18 participants, which is a relatively small sample size of the Lebanese youth aged between 21 and 27 years old. This study employed a qualitative analysis of the focus groups, which requires a smaller sample size than quantitative data. However, a sample size of 18 participants may not ensure a representative distribution of all young adults in Lebanon.

Furthermore, the focus groups were conducted via Zoom to abide by the social distancing and safety measures. However, some respondents refrained from opening their cameras due to poor WiFi connectivity, which limited our ability to monitor the non-verbal communication of the participants. The online focus groups challenged the ability to identify the non-verbal language of facial expressions, eye contact, social signals, and body expressions. Therefore, the analysis of the focus groups did not include non-verbal cues and visual emotional expressions that may have showcased the political attitudes of the participants in a more authentic and personal manner.

Another limitation that should be taken into consideration is that political opinions do shift and what youth believes at a certain point may change in the future. This study showcased how the political attitudes and behavior of young adults changed after the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis; if the focus groups were taken at another point in time, things could have been very different. A shift in the country's economy and political landscape can lead to an alteration in opinions. However, we do not anticipate that there will be a radical change in

popular, as the political and economic situation in Lebanon is not improving — quite the contrary, it seems to be getting worse in terms of employment prospects.

Despite the abovementioned limitations, the findings of this study contribute to the literature on multiple levels. This study contributes to the overall body of work on downturns and political attitudes and behavior by tackling the effect of economic crises on young adults in an Arab multi-party system, noting that all previous research on political change during crises has examined countries in the West. Our analysis contributes to the growing literature on the impact of economic crises on political attitudes by taking the case of the 2019 multidimensional crisis in Lebanon, while almost all studies, to our knowledge, examined the effect of downturns on Western populations. This study also contributes to the literature by focusing on young adults and their political attitudes and behavior. To our knowledge, previous studies have considered the impact of crises on political views without focusing solely on young adults.

Our contribution also moves beyond the question of *whether* economic crises affect political attitudes and behavior to a better understanding of *how* downturns have an impact and in what aspects. This study contributes to the literature by examining how economic crises have an impact on the political trust, interest, and affiliations of young adults.

Furthermore, this study also has practical implications, examining the political attitudes and behavior of Lebanese youth while the upcoming elections are scheduled for May 15, 2022. Politicians, analysts, and Lebanese citizens are all anticipating the results of the 2022 elections to discern if the 2019 multidimensional crisis impacts voting behavior, especially as a new

generation of 21 to 25 year olds will vote for the first time after being involved in the 2019 popular uprising. This study has examined the impact of the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis, confirming that it had a profound negative impact on young adults' political attitudes and behavior. These findings may translate into the results of the 2022 parliamentary elections.

This suggests the need for rigorous research on the impact of the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis on the voting behavior of young adults during the upcoming parliamentary elections. Future studies should consider examining the topic of this study over a longer period, especially after the 2022 elections, to capture the impact of the 2019 multidimensional crisis on the voting behavior of young adults. Future research can investigate if the change in political attitudes is reflected in the 2022 elections and if the current multidimensional crisis also deeply alerted the voting behavior of young adults. This study has demonstrated that the 2019 multidimensional crisis impacted youth's political attitudes and behavior. However, this does not necessarily mean that the elections' results are going to change drastically. Many other factors impact voting behavior during elections, including family pressure, economic needs, electoral fraud, and bribery. Given the devastating economic conditions that many young adults are living through, they may unwillingly accept money in exchange for their vote at the polling station.

Additionally, this study has examined the effect of the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis on young adults' political attitudes and behavior in general while focusing on three main aspects: political interest, trust in the government, and political affiliations. Each of these three aspects can be investigated in a separate study more deeply and critically, even though their combination is an added value to investigating political attitudes. Thus, future research can focus

on only one aspect of political attitudes to provide a deeper understanding using a larger sample size.

Future research can also employ a quantitative and more explanatory analysis of the impact of the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis on political attitudes and behavior. Quantitative research can generalize the findings of this study by examining this subject on a larger representative sample of Lebanese young adults.

The findings of this study suggested that the 2019 multidimensional Lebanese crisis severely impacted young adults aged between 21 and 27, and pushed them to alter their political preferences. Young adults became unwilling to cooperate with the corrupt political leaders and shifted their political affiliations. If so, the impact of the 2019 multidimensional crisis will likely be felt politically in the upcoming elections. In this study, first-time voters showed a high willingness to desert their parents' entrenched parties as they lost trust in the government and old political parties. The voting behavior of young adults during the upcoming elections is another promising avenue for future studies. This study explored the implications of the 2019 Lebanese multidimensional crisis on youth's political attitudes and behavior, however, a broad horizon of research on voting behavior opens up after we cast clear eyes on the results of the 2022 parliamentary elections. Even though this study suggests that young adults have completely lost trust in the government and shifted their political affiliations, youth's interest in politics noticeably decreased because of the 2019 multidimensional crisis. Moreover, there is a certain level of confusion among youth regarding whether and how to participate in the political process. Will first-time voters yield a significant change in the political landscape since they shifted from

their old political affiliations, or will their confusion and decreased interest in politics obstruct the changes in voting behavior? Answering such questions is an endeavor worth pursuing in periods of continued economic and political uncertainty.

The case of the 2019 multidimensional Lebanese crisis examined in this study highlights how crises play an active role in alerting political attitudes and behavior. In this case, young adults' political attitudes and behavior have been strongly impacted by the Lebanese multidimensional crisis. This crisis has led to an increase in political mistrust, alteration in political affiliations, and a gradual decrease in political interest. Therefore, the case given of the 2019 multidimensional crisis is intended to demonstrate how crises can highly impact political opinions. During tough economic periods, individuals tend to judge authorities on the basis of perceived responsibility. This study has shed light on the importance of economic shocks in propelling individuals toward producing an assessment of political authorities as ultimately responsible for the critical economic situation. Examining these political transformations in the aftermath of the 2019 multidimensional Lebanese crisis gave credence to the claims in this thesis that crises provide powerful explanations for political change.

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# Appendix A

## Focus group questionnaire

### Focus Group Questions

#### **The Impact of the Lebanese Multidimensional Crisis on Young Adults' Political Attitudes and Behavior.**

1. Are you currently employed? If yes, are you worried about losing your job?
2. At any time after October 2019, did you or any member of your family lose their job?
3. In the aftermath of the Lebanese crisis, what do you think of your chances/prospects of finding employment in Lebanon?
4. As a result of the economic crisis, do you pay more or less attention to political news? If so, how regularly? i.e. every day, twice a week, once a week, once a month, never
5. Who do you believe is responsible for the current economic crisis? Do you think one party/group should be blamed more or should we blame all parties/groups?
6. In your judgment what are the main causes of the current economic crisis? can you rank these causes by importance?
7. To what extent do you believe that the present government can improve the current economic situation in Lebanon?
8. Did your confidence in the government increase or decrease after the economic crisis?
9. Prior to October 2019, did you affiliate with any existing political party? is it the same party that one or both of your parents are affiliated with?
10. Do you currently affiliate with the same or another political party? why? If another party, is it a new anti-establishment party?

