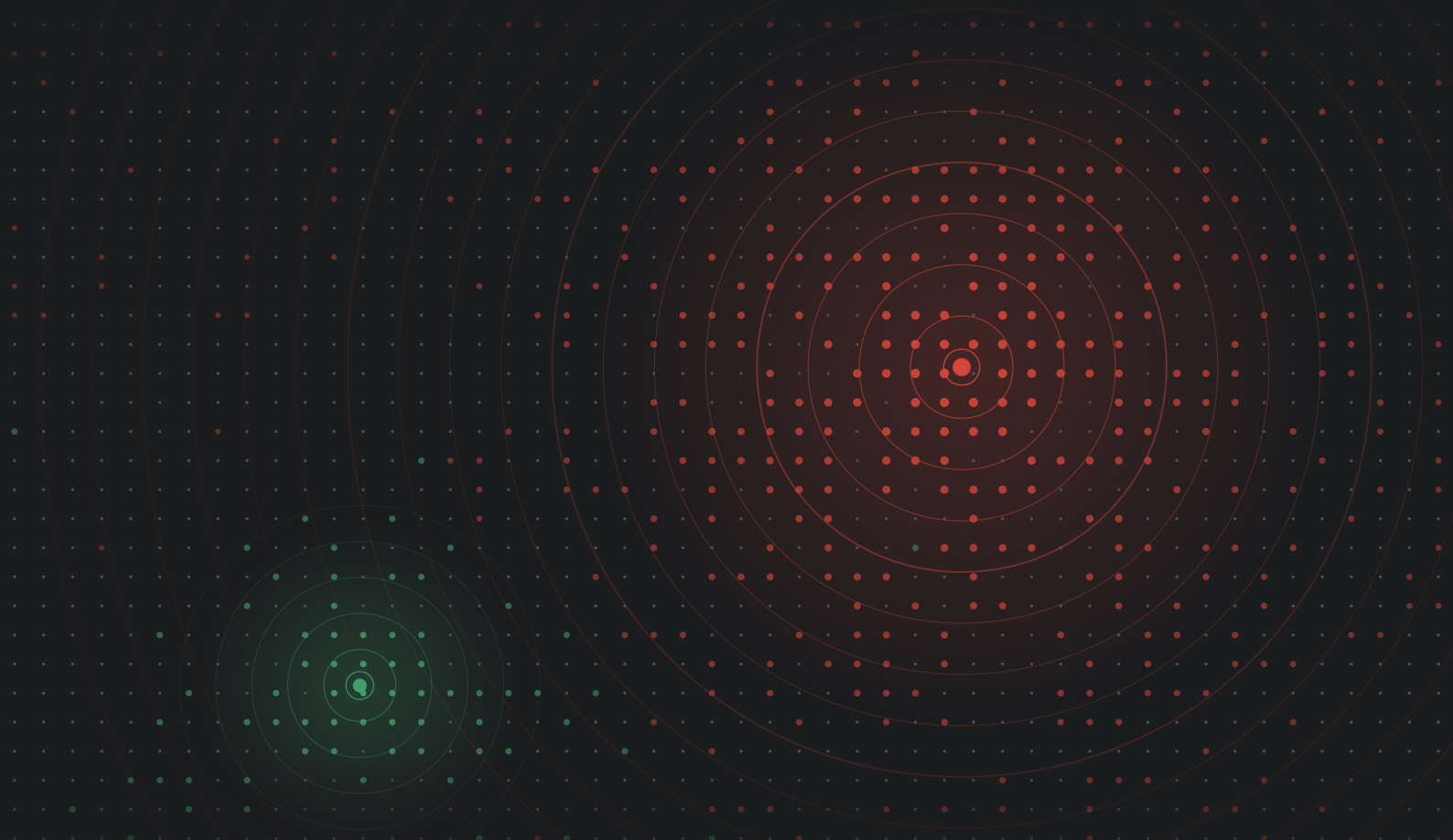
RESEARCH REPORT

NOVEMBER 2026

Digital Disinformation and Its Impact on the Integrity of the Electoral Process in Lebanon

Evidence from the 2022 Parliamentary Elections and a Village Case Study in Kfarqahel



AUTHOR

Moustafa Awwad

31 *of* 50

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Digital Disinformation and Its Impact on the Integrity of the Electoral Process in Lebanon

Evidence from the 2022 Parliamentary Elections and a Village Case Study in Kfarqahel

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Contents

	Key Findings	04
01	Introduction	05
02	Key Concepts and Earlier Research	07
03	Research Questions and Methodology	10
04	Contextual Findings: The Information Environment of the 2022 Elections	12
05	Field Study Findings: Kfarqahel	19
06	Discussion	22
07	Recommendations	26
08	Conclusion	28
	Appendix: Survey Questionnaire	30

AT A GLANCE

Key Findings

PLATFORMS
40%

WhatsApp and Facebook emerged as particularly important channels for misleading electoral information. In Kfarqahel, 40% of survey participants identified WhatsApp as the platform where false election information spreads most, followed by Facebook at 32%.

TACTICS
2022

Digital disinformation in 2022 went well beyond fake news. It included rewritten headlines, edited images and videos, content shared out of context, coordinated amplification by networks of real and fake accounts, and defamation campaigns, with several women candidates targeted by online harassment.

VERIFICATION
24%

Exposure to misleading content is common, while verification is uneven: 62% of participants had encountered false or misleading election information on social media, yet only 24% always verify election news before believing or sharing it.

IMPACT
22%

Eight in ten participants believe that misleading information influences voters' decisions, while only 22% said they had personally been influenced. The report interprets this gap as suggesting that influence may often be indirect and cumulative rather than immediately recognized by voters.

KNOWLEDGE
54%

Interest in politics does not mean electoral knowledge. Two-thirds of participants follow political news regularly, but more than half said they do not have sufficient knowledge of the electoral law.

TRUST

Declining trust in political parties and the media may increase reliance on informal information sources, including WhatsApp groups and personal networks, where verification is weaker.

REGULATION

Lebanon's legal framework provides no definition of digital disinformation, and the Supervisory Commission for Elections has little practical power over online political advertising, leaving the digital space largely unregulated during elections.

SECTION 01

Introduction

Over the past two decades, digital transformation has fundamentally reshaped the production, circulation, and consumption of political information. Traditional media are no longer the primary intermediary between political events and the public; social media platforms and instant messaging applications have become central arenas for shaping public opinion, political attitudes, and electoral behavior. While this transformation has enabled unprecedented speed in the dissemination of information and expanded opportunities for political participation, it has also created a complex information environment in which misleading and deceptive content can spread rapidly. Within electoral contexts, this has become one of the most significant challenges facing democratic systems because of its ability to shape voters' perceptions of political issues, candidates, and public institutions.

As a result, the integrity of elections can no longer be assessed solely by examining the fairness of voting procedures, vote counting, and compliance with electoral regulations. As citizens become increasingly exposed to misleading information, manipulated content, and politically motivated narratives, their ability to make informed electoral choices is diminished, even when electoral procedures themselves comply with legal and administrative standards. Safeguarding electoral integrity today therefore also requires protecting the information environment and ensuring citizens' access to accurate and trustworthy information.[1]

This challenge is particularly significant in Lebanon, where political and sectarian divisions intersect with a highly fragmented media landscape and widespread dependence on social media and encrypted messaging applications, especially WhatsApp, whose private and encrypted nature makes independent monitoring and verification particularly difficult.[2] At the same time, Lebanon's legal and regulatory framework governing elections still lacks a clear legal definition of digital disinformation and provides limited oversight of political content and online electoral advertising.[3] The

1 UNESCO. (2022). Elections in Digital Times: A Guide for Electoral Practitioners. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000382102
2 Global Media Registry & Samir Kassir Foundation. (2024). Media Ownership Monitor Lebanon 2024. https://lebanon.mom-gmr.org/en/findings/political-affiliations/
3 Maharat Foundation. (2025, May). Countering Misinformation and Disinformation in Lebanon: Promoting Information Integrity and Protecting Freedom of Expression Through Media Reforms. IFEX. https://ifex.org/countering-misinformation-in-lebanon-media-reforms-to-protect-free-expression/

rapid development of generative artificial intelligence and deepfake technologies, which make it possible to produce highly realistic audio and visual content that ordinary users struggle to distinguish from authentic material, adds a further challenge for legislators and electoral authorities.[4]

Existing Lebanese research has primarily examined digital disinformation from national, institutional, or media-monitoring perspectives, while relatively little attention has been devoted to how citizens within small local communities experience, interpret, and respond to misleading information. This report seeks to address part of this gap. It analyzes a survey conducted in the village of Kfarqahel to discuss digital disinformation and elections in a local context, and reads its results against an analysis of the Lebanese information environment surrounding the 2022 parliamentary elections. It asks whether the effects of digital disinformation represent isolated individual practices or reflect broader and more organized patterns, and what role political awareness, trust in media sources, verification practices, and trust in political institutions play in the relationship between exposure to misleading content and electoral decision-making.

4 Weiner, D. I., & Norden, L. (2023, December 5). Regulating AI Deepfakes and Synthetic Media in the Political Arena. Brennan Center for Justice. https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/regulating-ai-deepfakes-and-synthetic-media-political-arena

SECTION 02

Key Concepts and Earlier Research

Digital disinformation and electoral integrity

Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan describe the spread of false and misleading content as *information disorder*, distinguishing between three forms: **misinformation**, which is shared without the intention to cause harm; **disinformation**, which is deliberately created or disseminated to deceive and to advance political, economic, or ideological objectives; and **malinformation**, which is based on genuine information but is intentionally used, often out of context, in ways that cause harm.[5] In digital environments, disinformation takes several forms that share the common objective of manipulating public perception: entirely fabricated content; genuine information presented selectively or stripped of its original context; imposter content falsely attributed to trusted figures or institutions through fake accounts and coordinated networks; and, increasingly, AI-generated "deepfakes."[6] As the findings below show, misleading and out-of-context content in particular was widespread during Lebanon's 2022 elections.

Electoral integrity refers to the internationally recognized principles and standards that govern every stage of the electoral cycle, from voter registration and the campaign through polling day to vote counting and the announcement of results. Elections have integrity when they are founded on the principles of universal suffrage and political equality and are administered professionally, impartially, and transparently throughout the entire electoral cycle rather than only on election day.[7] Digital disinformation threatens electoral integrity in several ways. It undermines citizens' right to seek and receive accurate electoral information;[8] it distorts equal opportunity among competitors when coordinated campaigns damage

5 Wardle, C., & Derakhshan, H. (2017). Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policy Making. Council of Europe. https://edoc.coe.int/en/media/7495-information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-research-and-policy-making.html

6 Wardle, C. (n.d.). Understanding Information Disorder. First Draft. https://firstdraftnews.org/long-form-article/understanding-information-disorder/ On deepfakes, see also Weiner & Norden, Regulating AI Deepfakes and Synthetic Media in the Political Arena.

7 Global Commission on Elections, Democracy and Security. (2012). Deepening Democracy: A Strategy for Improving the Integrity of Elections Worldwide. International IDEA & Kofi Annan Foundation. https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/deepening-democracy.pdf

8 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2021). Human Rights and Elections: A Handbook on the Legal, Technical and Human Rights Aspects of Elections. https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/Human-Rights-and-Elections.pdf

the reputation of some candidates or artificially promote others;[9] and it weakens democratic deliberation by filling public debate with unreliable content.[10] It also erodes confidence in elections themselves: in a comparative study of 82 national elections across 74 countries, Mauk and Grömping found that higher levels of online disinformation were associated with less accurate public perceptions of electoral fairness and greater polarization over election legitimacy.[11]

Earlier research

International research has examined the relationship between digital disinformation and electoral integrity mainly at the macro level. Although such studies provide strong statistical evidence across many countries, they rely on national-level data and do not explain how digital disinformation develops and spreads within a specific local community.[12] Studies from emerging democracies also point to the digital divide: weaker digital infrastructure in rural and semi-urban areas makes it more difficult for people to verify online information and increases their vulnerability to misleading content.[13]

Research on Lebanon can be grouped into three main categories. The first focuses on national institutions and the legal framework, such as the European Union Election Observation Mission's assessment of the 2022 elections[14] and a recent American University of Beirut study that identified the legal and regulatory weaknesses limiting the Supervisory Commission for Elections' ability to respond to online disinformation.[15] The second examines digital political content at the national level, such as the Words Matter project of Democracy Reporting International and the Maharat Foundation, which monitored disinformation and hate speech in posts by candidates and political influencers during the 2022 campaign.[16] The third analyzes specific forms of misleading content, such as El-Masri, Riedl, and

9 The Carter Center. (n.d.). Election Standards: Freedom of Opinion and Expression. https://eos.cartercenter.org/obligations/20
10 Tenove, C. (2020). Protecting Democracy in the Digital Information Ecosystem. https://crtc.gc.ca/eng/acrtc/prx/2020tenove.htm
11 Mauk, M., & Grömping, M. (2024). Online Disinformation Predicts Inaccurate Beliefs About Election Fairness Among Both Winners and Losers. Comparative Political Studies, 57(6), 965–998. https://doi.org/10.1177/00104140231193008
12 Mauk & Grömping, "Online Disinformation Predicts Inaccurate Beliefs About Election Fairness."
13 Suherman, A., Hidayatullah, M., Sa'ban, L. O. M. A., & Mulia, F. (2026). Information Disorder and Electoral Integrity: The Impact of Disinformation on Elections in Developing Democracies. In O. I. Aluko (Ed.), Elections in the Global South and North – A Comprehensive Overview. IntechOpen. https://www.intechopen.com/chapters/1234241
14 European Union Election Observation Mission. (2022). Lebanon 2022 Final Report: Parliamentary Elections, 15 May 2022. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/EU%20EOM%20Lebanon%202022%20Final%20report%20English_0.pdf
15 Hani, J. (2025). Safeguarding Electoral Integrity in Lebanon: Revisiting the Role of the Supervisory Commission for Elections in Mitigating Online Disinformation. AUB ScholarWorks. http://hdl.handle.net/10938/34948

Woolley's study of 35 misleading WhatsApp voice messages shared in Lebanon between 2019 and 2020.[17] None of these studies examined how misleading content was received or interpreted within individual villages or local communities. In other parts of the Global South, local case studies have shown the importance of examining how disinformation spreads through family and community networks,[18] but no previous Lebanese study has combined the analysis of digital disinformation with a case study at the village level.

16 Democracy Reporting International & Maharat Foundation. (2022). Online Public Discourse in MENA: Disinformation and Hate Speech during the 2022 Lebanese and Jordanian Elections. Words Matter project. https://maharatfoundation.org/media/2253/dri-report-english-final.pdf

17 El-Masri, A., Riedl, M. J., & Woolley, S. (2022). Audio Misinformation on WhatsApp: A Case Study from Lebanon. Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) Misinformation Review, 3(4). https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-102

18 Garimella, K., Nayak, B., Chauchard, S., & Vashistha, A. (2024). Deciphering Viral Trends in WhatsApp: A Case Study From a Village in Rural India (arXiv:2407.08172v1). arXiv. https://arxiv.org/abs/2407.08172v1

SECTION 03

Research Questions and Methodology

The study addresses four research questions:

RQ1 What are the main forms of digital disinformation that appeared during the 2022 Lebanese parliamentary elections, and which digital platforms were most widely used to spread this type of content?

RQ2 How does digital disinformation affect the voting behavior of Lebanese citizens, especially young people who are more active on social media?

RQ3 Is electoral digital disinformation in Lebanon a spontaneous social phenomenon, or is it an organized practice with political and informational dimensions?

RQ4 To what extent does political awareness influence the relationship between exposure to digital disinformation and voting behavior among residents of Kfarqahel, and what role do trust in media sources and verification practices play in shaping this relationship?

The main hypothesis is that digital disinformation in Lebanon goes beyond a series of spontaneous individual actions: it has broader social, political, and informational dimensions and affects voting behavior and public trust in the electoral process to different degrees, especially among young people who use social media more frequently. Three complementary hypotheses hold that the level of exposure to and influence of digital disinformation varies across age groups; that the degree of trust people place in media sources influences their trust in the electoral process and their voting attitudes; and that the higher a person's level of political awareness, the less likely they are to be influenced by digital disinformation and the more likely they are to verify information before accepting or sharing it.

The study adopts a multi-method case study approach. It combines a descriptive-analytical, desk-based review of the information environment surrounding the 2022 elections, drawing on academic literature and on reports by local and international organizations working on digital media and elections, with a field survey conducted in Kfarqahel, a village in the Koura District of North Lebanon.

WHY KFARQAHEL. The village has social and religious diversity, as well as strong family and social relationships that play an important role in shaping political attitudes. These characteristics are similar to those found in many Lebanese communities. Like many other areas in Lebanon, Kfarqahel has also been affected by the political and economic changes that the country has experienced in recent years. The village was selected to provide an in-depth understanding of a specific local community rather than findings that represent the entire Lebanese population; this choice of depth rather than generalization guided the sample size and the methods of analysis.

SAMPLE AND DATA COLLECTION. The survey used a convenience sample of 50 residents who were legally eligible to vote in parliamentary elections. For context, approximately 850 voters were registered in the village for the municipal elections held on 11 May 2025, of whom about 400 voted. The sample included participants from different age groups and educational and occupational backgrounds. They were recruited by sharing the link to an online questionnaire (Google Forms) within the local community, with the assistance of several village residents who had no influence on participants' responses. Participation was voluntary, participants were informed of the academic purpose of the study, and the confidentiality of their responses was guaranteed. The questionnaire (see Appendix) covered demographic characteristics, political awareness, trust in media sources, political participation, the factors influencing voting behavior, and exposure to and verification of misleading election information. Responses were coded and analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages).

LIMITATIONS. With only 50 participants selected through convenience sampling, the findings cannot be statistically generalized to the village population or to Lebanon as a whole; they should be read as analytical evidence from a specific local context. Because the study relied only on an online questionnaire, it may have excluded people who use the internet less frequently, a group that may experience different levels of exposure to misleading content. Finally, the survey was conducted in late February 2026, before Parliament voted on 9 March 2026 to extend its mandate and postpone the parliamentary elections scheduled for 10 May 2026. The responses therefore reflect participants' opinions during a period when the elections were still expected to take place on time, and any later effects of the postponement on political interest or voter motivation are not captured.

SECTION 04

Contextual Findings: The Information Environment of the 2022 Elections

Where Lebanese voters get political information

The political and electoral information environment in Lebanon is shaped by traditional media and digital platforms working alongside each other. Television remains one of the main sources of political information, especially during election periods. Channels such as MTV, LBCI, Al Jadeed, Al Manar, and OTV are among the most influential broadcasters in Lebanon, but their different editorial policies and political affiliations often shape how they report political events and election campaigns. Each outlet tends to highlight issues and candidates that reflect its own political orientation, leading to different interpretations of the same electoral events.[19]

At the same time, internet access and social media use have grown significantly. In early 2022, Lebanon had around 6.01 million internet users, or 89.3% of the population, and 5.06 million social media users, or 75.2% of the population, an increase of 15.8% compared with 2021.[20] By audience size, YouTube was the largest platform (5.06 million users), followed by Facebook (3.15 million), Instagram (2.20 million), Messenger (1.85 million), and Snapchat (1.10 million). However, the number of users does not necessarily reflect a platform's political influence. Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) were the main platforms for political campaigns, hashtag campaigns, and political or sectarian messaging.[21] WhatsApp played a different but equally important role: its end-to-end encryption makes shared content much more difficult to monitor or verify independently than content on open platforms such as Facebook and X.[22] Analyzing digital disinformation in Lebanese elections therefore requires more than comparing user numbers. It is also

19 Maharat Foundation & Internews. (2021). Media and Information Landscape Assessment (MILA): Lebanon. https://internews.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Media-and-Information-Landscape-in-Lebanon.pdf
20 Kemp, S. (2022). Digital 2022: Lebanon. DataReportal. https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-lebanon
21 Democracy Reporting International & Maharat Foundation, Online Public Discourse in MENA.
22 Newman, N., et al. (2025). Digital News Report 2025: Overview and Key Findings. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2025/dnr-executive-summary

necessary to consider how open or private each platform is, how quickly information spreads on it, and how easy it is to monitor and verify its content.

Main forms of digital disinformation in 2022

Digital disinformation during the 2022 parliamentary elections took many forms and went beyond the spread of false news. The European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EOM) found that misleading practices included rewriting news headlines and articles to support particular political narratives, sharing edited images and videos, and reposting content out of its original context to change its meaning. These practices were not limited to one political group but were used by different competing actors, making it more difficult for citizens to distinguish between reliable and misleading information.[23]

The Maharat Foundation's fact-checking report on the post-election period (June–November 2022) shows that misleading information continued to circulate after the vote. Of the 32 fact-checks produced by Maharat News, half found the information examined to be false. Inaccurate claims were concentrated in constitutionality and legislation (8 claims) and energy (7 claims), and the report notes that many political statements showed a lack of legal knowledge and a disregard for the rule of law. This suggests that weak public understanding of the legal framework creates an environment in which rumors can spread easily.[24]

Digital disinformation also became more organized. The EU EOM documented coordinated amplification, in which networks of real and fake accounts repeatedly shared the same content to create the impression of broad public support, as well as so-called "hashtag wars," in which political actors used hashtags intensively to create artificial online trends.[25] Monitoring by Democracy Reporting International and the Maharat Foundation found that political actors relied heavily on propaganda designed to stir sectarian and political emotions, and documented the use of so-called electronic armies, coordinated groups that reported opposing content in an attempt to have it removed.[26] Freedom House likewise identified coordinated online campaigns that relied on mass reporting and the repeated promotion of specific political messages, reducing the visibility of opposing views.[27]

23 EU EOM, Lebanon 2022 Final Report.
24 Maharat Foundation. (2022). Fact-Checking Report [Maharat News fact-checks, post-election period, June–November 2022]. https://maharatfoundation.org/media/2324/fact-checking-report-final.pdf
25 EU EOM, Lebanon 2022 Final Report.
26 Democracy Reporting International & Maharat Foundation, Online Public Discourse in MENA.
27 Freedom House. (2022). Freedom on the Net 2022: Lebanon. https://freedomhouse.org/country/lebanon/freedom-net/2022

Defamation and hate campaigns were another important form. According to the EU EOM, around 69% of the violations recorded on social media were related to defamatory content, insults, or personal attacks, while other posts contained sectarian or inflammatory messages. Several women candidates, particularly those representing independent and emerging political groups, were targeted by online harassment that included attacks on their children, disabilities, and sexual orientation.[28] A joint study by the Maharat Foundation and Madanyat, supported by UN Women, found that 7% of the comments posted on the social media accounts of 18 women candidates contained gender-based harassment or abusive language.[29]

Private messaging applications played an important role too. El-Masri and colleagues found that misleading WhatsApp voice messages shared in Lebanon followed a similar pattern. They usually began with a friendly introduction to create a sense of personal trust, followed by claims that the sender was a reliable source, such as an eyewitness, an insider, or an expert. The messages then used emotions such as fear, anger, or panic before presenting misleading information, and often encouraged recipients to forward them.[30] Although the study did not focus on the election period, its findings provide a useful framework for understanding how WhatsApp could be used to spread disinformation during the 2022 elections.

Political discourse and polarization

In this environment, digital disinformation has become more than an occasional problem; it has developed into a tool of political communication. The Maharat Foundation, which monitored the Facebook and X accounts of 96 candidates, 11 politicians, and 25 influencers during the 2022 campaign, found that 49.5% of the political propaganda it recorded relied on appeals to sectarian and political emotions, while only 7.5% of overall political discourse focused on actual electoral programs.[31] Maharat's "Sharaka" project, implemented in cooperation with the Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections (LADE), monitored more than 8,700 news items and rumors and fact-checked 65 of them, documenting statements presented out of context, inaccurate figures, and misleading information used to support specific political narratives.[32]

28 EU EOM, Lebanon 2022 Final Report.
29 Maharat Foundation & Madanyat, with the support of UN Women. (2022). Media and Gender Monitoring of the 2022 Elections: Violence Against Women in Politics (VAWP). https://maharatfoundation.org/en/marsadvawp_finalreport
30 El-Masri, Riedl & Woolley, "Audio Misinformation on WhatsApp."
31 Maharat Foundation. (2022). Political Propaganda and Information Manipulation on Social Media during the 2022 Lebanese Parliamentary Elections. https://maharatfoundation.org/en/elections_socialmedia2
32 Maharat Foundation. (2022). Listening to Local Communities: Strengthening Trust in Political Participation as the Foundation for Change – 2022 Elections. https://maharatfoundation.org/sociallisteningreport_elections

Rather than reducing traditional political divisions, the digital environment often reinforced political and sectarian polarization. The Words Matter project documented the spread of disinformation, hate speech, and highly polarized content during the campaign, while social media algorithms contributed to the creation of echo chambers in which users were mainly exposed to information that confirmed their existing opinions.[33] Polarization is also closely linked to the country's media ownership structure. The Media Ownership Monitor Lebanon 2024 found a high level of ownership concentration and showed that 78.4% of the media outlets it studied were directly or indirectly connected to the state, political parties, or political figures. Political content from these outlets is frequently republished on social media, allowing the same messages to reach larger audiences more quickly.[34]

The legal and regulatory framework

The Lebanese legal system does not have one comprehensive law regulating the media sector. Instead, it relies on several separate laws, including the Penal Code, the 1962 Press Law, and the 1994 Audiovisual Media Law, which were written many years ago and have not been updated to address the digital environment.[35] Because some of their provisions are broad and unclear, especially those related to defamation and insult in the Penal Code, they have increasingly been used to prosecute journalists and activists instead of protecting their rights.[36] The case of journalist Dima Sadek is a clear example: in July 2023, after she criticized members of a political party on X, a court sentenced her to one year in prison and a fine on charges of inciting sectarian strife, libel, and defamation.[37] The digital space, meanwhile, is still not covered by an effective regulatory framework, partly because a large amount of online content related to Lebanon is created and shared from outside the country.[38]

With regard to elections, Law No. 44/2017 on the Election of Members of Parliament dedicates Chapter Six (Articles 68–83) to election media and political advertising. It gives the Supervisory Commission for Elections (SCE)

33 Democracy Reporting International & Maharat Foundation. (2022). Online Disinformation and Hate Speech on Social Media in the Middle East and North Africa: Regional Trends and Local Narratives. Words Matter project. https://maharatfoundation.org/media/2364/second-regional-report-en-dri.pdf
34 Global Media Registry & Samir Kassir Foundation, Media Ownership Monitor Lebanon 2024. https://lebanon.mom-gmr.org/en/
35 The Legal Agenda. (2023, November 28). Proposed Media Law Poses a Serious Threat to Freedom of Expression. legal-agenda.com/...
36 Human Rights Watch. (2019, November 15). Lebanon: Defamation Laws Used to Silence Critics. From the report "Shut Up or We'll Shut You Down": Criminalizing Peaceful Speech in Lebanon. https://www.hrw.org/ar/news/2019/11/15/334837
37 Maharat Foundation. (2023, November 28). Lebanon: Proposed Media Law Poses a Serious Threat to Freedom of Expression. https://maharatfoundation.org/FOE_Statement28112023
38 Jezzini, A. (2026, May 6). Media Freedoms in Lebanon: From a Legacy of Pioneering to the Edge of Contraction. ASAS Media. https://asasmedia.com/121256/

the authority to issue rules for election media coverage, monitor compliance by television, radio, print, and online media, and impose penalties such as financial fines or referrals to the Publications Court.[39] Law No. 81/2018 on Electronic Transactions and Personal Data, Lebanon's first law to recognize electronic documents, electronic signatures, and cybercrime, focuses mainly on commercial transactions rather than political disinformation, and many of its data protection provisions have limited practical impact on the use of personal data during election campaigns.[40]

Responsibility for monitoring election-related media is divided among several institutions, with no clear coordination or specialized digital oversight:

- The **Supervisory Commission for Elections** has broad legal authority under Law No. 44/2017 but very limited practical or technical power to regulate online political advertising, so the digital space remains largely outside its effective supervision.[41] Independent reports also show that the SCE lacks sufficient financial resources and the legal authority to prosecute electoral violations, and that legal limits on campaign spending are not effectively enforced.[42]
- The **National Audiovisual Media Council** is mainly advisory rather than regulatory and, unlike similar institutions in countries such as France, cannot enforce its decisions. Its attempts to extend oversight to online news websites have led to repeated disagreements with the Ministry of Information, as its legal authority is limited to the audiovisual sector.[43]
- The **Publications Court** is the only institution with the power to impose legal penalties, but it can act only after an individual files a complaint and the damage has already occurred, making its role reactive rather than preventive.[44]

This framework reveals several structural weaknesses. Lebanese legislation provides no clear legal definition of digital disinformation or misleading information, leaving room for different interpretations and possible political misuse. Existing laws do not require global platforms such as Facebook, X, or

39 Republic of Lebanon. (2017). Law No. 44 of 17 June 2017 on the Election of Members of the Chamber of Deputies, Chapter VI, Articles 68–83. See also Maharat Foundation. (2022). Media and Electoral Advertising. https://maharatfoundation.org/media/1987/position-election-1-en.pdf
40 Republic of Lebanon. (2018). Law No. 81 of 10 October 2018 on Electronic Transactions and Personal Data. See also National Human Rights Commission of Lebanon. (2022). A New Proposal to Amend Law No. 81/2018 on Electronic Transactions and Personal Data. https://nhrclb.org/archives/1562
41 The Legal Agenda. (2026, February 28). The Elections Supervisory Commission: The Legal Framework and the Dilemma of Regulatory Marginalization. legal-agenda.com/...
42 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. (2022). Lebanon's Looming Election Disaster. Sada. https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2022/02/lebanons-looming-election-disaster?lang=en
43 SKeyes Center for Media and Cultural Freedom. (2012, October 30). Media Council Moves to Regulate News Websites. Samir Kassir Foundation. https://www.skeyesmedia.org
44 Maharat Foundation, Media and Electoral Advertising (2022). https://maharatfoundation.org/media/1987/position-election-1-en.pdf

WhatsApp to cooperate with Lebanese regulatory authorities, in contrast with the European Union's Digital Services Act (DSA), which requires large online platforms to assess and reduce systemic risks related to recommendation algorithms and online advertising.[45] Lebanon also lacks official procedures for the rapid removal of misleading content or for addressing coordinated networks, often referred to as electronic armies, during election periods. Proposed media reforms and amendments to data protection legislation have remained under discussion in Parliament for years, largely because of political disagreements over the independence of regulatory bodies and the appointment of their members.[46] The Maharat Foundation has recommended a new media law that promotes transparency in media ownership and financing, and an independent National Media Council that would work with the SCE to ensure fair and balanced oversight during election campaigns; these recommendations have not been implemented.[47]

Lebanon's legal gap is therefore structural rather than temporary. The country's media laws were designed for a traditional media environment and have not adapted to the speed of online information, the diversity of digital actors, or the growing influence of social media platforms. Without effective oversight of online political advertising and coordinated digital campaigns, the polarization described above becomes a predictable outcome of a legal system that imposes few consequences on those who spread digital disinformation.

What the contextual findings show

Taken together, these findings show that the impact of digital disinformation in Lebanon goes beyond the spread of false or inaccurate information. It is shaped by three structural factors: the close interaction between digital platforms and traditional media, many of which have political affiliations; the wide range of disinformation practices, from unverified news and statements taken out of context to emotional and sectarian messaging; and the weakness of the legal and regulatory framework. The relationship between digital disinformation and voting behavior is therefore not direct but complex, influenced by trust in institutions, social and political

45 European Commission. (n.d.). The Impact of the Digital Services Act on Digital Platforms. Shaping Europe's Digital Future. https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/dsa-impact-platforms
46 Maharat Foundation. (2024). Modernize Media Laws to Cope with Digital Change. https://maharatfoundation.org/media/2670/ssd-innovation-eng-1.pdf
47 Maharat Foundation. (2025). Oversight, Media, and Accountability: Challenges and Opportunities Ahead of the 2026 Elections. https://maharatfoundation.org/en/OversightMediaAndAccountability-ChallengesAndOpportunitiesAheadofthe2026Elections

affiliations, the sources of information voters use, and the broader media environment. The field study examines how these factors play out within one local community.

SECTION 05

Field Study Findings: Kfarqahel

The sample

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the 50 participants. The sample shows a good level of diversity in terms of gender, educational level, and marital status, with the largest group holding university degrees (36%). A higher share of university-educated participants does not necessarily mean a higher level of political awareness, but it may help explain some of the findings related to following political news and dealing with information shared on digital platforms.

TABLE 1 Demographic characteristics of the sample (n = 50)

CHARACTERISTIC	GROUP	NUMBER	SHARE
Gender	Male	31	62%
	Female	19	38%
Age group (years)	18–25	6	12%
	26–35	12	24%
	36–45	12	24%
	46–60	10	20%
	60+	10	20%
Education level	Intermediate	12	24%
	Secondary	12	24%
	University	18	36%
	Other	8	16%
Marital status	Married	30	60%
	Single	16	32%
	Divorced	4	8%

Source: Field survey, Kfarqahel.

Political awareness, exposure, and verification

Political awareness is not limited to following political news. It also includes understanding the electoral system and being able to distinguish between accurate and misleading content. Two-thirds of participants (33, or 66%) regularly follow political news, while 17 (34%) do not, which indicates that

many participants are interested in political affairs. However, this interest does not necessarily reflect electoral knowledge. When asked about the electoral law, 27 participants (54%) said they do not have sufficient knowledge of it, while 23 (46%) said they have an acceptable understanding of its main provisions. Following political news, in other words, does not necessarily improve knowledge of electoral procedures, and voters may find it more difficult to evaluate the information they receive during campaigns, especially when it is shared on social media without verification.

Exposure to misleading information is common. Thirty-one participants (62%) had encountered false or misleading election-related news or information on social media, 12 (24%) had not, and 7 (14%) did not know. Verification practices vary considerably: 12 participants (24%) always verify election-related news before believing or sharing it, 24 (48%) sometimes do, 10 (20%) rarely do, and 4 (8%) never do.

Among the 17 participants who do not follow political news, the reasons were not limited to a lack of interest in politics. Nearly half (47.1%) believe that the media provide misleading or biased information, 35.3% are not interested in politics, and 17.6% said that politics does not concern them. A lack of trust in media sources is thus one of the main reasons why some participants do not follow political news.

The media, social factors, and voting behavior

In Lebanon, where political considerations are closely connected with family and social affiliations, voting decisions are often shaped by the interaction of several factors rather than by individual choice alone. Twenty-three participants (46%) believe that the media influence their voting choices, while 27 (54%) said their decisions are not directly influenced by the media. This does not mean that the media have no influence: their influence may be indirect, shaping which issues receive public attention and highlighting certain topics over others. Seventeen participants (34%) said family affiliations influence their voting choices, while 33 (66%) said they do not. Family influence therefore still plays a role for some participants, although most indicated that their decisions are based mainly on personal beliefs. On electoral vote-buying, 45 participants (90%) said electoral money does not influence their voting decisions, while 5 (10%) acknowledged that it does, though its impact may vary with the economic and social conditions of different regions.

Asked where false or misleading election-related information spreads the most, 20 participants (40%) named WhatsApp, followed by Facebook (32%), TikTok (12%), Instagram (10%), and other platforms (6%). Most participants

also recognize that such information can affect voting behavior: 21 (42%) believe it has a strong influence on voters' decisions, 19 (38%) a limited influence, 6 (12%) no influence, and 4 (8%) did not know.

Political participation and trust in the electoral process

Most participants still believe in elections. Forty-two participants (84%) support holding the parliamentary elections on schedule, while 8 (16%) do not. Among the 42 participants who answered the question on their main reason for voting, 35.7% cited exercising their constitutional right, 26.2% national duty, 26.2% strengthening the democratic process, and 11.9% a personal interest. Civic and national motivations are clearly the main reasons for political participation.

Trust in political parties, by contrast, remains low: 40 participants (80%) said the current political parties or movements do not meet their expectations, and only 10 (20%) expressed satisfaction with their performance. Participants who do not support taking part in the elections explained that they do not believe parliament can bring about real change or that their votes would affect the final results. The main problem, then, is not opposition to elections themselves, but declining trust in the effectiveness of elected institutions and their ability to achieve meaningful reform.

Finally, 11 participants (22%) said they had been influenced by election-related news that was later found to be false, 30 (60%) said they had not, and 9 (18%) did not know.

SECTION 06

Discussion

The impact of digital disinformation on electoral behavior

The findings of the contextual analysis and the survey point in the same direction. Most Kfarqahel participants had been exposed to false or misleading election information, and they identified WhatsApp and Facebook as the two platforms most associated with this content. This is consistent with earlier research on the Lebanese information environment, which identified these platforms as major channels for unverified political content because information spreads quickly and is difficult to monitor, especially on encrypted applications such as WhatsApp.[48] The similarity between the local and national evidence strengthens the findings about how digital disinformation spreads in Lebanon. What distinguishes this study from earlier research is not its findings but its level of analysis: where monitoring reports such as those of the EU EOM identified patterns of disinformation, coordinated networks, and amplification strategies,[49] this study looks at how citizens in one community receive misleading information, how much they are affected by it, how they verify it, and how much they trust political and media institutions.

The impact of digital disinformation on electoral behavior appears to be gradual rather than direct. Eight in ten participants believed that misleading information influences voters' decisions, either strongly or to a limited extent, yet fewer than one in four said they had personally been influenced by information that was later proven false. This difference between public perception and personal admission can be explained by the nature of self-reported influence rather than by the absence of a real effect. People often find it difficult to identify the exact moment or source that shaped their opinions, especially when misleading information comes from different sources over a long period of time. Its influence is therefore often indirect and cumulative, shaping the overall political environment rather than producing immediate and obvious changes in individual attitudes. This also points to a methodological limitation: measuring influence through self-report may underestimate its real effect.

48 El-Masri, Riedl & Woolley, "Audio Misinformation on WhatsApp."
49 EU EOM, Lebanon 2022 Final Report.

Weak verification habits reinforce this pattern. Only a quarter of participants always verify information before believing or sharing it, which means that inaccurate information can continue to circulate and influence political opinions, even among people who believe they are not affected by it.

Political awareness, trust, and vulnerability to misleading information

The findings are broadly consistent with the hypothesis that higher political awareness may reduce vulnerability to digital disinformation, although the research design does not allow a direct statistical test of this relationship, as the questionnaire did not include a composite indicator of political awareness. Nevertheless, the results reveal a clear gap between following political news and understanding the electoral law. Frequent exposure to political information does not necessarily lead to better electoral knowledge; people may remain highly engaged with political content without having the skills needed to evaluate it critically. This is consistent with the Maharat Foundation's finding that much of the disinformation it verified after the 2022 elections concerned constitutionality and legislation, and that many political statements showed a lack of legal knowledge.[50] Weak public understanding of the legal framework, in other words, creates favorable conditions for rumors.

The findings also reveal a clear decline in trust in political institutions, particularly political parties, and many participants who do not follow political news avoid it because they believe the media are misleading or biased. This suggests that low institutional trust is not only a result of digital disinformation but also one of the factors that increases its influence. As trust in political and media institutions declines, people may become more dependent on informal information networks such as WhatsApp groups and social media, where professional verification and editorial oversight are much weaker. Low institutional trust thus does not only affect political choices; it also creates a more fragile information environment in which elections become more vulnerable to rumors and misleading content. This echoes research on Lebanon's legal and regulatory framework, which argues that the limited powers of oversight bodies and the weak regulation of digital platforms reduce public trust in political and media institutions and make it harder to respond effectively to disinformation.[51]

50 Maharat Foundation, Fact-Checking Report (2022).
51 The Legal Agenda, "The Elections Supervisory Commission."

Trust in elections and trust in political actors

The digital environment influences trust in elections through indirect and complex processes rather than one direct pathway. Most participants still support holding elections on time and consider political participation both a constitutional right and a national duty, so trust in elections as a democratic process remains relatively strong. At the same time, trust in political parties is low and exposure to inaccurate information on digital platforms is widespread. This contrast suggests that people distinguish between trust in elections as a democratic institution and trust in the political and media actors operating within the electoral environment. The digital environment does not necessarily reduce citizens' belief in the importance of elections; instead, it weakens trust in those who provide information and compete for voters' support. When electoral decisions are made in an environment where platform algorithms give greater visibility to controversial content regardless of its accuracy, and where echo chambers reduce exposure to different viewpoints,[52] trust in elections may decline not because citizens reject democracy, but because they gradually lose confidence in the fairness of political competition and the reliability of the information used to make electoral choices.

Family, parties, and the media

Social factors do not interact with digital disinformation in the same way. Family influence on voting decisions was relatively limited for most participants, but family networks continue to play an indirect role by spreading information through trusted social relationships. In these close networks, information often appears credible not because the original source is reliable, but because it comes from trusted relatives or friends. This is consistent with research on information sharing on WhatsApp in Lebanon, which has shown that personal relationships can increase the credibility of misleading content.[53]

The relationship between political parties and digital disinformation is more complex. The field study found declining public trust in parties, while the contextual analysis showed that some political actors used organized digital strategies to amplify selected political messages and influence public

52 Duskin, K., Schafer, J. S., West, J. D., & Spiro, E. S. (2024). Echo Chambers in the Age of Algorithms: An Audit of Twitter's Friend Recommender System. arXiv. https://arxiv.org/abs/2404.06422
53 El-Masri, Riedl & Woolley, "Audio Misinformation on WhatsApp."

debate.[54] Some political actors, in other words, are not only affected by digital disinformation but may also contribute to producing or amplifying it, which makes efforts to reduce its spread more difficult.

The media also play a dual role. In principle, professional media should help verify information and correct misleading news. However, the strong links between parts of the Lebanese media and political actors documented by the Media Ownership Monitor sometimes make the media part of political polarization rather than a tool for reducing it.[55] This helps explain why some participants who do not regularly follow political news believe that the media provide biased or misleading information. Their responses reflect declining trust in the neutrality of media sources rather than complete disengagement from public affairs.

What the findings mean for electoral integrity in Lebanon

The impact of digital disinformation in Lebanon goes beyond influencing individual voters. It affects one of the main foundations of electoral integrity: the quality of the information environment on which citizens base their decisions. The field evidence of widespread exposure and uneven verification is consistent with national evidence of weaknesses in the legal and regulatory framework for the digital space,[56] including the absence of a clear legal definition of digital disinformation and of effective mechanisms to hold digital platforms accountable.[57] Electoral integrity should therefore be measured not only by fair voting and vote counting, but also by voters' ability to access accurate and reliable information before making electoral decisions.

These risks are not limited to a single election. They reflect a broader structural problem created by the interaction of three factors: weak legal and regulatory frameworks, strong political influence over part of the media sector, and declining public trust in political and media institutions. Together, these factors create an information environment that allows misleading information to spread more easily and makes it harder for voters to make informed decisions. Unless they are addressed through institutional reform, future elections are likely to face similar patterns of digital disinformation, with negative consequences for electoral integrity and democratic practice.

54 SKeyes Center for Media and Cultural Freedom. (2023). Lebanon's 2022 Parliamentary Election: A Look into Political Parties' Online Behavior Vis-à-vis Alternative Candidates. https://www.skeyesmedia.org/en/News/Reports/03-01-2023/10449
55 Global Media Registry & Samir Kassir Foundation, Media Ownership Monitor Lebanon 2024. https://lebanon.mom-gmr.org/en/
56 Ayoub, N. (2024). Media Regulation in Lebanon: Facts and Perspectives. Maharat Foundation. https://maharatfoundation.org/media/2732/_dr-nidal-ayoub-eng.pdf
57 Maharat Foundation, Countering Misinformation and Disinformation in Lebanon.

SECTION 07

Recommendations

Reducing the impact of digital disinformation in Lebanon cannot be achieved through one action or by one institution alone. Public awareness campaigns alone or legal measures alone will not be enough, because the factors behind digital disinformation, including weak fact-checking practices, declining trust in political and media institutions, gaps in the legal and regulatory framework, and the close relationship between parts of the media sector and political actors, are closely connected. Effective policies should combine legal reform, stronger oversight institutions, and better media and digital literacy, addressing the root causes of digital disinformation rather than only its consequences.

THE STATE AND ELECTORAL OVERSIGHT BODIES. The legal framework needs to be updated to reflect digital developments. This could include revising Parliamentary Elections Law No. 44/2017 or introducing additional regulations that give the SCE and other responsible authorities clearer powers to monitor online political campaigns and digital advertising, while maintaining a balance between combating digital disinformation and protecting freedom of expression. Comparative experiences, especially the EU's Digital Services Act, highlight the importance of cooperation between public authorities and major digital platforms to improve transparency and allow faster responses to misleading content.[58] This does not mean copying the European model, but adapting its general principles to the Lebanese legal and institutional context.

THE MEDIA AND CIVIL SOCIETY. The media's ability to reduce digital disinformation depends on their independence and professional standards, and political influence over parts of the Lebanese media limits their ability to play this role in a way that earns public trust. Civil society organizations, meanwhile, have played an important role in identifying misleading information, verifying claims, and publishing independent fact-checks.[59] Stronger cooperation between media organizations, civil society groups, and academic institutions could support sustainable national fact-checking initiatives, produce educational content, and improve transparency during

58 European Commission. (n.d.). How the Digital Services Act Enhances Transparency Online. https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/dsa-brings-transparency
59 Maharat Foundation, Fact-Checking Report (2022).

election periods. Cooperation with major digital platforms could also improve the speed of responses to misleading content, but it should complement, not replace, broader legal and institutional reform.

MEDIA AND DIGITAL LITERACY. Because following political news does not necessarily mean understanding the electoral law, media and digital literacy programs should go beyond warning people about false news. They should also improve public understanding of the electoral process and the electoral law, so that citizens can evaluate information within its proper context. Given WhatsApp's central role, citizens should be encouraged to verify the sources of messages, images, and videos before forwarding them, and to treat fact-checking as a regular habit rather than something limited to election periods. These programs should target all age groups rather than focusing only on young people.

SECTION 08

Conclusion

This report was based on the assumption that digital disinformation in Lebanon cannot be understood as a series of isolated individual actions. By combining an analysis of the information environment surrounding the 2022 parliamentary elections with a field study conducted in Kfarqahel, it examined the relationship between exposure to misleading content, political awareness, trust in media sources, verification practices, and trust in institutions within a local community that has received limited attention in previous Lebanese studies.

The findings show that digital disinformation during the 2022 elections appeared in forms well beyond traditional fake news, circulated especially through WhatsApp and Facebook, and in some cases took an organized form supported by networks that spread and amplified misleading content. Its influence on voting behavior is neither direct nor the same for everyone; it develops over time and is affected by trust in information, political awareness, and the social environment of voters. This helps explain why most participants recognized the dangers of digital disinformation while only a smaller number believed that they had been personally influenced by it. Interest in politics does not necessarily give people the skills needed to verify information or resist disinformation; lower trust in political and media institutions may encourage greater reliance on unofficial information sources; and weaknesses in the legal and regulatory framework reduce the ability of oversight bodies to respond to rapid changes in the digital environment. Overall, the findings support the study's main hypothesis: digital disinformation in Lebanon is more than the spread of false information. It is a phenomenon with social, political, and institutional dimensions that influences voting behavior and trust in electoral integrity.

The main contribution of this study is that it shifts the analysis of digital disinformation in Lebanon from the national and institutional level, which has been the focus of most previous studies, to the level of a local community, showing how nationally documented trends are experienced by citizens in a rural community. Its limitations should be kept in mind: the findings come from a small convenience sample and are descriptive; the questionnaire did not include a comprehensive measure of political awareness or examine its relationship with age groups; and the assessment of impact relied on self-reports, which may not capture indirect or unconscious

effects. Because the survey was conducted in February 2026, it captures the continuing patterns and effects of digital disinformation rather than voting behavior during the 2022 elections directly.

Future research could compare different Lebanese regions, develop more accurate tools for measuring political awareness, apply network analysis to track the spread of misleading information across platforms, and follow several election cycles to examine how digital disinformation evolves with the growing use of generative artificial intelligence and deepfakes in political campaigns.

Protecting electoral integrity in the digital age is no longer limited to ensuring fair electoral procedures. It also requires protecting the information environment in which public opinion and voting decisions are formed. Addressing digital disinformation is therefore a shared responsibility that requires cooperation among government institutions, media organizations, digital platforms, civil society, academic institutions, and citizens. Such cooperation can strengthen trust in information and democratic processes and contribute to more transparent and credible elections in Lebanon.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

Appendix: Survey Questionnaire

The questionnaire was administered in Kfarqahel in late February 2026, before Parliament voted to postpone the 2026 parliamentary elections, so the survey findings reflect participants' attitudes and perceptions under the assumption that the elections would be held as scheduled. It is reproduced below as administered. Questions 12 and 16 were included in the questionnaire but are not analyzed in this report.

01 **Gender**
Male / Female

02 **Age**
18–25 / 26–35 / 36–45 / 46–60 / 60 years and above

03 **Marital status**
Single / Married / Divorced

04 **Place of residence**
Open answer

05 **Educational level**
Intermediate / Secondary / University / Other

06 **Occupation**
Open answer

07 **Do you support holding the parliamentary elections on schedule?**
Yes / No

08 **Will you participate in voting in the upcoming parliamentary elections?**
Yes / No

09 **If your answer is "Yes," what is the main reason for your participation?**
Exercising my constitutional right / Participation is a national duty / Strengthening the democratic process / Pursuing a personal interest

10 **If your answer is "No," what is the main reason for not participating?**
I believe my vote will not affect the election results / I do not trust the ability of elected councils to bring about change

11 **Do you believe that the current political parties or movements meet your expectations?**
Yes / No

12 Do you support women's participation in political life (municipal or parliamentary)?
Yes / No

13 Does electoral vote-buying (money) influence your choice of candidate?
Yes / No

14 Do the media influence your electoral decision?
Yes / No

15 Do family affiliations influence your electoral choice?
Yes / No

16 Do you believe that the parliamentary elections will be held in Lebanon?
Yes / No / I don't know

17 Do you have sufficient knowledge of the electoral law to participate in the elections?
Yes / No

18 Are you interested in following political news in Lebanon?
Yes / No

19 If you do not follow political news, what is the main reason?
I am not interested in politics / Politics does not concern me / I believe that the media provide misleading information

20 Have you ever encountered false or inaccurate news or information about the elections on social media?
Yes / No / I don't know

21 Where do you think false or inaccurate election-related news and information are most widely circulated?
WhatsApp / Facebook / Instagram / TikTok / Other

22 Do you verify the accuracy of election-related news before believing or sharing it?
Always / Sometimes / Rarely / Never

23 Do you think false or inaccurate information on social media influences voters' decisions?
Yes, significantly / Yes, to a limited extent / No, it does not / I don't know

24 Have you ever been influenced by election-related news that was later found to be false?
Yes / No / I don't know

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