

With lower age, how many new voters?

Matt Nash, January 29, 2010



Lebanon may lower the national voting age to 18 from 21. (AFP photo/ Souleima Chreim)

Lowering the voting age in Lebanon from 21 to 18 – the world’s most common age of suffrage – would add some 283,000 potential voters to the rolls according to the Interior Ministry. And while parliament voted for the move back in March, it seems amending the constitution before municipal elections in the spring may not happen.

Civil society activists have long wanted the lower voting age as part of a package of reforms, but politicians have been hesitant to implement it – and other changes to the election law – for fear that a deluge of new voters would upset Lebanon’s sectarian balance. Indeed, it seems amending the voting age would add far more Muslims to voter rolls than Christians.

The exact confessional breakdown of the potential new voters is still unclear, though researchers have compiled approximate figures. Rabih Haber, president of the research company Statistics Lebanon, told NOW he got his numbers from the Ministry of Interior.

However, according to his figures, the change would add 232,963 new voters, some 50,000 fewer than sighted by Interior Minister Ziad Baroud last week. Haber said Baroud was discussing the most recent figures available, while his figures come from the Ministry of Interior as of March 2009, when parliament agreed to decrease the voting age before the 2013 parliamentary elections. The ministry did not respond to requests for the most up-to-date figures.

According to Haber’s numbers, lowering the voting age would add nearly 175,000 Muslims and around 58,000 Christians to the rolls with Shia Muslims being the sect with the most potential new voters.

Sunni Muslims, however, would still remain the confession with the most registered voters in Lebanon, he said. If the change is passed, Lebanon’s three largest confessions in terms of registered voters would be Sunni (938,583), Shia (738,886) and Maronite (738,886), based on Haber’s March 2009 figures.

If the voting age is...	21	18	% increase in registered voters
Muslim	1,941,031	174,695	9
Sunni	875,930	953,206	8.82
Shia	855,663	938,583	9.69
Druze	183,068	194,986	6.51
Alawite	26,370	28,951	9.79
Christian	1,289,407	1,347,667	4.52
Maronites	703,912	738,886	4.97
Orthodox	246,811	257,584	4.36
Catholic	163,235	170,329	4.35
Armenian Orthodox	98,849	96,478	2.8

Source: Rabih Haber

Of course, being registered does not necessarily mean one will vote, and Lebanon's voter rolls are somewhat inflated as they are not purged when people emigrate and are infrequently updated to account for deaths.

An-Nahar last week also published a report examining the sectarian breakdown of potential new voters (see chart). Unlike Haber, the newspaper did not indicate how many voters are registered in each confession now. The paper reported a total of 238,378 potential new voters – higher than Haber's figure but still less than the 283,000 cited by Baroud.

NEW POTENTIAL VOTERS		
Total	238,378	
Muslim	180,383	75.57%
Shia	85,595	35.86%
Sunni	80,519	33.73%
Druze	11,848	4.96%
Alawite	2,421	1.01%
Christian	57,995	24.3%
Maronites	34,249	14.35%
Orthodox	10,770	4.51%
Catholic	7,606	3.19%
Armenian Orthodox	2,484	1.04%

Source: An-Nahar

Lowering the voting age, though agreed to by the previous parliament in March 2009, has sparked a new debate. To change the voting age, lawmakers must amend the constitution, which requires the support of two-thirds of both the cabinet and parliament.

Amal, Hezbollah and the Progressive Socialist Party have voiced support for the move, the Free Patriotic Movement is against it, the Future Movement has said it both rejects and supports the measure, and the Kataeb Party and the Lebanese Forces say they agree only if other reforms are also passed.

Kataeb and the LF are particularly keen on lowering the voting age only if Lebanese expatriates are allowed to vote abroad. Currently, Lebanon has no mechanism for absentee voting, and all voters must be in the country on election day to cast ballots.

Their request is likely an attempt to counterbalance the anticipated influx of newly registered Muslim voters, as conventional wisdom has it that a majority of Lebanese expatriates are Christian. Tracking down the truth behind that assumption – and any hard numbers – however, is difficult.

Basma Abdel Khalek, a project manager with the Lebanese Emigration Research Center of Notre Dame University-Louaize, said exact figures are impossible as no one has officially kept count. One often reads figures as high as 12 million, though Abdel Khalek said the research center doubts that.

She said that LERC, based on years of research, puts the figure at 4.5 million but admits the number is not entirely accurate. Abdel Khalek said that before and during Lebanon's 15-year civil war Christians emigrated far more often than Muslims, but that trend is changing.

Between 1992 and 2007, 39% of Lebanese who left their homeland were Christian, 27% Shia, 23% Sunni and 9% Druze, she said, citing a study published in 2009 by St. Joseph University and written by Chohig Kasparian.

It is also unclear how many of the Lebanese who left still hold Lebanese passports or identity cards, which would likely be required in order to vote. Abdel Khalek noted that LERC conducted a recent survey of 209 expatriates who still have Lebanese passports and found a majority support the right to vote abroad.

Monday morning's fatal crash of Ethiopian Airlines Flight 409 pushed the voting age issue – and all electoral reform issues – off the cabinet's agenda for now, and it is unclear if the cabinet and parliament will address this or other reforms before municipal elections this spring.

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