

## Pre-election Analysis

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### **KUWAIT** **Legislative Elections 2023**

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## Introduction

In the realm of political science, electoral analysis constitutes a pivotal means to comprehend the dynamics of a nation's political landscape. However, the examination of election results in Kuwait presents a distinct challenge due to the scarcity of accessible official data, a situation that differs markedly from conventional practices. A further challenge in evaluating Kuwait's election results lies in the absence of formal political parties, and the difficulty to attribute a potential legislative performance to the winning candidates. This is a common characteristic within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, with the notable exception of Bahrain, which permits [Political Societies](#) to partake in the electoral proceedings since 2005.

In the wake of numerous analyses that have emerged post-election, and considering the abovementioned constrains, this Gulf Insights aims to illuminate facets of electoral turnout and hypothesize about the future political orientation of the chamber.

### *The challenge of assessing the turnout*

The Kuwaiti government have traditionally disclosed the number of registered voters, but the aggregate of eligible voters (citizens above the voting legal age) usually remains confidential. Consequently, the voter turnout rate can only be calculated based on the registered voters, rendering a potentially distorted portrayal of actual electoral turnout. This approach provides an incomplete snapshot, thereby skewing the interpretation of democratic engagement. This has been accompanied, at least consistently since 2016 elections, with the inconsistent official data availability on votes cast, a feature that has been observed and commented upon by numerous experts in Kuwaiti elections, such as [Michael Herb](#) and [Daniel Tavana](#).

**Table 1: Kuwait, Registered Voters, Votes Cast and Turnout 1963-2023**

Election	Year	Registered voters	Votes cast	Turnout
1	1963			85%
2	1967			65.5%
3	1971	40,649		51.6%
4	1975	52,994	30,863	58.2%
5	1981	41,698	37,528	89.9%
6	1985	56,745	48,000	85.1%
7	1990			62%
8	1992	81,440	69,224	85%
9	1996	107,169	85,735	79.9%
10	1999	112,882	93,996	83.2%
11	2003	136,715		80%
12	2006	340,248	312,762	91.6%
13	2008	361,684	214,886	59.4%
14	2009	384,790		59 %
15	2012/2	400,296	238,308	59.5 %
16	2012/12	400,296		40.8%
17	2013	439,911	228,314	51.9%
18	2016	483,186	338,000	69.9%
19	2020	567,694	340,600	59.9%
20	2022	795,911		63.3%
21	2023	793,646	470,369	59.3%

Source: Author's elaboration based on official data and Kuwaiti newspapers and news agencies.

Note: Estimations in *Italic*.

Table 1 above offers a comprehensive synopsis of voter turnout, calculated based on the registered voters, spanning the first election in 1963 through to latest one in 2023. Clearly, the dataset is not entirely complete. In instances where actual data was not officially released, Kuwaiti media outlets have occasionally supplied 'estimations' to provide some insight into voter participation.

Having the above listed figures in mind, it is noteworthy that the 2011 Arab Revolts, which created ripples of effervescence across the region, did not translate into a significant positive impact on the election turnout, which remained steady at 59.5% in February 2012, compared with the previous 2009 election (59%). Furthermore, despite the frequent elections held over the past three years, there was no discernible negative effect on voter participation. The turnout remained robust at 59.9% in 2020, even growing to 63.3% in 2022, before slightly falling to 59.3% in 2023.

The only exceptions occurred in [December 2012](#) and [July 2013](#) elections due to a boycott organized by a broad coalition of opposition groups, encompassing liberals, nationalists, and Islamists. Their concerted action was in response to their disapproval of the amendments to the electoral law enacted by the Emir in October 2012, which they perceived as a threat to fair representation.

### *The challenge of predicting political behavior*

As abovementioned, the constitutional prohibition on formal political parties further complicates the electoral analysis in Kuwait and the prediction of future political behavior of the elected members based on their ideological or political affinities. Instead, the overwhelming majority of elected members of parliament (MPs) have been historically characterized as independent or non-aligned. In response to this, academics have contributed with the scholarly literature and electoral analysis by producing databases, like the [Kuwait Politics Database](#), aiming at labeling and categorizing candidates and MPs as blocs representing a diverse array of factions, from the Salafi and Muslim Brotherhood (Hadas) to liberal, nationalist, and *badu* and *hadhar* factions, among others.

Following those categorizations, prevalent literature and journalistic analysis often classify members of the National Assembly as either pro-government or opposition, though both approaches possess inherent limitations and can potentially lead to misleading conclusions. The diversity and fragmentation of the Kuwaiti society is represented also in the National Assembly, and the lack of formalized political parties and the enforcement of party discipline in parliament make it nearly impossible to clearly determine majority and opposition alignments.

Nonetheless, an insightful indicator of the direction in which the parliament might steer, and the nature of its potential relationship with the government, hinges on the election of the Speaker of the National Assembly, who is chosen by a majority vote from the assembly's members. The NA comprises 65 members, 50 of them elected by popular vote, while the remaining 15 comprise the unelected Prime Minister and government ministers. Therefore, the government is represented in the legislative power by these members. A customary practice has evolved wherein the government typically refrains from participating in the Speaker's election. This norm reflects the perspective that the Speaker embodies the will and representation of the people.

However, it is important to note that there is no legal regulation that explicitly prohibits the government from partaking in the selection of the legislative branch's head. This nuance came into sharp focus when Marzouq al-Ghanim was elected Speaker of the National Assembly in 2020, with government ministers casting votes in

his favor. This incident emerged as a major bone of contention between the 'pro-government' faction and the opposition, ultimately triggering early elections in 2022.

In any case, it is unclear which of the two most likely forerunners, Marzouq al-Ghanim, the Speaker of the briefly reinstated NA elected in 2020 or the veteran Ahmad Al-Saadoun, Speaker of the dissolved NA elected in 2022 will win the race for the head of Kuwait's legislative. Furthermore, irrespective of what the outcome of NA speakership election is, as [Hamad H. Albloshi](#) points out, determining the relationship between the newly elected parliament and the government is inherently difficult given the history of minor issues hindering this relationship for months on end.

### *Conclusions*

While numerous analyses have already noted a limited change in the composition of the new assembly - with 38 out of 47 incumbent candidates securing re-election - several key questions arise as we look toward the future. One such question is whether the recently elected assembly will complete its full constitutional term - not achieved since the 1999 assembly - breaking the pattern of premature dissolutions, including those triggered by the Constitutional Court? Secondly, in the event of yet another premature dissolution of the assembly following confrontations with the government, would the Kuwaiti electorate lose its enthusiasm for elections altogether or would such an event produce an even greater impetus for further democratization? On a final note, it is probably safe to say that the latest in the long series of elections of the past decade is highly unlikely to produce the sort of political stability that would facilitate the necessary socio-political reforms that Kuwait is in such a dire need of.

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