Transformations of Electoral Identity
The Triad Shaping the Political Map in the Upcoming
Parliamentary Elections

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 About

Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies is an independent, nonprofit think tank based in Baghdad, Iraq. Its primary mission is to offer an authentic perspective on public and foreign policy issues related to Iraq and the region.

Al-Bayan Center pursues its vision by conducting independent analysis, as well as proposing workable solutions for complex issues that concern policymakers and academics.

Conceptual Introduction

The concept of electoral identity is not yet firmly established, as it has not gained widespread use in either the academic or political spheres. It has often been replaced by a set of distinct concepts that collectively convey its meaning, such as: electoral behavior, voting behavior, electoral discourse, and political identity. Each of these concepts focuses on a specific aspect, and the integrated interaction among them constitutes what can be termed "electoral identity."

While electoral behavior refers to the actions and reactions that occur during the electoral stage and lead to a specific orientation, voting behavior is closely related in meaning. Meanwhile, electoral discourse is represented by the language and slogans used to motivate voters and attract them to adopt particular electoral orientations, ultimately resulting in the election of a specific political group. Political identity, on the other hand, represents the form of political affiliation or loyalty that a voter grants to a particular political group.

Since elections are an expression of citizens' will in choosing a political group (party) or its candidates through the voting process, which generates voting behavior within the broader framework of the electoral process producing electoral behavior, electoral identity forms the comprehensive and overarching framework for all these components and interactions. It reflects the pattern, form, interaction, or choice exhibited by voters during elections.

In this context, a critical question arises regarding electoral identity: Why does a voter prefer one candidate over another? Most studies assume that voters' choices reflect a rational judgment based on a comparison between two factors: what the voter desires and what the candidate promises, thereby maximizing the likelihood of achieving desired political outcomes. Accordingly, a body of political and social science research posits that the rational choice theory of voting assumes voters evaluate the political attributes of parties or candidates, rank these attributes according to their importance, and then select the candidate whose attributes align most closely with their personal preferences.

Voter choices can be linked to two types of utility:

1.　Political utility, which entails evaluating issues related to the voter's personal benefits and what the party/candidate can achieve in public political matters based on their electoral promises. For example, promises made by some parties such as: "If we win, we will provide appointments and job opportunities" align with the personal interests of a voter seeking employment in a context of widespread unemployment.

2.　Social and identity considerations, which the party/candidate pledges through promises aimed at voters, reflecting their group and individual affiliations. This represents the voter's identity and its expression within

power structures.[1] For instance, adopting laws that reflect voters from a socio-identity perspective—such as the Personal Status Law, Popular Mobilization Law, General Amnesty Law, and Compensation Law under Article 140 for disputed areas—aims to make voters feel represented within governance structures. Essentially, these laws are designed to reinforce sectarian identity within Iraq's three main political components: Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds.

Recently, the Iraqi political arena has witnessed radical transformations in voters' electoral identity, influenced by intertwined domestic and regional factors. The sectarian base is no longer the sole decisive factor guiding voter choices. New factors have emerged, forming what can be called the "triad of differentiation," which reshapes the political map ahead of the parliamentary elections scheduled for 2025. This triad consists of: the decline of the traditional sectarian base, the impact of implementing an electoral boycott, and the rise of economic and service demands as decisive factors.

This study aims to understand electoral interactions within the context of this triad, anticipate the outcomes of the upcoming parliamentary elections, and assess their implications for Iraq's political landscape.

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1. Heutel Scott and Hincki Libby, Issues of or Identity: The Cognitive Foundations of Voter Choice, Journal of Cognitive Trends, University of Cambridge, Issue 11, Volume 20, 2016, London, pp. 794–804.

First: Transformations of Electoral Identity

The democratic system in Iraq, established after 2003, was founded on a consensus regarding the necessity of adopting practices that reflect pluralism in the country and break with the era of individual rule. However, these practices were implemented without clear and established foundations, resulting in the (sectarian–ethnic) dimension becoming the cornerstone upon which democratic mechanisms in the new Iraq were built.

Political parties and elections thus became a testing ground, demonstrating—beyond any doubt—the dominance of this approach, and contributing to the consolidation of a political norm rooted in sectarian and ethnic foundations. Consequently, the electoral identity of society and political forces coalesced around a primary goal: the reinforcement of sectarian presence, whether religious or ethnic. Elections thus shifted from being merely a national duty or ethical obligation to a tool for entrenching an electoral identity based on reciprocal benefits between parties and voters within a sectarian and ethnic framework—an outcome that was an inevitable consequence of the previous regime's policies.

This electoral identity remained dominant up to the 2018 elections, which in particular represented the pinnacle of the embodiment and reinforcement of sectarian–ethnic electoral

identity.[2]

In contrast, electoral boycott emerged as a parallel line to the electoral process itself, extending its influence to the concept of electoral identity. Advocates of the boycott adopt an alternative political identity grounded in the values of inclusive national identity, economic reforms, sound administration, good governance, respect for democratic principles, and the pursuit of genuine partnership in the state, free from the

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2. The aggression carried out by the terrorist organization ISIS against the Sunni component represented a turning point, prompting it to seek the consolidation of its political presence after a period of hesitation between integrating into the system or opposing it. As a result, Sunni political discourse shifted to emphasizing the "rights of the component" and its "entitlements", based on a collective sense of grievance and the existential threats it had faced, which undermined its political standing. On the other hand, the Shiite component benefited from politically adopting the fight against ISIS and celebrating its defeat through the efforts of security forces and the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). This achievement provided the Shiite component with a broad popular base founded on a deeply rooted sectarian religious discourse. This was clearly reflected in the 2018 parliamentary elections, where Shiite political entities achieved a landslide victory, as seen in the results of alliances such as Al-Fatah, Sairoun, State of Law, and Al-Nasr, whose discourse and presence were based on a religious sectarian ideology.
As for the Kurdish side, political forces found themselves after the 2017 independence referendum failure and the subsequent military confrontations in Kirkuk. In this context, Kurdish parties intensified the use of nationalist discourse to mobilize voters, emphasizing that achieving greater representation in the federal government in Baghdad would positively affect their capacity to secure gains and advocate for regional demands.

logic of control, quota-based division, and competition for influence.

The boycott movement took various forms, evolving from limited abstention from voting (which remained marginal until the 2014 elections) to instances of rejection, protest, and mass demonstrations that raised boycott rates to unprecedented levels of approximately 60%. The data illustrate this shift clearly: in the 2005 parliamentary elections, which recorded the highest participation rate (79.6%) and the lowest boycott rate (21.1%), whereas the 2014 elections marked a major turning point, with participation at 60% versus a 40% boycott. This upward trend in abstention continued to peak in the 2021 elections, where participation fell to between 41%–43%, while boycott surged to 57%–59%.[3]

The political transformations following the 2021 elections had a profound effect on the attitudes of non-participants and abstainers, who increasingly viewed depriving political blocs of legal legitimacy through boycott as the only means of reform and radical change. This stance was further reinforced after the Sadrist Movement's decision to withdraw and abstain from

3. Voter Turnout in Iraqi Elections 2005–2025, Al-Bayan Newspaper, Al-Saa News Network, Iraq, 2025. For further details, see: https://alssaa.com/post/show/37507-%D9%86%D8%B3%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%A9-2005-2025, accessed 1/10/2025.

participating in elections, which—perhaps unconsciously—created a popular base embracing the necessity of boycott and abstention, despite campaigns and warnings issued by various political and social forces urging voters to participate in order to consolidate the democratic system.

From another perspective, the October 2019 protests and the structural transformations they triggered in the political process, along with the aftermath of the early 2021 elections, pushed all political forces to adopt a targeted discourse focused on "services and economic development." This initiative sought to reorder the priorities of Iraqi society following a series of successive setbacks experienced by both the system and society since 2003.

Meanwhile, citizen priorities underwent a noticeable shift, with attention increasingly focused on service and economic programs more than ever before. Evidence of this shift is found in a public opinion survey conducted by Al-Bayan Center for Studies and Planning regarding voters' preferred electoral programs in the 2021 elections. The survey revealed that service, economic, and infrastructure-related programs ranked first at 39.3%, followed by programs focusing on security and border protection at 29.9%, and programs related to education and health at 8.5%. Together, these three areas accounted for 77.7%, indicating that public focus decisively shifted toward programs for economic and service

development and protection.[4]

This perspective expanded due to several factors, including:

- Internal political and security stability

- Absence of political opposition to the government

- Strong consensus formula of the political blocs forming the government

- High global oil prices, which generated substantial financial revenues

Consequently, political blocs no longer had any justification for the decline in services or lack of attention to them, in light of the absence of the objective reasons previously cited by these blocs to justify their failure in service delivery.

Second: Campaign Slogans for the 2025 Elections: Operating Within the "Rugged Triad"

Some political forces began their election campaigns early, possibly as early as the beginning of 2025, seeking to gauge the pulse of Iraqi public opinion, consolidate their position, and attract the electorate. This early start occurred in the absence of intense political competition that would normally

4. Iraqi Voters' Aspirations in the 2021 Parliamentary Elections (Opinion Poll), Al-Bayan Center for Studies and Planning, Baghdad, 2021, pp. 40–41.

stimulate voter engagement, particularly given the absence of major opposition forces, notably the Sadrist Movement and civil society forces.[5]

Since the launch of the campaigns, numerous election slogans have emerged. Analysis shows that they all revolve around the "rugged triad" without deviating from it, with some slogans addressing this triad directly or indirectly. This is evident in the main titles and slogans of several political blocs, as follows:

• Reconstruction and Development Coalition: Led by Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' Al-Sudani, the coalition adopted the slogan "Iraq First", using the symbol of a "construction crane". The coalition's visual and rhetorical identity emphasizes its service efforts during the government term, attempting to leverage this developmental track in its electoral marketing. The campaign relied heavily on reconstruction and service projects, reflected also in the coalition's name and identity.

• State Forces Alliance: Led by Ammar Al-Hakim, leader of the Wisdom Movement, the alliance adopted the slogan "Do Not Waste It", a clear reference to the importance of elections as a constitutional entitlement

5. The civil forces or independent MPs, as some describe them, were elected in 2021 as opposition and independent candidates. This also applies to blocs that adopted the slogans of the 2019 protests and won votes as opposition forces representing the protest discourse.

that reinforces the position of Iraq's main social components (Shiites, Sunnis, Kurds), particularly the Shiite component as the largest group. This reflects Al-Hakim's vision supporting active political participation in response to the boycott calls promoted by the Sadrist Movement.

•   State of Law Coalition: Led by Nouri Al-Maliki, the coalition adopted the slogan "Strength and Prosperity", combining Maliki's emphasis on sovereignty and security with the service and economic dimension implied in the term "Prosperity."

•   Al-Sadiqoon Movement: Led by Sheikh Qais Al-Khazali, the movement adopted the slogan "Strong Iraq." Despite its generality, Al-Khazali clarified in his election conference that the slogan derives its vision from the sacrifices of the martyrs in the Popular Mobilization Forces, as well as security forces in the war against ISIS, a trajectory to which he belongs.[6]

•   Taqaddum Party: Led by Mohammed Al-Halbousi, the party adopted the slogan "We Are a Nation," sending a message opposing political forces accused of marginalizing the Sunni community, emphasizing that

6. The resistance line, distinguished by its strong defense of the rights of resistance factions and the Popular Mobilization Forces, gave rise to Al-Sadiqoon, which represents and translates these rights into the political process according to their perspective.

Sunnis are not a "minority component" but a nation with a distinct historical, cultural, and religious dimension.

• Alternative Alliance: Led by Adnan Al-Zurfi, the alliance adopted the slogan "We Are the Alternative," presenting itself as an alternative to traditional and Islamic political forces, representing a civil vision of the state.

• Boycotters: Election boycott advocates launched their own slogans, such as the "Boycotters" slogan promoted by the Sadrist Movement, justified by the refusal to grant legitimacy to corrupt forces. Other groups raised slogans rejecting the conferral of legal legitimacy through non-participation.

A review of these slogans suggests that they rely more on immediate motivations rather than emerging from clear, realistic, and forward-looking strategic visions. This can be attributed to several factors:

1. Absence of electoral programs: Most political forces no longer prioritize developing written electoral programs that identify problems and offer clear solutions, which should serve as a binding commitment to voters. Immediate, situational messaging has become dominant, tailored to the emotional state of the electorate during the election period only.

2. Deterioration of service provision: The vast

majority of citizens suffer from severe shortages in basic services such as education, healthcare, infrastructure, and employment opportunities due to the failure of successive governments. This situation has created an environment in which electoral promises and programs—often dismissed as "ink on paper"—are not credible.

3.   Lack of future vision: Most political blocs lack a clear strategic vision of what they aim to achieve if victorious, rendering their slogans reactive, short-term, and unplanned rather than part of a coherent strategic agenda.

Third: Interaction of the Three Factors and Anticipating the 2025 Political Landscape

These three factors do not operate in isolation; rather, they interact dynamically to shape a new electoral reality. The decline of the sectarian base creates a political vacuum that can be filled by new forces advocating an economic–service-oriented discourse. Meanwhile, the electoral boycott system provides these forces with an optimal mechanism to achieve parliamentary representation without relying on the traditional, large party structures. This dynamic is expected to produce several key outcomes in the 2025 elections, the most prominent of which are:

1.   Fragmentation of Major Blocs and Redistribution of the Political Map

The political landscape is likely to witness a decline in the number of seats held by traditional major blocs, in favor of new or reshaped smaller alliances and blocs. Importantly, the total number of seats allocated to each major component (Shiite, Sunni, Kurdish) may remain roughly stable, but internal redistribution among political forces will alter the map of alliances and effective power. For example, the approximate seat distribution per component is as follows:

- Shiite seats: 185–190

- Sunni seats: 68–72

- Kurdish seats: 55–58

- Minorities: 9

A model of this redistribution can be observed when comparing the 2018 and 2021 election results:

- 2018: Sadrist Movement – 54 seats; Al-Fatah Alliance – 47; Al-Nasr Coalition – 42; State of Law Coalition – 25; Wisdom Movement – 19.

- 2021: Marked fragmentation appeared, with the Sadrist Movement gaining 73 seats, Al-Fatah declining to 17 seats, and new blocs such as "Imtidad" (9 seats), "Ishraqat Kanun" (6 seats), and "Tasmim" (4 seats), in addition to approximately 32 seats won by individual candidates. All these new blocs belong to the same Shiite

electoral base but attracted votes away from traditional blocs. The same pattern applies to Sunni and Kurdish blocs.[7]

This dynamic is expected to continue in the upcoming elections, especially with the absence of the Sadrist Movement from the competition, accelerating the process of reconfiguring alliances. For example, the Al-Fatah Alliance, which previously included Al-Sadiqoon Movement, Badr Organization, and others, may disband, with some components joining other alliances such as the Reconstruction and Development Coalition.

Based on the new political map of the blocs, and drawing on a series of public opinion surveys conducted by Al-Bayan Center for Studies and Planning between May and October of this year, the preliminary predictions for seat distribution are as follows:

Coalition/Alliance	Component	Rank	Approximate Seats
Reconstruction and Development Coalition	Shiite	1st	52–48
State of Law Coalition		2nd	37–33
Al-Sadiqoon Movement		3rd	30–24

7. Parliamentary Election Results 2018 and 2021, Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC). For further details, see: https://ihec.iq/results/

State Forces Alliance		4th	19–15
Tasmim Alliance		5th	9–7
Badr Organization		6th	9–6
Taqaddum Party	Sunni	1st	40–38
Azm Alliance		2nd	15–12
Siyada Alliance		3rd	8–5
Kurdistan Democratic Party	Kurdish	1st	38–35
Patriotic Union of Kurdistan		2nd	12–10
New Generation		3rd	8–6

The remaining seats will be distributed among smaller blocs, parties, and independent candidates across each component and throughout Iraq.

2. Emergence of Post-Election Alliances

Based on the above expectations regarding the political map shift and the fragmentation of major blocs, the political process is likely to face two main challenges:

•   Difficulty forming a dominant governing bloc: Seat fragmentation will complicate government formation, leading to pragmatic, functional alliances based on temporary consensus to achieve immediate interests.

•   Stalled government formation stages: Clear obstacles are expected in the voting for the posts of

President of the Republic and Prime Minister. If the Shiite House (Coordination Framework) fails to agree on a single candidate for the prime ministership, the entire process will be obstructed, since appointing the Prime Minister requires first electing a President, which itself requires broad political consensus.

Since no single party is expected to secure enough seats to form the "largest bloc," the only solution lies in broad alliances, particularly among the Shiite blocs that constitute the Coordination Framework. Within this context, two main scenarios emerge:

Scenario One: The Reconstruction and Development Coalition Joins the Coordination Framework

In this case, an agreement would be reached within the Shiite component to designate the next Prime Minister—who may be a figure other than Mohammed Shia' Al-Sudani—in exchange for advanced ministerial quotas and political gains for the Reconstruction and Development Coalition. This scenario would pave the way for relatively smooth and rapid government formation.

Scenario Two: Fragmentation of the Coordination Framework and Multi-Party Alliances

If the Reconstruction and Development Coalition fails to join the Coordination Framework, the main Shiite alliance could fragment, opening the door to cross-component alliances. Three potential directions may emerge:

•   Reconstruction, Taqaddum, and Kurdistan Democratic Party Alliance: This alliance would combine the Reconstruction and Development Coalition, Taqaddum Party, and Kurdistan Democratic Party, along with some breakaway components from the Coordination Framework such as the State Forces Alliance and "Abshir Ya Iraq" Alliance. Challenges include existing disagreements between Taqaddum and the Kurdistan Democratic Party, and the difficulty of forming a stable alliance formula to avoid repeating the failure of the "Triple Alliance" in 2021.

•   State of Law, Al-Sadiqoon, and Al-Asas Alliance: This bloc would include the State of Law Coalition, Al-Sadiqoon Movement, Al-Asas National Alliance, Azm Alliance, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, with the potential inclusion of other blocs such as the Badr Organization and split factions from the Reconstruction and Development Coalition, such as the Al-Aqd Al-Watani Alliance. Challenges include attracting parties like the State Forces Alliance, Badr Organization, and Al-Aqd Al-Watani Alliance despite disagreements with Al-Sadiqoon, and determining the final position (government participation or opposition) if a majority is

not achieved.

• Flexible and Opportunistic Bloc Alliances: This group comprises smaller, more flexible blocs that will determine their alliances based on last-minute power balances and interests. This category includes the Siyada Alliance, Services Alliance, Tasmim Alliance, and Babylon Movement (despite its leanings toward Al-Sadiqoon), as well as blocs that won one or two seats.

It should be noted, however, that these discussions remain speculative, as any political or electoral development could significantly alter the alliance map and its outcomes.

3. Transformation of Parliamentary Work: From Oversight and Legislation to Individual Services

The new electoral identity promoted by parties through their slogans and the nature of their candidates signals a fundamental expected shift in the work of the next parliament. The main criterion for parliamentary activity will no longer be political competence or national vision, but rather populist activity and direct service delivery.

In this context, a parliamentarian will transform from a representative of collective interests (sect or party) into a mediator or "service provider" for their electoral district, with their ability to meet infrastructure and direct service needs becoming the central measure of their performance. This shift

will come at the expense of the parliament's two primary roles:

• **Weakening oversight and legislative functions:** Responsibilities for monitoring and holding the government accountable, as well as enacting strategic national legislation, will be neglected.

• **Undermining political opposition:** This approach will obscure the presence of an effective opposition capable of accountability, thereby stifling its emergence.

The expected outcome is the transformation of parliament from a legislative–oversight institution into a service–demand institution, entrenching a culture of mediation and individual services at the expense of the public good. This will weaken parliamentary authority and result in the absence of a responsible parliament capable of representing the comprehensive national will.

Conclusion

The current transformations in electoral identity in Iraq indicate a growing maturity in the collective awareness of voters, who

have begun to dismantle the political sectarian equation in favor of a citizenship- and service-based framework. The "rugged triad"—comprising the decline of the sectarian base, the rise of electoral boycott influence, and the dominance of economic–service demands—is not a set of separate phenomena, but interconnected manifestations of a single, fundamental transformation.

Therefore, the 2025 elections do not represent a mere routine electoral exercise, but a critical test of the ability of these transformations to coalesce into an effective parliamentary force capable of redefining the political process away from the logic of quota-based allocation toward the principles of responsibility and accountability. It is likely that political sectarianism will emerge from these elections in its weakest state since 2003, even if it does not disappear entirely overnight.

All available evidence indicates that the driving force behind this transformation is urban youth, who bear the burdens of unemployment, lack of services, and the consequences of corruption. Accordingly, the main expected scenarios and challenges can be outlined as follows:

- Most likely scenario: A continued relative decline in the influence of traditional blocs in favor of reformist alliances and independent candidates, without resulting

in a radical shift in power balances, due to the ability of the ruling system to adapt and maintain its advantages.

- Greatest challenge: The capacity of new forces to organize themselves and present a cohesive political alternative that transcends internal disputes and protects voters' choices from potential fraud or manipulation.

- True measure of success: Will not be limited to the number of seats won by these forces, but will be assessed by their ability to enforce a reform- and service-oriented agenda as a fundamental condition in the political process, compelling other blocs to adopt this agenda as a prerequisite for their continued legitimacy and relevance.

For an Active state
and a participating society