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ABSTRACT

This article examines how Iraq's ethno-sectarian power-sharing system has continued despite significant generational change since 2003. Drawing on an online survey alongside structured group discussions and interviews in Baghdad and Erbil, it shows that three interacting mechanisms—identity reconfiguration, legitimacy erosion, and priority divergence—fragment reform coalitions and reinforce elite incentives for institutional continuity. The findings revealed a paradox: although majorities across ethno-sectarian communities oppose identity-based political parties, voting patterns remain largely communal due to electoral design and institutional constraints that entrench elite interdependence. The study contributes to consociational theory by integrating temporal and generational dimensions, offering insights into institutional endurance in deeply divided societies and the challenges of political transformation in post-conflict settings.

Introduction

Since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, Iraq has been governed under an ethno-sectarian power-sharing system commonly referred to as *Muhasasa*. This consociational arrangement informally allocates key state positions and resources based on communal identity: the prime minister is reserved for Shia Arabs, the parliamentary speaker for Sunni Arabs, and the presidency for Kurds, with over 1,000 senior posts distributed along ethnic and sectarian lines.[1] Although not codified in the 2005 Constitution, *Muhasasa* has become deeply embedded in Iraq's political culture,[2] designed to prevent renewed conflict by balancing representation across ethnic and sectarian communities.

Contemporary Iraq differs markedly from the post-2003 landscape, however. In early 2025, the Iraqi government released its first official census since 1987, revealing that approximately 36% of the population is under the age of 15.[3] A significant share of Iraqis has therefore grown up entirely within the *Muhasasa* era. Public dissatisfaction with the system's effectiveness and legitimacy has intensified across generations, as reflected in the 2019 October protests (the Tishreen Movement), where demonstrators of various ages explicitly rejected sectarianism, corruption, and elite domination.[4] This popular unrest signals a profound crisis of legitimacy for the post-2003 settlement.

In this context, this article addresses a central research question: How do power-sharing institutions survive across generations despite declining effectiveness and widespread public criticism? To address this paradox, this study offers an empirical

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analysis that demonstrates how Iraq's system endures not because of its structural efficacy but through the interaction of three mechanisms operating over time: Identity Reconfiguration, Legitimacy Erosion, and Priority Divergence.

This study advances academic understanding by offering three empirically grounded contributions. First, this study builds on lifecycle approaches to power-sharing by empirically investigating how institutions persist beyond their founding moment. It explores how generational change interacts with institutional structures, contributing to efforts to move beyond static accounts of consociational endurance. Second, it provides an empirically grounded account of institutional persistence, illustrating how pressures for adaptation are unevenly distributed across communities, shaped by demographic position, history, and protection needs, producing fragmented rather than unified reform demands. Third, the study contributes to debates on consociational power-sharing's flexibility by showing that institutional persistence depends on the interplay of time, elite incentives, and community interests, challenging simplistic notions of consociational power-sharing as either rigid institutions or inherently adaptable systems.

Empirically, the article provides detailed insight into Iraq's evolving public attitudes and institutional dynamics. While existing scholarship on Iraq's power-sharing system has made valuable contributions in explaining institutional persistence, such accounts have primarily focused on top-down dynamics, such as elite bargaining, leaving space to explore the broader societal and temporal factors that may also contribute to institutional endurance. This study builds upon and extends that literature by integrating additional mechanisms that explain persistence more comprehensively. Specifically, it incorporates community-level perspectives across majority and minority groups, the constraining effects of judicial rulings such as the Iraqi Supreme Court's 2022 presidential quorum decision, the role of electoral behavior shaped by institutional design, and the interlocking incentives produced by Iraq's rentier state characteristics. These factors, operating alongside elite interests, provide a more complete account of why Iraq's informal power-sharing has remained resilient despite generational change and temporal distance from its founding crisis.

The article is structured as follows. It begins by outlining the mixed-methods approach, followed by a review of the literature on power-sharing and institutional durability. The empirical analysis then examines three mechanisms of persistence. The analysis shows that, though many Iraqis oppose identity-based politics and support systemic reform, voting remains sectarian, reform coalitions fragmented, and performance expectations increasingly at odds with the system's identity-based design. The conclusion synthesizes these findings to explain why Iraq's power-sharing persists despite eroding legitimacy and considers implications for consociational theory and practice in other divided societies.

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed methods approach to examine attitudes toward Iraq's power-sharing system across demographic groups. The research design included interviews, group discussions, and a countrywide online survey, implemented in sequential phases to ensure methodological rigor. Two structured group discussions were

conducted in Baghdad and Erbil during July and August 2024, engaging twenty-one participants from a broad spectrum of ethno-sectarian backgrounds, genders, professions, and age groups. Participants were selected to reflect the social and political diversity of each region. Discussions were conducted in Arabic and Kurdish to ensure linguistic inclusivity and followed a semi-structured format, allowing for an in-depth exploration of participants' views on power-sharing, generational change, and identity. Complementing these discussions, eleven in-depth, in-person interviews were conducted between July and December 2024 in Baghdad and Erbil. Interviewees included politicians, academics, and civil society representatives, offering different perspectives on institutional dynamics and power-sharing mechanisms.

Building on themes identified in the qualitative phase, a survey was developed and disseminated online via social media platforms and civil society networks. The online approach was selected to facilitate broad geographic reach and minimize social desirability bias through respondent anonymity. Further details on the sampling rationale and distribution methods are provided in Supplementary Appendix 1, submitted separately as supplementary material. The survey generated 978 responses regarding ethnicity, with Arabs comprising 51% of respondents ($n = 496$) and Kurds 37% ($n = 360$). An additional 9% ($n = 83$) identified as Turkmen, Chaldo-Assyrian, or selected "Other" (including groups such as Ezidis and Shabaks). In terms of religious affiliation, 45% of respondents identified as Sunni Muslims ($n = 441$), 31% as Shia Muslims ($n = 303$), and 9% ($n = 86$) as Christian, Ezidi, or members of other religious minorities. Additionally, 10% ($n = 97$) preferred not to disclose their religion, and 4% ($n = 40$) selected "Other." The respondent pool was male (68%, $n = 662$) and female (32%, $n = 306$), and skewed toward younger demographics, with 70% aged 18–39 ($n = 683$), reflecting the study's focus on digitally engaged populations most relevant to examining generational perspectives on Iraq's power-sharing system.

While this mixed methods design yields valuable insights into public perceptions, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the online format may skew participation toward individuals with internet access and higher levels of digital literacy. Second, the convenience sampling approach may result in an overrepresentation of politically engaged individuals. Third, although anonymity was preserved, social desirability bias may still influence responses, especially on sensitive topics related to sectarian identity and political engagement.

Given that this study specifically focuses on the attitudes and political engagement of Iraq's younger generations, the online survey method was appropriate. This age group not only dominates online spaces but also embodies the evolving perspectives central to this research. Therefore, the use of an online survey was both suitable and aligned with the study's objective to capture the views of a digitally connected, politically aware generation navigating Iraq's power-sharing system.

Furthermore, to enhance analytical robustness, two validation sessions were held in Baghdad and Erbil in December 2024. These sessions brought together twenty-six participants, all of whom had completed the online survey, and included researchers and academics representing diverse gender identities, professional backgrounds, and regional perspectives. Participants were presented with preliminary findings and invited to offer contextual interpretations, particularly focusing on intergenerational perceptions of Iraq's power-sharing system. These sessions were

instrumental in linking statistical data to lived experiences, thereby strengthening the validity of the study's conclusions.

All participants, including interviewees, group discussion participants, and validation session attendees, were provided with detailed consent forms and information sheets about the research project, translated into both Arabic and Kurdish. The online survey included an informed consent question, and the questionnaire would only have been opened when the participants accepted to participate. Some participants from the interviews and group discussions expressed preference for anonymity, which has been respected throughout this study when presenting their perspectives and quotations.

A key methodological challenge was the conceptualization of power-sharing arrangements in Iraq using neutral terminology. In Iraq, the term *Muhasasa* carries negative connotations, commonly perceived as a system exploited by political elites. To mitigate potential response bias, all qualitative and quantitative instruments, developed in both Arabic and Kurdish, underwent rigorous consultation with Iraqi academics to ensure cultural and contextual appropriateness as well as comprehensibility. Prior to interviews, group discussions, and survey administration, participants were provided with a neutral definition of power-sharing and informed that in Iraq it is often referred to as *muhasasa* or *tawafuqiya*. The term "power-sharing" was translated as *taqasum al-sulta* following consultation with language experts to ensure conceptual clarity while maintaining analytical neutrality. For these methodological and conceptual limitations, I relied on qualitative group discussions and validation sessions, where issues around how to translate power-sharing in a neutral term, and the different meanings of these terms, such as *muhasasa* (quota system), *tawafuqiya* (consociational), *taqasum al-sulta* (power-sharing), might have for the research findings were carefully addressed. This approach enabled participants to engage with research questions without being primed by the negative associations of commonly used local terminology.

Power-sharing sustainability and institutional persistence

Power-sharing arrangements are designed to ensure the inclusion and active participation of all significant ethnic, sectarian, or political groups in essential decision-making processes.[5] Although these systems address immediate post-conflict or divided society challenges, they face fundamental questions about their long-term sustainability as political, social, and demographic realities evolve beyond the original circumstances that necessitated their establishment. Over time, power-sharing institutions confront new pressures that may undermine their continued relevance and effectiveness. Understanding how such systems endure requires examining both theoretical frameworks explaining institutional continuity and the specific mechanisms by which power-sharing arrangements adapt to or manage these temporal challenges.

Recent scholarship has moved beyond static analyses of power-sharing, instead conceptualizing it as a dynamic, evolving process.[6] Their "lifecycle approach" recognizes that consociational power-sharing systems undergo continuous adaptation, renegotiation, and potential termination. McCulloch and McEvoy identify three phases. First, the Adoption Phase involves negotiating, formalizing, and implementing the power-sharing settlement, typically following conflict or regime transition as in post-2003 Iraq. The way a consociation is established shapes its effectiveness, particularly regarding how

"adoptable" the settlement is to all major communities.[7] Second, the Adaptability Phase occurs while the arrangements operate, confronting challenges, reforms, and legitimacy shifts. This period often features political crises born of mistrust, unresolved constitutional issues, and cultural disputes over symbols.[8] However, such dysfunction need not signal the end of power-sharing; instead, it may open avenues for institutional change. Finally, the (Possible) End Phase entails either breakdown or evolution into a new governance model, with outcomes ranging from renewed violence and persistent dysfunction to transition toward stable, democratic alternatives.[9]

While the lifecycle approach offers a valuable framework for understanding the temporal evolution of power-sharing arrangements, there remains scope to deepen its engagement with how the passage of time itself reshapes these dynamics. As political, social, and demographic contexts evolve, the foundational justifications for adopting power-sharing may lose their salience, while new expectations and standards of legitimacy emerge. These shifts can pose challenges to institutional sustainability that are not necessarily rooted in performance failures but in broader transformations in the criteria by which political arrangements are judged. Greater attention to these temporal and normative transitions could enrich the lifecycle model's explanatory power.

Scholars remain divided on the adaptability and longevity of power-sharing arrangements. Critics argue that these systems function as rigid institutions,[10] persisting through identity entrenchment and elite capture rather than genuine effectiveness. Dodge's[11] analysis of Iraq's power-sharing empirically supports this critique, showing structural stasis despite repeated governance failures. Similarly, Horowitz[12] cautions that consociational power-sharing can calcify identity cleavages, impeding democratic evolution. Conversely, proponents highlight instances of flexibility. McGarry and O'Leary[13] advocates for the general adaptability of power-sharing mechanisms, while McCulloch and McEvoy[14] emphasize their evolution in response to changing demographic and political conditions, particularly across the adoption, adaptability, and potential end phases. Dysfunctional periods may thus represent "pathways to institutional change" rather than inevitable collapse,[15] underscoring consociational systems' capacity for renewal and adaptation.

While much debate centers on institutional rigidity versus adaptability, less attention has been given to how factors beyond consociational power-sharing designs, such as demographic shifts, temporal distance, and community interests, shape institutional persistence and possible identity transformations. McEvoy and Aboultaif[16] stress the importance of initial institutional design in shaping Iraq's consociationalism, but this perspective may understate how contextual and dynamic pressures decisively influence longevity.

Horowitz[17] highlights the complexity of locating an "exit" from power-sharing arrangements,[18] warning that societies risk becoming locked into inflexible frameworks. Vandeginste[19] similarly points to the "shelf-life" and "exit dilemmas" that arise as systems evolve. In Iraq, O'Driscoll and Costantini[20] argue that prioritizing conflict mitigation over governance has preserved elite stability,[21] while deterring effective governance reform. These insights underscore how temporal distance reshapes evaluation criteria and long-term viability, posing challenges distinct from initial adoption-era concerns.

As time passes and memories of original conflicts fade, publics may evaluate institutions based on contemporary performance rather than historical necessity, creating

predictable pressures for adaptation that operate across demographic groups. The broader literature on institutional persistence emphasizes multiple factors that explain why institutions endure despite declining performance or legitimacy. Path dependency theory suggests that institutions create self-reinforcing mechanisms that make change difficult.[22] Elite interest theories emphasize how established actors benefit from existing arrangements and resist change.[23] However, these approaches have focused primarily on economic and political institutions while paying less attention to identity-based arrangements like consociational power-sharing. Moreover, they have not adequately addressed how the passage of time since establishment create distinct dynamics that may either reinforce or challenge institutional persistence.

Drawing on the lifecycle approach and institutional persistence theory, this paper advances three hypothesized mechanisms that sustain power-sharing systems despite declining performance and legitimacy. It then presents the empirical sections as testing/illustrating these mechanisms at play in Iraq.

Hypothesized mechanism 1: Identity reconfiguration

Temporal distance from conflict enables more complex, layered identity constructions that challenge rigid ethno-sectarian categories while preserving the political relevance of communal identities. This dynamic creates pressure for flexible institutional interpretations within existing frameworks rather than wholesale transformation. Nonetheless, institutional structures and ongoing security concerns sustain the political importance of communal identities, resulting in a gap between the intellectual rejection of sectarianism and continued identity-based political behavior.[24]

Observable expectations:

- Survey data reveal widespread rejection of identity-based political parties alongside persistent identity-based voting patterns across age groups.
- Qualitative interviews highlight complex identity narratives reflecting attitude-behavior gaps, with citizens concurrently critiquing sectarianism and acknowledging pragmatic constraints.

Hypothesized mechanism 2: Legitimacy erosion

As time passes, the foundational legitimacy of the power-sharing system erodes, as its initial justifications lose relevance. This erosion generates mounting pressure for institutional adaptation that varies across communities, influenced by their protection needs and historical experiences.[25] Consequently, legitimacy deficits manifest unevenly among groups, fragmenting potential reform coalitions. In Iraq, public-opinion trends and governance assessments underscore the depth of this ongoing legitimacy erosion.[26]

Observable Expectations:

- Survey data show widespread criticism of the system across demographics, with variations correlated more with community-specific protection needs than with age.
- Qualitative evidence documents citizens questioning the necessity of the system while acknowledging their community's protection concerns.

Hypothesized mechanism 3: Priority divergence

While Legitimacy Erosion reflects broad-based disenchantment and declining trust in the system, this does not automatically translate into cohesive reform efforts. Instead, Priority Divergence captures how governance priorities and reform visions fragment across Iraq's diverse communities, preventing the emergence of unified coalitions for change. Temporal distance and relative stability enable citizens to evaluate institutions more on governance effectiveness than on conflict management,[27] creating tension between institutional designs focused on representation and public expectations cantered on performance. This shift from input legitimacy (based on representation) to output legitimacy (based on results) generates pressures for adaptation, even as protection-oriented arrangements retain relevance for minorities and vulnerable groups.

Observable Expectations:

- Survey findings indicate governance, and economic concerns dominate priorities across demographic groups, with low focus on formal power-sharing arrangements.
- Qualitative data reveal performance-based evaluations of political institutions cutting across age groups and communities.

These mechanisms operate with varying intensity across Iraq's communities, shaped by demographic positions, historical experiences, and protection needs. Identity Reconfiguration influences discourse broadly, while Legitimacy Erosion manifests unevenly: majority groups express stronger rejection of identity-based governance than minorities, who continue to value protection assurances. This uneven impact fosters fragmented rather than unified reform pressures. Temporal distance thus produces persistent institutional pressures of a non-transformative character.

This article identifies three core hypothesized mechanisms underpinning the endurance of Iraq's power-sharing system. First, entrenched institutional constraints reinforce elite dominance and identity-based politics, limiting pathways for change. Second, a pervasive legitimacy crisis, manifest across generations and communities, undermines public trust and system acceptance. Third, and crucially, widespread legitimacy erosion does not necessarily generate unified reform mobilization. Instead, it is systematically thwarted by Priority Divergence: the fragmentation of governance priorities and reform visions across Iraq's communities. Although many Iraqis express dissatisfaction with the status quo, their proposed solutions differ sharply, shaped by community-specific histories, demographic realities, and security concerns. Consequently, reform demands remain scattered and occasionally mutually incompatible, undermining the formation of broad coalitions for systemic change. In this way, Priority Divergence operates as a distinct and necessary mechanism that channels legitimacy erosion into fractured reform pressures, stalling effective institutional transformation.

Findings and analysis

Mechanism 1: Identity reconfiguration

Identity Reconfiguration reveals how temporal distance from conflict enables more complex identity constructions while institutional structures preserve the political

salience of communal categories. Iraq's post-2003 political order institutionalized ethno-sectarian identity as the basis of representation, with power distributed among Shia Arabs, Sunni Arabs, and Kurds. After 2003, political parties monopolized communal mobilization, reinforcing identity-based affiliations as the default mode of political engagement.[28] Harith Hasan characterizes this era as the rise of communalism, while Haddad[29] emphasizes the role of "sect-coding" in shaping public perceptions. Electoral outcomes from the early post-regime change period reflected the power of communal mobilization: in the 2005 elections, three ethno-sectarian blocs won approximately 87% of the vote, with the United Iraqi Alliance alone securing 47%.[30] These results were underpinned by communal mobilization, particularly among Kurds and Shias, suggesting a degree of popular legitimacy behind identity-based governance at the time.

Over time, the dominance of unified ethnic and sectarian blocs gave way to governance-based issues[31] and intra-communal rivalries.[32] Recent government formations have exposed deep divisions within the Shia and Kurdish camps, displacing the earlier logic of bloc-based power-sharing. This fragmentation has undermined the coherence of so-called "houses" (e.g., the "Shia house" or "Kurdish house") as organizing principles of governance and representation. Government negotiations now revolve around personalistic rivalries and intra-communal power centers, rather than communal bargaining across blocs.

The Tishreen Movement represented a significant discursive shift, originating predominantly in Shia-majority regions and articulating a rejection of sectarian governance, systemic corruption, and elite domination. As a result, the themes of political mobilization have been reconfigured to reflect what Haddad[33] describes as a new emphasis on "the language of change and reform, in line with popular demands for good governance, social justice, and the promise of a better life." Building on this shift, Alkhudary[34] argues that Iraq has moved from *Muhasasa* to *Mawatana* (citizenship), a form of identity detached from sectarian and ethnic affiliations. This promises a fundamental reimagining of political belonging.

However, the practical translation of these sentiments into cross-sectarian political movements has been limited.[35] The current government under Mohammed Shia al-Sudani (formed in 2022) and local governments in diverse provinces such as Kirkuk and Nineveh (established after the 2023 provincial elections) all operate under traditional ethnic and sectarian power-sharing arrangements. This institutional persistence, despite arguments that significant identity transformation has occurred, demonstrates the complex relationship between temporal distance, identity reconfiguration, and institutional continuity.

Identity configurations

The empirical findings of this study confirm that while the traditional Sunni-Shia-Kurd framework no longer serve as the defining feature of communities and Iraq's politics, institutional arrangements continue to perpetuate ethnic and sectarian identities, and different communities maintain distinct interpretations of identity and belonging. The survey began by assessing which aspects of identity are most salient across Iraq's communities and how these shape views of the *Muhasasa* system. Table 1 shows that among Shia and Sunni Arabs, *family* is most frequently cited as the primary identity

(24% each), followed by *religion* (17% among Shia; 21% among Sunnis), with *sect* more salient for Shia (13%) than Sunnis (6%). Among Kurds, *ethnicity* is the dominant identity (27%), while *family* and *religion* each account for 22%—a tie reflected in the table as "Family/Religion (22%)." For other minorities, *ethnicity* and *religion* each constitute 28%—a tie at the top—followed by *family* (18%), with *social class* least salient (0%).

Identity hierarchies show that familial, religious, and ethnic affiliations remain prominent. However, understanding respondents' connection to a broader national identity is crucial, particularly in light of upheavals like the 2019–2020 protests. While some literature suggests a rising, unifying national identity among younger Iraqis that might replace deep ethnic and sectarian divides, our findings reveal a more nuanced reality. Respondents rated their pride in various identity categories on a scale from 0 to 10. Scores were grouped into three categories—promoter (9–10), passive (7–8), and detractor (0–6)—to indicate the strength of identification. National identification varies across ethno-sectarian groups, undermining simple narratives of unification. As Table 2 illustrates, 81% ($n = 221$) of Shia Arabs identify strongly with the national identity. Sunni Arabs follow with 73% ($n = 121$) expressing similar sentiments. This trend likely reflects these groups' political dominance and greater integration within Iraq's national framework.

Minority groups exhibit moderate levels of national identification, with 61% ($n = 55$) identifying as promoters and 25% ($n = 20$) as detractors of Iraqi national identity. In stark contrast, 81% ($n = 273$) of Kurdish respondents identify as detractors. However, Shia Kurds ($n = 17$), a small minority largely based in Baghdad, Nineveh Plains and Diyala, show significantly higher national identification: 65% are promoters, and only 28% are detractors. As a Shia Kurdish researcher based in Baghdad, explains, "This can be explained by the fact that Shias constitute the majority in Iraq and will ultimately shape the country's governance direction. Many Shia Kurds live in Baghdad, which is predominantly Shia and Arab, influencing their identification with Iraqi national identity."

Table 1. Ranked identity markers by ethno-sectarian groups in Iraq.

Group	Most important aspect	Second most important	Third most important	Least important aspect
Shia Arabs	Family (24%)	Religion (17%)	Sect (13%)	Tribe/Clan & Ethnicity (5%)
Sunni Arabs	Family (24%)	Religion (21%)	Geographical background (15%)	Ideological beliefs (3%)
Kurds	Ethnicity (27%)	Family/Religion (22%)	Geographical background (12%)	Sect & Tribe/Clan (2%)
Minorities	Ethnicity (28%)	Religion (28%)	Family (18%)	Social class (0%)

Note: A slash (e.g., "Family/Religion") indicates two separate categories that received identical percentages within that group; the percentage shown applies to each category individually.

Table 2. Iraqi national identity attitudes across key communities.

Group	Promoter (%)	Passive (%)	Detractor (%)
Shia Arab	81	9	10
Sunni Arab	73	12	15
Kurd	8	11	81
Minorities	61	14	25

These contrasts in national identification foreshadow complexities in electoral behavior, where normative rejection of identity-based parties collides with practical voting patterns.

Beyond personal identity and nationalist sentiment, public attitudes toward political parties based on communal identities provide additional insight into the workings of Iraq's power-sharing system. As shown in Table 3, Arab respondents exhibit the strongest rejection of ethnic and sectarian party structures, with Sunni Arabs reporting the highest levels of opposition (77%, $n = 126$), followed closely by Shia Arabs (72%, $n = 214$). Kurdish respondents express more moderate opposition (58%, $n = 214$), while minority groups report comparable levels (55%, $n = 57$)—though a majority across all groups remains opposed to identity-based political organization.

Contrary to expectations that opposition to identity-based politics might be concentrated among younger generations, age-based analysis reveals minimal variation in opposition rates, which range from 69 to 71% across all age cohorts (Table 4). This consistency suggests that the shift away from identity-based politics is not confined to youth demographics but reflects a broader societal transformation shaped by temporal distance from the system's founding moment in 2003.

However, despite this opposition to identity-based parties in principle, electoral behavior tells a more complex story, revealing persistent support for sectarian and ethnic party candidates. Actual voting behavior continues to reflect ethno-sectarian patterns, revealing a gap between political attitudes and electoral choices. Survey participants were asked whether they had participated in the most recent elections in Iraq and, if so, whether they voted for a party, candidate or coalition aligned with their ethnic or religious identity. This disconnect is particularly pronounced among Kurdish respondents: while 58% oppose identity-based parties in principle, 78% ($n = 195$) reported voting for ethnically aligned parties in practice (Table 5). While this pattern also appears within the broader Shia Arab and Sunni Arab categories, their share of identity-aligned voting is somewhat lower. This finding was discussed during validation sessions in Erbil and Baghdad. Participants emphasized that this does not indicate

Table 3. Opposition to identity-based political parties by community.

Group	Detractor (%)	Passive (%)	Promoter (%)
Shia Arab	72	15	13
Sunni Arab	77	10	13
Kurd	58	22	19
Minorities	55	17	28

Survey Question: Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statement using a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means you completely disagree and 10 means you completely agree.
Statement: Different ethno-religious communities should have their own political parties to best represent their interests.

Table 4. Opposition to identity-based political parties by age group.

Age group	Detractor (%)	Passive (%)	Promoter (%)
18–28	69 ($n = 180$)	16 ($n = 42$)	15 ($n = 39$)
29–39	68 ($n = 274$)	17 ($n = 69$)	15 ($n = 61$)
40–60	70 ($n = 171$)	16 ($n = 37$)	14 ($n = 35$)
60+	71 ($n = 30$)	10 ($n = 5$)	20 ($n = 10$)

Table 5. Voting behaviour by community.

Group	Identity-aligned *n* (%)	Not identity-aligned *n* (%)	Prefer not to say *n* (%)
Kurd	194 (78%)	34 (14%)	19 (8%)
Shia Arab	137 (56%)	69 (28%)	39 (16%)
Sunni Arab	100 (57%)	46 (26%)	30 (17%)
Minorities (religious + ethnic)	75 (68%)	19 (17%)	17 (15%)

cross-sectarian support. Rather, some voters from a Shia or Sunni background supported candidates within their community who were not aligned with its dominant factions. For example, a Shia from Baghdad might back an independent Shia candidate, as occurred in the 2021 elections.[36] In this sense, the vote remains identity-aligned, but the boundaries of the community are understood more broadly than traditional ethnic and sectarian structures.

This persistent community-based voting pattern is not merely a matter of individual preference but is embedded in Iraq's electoral geography and institutional structures. This disconnect indicates that institutional arrangements and electoral laws reinforce communal mobilization. Voters' limited options and clientelistic networks incentivize ethnic and sectarian voting, thereby sustaining ethnic and sectarian power-sharing despite diminishing popular legitimacy. The gap between attitudes and behavior underscores how political institutions constrain transformation by embedding ethnic and sectarian competition in electoral processes.

Two key institutional factors help explain the prevailing gap between political attitudes and voting behavior. First, one of the demands of the Tishreen Movement was electoral reform, specifically the introduction of a district-based system that would favor independent candidates and smaller parties. In response, the Iraqi parliament in 2020 replaced the prior list-based proportional representation system, which had been widely criticized for benefiting entrenched political elites, with a Single Nontransferable Vote system.[37] However, while intended to enhance representation,[38] the introduction of district-based voting instead reinforced communal voting patterns by confining political competition to localized ethno-sectarian constituencies. These institutional arrangements limit the potential for cross-sectarian political mobilization, making it structurally challenging for non-communal parties to gain meaningful political support.

The electoral law mandates that candidates compete within their local constituencies and that voters cast ballots in their provinces of origin. In practice, the electoral law has further strengthened identity-based voting. This outcome stems from Iraq's electoral geography being segregated along ethno-sectarian lines. In provinces with relatively homogeneous populations, such as Najaf, Al-Anbar, and Sulaymaniyah, which characterize much of Iraq's electoral geography, candidates must necessarily rely on communal networks for political mobilization. This demographic reality renders cross-sectarian platforms not merely politically unviable but structurally impossible in many constituencies. Thus, even candidates who might personally prefer nonsectarian politics find themselves compelled to engage in identity-based mobilization to remain electorally competitive (Baghdad validation session, December 2024).

The second institutional mechanism involves the Supreme Court's two-thirds majority requirement for the election of Iraq president, which has institutionalized elite interdependence across ethno-sectarian lines. This ruling was specifically designed to counter

efforts by the Sadrist Movement, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), and Taqadum to form what they termed a "national majority government," which represented the most significant challenge to traditional government formation processes since 2003. By setting this high threshold, the Court prevented these actors from forming a government based solely on a simple majority, as they failed to reach the required parliamentary quorum.[39] Consequently, this judicial intervention compels political elites to negotiate cross-ethnic and sectarian coalitions, thereby fortifying the established power-sharing framework. This ensures that even the dominant Shia parties cannot unilaterally select a president without the backing of Kurdish and Sunni Arab factions, thus cementing *Muhasasa* as the prevailing governance model and further limiting alternatives to the existing consociational arrangement.

While this judicial facilitation can be critiqued as a tool for elite entrenchment, it also plays a role in ensuring that diverse groups retain representation and a degree of political influence within the system, as supporters of power-sharing advocate for. The process itself is not inherently negative—on the contrary, structured bargaining can underpin pluralism in a divided society such as Iraq by compelling political actors to negotiate and include multiple constituencies. The principal challenge arises, however, when these negotiations and outcomes primarily reinforce the interests of entrenched elite actors, sidelining broader societal needs. Therefore, reform discussions should not focus narrowly on dismantling inter-group bargaining or power-sharing mechanisms themselves, but rather on enhancing the quality and inclusiveness of representation so that government institutions reflect the will and preferences of citizens at large—not just elite dealmakers.

Identity Reconfiguration thus creates a fundamental tension: while public discourse rejects identity politics, institutional constraints ensure that identity-based mobilization remains politically necessary. This attitude-behavior gap provides the foundation for the second mechanism—Legitimacy Erosion—as citizens question a system that forces them to act against their stated preferences.

Mechanism 2: Legitimacy erosion

Iraq's power-sharing system faces a deepening legitimacy erosion characterized by widespread public disillusionment. Perceptions of endemic elite corruption, dysfunctional governance, and eroded trust afflict political institutions. Yet, despite this legitimacy erosion, the system endures, buoyed by entrenched patronage networks and elite accommodation. This section unpacks the paradox of enduring power-sharing amid growing societal dissatisfaction.

This crisis was most visible during the Tishreen Movement, where protesters adopted revolutionary rhetoric to challenge the post-2003 order's legitimacy.[40] The survey data on support for systemic change highlighted a pervasive erosion of legitimacy across Iraqi society. A clear majority of respondents across all adult age groups endorsed either fundamental reform or a complete overhaul of Iraq's current political system, indicating widespread disillusionment with the political order. As shown in Table 6, the highest level of support for systemic change was found among middle-aged respondents (aged 40–60), with 63% ($n = 147$) in favor of change. This cohort may be particularly vocal due to their direct experience of both the initial promises of the

Table 6. Do you believe Iraq should transition to a different political system?

Age group	Yes (%)	No (%)	Unsure (%)
18–28	52	18	31
29–39	57	19	24
40–60	63	17	20
60+	49	23	28

post-2003 era and its subsequent shortcomings, potentially resulting in a sharper perception of the system's failures.

Support among younger age groups is also substantial. Among respondents aged 18–28, 52% ($n = 123$) favor systemic change, while 57% ($n = 209$) of those aged 29–39 express similar views. These figures suggest that younger Iraqis have inherited deep frustrations with a system widely perceived as corrupt and unresponsive. Notably, the oldest age group (60+) mirrors the youngest cohort, with 49% ($n = 23$) supporting systemic change. This convergence across the age spectrum indicates that political discontent is not confined to any one generation but rather reflects a broader societal sentiment.

At the same time, a significant proportion of respondents in all age brackets reported uncertainty: 31% ($n = 72$) among those aged 18–29, 24% ($n = 91$) among those aged 29–39, 20% ($n = 47$) among those aged 40–60, and 28% ($n = 13$) among those aged 60 and older. This hesitation underscores the complexity of the issue; while dissatisfaction is widespread, many Iraqis remain ambivalent about what viable alternatives might look like or how change could be effectively achieved. As a female participant from the Baghdad group discussion remarked, "We are forced to follow this road against our will, with no knowledge of where it will lead," capturing the pervasive sense of disillusionment and entrapment within a system viewed as unaccountable and unresponsive.

This question was framed in an open-ended manner to allow participants to express their perspectives on whether they support systemic political change. Among the 502 respondents who answered "Yes" to the question presented in Table 5, 252 provided qualitative justifications for their response. Analysis of these open-ended responses revealed three dominant themes that cut across age demographics. The most prominent theme was a call for the replacement of the current parliamentary system with a presidential system. Many respondents argued that concentrating executive authority in a single office could reduce corruption and minimize party-driven manipulation. The frustration with governance since 2003 was particularly evident in one respondent's remark: "A presidential system—better to have one person stealing your resources than 300." Such sentiments reflect a disillusionment with the perceived inefficacy of governance based on ethnic and sectarian coalitions.

The second major theme among proponents of change involved the rejection of sectarian quota-sharing, coupled with a continued commitment to democratic principles. Respondents advocated for "moving away from a sectarian quota-based system and relying instead on a system of political majority with moderate elements from all groups," and emphasized the need for "a merit-based system, not sectarian quota-sharing." The third significant theme centered on federalism and decentralization, although interpretations varied. Some participants supported a vision of "true federalism," calling for Iraq to be "divided into federal regions." Others preferred

confederative arrangements in which "central government powers are weaker than the powers of the regions." Even among supporters of federal solutions, there was a consensus that the current arrangements are inadequate. As one respondent noted: "The current so-called federal system is only in name—political elites do not want to face real challenges."

In contrast, the qualitative responses from those opposing systemic change revealed a different logic, one focused more on implementation issues than on structural design flaws. Among the 162 respondents who answered "No" to the question, 73 provided qualitative justifications for their position. The most frequently cited argument was that "the problem is not in the political system but in the implementation," with several respondents asserting that "the current system is good, but the quality of work is wrong." This perspective reflects a belief that governance failures are attributable to poor execution rather than inherent institutional deficiencies. A second major theme among opponents of systemic change was a concern about instability and recognition of Iraq's complex sociopolitical fabric. Respondents highlighted the difficulty of governing a multi-religious society and emphasized that "a federal system based on consensus and partnership is the most appropriate long-term political and social opportunity." Finally, a third theme focused on reform rather than wholesale replacement of the political system. Many respondents expressed a preference to "improve the parliamentary system and not change it," while emphasizing that "Iraq needs reforms in education, health, services, and ideology" before contemplating systemic overhaul. This viewpoint suggests a pragmatic approach favoring incremental institutional reforms over radical transformation.

This pervasive pattern of cross-generational and communal criticism extends directly to perceptions of the power-sharing system's representativeness. When respondents were asked whether the current system adequately reflects Iraq's population and diversity, a consistent majority across age groups expressed strong reservations. Table 7 shows that among those aged 18–29, 59% ($n = 137$) viewed the system as outdated and unrepresentative. Similar sentiments were echoed by 56% of 29–39-year-olds ($n = 207$) and 55% of 40–60-year-olds ($n = 123$), underscoring a widespread and intergenerational critique of the system's democratic credentials. Even among the oldest cohort (60+), a substantial 48% ($n = 20$) shared this critical perspective, indicating that dissatisfaction with representation is not limited to those who have grown up entirely within the post-2003 order. This consistent, cross-generational perception of poor representativeness directly feeds the legitimacy erosion, highlighting a misalignment between the system's design and public expectations of functioning governance.

Table 7. Question: do you believe the current power-sharing system in Iraq is representative of the country's population and diversity?

Age group	Yes, it represents everyone fairly (%)	Somewhat, but could be improved (%)	No, it is outdated and unrepresentative (%)	Unsure (%)
18–28	6	23	59	12
29–39	4	30	56	10
40–60	6	32	55	7
60+	10	38	48	5

The electoral legitimacy trap

The fragmented nature of reform preferences becomes even more problematic when examined alongside public attitudes toward elections as vehicles for change. These survey findings were shared and discussed in validation sessions conducted in Baghdad and Erbil, prompting a critical question: if the majority prefers systemic change and views the current arrangements, including ethnic and sectarian power-sharing, as unrepresentative, what pathways exist for meaningful transformation? The discussions revealed widespread frustration and disappointment with elections as a mechanism for change, creating what might be termed an "electoral legitimacy trap." Participants emphasized that protests have been attempted but ultimately failed, external interventions are not deemed viable solutions, and elections have increasingly functioned not as tools for transformation but as mechanisms for reproducing the status quo, a view that resonates with broader scholarly evaluations. Yet, as Al-Shakeri[41] notes, this disillusionment has not translated into disengagement. Instead, many young Iraqis are turning to grassroots civic activism as alternative modes of political participation, seeking incremental change from outside the formal institutional sphere.

This erosion of trust in elections does not exist in a vacuum. It is intimately bound up with the mechanisms through which Iraq's political elites sustain their dominance. Central to this dynamic are the extensive patronage networks—fortified by what is locally known as *al-mal al-siyasi* (political money)—that bind voters to elites through material incentives. Dodge and Mansour[42] aptly term this practice "politically sanctioned corruption," highlighting its dual role in weakening democratic institutions and reinforcing elite dominance. Table 8 reveal that 65% of respondents aged 18–28 ($n = 135$) identifies as electoral "detractors." Similarly, 66% of those aged 29–39 ($n = 221$) and 58% of respondents aged 40–60 ($n = 121$) also views elections as ineffective. This cross-generational pattern of electoral disillusionment highlights the systemic nature of legitimacy erosion, rather than a sentiment isolated to age cohorts. As a youth activist based in Baghdad noted: "Elections have become festivals," underscoring the performative rather than substantive nature of the process. With limited voter participation, traditional elites maintain power through family-based succession and clientelist structures, creating a self-reinforcing cycle where electoral disillusionment enables the very elite reproduction that generates further public cynicism.

The analysis above and the legitimacy erosion mechanism thus reveals the complex relationship between popular dissatisfaction and institutional change in divided societies. While temporal distance from founding conflicts may enable more fundamental questioning of power-sharing arrangements, the same passage of time also allows elites

Table 8. Electoral disillusionment by age group.

Age group	Detractor (%)	Passive (%)	Promoter (%)
18–28	65	19	15
29–39	66	22	13
40–60	58	22	21
60+	59	24	17

Question: To what extent do you believe that elections in Iraq can significantly impact the governance of the country?
(0 = elections have no impact; 10 = elections have major impact).
Coding: 0–6 = Detractor; 7–8 = Passive; 9–10 = Promoter.

to develop more sophisticated strategies for system maintenance. Understanding this dynamic is crucial for explaining why Iraq's power-sharing system endures despite declining legitimacy and for anticipating similar patterns in other consociational arrangements facing temporal pressures and generational change.

Mechanism 3: Priority divergence

Priority Divergence became evident when widespread dissatisfaction fails to translate into unified reform demands. While Legitimacy Erosion reflects broad-based disenchantment and declining trust in the system, this does not automatically lead to cohesive reform efforts. Instead, Priority Divergence describes how competing reform visions within Iraq's communities prevent the emergence of unified coalitions for change, even when they share similar criticisms of system performance.

The patterns of community variation documented in legitimacy assessments had crucial implications for understanding why Iraq's power-sharing system persists despite widespread criticism. The findings revealed a clear pattern: communities' attitudes toward both existing arrangements and alternative governance models correlate directly with their demographic position and protection needs rather than merely temporal distance from system establishment. This creates a fundamental challenge where majority communities favor majoritarian alternatives that would enhance their political influence, while minority communities prefer arrangements that guarantee protection despite criticizing current implementation. This fragmentation explains why power-sharing arrangements can persist beyond elite interests alone, as reform coalitions remain divided along the same communal lines that the system was designed to manage.

The first dimension of community variation concerns fundamental assessments of whether power-sharing contributes to Iraq's stability. These attitudes demonstrate variations that reflect ongoing security calculations and historical memory rather than shared temporal experiences. As demonstrated in Table 9, a majority of Shia Arabs respondents (54%, $n = 159$) and Sunni Arabs (55%, $n = 89$) believe power-sharing does not contribute to stability. In contrast, Kurds (54%, $n = 185$) and ethnic and religious minorities (54%, $n = 45$) view it more favorably.

Kurdish and minority participants emphasized that power-sharing guarantees inclusion and safeguards against marginalization. As former Kurdish parliamentarian stated: "For us, power-sharing ensures both representation and survival." Similarly, Turkmen participant noted: "Ethnic and religious minorities in Iraq have limited awareness of and participation in major political decisions. These groups must be granted the

Table 9. Community attitudes toward power-sharing and stability.

Response	Shia Arab (%)	Sunni Arab (%)	Kurd (%)	Minorities (%)
Strongly agree	3	4	16	9
Agree	20	12	38	45
Neutral	24	28	27	22
Disagree	36	24	15	20
Strongly Disagree	18	31	4	4

Question: Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statement about power-sharing in Iraq. Statement: Power-sharing among different communities and political parties contributes to the stability of Iraq.

opportunity to define and represent themselves. At present, our identity is defined by the majority rather than by ourselves." These perspectives highlight how protection-oriented concerns continue to shape institutional preferences among demographically vulnerable communities.

While these divergent attitudes toward existing arrangements might suggest potential for coalition-building around shared criticisms, the reality is more complex. Community preferences for alternative governance models reveal deep divisions that mirror the same demographic calculations underlying current power-sharing support. When asked whether government should be established by coalitions holding parliamentary majorities, responses varied dramatically based on demographic position and protection needs rather than temporal factors or shared reform aspirations.

Among Arab communities, majoritarian governance finds considerable support, though for different historical reasons. As demonstrated in Table 10, Shia Arab respondents expressed the strongest support for majoritarian governance (58%, $n = 137$) agree/strongly agree), reflecting their demographic advantage and potential for dominant parliamentary representation. As a Shia academic in Baghdad explained: "As Shias, we should not hesitate to declare that we are the majority. For the past two decades, we have not clearly stated that we are the majority." However, constitutional constraints and judicial rulings have prevented single-community governance, making such preferences largely theoretical.

Sunni Arab respondents also showed considerable support for majoritarian governance (50%, $n = 81$, agree/strongly agree). This finding might seem counterintuitive given their minority status, but qualitative data provides important context. As Baghdad-based academic explained: "Historically, Sunni Arabs believe they led this country, and they think they are part of the larger Sunni Arab community across the region. They do not see themselves as a minority that needs special protection." This perspective reflects how historical memory and regional identity continue to shape institutional preferences, even when demographic realities suggest otherwise.

In contrast to Arab communities' relative enthusiasm for majoritarian alternatives, Kurdish and minority responses reveal the protection-oriented logic that sustains power-sharing arrangements. Among Kurdish respondents, opinions were markedly divided: 44% ($n = 150$) expressed support for majoritarian governance, 34% ($n = 116$) opposed it, and 22% ($n = 76$) adopted a neutral position. This near-even split reflects both the Kurdistan Region's unique federal status and growing dissatisfaction with Kurdish parties' performance. Erbil validation session participants highlighted that the

Table 10. Community attitudes toward majoritarian government formation.

Response	Shia Arabs (%)	Sunni Arabs (%)	Kurds (%)	Minorities (%)
Strongly agree	14	13	8	13
Agree	44	37	36	21
Total support	58	50	44	34
Neutral	18	22	22	14
Disagree	17	18	33	45
Strongly disagree	7	11	1	7
Total opposition	24	29	34	52

Survey question: "The government should be formed by a coalition of political parties that have the support of a majority of elected representatives." Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with this statement.

KDP and PUK increasingly approach power-sharing through narrow party interests rather than unified Kurdish concerns, particularly evident during recent government formations.

Most tellingly, minority respondents expressed the strongest opposition to majoritarian rule (52%, $n = 65$, disagree/strongly disagree), demonstrating how demographic vulnerability translates directly into institutional preferences. An Ezidi civil society activist articulated these concerns: "For minorities, like Ezidies, majority rule would mean complete erasure from the political landscape. Given that our communities have experienced forced displacement and migration over the past two decades, demographic realities simply do not work in our favor." This stark opposition underscores how protection needs override abstract preferences for democratic reform among Iraq's most vulnerable communities.

This community-based fragmentation represents a challenge to reform efforts because it prevents the emergence of cross-sectarian coalitions necessary for institutional transformation. Even when communities share similar criticisms of system performance, their divergent preferences for alternatives ensure that reform demands remain scattered and contradictory. Evidence from protest dynamics since 2003 reinforces this logic: while several waves of contention articulated cross-sectarian, governance-focused demands, mobilization was typically rooted in specific communal and geographic settings rather than forming a sustained nationwide coalition. The Tishreen Movement, for example, is widely noted for cross-sectarian slogans yet unfolded primarily in Baghdad and the Shia-majority provinces of the south; participation was limited elsewhere. As Costantini[43] argues, Iraq has not experienced a major, simultaneous, country-wide protest unifying all communal regions against the governing system. Together, these patterns show how shared grievances have not translated into cross-community organizational capacity, reinforcing the mechanism of Priority Divergence.

The shift to governance-centred priorities

Despite this fundamental fragmentation in reform preferences, temporal distance has enabled citizens across communities to evaluate institutions more on governance effectiveness than on conflict management, creating tension between institutional designs focused on representation and public expectations centered on performance. This shift from input legitimacy (based on representation) to output legitimacy (based on results) generates pressures for adaptation, even as protection-oriented arrangements retain relevance for minorities and vulnerable groups.

The data from this survey aligns with recent studies examining Iraqi public opinion,[44] which demonstrate that concerns related to governance dominate public priorities across all communities and age groups. Economic challenges and anti-corruption efforts now take precedence over identity-based representation, with striking uniformity in these priorities across demographic groups, despite their varying positions within Iraq's power-sharing political framework.

When survey respondents were asked to identify their top three priorities for Iraq, corruption emerged as the dominant concern across all communities. As demonstrated in Table 11, countering corruption ranks as the primary priority for Shia Arabs (24%), Sunni Arabs (23%), and Kurds (28%), while constituting the second-highest priority for

Table 11. Top three priorities by community (% of respondents selecting as priority).

Priority issue	Shia Arabs	Sunni Arabs	Kurds	Minorities
Countering corruption	24	23	28	18
Employment and job opportunities	18	17	22	13
State security and sovereignty	23	17	20	16
Counter-terrorism	15	16	13	14
Improved representation of all identities	1	3	3	21
Federalism and decentralization	6	4	6	5
Health care	6	9	3	4
Environmental issues	5	6	2	4
Power-sharing arrangements	1	1	1	5
Other	1	2	2	1

minorities (18%). This cross-community consensus on anti-corruption priorities demonstrates how temporal distance from system establishment has enabled citizens to evaluate institutions based on governance performance rather than foundational conflict-management rationales. Employment and job opportunities similarly rank among the top three priorities for all major communities: Shia Arabs (18%), Sunni Arabs (17%), and Kurds (22%), with minorities also prioritizing employment (13%). State security and sovereignty likewise transcends communal divisions, ranking as a top concern for Shia Arabs (23%), Sunni Arabs (17%), Kurds (20%), and minorities (16%).

Notably, issues traditionally associated with communal interests rank lower across all groups. Federalism and decentralization, historically central to Kurdish political demands,[45] receives only 6% support among Kurdish respondents, identical to its support among Shia Arabs and barely higher than among Sunni Arabs (4%) and minorities (5%). This finding particularly supports the argument that historically prioritized institutional arrangements now focus primarily on governance effectiveness. This shift also reflects growing public belief among Kurds that power-sharing arrangements with Baghdad serve the two dominant parties, KDP and PUK, rather than broader community needs.

The marginalization of power-sharing arrangements as a priority is striking, receiving support from less than 5% of respondents across all communities. This fundamental misalignment between institutional focus and public concerns underscores the extent to which citizens have moved beyond the foundational logic of the post-2003 system. Only among minority respondents did identity representation remain a top priority, with 21% selecting "improved representation of all identities, including minority groups" as a key concern. However, even among minorities, governance issues compete closely with representation concerns, as corruption (18%) and state sovereignty (16%) rank as second and third priorities respectively. This pattern indicates that while minorities maintain protection-oriented priorities due to their vulnerable demographic position, they share the broader societal shift toward performance-based institutional evaluation.

Beyond these community variations, survey data reveals modest age-based variations that reflect lifecycle concerns rather than fundamental value differences. Table 12 reveals modest age-based variations that reflect lifecycle concerns rather than fundamental value differences. Younger respondents (18–28) emphasize employment opportunities (21%, $n = 128$), reflecting their immediate economic concerns, while older respondents focus more heavily on security and counter-terrorism issues (24–28% for those 40+), likely reflecting their lived experience of conflict and instability.

Table 12. Top three priorities by age group (% of respondents selecting as priority).

Priority issue	Age 18–24 (%)	Age 29–39 (%)	Age 40–60 (%)	Age 60+ (%)
Countering corruption	27	24	27	24
Employment and job opportunities	21	19	16	9
The protection of the state's security and sovereignty	21	21	18	20
Countering and preventing terrorism	13	15	16	19
Improved representation of all identities, including minority groups	3	4	4	6
Federalism and decentralization	5	5	6	6
Health care	3	2	3	2
Environmental issues	2	6	6	9
Power-sharing arrangements	1	1	1	2
Other	3	1	2	2

While the "Other" category accounted for only 1–3 percent of selections across communities and age groups, the accompanying qualitative responses—though numerically limited—offer analytically significant insights into concerns overlooked by the pre-coded survey options. The 31 submissions expand the thematic scope of the findings, pointing to governance- and rights-oriented priorities with implications for institutional reform. Several respondents emphasized gender equality, increased female representation in decision-making, enhanced protections for minorities, and the rights of persons with disabilities, frequently linking these demands to calls for legal reform, particularly regarding the Personal Status Law and broader human rights legislation. Others focused on security and sovereignty, advocating for the elimination of militias and the consolidation of the state's monopoly on the use of force. Judicial reform also emerged, with participants stressing the need to strengthen the independence, impartiality, and effectiveness of the judiciary, ensure uniform enforcement of the law, and provide compensation for victims. Economic concerns included diversification beyond oil, revitalization of agriculture and livestock sectors, and investment in environmentally sustainable development. Finally, several respondents underscored the importance of fostering a cohesive national identity, resolving ethnic disputes, and integrating youth into governance processes, linking these objectives to broader strategies for achieving long-term stability and democratic consolidation.

This thematic diversity indicates that even when deviating from the structured survey categories, respondents remained aligned with the broader shift toward governance performance identified in the main dataset. This cross-generational consensus on the irrelevance of power-sharing as a priority mechanism reinforces the argument that temporal distance from the 2003 regime change has altered how citizens evaluate political institutions. The quantitative patterns revealed in the survey data find strong support in qualitative interviews and group discussions, where participants consistently articulated this shift from identity-based to governance-focused political priorities.

Opposition containment and rentier state dynamics

Following the Tishreen Movement, Iraq's political opposition landscape reflected a clear manifestation of Priority Divergence: despite widespread dissatisfaction, reform efforts fragmented across new parties and youth movements representing diverse, often conflicting strategies. Elite actors have adapted strategically, employing a combination of co-optation, legal obstruction, and intimidation to contain and divide opposition

forces. These political tactics are intertwined with Iraq's rentier state dynamics—economic incentives tied to public sector employment and patronage networks that bind individuals to existing power structures. Together, these political and economic mechanisms operationalize Priority Divergence by preventing unified coalitions capable of challenging entrenched elite dominance and catalyzing systemic reform.

Several youth-led groups emerged in the Tishreen's aftermath, including the Imtidad Movement, Al-Bayt al-Watani, Nazil Akhoth Haqqi, and the Promise Movement. These groups reflected a critical shift: many young Iraqis began translating protest demands into organized civil and political activities, demonstrating sustained agency beyond the streets. As Al-Shakeri[46] shows, this post-Tishreen generation engaged in grassroots organizing, political education, and even electoral participation, marking a strategic adaptation rather than withdrawal. However, their influence has remained marginal despite initial popular support. These movements followed divergent and contradictory trajectories that ultimately undermined their collective impact: while some pursued electoral participation within existing frameworks, others opted for complete rejection of formal political processes. This fragmentation was not accidental but reflected both internal disagreements about strategy and external elite interference designed to prevent unified youth-led opposition. Established political actors employ a range of tactics, from bureaucratic obstacles and legal harassment to intimidation and violence, effectively stymying the formation of durable, cross-sectarian political alternatives.[47] Furthermore, elites co-opt potential challengers by exploiting economic vulnerabilities, notably through patronage and clientelist networks that offer employment and social benefits contingent on political loyalty.

A civil society activist in Baghdad remarked on these challenges: "These groups lack the political experience and organizational skills needed for sustained engagement." Yet, capacity limitations alone do not fully explain marginalization. Youth activists note how affiliation with dominant parties, such as the Shia Coordination Framework, offers tangible rewards that discourage independent opposition. As one young activist put it, "The luckiest youth today are those affiliated with Al-Itar [the Shia Coordination Framework]; they've been rewarded and absorbed." This underscores how the economic incentives embedded within Iraq's rentier state create powerful pressures for accommodation even among ideologically opposed citizens.

These political containment strategies are intimately connected to Iraq's rentier state dynamics, which shape and reinforce the socio-economic foundation underpinning Priority Divergence. The allocation of resource revenues via public sector employment and patronage networks binds individuals across communities and age groups to the existing political system, creating strong incentives to maintain the status quo. As a Baghdad group discussion participant explained: "Iraq is a rentier state. People rely on public jobs, making systemic change difficult. As long as political parties maintain their clientelist networks, youth remain divided and politically immobilized."

In sum, Priority Divergence explains the persistence of Iraq's power-sharing system by revealing how diverse community interests and protection needs produce fragmented reform demands that inhibit the formation of effective, cross-sectarian coalitions for change. While widespread dissatisfaction with system performance and identity-based politics is evident, demographic positions shape contrasting institutional preferences, with majority communities gravitating toward majoritarian models and minorities

prioritizing protection within power-sharing frameworks. Simultaneously, a broad shift toward governance and anti-corruption concerns highlights evolving public expectations that challenge the system's foundational design. However, elite adaptation strategies, including opposition containment and rentier state patronage, interlock with these community-level dynamics to sustain a political environment in which unified reform efforts remain elusive. Together, these factors illuminate why persistent dissatisfaction does not translate into coherent pressure capable of transforming Iraq's entrenched power-sharing institutions.

Conclusion

This study has investigated the persistence of Iraq's consociational power-sharing system in the face of widespread public disillusionment and generational changes. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research identifies three interrelated mechanisms—Identity Reconfiguration, Legitimacy Erosion, and Priority Divergence—that help explain the continued operation of institutions originally intended to manage postwar ethno-sectarian tensions. Although the normative foundations of this system have weakened over time, these mechanisms collectively illustrate why power-sharing arrangements in Iraq, despite being informal and flexible, remain durable. Rather than reflecting enduring communal support, their persistence is primarily driven by the interaction of fragmented and structurally constrained reform efforts, along with divergent societal demands that continue to inhibit coherent collective action across communities.

Theoretically, this study advances debates on institutional endurance by extending the lifecycle approach to post-conflict governance. It reveals how temporal dynamics reshape both the societal bases and political contestation of power-sharing arrangements. By disaggregating sources of public dissatisfaction—across identity, legitimacy, and performance—it moves beyond static assessments of institutional success or failure common in consociational scholarship. Empirically, the paper contributes to literature on consociationalism, identity politics, and governance in divided societies through a grounded analysis of Iraq's evolving political landscape. Utilizing original survey data, interviews, and group discussions, it offers a nuanced account of shifting public attitudes, elite adaptation, and the mechanisms that sustain power-sharing institutions. While Iraq is a distinctive case, the analytical framework developed here may provide valuable insights for other post-conflict settings where demographic transformations and rising performance expectations strain legacy power-sharing systems.

Although rooted in Iraq's specific historical and institutional context, these findings resonate with broader regional and theoretical debates on postwar governance and institutional resilience. Iraq is not alone in its adoption of identity-based power-sharing arrangements; Lebanon's consociational system faces similar tensions between representational guarantees and governance effectiveness. Likewise, Syria's evolving post-Assad political settlement shares many comparable challenges. Comparative studies of such cases could test the generalizability of the mechanisms identified here—particularly the mismatch between evolving identity narratives and the durability of institutional power-sharing—and explore under what conditions these dynamics reinforce or undermine system stability. Future research might also examine how different power-sharing designs (such as formal constitutional frameworks versus informal elite bargains)

respond to shifting public expectations, and whether patterns of elite adaptation, such as co-optation, decentralization, or technocratic incorporation, promote long-term resilience or eventual breakdown.

These findings carry important implications for both Iraqi and international policymakers engaged with Iraq's political future. The study cautions against simplistic prescriptions for or against the country's power-sharing system. Although Iraq's flexible and informal power-sharing arrangements are often viewed as barriers to progress and stability, the 2022 Supreme Court ruling that institutionalized cross-ethnic and sectarian agreements among the dominant Shia, Sunni, and Kurdish parties signals continued elite reliance on such frameworks. In contexts where identity-based fears persist and are instrumentalised by political actors, broad political coalitions for government formation are not inherently negative. Instead, efforts should focus on leveraging such coalitions to enhance governance functionality and responsiveness, rather than allowing them to merely entrench elite power.

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