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Understanding Tunisian Voting Behavior

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Series: Case Analysis

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Introduction

Tunisia's parliamentary elections, held on October 26, 2014, were the country's second experience of an electoral process since the revolution, following the 2011 elections to the Constituent Assembly tasked with writing the new constitution. In the latest elections, 121 political parties and coalitions were represented by 1,327 electoral lists, who competed in 33 electoral districts (27 in Tunisia and 6 for Tunisians living abroad), with multiple international observation missions vetting their electoral integrity.

In contrast to the 2011 Constituent Assembly election, Tunisia's parliamentary election displayed a strong spirit of national reconciliation. Furthermore, it did not exhibit the complete rupture with the Ben Ali regime that was evident in 2011. The result was a political map that pitted the Islamist Ennahda movement as a "conservative" political force against Nidaa Tounes, a movement that coalesced in 2012 as a counterweight to Ennahda's power. While the courts have yet to issue a final ruling on a number of contested results, Ennahda, which won 89 seats in the 2011 polls was left with 69 seats in the 2014 legislature, compared to the 85 parliamentary seats won by Nidaa Tounes.

Understanding Electoral Behavior

Tunisia's latest electoral experience has highlighted a number of factors that are fundamental to the understanding of any electoral process.

To begin with, somewhat uncharacteristically, the elections were completely independent and free from any intervention by the government. The role of international and local civil society and other observer missions—including both the Carter Foundation and the European Commission—was a decisive factor in the success of the elections, as was the integrity and impartiality of Tunisia's High Electoral Commission.

The voter participation rate was also noticeably high by global standards, and this was true across all of Tunisia's provinces and districts: more than 50% of the eligible electorate had turned out on the first day of polling, with the ultimate turnout being roughly 62% over two days of voting. The significance of abstaining voters, however, should not be downplayed, particularly when these were believed to be the driving force behind the revolution and the changes sweeping across Tunisia since 2011.

The factors driving voter participation and—equally—abstention, can be interpreted in multiple ways. Understanding voting patterns and drivers will no doubt prove vital to the success of political parties in the future. An important factor to bear in mind is that the differences in voter participation amongst the youth in differing districts have not been understood: nobody can explain why voter turnout was higher in some places than in others. Understanding the causes behind these differences, whether in Tunisia or elsewhere, is an important part of understanding the electoral process as a whole. More broadly, why is it that close to 40% of voters abstained in the parliamentary elections, compared to only 10% who abstained in the 2011 polls for the Constituent Assembly? Could this be a case of political apathy in an emergent democracy?

Table 1: Electorate by Registration Status

Gross total of legally eligible voters	7,000,000
Registered voters	5,285,136
Voters who participated/cast ballots	3,266,214

While it remains important to geographically understand the results of the elections, doing so may prove highly sensitive. Observers and analysts may end up reading too much into the results and could potentially find themselves also dealing with questions concerning the ethics of political communication. Something akin to "electoral strongholds" may also emerge in nascent Arab democracies such as Tunisia, but not before the passage of time. One striking similarity between both the 2011 and the 2014 polls, and a lesson to be learned from them is that punitive electoral behavior—in this case, votes cast out of a sense of a lack of security—is not geographically bound to specific regions in Tunisia, but prevalent across the entire country.

There is a risk here of adopting a pre-conceived pattern to analyze voting behavior, for example falling prey to the idea that geography alone can explain differences in voting ("the north votes one way while the south votes another"), but this would be to miss the forest for the trees. Our figurative tree here is the non-homogeneous geographic distribution of votes across a country like Tunisia, which is nonetheless largely homogeneous in terms of ethnicity, language and in terms of religion and sect. The hidden forest, in this case, takes the form of the social dynamics that lead to the differences in voter behavior across geographical boundaries, but can be accounted for in terms of temperament and psychology, as well as agitation and media coverage. All of these must be documented and understood at the opportune moment. Just as soon

the election results were announced (see Table 2), a mold was quickly fit onto them: the public was told that the political polarization evident in the election results was echoed along the geographical boundaries of Tunisia.

Table 2: Electorate Results by Political Parties

Party/Bloc	Percentage of votes cast	Number of legislative seats	Percentage of legislature
Nedaa Tounes	%35.75	85	%39.1
Ennahda	%26.45	69	%31.7
Free Patriotic Union		16	%7.3
Popular Front		15	%6.9
Afek		8	%3.7
Congress for the Republic		4	%1.8
Initiative		3	%1.3
Democratic Current		3	%1.3
Mouvement Ecchaab		3	%1.3
Current of Love		2	%0.9
Republican Party		1	%0.4
National Salvation Front		1	%0.4
Movement of Social Democrats		1	%0.4
Agrarian Voice		1	%0.4
The Democratic Allaince		1	%0.4
Democratic Alliance Party		1	%0.4

Rehabilitation/Restoration		1	%0.4
The Call of Tunisians Living Abroad		1	%0.4
Majd Al Jareed		1	%0.4
Total		217	%100

Determinants of Voter Behavior: Exit, Voice, Loyalty

Albert Hirschman claims that voting behavior can take one of three forms, roughly concomitant with consumer behavior in the free market. In this view, political competition between different parties can be taken to be a form of competition within a "political marketplace". The first mode of action or pattern of behavior that can be expressed is that of *loyalty*. This contrasts with an *exit*, enacted by individuals when they express no intention of consuming a product, as demonstrated by those who refuse to vote and choose to abandon the rules of the game. A third type of action is that of *voice*: it is when individuals accept the choices on offer, be they commercial or political in nature regardless of any flaws, but also demand improvement. In terms of voting behavior, this is expressed by casting a ballot.

All of these behavior patterns were on display during Tunisia's parliamentary elections of October 26, 2014. While *loyalty* was clearly exhibited in some areas—including the south of the country and the tribal region—other parts of the small North African state, such as its north-west, were more likely than others to display signs of *exit*. Other areas, mostly concentrated along the coastline, displayed localized examples of *voice*.

There are clear factors that determine whether or not voters adopt *loyalty, voice* or *exit* as a strategy, and the experience of Tunisia's 2014 legislative elections demonstrates that there are two specific motivating factors that can be identified in this regard: freedom and security. More specifically, it is the *voice* of those who either wanted a return to the strong state that guaranteed security, and those who voiced the desire to see expanded freedoms and to prevent what many believed to the risk of resurgent dictatorship.

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While the details may vary from one electoral district to the next, it is abundantly clear—from the results both of the 2011 and 2014 polls—that real "electoral strongholds" for specific political groupings are indeed beginning to take shape. This would explain how Nidaa Tounes had its power concentrated in the tribal heartland (Nabel 1 and 2), the north-west and the coast. The support base for Ennahda, meanwhile, was concentrated in the south-east, the Greater Tunis Municipality and regions of the Tunisian interior and south-west.

Most of the competing political parties tried to make the most of the following factors in one way or another:

Personal Expression and Sectorial, Cultural and Religious Subdivisions

The south of Tunisia has a number of characteristics that are evocative of southern Italy: in both cases, developmental neglect shares a perch with religious conservatism. Nonetheless, this religiously conservative region is also more connected to the wider world, being the source of much of the country's emigration. Hosting the remnants of Tunisia's Jewish community and its Ibadi Muslim minority, as well the country's last few Amazigh/Berber towns, it is also more diverse and cosmopolitan. It is also the region that has been the most tolerant to the changes wrought by the country's tourism sector. Additionally, the *Arab Knowledge Report 2014*, a publication by the United Nations Development Program, demonstrates that students from the south of Tunisia are the most fluent in foreign languages, particularly university students.

This can only be understood in context if we accept that the tendency to vote for Ennahda is an act of political expression and not religious piety, notwithstanding a relatively high correlation with religious conservatism. In addition, studies of youth participation indicate that support for Ennahda is concentrated in areas where there is strong support for various Salafist strains, which is at odds with the pattern of support for Ennahda back in the 2011 polls. In the parliamentary elections, the Ennahda strongholds are scattered around the country's frontier, particularly towards the western borders, outside of the areas where the party had previously focused its recruitment efforts. Notably, however, some of the marginalized provinces troubled by social and security upheaval—specifically Sidi Bouzid, Al Qasrayn and Qafsa—turned out in favor of Nidaa Tounes, while both groups ultimately received the same number of seats across those three electoral districts.

On-the-ground Forces, Networks and Propaganda Machines, New and Old

Networks with an on-the-ground presence such as, for example, the old structures of the dissolved Constitutional Democratic Rally, have been more effective in the 2014 polls than those which depended on cyberspace and social media. The dismissal of local mayors from their positions, following Tunisia's revolution, played a role in turning this particular group into active social actors in the electoral battle. In addition, electoral districts with a strong rural character were also influential in the outcome of the elections, with local community notables (or "sheikhs") playing a decisive role in bridging the social gap between voters and candidates. This is true despite the importance of the politically significant middle class, who have easily been incorporated into the apparatus of political clientelism based on the local mayors and the old party machinery, alongside political funding. Such an understanding could explain the unexpected success of Nidaa Tounes in regions of the Tunisian heartland such as Sidi Bouzid, Al Qasrayn and Qafsa.

Fear as a Factor

The results of the 2014 parliamentary elections in Tunisia also reveal a "Geography of Fear". The *exit* displayed by young voters in particular highlights two specific fears:

First, the fear of a continued lack of security. Just as fears surrounding immigration, organized crime and terrorism impinge on the outcome of elections in the Global North, terrorist attacks in Tunisia were perfectly timed to impose on the political agenda and influence the turn of political events. In short, public fears were expressed in a desire for punitive voting. Indeed, surveys of public opinion reveal that terrorist attacks were turning points in the country's attitudes.

Prior to the attacks, Tunisians' political loyalties were spread out across the entire spectrum. This situation meant that social democratic parties were expected to do well, and it also led to the emergence of the Popular Front and the Free Patriotic Union as contenders behind the dichotomy of Ennahda versus Nidaa Tounes. Following the terrorist attacks, it became clear to voters that preemptive voting was useful, and they were courted by political parties who promised them stability and a return to safety and security.

Second, fear of the return of the Troika. This was aptly expressed by France's *Le Figaro* newspaper, which ran a headline echoed later by Tunisian journals: "They Have Returned". It was a clear indication of the dangers inherent—according to the newspaper—in a victory for Ennahda and its allies. These worries were only

exacerbated by the congress of Ennahda and groups allied with it in Sfax, which was followed by a televised address by Nidaa Tounes leader Beji Caid Sebsi enjoining his countrymen to cast their ballots in a show of force.

Both of the main parties ran a campaign reminiscent of American elections, and centered on towns like Sfax, Tunis, Djerba, Qabes and Benzert, while the Nidaa Tounes campaign was less intense than the campaign run by their competitors in Ennahda, and was focused more on direct communication with voters. Nidaa Tounes also made greater use of the data available from the country's electoral commission, and sought to use these and exploit the bandwagon effect to get undecided voters to cast their ballots in their own favor.

Conclusion

Tunisia's nascent democracy was the real victor, more than any of the political blocs or parties. The country's latest experience in democratization will present the Tunisian political classes who have thus far displayed unparalleled political maturity, with the challenge of continuing the process of political compromise and settlement, and to avoid a long-term period of political instability. The impact of the results from Tunisia's 2014 parliamentary elections will go beyond the immediate political climate, and, indeed, will help define Tunisia's political landscape. The new political divisions in Tunisia are likely to defy previous conceptions of both a polarization along geographical lines (a divide between the north and the south of the country) and of the ideological divide (between the Right and Left). With the eclipse of political parties of the moderate left, it is clear that the upcoming conflicts to grip Tunisia will be conflicts of societal concerns, it will be a battle of social mores brought to the country's parliament.

While the Secularist-Islamist split is very real and present, its coverage in French newspapers is exaggerated. In addition, Ennahda's abandonment of power for a period of roughly one year so that the country could be ruled by an interim cabinet of technocrats, and the group's acceptance of the results of the elections, support the hypothesis that political Islam is changing. While political Islamist movements have not become entirely rational players in the game of democracy, they do now abide electoral rules. This allows Islamists to be challenged through the ballot box, and for Tunisia to avoid the fate of military coups witnessed by Egypt.