

List fillers or future leaders? Female candidates in Tunisia's 2018 municipal elections

By Julia Clark, Aytuğ Şaşmaz, and Alexandra Blackman

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Background

Tunisia's long-delayed May 6th elections were the first local elections held since the country began its transition to democracy following the ouster of Zine El Abedine Ben Ali in January 2011. More than 45,000 candidates ran on party and independent lists in 350 municipalities across the country. Thanks to Tunisia's "zipper" style quotas, approximately 50 percent of these candidates were women.²

The 2017 electoral code requires both (1) *vertical parity* (each list must alternate between male and female candidates) and (2) *horizontal parity* (parties must have an equal number of male- and female-headed lists across all constituencies in which they are running).³ Although a vertical parity rule was used in the country's 2011 and 2014 national-level elections, a majority of lists were headed by men, and as a result only 31 percent (rather than 50 percent) of elected parliamentarians were female in 2014.

The success of these new quotas in ensuring near-equal representation of women among the first generation of democratically-elected municipal councilors is clear: approximately 47 percent of winning candidates are female.⁴ Although it is too early to evaluate the impact of this increase in representation on policy and governance outcomes, gender quotas have been shown to have a diverse array of positive effects across the

¹ Support for this project was generously provided by Democracy International (DI), the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), Stanford University (the Abbasi Program in Islamic Studies and the Freeman Spogli Institute), the Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS), and Harvard University (the Center for Middle Eastern Studies and the Institute for Quantitative Social Sciences).

² Tunisia uses a closed-list proportional representation (PR) electoral system where parties and independents present lists of ranked candidates that are equal in length to the number of municipal council seats. When the list alternates are included, the total number of candidates is closer to 55,000; some sources report that figure.

³ In practice, this means that parties that were running in an even number of municipalities were required to have an equal number of male- and female-headed lists, while parties that were running in an odd number of municipalities could run one additional male or female-headed list. Parties that ran a list in only one municipality—as well as independent lists that by definition run individually in each municipality—were not subject to the horizontal parity rule.

⁴ UN Women Maghreb. 2018. "Avancée historique en Tunisie: 47% de femmes élues aux élections municipales." <https://goo.gl/HfS2Mq>.

world, including improving voter turnout, girls' education and career aspirations, the efficacy of local governance, the type of public goods provided, and the quality of male representatives.⁵

In Tunisia, however, the impact of the quotas on the quality of local representation has been a source of speculation and debate. Many politicians, pundits, and election observers have expressed doubt that parties and independents would be able to recruit enough qualified women for their lists. If female candidates are simply low-quality “fillers,” will the performance of municipal councils suffer as a result? In the absence of systematic evidence, assertions about the fitness of female candidates have been largely anecdotal. However, using new data from our [Local Election Candidate Survey \(LECS\)](#),⁶ we are able to provide more substantial evidence on the implications of Tunisia's gender quotas on the quality of municipal representatives.

Overall, we find that female candidates in our sample are more educated and more willing to consider a future in national-level politics than male candidates. However, they also have less previous political and leadership experience.⁷ This experience gap highlights the persistent and longstanding barriers that many Tunisian women face in securing leadership positions in politics and society more broadly; even during the Bourguiba era—which was marked by important legal advances for women—only 5 percent of municipal councilors in power after the 1975 elections were female.⁸

Thus, while the quotas have succeeded in bringing women with comparatively high potential into office, this new generation of female leaders—who are also overwhelmingly young—may be at a disadvantage in terms of certain political resources and standing. Continued application of gender quotas will partly address this gap by putting more women in office, where they will gain experience. Still, more targeted support is needed to (1) ensure that the women elected on the 2018 councils have the resources they need to realize their full potential while in office, and (2) facilitate more opportunities for women and girls inside *and outside* of politics to engage in public life and develop core leadership skills. With this dual strategy, Tunisia may be able to eliminate the experience gap for future generations of female leaders.

⁵ See, respectively: De Paola, M., et al. 2014. “The impact of gender quotas on electoral participation: Evidence from Italian municipalities.” *European Journal of Political Economy*, 35; Beaman, L., et al. 2012. “Female leadership raises aspirations and educational attainment for girls: A policy experiment in India.” *Science*, 335(6068); Braga, M. and Scervini, F. 2017. “The performance of politicians: The effect of gender quotas.” *European Journal of Political Economy*, 46; Chattopadhyay, R. and Duflo, E., 2004. “Women as policy makers: Evidence from a randomized policy experiment in India.” *Econometrica*, 72(5); and Besley, T., et al, 2017. “Gender quotas and the crisis of the mediocre man: Theory and evidence from Sweden.” *American Economic Review*, 107(8).

⁶ See Blackman, A., Clark, J., and Şaşmaz, A. 2018. “Introducing the Tunisian Local Election Candidate Survey (LECS).” *Democracy International Policy Brief*, available at: <https://goo.gl/Hks3Gt>.

⁷ As described in Blackman, Clark, and Şaşmaz (2018), the LECS sample was designed to include equal numbers of men and women. However, the response rate among female candidates was slightly lower than for male candidates, and our final sample is 54 percent men and 46 percent women. Thus, while most of the results presented here should be broadly representative of gender differences across all municipal council candidates, it may be that non-respondents differ from respondents in some important ways that limit their generalizability to the broader population. If, for example, better qualified women were more likely to answer our survey than less qualified women—a plausible scenario—this would imply that our findings are underestimating the size of the experience gap between male and female candidates.

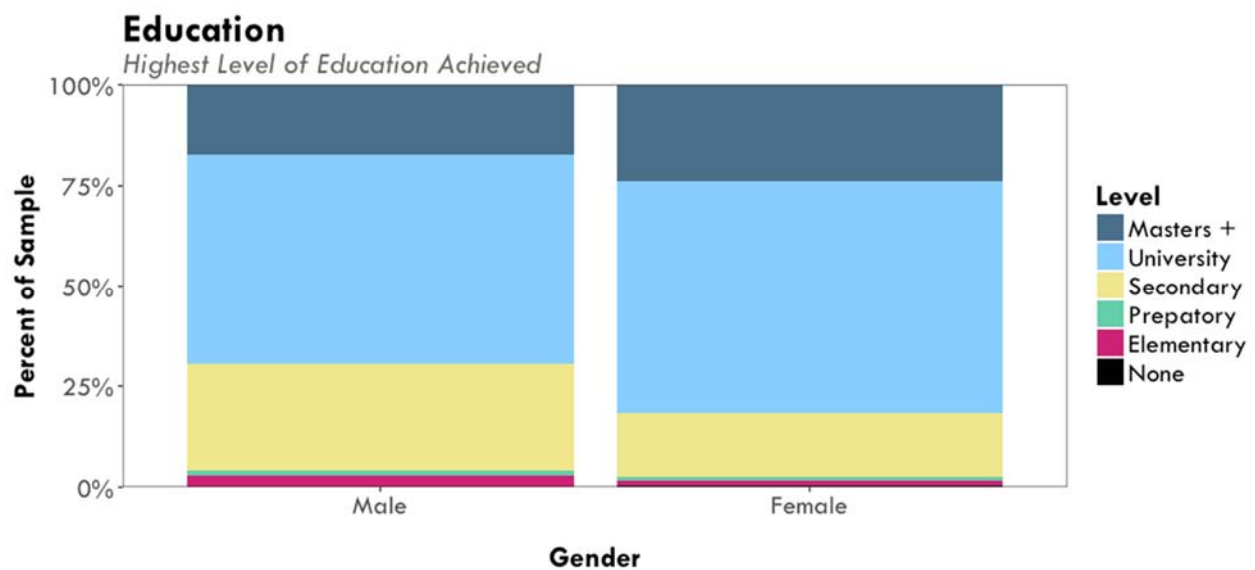
⁸ Ben Achour, Y. and Moussa, F. 1977. “Réformes, élections municipales et discours décentralisateur en Tunisie.” *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord*. <https://goo.gl/jvfhKt>.

Key Findings

1. Female candidates are equally or more educated than male candidates across municipalities and list positions.

Within the LECS sample, 82 percent of female candidates have attended university, compared with 69 percent of male candidates (see Figure 1). In part, this difference is due to the fact that female candidates also tend to be younger than male candidates—their average age is 36, compared with 45 for men—and youth is positively correlated with education level.⁹ However, even controlling for age and other correlates such as income and list type, women’s educational advantage remains statistically significant.

Figure 1



Contrary to the belief that lower-ranked female candidates are likely to be far less qualified than their male counterparts, we find a negative and statistically significant interaction between gender and rank.¹⁰ Although list position is positively correlated with education overall, this means that—all else equal—**lower-ranked female candidates are more educated than lower-ranked male candidates** (see Figure 2). Conversely, male and female candidates close to the top of the list are equally likely to have university degrees.

⁹ For more analysis on the age of candidates in the 2018 elections, see Blackman, A., Şaşmaz, A., and Clark, J. 2018. “Generational divide in Tunisia’s 2018 municipal elections: Are youth candidates different?” *Democracy International Policy Brief*.

¹⁰ In OLS regressions, the interaction between candidate gender and rank is significant at the 99.9 percent level, controlling for type of list (Ennahdha, Nidaa, Independent, and Third Party), candidate age, candidate income, the number of seats in the municipal council, log municipal population, and region. These (along with education) are standard controls used throughout the analysis in this brief.

Figure 2
Candidate Education by Gender and Rank

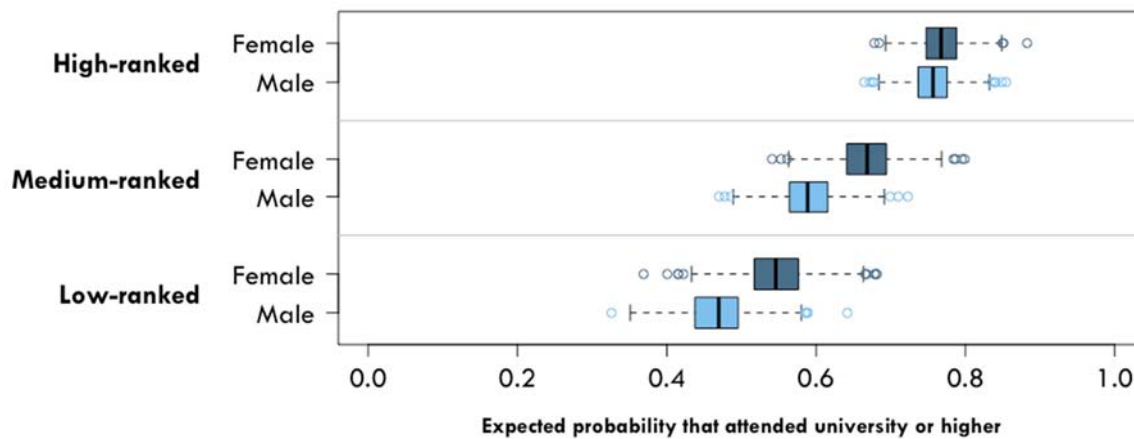
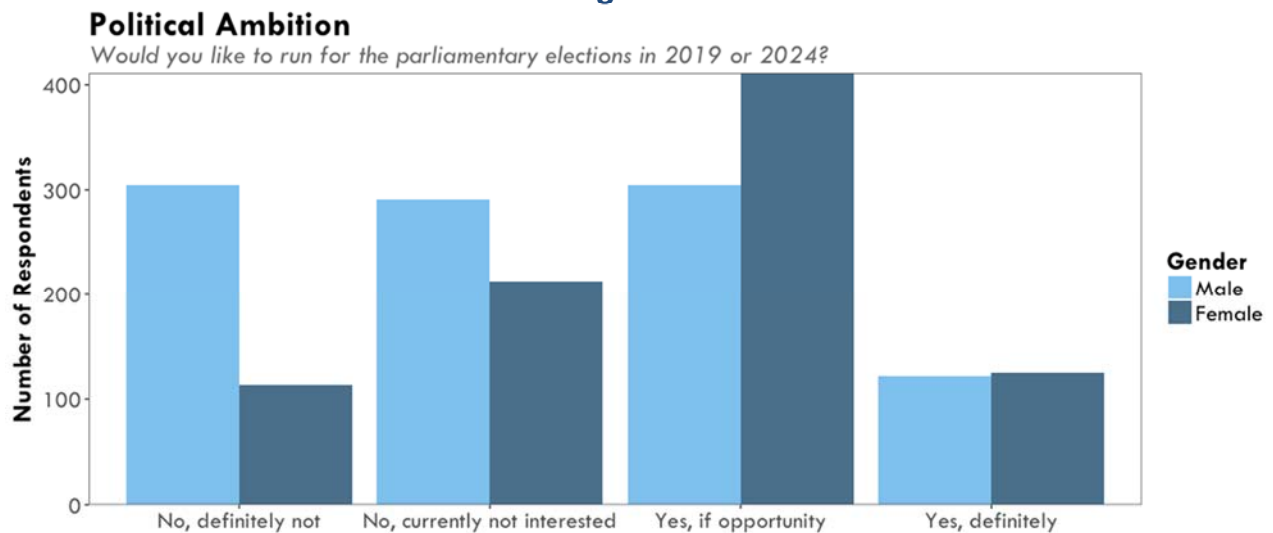


Figure 2 shows the expected probability—where 0 implies impossibility and 1 implies certainty—that a given candidate in our dataset has attended university or higher, based on the interaction between their gender and list position, after controlling for other correlates of candidate education. “High-ranked” candidates are those in the top third of the list (e.g., positions 1-4 in a list of 12), “medium-ranked” are in the middle third (ranks 5-8 in a list of 12), and “low-ranked” are in bottom third of the list (ranks 9-12 in a list of 12).

2. Female candidates are more likely to express enthusiasm when asked about running for higher office in the future.

When asked if they would like to run for parliament in 2019 or 2024, around 62 percent of female candidates in our sample responded that they would “definitely” consider running or would consider running “if the opportunity were available,” compared with only 42 percent of male candidates (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

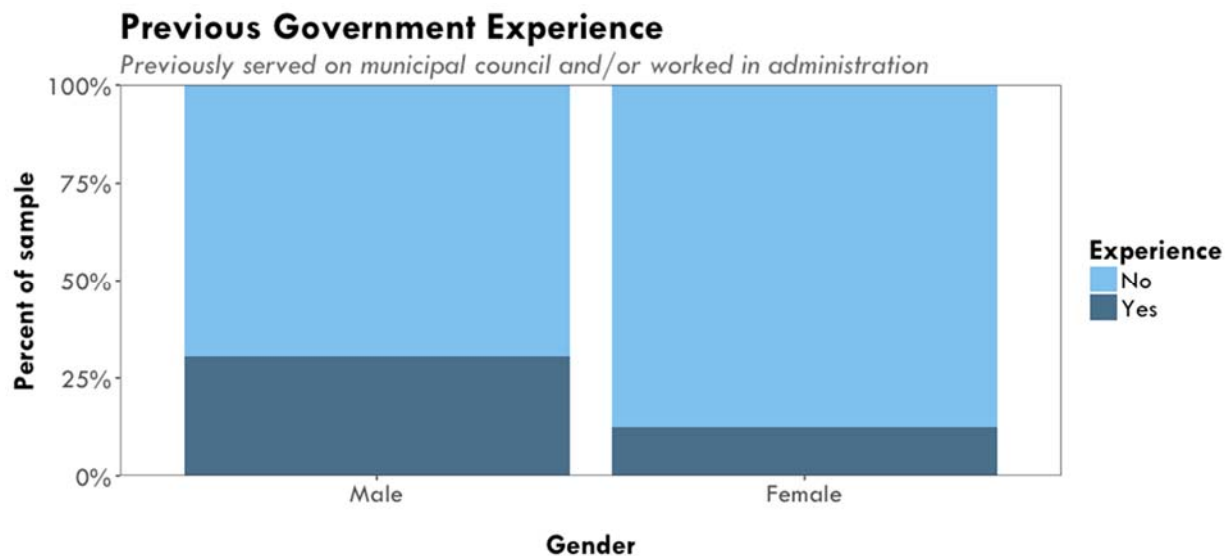


This finding is at odds with the popular opinion that many female candidates are “fillers” with no interest in professional politics. As with the education gap, it can partially be explained by the fact that female candidates are, on average, younger than male candidates, with potentially long careers ahead of them. Even controlling for age and other variables, however, we find that women still score higher on this measure of ambition. Overall, the positive relationship between gender and ambition holds both across and within municipalities.

3. Despite high levels of education and enthusiasm for politics, female candidates lack previous government experience.

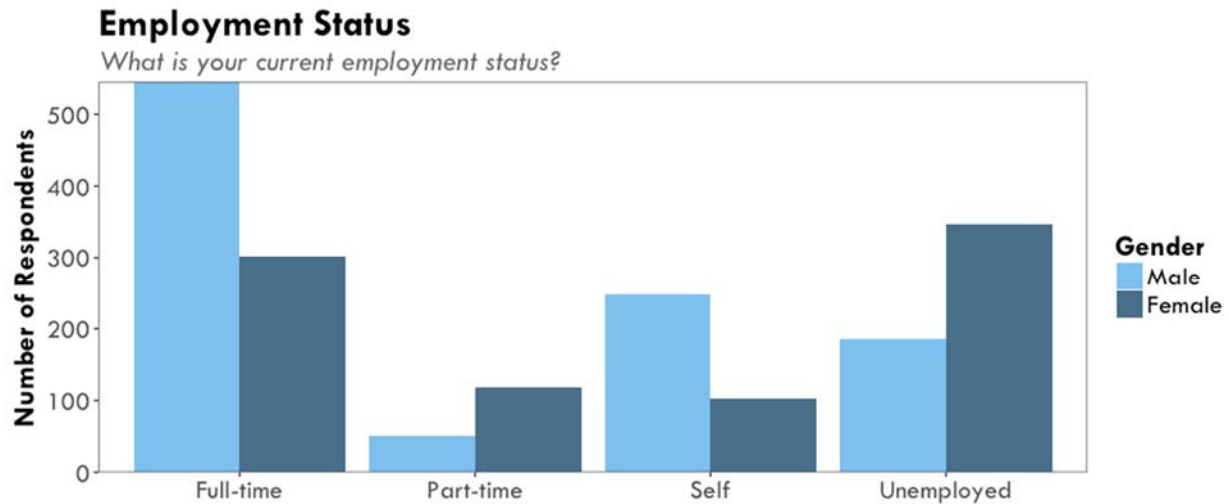
The 2018 elections represent an unprecedented opening of Tunisia’s political sphere, and many candidates lacked previous experience. Overall, only 22 percent of candidates in our sample had previously served on a municipal council or worked in public administration at the local, regional, or national level (see Figure 4).

Figure 4



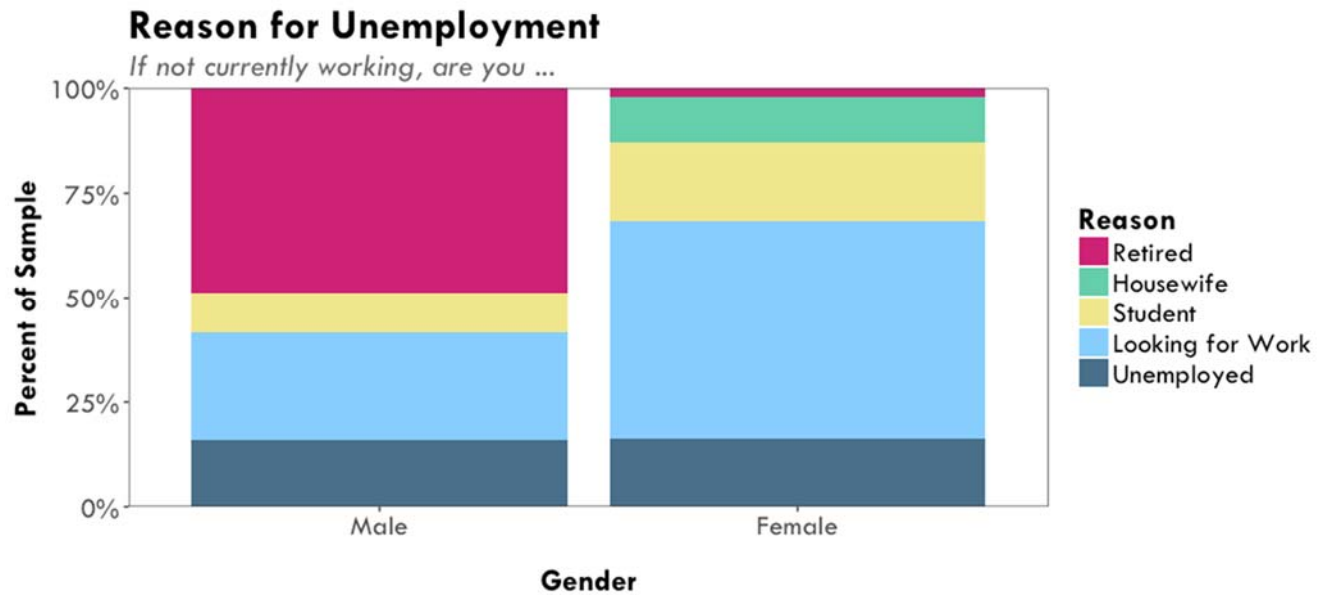
On average, however, women in our sample have less previous government experience than men: only 12.5 percent of female candidates had ever served on a municipal council or worked in administration, compared with 31 percent of male candidates. This is in part due to the age difference—women are younger and therefore less likely to have had full careers and less likely in general to be employed (Figure 5).

Figure 5



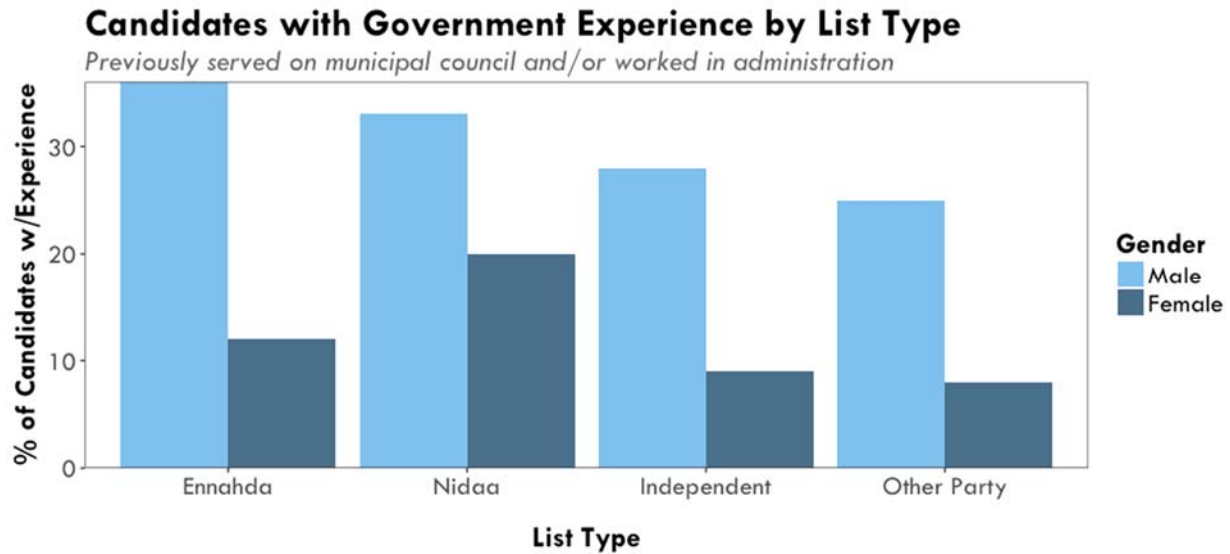
Indeed, female candidates who are unemployed are more likely to be students or looking for work, while unemployed male candidates are more likely to be retired (see Figure 6). Still, the gender experience gap remains statistically significant after controlling for age, rank, education, income, municipal population, and region.

Figure 6



Lower levels of government experience among women are, however, not evenly distributed across parties within our sample. Looking at the proportion of candidates with experience in each type of list, the largest gap between male and female candidates in our sample is in Ennahda lists, where 36 percent of male candidates have previous government experience, compared with only 12 percent of female candidates. The smallest gap is found on Nidaa lists, where 33 percent of male candidates have experience, compared with 20 percent of female candidates (see Figure 7).

Figure 7



However, controlling for other variables that are correlated with both experience and list type—including age, education, income, rank, municipal size, and region—we find that the gender gap disappears for candidates on Nidaa and independent lists, but persists on Ennahda lists (see Figure 8).¹¹ All else equal, however, the probability that a male candidate on an Ennahda list has previous experience in government is approximately 12.9 percentage points higher than it is for a female candidate on an Ennahda list.

Figure 8

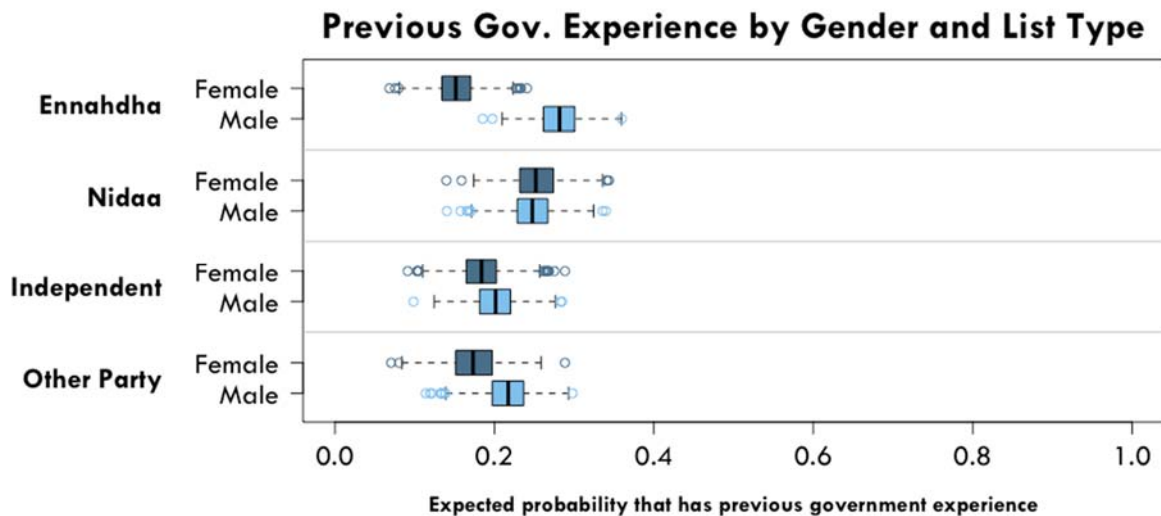


Figure 8 shows the expected probability—where 0 implies impossibility and 1 implies certainty—that a given candidate in our dataset has previous government experience, based on the interaction between their gender and type of list, and after

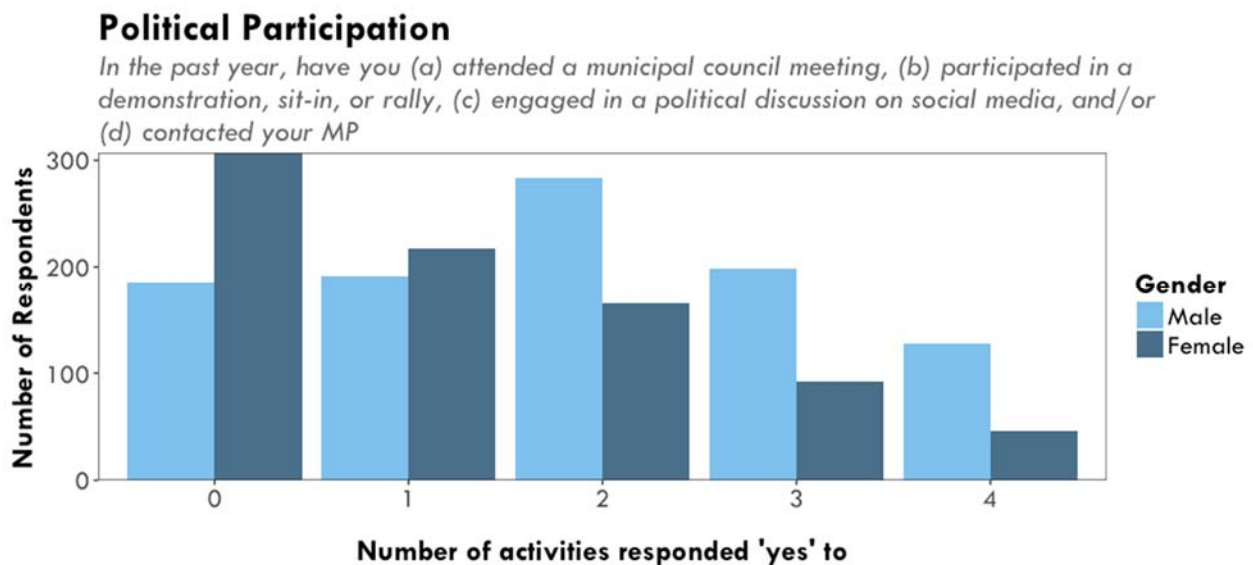
¹¹ For more on the differences between candidates from independent and party lists, see our forthcoming brief: Şaşmaz, A., Blackman, A., and Clark, J. 2018. “One third of new municipal councilors in Tunisia are from independent lists. How independent are they?” *Democracy International Policy Brief*.

controlling for other correlates of candidate experience, including age, education, income, rank, municipal population, and region.

4. In addition, female candidates report lower levels of participation in political and leadership activities and in civic life more generally.

Women’s lower level of experience working in government appears to be paralleled in a number of other indicators related to more general political experience. Female candidates, for example, **also score lower on an index of political participation**. In our sample, only 63 percent of female respondents reported that they had done one or more of a series of political activities¹² within the past year, compared with 82 percent of male respondents (see Figure 9).

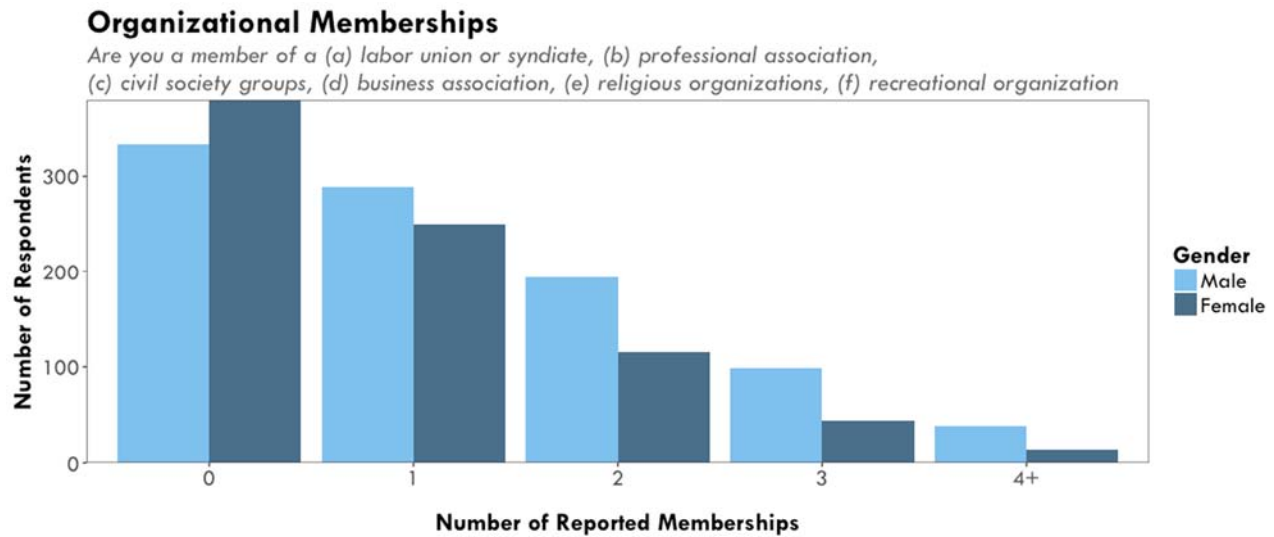
Figure 9



Furthermore, the LECS data show that **female candidates are less likely to be members of civic organizations and associations** than their male counterparts (see Figure 10). Such organizations not only foster leadership skills and experience, but also provide networks that may encourage and support political mobilization and participation. Similarly, female candidates are **less likely to report that they have engaged in leadership activities relevant for political office**—like research, public speaking, fundraising, recruitment, or event planning—as a part of their job or as a volunteer.

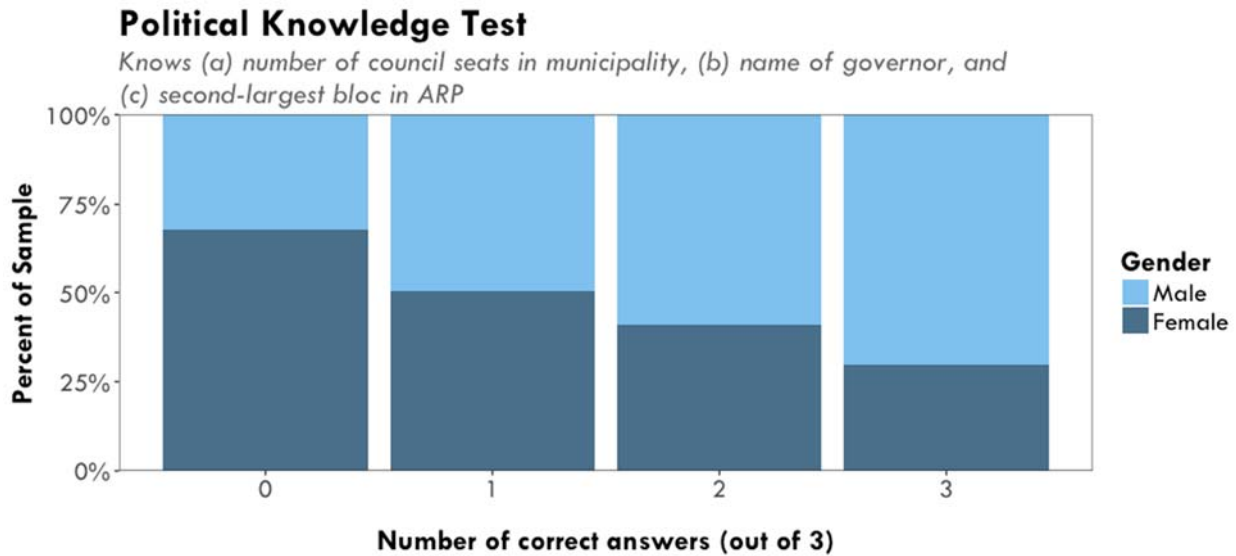
¹² For a more detailed description of this and other measures, see Blackman, A., Clark, J., and Şaşmaz, A. 2018. “Introducing the Tunisian Local Election Candidate Survey (LECS).” *Democracy International Policy Brief*, available at: <https://goo.gl/Hks3Gt>.

Figure 10



Perhaps as a result of lower levels of engagement, female candidates performed slightly worse on a political knowledge test designed to measure some basic knowledge about local, regional, and national politics (see Figure 11). Out of three possible points, female candidates scored an average of 1.4, while male candidates scored an average of 1.8.

Figure 11



In terms of overall capacity, our results show that female candidates—by virtue of higher levels of education and the age and enthusiasm for a future career in politics—may have similar or in some cases higher raw potential than male candidates. However, when compared with their male counterparts, many have lower levels of prior government experience and participation in political and organizational life.

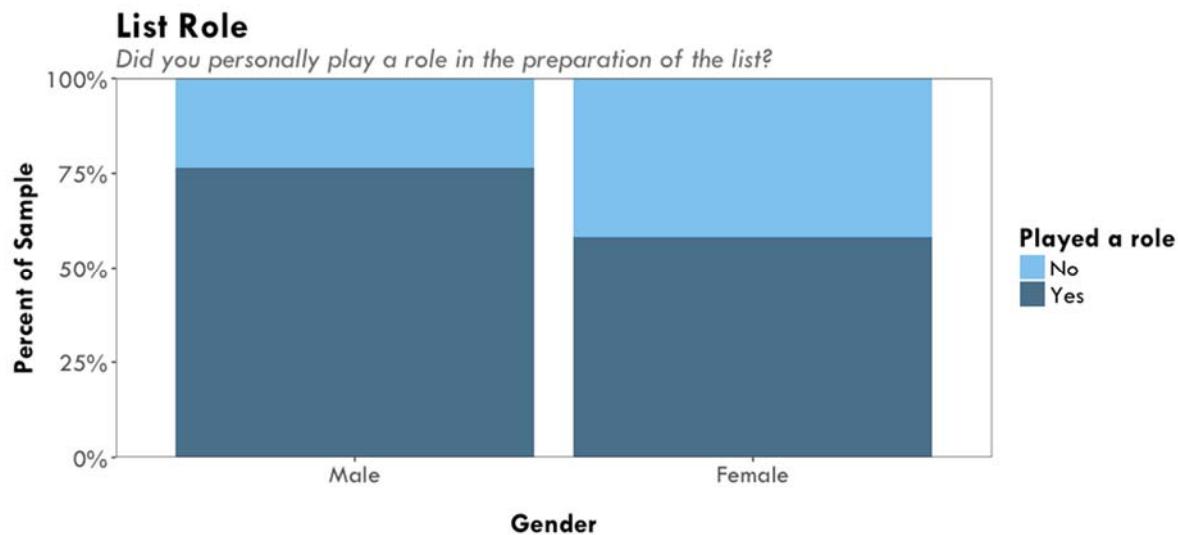
Policy implications

Tunisia’s progressive gender parity quotas have succeeded in dramatically increasing the number of women involved in politics in Tunisia, and are therefore a huge leap forward in remedying the long-standing gap in political experience for women. Furthermore, the fact that female representatives may have comparatively less experience does not necessarily mean that they will perform worse than their male counterparts. In India, for example, one seminal study finds that new female leaders had a positive impact on policy outcomes for women *despite* being less educated, experienced, and wealthy than previous (mostly male) leaders.¹³

However, while the LECS provides evidence that female candidates were not simply “fillers,” it also highlights the need for policymakers and non-governmental actors to look beyond numerical parity. With the quotas in place, the next step should be to ensure that newly elected female candidates have the resources they need for success.

As others have noted,¹⁴ the post-election period will require significant capacity building efforts for the thousands of new councilors who lack previous experience—as our data show, many of these councilors will be women. This might include professional development activities designed to strengthen core competencies relevant to municipal governance, as well as helping new female councilors overcome the power deficit that may result from the intersection between their gender, relative lack of government experience, and younger than average age. This dynamic has likely already played out during the campaign period itself, as women in our sample were significantly less likely than men to report playing a role in preparing their lists despite parity in list positions (see Figure 12).

Figure 12



¹³ Chattopadhyay, R. and Duflo, E. 2004. “Women as policy makers: Evidence from a randomized policy experiment in India.” *Econometrica*, 72(5).

¹⁴ Yerkes, S. and Muasher, M. 2018. “Decentralization in Tunisia: Empowering Towns, Engaging People.” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://goo.gl/X5io2V>.

In addition, this study highlights the need to continue breaking down the barriers that may still prevent or discourage women from entering politics and leadership positions within Tunisia. Efforts to support capacity building and professional development should therefore focus not only on the women who have been recently elected, but also on women in the general population. Strengthening political and social participation and leadership among Tunisian women more broadly will help ensure a more experienced pool of future candidates and leaders for years to come.

About the Authors

Alexandra Blackman is a PhD Candidate at Stanford University. Her research focuses on political development in French colonial Tunisia, as well as political behavior in the contemporary Middle East. She has conducted field research in Tunisia, Egypt, and France. Prior to Stanford, Alexandra was a CASA fellow in Egypt (2010-2011) and a Junior Fellow in the Democracy and Rule of Law and Middle East Programs at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2011-2012).

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