Introducing the Tunisian Local Election Candidate Survey (LECS)

By Alexandra Blackman, Julia Clark, and Aytuğ Şaşmaz

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Introducing the Tunisian local election candidate survey (LECS): A new approach to studying local governance

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Introduction

On May 6th, 2018, Tunisia held local elections to determine who will govern the country's municipalities for the next five years. Despite some lament over low turnout levels compared with the 2011 and 2014 general elections, the 2018 elections were still historic. They were not only the first municipal elections since the revolution, but also the first truly competitive, nationwide local elections in the country's history. Beyond their importance as a milestone in Tunisia's democratic consolidation, however, these elections were an unprecedented opportunity for local political mobilization, party institutionalization, and the potential induction of thousands of new people into the political elite.

Over 45,000 candidates ran for approximately 7,000 seats across 350 municipal councils.[2] As a result of new electoral laws and quotas adopted in 2017, half of these candidates were women, and half were under the age of 35. As with politicians in any context, these candidates vary in terms of background, motivation, and capacity, as well as differences in ideology and policy preferences. Given the often-personal nature of local politics, the particular characteristics of the candidates who ran—and who won—are likely to have broad consequences for local governance and investment priorities, the capacity to implement new decentralization reforms, and the ongoing development of parties at the local and national levels.

In order to study this new cohort of Tunisian politicians, we conducted a survey of nearly 2,000 candidates in 100 municipalities between April and May 2018. This Local Election Candidate Survey (LECS) included questions that measure a variety of candidate characteristics, including demographic and socioeconomic background, experience, history of political participation, policy preferences, campaign activities, political knowledge, and public goods orientation. The sample is representative of candidates from the two main

[2] Tunisia uses a closed-list proportional representation (PR) electoral system. When the list alternates are included, the total number of candidates is closer to 55,000; some sources report that figure.

parties—the Ennahda Movement and Nidaa Tounes—and also includes a substantial number of candidates from independent and other party lists.

The Tunisian LECS represents an innovative data collection effort for the study of local politics and democratization in Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, and this brief is the first in a series that will examine some initial high-level results. Here, we provide an overview of the sampling strategy and data collection methods, as well as summary statistics on several key metrics and survey questions. These measures will be used in subsequent briefs that explore the characteristics of candidates from three important groups— women, youth, and independents—that were previously largely excluded from elected office.

Sampling Strategy

Our sampling strategy was designed to conduct a survey that would be as representative as possible of (1) different-sized municipalities throughout the country, and (2) candidates who were likely to win the elections. In order to select respondents, we followed a three-step sampling strategy to first select municipalities, then lists within these municipalities, then candidates within these lists, as described below.

Figure 1

LECS Sampled Municipalities (n = 100)
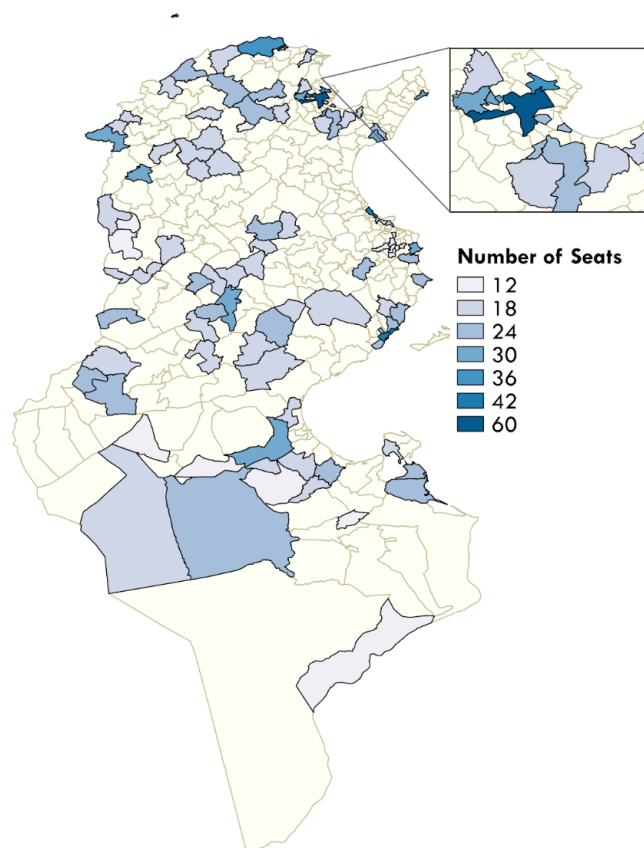
1. **Municipalities.** We randomly selected 100 of Tunisia's 350 municipalities (see Figure 1), as well as ten alternate municipalities, after stratifying on municipal council size. Stratification ensures that the proportion of municipalities selected in each size category—12, 18, 24, 30, 36, 42, and 60 council seats—reflects the true proportion within Tunisia (see Table 1). The strata are nearly proportional; however, we over-selected three municipalities in the 42 and 60 strata in order to include the important cities of Sousse, Sfax, and Tunis. This strategy also ensured broad geographic coverage, including municipalities in 23 out of 24 governorates (no municipalities in Zaghouan were selected due to random chance).

Table 1

Stratification by number of municipal council seats

Council seats (strata)	Frequency	Percent of total	Number in LECS sample
12	57	16.3%	16
18	148	42.3%	41
24	98	28.0%	28
30	34	9.7%	10
36	10	2.9%	2
42	2	0.6%	2
60	1	0.3%	1
Total	350	100%	100

2. **Lists.** After stratifying on list type, we selected four lists (with alternates) in each municipality: (1) the Ennahda Movement list, (2) the Nidaa Tounes list, and (3 & 4) two randomly selected lists from the remaining independent and other party and coalition lists in the municipality. This ensured that we would have a large number of winning candidates in our sample—as Ennahda and Nidaa ran in nearly all municipalities and were expected to win a plurality of seats across the country—and have sufficient responses from the two main parties to make reliable comparisons between the two.

3. **Candidates.** For each list, we selected one-third of candidates to participate in the survey, stratifying on gender by splitting the list into male and female candidates and re-assigning ranks within each gender. On a male-headed list, for example, the second candidate was the first female candidate, and was assigned a gender-rank $r = 1$.[3] We then sampled one-sixth of the male candidates and one-sixth of the female candidates, weighting the probability of selection by the inverse of the gender-rank. For example, a candidate assigned a gender-rank $r = 1$ had a selection weight of $1/1 = 1$, while a candidate with $r = 12$ had a selection weight of $1/12$. This strategy resulted in a sample with equal numbers of female and male candidates from each list and a higher proportion of the top-ranked candidates who were most likely to win.

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[3] Tunisia's gender quotas—to be explored in a forthcoming brief—ensure that half of all candidates on a list are female, and that lists are ordered alternating by gender so that every other candidate is female.

Data Collection

We began fielding the survey on April 13th in partnership with a Tunisian survey firm, ELKA Consulting. Teams of local ELKA enumerators contacted respondents through their list headquarters and/or list heads, and met with candidates in person to conduct the survey. The questionnaire contained over 100 questions and was designed to last approximately 40 minutes. It was written in formal Arabic and self-administered on tablets running Qualtrics software.[4] After introducing the study, enumerators handed the tablets to the respondents in order to read and complete questions on their own. Enumerators then remained with the respondents for the duration of the survey in order to assist them when needed and to collect the tablets at the end.

In order to maximize responses, ELKA continued to administer the survey during the week following the election, and ended data collection on May 13th. Of the 2,766 sampled candidates (plus alternates) who were contacted to complete the survey, we received 1,907 responses across 100 municipalities and 377 lists. Although this response rate (70 percent) is relatively high for a survey, non-responses were not always evenly spread across key demographics (see table below). To the extent that non-respondents are systematically different from those who completed the questionnaire, this has the potential to limit the generalizability of some of the results described below to the population of all municipal election candidates. Table 2 breaks down the LECS sample by key demographic and municipal groups.[5]

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[4] Although many surveys in Tunisia are conducted in the Tunisian dialect of Arabic, field testing of the survey confirmed that formal Arabic was a better choice for this survey given that respondents would be (1) reading the survey rather than having it read to them, and (2) well-educated individuals who preferred more formal communication. Self-administration was also feasible given the respondents' relatively high levels of education and literacy, and was intended to increase the accuracy of responses by reducing potential social desirability bias and enumerator effects. (See, for example, Presser, Stanley and Simpson, Linda. 1998. "Data Collection Mode and Social Desirability Bias in Self-Reported Religious Attendance." *American Sociological Review*, 63).

[5] Data for the breakdown of "all candidates" by gender and age come from the Independent High Authority for Elections (ISIE), Tunisia's electoral commission (http://www.isie.tn/) as reported by UN Women (https://goo.gl/HfS2Mq) and Al-Monitor (https://goo.gl/3hmBLm). The breakdown of "all candidates" by list type, council size, region, and rank was imputed by the authors based on the final list of accepted electoral lists published by the ISIE.

Table 2

Sample Composition

		All candidates (%)	LECS		
			Sample (%)	Respondents (%)	Response Rate (%)
Gender	Male	50	50	54	75
	Female	50	50	46	63
Age*	Under 35	52	*unknown*	37	*unknown*
	Over 35	48	*unknown*	62	*unknown*
List Type	Ennahda	16	26	26	71
	Nidaa	16	25	30	81
	Independent	41	30	24	56
	Other	28	19	19	70
Rank**	Top	33	58	64	76
	Middle	33	28	26	62
	Bottom	33	13	10	53
Council size	12	7	9	10	78
	18	31	34	38	75
	24	34	32	30	65
	30	17	14	14	66
	36	7	3	3	56
	42	2	4	3	49
	60	1	3	3	71
Region	Northeast	32	30	27	62
	Northwest	13	15	15	69
	Center East	24	21	19	64
	Center West	16	18	20	79
	Southeast	8	9	9	69
	Southwest	8	7	9	88

*Candidates under age 35 are considered "youth" candidates in the Tunisian electoral system. Because many youth candidates were placed lower on the list, the LECS strategy of oversampling top candidates has also resulted in undersampling these candidates.

**Here, "top" ranked candidates are those in the top third of their list, "middle" candidates are in the middle third of their list, and "bottom" candidates are in the bottom third of the list.

Key Indicators

The LECS included over 100 questions designed to measure various aspects of candidates' personal, professional, and political backgrounds, their campaign experiences, policy preferences, and more. In this note, we focus on a few key variables that will be examined further in subsequent briefs.

Rank

Each respondent has a given rank equal to the order in which they appear on their list. The higher the candidate appears on the list, the lower the numeric value of their rank (e.g., the first candidate has a rank of 1, while the tenth candidate has a rank of 10). To use rank as a control in our analysis, we have transformed the candidate's actual rank by (1) reversing the order (so that higher values are associated with higher positions on the list, and (2) dividing them by the length of the list (also equal to the number of council seats) in order to standardize them.[6] This second step is taken to ensure that we are comparing candidates with similar positions across municipalities with different size councils. Without this conversion, for example, we would be equating a candidate ranked 12 on a 12-person list (i.e., the last person on the list who is unlikely to be elected), to a candidate ranked 12 on a 60-person list (i.e., a person in the top 20 percent of the list). As described above and shown in Figure 2, our sampling strategy was designed to oversample from the top of the list in order to capture the candidates most likely to win.

Figure 2

Relative Rank
*Candidate's rank relative to length of list*
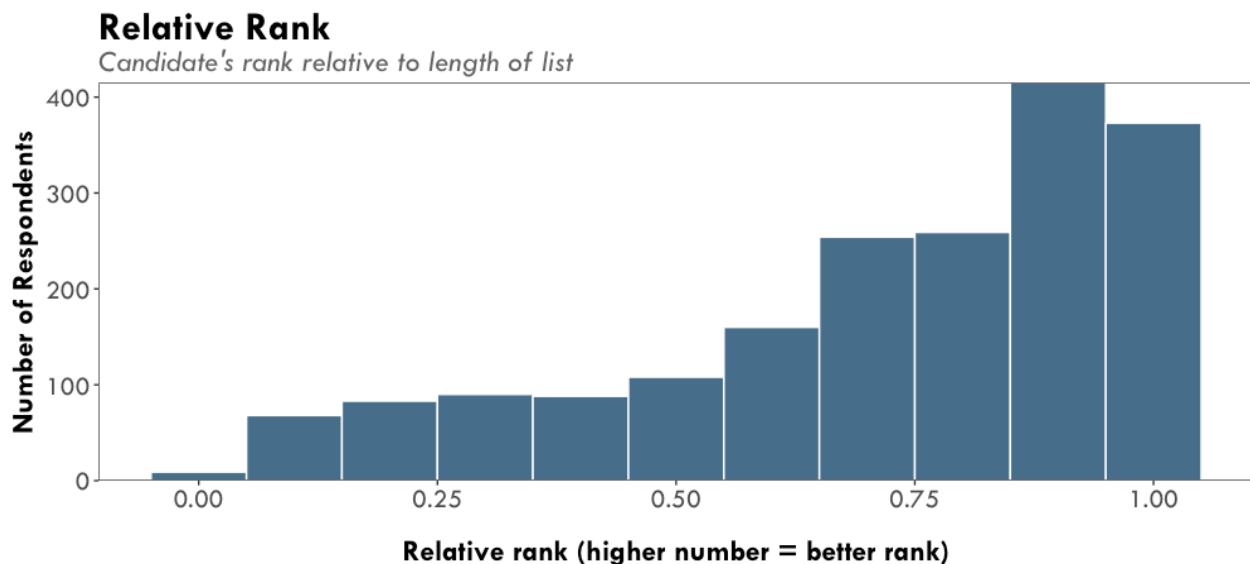
Education

We ask candidates to report the highest level of schooling that they have completed, and find that candidates within our sample are relatively well educated (see Figure 3). Approximately 75 percent have completed university or attained a post-graduate degree, while some 22 percent have only completed secondary school. A very small number—a little over three percent—have less than a secondary education.

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[6] Under Tunisia's 2017 electoral law, the length of each list must be equal to the number of council seats in the municipality. So, all lists in a 12-seat municipality must have 12 members, and so on.

Figure 3

Education
Highest Level Achieved
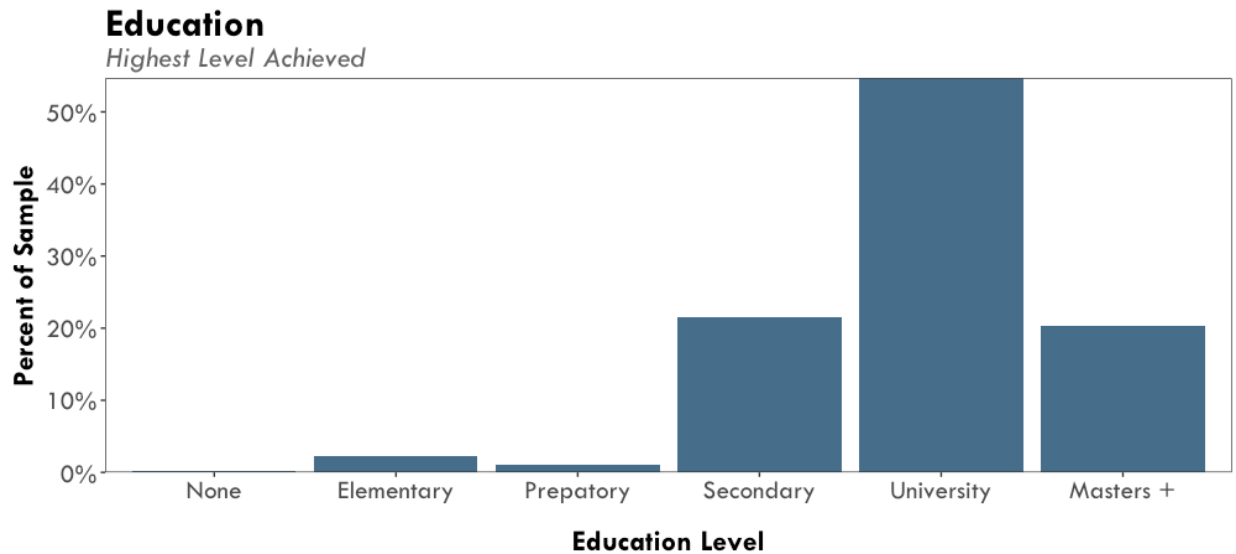
Government Experience

To measure whether candidates have previous experience in government, we combine two questions into a single measure. Specifically, we count a candidate as having previous government experience if they responded that they previously (a) served as a municipal councilor, and/or (b) worked in any level of government administration (national, regional, or local). Overall, 22 percent of respondents reported having previously served in one or more of these capacities (see Figure 4).
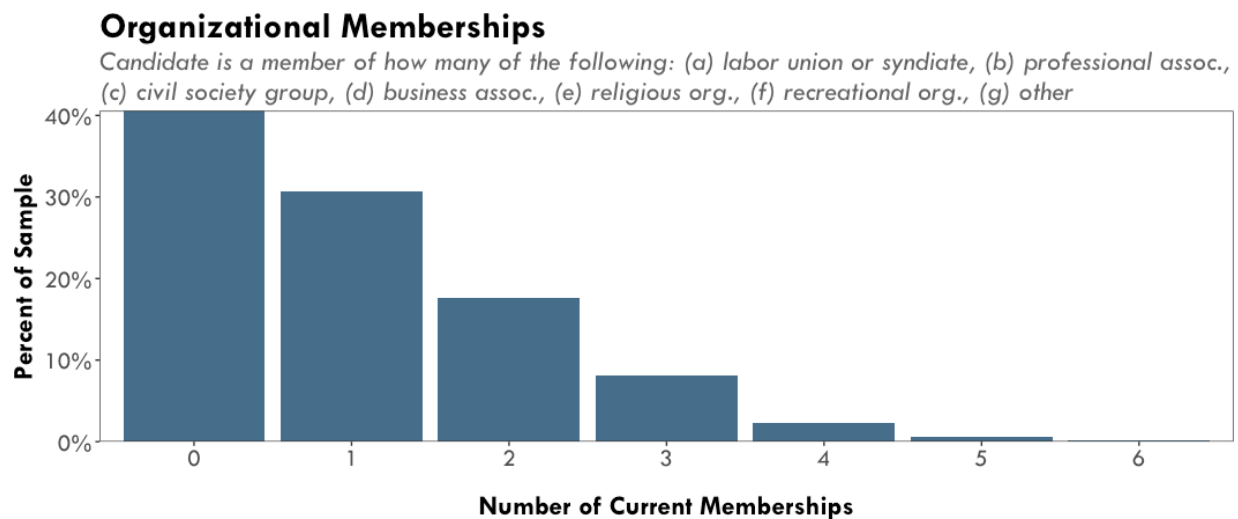
Figure 4

Government Experience
Previously (a) served on municipal council and/or (b) worked in administration
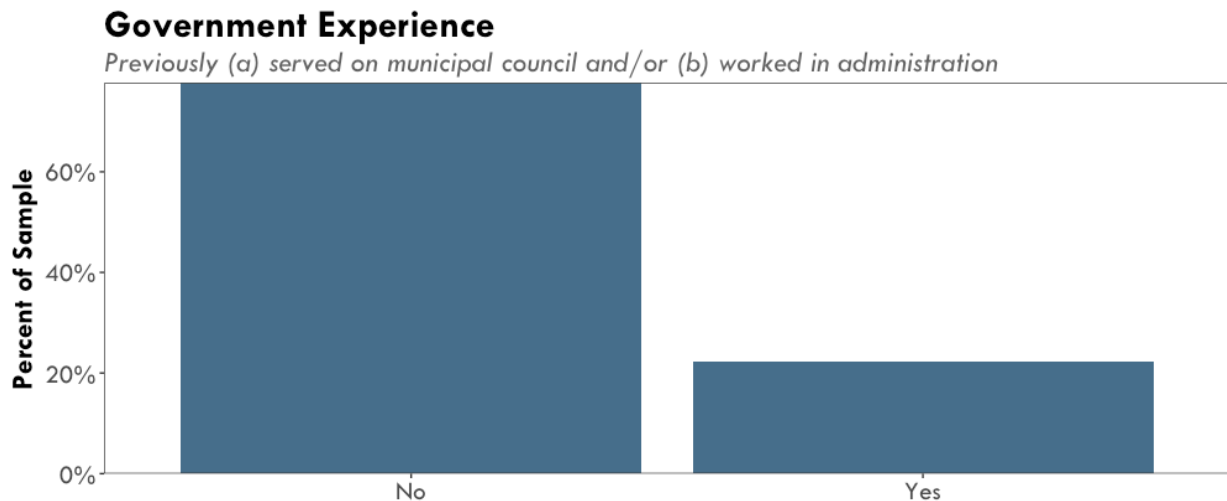
Membership in Civic Organizations

In addition to previous experience in government, the LECS asks candidates about membership in a variety of organizations and associations through which they might gain community ties and leadership experience that could be beneficial as a councilor. Specifically, we ask if they are currently a member of the following organizations: (a) labor union or syndicate, (b) professional association, (c) civil society organization or group, (d) business association or chamber of commerce, (e) recreational or sports organization or club, (f) religious organization, and/or (g) other. We then create an additive index by counting the number of organizations in which the candidate responded that they were a member. Within our sample, 41 percent are not currently a member of any civic organization, 31 percent are a member of only one, and 28 percent are members of more than one (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

Organizational Memberships

Candidate is a member of how many of the following: (a) labor union or syndiate, (b) professional assoc., (c) civil society group, (d) business assoc., (e) religious org., (f) recreational org., (g) other

Political Participation

Outside of formal roles and memberships, we ask a number of questions to measure the degree to which candidates have a history of engagement in local and/or national politics. We ask respondents to report whether they have, in the past year: (a) attended a municipal council meeting, (b) participated in a demonstration, sit-in, or rally, (c) engaged in a political discussion on social media, and/or (d) contacted their MP. Creating an additive index of these questions—with one point awarded per activity—reveals that a plurality (27 percent) have not engaged in *any* of the above activities within the past year, while the average candidate has engaged in one or two (see Figure 6).

Figure 6

Political Participation

Candidate has done how many of the following in the past year:
(a) attended a municipal council meeting, (b) participated in a demonstration, sit-in, or rally,
(c) engaged in a political discussion on social media, and/or (d) contacted their MP
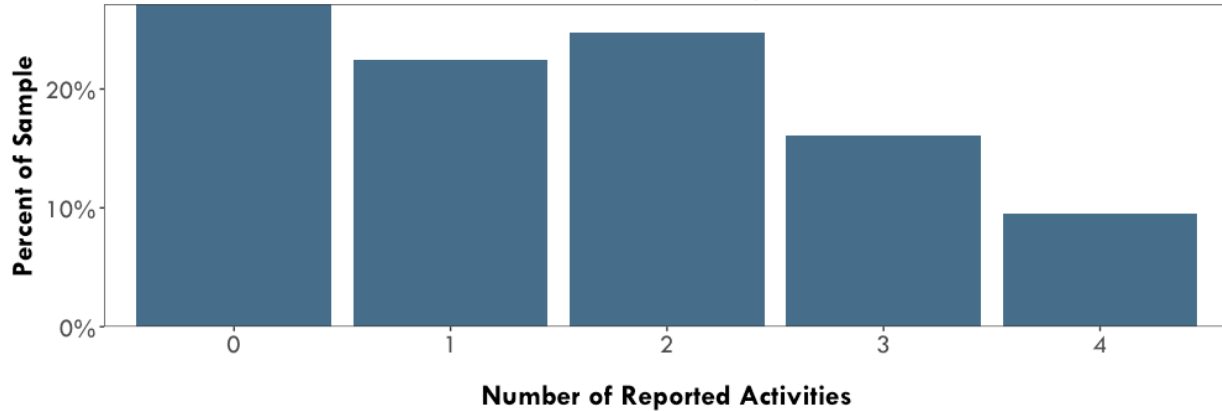
Leadership Skills

The LECS also asks a series of questions to determine whether candidates have had opportunities to develop certain leadership skills relevant for running for and holding elected office. Specifically, we asked how often they had done the following activities either in their job or as a volunteer: (a) policy research, (b) public speaking, (c) fundraising, (d) recruitment, and/or (e) event planning.[7] We then create an additive index of these questions, awarding two points for an activity done "many times," one point for an activity "once or twice," and zero points for an activity done "never." Nearly a third of the sample (29 percent) reported having zero experience with any of these skills at work or in volunteer activities (see Figure 7).

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[7] This question was adapted from the "Political Ambition Survey" found in Lawless, J. L., & Fox, R. L. 2010. *It still takes a candidate: Why women don't run for office.* Cambridge University Press.

Figure 7

Leadership Skills in Sample

For each of the following, 2 points if done 'many times', 1 point if done 'once or twice', 0 points if done 'never': (a) policy research, (b) public speaking, (c) fundraising, (d) recruitment, and/or (e) event planning


Political Knowledge

To create a basic measure of candidates' level of political knowledge at the local, regional, and national levels, we ask a series of three questions: (a) "how many seats are there in the municipal council in your municipality?" (choices = 12, 18, 24, 30, 36, 42, 60), (b) "Do you know the name of your governor?" (if yes, respondent fills in name which we verify against official records), and (c) "What is currently the second biggest party group in the National Assembly?" (choices = Ennahda, Nidaa, Popular Front, and the Democratic Bloc). In total, only 10 percent of candidates answered all questions incorrectly, compared with 35 percent who answered one correctly, 38 percent who answered two correctly, and 17 percent who answered all three correctly (see Figure 8).

*Figure 8*

Political Knowledge Test

Knows (a) number of council seats in municipality, (b) name of governor, and/or (c) second-largest bloc in ARP
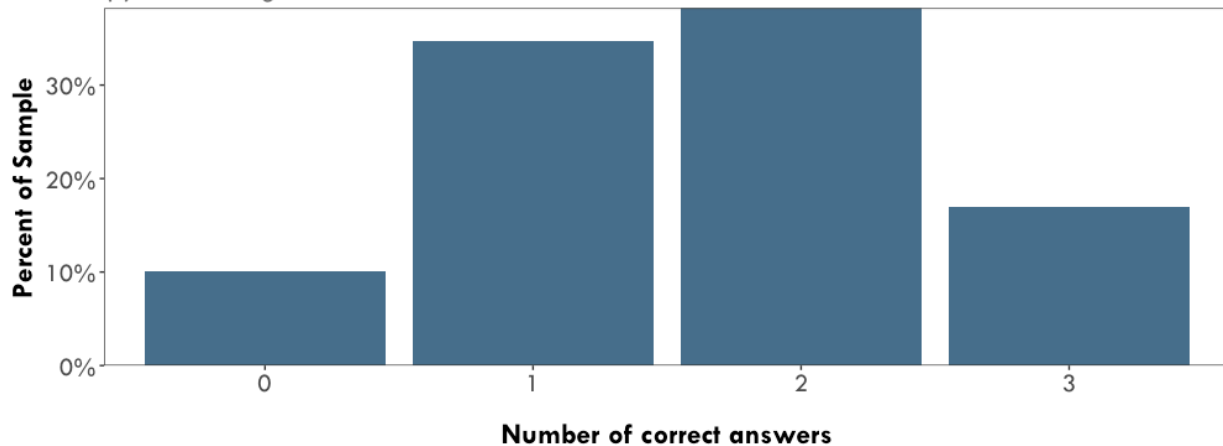
Ambition

We measure political ambition by asking candidates about their interest in running for higher office in the future. Specifically, we ask: "Would you like to run in the parliamentary (Assembly of the Representatives of the People, ARP) elections in 2019 or 2024?" In our sample, approximately 51 percent of candidates responded that they would run either "definitely" or "if the opportunity were available," while 49 percent respondent that they had "no interest" or "would definitely not" consider running (see Figure 9).
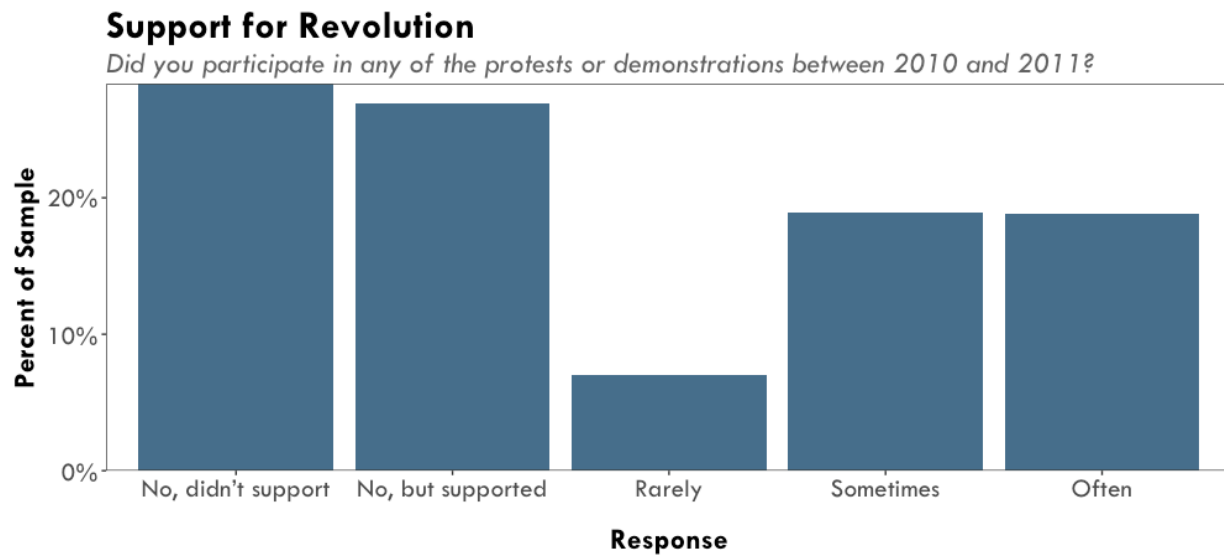
Figure 9
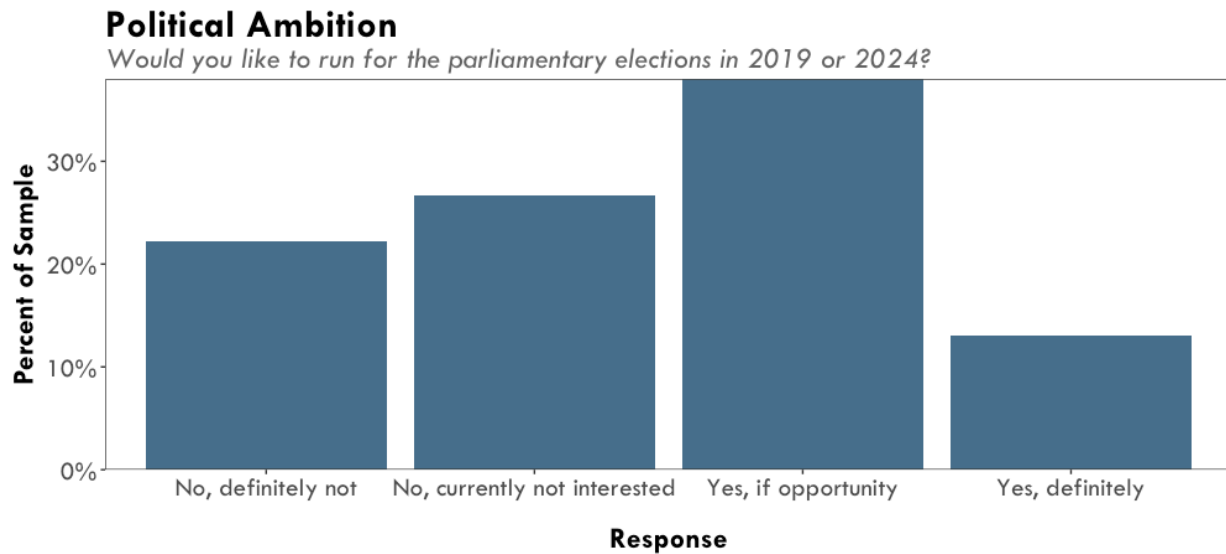
Support for the Revolution

We measure support for the revolution using the question "Did you participate in any of the protests or demonstrations between 2010 and 2011?", which had the following response options: (a) "No, I didn't participate and didn't support them," (b) "I didn't participate, but I supported them," (c) "I participated rarely," (d) "I participated sometimes," and (e) "I participated often" (see Figure 10). From this question, we create two different measures. First, we create an indicator of whether candidates *supported the revolution* coded as "yes" if they selection options (b)-(e). Second, we create an indicator of whether candidates *actively participated in the revolution* coded as "yes" if they selected options (c)-(e). In total, nearly a third (28 percent) of respondents indicated that they *did not support the 2010/2011 uprising*, while approximately 45 percent of respondents indicated that they *actively participated* (rarely, sometimes, or often) in the revolutionary protests.

Figure 10

Support for Revolution

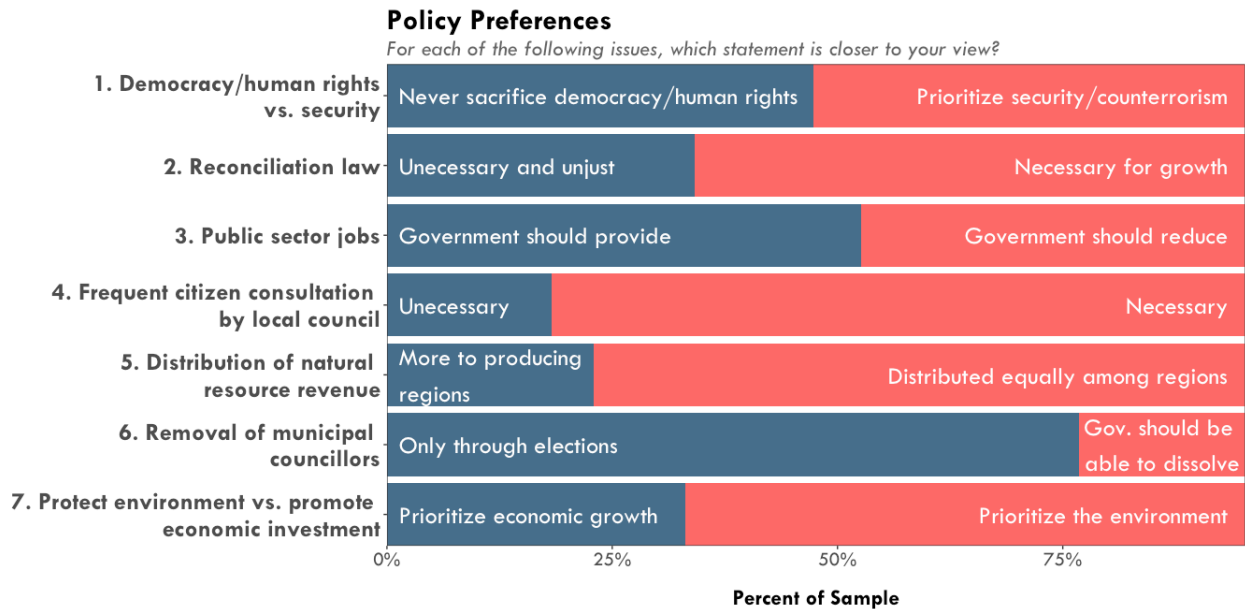*Did you participate in any of the protests or demonstrations between 2010 and 2011?*

Policy Preferences

The LECS attempted to elicit candidates' policy preferences on a number of salient issues in Tunisian politics by asking a series of questions where respondents were asked to select one of two alternate statements (A) and (B) that best fit their opinion.[8] The order of the questions themselves and the order of the (A) and (B) statements were randomized for each respondent. For a few issues—such as prioritization of democracy vs. security and support for public sector jobs—the candidates in our sample were almost evenly divided, while others revealed a greater consensus. For example, both the reconciliation law and prioritization of the

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[8] The full text of these questions is as follows: **1. Democracy/human rights vs. security:** (A) "The government should prioritize ensuring security and fighting terrorism, even if it sometimes means sacrificing democracy and human rights," vs. (B) "Democracy and human rights should never be sacrificed in the name of ensuring security and fighting terrorism"; **2.Reconciliation law:** (A) The economic reconciliation law was necessary to attract investment and create employment," vs. (B) "The economic reconciliation law provided an unnecessary and unjust amnesty for past offenses"; **3. Public sector jobs:** (A) "In Tunisia, the government should decrease the number of jobs in the public sector because too many people work in the public sector," vs. (B) "The state should continue to provide jobs for people in the public sector because this is the best way for a decent life"; **4. Frequent citizen consultation by local council:** (A) "Municipal councils should frequently consult citizens through participatory meetings in order to respect the popular will, even if this slows down decision-making," vs. (B) "As representatives of the citizens who elected them, municipal councils should be able to make decisions without much consultation or participation"; **5. Distribution of natural resource revenue:** (A) "All income from natural resources (e.g. oil and phosphate) should be allocated by the central government equally across regions, because these resources belong to all Tunisians," vs. (B) "The majority of the income from natural resources (e.g. oil and phosphate) should remain in the region in which they were extracted, because these regions carry the burden of production"; **6. Removal of municipal councilors:** (A) "Governors should have the power to dissolve municipal councils when necessary," vs. (B) "Only the voters should have the power to remove municipal councilors through elections"; **7. Protect environment vs. promote economic investment:** (A) "Economic growth is a priority for Tunisia, measures for protecting the environment can be delayed", vs. "(B) Environmental protection should be a priority for Tunisia, and some economic investments can be curbed to protect the environment."

environment garnered support from around 65 percent of the candidates, while empowering governors to dissolve municipal councils and allowing natural resource-producing regions to keep a majority of resource revenues garnered support from less than 25 percent (see Figure 11).

Figure 11

Policy Preferences
For each of the following issues, which statement is closer to your view?


Percent of Sample

Pro-Democratic Attitudes

In addition to looking at the above policy preference questions in isolation, we construct an additive index of pro-democratic attitudes using three questions: (1) whether they selected Statement A ("Democracy and human rights should never be sacrificed in the name of ensuring security and fighting terrorism") in Question 1, (2) whether they selected Statement B ("Municipal councils should frequently consult citizens through participatory meetings in order to respect the popular will, even if this slows down decision making") in Question 4, and (3) whether they selected Statement A ("Only the voters should have the power to remove municipal councilors through elections") in Question 6. Overall, we find that a large majority of respondents (over 78 percent) support two or more of these pro-democratic statements, while a minority (around 22 percent) support none or only one of these statements (see Figure 12).

Figure 12

Pro-democracy Index

Candidate responds that they prefer (1) to never sacrifice democracy/rights for security, (2) frequent citizen consultation in local politics, and/or (3) to only remove municipal councillors through elections and not administrative measures
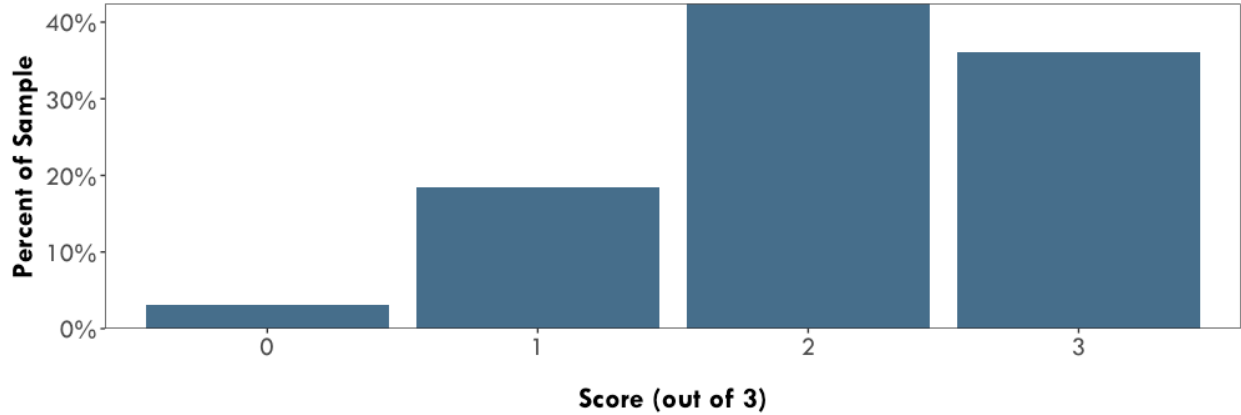
Motivation for Running

In addition to general policy preferences, the LECS asked a number of questions related to the campaign, including the candidates' various motivations for running. Specifically, we asked respondents "What prompted you to run for municipal council?" and allowed for the selection of multiple answers, including that they were (a) encouraged by family, friends, colleagues, (b) approached by somebody from within the party/list, (c) encouraged by activists from a civil society organization, (d) considering running on their own, and/or (e) other reasons. The list of motivators was randomly ordered for each respondent. Approximately 52 percent of our sample indicated that were self-motivated to run, while other reasons for running—including being approached by a party, list or civil society activist, and/or being encouraged by friends and family—were each selected by approximately a quarter of respondents (see Figure 13).

Figure 13

Motivation

What prompted you to run for municipal council?
(multiple selection possible)
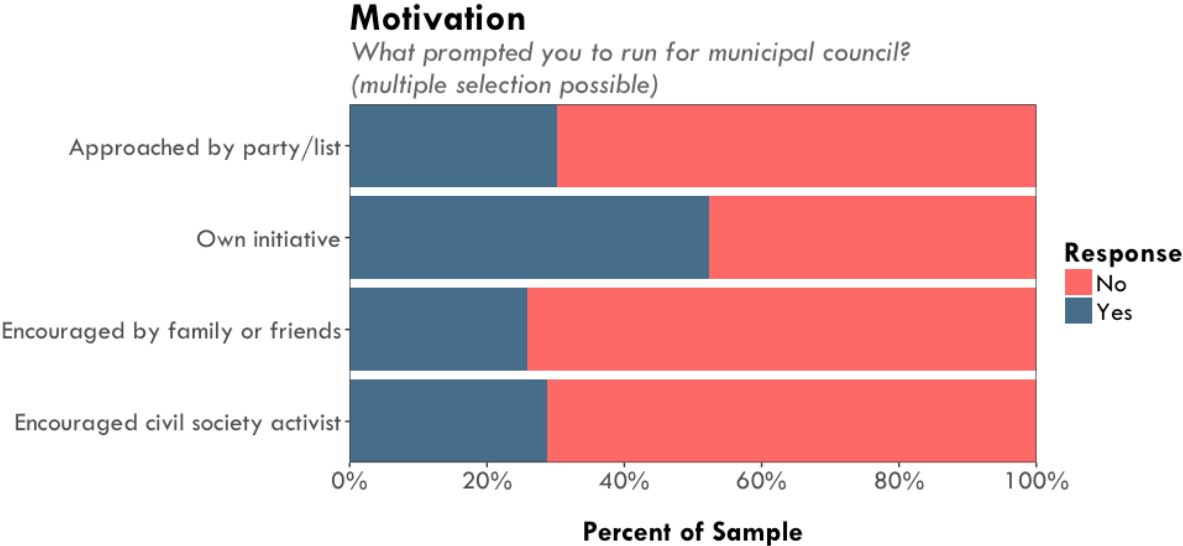
Campaign Challenges

In order to examine what barriers candidates face in their campaigns, we asked respondents, "What are the biggest challenges you face in your candidacy for municipal council?" and allowed them to select up to three responses from among the following: (a) lack of financial support, (b) differences in opinion between the members of the list, (c) lack of support from the party, (d) busy campaign schedule, (e) negative criticism from opponents, (f) finding enough qualified candidates, (g) other, (h) none. The list of challenges was randomly ordered for each respondent. Overall, the biggest challenge that respondents faced was a lack of financial support (34 percent), negative criticism from opponents (32 percent), and a busy campaign schedule (24 percent). A similar number of respondents (26 percent) reported no major challenges (see Figure 14).

Figure 14

Campaign challenges

What are the biggest challenges you face in your candidacy for municipal council? (select up to three)
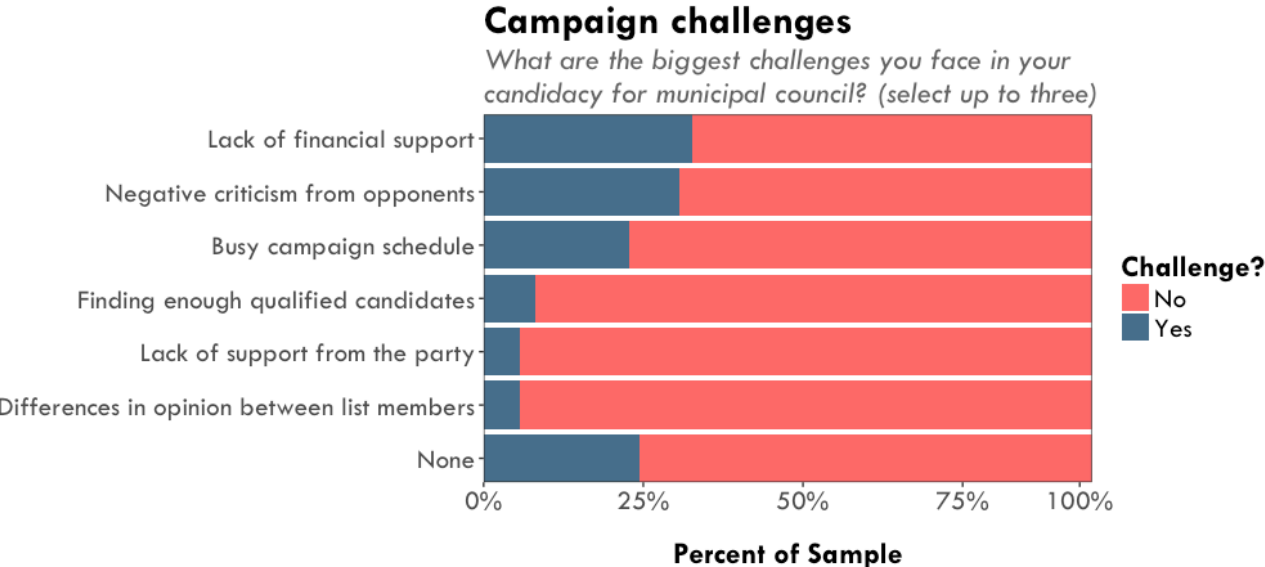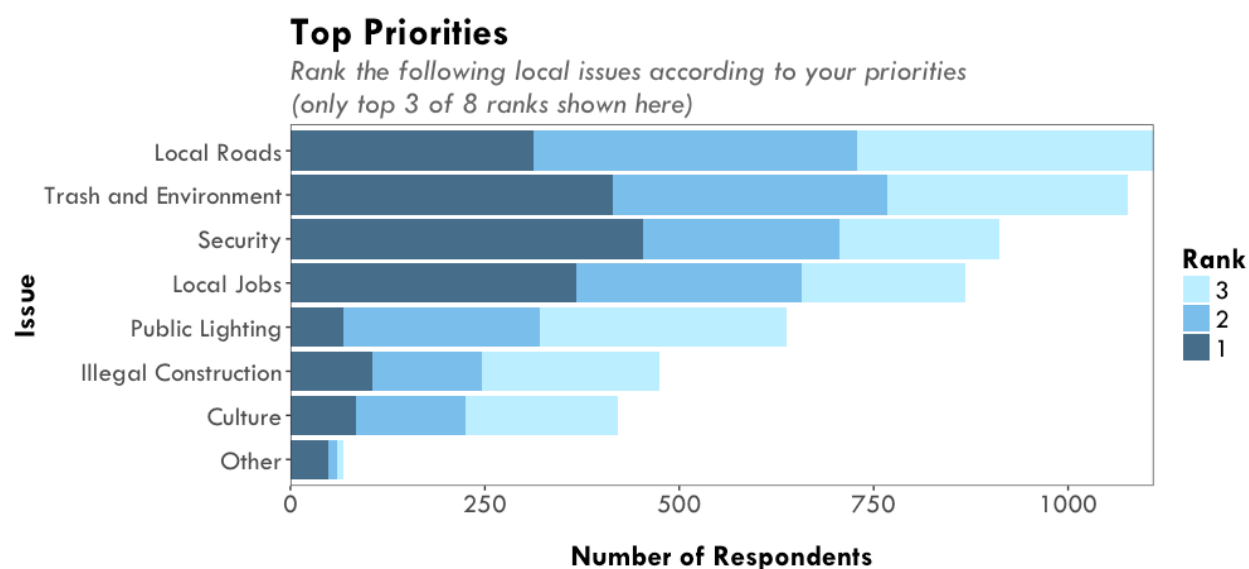
Role in Making the List

A final measure of campaign experience is the degree to which candidates participated—e.g., by recruiting candidates, deciding the order of the list, etc.—in making the list in which they were running. When asked "Did you personally play a role in the preparation of the list?", nearly equal numbers of respondents reported that they had played a "major" role (37 percent), a "minor" role (31 percent), and no role at all (32 percent). For use during analysis, we consider a candidate to have played a role in making the list if they indicated playing a "major" or "minor" role (see Figure 15).

Figure 15

Role in Making the List
Did you personally play a role in the preparation of the list?
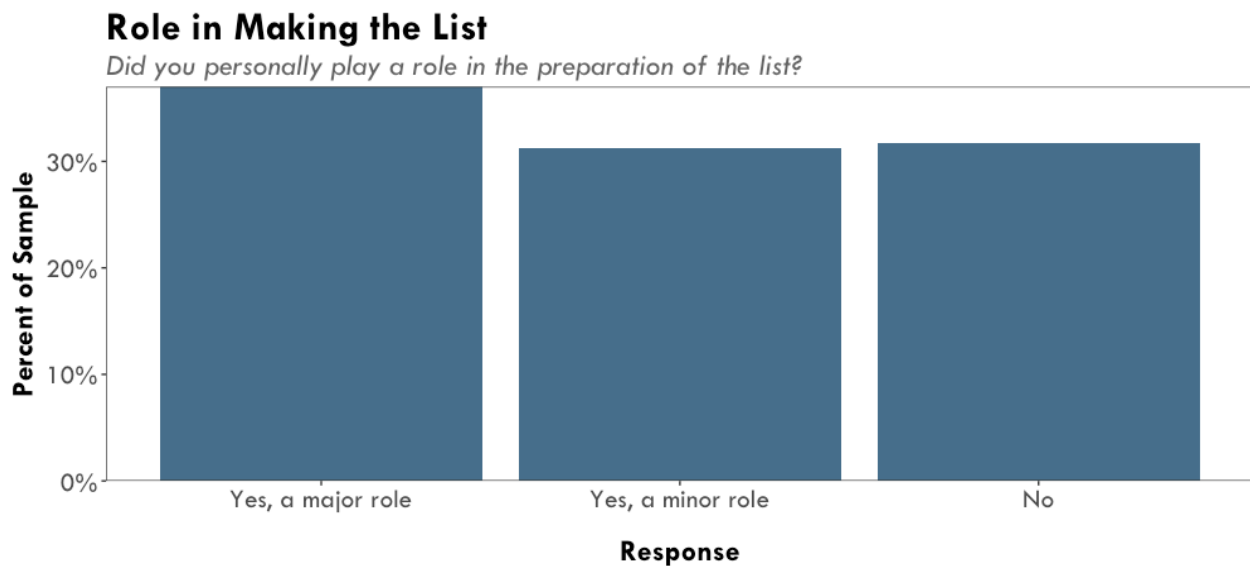
Local Priorities

In order to measure candidates' preferred investment projects for their municipalities, we asked respondents to rank the following local issues from 1 (highest) to 8 (lowest) in terms of their priorities: (a) collecting waste and maintaining the environment, (b) improving local roads, (c) ensuring security, (d) creating jobs for locals, (e) enhancing local cultural life, (f) stopping illegal construction, (g) installing more lights in public spaces, and (h) other. The list of issues was randomly ordered for each respondent. Overall, the highest priorities for a majority of respondents were improving local roads and trash collection, which approximately 60 percent included within in their top-three ranks (see Figure 16). However, the issues most commonly ranked *first* by respondents were ensuring local security (24 percent), trash collection (22 percent), and providing jobs for locals (20 percent).

Figure 16

Top Priorities

Rank the following local issues according to your priorities (only top 3 of 8 ranks shown here)

Future Work

In addition to forthcoming policy briefs on female, youth, and independent candidates, the LECS data will help us explore a variety of other topics. Specifically, we hope to use this data to understand the types of people who are likely to become candidates for political office, how quotas affect the electoral strategies of political parties, and the implications of councilor characteristics for future municipal governance. Additionally, we have embedded several survey experiments in the LECS in order to examine the factors that most affect candidates' responsiveness to constituents, selection of development projects, and the choice of future running mates. An anonymized version of the LECS data will also be made publicly available in 2019.

Within Tunisia, we hope to extend the LECS through follow-up surveys of the same and/or future waves of candidates and elected officials. This will allow us to track the development of this new political class as Tunisia progresses in its democratic consolidation and decentralization processes. For instance, a panel dataset could be used to examine how local politicians' relationships with political parties evolve over time, and how participation in municipal governance affects the political ambitions, policy priorities, and core competencies.

Beyond Tunisia, the LECS survey instrument can be adapted to other contexts in the MENA region and elsewhere. Additional surveys of local candidates and officials could supplement existing work—such as Arab Barometer—that focuses on public opinion. By better understanding local political elites, future studies of this kind will help deepen our understanding of political participation, party development, prospects for decentralization, and local governance across the region.

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).

Julia Clark is a PhD candidate in comparative political science and methodology at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD), where her research focuses on uneven democratization and development in Tunisia's post-revolution municipalities. She previously worked at Center for Global Development (CGD) and consults for the World Bank's Identification for Development (ID4D) group. Clark holds an MA in Governance and Development from the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Sussex and a BA in International Relations and Spanish from Tufts University.

Aytuğ Şaşmaz is a PhD candidate at Harvard University. Currently he is working on his dissertation project, which examines the challenges of party-building in the Mediterranean Middle East, particularly Tunisia, Turkey and Morocco. He is involved in research projects on the determinants of primary health care quality in Lebanon, decentralization process and institutional design of local governance in Tunisia, and municipalization of rural governance in Turkey. He holds degrees in political science from Bogazici University, London School of Economics and Brown University. Prior to his doctoral training, Aytuğ worked as an education policy analyst at the Education Reform Initiative, a think-tank in Turkey, where he conducted several research projects in collaboration with the Turkish Ministry of National Education, UNICEF, and Turkish Foundation of Education Volunteers.