



Generational divide in Tunisia's 2018 municipal elections: Are youth candidates different?

By Alexandra Blackman, Julia Clark, and Aytuğ Şaşmaz

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Background

Youth activists celebrated in late March 2018, when Tunisia's Independent High Authority for Elections (ISIE) reported that 52 percent of registered candidates for the municipal elections were youth (those 35 and younger), while those over 35 represented only 48 percent of total registered candidates.² This increased participation by youth as candidates is explained—in part—by the country's new “youth quota,” designed to ensure the inclusion of younger candidates.³ Others argue that youth put forth their candidacies out of frustration with the current political class. As a result of the high number of youth candidates on electoral lists, more than 37 percent of the winning candidates are under the age of 36.⁴

The excitement surrounding the high levels of youth candidacy and representation among the winning candidates assumes, however, that there are tangible differences in how younger and older candidates will govern. We examine that contention in this brief using data from our [Local Election Candidate Survey](#)

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 Litfi, M.A. 2018. “Young Tunisians have high hopes for May's municipal elections.” *Al-Monitor*, available at: <https://goo.gl/3hmBLm>. (Date of last access: July 7, 2018).

³ In the 2017 law governing the municipal elections, Tunisia mandated that all candidate lists must include at least one person between the age of 18 and 35—the legal cutoff of “youth”—among the top three members of the list. Additionally, each set of six consecutive list members must include an additional youth. These two factors constitute the “youth quota” in Tunisian electoral law. Despite these requirements, younger candidates were concentrated toward the end of many electoral lists, meaning they were less likely to win a seat on the council. For example, only 180 of the 506 candidates we surveyed from the top two spots on their lists youth (35.6 percent). For detailed analysis of the laws regulating the municipal elections, see: Tahar, N. 2017. “Analyse de la législation relative aux élections municipales et régionales.” *International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES)*, available at: <https://goo.gl/Kwn4RH>. (Date of last access: July 7, 2018).

⁴ Litfi (2018).

(LECS)⁵ in Tunisia. Overall, we find that candidates across different age cohorts diverge on key demographics; younger candidates are more likely to be female, to have a post-secondary degree, and to be interested in seeking higher office.

The recent outburst of frustration with the government's austerity package and the subsequent wave of protests in January 2018⁶ suggest several additional ways that youth may differ from older candidates: (1) their views on employment issues and (2) their protest behavior.⁷

Indeed, like others in their generation, the youth candidates in our sample are more likely to be unemployed or underemployed and, accordingly, more likely to support more public sector jobs and to prioritize job creation at the municipal level.⁸ However, although youth activists have attracted attention for their critiques of the current government and their involvement in recent protests,⁹ candidates in the LECS sample do not vary across different age cohorts in their support for democratic norms, their support for the 2010 revolution, and their views regarding key policy issues, such as the recent reconciliation law.

Key Findings

1. Youth candidates tend to be female and differ from older candidates on several other key demographics.

Our sample includes candidates ranging from 20 to 77 years old with a mean age of 40.6 and a median age of 39.¹⁰ **The most notable age difference is between male and female candidates: the mean age is 45 years old for male candidates and 36 years old for female candidates** (see Figure 1).¹¹ This stark gap in

⁵ 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>.

⁶ Berman, C. 2018. "Why do Tunisians keep protesting?" *The Washington Post*, available at: <https://goo.gl/3DstGz>. (Date of last access: July 7, 2018).

⁷ Blaise, L. 2018. "Nearly 800 Arrested in Economic Protests in Tunisia." *The New York Times*, available at: <https://goo.gl/q9gRh1>. (Date of last access: July 7, 2018).

⁸ Kestler-D'Amours, J. 2018. "'Employ us or kill us': Tunisian youth on the margins." *Al-Jazeera*, available at: <https://goo.gl/7Njklju>. (Date of last access: July 7, 2018).

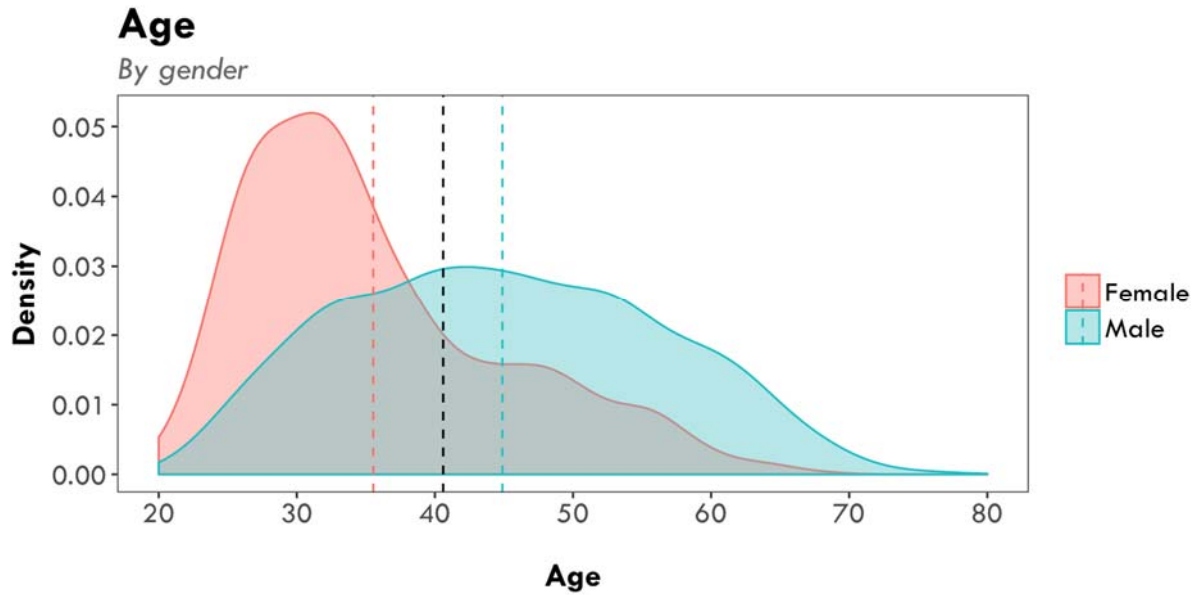
⁹ Leduc, S. 2018. "Seven years on, Tunisia's youth still talking about a revolution." *France 24*, available at: <https://goo.gl/t4gcQX>. (Date of last access: July 7, 2018).

¹⁰ The sampling procedure used to select respondents is described in detail in the first brief of this series. Notably, we did not have age information for candidates prior to the survey, and so were unable to stratify on candidate age when selecting candidates. In addition, because we do not have the age information of any candidates that did not respond, we cannot calculate the response rate by candidate age. Thus, while most of the results presented in this brief should be broadly representative of age differences across all municipal council candidates, it may be that non-respondents differ from respondents in some important ways that limit the generalizability of our results. This may be particularly true given our effort to survey "likely winners" by oversampling Ennahda and Nidaa candidates and more candidates from the tops of the lists. Accordingly, it is likely that the sampling strategy and potential differential non-response by age may make our results more representative of winning youth candidates than the overall pool of candidates.

¹¹ For more discussion of female candidates, see: Clark, J., Şaşmaz, A., and Blackman, A. 2018. "List fillers or future leaders: Female candidates in Tunisia's 2018 municipal elections." *Democracy International Policy Brief*.

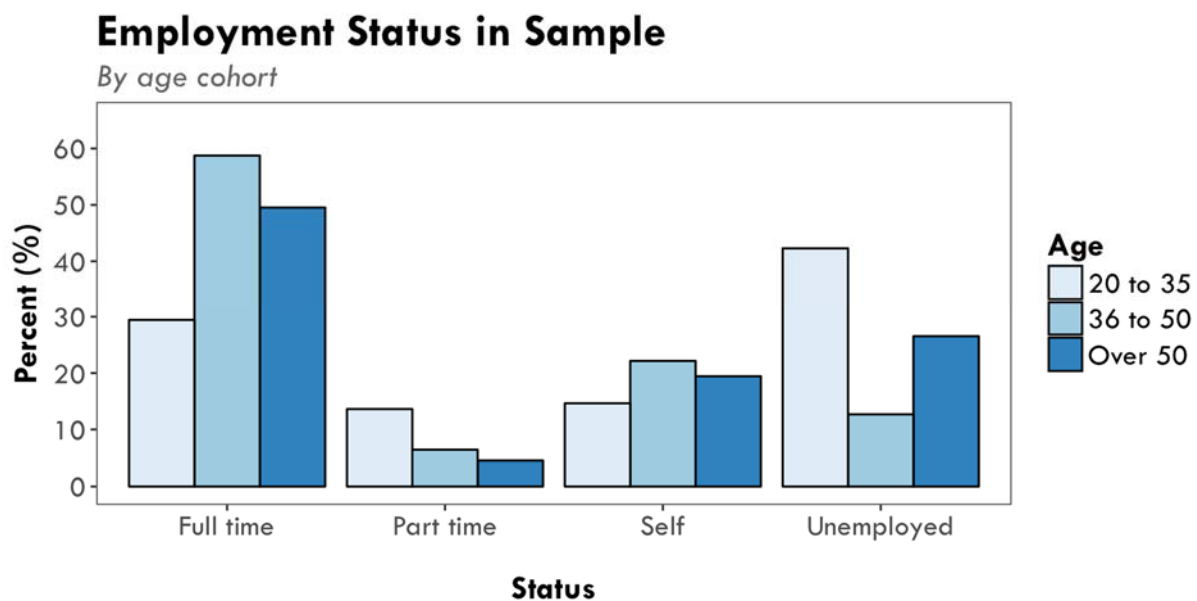
age difference between male and female candidates is likely due to list-makers’ attempt to satisfy both the youth and gender quotas simultaneously.

Figure 1



Youth candidates also differ from older candidates in several ways we would expect given life cycle differences. Youth candidates are less likely to be married and more likely to be unemployed. Unlike older candidates who are categorized as unemployed due to retirement, younger candidates are more likely to be students or looking for work (see Figure 2).

Figure 2



Given differences in employment status, it is also not surprising that youth candidates report lower monthly incomes than older candidates. Over 67 percent of youth candidates report an average household income of less than 1,000 Tunisian Dinars (TND) per month, compared with only 33 percent of those over 35.¹² Conversely, less than 10 percent of youth candidates report a household income greater than 2,000 TND per month, compared with over 26 percent of those over 35.

2. Youth candidates are more educated, while older candidates are more likely to have previous government experience.

Researchers and policymakers examining the municipal election highlight the importance of councilors' capacity in determining future municipality performance.¹³ We examine this concern about councilor capacity using two primary measures: education and previous government experience. Notably, in our sample, over 22 percent of candidates report that they have previously held a job in the government administration or previously served on a municipal council, and 75 percent report having a bachelor's degree or higher. Importantly, however, older and younger candidates differ with regard to these measures of capacity and in ways that could have significant implications for governance. Younger candidates are *more* likely to have completed a bachelor's degree or higher but *less* likely to have previously served in the government.

Education—particularly post-secondary education—is often used as a measure of candidate capacity, endowing candidates with additional skills relevant for policy-making and problem-solving and increasing their efficacy once in office. While roughly 20 percent of Tunisian citizens report obtaining a bachelor's degree or higher, nearly 86 percent of the youth candidates in our sample have completed university or postgraduate education (see

Figure 3).¹⁴

Moreover, our data show a negative correlation between older age and education level. Even when controlling for other correlates of education level, including candidate gender, income, list type, list rank, and municipality, **each additional year in the age of a candidate is associated with a decrease in the probability that candidate has completed post-secondary education by roughly 1.2 percentage points.** To the degree that education is a predictor of capacity, these results suggest that—despite concerns about youth inexperience¹⁵—younger cohorts of elected officials may have the resources to serve their communities well.

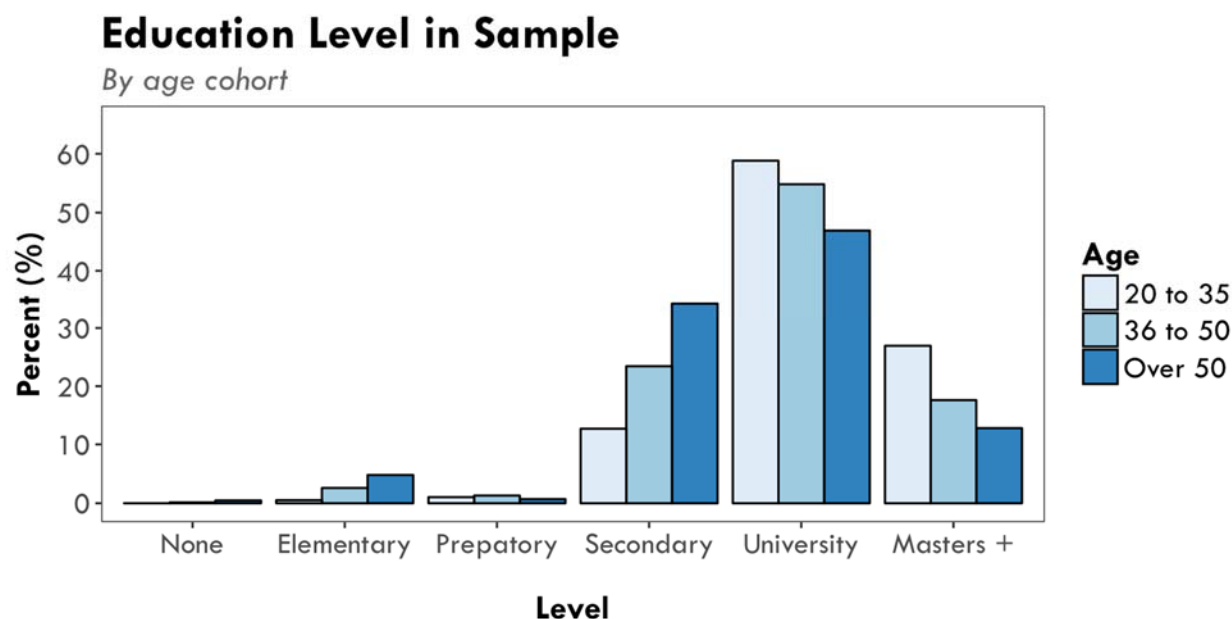
¹² In June 2018, 1000 TND is roughly equivalent to 380 U.S. Dollars.

¹³ Yerkes, S. and Muasher, M. 2018. "Decentralization in Tunisia: Empowering Towns, Engaging People." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, available at: <https://goo.gl/X5io2V>. (Date of last access: July 7, 2018).

¹⁴ We use estimates for the total population from the 2016 Arab Barometer Survey. For further details on Wave IV of the survey, see: Arab Barometer. 2017. "Instruments and Data Files." *Arab Barometer*, available at: <https://goo.gl/oKTZpj>. (Date of last access: July 7, 2018).

¹⁵ Yerkes, S. 2017. "Young people are staying away from Tunisian politics—here's why." The Brookings Institution, available at: <https://goo.gl/TZwErQ>. (Date of last access: July 7, 2018).

Figure 3

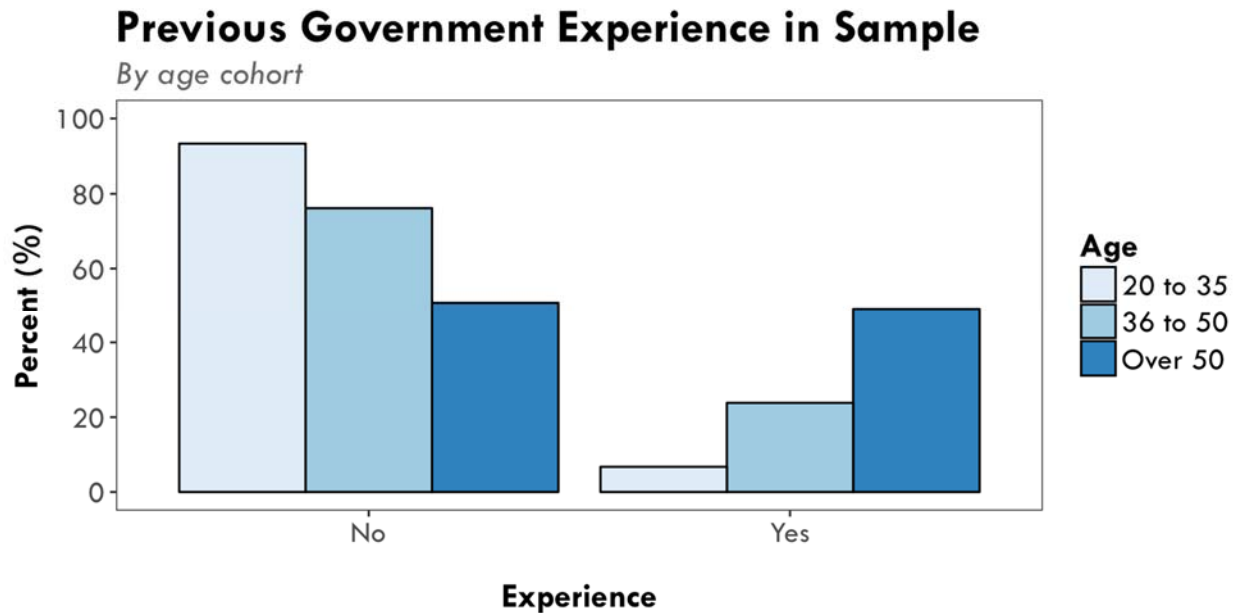


In addition to education, we measure candidate capacity based on whether the candidate has previously held a job in any part of the government administration and/or previously served on a municipal council. While officials who have previously served in government may arguably have entrenched local interests, they also have experience dealing with Tunisia's bureaucracy and with typical constituent requests. This type of previous experience may prove to be an asset for achieving cooperation between these new councils, the central government bureaucracy, and other officials, such as regional governors.¹⁶

In contrast to education, our data show a positive correlation between older age and government experience. Even when controlling for other correlates of previous experience, including candidate gender, income, list type, and list rank, each additional year in the age of a candidate is correlated with an increase in the probability that candidate has previous government experience by approximately 1.3 percentage points.¹⁷ More than 93 percent of youth candidates lack previous government experience, while more than 66 percent of non-youth candidates have such experience (see Figure 4).

¹⁶ Mahjoub, T. and Briki, R. 2018. "Q&A - Tunisia's Municipal Elections: The View from Tunis." *Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED)*, available at: <https://goo.gl/WWjiCt>. (Date of last access: July 7, 2018).

¹⁷ These results hold even when we control for unobserved differences across the municipalities by using municipal fixed effects.

Figure 4

While these differences indicate that both old and young candidates have qualifications that—in the right collaborative environment—could be valuable for governance, these different types of capacity could also contribute to tensions in how these councils approach their work. Moreover, these differences could exacerbate the existing social cleavage between generations: for instance, youth may perceive experienced older candidates as representative of the “politics as usual” with which many young people express frustration, while the old political class could marginalize youth councilors because they lack experience.¹⁸

3. Youth candidates report receiving similar levels of encouragement for their electoral run and facing similar challenges as older candidates.

Similar to concerns about female candidates, there has been some concern that youth candidates are not receiving sufficient encouragement or face higher barriers to becoming active in the political sphere.¹⁹ To better understand how the campaign experience differs for youth candidates, we examine whether youth candidates report different sources of encouragement for running or different obstacles to their candidacy. In general, we find that, across age groups, candidates in our sample report similar levels of encouragement and similar types of challenges (see Figure 5).²⁰ **Although younger cohorts report greater encouragement**

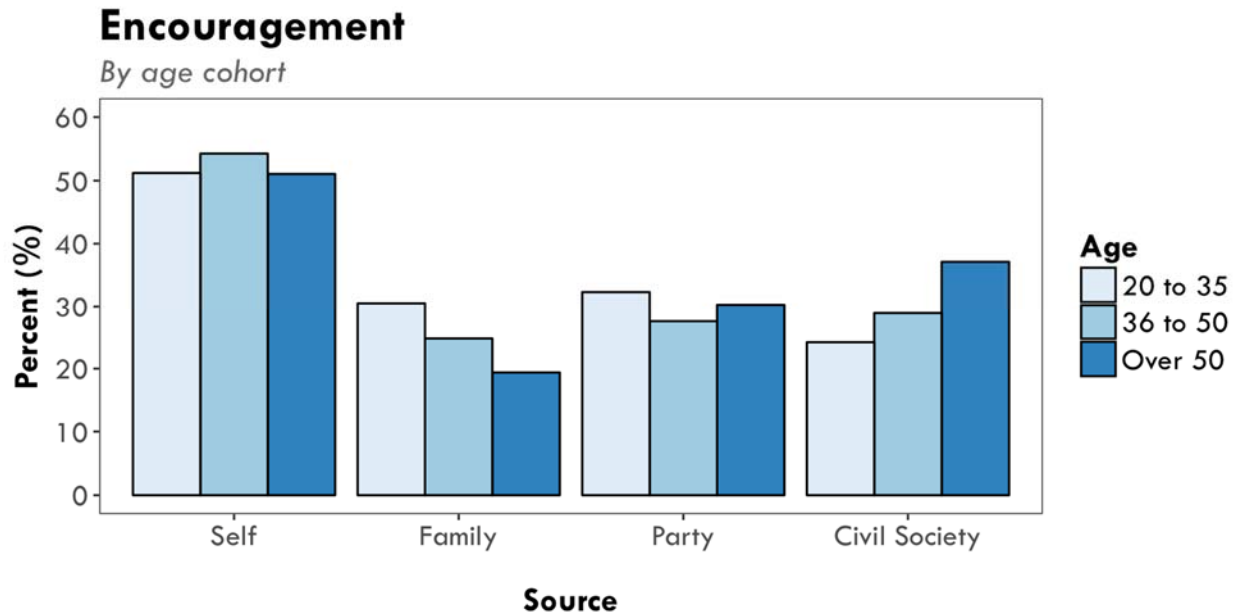
¹⁸ Wolf, A. 2018. “Former RCD officials stage a comeback in municipal elections in Tunisia.” *The Journal of North African Studies*.

¹⁹ World Bank. 2014. “Tunisia: Breaking the Barriers to Youth Inclusion.” *World Bank Group*, available at <https://goo.gl/vbbajV>. (Date of last access: July 7, 2018).

²⁰ Respondents could select more than one response for both questions, so percentages will not sum to 100. The questions are: (1) What prompted you to run for municipal council? (Select all that apply.) (2) What are the biggest challenges you face in your candidacy for municipal council? (Select up to three).

from family and older candidates report greater encouragement from civil society, there is substantively little difference across age cohorts once we include candidate gender as a control.²¹

Figure 5

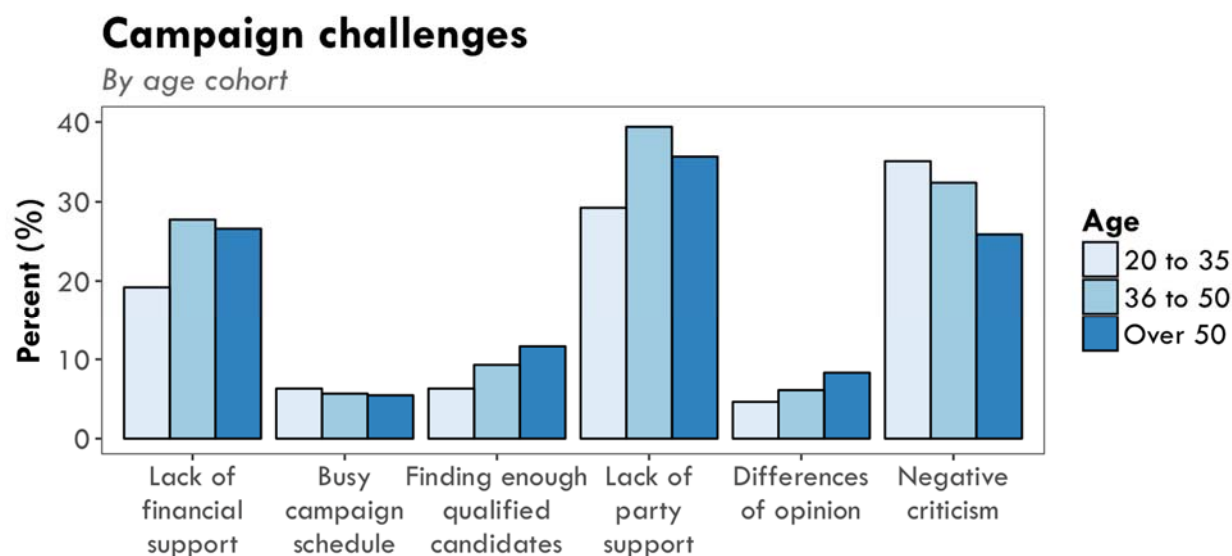


In general, the older candidates in our sample report more challenges facing their candidacy, including greater frustration with finding enough qualified candidates for the list and with existing differences of opinion among list members (see Figure 6). In part, this may be due to the fact that fewer youth candidates were at the top of their lists (only 37 out of 272 list heads we surveyed were youth candidates), and may therefore have been less involved with daily challenges. The broad similarities in levels and types of encouragement and challenges across age cohorts (or even slightly higher reported challenges among older candidates) suggest that the main obstacle to increased youth leadership is not a perceived lack of support or a particular perceived challenge during the campaign.²²

²¹ Each additional year in the age of a candidate is correlated with a decrease of 0.4 percentage points in the probability that candidate reports family encouragement and an increase of 0.3 percentage points in the probability that candidate reports civil society encouragement.

²² The only perceived challenge which youth candidates report at higher rates is negative criticism. However the differences are not substantively significant; each additional year in the age of a candidate is correlated with a decrease of 0.3 percentage points in the probability that candidate is concerned with negative criticism.

Figure 6



4. Youth and older candidates display similar levels of support for the 2010/11 protests and pro-democracy values.

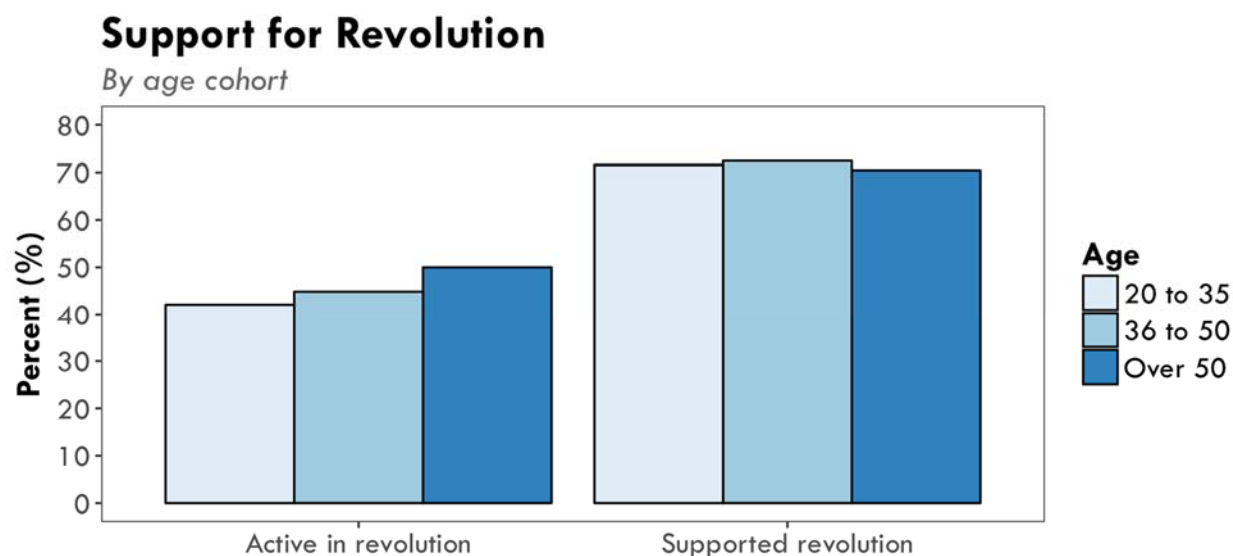
Advocates for bringing more youth into politics often portray these individuals as more supportive of the 2011 revolution and the ideals it represents.²³ This may indeed be true for the Tunisian population at large: in a 2013 nationally-representative survey, the Arab Barometer found that 26.3 percent of those 35 and under reported participating in the 2010/2011 protests, compared with 14.5 percent of those over 35.²⁴

Among the candidates in our sample, however, the differences between age cohorts are less pronounced. First, we examine whether the candidates report supporting or actively participating in the protests and demonstrations that led to the revolution. Across age cohorts, approximately 70 percent of candidates report supporting the protests and 40 percent report that they actively participated (see Figure 7). Even controlling for candidate gender, income, list type, and municipality, **there are no substantive differences among candidates of different ages with regard to the probability that they support or were active during the revolution.**

²³ Agence France Presse (AFP). 2018. "Tunisia's revolutionary youth disillusioned ahead of municipal elections." *Arab News*, available at: <https://goo.gl/4Ppy6g>. (Date of last access: July 7, 2018).

²⁴ This age difference in reported participation holds after including controls for respondent gender, education, and governorate fixed effects for unobserved heterogeneity by region. For further details on Wave III of the survey, see: Arab Barometer. 2017. "Instruments and Data Files." *Arab Barometer*, available at: <https://goo.gl/oKTZpj>. (Date of last access: July 7, 2018).

Figure 7



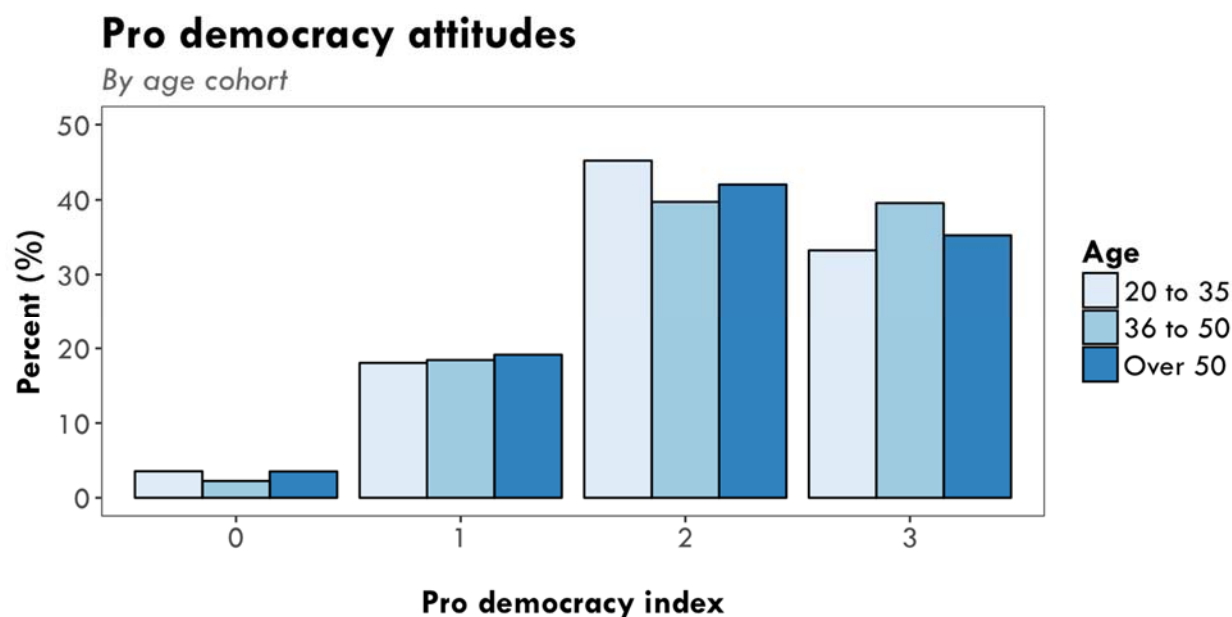
Second, we construct an index of pro-democracy attitudes, with those who receive a higher score on the index expressing higher support for norms and values often associated democratic practice and specific to the Tunisian context.²⁵ **The percentage of candidates at each level of the index is steady across most age groups, and age is not correlated with any substantive difference in pro-democracy attitudes** (see Figure 8).²⁶

Although we do not find substantive differences in support for the revolution between older and younger candidates in our sample, it is worth noting that **the candidates' overall rate of reported participation in the revolution (40 percent) is substantially higher than the percent of the general public that reported participating (18.6 percent) in the Arab Barometer (2013)**. This suggests that the types of individuals interested in pursuing politics or recruited by the parties across age groups differ from the general public in important ways. Future research will examine how individuals select into becoming political candidates.

²⁵ The pro-democracy index is constructed from responses to three questions related to democratic values and practice. For more details on the index, please 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>.

²⁶ This holds when including standard controls.

Figure 8



5. Youth and older candidates broadly share policy preferences, although younger candidates prefer greater public-sector employment and are more focused on job creation.

Given candidates' similar commitment to the revolution and democratic norms across age groups, are there tangible differences in older and younger candidates' approach to local governance? How do these candidates compare on substantive policy questions?

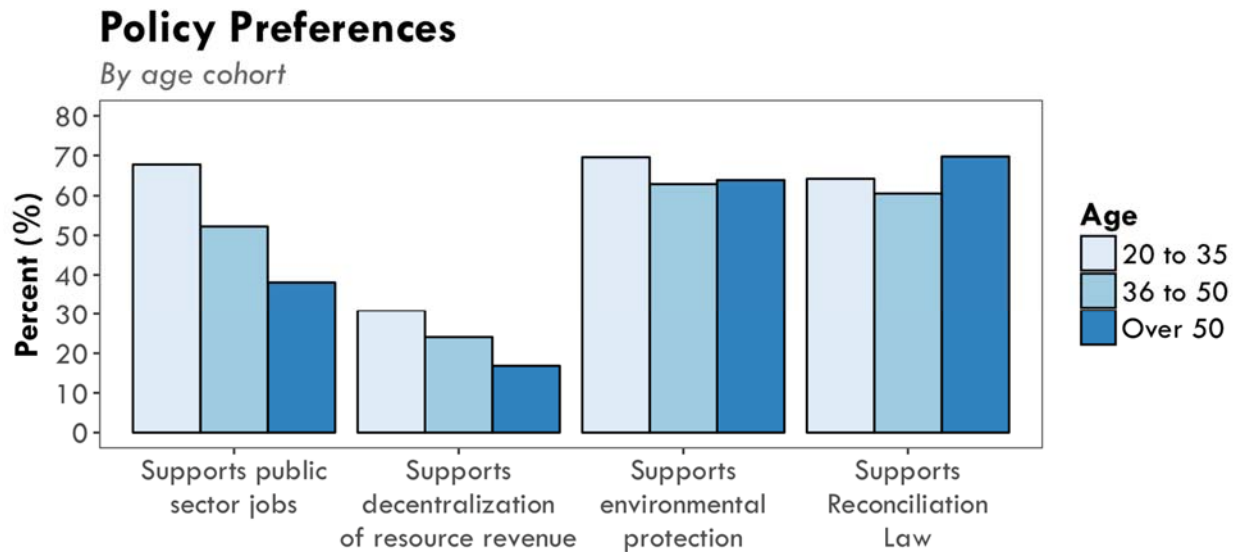
In our sample, we find that opinions regarding certain policies—such as the importance of environmental protection and the recent administrative reconciliation law²⁷—do not differ across age groups. We do, however, find that preferences regarding the role of the public sector in job creation and the distribution of resource rents²⁸ to producing regions differ across age cohorts (see Figure 9). The drastic differences across age cohorts regarding the importance of public sector employment may be the result of high unemployment and underemployment among younger candidates.²⁹

²⁷ Saleh, H. 2017. "Tunisia parliament passes controversial economic reconciliation law." *Financial Times*, available at: <https://goo.gl/f9JyQc>. (Date of last access: July 7, 2018).

²⁸ Namane, W. 2017. "The Tataouine Protests and Political Stability in Tunisia." *The Atlantic Council*, available at: <https://goo.gl/iGiXiW>. (Date of last access: July 7, 2018).

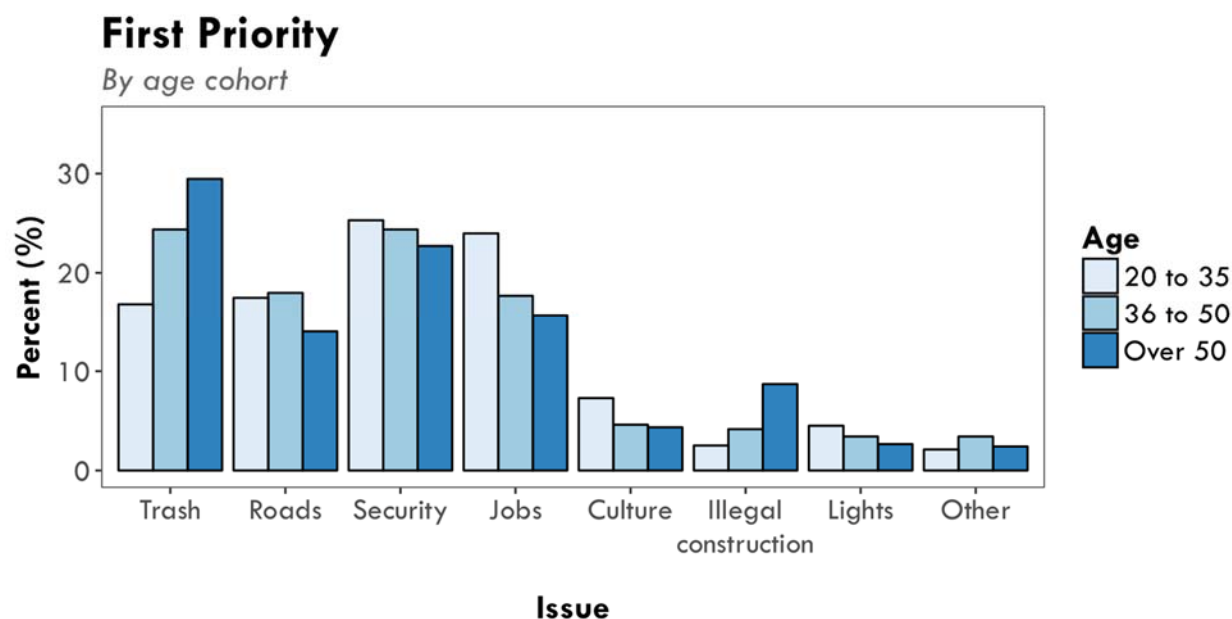
²⁹ Younger age remains positively and significantly correlated with a preference for public sector jobs even after including candidate gender, income, list type, list rank, and municipality fixed effects. The effect, however, is stronger for female respondents and respondents from independent lists. Because of the notable correlation between age, gender, and membership on a non-Ennahda/non-Nidaa list, fully understanding what drives this preference requires further research. For more discussion of partisan politics and independent candidates, see forthcoming brief on independent

Figure 9



With regard to the specific policy issues that fall under the authority of the municipal councils, we find that there is broad agreement on the local priorities across all ages. In general, respondents identified trash collection, roads, security, and jobs as the four main priorities for the municipalities (see Figure 10). However, older and younger candidates differ in which issue they rank as their top priority. Older candidates are more likely to list trash collection and illegal construction as first priorities, while younger candidates are more likely to list jobs and security as their first priorities. While these policy priorities do not vary drastically by age, they may be predictive of the types of policies older or younger councilors prioritize and pursue in the future.

Figure 10



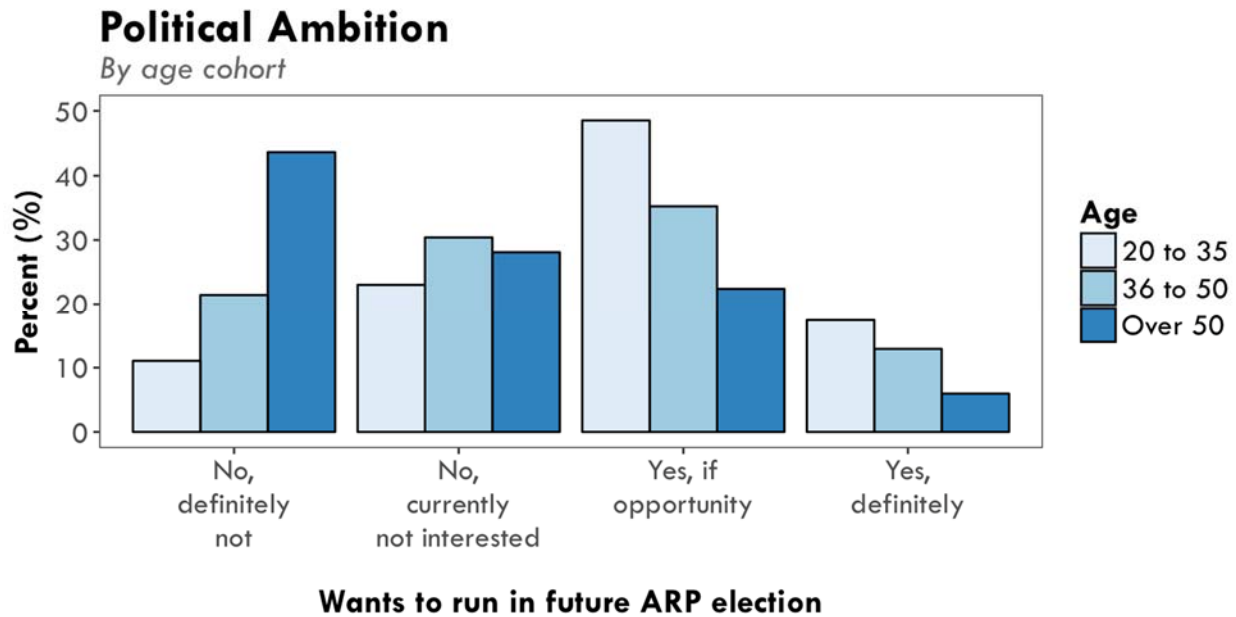
Policy Implications

Tunisia's youth quota has helped bring an unprecedented number of young people into formal positions of governance. Close examination of the similarities and differences between candidates of different age groups suggests that younger and older councilors-elect will bring important—but different—qualifications to their municipal councils, which may have implications for governance. Despite some differences in educational background and government experience, candidates across age groups express similar commitment to the revolution and democratic norms.

Moreover, candidates of different age groups report comparable levels of encouragement for and challenges to their campaigns, with older candidates more likely to report issues with finding qualified candidates and securing sufficient financial support. This suggests, fortunately, that younger candidates are not perceiving an increased lack of support or increased challenges relative to their older counterparts. Instead, the main obstacle to greater youth participation may be more closely related to the limited opportunities for leadership *within* parties and political or civil society organizations. For instance, younger respondents in our candidate survey—and particularly female candidates—were more likely to report playing no role or only a minor role in the construction of the list. Policymakers seeking to strengthen youth participation should **work to ensure that youth have additional access to professional development opportunities.**

A focus on leadership and professional development in this context is particularly important given the significant overlap between youth and female candidates. In Tunisia—like most countries around the world—political power is often a function of age and gender, potentially compounding the disadvantage facing young, female councilors-elect. It is important that future work aimed at strengthening municipal councils and political parties **targets support to both female and youth populations.**

Figure 11



Looking beyond the first months and years of governance, younger and older candidates also differ with regard to their reported future political ambitions. When asked if they would consider running in the parliamentary elections for the Assembly of Representatives of the People (ARP) in 2019 or 2024, older candidates typically declined, while youth candidates were more likely to say they would consider it if there was an opportunity (see Figure 11).³⁰ This difference in expressed political ambition across age groups again suggests that political parties, coalitions, and organizations should **focus on developing and providing new avenues for youth engagement and participation** to support and sustain existing interest among younger candidates.

³⁰ Even when including standard controls, each additional year in the age of a candidate is associated with a decrease in the probability that candidate expresses interest in running for higher office by roughly 1.2 percent.

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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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.