



# One third of new municipal councilors in Tunisia are from independent lists. How independent are they?

By Aytuğ Şaşmaz, Alexandra Blackman, and Julia Clark

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## Background

On May 6, Tunisia held its first local democratic elections. With Ennahda—the moderate Islamist party—seeing its lists win 29 percent of the votes nationwide, the party claimed victory.<sup>2</sup> Yet there was another type of list that garnered even more votes than Ennahda: independent, non-partisan lists received more than 32 percent of the votes. As a result, one third of municipal council seats will be held by candidates from independent lists.

Many observers have welcomed this development given perceived frustration with political parties in Tunisia.<sup>3</sup> Even though the country is considered a success case after the 2010-11 Arab uprisings, there are persistent concerns about the *sustainability* and *depth* of Tunisian democracy. In the eyes of a majority of Tunisian voters, the grand coalition between Nidaa and Ennahda has failed to solve the country’s most urgent problems, such as creating economic growth.<sup>4</sup> This has led to a widespread disenchantment among Tunisians

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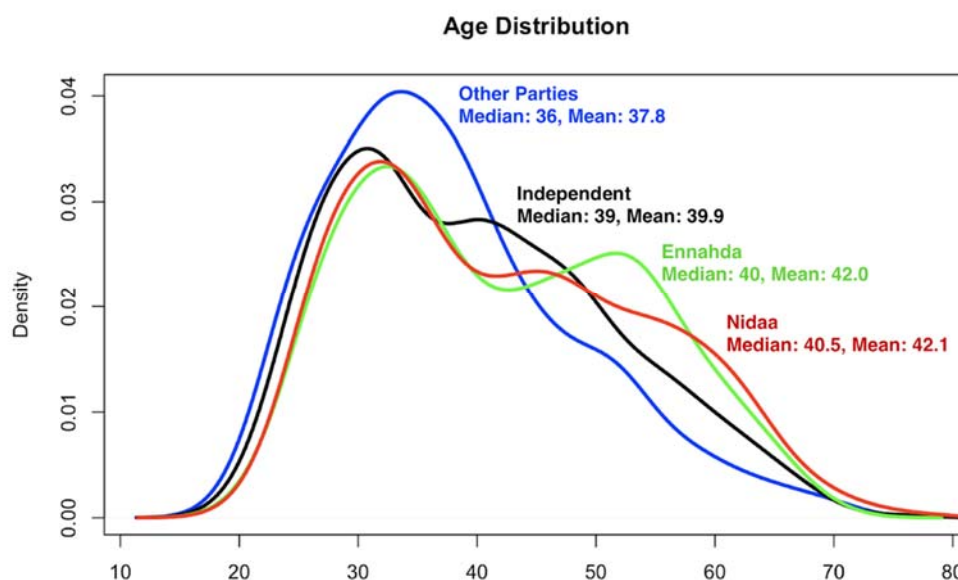
<sup>1</sup> Support for this project was generously provided by Democracy International (DI), the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), Stanford University (the Abbasi Program in Islamic Studies and the Freeman Spogli Institute), the Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS), and Harvard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

<sup>2</sup> Amara, T. 2018. “Tunisia's Ennahda claims victory in landmark local elections”. *Reuters*, available at: [goo.gl/SoSP8B](https://goo.gl/SoSP8B). (Date of last access: July 7, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> *Middle East Eye*. 2018. “‘A new actor’: Tunisia's independents beat main parties in municipal elections”. Available at: [goo.gl/h2vNbV](https://goo.gl/h2vNbV) (Date of last access: July 7, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> According to a poll released by the IRI in January 2018, 57 percent of Tunisians consider the performance of the government to be “bad,” and 61 percent think that the government does a bad job in creating employment opportunities. See the following report: Center for Insights in Survey Research. 2018. “Public Opinion Survey of Tunisians: November 23-December 3, 2017.” *International Republican Institute*, available at: [goo.gl/UouguW](https://goo.gl/UouguW) (Date of last access: July 7, 2018).



**Figure 1**

## 2. Independent candidates express greater mistrust of parties and politicians.

Among the general public in Tunisia, there is widespread mistrust for political parties and politicians. In the 2015 Afrobarometer survey, 76 percent of Tunisian respondents said that the politicians work more to serve their own ambitions rather than serving the people, and this sentiment is frequently echoed in informal conversations and on social media.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, data from the LECS suggest that most candidates did not share this sentiment.

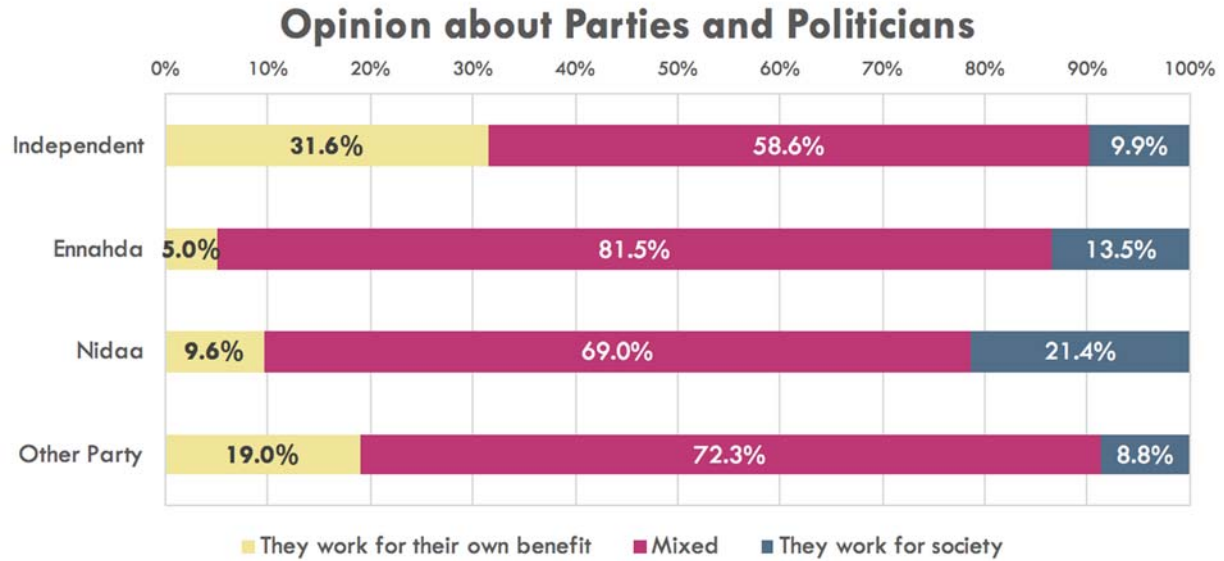
Only 5 percent of Ennahda candidates, 10 percent of Nidaa candidates, and 19 percent of other party candidates reported that they think parties and politicians usually work for their own benefit. **Here, independent candidates diverge: nearly 32 percent of candidates on independent lists reported this unfavorable view about the “political class”** (see Figure 2). This difference between independent candidates and party candidates is statistically significant after controlling for gender, age, list ranking, and municipality of the candidate. Yet independent candidates are still less likely than the general public to think that the politicians only work for their own benefit.

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in the national parliament but not as powerful as Nidaa and Ennahda. They include Popular Front, Democratic Current, Afek Tounes, Machroua Tounes, People's Movement, and Al-Irada. Small parties refer to all others.

<sup>11</sup> Afrobarometer datasets are available at: <http://afrobarometer.org/countries/tunisia-0>.

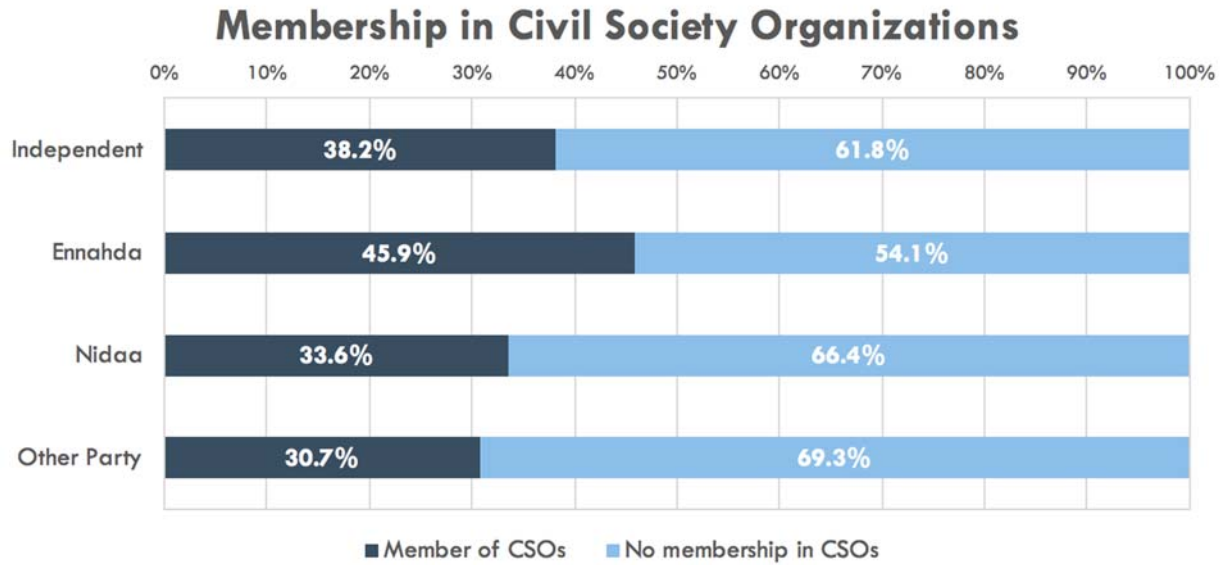
**Figure 2**



**3. Independents are active in civil society, but so are party list members.**

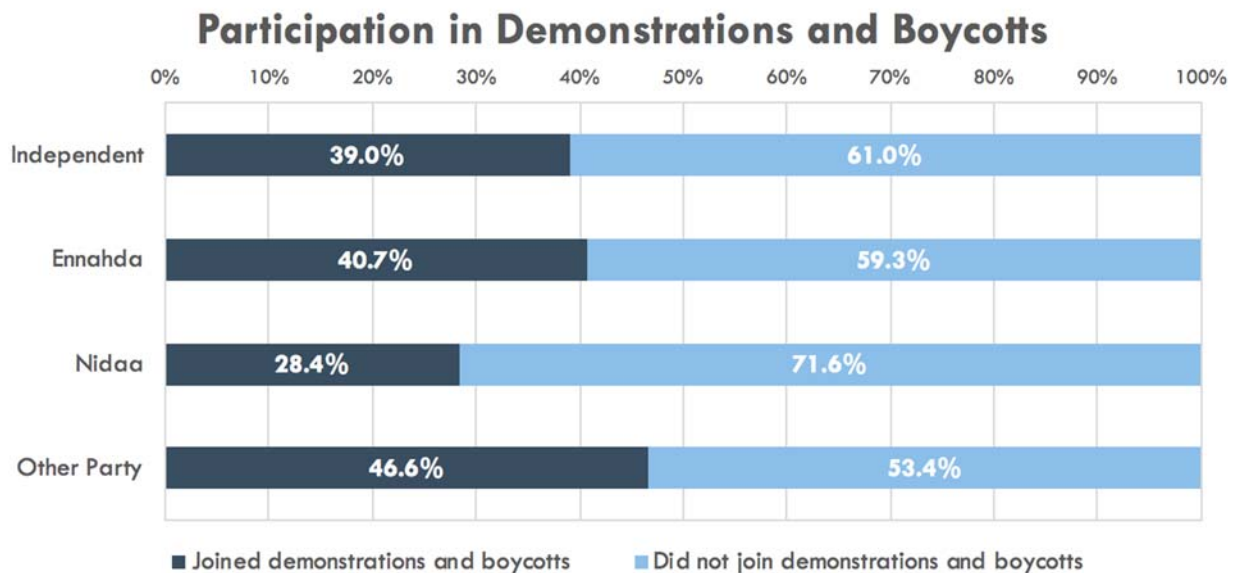
Another common expectation about independent candidates is that they might bring valuable experience from civil society—which bloomed in post-revolutionary Tunisia—to municipal councils. Overall, 38 percent of independent candidates in the LECS sample reported being a member of a civil society organization (CSO). This is a **higher rate of CSO membership than Nidaa and other party candidates (33.6 percent and 30.7 percent, respectively) but a lower rate than members of Ennahda lists** (see Figure 3). The difference between independent candidates and Ennahda and other party candidates is statistically significant after controlling for gender, age, list ranking, and municipality.

Figure 3



In addition to formal membership in CSOs, we might expect that independent candidates are more likely to participate in the frequent demonstrations, strikes, and sit-ins across the country.<sup>12</sup> Once more, however, a mixed picture emerges: as shown in Figure 4, **independent candidates are more likely to have participated in demonstrations than Nidaa candidates (39 percent to 28 percent) but their level of participation is similar to Ennahda candidates (40.7 percent) and less than other party candidates (46.6 percent).**

Figure 4



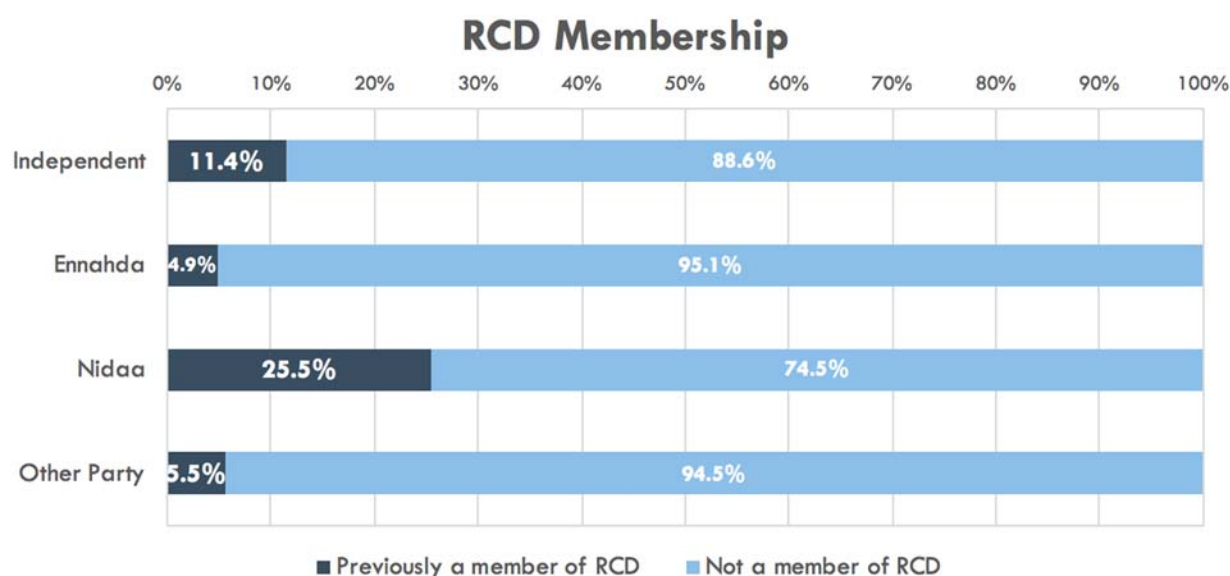
<sup>12</sup> Berman, C. 2018. “Why do Tunisians keep protesting?” *The Washington Post*, available at [goo.gl/cAGJv2](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/2018/07/07/why-do-tunisians-keep-protesting-2018/) (Date of last access: July 7, 2018).

#### 4. Some independents still have connections with the old regime and many did not support the 2011 revolution.

Despite the party being outlawed after the revolution, many observers have noted that cadres of the Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD)—the hegemonic party of the authoritarian Ben Ali era—have been gaining influence in Tunisian politics (primarily within Nidaa Tounes, the main secularist party founded in 2012).

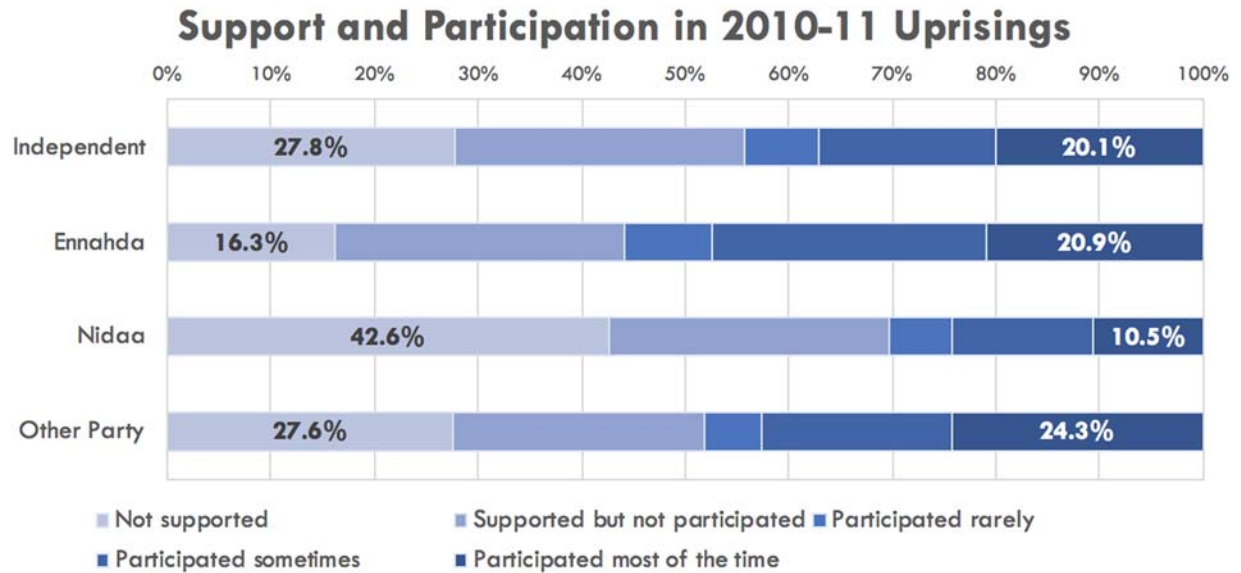
The LECS data provide empirical support for that claim: when asked which political organizations they were a member of before the revolution, some 26 percent of Nidaa candidates responded that they had been a member of the RCD, compared with only 4.9 percent of Ennahda members and 5.5 percent of other party members. **Unexpectedly, however, some 11 percent of candidates on independent lists in our sample also reported being former members of the RCD** (see Figure 5). These results remain statistically significant after controlling for gender, age, list ranking, and municipality fixed effects.

Figure 5



Did independent candidates support the 2010-2011 uprisings more than the party candidates? Yes and no: **independent candidates expressed more support than Nidaa, but less than other types of lists.** Some 28 percent of independent and other party candidates in our sample reported that they did *not* support the uprisings, whereas 43 percent of Nidaa candidates and 16 percent Ennahda candidates reported no support (see Figure 6). These differences are statistically significant after including standard controls.

*Figure 6*



**5. Independent support for democratic values and policy preferences is mixed**

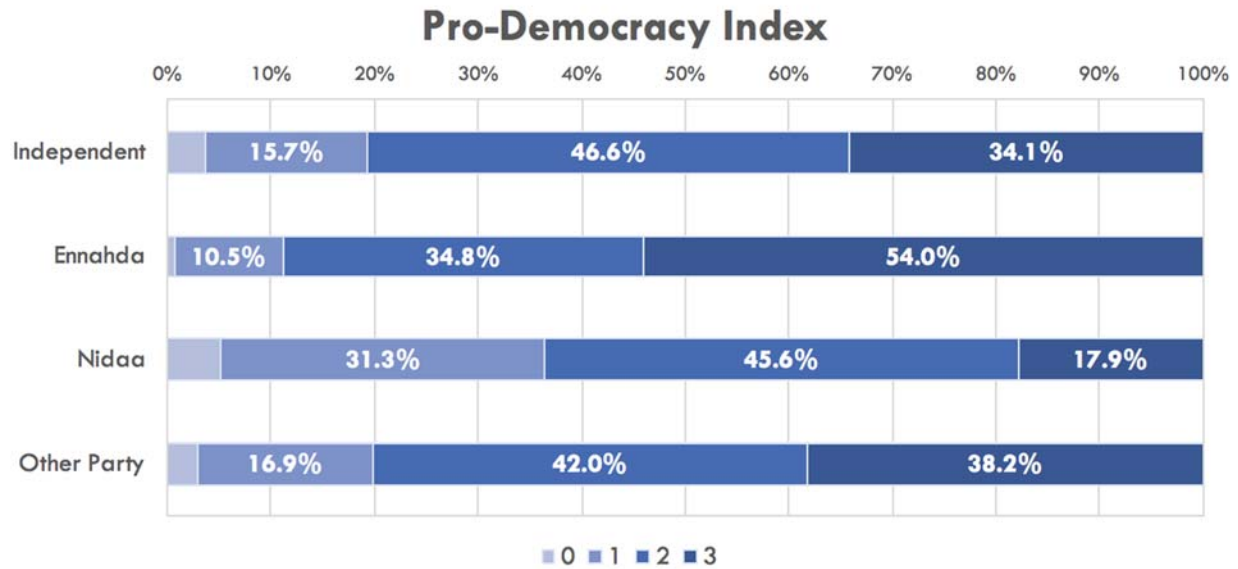
The LECS asked candidates to select between two opposing statements on salient policy issues in Tunisia. We used three of these statement pairs to construct a pro-democracy index.<sup>13</sup> Using this pro-democracy index, we find that independent candidates are once again between Ennahda and Nidaa candidates and quite close to candidates from other party lists. Approximately 34 percent of independent candidates scored a 3 out of 3 (highly supportive of democracy norms and practices), compared with 54 percent of Ennahda candidates and only 18 percent of Nidaa candidates (see Figure 7).

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<sup>13</sup> See Blackman, Clark, and Şaşmaz (2018) for a description of this measure.



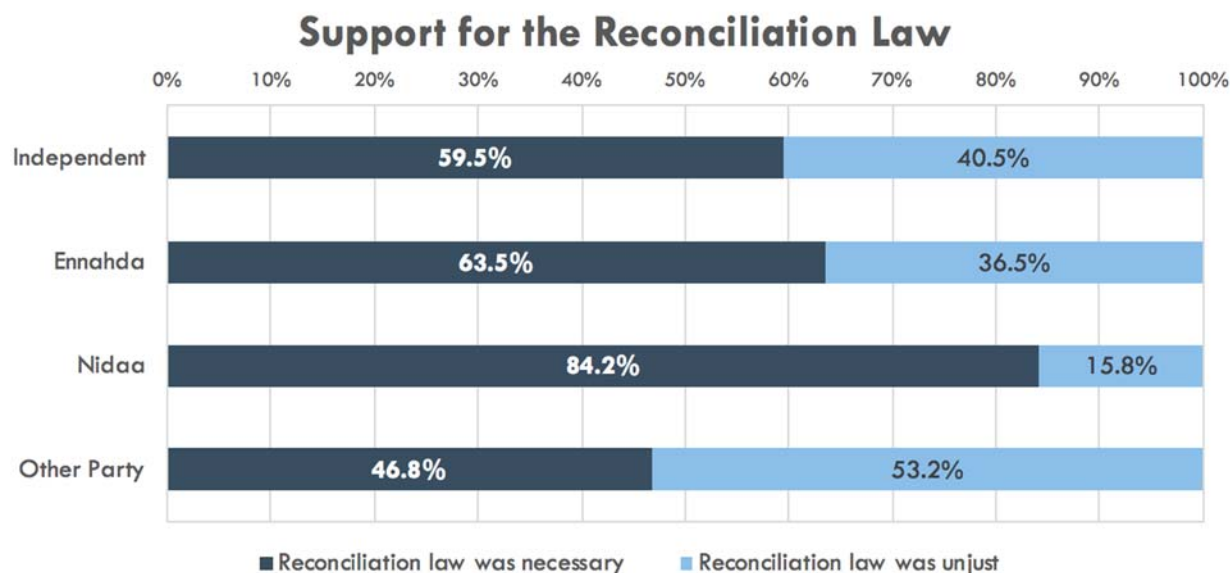
Figure 7



Another expectation of independent candidates is their ability to advocate for policies that diverge from the status quo. One issue that can indicate divergence from the status quo is a candidate’s opinion on the administrative reconciliation law that was passed by the parliament amid protests in September 2017, which provides amnesty against corruption accusations for state personnel during the Ben Ali era. The law was actively pushed by Nidaa and passively supported by Ennahda under the argument that it was necessary for economic growth. Conversely, many civil society organizations and youth activists from the *Manich Msamah* (“I will not forgive”) movement argued that this was an unnecessary and unjust law that would whitewash past offenses. Thus, *not* supporting the reconciliation law can be seen as a stance against the status quo.

In the LECS sample, 59 percent of independent candidates supported the reconciliation law, as opposed to 84 percent of Nidaa candidates, 63 percent of Ennahda candidates, and 47 percent of candidates of other parties (see Figure 8). Again, we see a slight differentiation of independent candidates from at least one of the major parties, but perhaps not as much as those who see independents as progressive activists might hope.

Figure 8



## How should we make sense of these results?

The LECS data suggest a complex picture. Although independent candidates differ in some key aspects from the candidates of the major parties, their profiles are not as different as many observers might have hoped. Candidates on independent lists are more likely to be CSO members than Nidaa candidates, but less likely than Ennahda candidates; only 39 percent of independents participated in demonstrations in the last year, as opposed to 47 percent of candidates from medium-sized and small parties; 28 percent of them did not support the 2011 revolution and 60 percent think that the reconciliation law was necessary. What explains this mixed picture?

Observations by the survey team and interviews conducted by Şaşmaz suggest that these inconsistencies can be explained by the fact that independent lists are not a monolith.<sup>14</sup> In particular, there appear to be **three distinct types of independent lists**:

1. Party lists in disguise: A first group of independent lists were in fact lists constructed by medium-sized parties that preferred to run in some municipalities under the “independent list” banner rather than the party banner. This appears to be largely due to the “horizontal” gender parity quota<sup>15</sup> that requires parties to ensure that (across the country) half of their lists are headed by women. The quota required a high level of coordination within parties across municipalities, and local party

<sup>14</sup> Şaşmaz, A. 2018. “Who really won Tunisia’s first democratic local elections?” *The Washington Post*, available at: <https://goo.gl/zncVyE>.

<sup>15</sup> 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*.

representatives often competed to prove that their locality was more competitive and conservative and thus more “deserving” of a male head. Some parties who wanted to run a male-headed list therefore chose to run as “independents” instead, avoiding the parity requirement.

2. Lists for dissidents of major parties: A second group of independent lists were those formed by dissidents—mostly from Nidaa but also other parties—who had disagreement with the party or did not like the rankings they received on their official party lists, and so decided to form “independent” lists in the same municipality. In a number of cases encountered by our enumerators, only the top few candidates were “real” (i.e., truly running and interested in governing), while the other list members were either filler candidates or (in a few cases) did not even know they were running.
3. Civic lists: The third group are those that most observers would consider to be “real” independent lists—those comprised of non-partisans or former partisans without the intervention of local party offices or representatives. These lists usually included more young people (sometimes unemployed graduates) and civil society activists interested in contributing to local governance. Overall, this third group was probably a minority within the category of independent lists.

This heterogeneity in independent lists largely explains the mixed picture presented in this brief, and should inform future scholarly, journalistic, and policy work that relates Tunisia's independents.

What remains to be seen, however, is whether potential differences between independent and party list candidates will translate into the behavior and performance of local councilors.

## 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.