Local Councils: Representing Citizen Interests

Research shows that:

Representation of citizen priorities at the local level is crucial for democratic consolidation.

Demographics influence how both citizens and political candidates prioritize local development needs, but these differences based on gender and age are limited.

There are significant gaps in citizen and political candidate priorities, particularly over unemployment and security issues.

Municipal governance and accountability

Tunisia has a long history of municipal governance. However, as with elsewhere in the Middle East, Tunisia has suffered from an absence of inclusive political institutions at the local level. Non-competitive elections held under colonial and post-colonial rule, council dominance by older male politicians, and the exclusion of about one-third of the population living in areas not governed by elected municipal councils have undermined the councils' abilities to channel citizens' demands to policymakers. However, prompted by the Tunisian Revolution in 2010, Tunisia held its first local democratic election in May 2018. This historical event led to the expansion of municipal systems to rural areas and, thanks to electoral quotas for age and gender, created more diverse and inclusive local councils.

Bringing the government closer to the people

The 2018 Tunisian local elections led to more inclusive representation at the local level. Furthermore, research shows that women and younger citizens often agreed with the priorities of female and youth candidates, respectively. For instance, both female citizens and candidates were more likely to prioritize waste management and the environment than their male counterparts, while both youth citizens and candidates were more likely to prioritize unemployment issues. There is also a significant rural-urban divide among citizens and candidates. For example, those in rural municipalities tend to be significantly more concerned about road construction than their counterparts in urbanized areas, particularly those in large coastal cities. However, there is a gap between citizens and candidates on issues of employment and security. Citizens tend to prioritize employment more than candidates, while candidates prioritize security more than citizens. One reason for this imbalance is that municipal candidates do not see employment as their responsibility due to budgetary constraints, unclear mandates for municipalities, and the general selection of individuals of higher socioeconomic status than average into political candidacy.

An optimistic path

The study finds general agreement between the local priorities of citizens and candidates. It also demonstrates that individual attributes (e.g., gender, age) and contextual factors (e.g., urban-rural contexts) shape political priorities. Policies should continue to address the socially disadvantaged as they are at the greatest risk of being unrepresented among the social class of politicians. Moreover, there is a need to further empower local councils to implement development plans that reflect local demands and facilitate cooperation between different levels of government.

To access the full paper, see:

Blackman, Alexandra Domike; Clark, Julia, and Sasmaz, Aytug. (2021). "Local Political Priorities during Tunisia's First Democratic Municipal Elections,"
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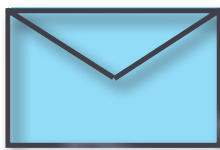 https://gld.gu.se/media/2165/gld-working-paper-42.pdf

About GLD

The Program on Governance and Local Development (GLD) is a research program based at the University of Gothenburg, originally founded in 2013 at Yale University by Program Director, Professor Ellen Lust. GLD focuses on the local factors driving governance and development. The program is dedicated to international collaboration and scientifically rigorous, policy-relevant research in an effort to promote human welfare globally. Program findings are made available to the international and domestic communities through academic publications, policy briefs, public presentations, and social media, as well as on-the-ground workshops in cooperation with local partners.

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