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Pellicer, Miquel; Wegner, Eva

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Who Votes for Islamist Parties – and Why?

Miquel Pellicer and Eva Wegner

When parliamentary elections were held in Tunisia in late October 2014, the Islamist Ennahda party, which had won most of the votes in 2011, was defeated. This shows that if Islamist parties make no concrete improvements, the people who voted for them will punish them.

Analysis

Voters for Islamist parties are often described as poor and easily manipulated, people who trade their votes for the social services provided by Islamist charitable organizations. However, surveys reveal that support for Islamist parties is not primarily about patronage. Even in countries where Islamists supply social services for many people, their voters are not less educated or more often unemployed than voters for “more secular” parties. The fact that Islamist voters agree with central issues of Islamist party programmes suggests that these parties partly use content, rather than offers of selective material incentives, to mobilize voters.

- Whether a party wins more for clientelistic reasons or more because of its programme influences how accountable it will be to voters.
- Data from opinion polls show that Islamist voters’ values tend to coincide with Islamist party policies, for example, conservative attitudes regarding social issues such as gender equality, the acceptance of homosexuality and the condemnation of corruption.
- Despite the upheavals of the “Arab Spring”, in many countries Islamist parties have no particular influence on political decisions. Opinion polls conducted between 2011 and 2013 revealed that it was the group of Islamist party voters who considered politics and democracy to be most important. The authoritarian consolidation that is taking place in most Arab countries could, however, cause these voters to become alienated from institutional politics or even become radicalized.

Key words: Arab Spring, Islamist parties, voters, clientelism

How Islamist Voters are Typically Represented

Tunisia's second democratic election following the overthrow of authoritarian President Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali was held in late October 2014. The Islamist Ennahda party, which had won the 2011 elections for the constituent assembly with 37 per cent of the seats (the next-strongest party got only nine per cent), came in second in 2014. Ennahda lost a good third of its votes and 20 seats in Parliament.

This voter migration shows that Islamist voters – at least in Tunisia – do *not* blindly support Islamist parties, and *do* expect concrete economic and social changes. Should these fail to be realized, Islamist voters hold their parties accountable and withdraw their support. It is not surprising that political parties are made to pay for the lack of improvements in elections; however, Islamist parties have been regarded as a special category because of their religious ideology.

Until recently, little attention was given to the social profile and expectations of Islamist voters. Electoral research focused on elites, while research on political Islam concentrated on Islamist ideology. The paramount question was whether political Islam is compatible with Western democracy; this was answered by combining Koran exegesis with studies of Islamist propaganda. The reasons why Islamist parties are elected – aside from allusions to the failure of Arab states to provide their populations with public goods or to the Islamists' presenting a credible opposition to the current rulers – remained underexposed by research.

The most important question with regard to the profiles of Islamist party voters, however, is whether they vote more because of clientelism or because of the content of the party programme. This determines voters' expectations and thus how they will hold parties accountable. Researchers have two conflicting opinions about Islamist party supporters – which lead to very different evaluations of the long-term success of Islamist parties in (democratic) elections.

One viewpoint, which is widespread in the media, characterizes Islamist voters as easily manipulated, relatively poor, little-educated members of the population who have clientelistic relationships with Islamist organizations. The basic assumption of this view is that the social services provided by Islamist organizations – hos-

pitals, educational institutions, charitable work and jobs – are paid for in votes (Toth 2003; Fuller 2003). Islamist parties are not expected to implement a particular policy because they are not held accountable for fulfilling election promises but rather for supplying social services. Islamist governments get *carte blanche* for their policies and the achievements of their terms in office – as long as they maintain the social services.

Another view holds that Islamist party voters belong mostly to the middle class, and that recruitment for supporters is not conducted vertically, as in clientelistic relationships, but rather horizontally (Clark 2004). Islamists are believed to seek voters amongst the population segments that resemble themselves socioeconomically. Studies have documented the high level of education of many Islamist party cadres and politicians: El-Said and Rauch (forthcoming) for the Jordanian Islamic Action Front, and Pellicier and Wegner (2015) for the Justice and Development Party in Morocco, where Islamist party supporters mostly belong to the educated classes who see their social mobility blocked by ruling elites. Such groups particularly suffer because of corruption, whose eradication is often one of the main campaign issues of Islamist parties. In addition to their usual socially conservative demands, Islamist party voters want the fight against corruption and nepotism to be given priority.

The Social Profile of Islamist Voters

In recent years, various studies have examined the social profiles of Islamist voters. This incipient electoral research makes use of voter data and a growing number of opinion polls. One type of study of Islamist voters analyses social profiles, paying special attention to educational levels and socioeconomic backgrounds. The key concept is that poorer and uneducated voters have been proven more susceptible to clientelism than those who are economically better off and more educated: Poor voters' high degree of approval for a party could thus indicate that it is clientelistic. Another approach examines the social and political values of Islamist voters, asking how much they dovetail with party electoral programmes and what distinguishes Islamist party voters from voters for other parties.

Thus far, studies of voters' profiles have focused on election data, evaluating the socioeconomic profiles of electoral districts where Islamist parties are particularly successful. This approach yields different results in different countries. In their study of the Egyptian parliamentary elections of 2011 and 2012, Elsayyad and Hanafi (2014) conclude that there is a negative link between educational levels and votes for Islamists, that is, approval for Islamists is higher in electoral districts of largely uneducated people. The authors explain this finding through the indoctrination that is assumed to take place in mosques. However, studies in Morocco and Tunisia that use the same methods arrive at the opposite result: they find a positive correlation between educational levels and votes for Islamists (Pellicer and Wegner 2014 for the elections in Morocco in 2002 and 2007; Gana, Hamme and Rebah 2012 for the 2011 elections in Tunisia). Thus, a profile of clientelistic voters is indicated in Egypt, but not in Morocco and Tunisia.

However, these studies are based on data about electoral districts, not on individual voting behaviour. In other words, the findings are based on the average features of an electoral district, without any knowledge about which part of the population actually voted for the Islamists. Especially in cases of low voter turnout, which often occurs in these countries, it is possible that, to give just one example, in electoral districts with generally low educational levels, it is mostly the educated voters who vote – thereby distorting the results. The bigger the electoral district, the more likely the distortions. The Egyptian study is based on just 48, thoroughly heterogeneous, electoral districts.

Islamist Voters: Higher Educational Levels and Greater Interest in Politics

The World Values Survey has been conducting representative national opinion polls on attitudes and values in almost 100 countries, including Arab countries such as Morocco and Egypt from 2001. Tunisia and Yemen were added to the last “wave” that was published in 2014. These surveys identify respondents' socioeconomic backgrounds as well as their preferred political parties. These two voter attributes make it possible to check the plausibility of both theories about the profile of Islamist party voters. The theory on clientelism expects these voters to have lower educational levels and be less interested in politics than other groups of voters, while the “middle-class theory” assumes that Islamist party voters will have higher educational levels and be more interested in politics.

Table 1 shows the percentages of respondents with higher school-leaving qualifications, as well as the percentages of respondents who express serious interest in politics, for three different groups:

- 1) Islamist party voters,
- 2) Voters for other parties and
- 3) Non-voters, who make up the largest group in most countries.

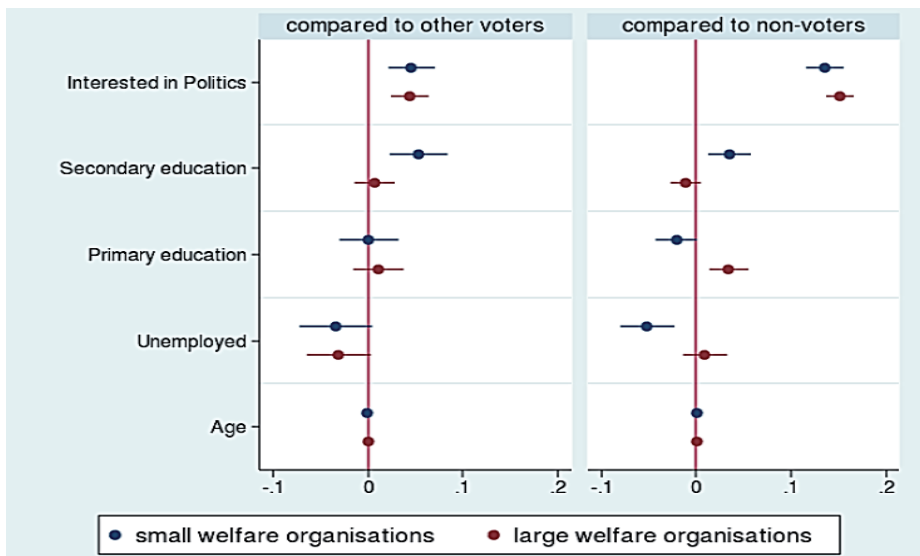
The data illustrate that in terms of the relationship between educational level and support for Islamist parties, there are two groups of countries: In the first group of Algeria, Yemen and Morocco, Islamist party voters have higher educational levels than the other voter groups. The biggest gap is between Islamists and non-voters in Morocco, where almost a third of Islamist party

Table 1: Voter Behaviour, Educational Level and Degree of Political Interest

	Islamist Voters	Voters of Other Parties	Non-Voters	Islamist Voters	Voters of Other Parties	Non-Voters
	Secondary Education			High Political Interest		
Morocco	29	24	9	56	45	13
Algeria	47	35	42	36	36	24
Tunesia	24	24	42	59	50	30
Egypt	32	30	24	74	71	17
Jordan	41	39	38	66	63	43
Palestine	55	56	-	71	58	-
Yemen	34	20	23	72	49	41
Total	37	33	26	61	54	27

Source: World Values Survey, data in percentages (authors' calculation).

Figure 1: Islamist Charities and Voting Behaviour



Source: World Values Survey (authors' calculations).

supporters and only nine per cent of the non-voters have higher school-leaving qualifications. In contrast, in the second group of countries that includes Egypt, Jordan, Palestine and Tunisia, there is no significant difference in educational levels amongst the various voter groups, although Islamist voters tend to have slightly higher educational levels than the other groups.

In all of these countries, however, Islamist voters indicate their very serious interest in politics. For most countries, this is very clear, particularly in comparison with non-voters. However, there is also a distinct difference when Islamist party voters are compared with voters for other parties.

These data contradict the image of the poor, easily manipulated voters for Islamist parties: In some countries, Islamist voters are not very different from voters for other parties. Where differences exist between Islamist party voters and others, the former have *higher* educational levels and are *more* interested in politics. As a whole, the biggest difference regarding educational levels and interest in politics is found between voters and non-voters.

This conclusion could be countered by arguing that clientelistic voters are only found in countries where Islamist parties have large charity organizations, like those found in Egypt, Jordan and Palestine. Where Islamists have less to distribute, for example, in Morocco and Algeria, it should be more difficult to mobilize large segments of the poor. The data in Table 1 does indeed show that as a whole, in countries with big

Islamist social networks, there are fewer differences between Islamist voters and voters for other parties than in countries with smaller Islamist organizations.

On that score, Figure 1 presents a more differentiated analysis of Islamist voter profiles. The countries are divided into two groups, based on the scale of their Islamist charities. The group with relatively small charities (blue dots) includes the Maghreb countries and Yemen. The second group includes Egypt, Jordan and Palestine, where Islamist parties often have very close links to, or even function as, large charities (red dots).¹ This figure shows Islamist voters' interest in politics, their school-leaving qualifications, employment status and age in relation to voters for other parties (left) and non-voters (right). The values for non-Islamist voter groups are found along the vertical zero line and values for Islamist party voters, along the horizontal.² The farther the dots for the Islamist parties are found from the zero line, the greater the differences are to the other groups of voters.

In countries with smaller Islamist charities, Islamist voters have higher educational levels and are less often unemployed. In these countries, they are not at the fringes of society but rather, are socially well integrated. In contrast, in coun-

¹ Countries and survey effects are taken into account so that differences between individual surveys or, e.g., a country that has a lot of Islamist voters, will not bias the results.

² The dots show the estimates and the lines, the confidence intervals. In other words: Where horizontal lines cross the zero line, voter characteristics cannot be clearly distinguished.

tries with large Islamist networks it is clear that Islamists do not differ demographically from voters for other parties. A more striking disparity is the Islamist voters' greater interest in politics, a characteristic they share with Islamist voters in other countries, indicating that Islamist party voters tend to be more interested in politics than other groups of voters.

The finding in Figure 1 is unambiguous: Even in countries in which Islamist parties are closely connected with very developed charities, like the Islamic Action Front's association with the Islamic Center Charity Society in Jordan, Islamist voters do not belong to the poorer segments of the population. In these countries, their social background strongly resembles that of voters of other parties, and they are more likely to be better off than non-voters.

Islamist Voters' Values

We have seen that people who vote for Islamist parties are generally well integrated in their societies. But if social differences are not the answer, what is it that distinguishes Islamist party voters? For a long time, researchers drew conclusions about these voters by comparing Islamist thought and the practises of Islamist parties, movements and organizations with idealized Western expectations. Many studies were conducted about exactly how moderate Islamists could be, that is, how much liberal-democratic thought they include in their discourse and programmes (Schwedler 2006; Schwedler 2011; Wickham 2004). Likewise, attitudes towards women or the percentage of women in Islamist parties – often in comparison with European countries – were measured.

Recent research has adopted other methods and explanatory approaches, contextualizing party positions and practises as well as voter attitudes in Middle Eastern and North African societies. This is of crucial significance since these generally very conservative groups will always appear “negative” when compared with Western ideals. In the representative opinion polls of the World Values Survey in Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Jordan, Palestine and Yemen, for example, 80 per cent of respondents believe that men are more suited to be political leaders than women; only six per cent believe that divorce can be

justified; and fewer than one per cent approve of homosexuality.

An unpublished study on election behaviour in the Middle East and North Africa by Cavortorta and Wegner (2014) also uses survey data (the World Values Survey and the Afrobarometer) to compare the values of Islamist party voters with those of average voters and voters for secular parties. The study reveals that after eliminating factors such as education, sex and age, voters for Islamist parties are more conservative than other groups with regards to divorce and women's emancipation. In connection with the findings about the social background of Islamist voters, it can be said that this group of voters consists of relatively well-educated, well-integrated members of society, who tend to have more conservative values than others. The study's authors interpret this as evidence of “programmatically” voting – that Islamist party voters are not mobilized by clientelistic promises, but rather with party platforms that reflect their values.

Another study about Islamist voters' attitudes, based on data from the Arab Barometer, reaches similar conclusions (Robbins 2010). The study emphasizes two additional factors: First, frustration about corruption in countries such as Palestine, Jordan, Yemen and Algeria is closely correlated with support for Islamist parties. Second, voters for Islamist parties consider that their (non-Islamist) governments perform very badly. These factors are consistent with the middle-class profile of Islamist voters described above, and underscore that Islamist party voters, too, expect concrete improvements from Islamists in government and base their support on tangible results.

The Future of Islamist Voters

As a whole, support for Islamist parties is not clientelistic. On the contrary, even in countries where Islamists provide social services for many people, voters for Islamist parties are not less educated than voters for “more secular” parties. Furthermore, these voters support the main points in Islamist party platforms that include conservative social values and the need to fight corruption.

Islamist voters have little political influence following the authoritarian backlashes that took place in some “Arab Spring” countries.

The change in direction was particularly radical in Egypt, where the military coup of 2013 led to mass imprisonments, mass trials and a large number of death sentences for members of the Muslim Brotherhood, which was declared a terrorist group and banned. But even in Morocco, the Islamist Party for Justice and Development (PJD) is, at best, only formally in charge of the government: The king still runs the show, and ever more legislation is being drafted to reduce political transparency.³

In this context, the question arises about the future direction of Islamist voters. Surveys made between 2011 and 2013 described them as the group who considered that politics *and* democracy were most important. That could change, perhaps increasing these voters' alienation from institutional politics, further swelling the large ranks of non-voters or pushing them towards a radicalism that would swell the ranks of extremists.

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³ A draft version of a change in the election law prohibits observers and parties bringing mobile devices to the polling stations to prevent individual results being collected and disseminated as they used to be. This would allow the Home Office to retain control over the details of the election results.

■ The Authors

Dr. Miquel Pellicer and Dr. Eva Wegner are researchers at the GIGA Institute of Middle East Studies. Their research includes the causes for political clientelism, political participation under authoritarian regimes and social inequality.

<miquel.pellicer@giga-hamburg.de>, <www.giga-hamburg.de/en/team/pellicer>

<eva.wegner@giga-hamburg.de>, <www.giga-hamburg.de/en/team/wegner>

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In GIGA Research Programme 1, “The Legitimacy and Efficiency of Political Systems”, team members make comparative analyses of political transformation processes, the importance of elections, and the interplay of governments and oppositions.

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■ Related GIGA Publications

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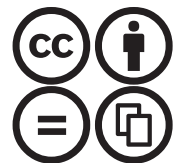
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Contact: <giga-focus@giga-hamburg.de>; GIGA, Neuer Jungfernstieg 21, 20354 Hamburg, Germany

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