

# **Voting in disaffection: Analysing 2019 Tunisian parliamentary election**

## **Abstract**

Tunisia is considered a success story of democratic transition in the Arab world. Although formally Tunisia's democratic integrity seems out of discussion (Norris et al., 2018). Nonetheless, the results of legislative elections in 2019 confirms a trend of low participation and low partisan identification as exposed in 2018 local elections.

The tendence of disaffection of the voter is increasing since at least 2018 as clearly shows the historical figure of Afrobarometer (2015, 2018, 2020). A disaffection to the institutions and to political actors and representatives.

Knowing that, the aim of this paper is to analyse the electoral behaviour of a highly disaffected electorate. In 2019 we can perceive this disaffection is expressed mainly by non-vote and a volatile vote.

The Tunisian electoral behaviour is studied through the results of the parliamentary elections in 2019 and 2014, both aggregated and disaggregated, through our database TUNEL1419 that studies turn-out and vote behaviour through volatility (general, inter-block and intrablock); combining them with local socio-demographic data measured by governorate (region).

Turn-out shows a general trend decrease in voting in 2019, showed at two levels, less people registered for the elections and a smaller number of the registered citizen voted. The official turn-out (over registered voters) was 41.7% among registered voters - 27 percentage points (p.p.) bellow 2014.

Regarding volatility, parliamentary volatility gets as high as 69.6%; in comparison with the 2014 elections. Nonetheless, this volatility decrece on the interblock perspective to 12.3%. Although it is high, it shows most of the electors swich vote within the same ideological family, showing the secularist conservative block is the only one losing popular support. The intra-block analysis shows a differenced trend between the right, which votes more to new populist options; and the left, which is voting to more moderated less ideologised parties.

## **Introduction**

Tunisia it is credited as democratic by the most relevant international democratic indexes (Freedom House, 2019; Bertelsmann transformation index, 2018; Norris et al., 2018), being considered the only successful transition among the Arab countries after the anti-authoritarian revolts in 2010-2011 (Masri, 2018).

One of the pillar of the democratic consideration of Tunisia are their elections which can be considered as competitive, free and fair, in keeping with Nohlen's free elections fundamentals (1996, 1994): respect to the collective decision, a fair competition among candidates, guarantee free election by secret voting, a temporary limitation of the mandate and an electoral system that orders the people's preferences. On the other hand, from a wider perspective, Tunisia is showing clear progress in the last years in the accomplishment of public freedoms closely linked to the democratic culture: freedoms of press, association and assembly.

Nonetheless the positive data, the consolidation of the democratic process is still facing risks and is affected by several institutional, political and social factors. Institutionally, lacks a Constitutional Court to close and order inter-institutional conflicts, mainly due to parliamentary incapacity to designate their members. Socially, the perpetuation of the social and economic interregional inequalities, a key element for the spark of the revolution in the central regions of the country in 2010 (European Union, 2018; Hernando de Larramendi & Govantes 2018; Baron et al., 2018). Politically, there is a growing disaffection of the population towards the leading actors, the political system and public decisors.

The growing disaffection showed in the last surveys (afrobarometer, 2015, 2018, 2020) display a new reality different from the one in the 2014 parliamentary elections. The impact of the disaffected electorate started to be visible in the 2018 local election with a historically low turn-out, 35.6% among the registered voters, 23.5% among the potential voters (Hernando de Larramendi & Govantes, 2018) and a particularly high vote to independent lists (32.8%), achieving together more votes than any single candidacy.

The aim of this paper is to explain the behaviour of a disaffected electorate. The data clearly shows two effects: an increase of abstention and a growing level of volatility, that affects every region of the country. Regarding abstention, turnout went from 68.4% in 2014 to 41.7% in 2019, it went down 26.7 p.p. Concerning volatility, it went from 61.3 in 2014 to 69.3%<sup>1</sup> (an increase of 8p.p in an already extremely high volatility), what means almost 70% of the parliament is composed by parties or coalition that did not have representation in 2014. In fact, only 48 representatives (22%) were in parliament in 2014 (Redissi, 2019).

To measure the real impact of the citizen disaffection we tend to measure turn-out and vote globally and regionally, focalizing in several measures of volatility (general, intra and inter blocks) in order to test the following hypothesis:

- Disaffected electors tend to participate less in the elections.
- Disaffected voters tend to change to different political options.
- Disaffected voters to change more within the same political block.
- Disaffected voters tend to vote more to populist parties

The asymmetry among regions is a key element to understand the different realities of the country. We understand the maintenance of inter-regional social asymmetry could be relevant to understand some of the elector's disaffection. Therefore, this paper takes into consideration the regional analysis in order to test whether it has an impact in the analysed factor.

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<sup>1</sup> Calculations by the authors

To implement our analysis we use our database TUNEL1419 as a tool to cross voting and non-voting preferences of the citizens in parliamentary elections in 2014 and 2019. The governorate, region and main electoral circumscription, is used as the main analytic unit, taking into consideration the regional asymmetry through socio-economic and access to public services variables.

## Methodological approach

In order to study the behaviour of a disaffected electorate we will focus on the vote oscillation among different political options (vote) , and the variation from vote to abstention.

The indicator to measure the parliamentary impact of the inter-party variation is the parliamentary volatility. Volatility informs about the net electoral changes between two consecutive elections considering the vote (electoral volatility) or seat (parliamentary volatility) transfer among different political options. Therefore, volatility is pondered as a key element to value the crystallization of a party system, considering the maintenance of high levels of volatility as a sign of a non-consolidated party system (Pedersen, 1983; Bartolini et Mair, 1990) and a risk for the democratic system in the long term. We have chosen as more suitable for this paper to use the parliamentary volatility and not the electoral one taking into consideration the country's electoral system is highly proportional.

Our analysis is based on the exploitation of our database TUNEL1419 that has been created using the data provided for official sources like the Independent High Authority for Elections (ISIE), or official socioeconomic figures from the Institut National de la Statistique (INS) and the Carte Sanitaire(2018). *TUNEL1419* gathers data of both the 2019 and 2014 parliamentary elections (national, regional and local) in order to study the evolution of the electoral behaviour taking into consideration socio-demographic conditions gathered in two composed variables measured by governorate: socio-economic conditions and conditions of access to public.

In order to ease the comparison of the two electoral processes, we have taken the following methodological decisions:

- Using the governorate as the main analytic unit. The governorate is the regional division of the country's territory as well as the electoral circumscription for legislative elections (with the exception of Tunis, Sfax and Nabeul which are divided into two circumscriptions). Using the governorate is coherent with the circumscription and it facilitates the inter-regional analysis.
- The electoral analysis focuses in the analysis of the parliamentary volatility and turn out in both elections. The voting and not voting trends will be examined as a general trend as well as regionally considering local characteristics of the regions (socio-economic and access to public services variables).

- In the volatility calculations all the electoral parties, coalitions and independent lists will be treated individually, avoiding the aggregation of candidacies or lists. When studying volatility, in order to achieve a finer approach, this will be examined in global terms as well as inter and intra block. For the inter-block analysis, the parties are located in a matrix considering their positions on the progressivism-conservatism axe, as well as on the religious-secularist axe.
- The electoral circumscription of Tunian living abroad will be considered only for voting trends and volatility. These data will not be taken into consideration for the analysis of socio-economic and access to public services variables.