

THE RATIONALITY OF ARAB VOTERS: WHY AND HOW PEOPLE VOTE IN NON-DEMOCRATIC REGIMES ACROSS THE MENA REGION

Valeria Resta

Abstract

While we can now rely on a solid literature on why and how elections can serve authoritarianism, little is known about the perspective of citizens in the MENA region when it comes to electoral contests. This aspect is of paramount importance because of the micro-foundations of electoral authoritarianism. A first set of questions has to do with the very act of voting under competitive authoritarianism. Why should they go to the polls and cast their vote if elections are aimed at consolidating incumbents? Why do MENA citizens lend themselves to this farce? A second set of questions has to do with how individuals in the MENA region cast their votes. What is the rationale guiding their choice? Why do people continue to cast their votes for the ruling party or its affiliates? What is the link between individuals and political parties? In trying to answer these questions, this chapter shows that voters across the region have learned to 'vote by the rules', thus using electoral contests to maximize their expected payoffs. On the one hand, the Arab public interprets the turnout as a signaling game vis-à-vis the regime to sanction its conduct. On the other hand, the vote choice is deemed to maximize Arabs' material or immaterial needs depending on their socio/economic conditions.

Introduction

Since the introduction of nominally democratic institutions as part of the process of authoritarian upgrading in the late 1990s, a rich literature has explained how elections were far from democratizing the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Rather, they were aimed at consolidating unaccountable authoritarian power across the region. Much has been written trying to explain why and how nominally democratic institutions can serve to consolidate authoritarianism. For instance, we now know that elections in the MENA region have largely served to convey internal and international legitimacy, the latter fundamental – at least in the past – to obtain loans to refund internal debts and carry out economic modernization projects.

Elections helped in dividing and co-opting opposition, solving conflicts within the ruling coalition, and ensuring dictators' seemingly credible commitment to power-sharing agreements with it (Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009; Heydemann 2007; Khiari and Lamoum 1999; Sadiki 2009; Schedler 2006). Yet, little is known about the perspective of citizens in the MENA region. A first set of questions has to do with the very act of voting on the part of citizens living under competitive authoritarianism. Why should they go to the polls and cast their vote if elections are aimed at consolidating incumbents' power? Why should MENA citizens lend themselves to this farce? A second set of question has to do with how individuals in the MENA region cast their vote. What is the rationale guiding their choice? Why do people continue to cast their votes for the ruling party or its affiliates? What is the link between individuals and political parties?

These questions are of paramount importance to fully grasp individual-related micro-level mechanisms of authoritarian resilience and breakdown. After all, elections can be called, but can nonetheless be ignored by the people, if they are convinced that they are only aimed at sustaining a despotic status quo. From this perspective, in fact, the widespread understanding according to which voters cast their vote out of duty to do so (that is when voting is compulsory) or for fear of retaliation in case of defection falls short in explaining how the threat of violence managed to be so effective in presenting to the world a spectacle of elections for so long. Similarly, the overwhelming role of patronage and vote-buying used to account for voters' choice at the ballot box no longer chime with the complexity of party politics in the region.

This chapter aims to account for the increasing complexity of party politics in the MENA region, which cannot but be sustained by voters. Building on a rational choice reading and on the emerging literature on electoral behavior in the MENA region, this chapter discusses the main determinants of voting behavior in the MENA. Building on a rational choice model, the chapter investigates why MENA citizens show up to the polls when called to do so and how they cast their vote in different types of electoral contests. In so doing, it will emerge that Arab voters are as rational as their Western counterparts when it comes to turning out and that they are also rational when it comes to picking a preference, because they use their vote to maximize their expected payoff.

The paradox of voting: a rational choice perspective

For rational choice theory, voters are deemed to be rational inasmuch as they use their vote instrumentally to maximize their expected payoff (Aldrich 1993; Blais 2000; Fisher 2004). From this, given individuals' preferences, not all vote choices are equally rewarding. Also, the very act of heading to the polls on election day, even though it is a low-cost/low-benefit choice, might not always be worthwhile. According to the basic model (Downs 1957):

$$R = PB - C > 0$$

individuals are better off turning out if the expected utility of voting outweighs the costs of so doing.

The expected utility (R) is the result of the expected benefits deriving from voting for one's preferred candidate (B) multiplied by the probability that that outcome will eventually happen (P) – or, put differently, by the probability that one's vote will actually make a difference – minus the costs of voting (C). These costs are related to getting prepared for voting, for example registering to vote and gathering information about the candidates (Converse 2000; Highton 2004), and to the very act of voting on the election day, like wasting time going to the polling station (Niemi 1976). Even though these costs are rather small, the main implication of this formulation

is that for individuals abstention would be the most rational choice because the probability that one's vote would make a difference to the expected outcome is *close to zero* in most cases. This is true in established democracies, whence this literature has been produced, and it is even truer for competitive authoritarianism elections, which are rigged in order to rule out the possibility of significant political change. Yet, people do vote in both settings and this constitutes, at least from a purely rational choice perspective, the 'paradox of voting', which is even more paradoxical in electoral autocracies where P is, by definition, *equal to 0*.

In trying to account for this apparent paradox, several contributions have been put forward by either changing the perspective from which turnout is approached or by adding some elements to the basic equation. New approaches to turnout have relied on the minimal regret model and game theoretic accounts. Building on the assumption that voting occurs amidst uncertainty, the minimax regret model conceives turnout decision as ruled by individuals' pursuit of minimal regret in the worst-case scenario (Ferejohn and Fiorina 1974). While this model predicts higher levels of turnout if compared to the basic formulation, it has been set aside in light of theoretical and empirical flows. Theoretically, the calculus of probability of the different case scenarios it leaves to individuals seems untenable, as it is the belief that elections will be decided by exactly one vote. Empirically, the model is not able to explain the strategic vote or the different levels of turnout depending on the closeness of the election. Game theoretic models, for their part, depart from the non-strategic assumption of the basic model, for which the level of turnout is just the aggregated decision of individuals regardless of others' decisions, and conceive individuals' turnout decision as one influenced by what others do (Ledyard 1984; Palfrey and Rosenthal 1985). In other words, P, i.e. the probability of affecting the outcome of the election through one's own vote, is now endogenous to the model and is given by others' turnout decisions. If everybody votes, then one's vote will only have a small impact on the final outcome (P close to zero, as it emerges from the basic formulation) and abstention will be the rational choice, but if only a few people vote, then turning out is a rewarding choice. The assumption behind such reasoning is that one's decision occurs in situations of perfect information, that is that each individual knows exactly the preferences (and hence the final decision) of the other potential voters, which is – again – unrealistic, especially when large audiences are considered. Because of this, the model might work well with very small electorates but when shifting to larger ones the assumption of perfect information is not tenable and the probability of affecting the final outcome (P) approaches zero, again making abstention the most rational choice (Aldrich 1993; Mueller 2003).

Returning to the basic formulation, another set of contributions aims at integrating it with the 'missing element' able to account for why people turn out. If people do not vote in light of their belief in affecting the electoral outcome, what can explain it? Some students have pointed to how the role of information might increase the value of the B term. This is because the better informed an individual is, the greater the awareness that their choice will be a good one (Matsusaka 1995). Yet, while this line of reasoning is apt at explaining different levels of turnout across voters, the question of why people vote remains unanswered since the P value (which is always close to 0) nullifies B (Geys 2006).

A more fruitful avenue of research had already been traced by Downs's introduction of a D term to the equation, whereby D represents the value of seeing democracy continue (Downs 1957), for which the basic model of turning out becomes

$$R = PB + D - C$$

With the passing of time, the D term expanded its meaning and ended up denoting the 'expressive' components of the vote. This stands for the value of voting itself, regardless of its outcome.

It can stand for citizens' willingness to legitimize the elections, and thus consolidating and reinforcing democracy, as per Downs' formulation, but it can also be a means of voicing one's own evaluation about the political status quo, or to just act in accordance with one's own ethics and moral persuasions. The problem of such 'consumption voting' (Fiorina 1976) by which citizens consume voting for its own sake, is the risk of making rational choice models tautological inasmuch as D adds nothing to their explanatory power. The theoretical challenge is then that of making D endogenous to the model, or as Aldrich (1993: 258) states: 'if the answer to the question "Why did you vote?" is that "I voted because I wanted to", then it moves the theoretically important question back to one step to "Why did you want to vote?"'

For a more recent body of scholarship, D is determined by the role of learning from one election to another (Fowler 2015). Drawing on the concept of bounded rationality, for which learning proceeds along a win-stay/lose-shift strategy, learning models link the decision to turn out for an upcoming election not to the expected outcome of the election but to the actions and the outcomes of past elections (Kanazawa 2000). In this sense, one's willingness to vote is given by individuals' rewards and punishments from past elections. In a slightly different acceptance, the D term can also be conceived as a result of group involvement (Grossman and Helpman 2001). For individuals embedded in a group, turning out is rational in order 'to build a reputation of trustworthiness towards other group members' (Geys 2006: 24) or because of the benefits expected, which are larger for groups than individuals, as the impact that groups have on the election outcome is larger when compared to that of one individual. As Geys observes (2006), group models are theoretically sound in that they are apt at explaining high-level voter turnout against the odds of the basic formulation. In addition, they can also cover a broad range of empirics, like the positive impact of group identity on turnout; stylized facts like individual-level predisposition to turn out based on their socio-economic characteristics; and also different levels of turnout depending on the order of the election and strategic vote. An asset of group models-like formulations is that they have something to say about strategic politicians and turnout, a point Aldrich had already raised when he stated that 'strategic politicians will invest more heavily in the closest contests, and this investment will be reflected in increasing levels of turnout, even if voters do not consider the closeness of the contests' (Aldrich 1993: 268). The active involvement of politicians in altering the P value (the probability of the outcome to happen) along with the B parameter (the desirability of one electoral outcome over the other) has found broad support in empirical studies. Strategic politicians can thus play on the construction of strong group identity and/or use pork barrel politics to reward their voters, which will be a strong incentive to turn out (Boubekeur 2016; Catalinac et al. 2020; Gao 2016).

Turning out in the Arab world

As for the Arab region, it is hard to believe that learning models can be applied to explain turnout, given that the vast majority of elections regularly produce victories for the incumbent party and its ruling coalition. In fact, from a purely theoretical point of view, the main conundrum in accounting for the turnout in the Arab world lies in the fact not only that P is equal to zero (as is virtually the case for all consolidated democracies), but also that B approaches zero, in that elections are aimed at producing victories for the incumbents and therefore have a predetermined outcome.

In acknowledging this, the act of voting across the region is often explained with reference to vote-buying and patronage politics. However, this kind of explanation falls short in accounting for lively and complex party systems and does not take into account the point that only a tiny

minority of Arab voters can accede to such benefits. In a recent study on seven Arab countries between 2006 and 2009, de Miguel et al. (2015) noted that patronage is strong among high-income individuals, especially when government *wasta* is involved, ‘presumably because these individuals are better connected to the state and thus stand to gain substantially from trading their electoral support’ (de Miguel et al. 2015: 1377). From such a perspective, the B term is not understood as a policy outcome, as in the basic model, but for the personal benefits deriving from patronage.

A more policy-based understanding of the B term is offered in those accounts linking the decision to vote to expected policy outcomes. From this perspective, Masoud (2014) has, for instance, shown that Egyptians turned out and voted for the party because of their policy preferences over the economic programming in the founding elections of 2011/2012. Yet, Masoud’s take is that such a perception was not driven by actual congruence between voters’ preference and parties’ policy positions, but by individuals’ exposure to parties’ propaganda. In sum, the more a given party was able to get to the voters, the more likely those voters were to vote for the party, regardless of the party’s closeness to their policy preferences. The great merit of this account is that of highlighting the effects of the unevenness of the opportunity structure available to parties in the elections as a result of previous electoral authoritarianism (Masoud 2014; Resta 2018) and of speaking to the widespread incongruence between voters’ policy preferences and their final vote choice across the region due to low levels of party system institutionalization (Çarkoğlu, Krouwel, and Yıldırım 2018). Moreover, it also has the merit of linking the B term to the role of strategic politicians, as Aldrich (1993) suggested. By exploiting an extremely volatile electorate, they can thus mobilize potential voters by playing on different levels, depending on the circumstances. Strategic politicians can, for instance, invest different amounts of resources depending on the closeness of the electoral race (or by altering the perception of closeness), so they can mobilize their voters not only by promising personal benefits and policy outcomes but also by acting on the ‘expressive vote’ embodied by the D term.

In fact, an important body of literature emphasizes the importance of the networks of kinship, the role of strategic politicians and the expressive valence of the vote even in the MENA region. Confirming the theory of group models, in a study of voting behavior within the Arab community in Israel, Ben-Bassat and Dahan (2010) find an inverted U-shaped relationship between group size and voter turnout, meaning that voters belonging to a group find it rational to vote if they are expected to make a difference – and are therefore unlikely to vote if their group is too small to impact the final outcome or if their group is so big that they do not see their vote as decisive. However, another reading has stressed how, in such contexts, turnout can be read under individuals’ belief that the other groups constitute a threat to their own or when the survival of their group is at stake (Zeedan 2018). In these contexts, the role of strategic politicians is that of fomenting group identity discourse to mobilize their following. This might occur when group identities are instrumentalized for the sake of power maintenance (Brumberg 2013), as was, for instance, the case when secularly legitimated incumbent dictators called on their constituencies to vote to counterbalance the Islamist threat, but it has also been observed within recent populist trends (Ben Salem 2021). Another, yet different conceptualization of the D term that nonetheless remains within the boundaries of group identity is that of horizontal voting, usually associated with preferences for Islamist parties. In fact, quite in contradiction with the modernization theory (Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Norris and Inglehart 2011), it has been observed that the middle class is more likely to vote for an Islamist party out of identity and cultural concerns (Pellicer and Wegner 2014). The salience of such issues is further corroborated by subsequent studies aimed at explaining the voting behavior of the Arab electorate (Resta 2022; Wegner and Cavatorta 2018).go

The D term has also been understood in terms of retrospective evaluation, meaning that, beyond their desire to vote to express their group membership, Arab voters turn out because of their willingness to voice their views over regimes' performances. This means that Arab voters turn out to voice not only their dissatisfaction with the regime's conduct but also to endorse it. As for this latter acceptance, de Miguel et al. (2015) found that turnout is correlated with individuals' positive evaluation of the regime's economic policies. Rephrasing Downs, it might then be the case that Arab voters vote when they want a positive economic trend to continue. At the same time, higher levels of turnout are also associated with increasing support for opposition parties, first and foremost the Islamist ones. In this sense, in addition to identity and cultural concerns, the act of voting is also seen as a means to express discontent with a regime's conduct (Frantz 2018). Understanding the D term as voters' retrospective evaluation is in line with one of the many instrumental uses ruling parties across the region make of the elections. Even though competitive authoritarian elections are not deemed to provoke radical political change – even if, in some cases, this might occur as the 2011 Justice and Development Party (PJD)-led government in Morocco testifies – they nonetheless provide information to the incumbents in order to calibrate policy concessions (Miller 2014), thus somewhat resembling what elections are deemed to do in their pure and original acceptance.

From this perspective, the turnout in the Tunisian elections from 2011 onward seems to assume a punitive valence. In the 2011 founding elections, turnout was around 49% and marked by difficulties for citizens to register. Turnout went up to 67.7% for the 2014 legislative elections only to go down to 41.7% in 2019. The unprecedented rate of Tunisians willing to cast their vote in 2014 was accompanied by a net loss for the incumbent parties, first and foremost the Islamist *Ennahda*, and the overwhelming victory of the *Nida Tounes* party, which was created after the 2011 elections with the declared aim to rally all the secular forces to curb the power of the Islamists. In contrast with this narrative, the overwhelming 2011 and 2016 victories of the Justice and Development Party, the main opposition party in Morocco, do not correlate with higher levels of turnout. In the same way, the 2005 Egyptian election, which saw victory for the Muslim Brotherhood, is also among those with the lowest level of turnout (28.1%), notwithstanding the provision of compulsory voting.¹ In this sense, a first rough differentiation can be made between electoral authoritarianism and consolidating democracies in the region. While the former turnout is accompanied by citizens' belief of having a real alternative to the status quo (as it was *Nida* in 2014), in electoral authoritarianism the data confirm the hypothesis of expressive voting with retrospective positive evaluations about regimes' conduct, meaning that Arab voters in non-free contexts are more likely to vote to support the regime when they have reasons to do so than to vote to express dissatisfaction with the status quo.

Patterns of voting behavior across the Arab region

Voting in first-order elections

Even though conceptually different, practically speaking the decision to turn out is necessarily entangled with the decision for whom to vote. Far from the conventional wisdom, which portrays elections in the MENA region as a gigantic sham for showing off consensus around the leader, even in electoral autocracies voting assumes an instrumental valence for the maximization of voters' payoff.

In this regard, a great number of studies have dealt with the determinants of the vote choice for either the ruling party or its main opposition, namely Islamist parties. The former is usually associated with patronage voting and, only partially, with identity-driven concerns. As for the lat-

ter reading, individuals vote for the incumbent party if they perceive it as the guarantor of their group's survival (Brumberg 2002; Lust 2011). This is the case, for instance, when individuals living under 'secular' regimes vote for the incumbent parties to prevent an Islamist takeover. However, for the majority of the literature, it is clear that voters cast their choice for the ruling party because of material benefits. This is pretty much in line with de Miguel et al.'s findings that turnout in a number of MENA countries is correlated with the voters benefiting from *wasta*, which implies access to such benefits and is therefore more likely to involve the upper classes. Another strand of the literature though argues that voting for the ruling party is associated with the poorer strata of society. In this sense, the strongholds of the ruling party are deprived areas where low-income and illiterate voters live (Blaydes 2006). This is because vote-buying is deemed to be cheaper and notables associated with the ruling party and the regime have the means to pay for such votes.

Intriguingly, the poor strata of MENA societies are often also portrayed as the main constituencies for the competitor of the ruling parties, the Islamists. Scholars have provided several explanations for why this would be the case. For those adhering to the modernization theory, low-income and poorly educated voters are more likely to be seduced by religious rhetoric and appeals, insofar as they are not yet 'disenchanted' with religion. The same classes are deemed to be a key constituency for Islamist parties because, out of their state of necessity, they are the first beneficiaries of the services that charitable religious associations linked to Islamist parties provide (Masoud 2014). In this regard, Islamist parties are deemed to build their popularity from their reputation for providing a sort of welfare their voters would like to see the state deliver (Clark 2004; White 2012). Another reading argues that the poor support Islamist parties due to 'grievance voting' (Pellicer et al. 2020). Far from voting because of their pious convictions or for the services received, poor voters left at the margins of state-led programs of economic modernization, and in some case exploited by it, support Islamists' economic proposals and their rhetoric of emancipation from the crony capitalism sustaining the ruling elite across the region (Van Hamme et al. 2014; Merone 2015). Grievance voting also entails that Islamists find supporters among well-educated individuals who did not manage to find an appropriate place in society in terms of work opportunities because of the dysfunctional economic paradigm adopted in many post-populist regimes (Pellicer and Wegner 2015). In addition to the socio-economic determinants of the Islamist vote, its identity-driven component has been acknowledged. This is what has been called the horizontal vote, meaning that many individuals from the middle and upper classes, and hence well integrated within the economic structure, also choose to vote for Islamist parties because they want to distance themselves from the regime and, in particular, from its imposed secular identity (Pellicer and Wegner 2015).

With the exclusion of the 'modernization' hypothesis, which indeed has found little support in empirical evidence, it is then quite evident that the support for Islamist parties comes from their oppositional stances to the regime and cross-cuts across voters' socio-economic conditions for a variety of reasons. This is because, Islamists, and in particular the moderate political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, have managed to monopolize the protest vote. Evidence of the socio-economic miscellaneous composition of the electorate for Islamist parties has recently appeared. Studies aimed at detecting the individual determinants of the religious divide that emerged after the 2011 uprisings have found that these are confined to denominational elements that have to do with the role of religion in the public sphere and the role of women in society, often mediated by individuals' embeddedness in religious networks (Masoud 2014; Wegner and Cavatorta 2018; Resta 2022).

Last but not least, departing from the contrapositions between ruling vs. Islamist parties, numerous contributions have demonstrated how religious and tribal affiliations are good predictors of voting in a great number of countries. The role of denominational elements in the decision to vote is greater in the context of societies divided along identity lines – religious, tribal

AU: The references 'Blaydes 2006' are cited in text but not provided in list. Please check and provide the reference list entry or delete the reference citation.

or ethnic (Ben-Bassat and Dahan 2010; Corstange 2018; Freer 2019; Zeedan 2018). Yet, this is again the result of the divide-and-rule strategies employed by the ruling elites to maintain their grip on power (Brumberg 2002; Resta 2021; Salloukh et al. 2015).

Voting in second-order elections

What has been said thus far about the behavior of Arab voters when casting their electoral choice derives from the observation of first-order elections, namely legislative and, to a limited extent, presidential elections. In fact, much of what concerns these kinds of electoral contests does not apply to second-order elections. Differently from the first-order elections which have an impact on who governs the country, second-order elections determine the outcome for lesser offices, such as regional, municipal and local councils, and are therefore considered of less importance (Norris and Reif 1997; Reif and Schmitt 1980). According to the literature developed in consolidated democracies, the turnout for second-order elections is usually lower and the role of national parties might be somewhat scaled down, with different – and sometimes non-partisan – actors having the lion share instead. Moreover, when local elections occur at a different time from the parliamentary or presidential elections, they are also used to signal approval of or disappointment with the governing party or parties (Norris and Reif 1997).

Even though the literature on voting in second-order elections in the MENA region is scarce, the available data confirm these trends. To begin with, turnout for local elections is lower than the turnout registered in parliamentary and presidential elections. Further, the role of national political parties is reduced. This is because different determinants come into play for local elections. For instance, individuals might prefer a candidate who is recognized as capable of enacting a series of initiatives for the local population, even if they do not hold the same ideological outlook or political views. This attitude can even lead voters to prefer women candidates as they are perceived to be less corruptible (Benstead and Lust 2018). In a similar vein, individuals might prefer to vote for somebody they personally know in order to have access to information and social services (Benstead 2019). Pushing this argument further, the choice may fall on the candidate who can guarantee material benefits in exchange for one's vote (Blaydes 2010). Moreover, as per group theories hypotheses, at a local level one is more likely to vote for kinship-led considerations. Yet, the Lebanese case shows that the opposite is also true, in that local elections can be seen as a unique opportunity to forge a new civic culture breaking away from sectarianism and other denominational identities (Deets 2018).

Yet, besides these individual considerations, the reasons why national parties give way to other actors in second-order elections have also to do with differences at the system level that have recently emerged. In local elections in predominant party(ies) electoral authoritarianisms, ruling parties are overshadowed by the role of individual candidates, who are generally notables affiliated with the regime and who use elections to build or consolidate – depending on the case – a patronage network to increase their influence which, in turn, augments their power position within the ruling elite (Lust 2009; Vollmann et al. 2020). However, the consolidating democracy of Tunisia sees a different trend. From the data received thus far, the 2018 local elections saw the rollback of the parties that had a prominent role in the process of democratic transition from authoritarianism and the concomitant blossoming of a myriad of independent and non-partisan lists. For instance, the party *Nida Tounes* that won the 2014 parliamentary elections with more than 37% of the vote and managed to have its leader elected in the presidential elections, gained only 20% of the vote in the 2018 local elections, thereby controlling only 76 of 350 local councils. In this way, local elections in the Arab region are beginning to resemble second-order elections in consolidated democracies when it comes to their power to punish or

reward the national government and the national party system. Looking back, it emerges how local elections not only in Tunisia but also in the MENA region – one can think, for instance, of the 1990 Algerian local elections – should no longer be disregarded for the predictive insights they can provide about national politics.

Conclusion

From the perspective of rational choice theory, voting in Arab electoral competitive authoritarian systems is as (ir)rational as voting in Western consolidated democracies. This is because in both cases, the probability that one's vote will actually make a difference to the final outcome is close to zero, regardless of the fact that in consolidated democracies this is a consequence of the size of the electorate while in electoral authoritarianism this is due to a system deliberately designed to prevent any change in the status quo. Yet, of course, the vast majority of Arab voters do not have the same incentives to turn out as their counterparts living in democratic settings. In fact, Arab voters living in autocracies are more likely to turn out when they want to express their support for the regime. This is because they have learned to use elections as a signaling game toward the regime. And they do so in the best possible way for their safety – avoid voicing their discontent, but mark their satisfaction with economic conditions. Only in the newly democratic Tunisia is the trend reversed with higher levels of turnout associated with the victory of the challenging party.

Equally rational is the vote choice. The possibility of provoking regime change through elections is ruled out from the start, but Arab voters have nonetheless learnt to use their vote instrumentally to maximize their payoffs. This is because Arab voters, as anyone else around the world, cast their vote to make their life better. Depending on their socioeconomic conditions, their embeddedness in social networks or simply their political orientation (even though the latter might be driven by the former), their vote choice is aimed at either materially improving their living conditions or satisfying immaterial needs, as the horizontal vote testifies.

Far from being a long-deemed apathetic public, Arab citizens have constantly demonstrated that they are willing to participate in public life and to have a say in the future of their country. However, the problem lies in the structures of opportunity available to them that are purposely aimed at preventing competition and inclusion, which are the two basic dimensions of a democratic polity. Against this backdrop, political learning has induced voters living under electoral authoritarianism to take advantage of the electoral moment. However, 'voting by the rules' reinforces these kinds of regimes inasmuch as elections are deemed to sustain them, which is why in the last decades the democratization-through-elections hypothesis has been discarded. Yet, it remains to be seen what the repercussions are of such political learning on the new democracies of the region, when and where they might emerge.

Note

- 1 Source: IDEA dataset.

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