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To Vote or Not to Vote:

Youth Political Agency in Post-Revolutionary Tunisia

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Abstract

In the wake of the Tunisian Revolution, young people in Tunisia have become very interested in politics. For some young people, this excitement has resulted in positive feelings about voting. For others, voting is not seen as an effective way to express political agency. This paper will analyze field research conducted by the author with young Tunisians in order to better understand Tunisian youth attitudes towards voting, and explore various interpretations of political agency. This paper will ask the fundamental questions: why didn't revolutionary activism translate to voting for more young Tunisians, especially as they continue to express interest in politics in general? Why do some youth seem to have "given up" on the effectiveness of voting? If some young Tunisians do not find political agency in voting, what can be done to counter this? What does it mean for Tunisian youth, and Tunisia as a whole, if youth are losing interest in the democratic process?

To Vote or Not to Vote:

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Introduction

One afternoon, over coffee with my Tunisian host family and friends, we were discussing voting and politics when one 19-year-old girl said she does not plan to vote in the next election. Her friend, who was around the same age, seemed personally offended by this statement, and began to lecture the girl about her duty to her country and the responsibility she holds as a citizen. The girl looked uninterested, sank back into her chair, and simply stated that voting won't change anything.

Sidi Bou Said, March 2013

Tunisia, a country that has experienced a complete political upheaval resulting from a grassroots revolution, is currently filled with varying opinions regarding politics and how to be politically engaged. This conversation among two Tunisian girls seems to perfectly illustrate the contrasting attitudes towards voting among Tunisian youth in today's post-revolutionary transitioning society.

Beginning in December 2010 and culminating in January 2011, Tunisians took to the streets and successfully ousted dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali from power. After years of high unemployment rates, government corruption, and general feelings of neglect, the Tunisian Revolution began in December 2010 when 28-year-old vegetable vendor Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in the streets of Sidi Bouzid in protest of the poor environment for working class people. The tragic event rallied Tunisians throughout the country and sparked a mass movement for change. The protests began with gatherings in central, rural Tunisia and subsequently spread to city centers, eventually reaching the capital city. Large concentrations of Tunisian youth who faced a job market with little to no possibility for employment took to the streets. Youth activists and bloggers organized on social networks such as Facebook. Protests lasted from December until 14 January

2011, when President Ben Ali finally stepped down. The success of Tunisia's Revolution inspired similar protests in many surrounding countries, which cumulatively became known as "The Arab Spring," although many observers, analysts and everyday citizens are increasingly rejecting this term.

Tunisia then entered into a period of political transition; the country was alive with political discussion. Elections were held on 23 October 2011 to elect representatives to the National Constituent Assembly, a body tasked with rewriting the Tunisian constitution. Under Ben Ali, political parties existed in an extremely regulated environment. Ben Ali's party had completely dominated the political scene, therefore following the revolution, groups scrambled to create new political parties, while existing parties worked to promote and publicize their platforms. On the 23rd of October, votes were cast and the moderate Islamist party Ennahda, one of the few oppositional movements that was well-known and established before the revolution, emerged with the most votes, forming a coalition with two other leading parties, the secular Congress for the Republic (CPR) party, and the leftist party Ettakatol. This alliance later became known as the "Troika."

While Tunisians were extremely proud to hold their first free and open election, the youth turn out was surprisingly low. The Tunisian Revolution was widely seen as a youth powered revolution, with young activists and bloggers uniting the country to demand change (Sika, 2012). Just two weeks before the election, however, it was estimated that only 17% of eligible youth were registered to vote (POMED, 2011, p. 17). While many youth were excited to cast their ballots, others were skeptical of the politicians and the political process in general. Additionally, during my time in Tunisia, I've witnessed many young Tunisians declare that they do not plan to vote at all in future elections.

Both girls who were discussing politics that day over coffee had attended protests during the revolution and continue to actively post political opinions on Facebook, yet each has such a different conception of the value of voting. This inspired me to ask the fundamental questions posed in this paper. Why didn't revolutionary activism translate to voting for more young Tunisians, especially as they continue to express interest in politics in general? Why do some youth seem to have "given up" on the effectiveness of voting? If some young Tunisians do not find political agency in voting, what can be done to counter this? Ultimately, these two girls represent different interpretations of functioning in a democracy. What does it mean for Tunisian youth, and Tunisia as a whole, if youth are losing interest in the democratic process?

Literature Review

Today's youth in Tunisia have spent their whole lives under the rule of Ben Ali. Ben Ali took power in 1987, meaning that until the revolution, for anyone under the age of 26, Ben Ali was the only president they've ever known. Living under Ben Ali's notoriously corrupt and politically oppressive regime has shaped the way that Tunisian youth view politics. Even though the Ben Ali regime claimed Tunisia to be a democracy while he was in power, his political party, the *Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique* (RCD), clearly dominated in Tunisian government and society. As researched by Erica Zarlenga, Tunisian youth received information and lessons about democracy in Tunisia through public education, however their lessons were overshadowed by the reality of Ben Ali's corruption (2011, p. 7).

Any party that challenged the RCD faced harsh consequences from the government. Elections were held, but were extremely corrupt, typically resulting in 90-100% of the

votes for Ben Ali or the RCD. Larbi Sadiki, a scholar of Arab democracy and expert on Tunisia, explains that Ben Ali's elections were "merely a superficial badge of legitimacy noted for the absence of popularly based active citizenry" (2002, p. 77). Omezzine Khelifa, a young Tunisian woman who ran for a seat in the National Constituent Assembly as a member of the Ettakatol party, is currently an advisor to the Minister of Finance, and works to lower age limits for political office, explains that Tunisian youth grew up with a strong "tradition of propaganda" (2013). The democratic rhetoric of the government was clearly untrue, and anyone who wished to be involved in politics had to be "willing to work within the straightjacket of either political deference or loyal opposition" (Sadiki, 2002, p. 77). Despite the creation of programs targeting young Tunisians, youth did not feel like a priority of the Ben Ali government. Youth were subjected to "exclusion and marginalization which resulted from post-independence state failures in the political, economic and social realms" (Murphy, 2012, p. 5).

Having witnessed the striking contradiction between the rhetoric of democracy presented in school and the harsh reality of political corruption of their government, it is no surprise that young Tunisians were the driving force of the revolution. In addition, a January 2012 survey by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) shows that of all age groups, youth felt the most affected by the lack of job opportunities (*Revolution*, p. 7). Many young people were graduating from universities and, despite their advanced education, found no opportunities to work. A collective frustration and desperation pushed Tunisian youth into the streets to demand the end of the oppressive Ben Ali regime.

After the fall of Ben Ali, the country buzzed with excitement for the first free election in Tunisia. Tunisian youth perceived the National Constituent Assembly elections as their

first legitimate opportunity to participate in the democratic process (*Revolution*, p. 8). In an April 2011 NDI survey, “respondents were nearly unanimous in expressing a genuine desire to participate in Tunisia’s political transition” (*Voices*, p. 5). This general excitement among youth illustrated high hopes for the success of the revolution. However, behind the excitement about the prospect of democratic elections, many youth expressed opinions that were more cautious. The legacy of Ben Ali’s corruption was still present in their thought processes.

The same April 2011 NDI report concludes that Tunisian youth are eager to participate in their country’s democratic transition, but are wary of political parties and civil society organizations profiting from the revolution for personal gains. The report explains:

This reluctance likely stems from a long-standing exclusion of youth, as with most Tunisians, from the political process, a phenomenon that has to a lesser extent extended into the political transition. Political parties, which were co-opted and marginalized under the former regime, have poor standing among youth. While civil society organizations fare slightly better, young people remain suspicious about lending formal support to any organized institutions. (*Voices*, p. 5)

This skepticism was also evident in NDI’s subsequent July 2011 report, which observed the frustration Tunisian’s had with the political situation and concluded, “Much of participants’ outrage is reserved for politicians, whom they accuse of, at best, a complete lack of concern for the welfare of the people and, at worst, of corruption” (*Imagining*, p. 6).

Ultimately, as reported by a more recent post-election survey in the fall of 2012 conducted by Lindsay Benstead, Ellen Lust, and Dhafer Malouche, only 47.8% of Tunisians age 18-33 who were polled said they voted, compared to 67.6% aged 48-63, the age group with the highest voter turnout. These numbers do not seem to reflect the notion that the revolution was led and inspired by Tunisian youth. A report by the Project on Middle East

Democracy (POMED) observes, “Although youth were the driving force behind the protests that removed Ben Ali from power, they are conspicuously absent from the political scene during the transition” (2011, p. 17).

In a recent conference paper, John Entelis remarks that post-Arab Spring emerging democracies must remember “the fact that the everyday activity of individuals within the new institutional order will have been shaped by habits developed mostly in the old one.” He continues that these new democracies are dealing with populations with “a distrust of politics and politicians in general, whether authoritarian or democratic” (2012, p. 12).

The slow progress of the newly elected National Constituent Assembly has only reinforced the feelings of skepticism surrounding political motives in Tunisia. Many youth report dissatisfaction with how their representatives have performed (*Promises*, 2012, p. 7). An International Republican Institute (IRI) report conducted in January 2013 concludes “77 percent of respondents said they believe the country is moving in the wrong direction, an increase of 10 points over IRI’s previous survey and the highest level of dissatisfaction that IRI has measured since it began polling in Tunisia” (2013, p. 1). This dissatisfaction is reflected in Tunisian’s opinions on voting. The IRI report also found that among those who voted in the 2011 election, 14% said they will not vote again, which is an 8% increase since the previous survey (2013, p. 4). While many were excited to vote in the first free election in Tunisia, the disappointing performance of their representatives seems to be dissuading Tunisians from voting again. Francesco Cavatorta explains, “[a]n old generation of politicians that were marginalized under dictatorship is now in control of the country... They have difficulties in representing the demands of the youth, which is increasingly

turning towards forms of extremist political engagement... or being disillusioned and opting out from engagement" (2013, p. 2).

Out of all the age groups, youth seem to be most affected by this disillusionment. Benstead, Lust, and Malouche's post-election survey found that Tunisians age 18-33 had the highest rate among age groups of reporting that Tunisia is currently worse off than before the revolution, as well as had the lowest rate of reporting that Tunisia is currently better off (2012). This negative outlook on the current state of Tunisia helps to explain why many young Tunisians report believing that voting will do little to change the government or improve their country.

In their study, Bernstead, Lust, and Malouche examine Tunisians' different definitions of democracy, which provides insight into why some Tunisians respond to poor governance by saying they will be sure to vote again and make their voice heard, while others respond by giving up on voting all together. He writes that when asked what is the most important characteristic of democracy, Tunisians do not have a clear consensus among responses, and only 26% of Tunisians polled answered "opportunity to change government through elections" (2012, p. 4). In this transitional time, Tunisians have not yet found a collective understanding of what it means to live in a democratic country. As young Tunisians navigate decisions about political involvement, having a unified understanding of democracy becomes extremely important.

John Entelis, an expert on democracy development and democratic transitions in the Maghreb, writes, "[D]emocracy must be learned if it is to have long-term significance. Democracy learning involves a complex process of political socialization utilizing a diversity of different but reinforcing agents: family, school, religious institution, work place,

community, [and] political systems” (2012, p. 2). Entelis argues that political learning is necessary to develop “an inherent sense of citizenship, civic mindedness, participation, compromise, and social justice,” which are necessary attributes of citizens in a viable democracy (2012, p. 4). Tunisian youth, having never experienced a true democracy, are still heavily influenced by the legacy of the Ben Ali regime. Young Tunisians have largely not undergone what Entelis describes as “political learning,” and therefore do not yet have a collective sense of democratic values. Similarly, Omezzine Khelifa remarked that Tunisian youth, as well as all Tunisians, are lacking in “citizen education” (2013).

After successfully overthrowing a dictator in the name of liberty and dignity, Tunisia stands at a crossroads in terms of its path towards democracy. This paper aims to better understand Tunisian youth attitudes towards voting, and explore various interpretations of political agency among youth. In order to answer the proposed research questions surrounding voting and youth political agency, this paper will explain the methods used to collect youth testimonies, summarize the opinions and insights provided by youth, analyze the testimonies in order to answer the proposed research questions, and ultimately frame the research in the broader context of Tunisia’s democratic transition.

Methodology

Before I began my specific fieldwork for this project, my research began with daily observations. Living with a Tunisian family and spending much of my time with my host sisters and their friends, I was extremely lucky to witness and participate in many discussions and debates about Tunisian politics. More often than not, the young Tunisians I spent time with would speak about youth political involvement and attitudes.

Conversations like the one previously mentioned between the two girls over coffee sparked

my interest in the subject of Tunisian youth agency, so I began more formal fieldwork on the topic.

In order to investigate my questions of youth political involvement and attitudes towards voting, I conducted formal field research with Tunisian youth ages 18-27 both online and in person. I created an online survey hosted by Google Forms and asked 15 open ended questions about political involvement before and after the revolution, participation in the 23 October 2011 election, hypothetical participation in future elections, and avenues through which youth can have political impact (see appendix). I distributed the survey to various Tunisian Facebook pages that were related to political discussion and activism, as well as to a group for students at Manouba University. I received 20 total responses to my survey.

Because my survey was distributed to young Tunisians who were most likely interested in politics based on the fact that they followed a political Facebook page, I made a conscious effort to conduct personal interviews with youth who were less politically inclined, or had more negative feelings towards politics. While my online survey received responses from young Tunisians living in a wide variety of locations in Tunisia, my personal interviews were limited to young Tunisians living in Tunis or Tunis suburban areas. I conducted 7 one-on-one personal interviews, as well as one group interview with 13 Tunisian students. Subjects interviewed in person, as well as those who contributed responses online, were likely more highly educated than most Tunisians as all interviews (except for the group interview of 13 students) were conducted in English. This is important to note when making broader assumptions about Tunisia as a whole. Overall,

my research provided a wide variety of opinions to demonstrate the varying viewpoints among Tunisian youth.

Research Findings

My online survey results and personal interviews provided youth testimonies, which I have organized into three categories. First, I discuss the general change in attitude among young Tunisians in regards to their interest in politics. Second, I discuss testimonies and explanations from youth who find political agency in voting. Third, I discuss testimonies and explanations from youth who do not view voting as an effective way to make change.

Changes in Youth Attitudes Towards Politics

Upon arriving in Tunisia, I was surprised how eager and willing almost every young person I spoke to was to discuss politics with me. Even more so, I was surprised to hear that before the revolution, politics rarely made it into the daily conversations of Tunisian youth. Most of my interviews, as well as my online survey, began by asking about interest and involvement in the revolution before and after the revolution. While those I interviewed provided various opinions on many subjects, almost every single person I interviewed stated that although they were uninvolved in politics before the revolution, they are now extremely interested in keeping up with political developments. Despite their differing opinions on voting or democratic involvement, the overwhelming majority of young Tunisians whom I interviewed proclaimed a transformation of interest not only within themselves, but also within Tunisian youth as a whole.

Many respondents made simple statements, such as, "I had no interest in politics before the revolution," or "Before the revolution, I wasn't interested in politics at all

because it wasn't popular as much those days." They went on to describe the current post-revolutionary environment, with comments such as, "Voting [has] become a natural topic that we talk about in our daily life. Everyone has his own opinion." 19-year-old student Oussema said that after the revolution, politics were the constant subject of conversation. He explained people talked about politics "from the time I opened my eyes until the time I went to bed" (Temtem, 2013).

Others drew comparisons to the pre- and post-revolutionary political environments. 18-year-old M'hamed explained, "Politics before the revolution [were] a taboo, nobody would take the step and talk about the situation." After the revolution, he stated, "most of the people... got involved in politics, not because they like politics but because the situation pushes you to follow every single political event, and your own life gets involved while changes happen around you." He remarked, "after all, we all share this country." 23-year-old Ons described feeling a similar responsibility to follow politics, saying, "after the revolution, politics has no longer been a taboo but rather a current duty towards the country."

Many youth explained that they are able to fulfill this duty of keeping politically informed through Facebook. "Most people on Facebook are young, and they get ALL their news from Facebook pages," explained 19-year-old Wadhah. When asked how they are involved in politics, many reported that they post political statuses on Facebook to express their opinions. 25-year-old Ahmed noted that while he was studying outside of Tunisia during the revolution, he was still able to be involved and influential in the revolution by sharing videos on Facebook. Overall, youth seemed extremely excited and proud to be able to keep up with politics and share their opinions with others.

While this current political excitement among youth may seem like a drastic change from pre-revolutionary attitudes, it is important to note the historical and political situation that existed before the fall of the Ben Ali regime. “Before the Tunisian revolution I didn’t... pay much attention to politics because we didn’t really have the opportunity as youth to participate in political life... since we used to live under a highly oppressive regime under the leadership of a despotic president,” said 24-year-old Nawel. The Ben Ali government was extremely hostile towards those who questioned the regime, so political involvement seemed out of the question for many Tunisian youth. 26-year-old Iheb explained that before the revolution, the only choices that existed in politics were to be completely uninvolved in politics or join Ben Ali’s RCD party.

While some youth simply stated that they had no interest in politics before the revolution, the testimonies of those who analyzed their lack of interest in connection to the stifling Ben Ali regime provided important insights into the political upbringing of this young generation of Tunisians. 24-year-old Montassar said that even though he is a law student, before the revolution he didn’t follow politics. He explained that the system didn’t “even let you think about politics. The system had almost full control [of] the media, civil society, political parties, and education.” He continued that he and other youth “feared the possible consequences of breaking the system rules” and therefore “chose to be neutral and to have other interests.”

Under Ben Ali, being politically active was not only uncommon, but essentially did not seem like a viable option. Questioning or thinking critically about the government was dangerous, and therefore politics were rarely discussed. After the revolution, however, with Ben Ali and his oppressive government gone, politics have come to the forefront of

discussion among young Tunisians. In our discussions, Tunisian youth expressed genuine interest and excitement about politics. While they went on to provide differing answers to how they find agency in politics, the collective positive feelings about a more open political atmosphere remained. The Tunisian youth I spoke with reported a strong interest in politics, whether they felt eager to vote or not.

Voices of Youth who Find Political Agency Through Voting

Many of the Tunisian youth I interviewed felt the same sort of obligation towards voting as they did towards staying politically informed. Echoing the language of “duty” that Ons used to describe his interest in politics, when asked if they plan to vote in the future, many young Tunisians responded with answers like, “I believe that voting is my duty towards my country,” “I still feel obligated and privileged to vote today,” and as a “responsible citizen” voting is my “duty.”

When speaking about the topic of voting in the 23 October 2011 election, many described feeling an intense excitement about the opportunity to vote. When asked if he voted in the election, 22-year-old Khoubeib responded, “Yes, because to me, it was unacceptable to just stay home and miss the historical event.” Many other young Tunisians I spoke to who were old enough to vote in the election voiced the same sentiments, saying that it was the first free vote in Tunisia, so of course they voted. While some look at the election results with frustration, most of the youth I spoke with recalled feeling excited and optimistic before the election. “It was the first real election,” said 19-year-old Oussema (Temtem, 2013). To Tunisian youth, the era of sham elections held by Ben Ali’s government was over and they went into the election with great expectations. Their

frustration and anger at the corruption of Ben Ali was replaced with high hopes for a freely elected government in a new Tunisia.

Although the overwhelming majority of those I spoke with expressed dissatisfaction with the current government, some youth remain positive about voting. They expressed feelings of empowerment and political agency, despite the fact that the last election produced what many describe as disappointing results. 24-year-old Nawal emphasized the responsibility that comes with the eligibility to vote. She explained that during the 23 October 2011 election she “felt highly responsible” and saw it as “an amazing experience.” She continued, “I still think it is necessary to vote because it is the only way your voice can be heard.” 25-year-old Ahmed emphasized that young people were “the engine of the revolution” and expressed his belief that youth should embrace their opportunity to vote.

Many young people voicing similar opinions invoke reminders of the excitement and sacrifices of the revolution. 24-year-old Montassar said he believes elections are “crucial for the achievement of revolution goals,” and 18-year-old Oumayma says she will vote because participating in elections is her way of saying thank you to the martyrs of the revolution, to make sure that their “blood won’t go to waste.”

While some, like 26-year-old Najla who said, “people are still convinced that we need to vote again,” are optimistic about the future of voting in Tunisia, others acknowledge their intense frustration with the election outcome when discussing their future intentions, yet still remain somewhat positive. “Despite many disagreements that I have with the current government... I still believe in my people. Our vote is extremely important and will still [be] effective,” said 22-year-old Khoubeib. His issues with the current government have not discouraged him from voting again, and he hopes other

young Tunisians will feel the same way. 19-year-old Safa responded by saying of course she will vote again, and added, “I have to, because this government is very bad and we have to tell them *dégage!*” using the iconic slogan of the revolution, meaning, “get out!” in French (Dejoui, 2013).

Many respondents acknowledged that not all Tunisians feel the same responsibility to vote that they do. 26-year-old Maher said that some of his friends and family members aren’t planning to vote again, and explained that he has tried “to convince them to vote and don’t boycott because it will make the situation worse.” These young Tunisians see voting as a way to improve their current situation, even if they don’t think the first election brought positive change to Tunisia. Not only do they feel personally inclined to vote again, but they also advocate for Tunisian youth to value the duty of voting and remain dedicated to the democratic process.

26-year-old Naija said, “I am so disappointed in the party I’ve voted for. I [am] so disappointed by its leader who turned out to be a mere marionette, serving absolutely for nothing. I will never vote for that party nor for that politician ever again.” However after this intense display of contempt for the party and politician she voted for, she illustrated her equally passionate drive to vote again. “Yes, indeed [I will vote again]. I feel like our revolution is in danger. It is straying away from the right path. The current politicians lack any competence... They need to go.”

Naija exemplifies the young Tunisians who are angry at the way the winners of the first election have conducted themselves, yet still hold a fierce determination to vote again. To Naija, and other young Tunisians like her, voting remains a powerful tool of political agency.

Voices of Youth who Question the Effectiveness of Voting

However, not all the young Tunisians I spoke with expressed a desire to vote as Naija did. For some, frustration with the current government and disappointment with their elected officials in the National Constituent Assembly have led them to question the efficacy of voting, or even to decide they will not vote again. In multiple interviews, youth seemed to classify frustration with the government and frustration with voting as one in the same.

One of the biggest complaints expressed by young Tunisians was that, since the 23 October 2011 elections, little about the workings of the government has changed. Excitement and high hopes were widespread before the election, yet, according to Tunisian youth, the new government has many if not all of the same problems as it did under Ben Ali. Many are furious about corruption and are angry with members of the NCA for taking so much time to make such little progress, while still getting paid. 23-year-old Merghemi said he views all political parties as “searching for their interests, not the needs of citizens.” 19-year-old Wadhah said, “I try to distance myself from everything political mainly because it’s depressing, also the amount of propaganda skyrocketed after the revolution.”

Youth who yearned for an open and honest government after the revolution are fed up with a government that they see as having many of the same qualities as Ben Ali’s regime. When speaking about looters that took advantage of the chaos of the revolution, 18-year-old Fares laughed and likened politicians to these opportunistic thieves, saying, “Political parties are like thieves. They wait for something bad to happen and then they steal from you” (Louti, 2013). Some feel as if the parties that won the election mislead

voters. 22-year-old Youssef explained, “[C]urrent government manipulated illiterate people to win their voices with false promises.”

Many other Tunisian youth expressed anger with false promises of political parties’ platforms. When Ben Ali was toppled from his dictatorial position, the youth, as well as the rest of Tunisia, had high expectations for the future of the country. Political parties claimed in their campaigns they would greatly improve Tunisia, but many people are dissatisfied with the realities of the current government. 19-year-old Oussema said that he had big dreams before the election, but his vote didn’t change anything. He said he feels as if he has been lied to, and added cynically, “If voting could improve the country, the government would make it illegal” (Temtem, 2013). 24-year-old Montassar said many of his friends have decided not to vote again because they are disappointed by the efficiency of decision making in the government, or they are disappointed that their political parties have not achieved their promises. Some came to the conclusion that voting simply doesn’t create change. “I don’t think [voting] is going to be effective as long as we have such a government,” said 22-year-old Randa. 20-year-old Saffwen said he is unsure if he will vote again, and remarked that voting is “not useful because the politicians are big liars, they just make big promises. I’m waiting for a new party, new hope” (Bargaoui, 2013).

The idea that there is no political party worth voting for was an extremely prevalent theme throughout the responses of youth who are pessimistic about the voting process. Many youth are unhappy with how their representatives have conducted themselves in the NCA, yet struggle to find an alternative party, which then leads them to decide they will not vote again. The perceived failure of the current elected officials, combined with a history of

corruption in government, has led many youth to conclude that no political party would be able to satisfy their demands.

A 19-year-old young woman, interviewed as part of a group interview, stated, “There is no party that represents me.” A young man of the same age who was part of the same interview said that the Troika, the ruling coalition, has “led Tunisia in the wrong direction, and there is no good alternative.” When asked if she planned to vote in any future elections, 19-year-old Zeineb boldly answered, “No, no, no, no, no! No one has convinced me, no one represents me!” (Shili, 2013).

Even some who still seem to put value in the democratic electoral process understand the conclusion of others who have decided not to vote. 22-year-old Youssef notes that even though there are many people in Tunisia who “believe that voting is essential,” there is still “no party worth voting for, even the new parties or the ones that did not participate in the previous election.” He says that it is “not quite clear that they can be trusted.” 18-year-old Fares emphasizes how this situation is made even worse for youth. He said that although some of his friends decided to join political parties, it is extremely hard to find one that truly supports youth. “Old people, they just ignore the youth,” he said. They don’t involve young people in decision making because “they don’t think they have enough experience” (Louti, 2013). To young people who have come to view the electoral process as frustrating and unwelcoming to youth, the act of voting no longer seems like an avenue for political agency.

Some youth even expressed their desire for Ben Ali to return to Tunisia. “If Ben Ali comes back, I will vote for him,” said one Tunisian student in a group interview. “Under Ben Ali we were safe. If he comes back, I will vote for him,” echoed another. Half-jokingly,

half-seriously, one student told me, “Tell Barack Obama that I want Ben Ali to come back to Tunisia!” After fighting so passionately for Ben Ali to *dégager* and then experiencing the tumultuous post-revolutionary environment, some young Tunisians now reflect on Ben Ali’s presidency from a different perspective. As 19-year-old Safa explains, under Ben Ali, “we had security, we had more money” (Dejoui, 2013). For these young Tunisians, the high hopes of a free and prosperous Tunisia seem to have faded. Now, they simply wish to return to the less chaotic, more stable time before the revolution. And like many others, when pressed to answer the question whom they would vote for because Ben Ali would not be an option, they answered “no one.”

Analysis

Despite the fact that I received such varied responses when asking about young Tunisian’s feelings towards voting, overall, it was clear that everyone I spoke with was excited to discuss politics. Almost every respondent to the online survey expressed a personal transformation of political interest as a result of the revolution, saying that they now keep up to date with politics and have opinions of their own. Many referenced frequent political debates and discussions with friends and family. I was lucky enough to be a part of many political discussions with youth during my time in Tunisia, and felt the energy that young Tunisians displayed when talking about politics. The subject matter of discussions in Tunisia has been profoundly affected by the revolution, especially in regards to the discussions among youth.

Yet, while it seems the country is alive with political excitement, not all young people share a consensus about the effectiveness of voting. As illustrated by the testimonies of youth when asked about their plans to vote, some reported feeling an

intense “duty” or “responsibility” to vote, both in regards to the 23 October 2011 election and in regards to future elections. Others declared they would not vote again and seemed to have given up on voting, viewing it as ineffective.

When exploring my first research question of why communal political engagement didn't translate to higher numbers of youth voting, it became clear that among Tunisian youth, political involvement and activism is not synonymous with excitement to vote. I had expected to find that those who did not plan to vote would not be interested in politics, or would have become tired of following a political scene that made little progress, but this did not prove to be the case. Rather, the youth I spoke with who had negative feelings about voting were just as politically engaged as those who were excited about voting. Young people who do not plan to vote are not politically apathetic or disengaged. Instead, they do not view voting as a form of political agency.

This observation led me to investigate my second research question, why did these young Tunisians “give up” on voting? On a basic level, this question can be explained by analyzing young people's emotions and attitudes towards the 23 October 2011 election. Young people, as well as the rest of Tunisia, had high hopes for change, and are extremely disappointed with the lack of improvement under this newly elected government. They anticipate that future elections will be the same, and therefore see no purpose in voting.

However, on a deeper level, these sentiments are firmly rooted in the historical and political mindset of young Tunisians. Raised under Ben Ali and disappointed by revolutionary promises of a new kind of government, some youth don't see elections as something that can change the reality of Tunisian political life. Ben Ali branded his dictatorship with false labels of democracy, and as 19-year-old Oussema stated, current

political parties lie to the population and feed them false promises (Temtem, 2013). Ben Ali claimed to support youth but simultaneously dissuaded youth from political participation, while, according to Omezzine Khelifa, today's political parties "praise a Youth Revolution but when it comes to real action, they don't think of the youth or involve them at all" (2013). To some young Tunisians, many of the realities of living under a dictatorship are still realities in their lives today, despite the fact that Tunisia held its first free and fair election. As a result, voting has not proved to be effective, and in their opinion, it will make little difference if they vote in the future.

After hearing testimonies of disappointment and dissatisfaction with the government, the natural next question in my research was what can be done to counter these frustrations and encourage youth to continue voting? This challenge is not a question of getting young Tunisians interested in politics, because even those who have ruled out voting as ineffective are still politically engaged and aware. Rather, this is a question of how to change the perception of voting to an avenue of political agency and effective change. It is also important to note that while a growing number of Tunisians have decided not to vote, there are still many young Tunisians who feel strongly about voting and spreading the message to their peers (IRI, 2013, p. 4).

When searching for answers to this question, Omezzine Khelifa explains that the core problem in this situation is the lack of confidence in the government among youth (2013). Because youth have never experienced a supportive, effective government that listens to their demands, many youth do not think that any current or future political parties could, or would, help them. John Entelis explains, "The authoritarian socialization

process” that young Tunisians experienced under Ben Ali “is still very much in place” (2012, p. 10).

In order to break down these learned notions of government, Khelifa believes the government must provide three things, “Free and responsible media, an independent judiciary system, and fair and transparent elections” (2013). She added that while the current government is headed in the right direction with these initiatives, it will take time for young people to experience these initiatives in action and slowly build trust.

Moreover, both Khelifa and Entelis emphasize the need for citizen education. Khelifa noted that currently, civil society organizations have taken on the role of attempting to educate youth about democratic elections, the importance of involvement, and the details of voting (2013). Entelis writes that these types of lessons provide a gradual development, which, paired with learned experience under a truly democratic government, can change political perceptions over time (2012, p. 2). Additionally, it is important to note that there are many youth who feel strongly about voting and who continue to converse with their fellow young Tunisians. These discussions, like the one I witnessed between two 19-year-old girls over coffee, are extremely important in keeping the subject of voting at the forefront of political discussions. A combination of proactive government measures, citizen education, and active political debate can combine to support youth through this chaotic democratic transition and encourage them to express their political agency through voting.

Conclusion

Building government trust, spreading civic education, and influencing peers is a slow process, and as reported in IRI’s January 2013 poll, the number of Tunisians reporting

they will not vote again is growing (IRI, 2013, p. 4). As this number rises, the importance of engaging youth becomes more and more critical. Considering the broader implications of the situation, what does this mean for Tunisian youth, and Tunisia as a whole, if youth continue to lose interest in engaging in the democratic process through voting?

Most importantly, this means that the very demographic that is perceived to have ignited and powered the revolution will cease to take advantage of the new political atmosphere that they helped to create. While many may be dissatisfied with the performance of the current government, the revolution undoubtedly succeeded in providing Tunisia with its first opportunity to vote in free and open elections. If youth as a whole become “fed up” with the political system and refuse to vote, they will be as distant from political involvement as they were under Ben Ali, in terms of concrete political influence. Some young Tunisians I spoke with were very aware of this possibility, and expressed a desire to change the minds of their peers who have chosen not to vote. 19-year-old Sarah said that she hopes to tell her peers that if they love this country, they must vote. She also recognized that, while many young Tunisians are discouraged by the slow process of political change, this is just part of the revolutionary process. “For all the other countries that had revolutions throughout history, the first period is bad,” she said. “But afterwards it will be a very beautiful country. It just takes time” (Zendeh, 2013). 18-year-old Fares noted that young Tunisians “want everything at once. Jobs, money, everything” (Louti, 2013). Both Sarah and Fares hope to see progress in Tunisia, but they have come to understand that these things take time.

The sentiments of Sarah, Fares, and other young Tunisians like them remind us that, while it is important to consider the risks of losing youth interest in voting, it is equally

important to envision the benefits of a youth population that becomes more engaged in the voting process. Although a democratic transition is a slow and tedious process, voting remains a tangible way that young Tunisians can make their voices heard. While some may struggle to find a political party they feel represents them, Tunisian youth have fought for the power to select the best choice from the available options.

After the successful ousting of Ben Ali, Tunisia became seen as an example for other countries in the region involved in the “Arab Spring” (Albertus & Menaldo, 2013). By working towards a more accountable government and civically minded population, Tunisia can continue to lead the way, not only by striving to develop governmental change, but also by creating a sustainable democracy with an empowered youth population. As Omezzine Khelifa explained, youth are so often told that they are the future of the country. “It is time that we start telling them that they are not only the future, but the present” (2013). Tunisia is posed to lead the region in a major way, but must first work to harness the political activism of youth and engage their interest to create a strong democracy.

Appendix

Below is the online survey that was distributed on various political Tunisian Facebook pages, as well as a Manouba University student Facebook group. The survey was hosted on the Google Forms platform. All questions were followed by a text box for an open ended, short answer response.

Tunisian Youth Survey

My name is Sarah Dickson and I am an American student spending the semester in Tunisia. I am working on a project studying the attitudes of Tunisian youth towards voting and politics. If you are between the ages of 18-27, please fill out this survey. The more detail you give in your answers, the better! I am extremely interested in everyone's responses, whether you have voted or not! Thank you!

* Required

What is your name? *

How old are you? *

Where do you live? *

(Just the name of the city is enough)

Describe your interest (or lack of interest) in politics BEFORE the Tunisian Revolution.

Describe your interest (or lack of interest) in politics AFTER the Tunisian Revolution.

Did you vote in the 23 October 2011 election? Why or why not? *

Describe how you felt about voting BEFORE the election. Is it important? Is it effective?

Describe how you feel about voting TODAY. Is it important? Is it effective?

Are you going to vote in the next election? Why or why not? *

What people (family, friends, teachers, etc.) have talked to you about voting? What kind of conversations do you have?

What organizations have you heard of that work with youth and politics? What do you think about them?

Were you involved in protests during the revolution? If so, please describe your experiences.

Do you believe that young people have an influence on politics in Tunisia today?

What is the best way for young people to influence politics?

If you are interested in answering follow up questions, please leave your email below (optional).

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