

The Voter Turnout in Tunisia: Exploration of the Reasons Behind Abstention and The Measures to Improve

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Abstract

This research presents the first results of a qualitative study dedicated to the electoral abstention. The objective is on the one hand to understand and analyze the reasons behind the abstention of the Tunisian voter and on the other hand, to identify measures to improve the voter turnout. Judging from the results of the study, it seems that the Tunisian citizen can abstain for logistical, circumstantial and religious reasons. These reasons can also be linked with the number of the political parties and the attitude towards the political institutions. This study allows suggesting measures, which are likely to improve the voter turnout like the mandatory vote, the civics programs at school, the relations of trust between the citizen and the political institutions, the access to information about the political parties.

Key Words: *Electoral Abstention, Reasons for Abstention, Improving the Voter Turnout.*

Introduction

The electoral turnout reflects a form of the citizens 'involvement in the major public debates. Voting is a civil duty, a right (Blais, 2000; Dalton, 2007) that obeys a social and moral imperative (Muxel, 2008), but that is not an obligation except for some countries like Belgium, Luxembourg or Australia. That is why the electoral turnout varies depending on the type and the ballot and, likewise, its seamy side: the abstention. Thus, the abstention rate is very high in professional elections and more so in the student elections. It is lower in the presidential elections.

Nowadays, the low electoral turnout phenomenon affects the pluralist representative democracies as well as the countries on the way of democratization and takes a proportion that is disturbing for democracy. As a matter of fact, many authors highlighted that the electoral turnout in general is decreasing even if some countries make the exception (Blais, 2000; Franklin, 2004; Gallego, 2009).

In this context, we endeavor to study in this article the Tunisian electoral turnout in the 2014 elections, the first official elections after the revolution. Furthermore, the objectives of this article consist first in exploring the reasons for the participation and the abstention during the presidential as well as the

legislative elections and then the presentation of the necessary measures to be taken to increase the electoral turnout in the coming elections in Tunisia

Review of Literature

Definition of the Abstention

In the political field, the electoral abstention has a negative definition (Pierre Bréchon, 2007). It is defined by Paul Bacot (1994) as “the non-participation, in any authorized form, of a voter to a voting to which he is summoned (...), it can sometimes be considered as a paradoxical form of political participation, notably in case of boycott.” According to Perrineau Reynie (2004), the abstention expresses “the refusal of the political offer of a particular moment in particular circumstances”.

Gerstlé, (1992) defines abstention as a communication act consisting in three dimensions: a pragmatic, a symbolic and a structural dimension. The pragmatic dimension of the communication act which is abstention is due to its intentional character inasmuch as the non-vote can be considered as a form of participation in the elections. The symbolic dimension is due to the fact that the act of non-vote is meaningful. Finally, the structural dimension is due to the presence of channels through which the non-vote information is transmitted like the electoral lists”

We notice from these definitions that the abstention illustrates a behavior of disinterest or disaffection of some citizens as far as public life is considered. It reflects a social situation; it tallies with a political choice and expresses a refusal to make a decision in favor of one suggested alternative or the other (Sineau and Mossuz-Lavau, 1978).

Typology of the Abstention

The stay-away voters do not form a homogeneous block of voters staying outside the polling booth neither from the political standpoint nor from the social one. Muxel (2014) suggests that the works dedicated to the abstention have shown its diversity which is due to a lack of social integration, either fostering its political utilization, or, considering it as the expression of a strategic or rational behavior that is appropriate in the context of certain elections.

Researchers in politics distinguish four kinds of abstention:

On the Practical Level

- The durable stay-away voters: called also the permanent or systematic abstentionists. Jadot (2002) calls them the “excluded from vote” because they are often socially excluded as well. They abstain systematically regardless of the type and the stakes of the ballot (Héran and Rouault, 1995) for they do not feel concerned with politics or they no longer have the capacity to move.
- Intermittent or occasional stay-away voters: Muxel (2008) states that “it is the practice of intermittence that has increased the most and that has defined a new type of electoral behavior”. The author indicates that the intermittent stay-away voters constitute the most dynamic category of the electoral body. They choose the elections in which they participate depending on the stakes or the political moment.

On the Level of Justifications

Muxel (2008) makes the difference between two types of abstention depending on their sociological characteristics and their relationship with politics:

- *The stay-away voters « outside the political game »*: the stay-away voters pertaining to this category are scarcely interested in the political life, they have few political references and they feel incompetent.

They do not feel close to any party and they stay away from all the forms of political participation and involvement. Their non-vote is one of the first signs of a divestment and a detachment from the political scene. Their biggest numbers are within the working strata with a low level of education, among the categories having difficulties in social integration as well as the urban populations (Gaxie 1989, Muxel, 2008; 2014)

- *The stay-away voters "in the political game"*: they are often young people, with diplomas and rather privileged as far as their social integration is concerned. They are interested in politics but they have a dissident attitude towards the political offer. According to Muxel (2008), their abstention is intermittent most of the time.

Methodology

The objectives of this article, as we have already mentioned, consist in explaining the electoral abstention of the Tunisian citizen. Thus, we will try to explore the obstacles that make people refrain from voting. After that, we will try to suggest measures to be taken into consideration during the coming elections in order to improve the electoral turnout.

To meet the objective of our research, a qualitative methodology proves to be judicious to understand and explore the electoral turnout. Thus, we have conducted four focus groups with stay-away voters and a group of voters. Every group meeting lasted about 60 minutes. We have made sure men and women, social classes and ages are mixed among the groups. The phase of fieldwork in the qualitative steps took place in the professional framework of a market research company with the glass, the audiovisual records, a professional moderator...etc.

To collect the data, we used direct questioning techniques. However, because the objectives of this study are a little special and the topic is sometimes delicate and embarrassing, we used the projective techniques. Finally, we have wholly transcribed the discourse of the participants and we used the Nvivo 10 for the categorisation operations and the construction of analysis grid.

Results

The analysis of the global corpus content allowed us to well discern and explore the obstacle that made the Tunisian citizen refrain from voting in the 2014 elections as well as the measures that we can undertake to improve the electoral turnout in the next elections.

Barriers of the Electoral Participation: 2014 Elections

The analysis of the transcripts' content allowed us to deduce diverse reasons of the abstention of the Tunisian citizens during the 2014 presidential as well as legislative elections. (Appendix A)

Logistical Reasons: they include the reasons linked with the voting bureau's location being distant. The majority of the respondents supposed that the major reason for not going to vote is the fact of not being registered or being registered in another region especially for the students and people who moved from their houses. In addition and more particularly in the rural zones, the distance to go for the voting bureau is also the reason for the abstention on the elections day. This kind of non-voters are not convinced with their abstention. On the contrary, they wanted to vote so much that some of them said they regretted not to have registered on the ballot day: these are stay-away voters described as accidental.

Circumstantial Reasons: linked with the moment of vote. These are circumstances that occurred on the ballot day and they are out of the citizen's control like being abroad, being ill, having a serious hindrance ...etc. these stay-away voters had the intention to vote and, generally speaking, they were registered but they decided not to vote in the last moment and may be on the very day of the ballot.

The Number of Political Parties: the analysis of the transcripts confirms that a narrow range of alternatives lowers the chance to find the candidate or the party for which to vote and abstention stems from there. This was the case during the second tour of the presidential elections. Nevertheless, with a high number of choices, the respondents mentioned that they were unable to decide and to collect information for themselves. Others said that a high number undermines the chances of their favourite candidate and in this case their voice wouldn't make any difference and that's where the abstention stems from. Therefore, it's the undecided or those who are aware that their favourite candidate or party will by no means win that refrain from voting on the day of the ballot.

These stay-away voters profiles intended to vote but for circumstantial reasons which are beyond their control and which can be logistical or in connection with the number of choices, they didn't vote. In general, the level of their abstention is feebly anchored and they can easily participate in the next elections. These are the occasional stay-away voters (Muxel, 2008).

Reasons linked with the Traditional political culture: many answers explain the abstention of the citizens from voting by the fact that they are not aware of their weight in the political life. They don't see any advantage of voting even in their everyday life. We notice then a lack of awareness and of consciousness-raising towards the political life. This can be explained by the fact that the Tunisian people are still in the phase of democratic learning.

Attitudes towards the Political Institutions: this includes the attitude towards the political parties, the political leaders and the electoral campaigns. Certain respondents refer to elements associated with political cynicism and negativism. Put differently, they justify their abstention with the lack of confidence in the political parties. The others trace the non-voting to the lack of interest and to contextual elements that vary from one electoral campaign to another. Besides, we can point out that the politicians are unable to mobilise and sensitize the voters who remain cynical and not sufficiently informed.

These two types of stay-away voters know since the electoral campaign that they wouldn't vote. They have a level of abstention averagely anchored.

Religious Reasons: a minority, but a minority that deserves to be indicated, squarely refuses the act of voting straight-out. They think it is not acceptable by religion; this is firm that they did not vote; they wouldn't vote in any case and nothing can incite them to. These are the convinced stay-away voters whose abstention is the most anchored. According to Heran and Rouault (1995) and Jadot (2002), these are the durable stay-away voters.

The measures to be taken into consideration to improve the electoral turnout rate

The content analysis of the respondents' answers allowed a number of measures that would permit the improvement of the turnout during the next elections. These measures can be classified into several categories (Annex B):

The Mandatory Vote: it was spontaneously evoked that imposing the vote by the government will certainly increase the electoral turnout. As a matter of fact, this was experimented by many countries like Australia, Greece, Luxembourg, Italy, Denmark and the Netherlands among others as well as in many countries of Latin America notably Brazil, Argentina and Costa Rica. The financial penalty practiced by Belgium since 1893 has conclusive results (in 2004 only 9% abstained) so the experience shows that making the vote obligatory and penalizing the abstention will certainly increase the electoral turnout

Access to the Vote and Ballot Mode: the second strategy suggested by the respondents to increase the citizens' votes consists in facilitating the access to vote. We highlight first of all the necessity to facilitate the registration procedure and, most importantly, to stretch the registration deadline along with the

necessity to increase the number of voting bureaus and to allow for vote in the faculties, in the supermarkets, in the airport and even through electronic media. Finally, why not to provide transportation for free in the rural zones.

Civics: the participants in our study have frequently evoked that the government has to provide education programs of civics to make people learn political culture since the childhood. Actually, we have little information about the political system and the importance of vote. This has to be taught at schools. Answers like “even civics has been always considered as a neglected subject despite its importance”, “the political has to be educated and simulations have to be carried out at school” ... are redundant.

Exploitation of the Citizen Contribution: the respondents suggest explaining to young people the importance of the voting act as well as the advantages of doing it and the drawbacks of abstaining from it. Here it is about conceiving the vote not only as a right but also as privilege and a duty likewise. It is also a matter of interest that must be conferred on the act of vote while pointing out its impact on the individual life and on the nation in TV programs to explain the importance of voting.

Reaching the information: to be easily informed about the political parties, the candidates and the political system as a whole is very important and it certainly increases the voter turnout rate. In fact, the more well informed we are the less hesitant we become and the more we vote. Moreover, the respondents did often point out the importance of providing information on the websites, the meetings and the dialogues with the candidates first and then with the elected people...etc

Building a Relationship of Trust between the Citizen and the Political Institutions: almost all the participants pointed out that a relationship of confidence has to be established between the citizen and the political institutions (ISIE, the implemented regulations...etc). The notion of “political ethics” is also pointed out. Indeed, the political parties have a major role to play in order to solve the problem of political cynicism. They have to be transparent and to keep their promises and programs and why not to add a law that protects the citizen against the fraud and the exaggerations of the politicians.

Conclusion

Many researches focused on the decline of the electoral turnout in general (Blais, 2000; Franklin, 2004; Gallego, 2009). Nevertheless, the researches that lead to serious results concerning the reasons behind such a fall are not numerous. The objective of this research was to uncover the major reasons that justify the abstention behavior of the voters during the 2014 legislative and presidential elections and to articulate a package of measures to improve the electoral turnout rate.

The analysis of the content of the transcripts issuing from our qualitative study lead to the explanation of a certain number of reasons standing behind the citizen's abstention namely the logistical reasons represented by the non registration and the far distance of the voting bureaus, circumstantial reasons linked with the circumstances on the day of the ballot. These are unpredictable reasons out of the citizen's control. These respondents said that they could not vote because of the big number of candidates. In addition to this, there is the political cynicism (negative attitude towards the political institutions) and the religious reasons that contribute a great deal to the explanation of the voter abstention.

In the light of these reasons which are determining in the citizen's 'disinterest' as regards the elections, our exploratory research allowed us to suggest a package of solutions to address the causes at the origin of abstention. Thus, the analysis of the global corpus's content made it possible to suggest the following measures likely to improve the electoral turnout rate:

- Make the voting act mandatory like in many countries around the world
- Make it easy to reach the vote especially through the facilitation of the registration procedure and the prolongation of its deadlines

- Give civics programs at school in order to teach the political culture
- Increase the status of the citizen's contribution through the explanation of the importance of voting as a privilege and duty
- Make it easy to reach information about the political parties, candidates and the political system as a whole
- Establish a relationship of trust between the citizen and the political institutions with a view to addressing the phenomenon of political cynicism and improving the voter turnout rate in the next elections

Although this exploratory study has allowed us to clearly account for the major origins of abstention and has thus led to suggest motivating measures, it nevertheless has shortcomings linked in particular with the ad hoc sample and to the fact that, in this case like in other cases, the answers do not definitely indicate the real behavior of abstention. However, the act of voting has to be perceived notably as a necessity rather than a choice so that the citizens have a real interest in more commitment to the political life.

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Appendix

Appendix A

Categories	Definitions	Verbatim
Logistical reasons	*the registration *long distance to the bureau of vote	« I really wanted to vote», « I regretted that i hadn't registered », « the bureau of vote was far from my house. I was not able to go and vote »...
Circumstantial reasons	*being away from the country or the region *being ill or having a serious hindrance.	« I was in a trip to Morocco », « unfortunately, I lost my father on the eve of the elections day. This was stronger than me»

The number of the political parties	*the undecided/ hesitant people * or those who are aware that their favorite party or candidate cannot win by any means	« In fact, I was unable to decide for whom to vote until the last minute», « the number of parties was very high in the legislative elections. I was unable to choose»; « likewise, in the second tour of the presidential elections, I was against the two candidates so I didn't vote »...
The traditional political culture	*Those who are not aware of their weight in the political life	« Whether I vote or not, I wouldn't change anything», «do you think that my voice would make the difference? Personally, I don't think so », « this is useless. It is a waste of time »
Attitudes towards the political institutions	The attitude towards: * the political parties * the political leaders *the electoral campaigns * political cynicism and negativism	«I don't trust politicians » « they will not keep their promises » « nothing will change », «we see them only during the electoral campaign period and after that we see nobody» are redundant « They all have the same programs; they say the same things in the televisions, in the newspapers...etc ».
Religious reasons	Salafists forbid voting	« It would not be acceptable to vote for anyone»

Appendix B

	Mandatory Vote
1	Make voting obligatory
	Access to the vote and ballot mode
2	Allowing students to vote in their faculties nad universities
3	Allow for electronic vote
4	Make the elections at reach everywhere : in hypermarkets, airport
5	Provide transportation to the bureau of vote
	Civics
6	Give more room to civics at the primary and secondary schools.
7	Design an obligatory course in the faculties about the political and electoral systems in Tunisia
8	Organise simulations of elections in the secondary schools
	Citizen contribution
9	Value and encourage the citizen's contribution
10	value the participation of young people in the political life
11	Organise meetings and debates with public figures about the importance of voting
12	Produce a television advertising campaign on the importance of voting
13	Lead an electronic consciousness-raising campaign in the social networks
14	sensitization by sending text messages
	Reaching the information
15	Put a website online which is concerned with the politics and the elections in Tunisia
16	Organise activities and debates between the candidates in the faculties
17	Meet and talk to the elected people
	Build a relationship of trust between the citizen and the political institutions
18	realistic and clear programs, encourage the youth, keep promises, trustworthy candidates
19	build a trust relationship between the citizen, the politicians and the ISIE