

Political, Not Partisan:

The Tunisian General Labor Union under Democracy

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Labor unions have long been considered one of the engines of democracy.¹ Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens, for instance, argued that the likelihood of democratization was conditioned first and foremost by the power of labor: “the working class was the most consistently pro-democratic force.”² Levi likewise posited that “organized labor is arguably the most effective vehicle for achieving a democratic and equitable society.”³

Yet labor’s precise role and level of political engagement during the various phases of democratization remain underspecified. In some cases, labor unions play major partisan roles during transitions to democracy, from directly running in elections in Poland, Brazil, and South Korea, to endorsing leftist parties in South Africa and Czechoslovakia. However, many other labor unions, while striking and protesting in the lead-up to democratization,⁴ choose to forego formal electoral participation during the transition. This variation raises the question: Under what conditions do trade unions engage in electoral politics in the aftermath of transitions from authoritarian rule?

Understanding the conditions under which unions run in elections or seek ties to political parties is important for a number of reasons. First, the theoretical debate on this issue remains inconclusive.⁵ Second, unions are important forces in the process of democratization; their participation in politics is thought to help bring about and sustain democracy.⁶ Third, unions’ ability to “translate membership into power at the ballot box”⁷ has significant implications for their leverage over economic policy and government spending, and hence for the type and quality of democracy that is produced.

Conventional explanations for when unions engage in elections focus primarily on structural and historical factors. Unions are more likely to run in elections or endorse parties during democratic transitions when they have historic ties to political parties,⁸ when they are organizationally powerful, when structural economic changes increase

the size of labor,⁹ and when they were militant in the lead-up to democratization.¹⁰ Yet these structural factors, while all empirically valid, also tend to neglect considerations internal to the union.

In this article, we theorize an additional factor that shapes whether unions engage in elections: internal cohesion. Labor unions that are internally divided along politically salient lines should be less likely to run in elections than homogeneous unions, for at least two reasons. First, these divisions make them less able to mobilize their members to the polls in support of a particular candidate, undercutting the gains of participation. Second, these divisions threaten to fracture and fragment the union if it were to run or endorse a party. Both of these mechanisms lead internally divided unions to eschew elections and instead pursue a “political, but not partisan” approach to their engagement during democratization.

To build this theory, this article leverages the case of Tunisia’s General Labor Union (UGTT). The conventional wisdom would lead us to expect that the UGTT would contest elections after Tunisia’s transition to democracy in 2011. Each of the commonly cited factors feature prominently in Tunisia. The UGTT is a strong, well-organized union without major competitors, and Tunisia enjoys relatively high levels of union density.¹¹ The UGTT has a history of successful involvement in politics, having played a major role in the 1950s independence movement, in the 2011 revolution, and in brokering the 2013 negotiations that rescued the democratic transition and earned it a Nobel Peace Prize.¹² The UGTT and its members also would have much to gain from access to policy-making, as successive post-revolution governments have instead pursued International Monetary Fund (IMF)-encouraged austerity measures that have hurt the UGTT members’ interests. Moreover, in our own survey discussed below, we find that the vast majority of Tunisians and of union members want the UGTT to play a major role in politics.

And yet, despite this favorable “electoral opportunity structure,”¹³ the UGTT has eschewed electoral participation. Six elections into democracy,¹⁴ the UGTT has neither put forth its own candidates, nor officially endorsed or allied itself with any political parties.¹⁵ What explains this puzzle?

Contrary to the conventional focus on structural and historical factors, our findings highlight the importance of internal constraints on unions’ electoral participation even when structural conditions are favorable. We argue that the UGTT eschewed electoral participation because it would threaten the union’s internal cohesion, potentially leading the union to fracture. To make this argument, we draw upon in-depth interviews with union leaders and original survey data of union members. The interviews with UGTT leaders indicate that the threat of internal fragmentation has been a primary cause of the UGTT’s reluctance to field or endorse candidates for political office. In particular, the qualitative evidence suggests, and the survey data confirm, the existence of at least three salient internal cleavages within the UGTT, namely ideological (secular vs. Islamist), regional (coastal vs. interior), and mission-related (apolitical vs. political syndicalists). Each of these internal cleavages would be aggravated by a decision to create or endorse a party, potentially dividing and fragmenting the union. More generally, the case of Tunisia suggests that in countries where the economic left-right spectrum is not the

only electoral cleavage, other political divisions, in this case, religion and region, will threaten to divide the union, deterring it from participating in elections.

While beyond the scope of this article, the importance of internal cohesion appears to generalize beyond the case of Tunisia. In South Korea, the salience of regional identities has limited the appeal of the Democratic Labor Party.¹⁶ In Indonesia, unions have been reluctant to ally with a political party fearing strife among their politically diverse members.¹⁷ In Ghana, Niger, and Nigeria, unions have eschewed links to political parties because partisan links “would and do divide the unions.”¹⁸ In Mexico, the teachers’ union has only been able to generate votes for parties its members are ideologically close to,¹⁹ while in the United States, the AFL-CIO, despite often endorsing individual Democratic candidates, has not formally allied with the Democratic Party due to ideological issues like abortion and gun rights, which divide the American labor movement.²⁰ While Tunisia is a particularly useful case allowing us to isolate the effect of internal divisions, concerns over internal cohesion and fragmentation appear to shape unions’ electoral behavior globally.

Moreover, the Tunisian case also challenges a key assumption in the literature. Scholars have thus far assumed that contesting elections will lead to greater policy influence. Our article highlights an important moderator in this relationship: internal cohesion. Where electoral participation would fragment the union, it could undermine its influence by cutting its membership and weakening the threat of a strike, thereby compromising its political clout. For Tunisia’s UGTT, therefore, its maximum level of political influence is through the role it currently plays: standing above partisan politics by brokering and mediating between the existing political parties, rather than endorsing one or creating its own. Given the internal constraint of cohesion, the UGTT is able to maximize its influence by taking a “political, but not partisan” approach.

Unions, Elections, and Political Parties in Processes of Democratization

Several bodies of research have explored the relationship between unions and parties, and the conditions under which unions form political parties or forge close ties with existing ones. Research in this area has examined the decline of union-party ties in established democracies, variation in the strength or weakness of union-party ties, the nature of union-party ties under authoritarian rule, and the conditions under which unions seek ties to political parties or engage in electoral politics in transitions from authoritarian rule.

Research on democratization shows that labor unions can capitalize on their prominent role in democratic transitions and consolidate their political influence by forming a political party or backing a Leftist party.²¹ Elections provide an opportunity for unions to rely on parties rather than strikes and other forms of collective action to press for their demands.²² For unions, the primary payoff is increased political influence through direct access to policy making,²³ helping them to secure labor-friendly legislation.²⁴ Unions may also be able to increase their membership by pursuing institutional ties to a

political party.²⁵ Legacy unions—“unions allied with the previous authoritarian regime that survive in the democratic era”—may also seek partisan links to “more effectively defend their inherited advantages.”²⁶

Increased policy influence and engagement with parties, however, may come at the expense of autonomy and independence.²⁷ Unions face a potential dilemma, given that parties may be beholden to a larger constituency than union members, and hence pursue policies contrary to unionists’ interests. If the party ends up pursuing privatization and economic liberalization, it may tarnish the union’s legitimacy.²⁸

Given these risks and rewards, what factors affect whether unions engage in electoral politics or seek alliances with political parties? Why do some unions contest elections and others do not? Although “the jury is still also out on the issue of what the most important explanations for such differences are,”²⁹ the literature has thus far focused almost exclusively on structural or historical explanations.

Structural explanations point to changes in the economy that might alter the relative size of the constituencies tied to labor unions, making them more or less attractive to political parties.³⁰ They also emphasize variation in union structures as a result of divergent implementation of economic adjustment policies,³¹ or competition between unions, which might drive unions to sever their ties to political parties in an effort to attract a greater number of members.³²

Historical explanations, meanwhile, focus on the origins of union-party ties and the legacies of authoritarian rule on labor’s capacity to engage in electoral politics.³³ Caraway et al., for instance, argue that authoritarian legacies such as bringing unions under state control, severing ties between unions and parties, or repressing Leftist parties can weaken and fragment unions, making it less likely for them to participate in elections following democratization.³⁴

Comparing the political engagement of unions in South Korea and Taiwan in processes of democratization, Yoonkyung Lee likewise points to labor’s relationship with ruling parties. In South Korea, unions’ organizational independence from the ruling party drove them to form their own political party in the transition to democracy. In Taiwan, on the other hand, unions had closer ties to the ruling party. This meant that even as new oppositional unions emerged, they forged close ties with opposition parties.³⁵

Other scholars highlight the importance of labor’s role in the lead-up to democratization. Even in the absence of historic ties to parties, Caraway et al. point out that unions with high levels of mobilization in the lead-up to democratization can capitalize on this legitimacy to seek ties with political parties.³⁶ In sub-Saharan Africa, LeBas shows the potential for labor unions to emerge as bastions of opposition under authoritarian rule and form the foundation for the emergence of opposition parties in democratic transitions.³⁷

In short, most accounts focus on the structural and historical conditions that might provide opportunities for or impose constraints on unions. These factors include historic ties to parties, unions’ organizational power, structural economic changes, inter-union fragmentation, and the degree of unions’ militancy in the lead-up to democratization. However, largely absent from these accounts is the power of internal factors in shaping or constraining unions’ choices.

The Power of Internal Constraints

We argue that internal cohesion acts as an important constraint on unions, even in situations where they are otherwise well-positioned to engage in electoral politics. The threat of internal fragmentation is particularly serious in cases where unions have diverse memberships.

The choice to contest elections is not just political, but partisan: unions must endorse or form a political party and develop a political platform. In countries where the left-right economic spectrum is the dominant political cleavage, this may not be a difficult decision for the union: most unionists likely support a leftist party or platform. But in countries with additional cleavages, and especially in countries where the economic cleavage is secondary, forming or endorsing a party may be more contentious. While most unionists may agree on a leftist agenda, they may not see eye-to-eye on identity issues, whether ethnic, religious, or regional. Where these identity cleavages are highly salient within the union itself, it may be difficult to internally agree on which party to endorse, or which platform its own party should pursue. Even when a majority can agree, such a choice risks alienating minorities within the union.

We highlight two distinct mechanisms by which internal divisions shift unions' rational calculations away from electoral participation. First, unions with diverse memberships may be less able to deliver the votes necessary to succeed in electoral politics. Even if the union leadership uniformly wished to enter the electoral arena, it may not be able to ensure that all its members would vote for a union-backed electoral list or political party. If the leadership is also internally divided, dissident leaders may send cues to the base not to turn out or to instead vote for an alternative. As a result, an internally diverse union may not perform as well in elections as a homogenous one, and thus may not win much policy influence, undercutting the gains of elections and thus shaping their calculus away from participation.

Several scholars have highlighted a similar concern in passing. Rawson, for instance, points out that in countries with single trade union confederations, "trade unionists are treated as being sufficiently homogenous to be grouped together for purposes of political analysis. Yet trade unionists and their organizations come in very different forms and it is by no means self-evident that they will tend to share common political positions."³⁸ Examining the electoral performance of the Democratic Labor Party (DLP) in South Korea, Lee finds that many workers did not cast their ballots for the DLP.³⁹ He attributes this to the predominance of regionalism and the salience of regional cleavages at the expense of partisan voting among workers. Examining the case of Indonesia, Caraway et al. also briefly allude to unions' reluctance "to [being] strongly tied to one party, fearing that this would cause internal strife among their members with varying political affiliations."⁴⁰ This suggests that workers' voting behavior cannot be taken for granted in contexts where other cleavages are politically salient.

Second, and more seriously, unions with diverse memberships may even fragment along internally salient cleavages as a result of electoral participation. Members who disagree with the leadership's choice of party or platform might leave the union,

shrinking membership dues and limiting the union's ability to mobilize in a protest or strike. If the leadership is also divided, alienated leaders may decide to break from the union, forming a splinter union that stays out of politics or even endorses a different party.

As a result, in this worst-case scenario where the union fragments over the choice of party or platform, the union may even lose political influence. As its membership shrinks, its strikes will become less effective and its political clout weakened. For instance, comparing the experiences of unions following democratic transitions in Poland and South Africa, Hartshorn and Sil warn that unions' partnerships with ruling elites "had the unexpected consequence of splintering and shrinking organized labor, which in turn prevented concerted efforts to forestall a host of laws and policies that would limit trade union rights, reduce employment protection in the private sector, and dilute the enforcement of labor standards."⁴¹

In short, unions that have politically diverse memberships may not perform well in elections, and may even fragment. They thus may not gain much policy influence and could even lose influence overall. As a result, all else equal, we hypothesize that internally diverse unions should be less likely to contest elections than homogeneous ones. In contexts where identity cleavages trump economic ones, like Tunisia, we anticipate that unions divided along these salient cleavages will not run in elections.

The Case of Tunisia

To test this theory, we examine the case of Tunisia. The conventional wisdom would suggest that Tunisia's dominant labor union, the UGTT, would contest elections after the 2011 transition to democracy. Yet, six elections in, it still has not.

There are several reasons to believe that the UGTT has had a favorable "electoral opportunity structure" over the course of Tunisia's transition to democracy. First, the UGTT's regional and sectoral unions played an important role in the lead-up to democratization, helping to organize the 2011 protests that ousted President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali.⁴² The UGTT therefore earned considerable pro-revolution legitimacy that it could have capitalized on to run in elections or seek ties to political parties. Comparatively, unions' militancy in the lead-up to democratization is an important predictor of their running in elections or serving as the backbone of an opposition party.⁴³

Relatedly, historical legacies have also presented the union with a favorable image as not just an economic actor, but a national, political one as well. It played a foundational role in the national independence movement in the 1940s and 1950s,⁴⁴ and in mobilizing the first major opposition to Tunisia's first president, Habib Bourguiba, in the general strike of 1978 and then bread riots of 1984.⁴⁵ It was thus perceived as a haven for political activists under authoritarian rule.⁴⁶ More recently, it helped rescue the democratic transition in 2013 by brokering between the major political parties, earning it a Nobel Peace Prize in 2015. These legacies have endowed the UGTT with tremendous political clout and a dual identity as both a national and social actor. This

historical legitimacy likewise positions the UGTT well to expand its political engagement through elections.

In addition, unlike in other countries, authoritarian legacies in Tunisia did not leave labor fragmented or in an organizationally weak position. On the contrary, as a “legacy union,” the UGTT has retained its dominant status after democratic transition. In fact, its membership increased by 30 percent to 750,000 members after the revolution.⁴⁷ The UGTT’s organizational capacity and the fact that it is a grassroots organization with nationwide presence provide the organizational infrastructure necessary for an electoral run. In addition, Tunisia has considerably higher union density rates than neighboring countries.⁴⁸

Moreover, no major challenger union has emerged to contest the UGTT’s dominance.⁴⁹ Although a few challenger unions have splintered off, none have become meaningful competitors to the UGTT. The fact that the UGTT has faced little competition from other unions means that it would not have faced the same pressures to distance itself from parties in an effort to attract more members.⁵⁰ The lack of inter-union fragmentation in Tunisia likewise creates favorable conditions for electoral participation.⁵¹

In addition, the UGTT has repeatedly floated the idea of electoral participation. Most recently, UGTT secretary general Nouredine al-Taboubi in November 2018 announced the organization’s “interest” in the 2019 elections.⁵² In internal discussions, the union entertained several options for electoral participation, including fielding its own electoral lists or supporting political parties that endorse its economic program.⁵³

In short, the UGTT is a dominant union with historical legitimacy to get involved in elections. In our nationally representative survey in 2017, described in more detail below, we find that 73 percent of Tunisians think the UGTT should be involved in “resolving social and political conflicts,” and 34 percent of Tunisians want the UGTT to run in elections. While the latter may not seem high, 34 percent would easily win the UGTT first place in Tunisia’s fractured landscape (the victor in 2019 won 19.6 percent). Tunisia’s UGTT thus enjoys a favorable “electoral opportunity structure.” And yet, the union appears reluctant to run in elections.

Methods

Why has the UGTT not run in elections? To gain maximum leverage over this question, we employ a two-pronged, mixed methods approach. We first draw on interviews with current and former unionists in Tunisia, as well as Arabic and French-language sources, to generate our theoretical predictions. Interviews with union leaders reveal that concerns about internal divisions are front and center in their debates over whether to run. In particular, our qualitative research reveals three distinct internal divisions within the UGTT—ideological, regional, and mission-related—each of which appears to shape members’ attitudes toward running in elections.

To test whether this theory generalizes beyond our interviewees, we then draw on an original survey of 158 current and former UGTT members. The data were collected as

part of a nationally representative telephone survey of 1,038 Tunisians in 2017.⁵⁴ While we also draw on findings from the full sample, we focus primarily on the views of the 158 current and former unionists, as we are interested in unionists' attitudes. While we acknowledge the small sample size, the consistent results across both the qualitative and quantitative analyses help to mitigate the limits in each. Moreover, we explicitly test our theory against rival explanations and find support only for our hypothesis about internal divisions.

Unlike our targeted interviews, the survey captures the views of union members writ large rather than just leaders. However, understanding members' views is especially important in the context of the UGTT. The union exhibits relatively high levels of internal democracy,⁵⁵ and the issue of electoral participation has already been discussed internally beyond the executive bureau. A decision to run in elections would likely be taken only with approval from representative bodies within the union. Moreover, members' attitudes are particularly important for assessing whether they would actually turn out in elections, and whether they might split from the union. The survey of union members thus helps to validate the concerns we heard in interviews with the leadership about their internally divided membership.

Our article is among the first utilizing original survey data of union members in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Although surveys of union members are common in other world regions,⁵⁶ they are almost entirely absent in the MENA. Our survey paves the way for further survey work in this area and draws attention to the need to gain a more systematic understanding of the views of union members in the MENA.

Internal Divisions and Elections

The interview and survey evidence suggests that the UGTT has decided not to contest elections due primarily to internal constraints. Even though externally there may be favorable conditions for electoral participation, the UGTT is internally divided both on whether to contest elections and on whom to support. Endorsing an existing party or forming their own party and platform are thus internally divisive actions that risk fracturing the union.

The interviews with current union leaders reveal support for both mechanisms by which internal diversity deters electoral participation. First, some leaders indicated that the union's internal divisions would make it particularly difficult to ensure voting discipline among members and even leaders. As one leader puts it, "the UGTT is convinced that the bases will not abide by a political position. Even members of the executive bureau would not abide. In social matters there is unity, but this is different in political matters."⁵⁷ As such, the internal struggle inside the UGTT would make it difficult for unionists to vote for candidates put forth or supported by the UGTT. While unionists may exercise discipline when it comes to socioeconomic matters, it would be difficult for them to do so when it comes to politics.

Second, UGTT leaders and members alike express concern that electoral participation would fragment the union. When asked about electoral participation, members and leaders consistently raised the threat of an internal “explosion” if the UGTT were to enter the electoral arena. In doing so, they emphasized the diversity of the UGTT’s membership and the fact that it comprises all intellectual and political currents in Tunisia. As one former unionist put it, the UGTT decided not to participate in elections in order to “protect syndical unity.”⁵⁸ These divisions are replicated at the level of the executive bureau, threatening a major institutional split. Pointing to the experiences of other countries where unions engage in electoral politics, a senior UGTT leader warns that “unions become hostage to election results. These political alliances lead to the creation of partisan unions and could lead to the fracturing of the union movement.”⁵⁹ This is echoed in analysis of the UGTT’s decision. As one analyst writes, “Electoral participation would lead to horizontal fragmentation given that the UGTT’s membership structure reflects Tunisia’s political pluralism.”⁶⁰ This illustrates that UGTT leaders are concerned that electoral participation would bring the UGTT’s internal divisions to the fore, thereby leading to the fracturing of the union.

The interviews as well as secondary data reveal at least three salient internal divisions within the UGTT, which we summarize here and detail below. The first concerns the proper mission of the organization, whether they should be involved in elections at all. On the one side are apolitical syndicalists, who view the proper mission as staying far from politics and focusing exclusively on members’ interests and traditional union activities. They thus disagree with more politically oriented unionists and oppose the union running in elections or endorsing candidates.

The next two internal divisions concern who to endorse or field for elections and stem from the existing political cleavages in society. In Tunisia, the economic left-right cleavage is not the only electoral cleavage, nor even the most salient. Instead, ideological (secular-Islamist) and regional (interior-coast) cleavages are front and center.⁶¹ These divisions likewise permeate the UGTT. Even though most of the unionists would support leftist policies, these other cleavages make the choice of what party to endorse or what platform to create particularly contentious. As we show below, more Islamist-oriented unionists, as well as those from the coastal regions, tend to be less supportive of the union running.

In short, these three internal divisions—mission-oriented, ideological, and regional—contribute to unionists’ fears that if the UGTT were to participate in elections, it may fracture along these lines. We now discuss each division in turn.

Mission Cleavages A longstanding division inside the UGTT is between those who prefer a strictly syndicalist role for the organization and those who wish to see a continued political role for the UGTT.⁶² The UGTT has played a major role in Tunisian politics, from helping to organize the independence movement in the 1940s and 1950s, spearheading the 2011 revolution, and then chairing the 2013 national dialogue. Throughout these episodes, however, a vocal minority within the UGTT has opposed this politicization, concerned it

may distract from the union's duties to workers and could lead to its cooptation by partisan interests. As Hela Yousfi describes during the 2010–2011 uprising:

Passions flared over the union's position as a key stakeholder in transforming Tunisian politics. Those who viewed the UGTT primarily as a union movement were wary of its political moves and several figures called for an urgent return to the traditional union role of defending workers. On the other side, there were those who wanted the UGTT to foster the re-emergence of political freedoms, with some calling for the union to take on an exclusively political role.⁶³

One faction within the UGTT, which we label the “apolitical syndicalists,” is particularly wary of the union's politicization and advocates prioritizing the union's economic mission over its political or national mission. Divisions over the proper scope of the UGTT's mission are historically rooted, dating back to the founding of the UGTT. Historian Ali al-Mahjoubi attributes the development of a political/national orientation to the prominent role of white-collar members at the UGTT's inception.⁶⁴ By contrast, a faction comprised primarily of blue-collar members and headed by prominent UGTT leader Habib Achour opposed subordinating the union to a political party.⁶⁵

This mission-oriented cleavage was then reinforced by the UGTT's relationship with the former dictatorships of Bourguiba and Ben Ali. While the UGTT often led the opposition to these dictators, it also on occasion accepted ministerial positions and had a “checkered alliance” with the RCD, the former ruling party.⁶⁶ Some in the union, particularly the apolitical syndicalists, have therefore grown wary of political parties and their potential to coopt the union. “Union members often suspected the parties of seeking to co-opt the UGTT to advance their own partisan agenda.”⁶⁷

While vocal, these apolitical syndicalists tend to be a minority within the union. In the current executive bureau, elected in 2017, five of the thirteen members (or 38 percent), including the secretary general, are thought to have this more apolitical mindset.⁶⁸ The remaining eight members, by contrast, have direct or indirect ties to various leftist and nationalist parties.⁶⁹ We also find that these apolitical syndicalists are a minority among the membership. In our survey of 158 current and former UGTT members, we asked two questions that, when combined, allow us to capture this group. First, we asked respondents whether they believed “The main role of the UGTT should be to secure better wages and working conditions for its members.” Second, we asked whether they believed “The UGTT has an obligation to help resolve social and political conflict in Tunisia.” Only twenty-five of the unionists surveyed, or 16 percent, believed that the main role of the union should be its members and disagreed that the UGTT has an obligation to help resolve social and political conflict. By contrast, 77 percent agreed that the UGTT should help resolve political conflicts.

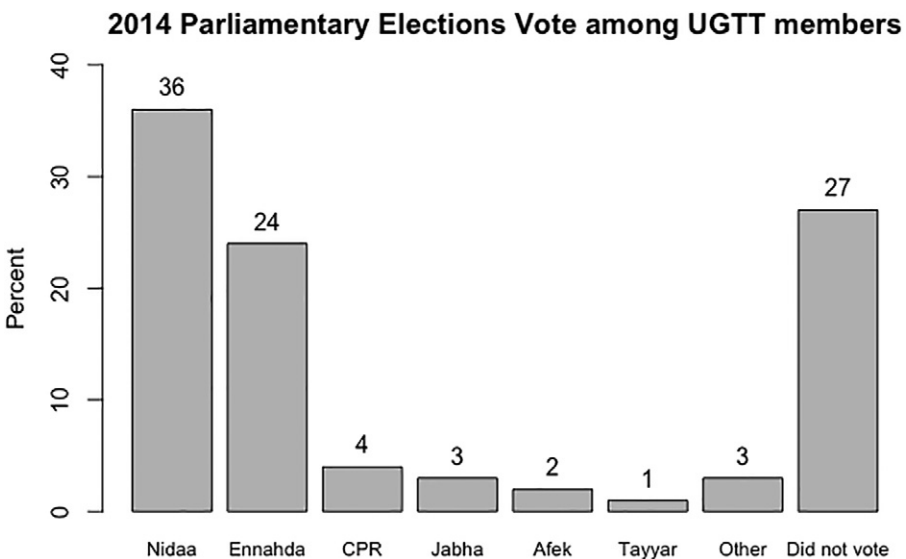
We hypothesize that the “apolitical syndicalists” will be less likely to support the UGTT's electoral participation, as they would perceive such participation as a distraction from the union's mission to defend its members' interests and would lead to the union's cooptation. But as a minority, this faction alone cannot explain the union's overall decision not to participate. Two additional divisions are also at play.

Ideological Divisions Among unionists with more partisan leanings, there is little agreement on which party to support. Before the 2011 revolution, observers identified at least three different partisan currents—leftists, nationalists, and RCD supporters. These cleavages are reproduced in the executive bureau, where “cleavages and affinities between members...are likened to political affiliations.”⁷⁰ In the current executive bureau, eight of the thirteen members belong to a variety of small leftist and nationalist parties, including two from the Democratic Patriots Movement (Watad), two from the National Democratic Workers Party (PTPD), one from the People’s Movement (Echaab), one from the Popular Current, one from the Workers’ Party, and one from the Social Democratic Path Party.⁷¹ Notably, each of these leftist parties are strongly anti-Islamist.

On the other hand, a growing number of members with Islamist orientations have joined the UGTT since the 2011 revolution.⁷² At this point, they are still a small minority among the membership and have little influence among the leadership or on trade union activity.⁷³ However, their growth has sparked mistrust and internal divisions within the UGTT. Some (secular) unionists accuse the Islamist party Ennahda of trying to dominate the middle and base ranks in order to control the union.⁷⁴

Our survey confirms that the UGTT is internally divided between a number of political parties, both secular and Islamist. The survey asked current and former UGTT members who they voted for in the 2014 parliamentary elections (see Figure 1). About 36 percent voted for Nidaa Tounes, the winning big-tent secular party. Yet, 24 percent voted for its electoral rival, the Islamist party Ennahda. About 13 percent voted for other secular parties, while the remaining 27 percent did not vote. In short, UGTT members

Figure 1 Vote Choice in 2014 Parliamentary Elections (N=158)



support a range of political parties and are even divided along the major ideological cleavage: secular versus Islamist. While the majority may be secularists, about a quarter of the union members surveyed voted for Ennahda in 2014.

This diverse membership makes it difficult for the UGTT to settle on a party to endorse without alienating at least some of its members. As unionist Radi bin Hussain observed, “The UGTT cannot enter any political battle because it includes all political currents.”⁷⁵ A former unionist claimed that partisan divisions are having a greater impact on decision-making inside the union than in the past and that it will be important to manage this internal pluralism.⁷⁶

Doing so likely requires abstaining from elections. As another unionist eloquently put it: “The UGTT is a mosaic; it includes all political sensibilities. The members [must] perform their unionist roles regardless of their views or political parties.”⁷⁷

Given these internal divisions, the UGTT is unlikely to contest elections or endorse a party. If it did, supporters of parties not endorsed by the UGTT may very well break from the union. While we cannot predict for sure who the UGTT would endorse, it is likely to be a secular party, given that secularists dominate the UGTT’s leadership and remain a majority of its members.

Moreover, the UGTT’s leaders have a history of poor relations with the Islamist party Ennahda. Most importantly, in 2012–2013 the UGTT held a number of general strikes against the Ennahda-led Troika government, ultimately succeeding in getting it to resign.⁷⁸ That episode had already led to minor splits within the UGTT, with some Islamist-leaning members breaking off to form the Tunisian Labor Organization (OTT) in August 2013.⁷⁹ An explicitly partisan move to run in elections would likely fragment the union further.

For its part, Ennahda views the UGTT as a potential threat, given its strong mobilizational capacity. Many Ennahda leaders consider the UGTT as the only force capable of challenging it.⁸⁰ Accordingly, we hypothesize that Ennahda supporters within the union should be especially opposed to the UGTT running in elections, as they anticipate the secular leadership of the union endorsing (or even forming) a secular leftist party, not Ennahda. The union running in elections thus presents direct competition to their preferred party.

Regional Cleavages Finally, Tunisia—and by extension, the UGTT—features important regional divisions. Historically, Tunisia’s dictators Bourguiba and Ben Ali privileged the coast over the interior regions. The coastal cities, particularly in the Sahel (Sousse, Monastir, and Mahdia), but also Tunis, Nabeul, and Sfax, received the lion’s share of government spending on infrastructure, education, and employment,⁸¹ as well as the majority of ministerial appointments.⁸² Regional identities have thus become a major electoral cleavage, with demands for redistribution and greater investment into the interior regions.⁸³

These regional divisions likewise penetrate the UGTT.⁸⁴ This is most notably seen in the voting behavior of union members in national congresses, which often reflect economic and political inequalities across Tunisia’s regions.⁸⁵ Hela Yousfi draws attention

to the fact that Tunisia's coastal (Sahel) areas, while politically and economically powerful, are actually marginalized within the UGTT.⁸⁶ Joel Beinin underscores that the "underdevelopment of the interior regions of the center-west and the South in contrast to the coast have been constant undercurrents in national and trade union politics."⁸⁷

Accordingly, we anticipate that there may also be regional differences in unionists' support for running in elections. While there are not strong theoretical priors for which direction these divisions might manifest in, one possibility is that unionists from the country's neglected Southern, Interior, and Northwestern regions might be more supportive of the UGTT running in elections than their counterparts from the coast. These regions have historically pushed the union into more political positions, such as in 2011 when unionists from these regions joined the revolution first, pushing the UGTT's national leadership to take a political stance against Ben Ali. These regions might likewise be more fed up with the existing party system for having been unable to address persistent regional inequalities and potentially hopeful that a new face like the UGTT might prove more effective. Meanwhile, the party dominant in the coast, *Nidaa Tounes*, remained relatively united and popular at the time of our survey in 2017. Unionists from the coast might therefore be more anchored to the existing party system. As a result, we hypothesize that in our survey, unionists from the coast (Tunis, the Sahel, and Sfax) should be less supportive of the UGTT running in elections.

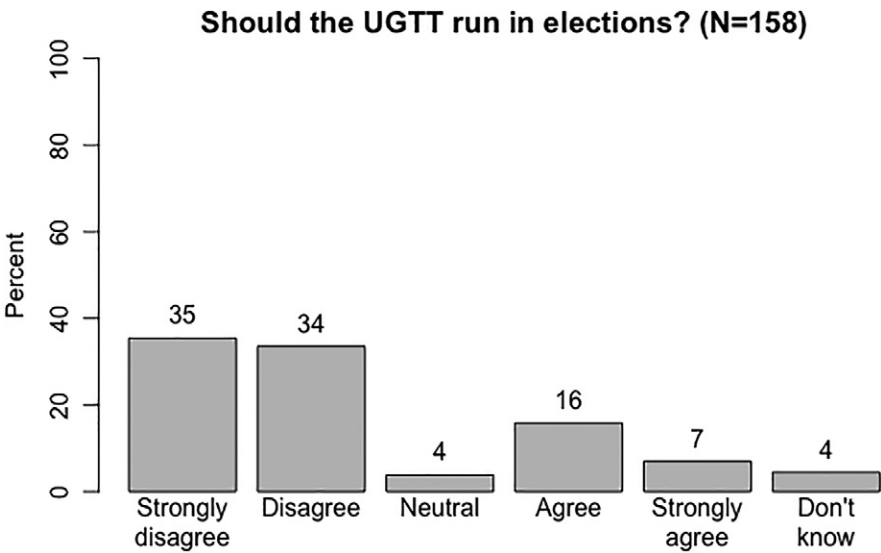
In sum, the UGTT is a mosaic representing a number of ideological and regional currents. At least three internal divisions are salient for the question about running in elections: mission-related (apolitical syndicalists vs. more politicized unionists), ideological (secular vs. Islamist), and regional (interior vs. coastal). As a result, a decision to run may very well fracture the union along these lines.

This fear of fragmentation in turn convinces the UGTT not to run, despite the favorable electoral opportunity structure. UGTT leaders have for years been careful not to take actions that may divide the union. Even in internal union elections for the executive bureau, winning lists are often carefully chosen to ensure the selection of consensual candidates and avoid internal conflict. One unionist underscores the importance of consensus around unity in building the list and the need to avoid anything that would "weaken the organization."⁸⁸ Maintaining unity in the face of internal diversity is a priority for the organization, especially in the context of a changing political landscape.⁸⁹ "Protecting the unity of unionists" was one of the main priorities for everyone.⁹⁰ As one union official puts it, "the power of the UGTT lies in its ability to achieve unity in difference...managing a very diverse organization in a social and political composition is difficult. The wisdom is the very ability to control conflict while preserving the unity of the organization."⁹¹

Survey Evidence

In our survey, we therefore anticipate finding low support overall for the union running in elections, and especially low support among those factions likely to lose out from the

Figure 2 Unionists Oppose Running in Elections



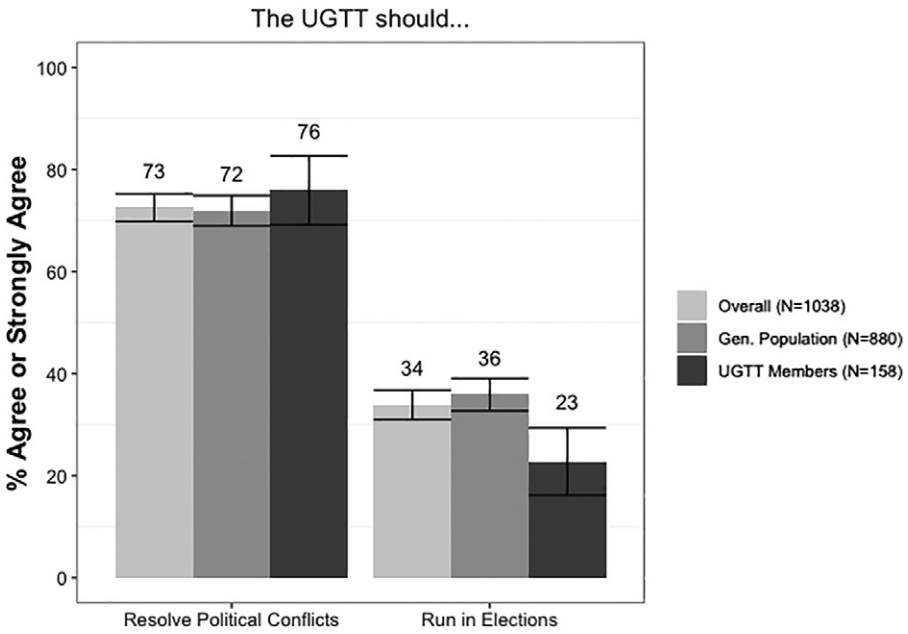
UGTT running. To gauge support, our survey asked respondents whether “the UGTT should directly present candidates for political office.” Overall, only 23 percent agreed or strongly agreed (Figure 2). Meanwhile, nearly 70 percent of unionists disagreed or strongly disagreed.

That low support for running in elections, 23 percent, seems especially low when compared to whether respondents believe the union should be involved in politics (Figure 3). Over 76 percent agreed or strongly agreed that the UGTT should help resolve social and political conflicts. Yet, while unionists apparently support playing a role in politics, they do not support the union playing a partisan role by contesting elections.

Since the survey of unionists was conducted as part of a nationally representative population survey, we can also compare this 23 percent support among unionists to what the general public in Tunisia thinks (Figure 3). Among the 880 non-unionists in the sample, 36 percent wanted the UGTT to run in elections, significantly higher than the unionists themselves ($p < 0.001$). The general public wants the union to run more than the union itself does.

With only 23 percent support, the UGTT will likely be unable to translate its organizational weight into votes at the ballot box. It thus may not perform well even if the leadership were to decide to run. In addition, the low support in our survey also breaks down precisely along mission-oriented, ideological, and regional lines. It therefore risks fracturing the union along those divisions. First, Figure 4a presents the level of support for running in elections (on a 1–5 point scale where 5 equals strongly agree) when breaking up the sample by whether unionists are apolitical syndicalists (classified like before as those who want the union to focus exclusively on members’ interests and not

Figure 3 Political, not Partisan



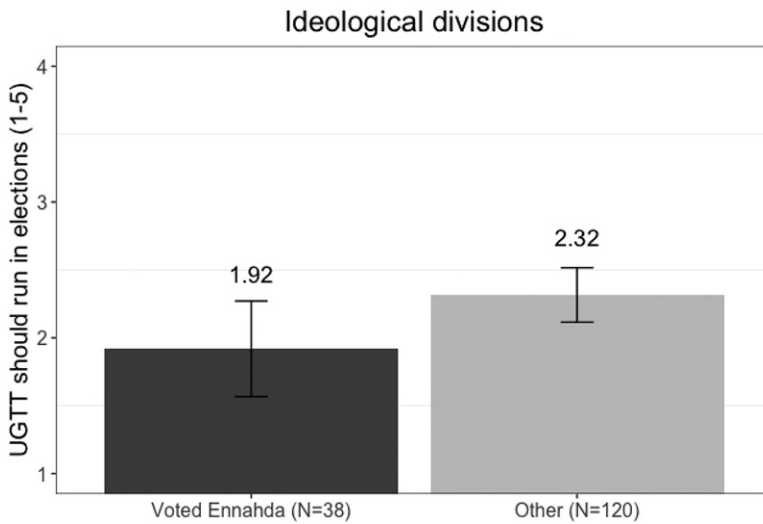
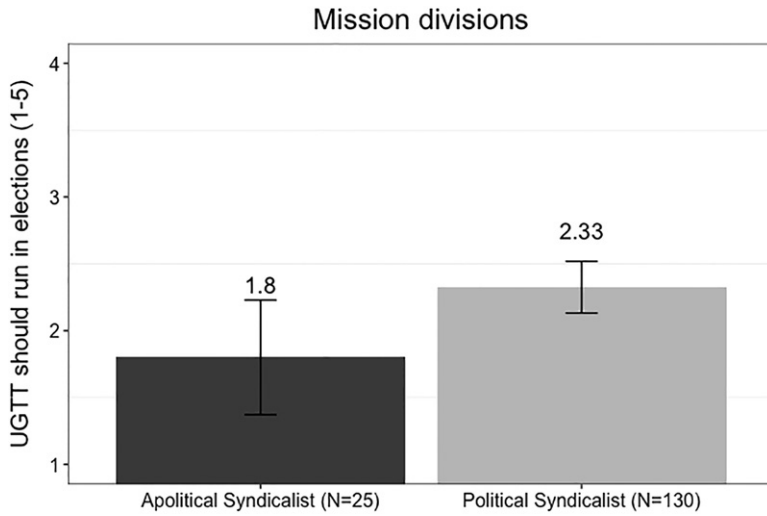
to resolve political conflicts). As expected, the apolitical syndicalists are significantly less likely to want the UGTT to contest elections.

We likewise find differential support for running in elections by ideological and regional cleavages. Figure 4b breaks up the sample instead by who respondents voted for in the 2014 elections. In line with our hypothesis, the unionists who voted for the Islamist party Ennahda are the least supportive of the union running, likely because they know that the union would endorse/create a secular party. Finally, Figure 4c breaks up the sample by region. As expected, unionists from the coastal areas—from Tunis to the Sahel to Sfax—are significantly less supportive of the UGTT running than unionists living in the Interior, North, and South.

Multivariate Regression These bivariate correlations, while illustrative, are limited in two ways. First, we cannot tell whether these three cleavages are independent of one another, or if they are overlapping. Second, we cannot tell whether they might be driven by underlying demographic variables or by other counter-explanations.

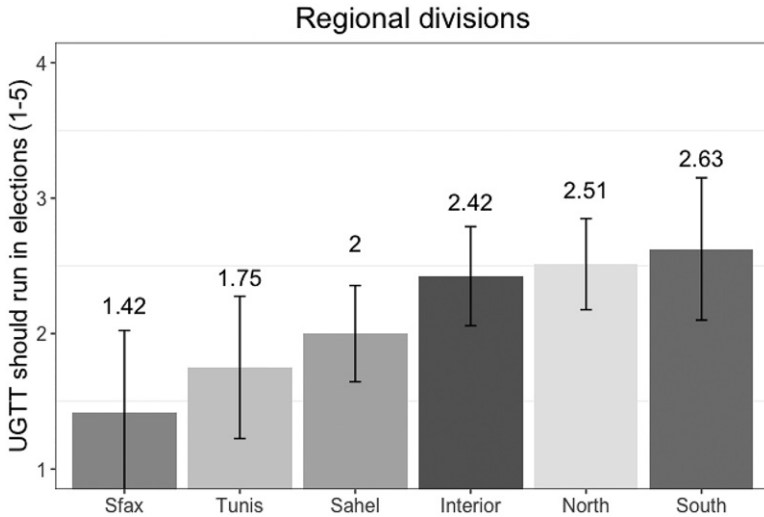
To address these possibilities, we run a multivariate regression model that allows us to assess the effect of each cleavage simultaneously, while also controlling for co-variables. We control for a number of demographic variables, including age, gender,

Figure 4 Electoral Engagement by (a) Mission, (b) Ideology, and (c) Region



(continued)

Figure 4 (Continued)



education, income, refused to answer income, urban, white collar, and whether they are a current or former member of the UGTT.

We also control for a number of counter-explanations. First, we control for whether respondents believe the UGTT is currently independent from political parties, as union members who believe the UGTT could bring something new to the political landscape may be supportive of it running in elections. Second, we control for respondents’ evaluation of how well the union is doing in “raising wages” and in “combating social and economic problems in Tunisia today.” Those who believe the union is doing well on these economic dimensions may be less supportive of it running for fear of politics distracting the union from its economic work. Third, we control for how respondents evaluate how well the union performed in the 2013 National Dialogue Quartet negotiations, on the assumption that those who believed the UGTT performed well should be more supportive of it taking a direct role in elections. Finally, we control for an alternative mission, whether respondents believe “the main role of the UGTT should be to address economic problems for all Tunisians (including non-UGTT members).”

Table 1 shows that even accounting for all of these demographic variables and counter-explanations, the three factions—apolitical syndicalists, Ennahda supporters, and members from the coast (Tunis/Sahel/Sfax)—are all still significantly less supportive of the union running in elections.

Importantly, none of the counter-explanations are significant. Union members’ attitudes about running in elections do not appear to be shaped by their evaluations of the union’s independence, its economic performance, its political performance, or

Table 1 Should the UGTT Present Candidates for Office (among UGTT members)?

	<i>Dependent variable: Run in Elections (1-5)</i>	
	(1)	(2)
<u>Factions</u>		
Apolitical syndicalist	-0.589* (0.318)	-0.545* (0.307)
Voted Ennahda 2014	-0.481* (0.259)	-0.418* (0.250)
From Coast	-0.765*** (0.218)	-0.563*** (0.210)
<u>Counter-explanations</u>		
independent	-0.028 (0.079)	-0.041 (0.074)
wages	0.058 (0.104)	0.097 (0.100)
influence	0.065 (0.106)	0.036 (0.106)
quartet	-0.135 (0.102)	-0.059 (0.100)
everyone	-0.049 (0.099)	-0.163* (0.095)
<u>Demographics</u>		
female		-0.604** (0.234)
student		2.577*** (0.905)
income		-0.204*** (0.069)
inc refuse		1.081* (0.555)
current member		0.100(0.225)
age		-0.007 (0.049)
urban		0.261 (0.260)
education		-0.079 (0.084)
white collar		-0.183 (0.265)
Constant	3.188*** (0.553)	4.518*** (0.723)
Observations	142	142
R ²	0.134	0.313
Adjusted R ²	0.082	0.219

Note: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

whether its mission should be to defend the interests of all Tunisians. Instead, it is the three internal cleavages we identified above that are driving the variation in unionists' attitudes.

Table 1, Model 2 then adds demographic variables. The results confirm that the three cleavages are not driven by demographics and instead remain statistically significant. Moreover, among the demographic covariates, few are significant: women and

richer members are also less supportive of the UGTT running, while students are more supportive. In sum, the survey shows that not only are very few unionists supportive of running in elections, but that support is especially low among the UGTT's Islamist, coastal, and apolitical members. In line with our hypotheses, these internal divisions appear to be shaping unionists' attitudes against running in elections.

Conclusion

This article sought to understand why the UGTT, Tunisia's powerful, Nobel Peace Prize-winning labor union, has not contested elections despite enjoying a favorable opportunity structure. Leveraging this case, we call attention to an important yet overlooked consideration, internal cohesion. In Tunisia, where religious and regional divisions dominate elections, the UGTT anticipates that it may fracture if it were to run. Drawing on in-depth interviews with UGTT leaders and an original survey of unionists, we find strong evidence that the union may divide along mission-oriented, ideological, and regional lines if it were to contest elections.

While beyond the scope of this article, the case of Tunisia also provides some tentative answers regarding the scope conditions of our argument. A difficult challenge for arguments positing internal divisions is explaining why they emerge in some cases but not others. We anticipate, though do not test, that the salience of internal divisions over a union's choice to contest elections should vary by the nature of the electoral cleavage. In countries where the dominant or sole electoral cleavage is the economic left-right spectrum, a union should be more able to unite its members in favor of a leftist party. But in countries where other, identity-based cleavages are also salient, unions should face a tougher time in keeping the membership united in support of a candidate.

A second potential scope condition is that the threat of internal fragmentation may be most salient during times of political upheaval, such as during revolutions or transitions to democracy.⁹² At these moments, when institutional vulnerability is at its peak, union leaders may be most concerned about disaffected members splintering from the organization. However, the fact that similar pressures appear salient in the United States as well suggests that internal diversity may matter even during more stable and consolidated eras.

These findings carry at least four important implications for research on democratization and union-party ties more broadly. First, they highlight the power of oft-neglected internal union dynamics, especially internal cohesion, in explaining unions' decisions to engage in electoral politics. Scholars of democratization and union-party ties have traditionally focused on broad historical or structural factors in theorizing the conditions under which unions endorse or form political parties during democratic transitions. While some work has emphasized inter-union fragmentation as an obstacle to unions' electoral participation,⁹³ our findings underscore the importance of intra-union fragmentation. Second, our findings challenge the assumption that electoral involvement increases unions' policy influence. In Tunisia's case, the UGTT may fracture and therefore lose its political

clout. Indeed, the case of the UGTT suggests that powerful unions might be able to escape the classic tradeoff between influence and independence.⁹⁴ The UGTT's current approach—mediating between parties rather than turning partisan itself—appears to be the best way for it to maximize its political influence. Third, our findings speak to an ongoing debate about the fate of legacy trade unions after democratic transitions.⁹⁵ Not only can these unions retain dominance following democratic transitions, but they may also be able to do so without electoral participation. Finally, our findings highlight the importance of survey-based work in the Middle East and particularly in the study of unions. The organizational complexity of unions, and the fact that they often include diverse memberships, makes it imperative to seek more systematic data on the views of union members.

NOTES

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APPENDIX

Survey Methodology

The survey of UGTT members was extracted from a larger, nationally representative telephone survey conducted by One to One for Research and Polling in August-September 2017. The population survey represents a national quota sample of adults 18 years and older. Respondents were selected according to the following quotas: governorate, urban/rural, gender, and age. Interviews were solicited proportionally to population size in terms of these variables.

Phone surveys represent an important and increasingly accurate means of low-cost surveying in Tunisia. In line with One to One's recommendations, the survey comprised 18% landlines and 82% mobile phones. Landline penetration rates in Tunisia have been decreasing and One-to-One estimates that only 20-25% of Tunisians have access to a landline and that there is a 95% probability that Tunisians who have landline have a mobile phone.

Potential respondents' numbers were selected using two methods: 1) a random selection from One to One's database constructed from field gathering of phone numbers, now comprising 600,000 contacts, and 2) a random generation of mobile phone numbers, taking into consideration all mobile operators in Tunisia. The survey was conducted using CATI (Computer Assisted with Telephone Interview) technology.

Subset of Unionists

We extract the subset of UGTT members through a question asking: "Are you a current or former member of the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT)?" Respondents could answer: "Yes-current member, Yes-former member, No, or don't know/refuse." 158 of the 1038 respondents answered that they were current or former members of the UGTT. Table S1 provides demographic information on the 158 UGTT members. It is difficult to assess the representativeness of this sample, given that there are no publicly available data on UGTT membership. However, we can compare the unionists to the general population from the survey, and the results are illuminating. Compared to the general population, UGTT members are on average older, more female, more urban, better educated, wealthier, more white-collar, and more politically active.

Table S1: Demographics of Population and UGTT Survey Samples

Demographic	Full Sample (N=1038)	UGTT Subset (N=158)	P-value of Difference
Average Age (1-9)	4.75	5.92	<0.001
Female (%)	50.4	63.9	0.001
Urban (%)	68.6	76.6	0.03
Average Education (1-7)	4.05	4.49	0.002
Average Income (1-8)	2.66	3.25	<0.001

Demographic	Full Sample (N=1038)	UGTT Subset (N=158)	P-value of Difference
Refused to answer income (%)	15.5	8.9	0.009
White collar occupation (%)	18.7	30.4	0.002
Voted in 2014 (%)	53.1	73.4	<0.001
From Tunis/Sahel (%)	32.1	33.5	0.72
From Sfax (%)	8.9	8.9	0.99

Table S2 presents the UGTT members' attitudes about the UGTT, in comparison again to the full sample. As expected, UGTT members have significantly more positive attitudes of the UGTT, being more likely to say it has done well in combating socioeconomic problems, in raising wages, and in the 2013 national dialogue quartet. Yet, UGTT members are significantly less likely to say the union should run in elections.

Table S2: Attitudes of Population and UGTT Survey Samples

The UGTT... (% agree)	Full Sample (N=1038)	UGTT Subset (N=158)	P-value of Difference
Should run in elections	33.9	22.8	0.003
Has done well combating socioeconomic problems	31.1	39.2	0.052
Has done well raising wages	38.7	47.5	0.042
Did well in 2013 quartet	42.6	56.3	0.001
Should care about members	67.5	75.9	0.024
Should care for everyone	76.7	78.5	0.612
Should resolve political conflict	72.5	75.6	0.356
Is independent of parties	55.2	57.6	0.573

Questionnaire

We use the following survey questions in our analysis:

1. I would like to ask you some questions about your participation in various national organizations. Are you a current or former member of...

a. UGTT [Yes-Current, Yes-Former, No, DK/Refuse]

2. The Tunisian General Labor Union is one of the largest civil society organizations in Tunisia. People have different opinions on its role in Tunisian society and politics. I am going to ask you a number of questions about the UGTT in Tunisia.

What kind of influence is the UGTT having combating social and economic problems in Tunisia today?

- a. Very bad
- b. Bad
- c. Neither good nor bad
- d. Good
- e. Very good
- f. Not sure/don't know (do not read)
- g. Refuse (Do not read)

3. I am going to ask you a number of questions related to the UGTT's role in Tunisia since 2011. How would you evaluate the UGTT's role in...?

	Very Bad	Bad	Neither Good nor Bad	Good	Very good	I don't know (do not read)	Refuse (Do not read)
3a. Raising wages	1	2	3	4	5	97	98
3b. Role in the National Dialogue Quartet (al-hi-war al-watani al-ruba'i)	1	2	3	4	5	97	98

4. To what extent do you agree with the following statements about the UGTT?

The main role of the UGTT should be to secure better wages and working conditions for its members

- a. Strongly disagree
- b. Disagree
- c. Neither agree nor disagree

- d. Agree
 - e. Strongly agree
 - f. Not sure/Don't know (do not read)
 - g. Refuse (Do not read)
5. The main role of the UGTT should be to address economic problems (such as unemployment and poverty) for all Tunisians (including non-UGTT members)
- a. Strongly Disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neither agree nor disagree
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly agree
 - f. Not sure/Don't know (do not read)
 - g. Refuse (Do not read)
6. The UGTT has an obligation to help resolve social and political conflict in Tunisia
- a. Strongly Disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neither agree nor disagree
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly agree
 - f. Not sure/Don't know (do not read)
 - g. Refuse (Do not read)
7. The UGTT should directly present candidates for political office
- a. Strongly Disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neither agree nor disagree
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly agree
 - f. Not sure/Don't know
 - g. Refuse (do not read)
8. The UGTT is independent from political parties in Tunisia
- a. Strongly disagree
 - b. Disagree

- c. Neither agree nor disagree
- d. Agree
- e. Strongly agree
- f. Not sure/Don't know(do not read)
- g. Refuse (Do not read)

Demographics

9. What is your age?

- 1. 18-24 years
- 2. 25-29 years
- 3. 30-34 years
- 4. 35-39 years
- 5. 40-44 years
- 6. 45-49 years
- 7. 50-54 years
- 8. 55-59 years
- 9. 60 years and over
- 98. Don't know (Do not read)
- 99. Refused to answer (Do not read)

10. In which governorate do you live?

a. Ariana
b. Béja
c. Ben Arous
d. Bizerte
e. Gabès
f. Gafsa
g. Jendouba
h. Kairouan
i. Kassérine
j. Kebili
k. Le Kef
l. Mahdia
m. Manouba
n. Médenine
o. Monastir
p. Nabeul
q. Sfax

r. Sidi Bou Zid
s. Siliana
t. Sousse
u. Tataouine
v. Tozeur
w. Tunis
x. Zaghouan

98. Don't know (Do not read)

98. refused to answer (Do not read)

11. What is your gender?

- a. Male
- b. Female

12. What is your level of education?

- a. Illiterate/No formal education
- a. Elementary
- b. Preparatory/Basic
- c. Secondary
- d. Some university education
- e. License/Bachelor's degree
- f. MA and above
- 99. Refused to answer

13. What is your occupation?

- a. Employer/director of an institution
- b. Director of an institution or a high ranking governmental employee
- c. Professional such as a lawyer, accountant, teacher, doctor, etc.
- d. Employee
- e. Manual laborer
- f. Agricultural worker/Owner of a farm
- g. Owner of a shop/grocery store
- h. Craftsperson
- i. Working at the armed forces or the police
- j. Retired (go to Q7)
- k. A housewife (go to Q7)

- j. A student (go to Q7)
- m. Unemployed (go to Q7)
- m. Other (specify)
- 98. Don't know
- 99. Refuse

14. Do you work full time or part time?

- a. Full Time (more than 30 hours a week)
- b. Part time (less than 30 hours a week)
- c. Refused to answer (do not read)

15. What is your marital status?

- a. Unmarried or Bachelor
- a. Married
- b. Divorced or separated
- c. Widowed
- d. Others (specify)
- 99. refused to answer (Do not read)

16. What is the total monthly income for all household members?

- a. Less than 500 TND
- b. [500-999 TND]
- c. [1000-1499 TND]
- d. [1500-1999TND]
- e. [2000-2499TND]
- f. [2500-2999TND]
- g. [3000-5000 TND]
- h. More than 5000 TND
- 98. Don't know (Do not read)
- 99. Refuse (Do not read)

17. Who did you vote for in the 2014 parliamentary elections?

- a. Nidaa Tounes
- b. Ennahdha
- c. Free Patriotic Party

- d. Jabha Chaabia (Popular Front)
- e. Afek Tounes
- f. Congress for the Republic
- g. Democratic Current
- h. People's Movement
- i. Al Moubadara (National Destourian Initiative)
- j. Democratic Alliance
- k. Current of Love
- l. Union for Tunisia
- m. Ettakatol (Front)
- n. Wafa (Loyalty Movement)
- o. Al Amen (Safety Party)
- p. Party of the Voice of the Tunisian People
- q. National Salvation Front
- r. Movement of Socialist Democrats
- s. List of the Rehabilitation
- t. List for the Glory of Djerid
- u. Famers' Voice Party
- v. List of the Call of Tunisians Abroad
- w. Other parties/lists
- x. Did not vote
- 98. Don't remember/Don't know
- 99. Refuse