

# Authoritarian Legacies and Autocratic Consolidation in Tunisia

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## Abstract

Do authoritarian legacies shape authoritarian consolidation? Prevailing accounts of autocratization emphasize the role of party-based state capture and polarization as mechanisms for sustaining electoral support, while research on authoritarian legacies focuses primarily on their effects on democratic development. We argue that in unconsolidated democracies with shallow party systems, democratic breakdown can trigger a realignment rooted in demobilization and the reemergence of autocratic legacies. Tunisia offers unique leverage for this argument. While Tunisia's Kais Saied rose to power as a populist outsider in democratic elections in 2019, he staged a self-coup in 2021 and proceeded to dismantle Tunisia's fragile post-2011 democracy. In 2024, he was reelected in blatantly uncompetitive elections. Building on the literature on authoritarian legacies, we argue that Saied's support base has shifted from a populist to an authoritarian coalition rooted in legacy networks rather than mass mobilization. Leveraging original district-level data from the 2019 and 2024 presidential elections, we trace how Saied's support evolved under conditions of widespread demobilization and increasing autocratic restrictions on competition. Using a difference-in-differences design, we show that districts with stronger authoritarian legacies responded differently to the shock of democratic breakdown in 2021, exhibiting significantly less electoral demobilization and disproportionate increases in support for the incumbent between 2019 and 2024. These findings demonstrate that, in the absence of hegemonic party-building, authoritarian consolidation can draw on residual autocratic infrastructures to generate electoral support. More broadly, the article highlights how authoritarian legacies not only constrain democratic development but can also provide the organizational foundations for its reversal.

## **Introduction**

How does autocratization reshape electoral support for incumbents, and through what mechanisms do electoral coalitions change as democracy breaks down? Prevailing accounts of autocratization highlight party-based state capture and polarization as mechanisms to sustain electoral support (e.g., Esen and Gumuscu 2016; Ugur-Cinar 2023 on Turkey; Enyedi and Mikola 2024; Ilonszki and Lengyel 2025 on Hungary; Handlin 2016 on Venezuela). This paper advances an alternative perspective. We argue that in unconsolidated democracies with shallow party systems, autocratization may instead produce a process of coalitional realignment rooted in demobilization and the reactivation of authoritarian legacies. As competitive actors are repressed and electoral participation declines, dispersed networks tied to the former authoritarian order gain influence by default, becoming a residual source of organizational capacity and electoral support.

We develop this argument through the Tunisian case, where democratic breakdown in 2021 followed a decade-long process of competitive politics. This specific sequence of events allows us to assess the causal effect of legacies from the pre-2011 autocratic order on the consolidation of a new autocratic regime under President Kais Saied after 2021. We analyze district-level electoral data from the democratic 2019 and the autocratic 2024 presidential elections in a difference-in-differences design to show that autocratic legacies from the pre-2011 era shaped how districts responded to autocratization: Where autocratic legacies were stronger, demobilization was less pronounced and Saied's vote share increased disproportionately between 2019 and 2024, suggesting that local-level autocratic networks became the default reservoir of electoral support for Kais Saied.

This argument contributes to two strands of research in comparative scholarship on regime transitions. First, it adds theoretical nuance to the literature on autocratization by exploring sources of electoral support during periods of authoritarian regime formation beyond the prevailing account of polarization-driven, party-based mobilization. Second, this paper extends the theoretical reach of scholarship on the electoral effects of authoritarian legacies by shifting focus from how such legacies constrain democratic development to how they enable autocratic consolidation. Leveraging the case of Tunisia, where the transition to democracy was relatively short and was followed by abrupt democratic breakdown, we theorize the effects of authoritarian legacies on autocratic consolidation in the aftermath of democratic breakdown.

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows: we first bring the puzzle of authoritarian regime change into a conversation with the literature of authoritarian legacies to develop a testable hypothesis. We then introduce Tunisia as a particularly well-suited case study, discussing the political context in a country that has experienced transitions from authoritarianism to democracy, and back. In a third section, we introduce our empirical strategy and data, before we leverage a difference-in-difference design to test the effects of authoritarian legacies on autocratic consolidation in Tunisia. We finally discuss the results of our empirical examination and their broader implications for our understanding of authoritarian legacies and autocratization.

### **Theorizing Electoral Support in Authoritarian Regime Formation**

Autocratization has become a prominent, well-researched phenomenon in global politics (Waldner and Lust 2018; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). Transitions to authoritarian rule are characterized by two contingent processes: the establishment of an institutional infrastructure for the consolidation of autocracy and the formation of a popular base in support of incumbents in power and their political projects. The former process has drawn ample attention by scholars exploring the institutional working mechanisms of electoral politics (Magaloni 2008; Boix and Svobik 2013; Meng 2020), the composition of political elites (Buehler and Ayari 2018; Leber, Carothers and Reichert 2023; Mirić and Pechenkina 2023), and the formation of ruling parties as institutional vehicles of authoritarian dominance and elite negotiations (Magaloni 2008; Reuter and Remington 2009; Slater 2010; Meng 2021). Hence, in this vast research program, prominent attention was placed on the formation and elements of the authoritarian winning coalition (Buono de Mesquita, et al. 2004; Svobik 2012).

From a demand-side perspective on autocratization, a growing literature emphasizes the role of mass attitudes and voter behavior in sustaining democratic erosion. Prominently, scholars have examined how (affective) polarization motivates electoral support for autocratizing incumbents (Graham and Svobik 2020; Şaşmaz, Yagci and Ziblatt 2022), including the extent to which voters view the opposing camp as violating democratic norms and therefore deserving of exclusion (Braley et al. 2023). Related work highlights the centrality of partisanship in shaping citizens' willingness to tolerate or actively endorse anti-democratic behavior by their preferred political actors (Simonovits, McCoy and Littvay 2022; Gidengil, Stolle and Bergeron-Boutin 2022).

Beyond polarization and partisan loyalty, other studies point to weak attachments to liberal-democratic principles as a key enabling condition for autocratization (Wunsch et al. 2025). A further strand emphasizes material and organizational mechanisms, identifying patronage and clientelism as crucial channels through which autocratic incumbents mobilize electoral support (Frye, Reuter and Szakonyi 2019; Szabó and Reiff 2025). This perspective echoes a long-standing literature on authoritarian elections, which documents how distributive incentives and clientelistic networks substitute for genuine political competition (Blaydes 2010; Lust-Okar 2009).

Taken together, these strands converge on a dominant account of autocratization in which democratically elected incumbents consolidate power by capturing state institutions and mobilizing mass support through polarization and partisan alignment. In this view, electoral dominance is sustained by activating loyal constituencies against a demonized opposition. Yet this framework is ill-suited to contexts in which autocratization proceeds without polarization-driven mobilization, and where electoral participation instead contracts sharply under conditions of repression, exclusion, and declining contestation. We argue that it is precisely under these conditions of demobilized authoritarian consolidation that authoritarian legacies become politically consequential, shaping who withdraws from electoral politics and where residual support for the incumbent persists.

### *Authoritarian Legacies in Unconsolidated Democracies*

Investigating the emergence of an authoritarian support coalition begins with the premise that autocratization tends to occur in weak and unconsolidated democracies that look back at an authoritarian past of their own. Such unconsolidated democracies have not developed, tested, and entrenched democratic procedures for long periods of time, at least in part because they have had to navigate political holdovers from their authoritarian past. We argue that such authoritarian legacies can serve as a source for the emergence of a support base for a new authoritarian regime effectively reversing a democratic regime cycle. In this perspective, the new regime's authoritarian selectorate represents a realignment of sorts with the country's authoritarian past.

Prior research has highlighted cognitions, coalitions, and institutions as three core mechanisms through which authoritarian legacies have shaped subsequent outcomes (Simpser, Slater, and Wittenberg 2018). In terms of cognitions, scholars have examined the effects of authoritarian

legacies on political preferences among social constituencies. This research has established a range of individual-level effects of authoritarian legacies. Studies have shown, for instance, that authoritarian legacies lead to lower support for democracy (Neundorf 2010) and lower propensities for civic and political participation (Bernhard and Karakoç 2007). Others have argued that citizens develop an anti-dictator bias in that they seek to distance themselves from the ideological positions of prior autocratic regimes (Dinas and Northmore-Ball 2020), but also that this bias might turn positive if citizens associate the autocratic past with positive sentiments (Kim-Leffingwell 2023).

Second, scholars have recognized that authoritarian coalitions can persist beyond the breakdown of autocracies. Former elites can benefit from legal safeguards in negotiated transitions and reemerge in powerful political and administrative positions (Albertus and Menaldo 2014; Albertus 2019). Authoritarian elites adapt their ideological outlook and resurface as members of new political parties formed amid democratic transitions (Zucco and Power 2025; Self and Hicken 2025), possibly sustaining clandestine networks of authoritarian elite alignment across the political spectrum. Ultimately, ‘authoritarian diasporas’ have been known to effectively shape political elite composition during democratic transitions—both as members of political organizations representing the authoritarian past and among the new political establishment (Loxton and Power 2021).

Finally, scholars have identified authoritarian legacies on the institutional level, in particular among political parties directly representing the old authoritarian order. In unconsolidated democracies, authoritarian ‘legacy’ or ‘successor’ parties are organizations “that emerge from authoritarian regimes, but that operate after a transition to democracy” (Loxton 2015: 158). Such parties can benefit from an “authoritarian inheritance” under democracy, including a party brand, on-the-ground organizational capacity, clientelist networks, and financial resources (Loxton 2018: 10). Such authoritarian legacy parties often have an electoral advantage over their competitors because of their superior organizational capacities and established elite networks used to coordinate party politics and mobilization efforts (Grzymala-Busse 2020; Ishiyama and Quinn 2006; Loxton and Mainwaring 2018).

Since their alignment with the old authoritarian order can render them ideologically compromised (Dinas and Northmore-Ball 2020; Frantzeskakis and Sato 2020), authoritarian legacy parties may not be able to gain majorities in competitive electoral contests. As such, these parties may be

hindered by “authoritarian baggage,” including such poor economic performance or a record of human rights violations (Loxton 2018: 14). Yet, their organizational advantage turns authoritarian legacy parties and elite networks into a sticky element in unconsolidated democracies, able to sustain party-voter linkages (Berman and Nugent 2020), in particular where they develop recognizable party brands (Kim and Song 2025).

Our argument builds on this research program. While much of this literature has focused on how authoritarian legacies constrain democratic development, we argue that they also play a critical role in enabling authoritarian consolidation. In particular, we highlight the role of authoritarian diasporas—dispersed networks of former regime elites who reinsert themselves into post-transition political landscapes through new or repurposed vehicles (Loxton and Power 2021). These actors may lack centralized coordination but retain the organizational capacity, elite linkages, and ideological continuity necessary to influence political behavior in moments of democratic erosion. We thus conceptualize authoritarian legacies primarily as coalitional resources—networks, organizational residues, and elite linkages—that may or may not be expressed through formal institutions such as parties. As electoral competition weakens, these coalitional legacies can be reactivated to sustain regime support, demonstrating how the authoritarian past not only constrains democracy but also provides the infrastructural foundations for its reversal.

Crucially, our argument does not hinge on a widespread ideological shift among voters or a spontaneous resurgence of mass support for authoritarian rule. Rather, we emphasize how authoritarian diasporas become increasingly influential by default, as competitive actors are repressed and overall political mobilization declines. In such contexts, the relative weight of these legacy networks grows because they retain organizational embeddedness and elite cohesion at a time when alternative forces are fragmented, disbanded, or excluded. As democratic institutions weaken and participation erodes, these actors fill the vacuum, leveraging their historical infrastructure to shape electoral outcomes and influence regime trajectories.

These dynamics should be particularly visible in the first electoral contests after the breakdown of democracy. Such authoritarian founding elections turn on its head the democratic principal of institutionalized uncertainty (Przeworski 1991); that is, they are noncompetitive and characterized by ex-ante uncertainty about the rules and procedures governing the electoral contest, yet certainty

about the electoral outcome, with the incumbent guaranteed to win. In such settings, the relative influence of authoritarian diasporas is amplified because their embedded elite networks persist as others are excluded or demobilized. As democratic institutions decay and alternative actors retreat, these legacy coalitions gain prominence by default, shaping electoral outcomes through organizational continuity. If this theoretical claim is correct, we should expect electoral dynamics in authoritarian founding elections to be moderated by the presence and strength of authoritarian coalitional legacies. This leads us to the following testable hypothesis:

*Hypothesis:* Districts with stronger authoritarian coalitional legacies will exhibit less demobilization and higher support for the authoritarian incumbent in founding elections following democratic breakdown.

### **Tunisia: Authoritarian Legacies and Autocratic Consolidation**

Contemporary Tunisian politics serves our purpose particularly well as the country has experienced democratization in the wake of a mass uprising in 2010, followed by democratic breakdown triggered by President Kais Saied’s self-coup in 2021. Following Saied’s power grab, the country has undergone rapid autocratization and a new authoritarian regime has begun to take shape. This sequence of events allows us to directly observe the effects of authoritarian legacies not just on democratization, but on the emergence and consolidation of a new autocratic regime.

#### *Tunisian Democracy*

The country’s transition to democracy had been aided by civil society organizations, most importantly the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT) (Bishara 2020), and a transitional pact between Nidaa Tounes—a new political party that represented both old elites from the Ben Ali regime and secular elements in the Tunisian political spectrum (Boubekeur 2016; Berman and Nugent 2019)—and the country’s largest Islamist party Ennahda. Ennahda had been the most important opposition party during the Ben Ali era and quickly emerged as one of the most popular and best organized actors in the new democratic establishment (Wolf 2017). Following democratic founding elections in 2014, Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda formed a shaky coalition government. As

many Tunisians felt economic hardship and security concerns, people became increasingly disillusioned with the new political order and its agents (Koehler 2013).

In the 2019 presidential elections, a political outsider—university professor Kais Saied—rose to power on a populist platform (Redissi, et al. 2020). Saied’s surprising ascent in politics occurred in the context of increasing popular disenchantment with the political establishment and amid a fragmented field of candidates in the first round of the presidential elections. Saied’s victory in the first round of the 2019 presidential elections came as a shock to many observers of Tunisian politics. In a crowded field, Saied gained 18.4 per cent of the vote in the first round and won the run-off election against second-placed contender Nabil Karoui handily with 72.7 per cent of the vote. Following Saied’s election in 2019, Tunisia witnessed a severe socio-economic crisis, further compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges, in addition to growing tensions between the parliament and the executive, created a “perfect storm” and provided the background for Saied’s takeover (Tamburini 2023: 5).

### *Executive Self-Coup*

Tunisian politics took a decidedly authoritarian turn in 2021 (Yerkes and Henneberg 2024). On July 25, 2021, less than two years after he assumed power, Saied froze parliament, dismissed the prime minister, lifted the immunity of members of parliament and announced that he would “temporarily rule by decree” (Grewal 2021). In the months that followed, Saied took a series of steps that further consolidated his hold on power. In August 2021, he extended his suspension of parliament “until further notice” (Amara 2021) and eventually dissolved it in March 2022 (Amara and McDowall 2022). On September 22, 2021, Saied issued presidential decree 117, transferring the powers of the legislative branch to himself, and giving himself the authority to issue decrees regulating a wide range of issues, including the judiciary, electoral law, and political parties (Sadek 2021). In February 2022, Saied dissolved the Supreme Judicial Council, dealing a serious blow to judicial independence (Amara 2022). Continuing his attack on the judiciary, Saied issued a decree in June 2022, giving himself the right to fire judges. As part of the move, he dismissed 57 judges (“Tunisia: Arbitrary Dismissals”).

Saied’s authoritarian power grab culminated in the adoption of a new constitution in July 2022, which transformed Tunisia into a “hyper-presidentialist system” (Grewal et al. 2022). Presidential

powers expanded to appoint the prime minister and other cabinet members, dissolve the cabinet, impose greater restrictions on citizens' rights and freedoms under 'exceptional circumstances,' and the ability to appoint judges without having to follow recommendations from the Supreme Judicial Council. The 2022 constitution also removed parliament's ability under the 2014 constitution to remove the president through a vote of no-confidence (Maboudi 2020). Finally, the 2022 constitution did away with the prerogatives of the Supreme Constitutional Court to adjudicate legal conflicts regarding the powers of the president.

Within one year from his power grab, Saied had thus completely remodeled the Tunisian legal and institutional system and established one-man rule to lead efforts at authoritarian regime formation. Apart from institutional change, this transition period has been marred with increasing assaults on civil rights and liberties, the freedom of expression, and political opponents. Greater restrictions on freedom of association have included the use of emergency measures related to COVID-19 to stifle protest and the use of violence to quell anti-Saied protests (Guetat and Agrebi 2021).

Since 2021, Saied has deployed a number of legal texts to consolidate his hold on power and target his political opponents (Yerkes 2024). These include the 2022 constitution and Decree 2022-54, a cybercrime law which criminalizes the spread of "false news, data, rumors" to "harm public security or national defense, or spread terror." As Safae El Yaaqoubi writes, "the law grants the government broad powers to detain those who challenge or criticize the regime, effectively silencing opposition voices" (2024). The law was used to target high profile opposition figures, including Rached Ghannouchi, leader of the Islamist Ennahda Party, and Abir Moussi, head of the Free Destour Party (PDL). The former was sentenced to 14 years in prison in July 2025 (Chibelushi 2025), while the latter was sentenced to 12 years in jail in December 2025 (Amara 2025).

### *Authoritarian Elections in 2024*

The 2024 presidential elections, held on October 6, took place amid a politically repressive environment, featuring broad assaults on opposition figures and civil society actors. The elections could be characterized as "uncompetitive" authoritarian elections, where "the incumbent legally bars opposition actors from existing, violates basic civil liberties using overt coercion, and monopolizes access to resources, media, and the law" (Martinez i Coma and Morgenbesser 2020: 2). In the months leading up to the elections, several opposition candidates were disqualified by

the election commission. Four serious contenders were barred from running by a Tunisian court in August 2024 (Amara 2024a). According to Bassam Khawaja, deputy Middle East and North Africa director at Human Rights Watch: “After jailing dozens of prominent opponents and activists, Tunisian authorities have removed almost all serious contenders from the presidential race, reducing this vote to a mere formality” (Human Rights Watch 2024).

Out of 17 candidates who initially submitted their paperwork in August 2024, only two candidates eventually were allowed to challenge Saied. One of them was Zouhair Maghzaoui, head of the People’s Movement, which supported Saied’s 2021 self-coup. The other was Ayachi Zammel, the head of the Azimoun liberal party, who was jailed before the election and sentenced to 12 years in prison, just five days before the election, in cases related to falsifying voter signatures on election documents (Amara 2024c). On September 27, 2025, nine days prior to the election, the Tunisian parliament voted to strip the country’s Administrative Court of its ability to settle electoral disputes (Amara 2024b). Notably, the court had previously ruled that the electoral commission should reinstate three of the candidates it had disqualified.

Beyond opposition candidates, journalists, lawyers, and social media users were also arrested in the lead-up to the election, under Decree 54 (Freedom House 2024). In May 2024, two TV hosts and political commentators, Mourad Zghidi and Borhen Bsaies, were sentenced to one-year in prison for “spreading false news” and “defaming others” (France24 2024). In July 2024, lawyer and political commentator Sonia Dahmani, was sentenced to one year in prison, for sharing a sarcastic comment about Tunisia’s policy toward African immigrants (Wilson 2024).

Taken together, the collapse of meaningful competition, the exclusion of viable challengers, and the criminalization of opposition activity fundamentally altered the informational and mobilizational environment in which voters and local actors operated. This calls for an analytical strategy that does not treat electoral outcomes as direct expressions of popular preference, but rather as patterned responses to authoritarian constraint. Understanding electoral outcomes under these conditions therefore requires shifting attention from aggregate levels of participation or support to their spatial variation across districts. In the following section, we outline a research design that exploits this variation to assess how historical political legacies conditioned district-level responses to Tunisia’s post-2021 authoritarian turn.

## Research Design and Data

Our empirical strategy focuses on the founding elections of Tunisia’s contemporary authoritarian regime: the 2024 presidential elections. We analyze two district-level dependent variables—electoral turnout and vote share for Kais Saied—and explicitly compare electoral behavior under two fundamentally different political conditions. In 2019, Saied competed as a political outsider in a genuinely competitive election; by 2024, he had become an autocratic incumbent presiding over a non-competitive contest.

This comparison offers clear analytical leverage. Both outcome variables changed considerably between 2019 and 2024, but in opposite directions: Turnout decreased sharply from 48.9% in the first round of the 2019 election to 28.8% in 2024—a level far below the average of 69% for authoritarian presidential elections reported in the comparative literature (Reuter 2021). This sharp decline justifies our characterization of the 2024 contest as one of generalized demobilization, rather than selective abstention. By contrast, Saied’s vote share surged to 90.6% in 2024. This increase is mechanically inflated by the exclusion of credible competitors, the criminalization of opposition, and the broader repressive electoral environment. For this reason, we do not interpret Saied’s aggregate vote share as a measure of popular support. Instead, our interest lies in how changes in support and participation vary across districts, not in their absolute levels.

Accordingly, our analysis focuses on within-district changes between 2019 and 2024. We exploit district-level variation in electoral behavior to examine how the geographical distribution of turnout and Saied support shifted as Tunisia transitioned from competitive politics to outright autocracy. The empirical strategy is a Difference-in-Differences (DiD) design with district fixed effects, which allows us to assess whether districts associated with specific political legacies responded differently to the post-2021 authoritarian turn.

We estimate the following DiD specification:

$$Y_{it} = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{Post}_t + \beta_2 \text{Treated}_j + \beta_3 (\text{Treated}_j \times \text{Post}_t) + \gamma \text{Controls}_{it} + \delta_i + \varepsilon_{it}$$

Where:

- $Y_{it}$  denotes either turnout or Saied’s vote share in district  $i$  at time  $t$ ;
- $\text{Treated}_j$  is a binary indicator for whether district  $i$  is aligned with specific legacy  $j$ ;
- $\text{Post}_t$  equals 1 for the 2024 election and 0 for the 2019 election;

- $\delta_i$  are district fixed effects.

With district fixed effects included, the DiD estimator does not rely on cross-sectional differences in levels of turnout or Saied support. Instead, identification comes from differential within-district changes over time between treated and untreated districts. Table 1 below summarizes this variation. Concretely, the model compares how turnout and Saied’s vote share changed between 2019 and 2024 *within the same district*, and whether these changes were systematically larger or smaller in districts with specific political legacies.

**Table 1: District-Level Changes in Turnout and Saied Vote Share**

<b>Outcome</b>	<b>Change</b>	<b>Min</b>	<b>Max</b>	<b>SD</b>
Turnout	-18.53	-40.67	6.35	9.94
Saied vote share	70.76	51.87	89.86	7.89

All time-invariant district characteristics—such as historical political culture, long-standing socio-economic conditions, or persistent center-periphery divides—are absorbed by the district fixed effects. Common nationwide shocks affecting all districts in 2024, including the overall authoritarian tightening and the collapse of electoral competition, are absorbed by the post-election indicator. As a result, the DiD coefficient captures whether districts with specific political legacies experienced disproportionate demobilization or disproportionate increases in support for the incumbent, relative to other districts, following the post-2021 regime transformation. Under the parallel-trends assumption, this coefficient identifies the causal effect of legacy political alignments on electoral behavior in an increasingly authoritarian electoral context.

*Treatment: Local Pro-Authoritarian Networks*

We operationalize the presence of authoritarian coalitional legacies by measuring the vote share of groups openly supportive of the pre-2011 authoritarian order. Such groups have always been

present throughout Tunisia's democratic period between 2011 and 2021. In the first electoral contest following the fall of the Ben Ali regime, the 2011 election of a National Constituent Assembly (NCA), lustration laws meant that former members of Ben Ali's ruling party—the Democratic Constitutional Rally (*Rassemblement constitutionnel démocratique*, RCD)—were barred from running, even though this ban was only enforced selectively. The first regular parliamentary elections in 2014, in turn, saw the rise of the Nidaa Tounes party—a group that included a significant share of former RCD-members. The rise of Nidaa Tounes thus marked the partial rehabilitation of old regime elites, yet Nidaa entered an uneasy coalition with the Islamist Ennahda party, even though they had campaigned as staunch opponents of the Islamist camp. In 2019, finally, at least in part because of Nidaa's compromising stance, a staunchly anti-Islamist and pro-authoritarian party emerged in the form of the Free Destourian Party (*Parti destourien libre*, PDL).

In principle, the vote shares of any of these groups could be a plausible proxy for pro-autocratic networks. We argue, however, that the cleanest measure is the electoral performance of yet another set of forces, namely the 10 individual lists from the wider Destourian<sup>1</sup> spectrum participating in the 2014 legislative election.<sup>2</sup> While these lists were electorally inconsequential with an average vote share of only 0.68% (min=0, max=4.83, sd=0.69), their electoral support is a clear sign for the presence and strength of pro-authoritarian networks on the local level. First, in contrast to the 2011 contest, lustration laws no longer limited former RCD-members' ability to run in these elections. Second, given the rise of Nidaa Tounes as a more mainstream force aiming for a rehabilitation of at least parts of the authoritarian legacy, a vote for an explicitly Destourian list is a strong sign of pro-authoritarian tendencies. A vote for Nidaa Tounes, by contrast, could also be attributed to Nidaa's anti-Ennahda platform, not their stance on the pre-revolutionary regime. Vote shares for

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<sup>1</sup> The term Destourian refers to Tunisia's constitutional nationalist tradition originating in the Destour and Neo-Destour parties which dominated Tunisian politics since independence, including through the Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD), the Ben Ali-era ruling party. In the post-2011 period, the term denotes political actors and networks claiming continuity with this pre-revolutionary authoritarian legacy.

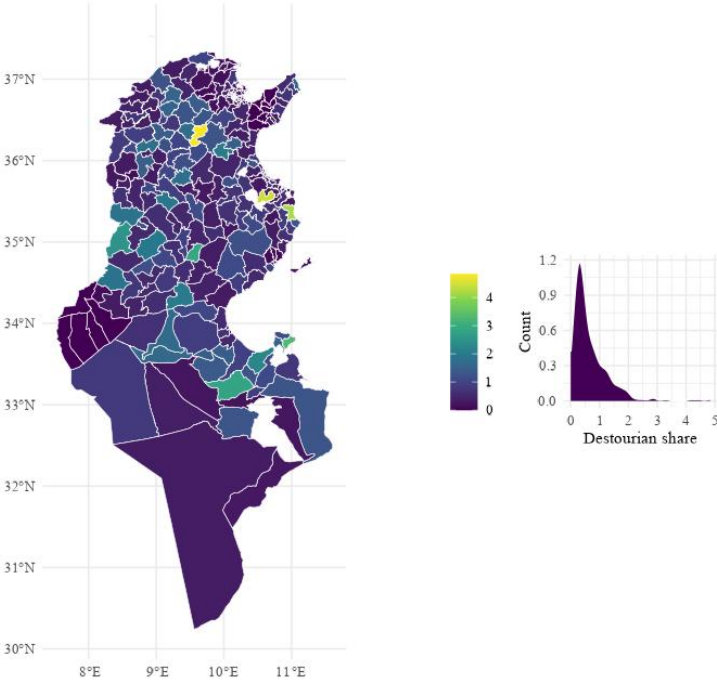
<sup>2</sup> The most important of these are الحركة الدستورية (Destourian movement), a party founded in 2013 by former Prime Minister Hamed Karoui which was renamed the Free Destourian Party (PDL) in 2016 ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Free\\_Destourian\\_Party](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Free_Destourian_Party)); حزب اللقاء الدستوري (Destourian Gathering), founded by Sami Chabrak in 2012 (<https://www.turess.com/attounissia/51539>); حزب المبادرة الوطنية الدستورية (National Destourian Initiative), the remnants of the party founded by Kamel Morjane in 2011 ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National\\_Destourian\\_Initiative](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Destourian_Initiative));

the PDL in 2019 would be plausible as a proxy. Yet the fact that the parliamentary election in 2019 took place after the first round of the presidential contest precludes this measure.

It is important to note that we are not suggesting an individual-level causal mechanism. For one thing, our data is ecological and does not allow us to directly test individual-level mechanisms. Moreover, the limited numbers of Destourian voters in 2014 cannot singlehandedly account for Saied’s high 2024 vote shares, even if the distorted competitive environment and low levels of turnout are taken into account. Rather, our contention is that relatively higher vote shares for Destourian lists in 2014 reveal the presence and effectiveness of ex-RCD networks within local communities. Our hypothesis is that these networks dampened demobilization in 2024 and further increased support for Kais Saied.

Figure 1 shows the spatial distribution of the Destourian vote share in 2014. Given the highly skewed distribution of this variable, we use the median (rather than the mean) as the cut-off for our treatment indicator. This leaves us with 129 treated and 133 untreated delegations.

Figure 1: Destourian Vote Share, Legislative Elections 2014





The difference-in-differences design rests on the assumption that, absent the post-2021 regime transformation, districts with stronger Destourian legacies would have exhibited parallel trends in turnout and incumbent support relative to other districts. This assumption is plausible in the Tunisian context. The 2021-2024 period constituted a nationwide institutional shock—characterized by the suspension of competitive politics and the exclusion of viable challengers—that plausibly affected all districts simultaneously, while interacting differentially with pre-existing political alignments. Under this assumption, the interaction between the Destourian legacy indicator and the post-2024 period captures the causal effect of historical Destourian alignment on electoral demobilization and support for the incumbent under increasingly constrained electoral competition. Standard errors are clustered at the governorate level to account for spatial correlation and shared political shocks operating above the district level

The results in Table 2 indicate that historical Destourian political alignments are associated with a distinct pattern of electoral behavior under Tunisia’s post-2021 authoritarian consolidation. Turnout declines sharply between 2019 and 2024 across all districts, reflecting widespread demobilization in a contest marked by restricted competition. However, the positive and statistically significant interaction between Destourian legacy and the post-2024 period in Model 1 indicates that turnout declined less in Destourian-aligned districts than elsewhere. This pattern is consistent with selective demobilization, whereby electorates historically connected to regime-associated networks remain comparatively more mobilized despite an overall collapse in participation. At the same time, the significant positive interaction effect in the Saied vote-share model suggests that districts with stronger Destourian legacies experienced a disproportionately larger increase in support for the incumbent between 2019 and 2024. Taken together, the results point to a consolidation strategy that does not rely on broad-based mobilization, but rather on the relative resilience of coalitional authoritarian legacies. In a low-turnout, weakly competitive electoral environment, these constituencies appear to provide a stable—if narrow—electoral foundation for incumbent dominance.

**Table 2: DiD Models with Destourian Legacy Treatment**

	Turnout (1)	Saied share (2)
Destourian legacy	-0.439*** (0.101)	-0.0002 (0.129)
2024 elections	-0.183*** (0.011)	0.702*** (0.008)
Registered voters	-0.00000*** (0.00000)	-0.00000** (0.00000)
Destourian legacy * 2024	0.053*** (0.011)	0.029*** (0.010)
Constant	0.954*** (0.097)	0.159** (0.078)
Delegation fixed effects	Yes	Yes
Observations	523	523
R <sup>2</sup>	0.866	0.989
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.728	0.977
Residual Std. Error (df = 257)	0.063	0.054
F Statistic (df = 265; 257)	6.266***	85.347***

*Note:*

\*p&lt;0.1; \*\*p&lt;0.05; \*\*\*p&lt;0.01

Standard errors clustered in governorates.

One plausible mechanism underlying these patterns is the differential persistence of regime-linked organizational and social networks across districts. Although Destourian party structures collapsed formally after 2011, areas with stronger historical ties to the former ruling party retained informal linkages between citizens and state actors. In the context of the 2024 presidential election—characterized by restricted competition and weak incentives for broad-based mobilization—such networks may have facilitated limited but targeted electoral participation, insulating these districts from the most extreme forms of demobilization observed elsewhere. At the same time, the absence of viable challengers and the consolidation of executive authority likely increased the salience of incumbency as a focal point for regime-aligned actors, producing a disproportionate shift toward President Saied in Destourian legacy districts. Importantly, this mechanism does not imply active mass mobilization or ideological support, but rather a form of passive compliance and residual mobilization rooted in historical state-society linkages. Under authoritarianizing conditions, such

legacies can thus shape electoral outcomes less by generating enthusiasm than by dampening abstention and channeling limited participation toward the incumbent.

*Over- and Underperforming Districts*

Figure 2 looks at the 2024 performance of districts with low and high support for Saied in 2019. Districts are classified according to whether Saied’s initial vote share in 2019 was above or below the national median and whether subsequent changes in support by 2024 exceeded the national average, yielding four distinct performance trajectories. These trajectories are cross-tabulated with a binary indicator of Destourian legacy, defined by relative support for Destourian lists in the 2014 elections. The figure reports the number of observations in each cell along standardized residuals from a  $\chi^2$  test of independence (in brackets), allowing for a direct assessment of where observed district counts diverge from expectations under independence and which performance–legacy combinations account for any association between the two dimensions. Bolded cells diverge significantly from the distribution expected under independence.

Figure 2: Saied Performance by Legacy

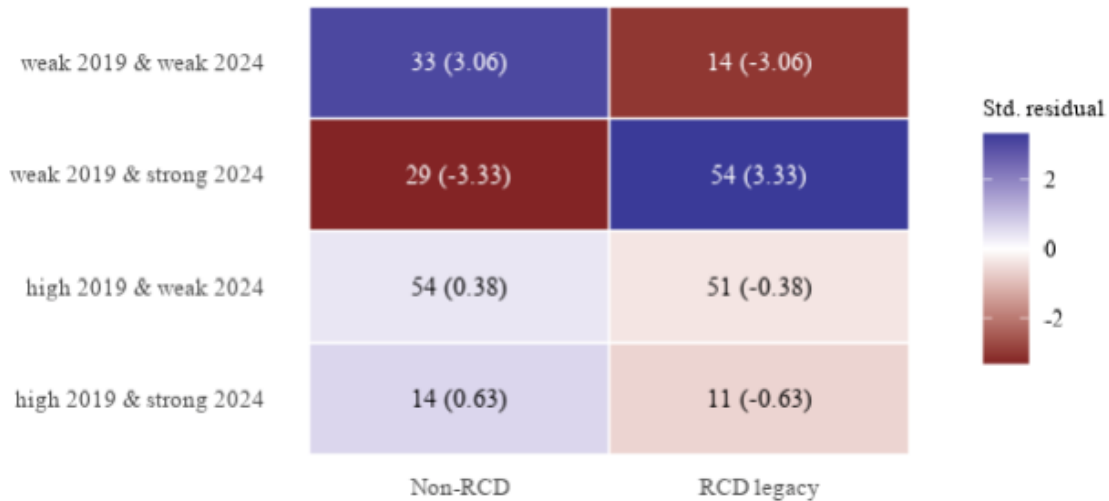


Figure 2 reveals a sharply asymmetric association between electoral trajectories and authoritarian legacy status, driven almost entirely by districts with initially weak support for Saied in 2019. Among these districts, non-legacy areas are significantly over-represented in trajectories characterized by persistently weak support across both elections, while Destourian legacy areas

are significantly under-represented in this category. Conversely, Destourian legacy districts are strongly over-represented among cases that shift from weak support in 2019 to strong support in 2024, whereas non-legacy districts are markedly under-represented in this upward trajectory. In contrast, districts with initially high support in 2019 show no statistically meaningful deviations from independence, regardless of whether support subsequently weakened or remained strong. Taken together, the pattern indicates that authoritarian legacies are associated not with baseline strongholds but with the mobilization and realignment of previously weak-support areas, suggesting that legacy structures matter most where initial electoral attachment was low rather than where support was already entrenched.

### *Robustness Checks*

To assess the credibility of the main findings and probe the sensitivity of the empirical results, this section presents a series of robustness checks. These include an entropy balancing procedure to improve covariate balance between treated and untreated delegations, as well as a placebo test that examines pre-treatment trends in electoral participation. Together, these checks help ensure that the estimated effects of Destourian legacies are not driven by compositional differences or underlying time trends unrelated to the post-2021 authoritarian shift. The robustness analysis thus strengthens the interpretation that localized regime-aligned networks contributed to differential electoral responses under conditions of authoritarian consolidation.

### Entropy Balancing

As an additional step to strengthening causal identification, we employ entropy balancing on pre-treatment covariates to improve comparability between treated and untreated districts. Although the difference-in-differences framework controls for time-invariant unobserved heterogeneity through fixed effects, it does not guarantee balance in observed pre-treatment characteristics that may shape differential responses to the post-2021 political shock. Entropy balancing reweights control districts so that the distribution of selected pre-treatment variables matches that of treated districts on specified moments of the covariate distribution. By enforcing exact balance on these characteristics, entropy balancing reduces the risk that estimated treatment effects reflect

compositional differences rather than differential exposure to the post-2021 regime transformation. In this setting, where treatment assignment is plausibly related to long-standing structural features of districts, entropy balancing provides a transparent and minimally invasive way to align treated and control units on observables.

**Table 3: Entropy-Balanced DiD Models with Destourian Legacy Treatment**

	Turnout (1)	Saied share (2)
Destourian legacy	-0.423*** (0.109)	-0.007 (0.129)
2024 elections	-0.174*** (0.011)	0.709*** (0.008)
Registered voters	-0.00000*** (0.00000)	-0.00000** (0.00000)
Destourian legacy * 2024	0.030** (0.012)	0.017* (0.010)
Constant	0.945*** (0.102)	0.170** (0.081)
Delegation fixed effects	Yes	Yes
Weights	Yes	Yes
Observations	517	517
R <sup>2</sup>	0.863	0.989
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.722	0.977
Residual Std. Error (df = 254)	0.063	0.054
F Statistic (df = 262; 254)	6.109***	86.430***

*Note:*

\* p<0.1; \*\* p<0.05; \*\*\* p<0.01

Standard errors clustered in governorates.

We balance on a set of district-level characteristics measured prior to treatment assignment, including turnout in 2011, population size, unemployment, distance to the capital, and vote share for the National Destourian Initiative in the 2011 elections. The data come from a dataset on the 2011 constituent assembly election (Koehler and Warkotsch 2014). The inclusion of the Initiative’s vote share is particularly important, as it captures early post-revolution electoral support for Destourian political forces and therefore directly proxies pre-existing regime-aligned political tendencies. The resulting weights achieve balance on the means of all covariates, with

adjusted standardized differences well below conventional thresholds and no loss of treated observations. We then estimate weighted DiD models that retain district fixed effects and cluster standard errors at the governorate level. This approach preserves the within-delegation comparison central to difference-in-differences while explicitly conditioning on early Destourian support, thereby reducing the risk that differential post-2021 trends reflect long-standing political alignment rather than responses to the authoritarian turn. The weighted estimates closely track the unweighted results, albeit with modest attenuation in magnitude, reinforcing the interpretation that the core findings are not driven by compositional differences between Destourian and non-Destourian districts.

### Placebo Test

To assess the validity of the parallel trends assumption that underpins the main difference-in-differences analysis, we estimate a placebo model using district-level changes in total votes cast between the first round of the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections. This test examines whether Destourian-aligned districts were already on diverging turnout trajectories prior to the post-2021 regime transformation. While standard turnout measures (based on registered voters) are unavailable for the 2014 presidential election, changes in total votes nonetheless serve as a reasonable proxy for shifts in electoral mobilization. One potential concern is that the treatment variable—based on above-median support for Destourian lists in the 2014 legislative elections—was constructed using data from the same electoral cycle as the placebo baseline. However, we interpret Destourian vote share in 2014 not as a contemporaneous intervention but as a proxy for deeper, historically rooted authoritarian legacies and the persistence of local regime-aligned networks. Treatment assignment thus reflects pre-existing characteristics that plausibly shaped responses to the post-2021 authoritarian turn but were not themselves caused by political developments in 2014. Under this interpretation, the placebo model remains a valid and conservative diagnostic tool for assessing pre-treatment comparability between treated and untreated delegations.

**Table 4: Placebo Test, Change in Total Votes 2014-2019**

	Total Votes
Destourian legacy	-54,813.580*** (170.412)
2019 elections	760.210** (384.931)
Destourian legacy * 2019	247.168 (340.824)
Constant	57,887.890*** (192.465)
Delegation fixed effects	Yes
Observations	520
R <sup>2</sup>	0.992
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.985
Residual Std. Error	1,110.832 (df = 256)
F Statistic	126.689*** (df = 263; 256)

*Note:* \*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01  
Standard errors clustered in governorates.

The results of the placebo test provide support for the parallel trends assumption. The interaction term between Destourian legacy and the 2019 election indicator is small in magnitude and statistically insignificant, indicating that districts with stronger Destourian alignment did not exhibit systematically different changes in total votes between 2014 and 2019, prior to the post-2021 authoritarian shift. This suggests that the post-2021 divergence in electoral behavior observed in the main analysis is unlikely to be driven by pre-existing trends in political mobilization. The lack of significant differential change in vote totals reinforces the interpretation that historical Destourian networks began to matter politically only once the competitive electoral environment was dismantled, rather than shaping turnout patterns under democratic conditions.

## Conclusion

How does autocratization reshape electoral coalitions, and where does electoral support for new authoritarian regimes come from once democratic competition collapses? This article has argued that authoritarian consolidation need not rest on polarization-driven mass mobilization or

hegemonic party-building. Instead, in unconsolidated democracies emerging from relatively recent authoritarian rule, democratic breakdown can reactivate residual coalitional infrastructures tied to the *ancien régime*. Under conditions of repression, exclusion, and declining participation, these authoritarian legacies gain influence by default, becoming a residual but politically consequential source of electoral support.

We developed this argument through the Tunisian case, where a decade-long democratic interlude was followed by abrupt autocratization after President Kais Saied's self-coup in 2021. Comparing the 2019 democratic presidential election to the 2024 authoritarian founding election, we showed that districts with stronger pre-2011 authoritarian legacies experienced significantly less electoral demobilization and disproportionate increases in support for the incumbent. These patterns do not reflect renewed mass enthusiasm for authoritarianism, nor a simple carryover of Saied's populist support base. Rather, they point to the selective persistence of regime-aligned networks that retain organizational embeddedness even as competitive actors are repressed and broad participation collapses.

These findings contribute to comparative scholarship in two ways. First, they extend research on autocratization by identifying a mechanism of electoral consolidation that operates through demobilization and relative organizational advantage rather than polarization and mass mobilization. This perspective helps explain how autocratizing leaders can secure electoral dominance even in the absence of strong ruling parties or ideologically cohesive mass constituencies. Second, the article advances the literature on authoritarian legacies by demonstrating that their political effects extend beyond democratic transitions. Authoritarian infrastructures do not merely constrain democratic development; they can also be reactivated to facilitate transitions back to authoritarian rule.

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