Civic space and civic life in Tunisia

Example final project — IPOL 3270, Fall 2026

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Summary

Some countries give civil society organizations—including community groups, charities, and advocacy organizations—lots of room to work, while others shut them down. In this report, we use data from the Varieties of Democracy project and the Arab Barometer to explore two questions: (1) whether countries with strong civil society have less corrupt governments, and (2) whether people who volunteer trust civil society organizations more. We find that across the world, countries with stronger civil society tend to have less public sector corruption, even compared to countries that are similarly wealthy and in the same region. In Tunisia, people who volunteer are slightly more likely to trust civil society organizations than people who don't. Tunisia, in particular, provides an interesting puzzle for future research: Tunisians volunteer at a higher rate than any other country in the Arab Barometer, but has the most restrictive environment for civil society. We conclude that civic life and civic space aren't the same thing, and governments can squeeze organizations even when citizens are deeply engaged.

Question and hypotheses

Robert Putnam argues that civic associations—clubs, charities, community groups, and advocacy organizations—make democracy work better (Putnam 1993). When people join and volunteer with these groups, they build networks and habits of cooperation and trust. Strong civil society can act as a watchdog against government abuses, expose wrongdoing, and reduce corruption.

At the same time, governments around the world have been restricting civil society organizations over the past two decades, using laws that limit foreign funding, registration, and advocacy (Chaudhry and Heiss 2022; Christensen and Weinstein 2013). Tunisia is an important case. After the 2011 revolution it had one

of the most open civil societies in the Arab world and its new constitution enshrined many of these rights (Heiss 2019b), but since 2021 its government has increased restrictions on civil society organizations.

We test two hypotheses based on these arguments:

- **H_1 (cross-national)**: Countries with stronger civil society will have less public sector corruption, even after accounting for wealth and regional differences.
- **H_2 (within-country)**: Tunisians who volunteer are more likely to trust civil society organizations than Tunisians who don't.

Data

For our cross-national analysis, our outcome is V-Dem's public sector corruption index (`public_corruption_10`), which measures how often public officials take bribes or steal public resources. Our main explanatory variable is the core civil society index (`civil_society_10`), which measures how freely organizations can form and work without government repression. Each of these are measured on a 0–10 scale, where higher values mean both more corruption and more robust civil society. We control for GDP per capita (logged, since a $1,000 increase means a lot more in a poor country than a rich one) and world region, since both wealth and regional history are related to corruption and to civil society.

For our within-country analysis, we use Tunisia, which has the largest Arab Barometer sample (2,406 people). Our outcome is whether someone trusts civil society organizations "a great deal" or "quite a lot" (`trust_cso`), and our main explanatory variable is whether they volunteer in a typical month (`volunteer`). We control for age, gender, whether someone has a university degree, and whether their household income covers their expenses, since older, more educated, and better-off people might have more free time to volunteer.

We collapsed the four trust answers into a binary yes/no variable to make the results easier to interpret as percentages. Around 3% of Tunisians said they didn't know or refused to answer the trust question, so we dropped those responses.

Cross-national analysis

Exploring the data

Figure 1 shows a strong negative relationship between civil society and corruption: countries where civil society is less restricted tend to have far less public sector corruption. The Arab Barometer countries are mostly in the lower-left half, with weaker civil societies and moderate-ish corruption. Tunisia has the weakest civil society of the group.

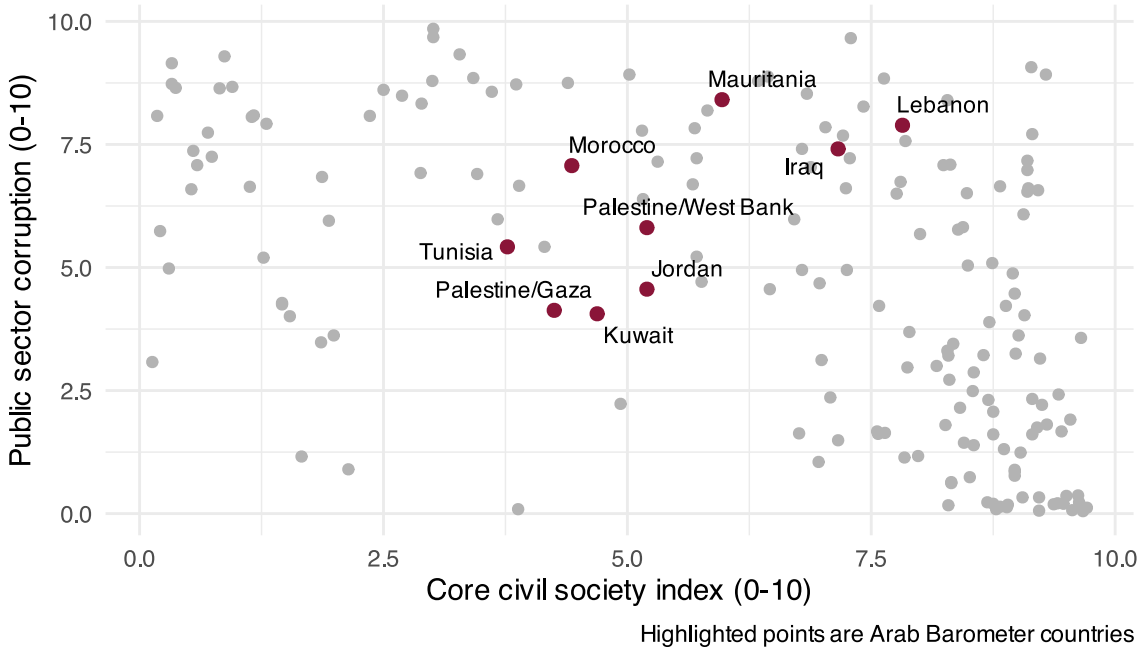


Figure 1: Civil society and public sector corruption, 2023

Wealth is a likely confounder, since richer countries tend to have both less corruption and stronger civil societies. Figure 2 shows that civil society also varies a lot by region. The Middle East and North Africa region has the lowest average civil society score in the world, which is one reason we control for region in our model.

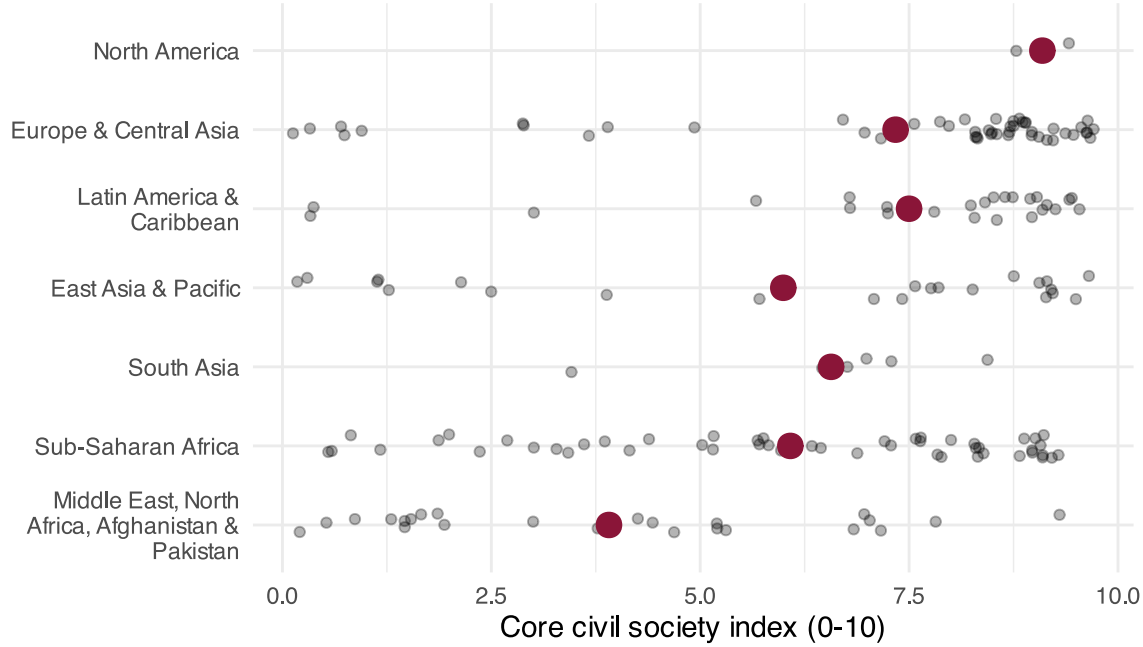


Figure 2: Civil society by region, 2023

Model

Table 1 shows the results of our regression model. Controlling for wealth and region, a 1-point increase in the civil society index is associated with a 0.36-point decrease in public sector corruption, on average. That's a substantial amount—moving from Tunisia's civil society score (3.8) to Lebanon's (7.8) is associated with about 1.4 fewer points of corruption. The 95% confidence interval ranges from −0.47 to −0.25. This supports H_1. The interval doesn't include 0, and the p-value is less than 0.001, meaning that in a world

where there's no relationship between civil society and corruption, the probability of seeing a relationship as extreme as 0.36 is nearly impossible. We can reject the null hypothesis that there's no relationship and feel pretty confident that there's a statistically significant association between the two.

Table 1: Regression model of public sector corruption across countries, 2023

term	estimate	std_error	statistic	p_value	lower_ci	upper_ci
intercept	23.11	1.77	13.02	0	19.6	26.61
civil_society_10	−0.36	0.06	−6.42	0	−0.47	−0.25
gdp_log	−1.72	0.18	−9.49	0	−2.08	−1.36
region-Europe & Central Asia	0.37	0.51	0.72	0.47	−0.64	1.38
region-Latin America & Caribbean	0.8	0.58	1.4	0.17	−0.33	1.94
region-Middle East, North Africa, Afghanistan & Pakistan	0.62	0.59	1.05	0.3	−0.55	1.79
region-North America	−0.62	1.42	−0.44	0.66	−3.42	2.18
region-South Asia	0.49	0.87	0.56	0.58	−1.23	2.21
region-Sub-Saharan Africa	−0.06	0.55	−0.11	0.92	−1.15	1.03

Within-country analysis

Exploring the data

In Tunisia, 43% of people say they volunteer in a typical month, and 42% trust civil society organizations a great deal or quite a lot. Figure 3 shows that volunteers are slightly more likely to trust organizations than non-volunteers, but we can't really tell if that's a significant or substantive difference.

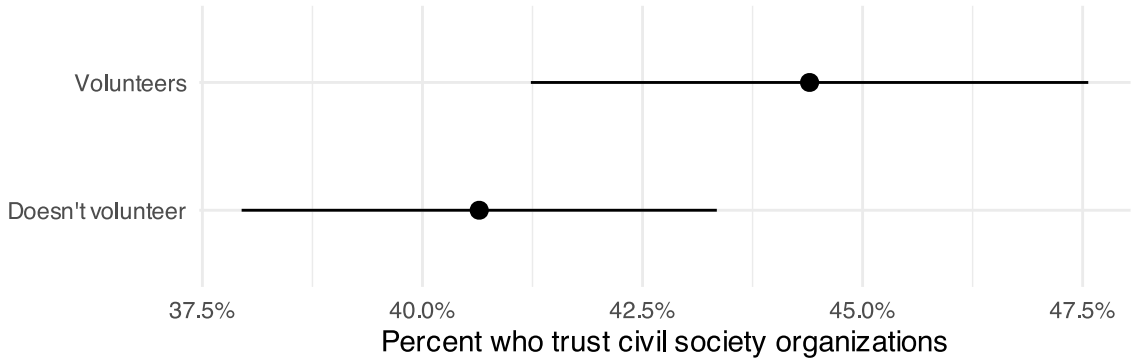


Figure 3: Trust in civil society organizations among Tunisian volunteers and non-volunteers

Volunteers might be different from non-volunteers in ways that also affect trust. Figure 4 shows that the volunteer gap appears among people with and without university degrees, though it's a little smaller among university graduates.

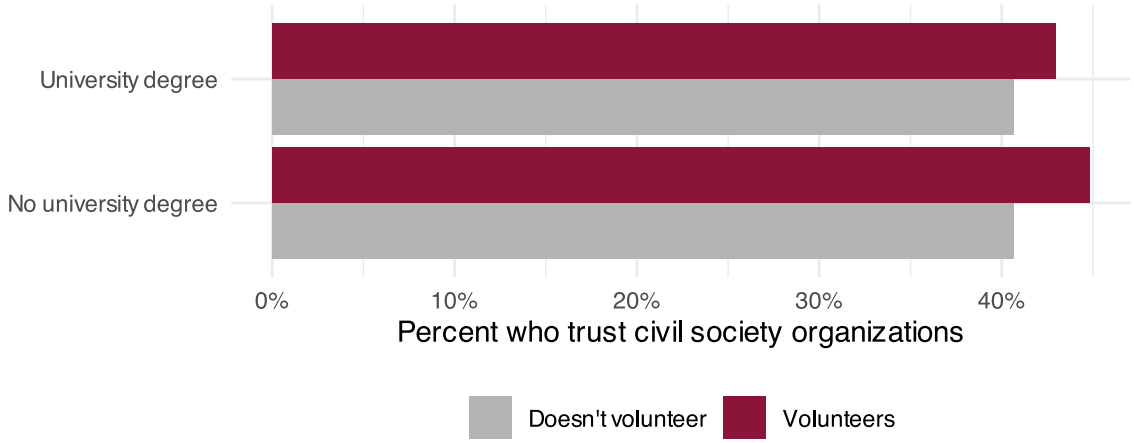


Figure 4: Trust in civil society organizations by volunteering and education

Model

Table 2 shows the results from a regression model. Since our outcome is binary, the coefficients can be interpreted as percentage points. Holding age, gender, education, and income constant, Tunisians who volunteer are 4.6 percentage points more likely to trust civil society organizations than those who don't, on average. The Arab Barometer is a random sample of Tunisian adults, so this is a statistic that estimates the population parameter for all Tunisian adults. We're 95% confident that the true difference among all Tunisian adults is between 0.4 and 8.7 percentage points. The interval doesn't include 0 and the p-value is 0.031—in a world where there's no relationship between trust in civil society and volunteering, there's a 3% chance of seeing a relationship as extreme as 4.6 percentage points. We can reject the null hypothesis, which supports H_2.

Table 2: Regression model of trust in civil society organizations in Tunisia

term	estimate	std_error	statistic	p_value	lower_ci	upper_ci
intercept	0.33	0.04	8.73	0	0.25	0.4
volunteersTRUE	0.05	0.02	2.16	0.03	0	0.09
age	0	0	0.15	0.88	0	0
gender-Female	0.14	0.02	6.5	0	0.1	0.18
universityTRUE	−0.02	0.03	−0.6	0.55	−0.07	0.04
income_coversTRUE	0.02	0.02	0.97	0.33	−0.02	0.07

This doesn't mean volunteering causes trust. People who already trust organizations are probably more likely to volunteer with them in the first place.

Bonus: logistic regression

A logistic regression gives almost the same answer. The average marginal effect of volunteering is about 4.5 percentage points (see Table 3 and Figure 5), basically identical to the linear model.

Table 3: Average marginal effect of volunteering from a logistic regression model of trust in civil society organizations in Tunisia

term	contrast	estimate	conf.low	conf.high
volunteers	TRUE - FALSE	0.046	0.004	0.087

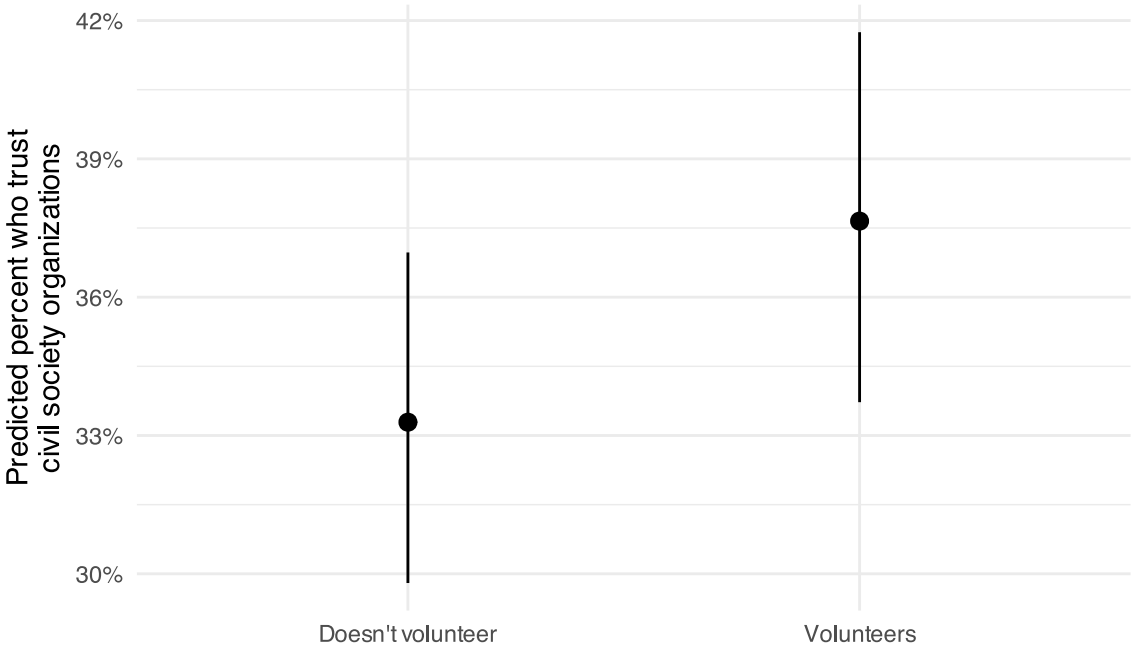


Figure 5: Predicted percent of Tunisians who trust civil society organizations, from the logistic regression model

Synthesis

Figure 6 shows the results from running the same model we used for H_2 (with the same controls) in each of the Arab Barometer countries that asked about trust in organizations. In 6 of the 7 countries, people who volunteer are more likely to trust civil society organizations. Jordan is the only place where the relationship reverses, though it its confidence interval includes 0 and the relationship is not statistically significant.

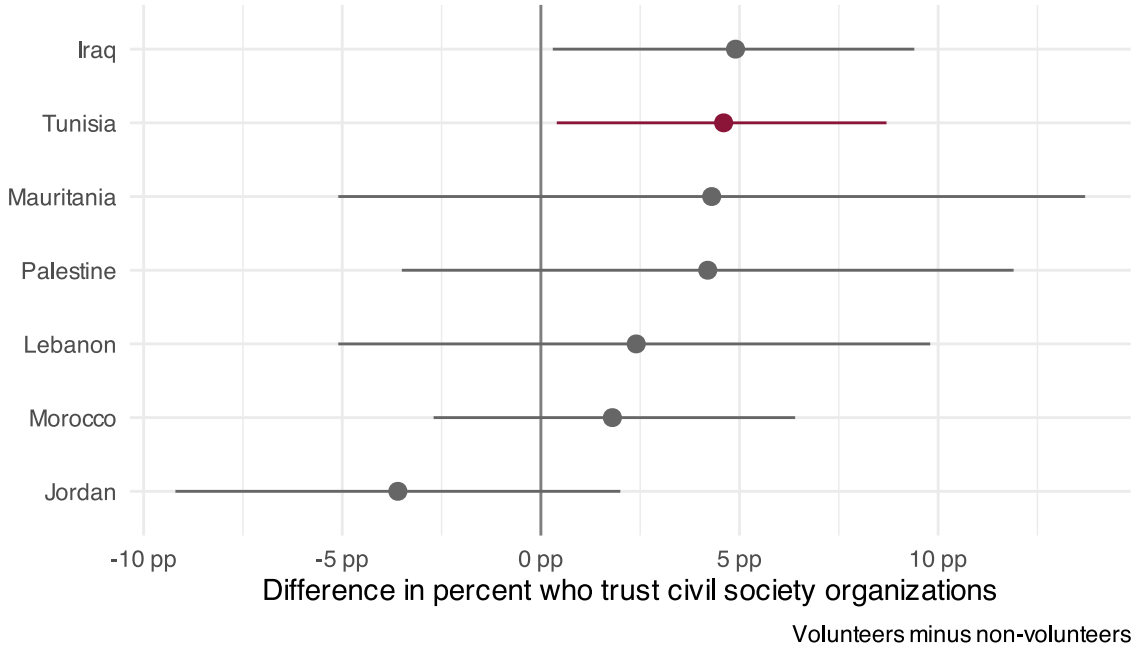


Figure 6: Difference in trust in civil society organizations between volunteers and non-volunteers

Tunisia is at the high end of coefficients. Its estimate of 4.6 percentage points is second only to Iraq's (4.9 points), and they're the only two places where the confidence interval doesn't include 0. Everywhere else, the relationship is small, uncertain, and not significant. Some of the confidence intervals are very wide

because few people volunteer. In Mauritania, for example, only 119 of the people interviewed volunteer, so the estimate there is very noisy. Morocco is an interesting case—Moroccan volunteers are about 10 percentage points more likely to trust organizations than non-volunteers, but after controlling for age, gender, education, and income, the difference shrinks to 1.8 points. Most of that gap comes from *who* volunteers in Morocco, not from volunteering itself.

Putting both analyses together tells a consistent story. Across countries, stronger civil society is associated with less corruption, and within countries, people who take part in civic life through voluntarism tend to trust civil society more. But these two findings are actually about different things, and one doesn't imply the other. Tunisians volunteer more than people anywhere else in the Arab Barometer (about 42%), but in V-Dem, Tunisia has the weakest civil society of any Arab Barometer country—its civil society score was 8.3 in 2021 and fell to 3.8 by 2023. V-Dem's index measures how governments treat civil society organizations, while volunteering measures how citizens interact with civil society. Tunisians are clearly still engaged in civic life, even while the government narrows the space for civil society organizations.

Limitations and conclusion

Our biggest limitation is that neither of these analyses is causal. Across countries, corruption might weaken civil society (corrupt officials have good reasons to silence watchdogs) just as much as civil society reduces corruption (see Heiss (2019a)). Within Tunisia, trust probably leads to volunteering as much as volunteering leads to trust. With data from multiple years, we could see whether changes in civil society come before or after changes in corruption, and whether volunteering has declined as government restrictions have increased.

Our main takeaway is that civic space and civic life are different things. Countries that give organizations room to work tend to be less corrupt, and volunteers tend to trust organizations a little more, but Tunisians are among the most civically engaged people in the region even as their government restricts organizations. Anyone who wants to understand the health of a country's civil society (donors, advocates, or researchers) needs to look at both.

References

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AI use

We didn't use any LLMs for this project.