Is Tunisia's Democracy on Its Deathbed?

Social Capital, Economic Insecurity, Middle Class and Attitudes Toward Democracy

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Abstract

This paper delves into the intricacies of Tunisia's evolving democratic landscape, examining the factors influencing citizens' support for democracy. Leveraging data from the Arab Barometer Wave VII survey, it investigates the relationships between middle-class status, individual social capital, economic insecurity, and democratic attitudes. In the backdrop of Tunisia's unique context, characterized by a nascent democracy and economic turbulence, this research sheds light on critical dimensions of democratic resilience. Building upon a foundation of literature emphasizing social stratification, social capital, and economic insecurity, the paper formulates hypotheses to explore these factors' impact on democratic support. Through Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) and Generalized SEM (GSEM) analyses, the results challenge conventional assumptions, highlight the pivotal role of social capital, and underscore the adverse effects of economic insecurity. Ultimately, the findings emphasize the need for tailored policies to address these challenges and strengthen democratic values in Tunisia, offering valuable insights for emerging democracies worldwide.

ملخص

تتعمق هذه الورقة في تعقيدات المشهد الديمقراطي المتطور في تونس، وتدرس العوامل التي تؤثر على دعم المواطنين للديمقراطية. بالاستفادة من البيانات من استطلاع الموجة السابعة من البارومتر العربي، فإن هذه الورقة تبحث في العلاقات بين وضع الطبقة الوسطى، ورأس المال الاجتماعي الفردي، وانعدام الأمن الاقتصادي، والمواقف الديمقراطية. في خلفية السياق الفريد لتونس، الذي يتميز بالديمقراطية الناشئة والاضطراب الاقتصادي، يلقي هذا البحث الضوء على الأبعاد الحاسمة للمرونة الديمقراطية. بناءً على أساس من الأدبيات التي تؤكد على التقسيم الطبقي الاجتماعي ورأس المال الاجتماعي وانعدام الأمن الاقتصادي، تصوغ الورقة فرضيات لاستكشاف تأثير هذه العوامل على الدعم الديمقراطي. من خلال نماذج المعادلة الهيكلية والتحليلات المعممة، تتحدى النتائج الافتراضات التقليدية، وتسلط الضوء على الدور المحوري لرأس المال الاجتماعي، وتؤكد الآثار الضارة لانعدام الأمن الاقتصادي. وفي نهاية المطاف، تؤكد النتائج على الحاجة إلى سياسات مصممة خصيصًا لمواجهة هذه التحديات وتعزيز القيم الديمقراطية في تونس، مما يوفر رؤى قيمة للديمقراطيات الناشئة في جميع أنحاء العالم.

1. Introduction

Tunisia, the cradle of the pro-democracy uprisings in the Arab region, has witnessed significant strides towards democratic governance, marked by peaceful transitions of power, national and local elections, and notable advancements in human rights and freedom of expression, which have been recognized on the global stage. The decade following the uprising also witnessed the emergence of a dynamic civil society that played a pivotal role in enhancing transparency and the functionality of emerging, albeit fragile, political institutions and processes.

However, Tunisia continues to grapple with enduring challenges in both its political and economic domains. Its political leadership has struggled to establish a stable political framework and articulate coherent positions on critical economic and social issues. Despite promises to address socioeconomic disparities, successive governments have made insufficient progress in implementing economic reforms and combating corruption and political inefficiency. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated preexisting vulnerabilities and heightened threats to democracy, leading to an unexpected turn of events. President Kais Saied's bold move on July 25, 2021, involving the suspension of Parliament, dismissal of the Prime Minister, and revocation of parliamentary immunity, all under the umbrella of Article 80 of the constitution, was aimed at combatting pervasive government corruption and inefficacy. However, after two years of significant control, Saied's administration has failed to reverse political turmoil or economic decline.

These concurrent challenges in democracy and the economy have left a profound impact on how Tunisian citizens perceive their political leaders and engage in political processes, thereby affecting their trust in the democratic system. This transformation is evident through a series of public opinion surveys conducted between 2013 and 2021 as part of the Arab Barometer (AB) project. Notably, the events of July 25, 2021, including the suspension of parliament, garnered substantial support among citizens, as indicated by the AB Wave VII survey. Over time, these surveys have revealed three critical trends: declining confidence in Parliament and the government, a growing perception of public corruption, and, alarmingly, diminishing support for democracy and a preference for strong leadership. Simultaneously, Tunisia faces a severe economic crisis marked by recession, inflation, and high unemployment, leading to hardships for many citizens who once enjoyed relative prosperity. The growing appeal of authoritarian alternatives and non-traditional party systems poses significant risks to both the stability of Tunisia's emerging democracy and the process of democratic consolidation. Limited support for the newly established democratic regime among its citizens threatens the perception of democracy as an ideal.

While extensive research has explored trust levels in democratic institutions, there's a notable gap in our understanding of citizens' support for political alternatives beyond elections in emerging democracies, particularly in the Arab world. This study aims to uncover the factors behind the declining support for ruling elites and institutional structures in a nascent democracy. Specifically, it investigates whether a robust middle class, civic engagement, and personal economic circumstances, such as financial hardships and unemployment, influence support for Tunisia's fledgling democracy and its transition process.

The Tunisian case study is noteworthy as it provides an opportunity to address these issues in a fledgling democracy rather than a firmly established one. Drawing upon data from the AB wave VII, the paper builds upon a well-established tradition in sociology, political attitudes and

behaviors and emerging field of behavioral political economy to explore how social stratification, social capital and citizen's economic insecurity tend to condition Tunisians' political attitudes toward democracy.

Social stratification's impact on attitudes towards redistributive politics and political transitions has long been recognized by scholars such as Piketty (1995), Ravallion and Lokshin (2000), Alesina and La Ferrara (2001), Benabou and Ok (2001) and Zak and Feng (2003). This influence extends to the economy, where it affects aggregate demand, investments in education, entrepreneurship, and the demand for quality consumer goods (Thewissen et al., 2015; Acemoglu and Zilibotti, 1997). Easterly has described a "middle-class consensus" characterized by a prosperous middle class and minimal ethnic divisions, associated with higher growth, improved development, institutional outcomes, reduced political instability, and fewer civil wars (Banerjee et Duflo, 2008; Easterly et al., 2006; Easterly, 2001 and Barro, 1999).

Social capital research agenda, initiated by Bourdieu (1980) and Coleman (1990), emphasizes on the other hand the intricate interrelationship between individual and collective choices, social structures, and generalized trust. According to these authors, people's rational decisions drive their participation in social activities. The primary focus of the researchers is on the impact of social capital on various domains, such as civic engagement and democracy (Putnam, 1993; Kim, 2005; Maloney et al., 2008) and several economic outcomes, including loan repayment and credit access (Karlan et al., 2009; Hasen et al., 2020), financial growth (Guiso et al., 2004), education investment (Coleman, 1988), innovation (Knack and Keefer, 1997), corporate setting (Jha and Chen, 2015; Hasan et al., 2017), political responsibility (Nannicini et al., 2013), and organizational productivity (Guiso et al., 2015; Kaasa, 2016).

Economic insecurity, characterized by financial instability (Osberg, 1998) or uncertainty about future material circumstances (Stiglitz et al., 2009) , poses a dual threat to democracy and democratic transitions. It not only leads to citizen disillusionment but also fuels a shift away from democracy towards authoritarianism, often accompanied by support for nativist populism. This disappointment, arguably even more influential than inequality itself, fosters resentment towards marginalized groups and a deep distrust of political elites, seen as responsible for perpetuating macroeconomic policies that worsen these insecurities (Bardhan, 2022).

The paper leverages the AB Wave VII dataset, encompassing 2400 participants and covering a diverse array of topics, to investigate hypotheses regarding democratic attitudes, the influence of the middle class, economic insecurity, and individual social capital in Tunisia. A democracy support index is constructed, focusing on citizens' perspectives on governance methods and constraints on basic freedoms. Both individual social capital and economic insecurity are assessed using latent variables approach. To comprehensively analyze the interrelationships among these variables, the study employs Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) and generalized SEM (GSEM) analyses. The results yield valuable insights into how various factors impact support for democracy in Tunisia, underscoring the importance of tailored policies that address economic insecurity and engage citizens across different demographic groups to strengthen democratic values and enhance the country's democratic resilience.

The subsequent sections of the paper are organized as follows. Section 2 conducts an examination of the literature background and introduces hypotheses concerning middle-class influence, social capital, and economic insecurity. Section 3 offers insights into the data sources and the chosen methodological approach, encompassing SEM and GSEM analyses. Section 4

is devoted to the presentation of results, unveiling noteworthy findings regarding the determinants of democratic attitudes. Finally, Section 5 concludes the paper.

2. Literature Background and Hypotheses

There is a significant body of literature that seeks to clarify why citizens' support for democracy differs. The main theories suggest that political beliefs and experiences, such as satisfaction with the government's performance and representation of interests, political institutions and democratic governance, as well as economic evaluations, including both personal and national economic situations, play a critical role in shaping attitudes toward democracy. Several notable works, including Putnam (1993), Evans and Whitefield (1995), Anderson and Guillory (1997), Norris (1999, 2011) and Diamond (1999), as well as Anderson and Tverdova (2003), Mattes and Bratton (2007), Acemoglu and Robinson (2005) and Welzel (2013), have explored these ideas in detail.

Of particular relevance to this paper, the existing literature offers insights into how class stratification, social capital, and personal economic insecurity influence citizens' perceptions and/or support for democracy.

2.1. Middle-Class and Support for Democracy

Moore's adage, "No bourgeoisie, no democracy", has led to extensive research on the middle class's role in establishing democracy globally since 1966. The Arab world, historically lacking in democracy, has only recently gained scholarly attention regarding the middle class's impact on democratization. Before the Arab Spring, it was unexpected that the middle class played a leading role in the uprisings against authoritarian regimes. The Arab "Petite Bourgeoisie" has often been seen as conservative and anti-revolutionary, aiding the emergence of a new state bourgeoisie and supporting authoritarian status quo (Cammett, 2018; Greenwood, 2008).

As of 2013, researchers increasingly turned their focus to understanding the evolving attitudes of the Arab middle class towards democracy following the uprisings. According to findings by Cammett and Diwan (2013), economic liberalization had given rise to a more politically engaged middle class, encompassing professionals, industrialists, and small-scale merchants. Concurrently, Luciani (2013) observed that small business owners, who were part of marginalized groups, actively participated in the protests, aiming to challenge the influence of economic insiders. This period marked a turning point as the Arab Spring acted as a catalyst, prompting the frustrated middle class to forge alliances with less affluent segments of society in opposition to the existing regime.

The modernization theory links middle-class growth to democracy, driven by increased independence through income, education, and social interactions. This independence fosters security and autonomy, promoting pro-democratic attitudes. A wealthier, educated middle class is expected to be more pro-democratic than both the poor and the elite (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005, 2010). Recent works by Inglehart (2018) and Acemoglu and Robinson (2019) further explore the interplay between modernization, democracy, economic development, cultural shifts, and social structures globally.

The modernization perspective faces three critical counter-arguments, especially pertinent in low and middle-income nations. Firstly, economic security may not necessarily spur demand for democracy among the middle class. Recent research shows that the upper middle class often

prioritizes stability and preserving privileges over supporting democratization efforts (Wietzke and Sumner, 2014, 2018). Secondly, state-led economic growth in many developing countries has led to a patronage-based public sector, creating financial dependency among the middle class. This can reduce their responsiveness to political failures or corruption and dampen their motivation for civic engagement (Handley, 2015). Thirdly, the middle class's perception of their social mobility prospects can influence their political attitudes and actions beyond their income level. Recent theoretical analyses suggest that when the middle class feels secure about their future prospects, they may oppose social mobility for lower social strata and align with the elite to maintain regime stability (Acemoglu et al., 2018).

Considering the preceding arguments, the middle-class support for democracy hypothesis emerges as follows: Among non-higher income Tunisians, individuals within the middle-class category are anticipated to display more positive inclinations toward democracy.

2.2.   *Social Capital and Support for Democracy*

The concept of social capital is multifaceted, with various academic disciplines offering distinct perspectives. Institutional economics sees it as a means to establish credible commitments and reduce transaction costs in contracts (Williamson, 1993; Karpik, 1996). Political sociology explores power dynamics within social capital (Bourdieu, 1972; Fine, 2001). Sociological and philosophical research highlights the social nature of social capital, emphasizing the role of learning mechanisms in fostering shared values (Quéré, 2009; Six, 2013). All these approaches aim to counteract negative effects like "anti-commons" and "crowding-out" that hinder collective action (Frey and Jegen, 2001). Social capital revolves around social connections enabling economic or non-economic benefits. Coleman (1988) stresses that it's not an individual attribute but a feature of relationships between individuals. Social capital can manifest in various forms, including group obligations, trust, shared norms, values, and social sanctions. Bourdieu (1983) underscores the importance of enduring and personally meaningful relationships for them to qualify as social capital.

Social capital yields a dual influence on democracy, either sparking its establishment in non-democratic settings or reinforcing existing democratic systems. In the former case, robust associations curb state oppression and enable organized opposition against non-democratic regimes. In the latter, these associations promote tolerance, compromise, political engagement, and leadership development, bolstering thriving democracies (Uslaner, 1999; Zmerli and Newton, 2008). This impact's nature and scope are widely explored. Liu and Stolle (2017) examine the correlation between social trust and political trust. Lee and Yi (2018) investigate the link between generalized social trust, political trust, and institutional performance. Vrablikova and van Deth (2017) explore social capital's influence on democratic politics in western democracies, examining its effects on citizens' satisfaction, trust in politicians, voting, and non-electoral participation. Bäck and Christensen (2016) find that generalized trust affects political participation, including voting and various forms of involvement. Poggi (2017) observes that higher social trust reduces the significance of voting as a means of political punishment. Rhodes-Purdy (2017) suggests that participation hinges on citizens' perception of control over politics and the political process in their country.

While initially considered a group-level attribute by Coleman and Bourdieu, Putnam (1993, 1995, 2000) broadened the concept of social capital to a macro-level, asserting that it could accumulate and influence government effectiveness. He defines social capital as a social

group's characteristics, including networks and norms, proposing that social trust can enhance coordination and cooperation. Nonetheless, this definition has sparked varying interpretations, and the social capital literature lacks consensus on its underlying processes (Davidson-Schmich, 2006; Hero, 2007) and effective measurement methods (Bjornskov, 2006; Newton, 2006). A prevalent approach, advocated by numerous scholars, treats social capital as an environmental factor encompassing the impacts of social norms and the density of associational networks within a geographic community. Guiso et al. (2011) suggest that socio-economic research should focus on cooperative norms, which entail values and beliefs fostering cooperation, as they can curb self-interest and opportunistic behavior while bolstering trust.

Social capital goes beyond collectives, as Lin (2001) and Flap (2002) have emphasized. Recognizing individual experiences within a community with specific social capital levels is vital, known as "individual social capital". It evaluates an individual's connections to their community. To gauge personal social capital at an individual level and comprehend its impact on outcomes like support for democracy, three key components/resources are involved: trust (both generalized and institutional), human values/norms (encompassing altruism, equality, tolerance, and humanitarianism), and participatory actions/networks (like political engagement, organizational involvement, and activism). These resources effectively address challenges like free-riding, overuse of shared resources (the "tragedy of the commons"), and a lack of cooperation (the "prisoner's dilemma").

In light of the previously discussed points, the social capital's influence on democracy support hypothesis can be formulated as follows: Individuals with a high level of personal social capital are expected to be more inclined toward expressing positive attitudes and support for democracy.

2.3.   *Economic Insecurity and Support for Democracy*

Since the 1970s, scholars have explored the link between democratic attitudes and government performance. Easton's foundational work (1965) introduced specific and diffuse political support dimensions. Specific support relates to government outcomes and institutional ability, while diffuse support is tied to political system principles and is less affected by short-term performance. However, short and medium-term events like economic crises influence public perceptions of democracy and support for the political regime (Magalhães, 2014; Cordero and Simón, 2016). Insecurity can lead to increased solidarity within groups, rejection of outsiders, and authoritarianism (Inglehart and Norris, 2017). Economic insecurity correlates with reduced political trust and trust in institutions (Wroe, 2016).

Recent contributions have explored, in particular, the connection between economic insecurity and various phenomena, including support for populist parties (Guiso et al., 2020; Guriev and Papaioannou, 2022), lack of trust towards the European Union (Algan et al., 2017; Dustmann et al., 2017; Foster and Frieden, 2017), the 2016 US Presidential election (Inglehart and Norris, 2016), and the 2016 UK referendum on EU membership (Sampson, 2017). These contributions propose economic insecurity as an alternative explanation for populist preferences and dissatisfaction with democracy.

Benstead's "consequence-based" theory links weak support for democracy in the Arab uprisings to concerns about stability and economic prospects (Benstead, 2015). These countries faced security challenges due to violent non-state actors and a decline in state-provided services. Economically, the region saw no improvements, with issues like low growth, high unemployment, inflation, and scarcity of goods persisting. This contrasts with the protesters' aspirations for dignity, equality, and justice. Research on economic insecurity, coupled with

increasing public opinion studies in the Arab region, raises questions about the political impact of insecurity, particularly economic insecurity (Cammett et al., 2020; Kraitzman and Genauer, 2023).

Economic insecurity involves uncertainty about future financial prospects and unease about facing economic challenges. It results from unstable income and insufficient resources for a desired standard of living. Richiardi and He (2020) offer a comprehensive review of the existing literature concerning the concept and measurement of economic insecurity, providing valuable insights into this subject matter. While its consequences remain less understood than its causes, research indicates that economic insecurity can notably affect political behavior, particularly trust and democratic attitudes. Accordingly, the third economic insecurity eroding impact hypothesis follows: The presence of economic insecurity leads to a greater erosion of citizen's satisfaction with the democratic and significantly weakens his support for democracy.

3. Data and Methods

3.1. Data source

In the late 2000s, scholars gained an opportunity to enhance their understanding of the Arab region through the release of the initial AB project wave by Tessler et al. (2012). Conducting over 116,000 nationally representative face-to-face public opinion surveys across 15 Arab countries since 2006, the project aims to provide valuable insights into the social, political, and economic attitudes and values of citizens aged 18 and above in the Arab world, identifying the factors that influence these attitudes and values. The AB Wave VII dataset, collected through face-to-face interviews conducted in Arabic between October 1st and November 20th, 2021, serves as a platform to test the research hypotheses regarding democratic attitudes, the middle class, economic insecurity, and individual social capital in Tunisia.

A comprehensive sample design, involving stratification and clustering, was employed, ensuring representativeness by utilizing the sampling frame from the 2014 Census conducted by the National Institute of Statistics. The dataset comprises 2,400 participants and covers various topics such as the economy, trust, governance preferences, identity, religious practices, gender norms, media, and international relations, with the majority of questions offering multiple-choice options. Participants (1,205 women and 1,195 men) were randomly sampled from the population aged 18 and above, stratified across 24 governorates and 2 areas (68% urban and 32% rural), aiming to represent the country's social, economic, and political attitudes and values. The median age of respondents was 44, ranging from 18 to 98 years old, with a median annualized family income of 6,000 Tunisian Dinars (1,900 USD). Approximately 51.1% of the sample reported having a secondary education level or higher.

### 3.2. Dependent variable: Attitude towards democracy

The study delves into democracy-supporting attitudes, recognized as a dynamic choice between democracy and alternative systems, particularly in transitioning societies like Tunisia. In such contexts, remnants of past authoritarian norms often coexist with newly established democratic institutions, leading citizens, especially those less familiar with democratic politics, to question which system is more suitable for addressing societal issues. This uncertainty can result in individuals simultaneously embracing both democratic and authoritarian tendencies. To address this ambiguity, scholars suggest measuring democratic support across two dimensions: one gauging favorable orientation toward democracy and the other assessing orientation toward authoritarianism (Inglehart 2003; Mattes and Bratton 2007).

To construct a democracy support index, this research employs a specific analytical approach based on seven questions from the AB survey. The index creation involves three sequential steps, focusing on citizens' attitudes toward governance methods and limitations on basic freedoms.

The first question (Q516A) offers citizens the opportunity to express their views on three statements regarding the importance of the government type. Respondents can choose from "For people like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have", "Under some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable", and "Democracy is always preferable to any other kind of government". These responses are coded on a scale, with a value of 3 assigned to those aligning with the third statement, a value of 2 for the second statement, and a value of 1 for the first statement. The subsequent three questions (Q533_3, Q533_4, and Q516_5) present citizens with statements about governing a country and ask for their level of agreement, with response options ranging from "Strongly agree" to "Strongly disagree". Initially, these questions were on a 4-point scale but were transformed into a 3-point scale to indicate acceptance or rejection of authoritarian tendencies. Questions five and six focus on opinions about limiting freedom of speech (Q536_2) and media censorship (Q536_4) during public emergencies. These variables are expressed as a 3-point scale index (1 for always justifiable to 3 for never justifiable) to indicate acceptance or rejection of authoritarian practices. The final question (Q216) asks participants to express their opinion on whether citizens should support the government's decisions even if they disagree with them. Respondents select from four response options, ranging from "Strongly agree" to "Strongly disagree". This question was transformed into a 3-point scale to reflect favorable orientation toward democracy.

The study combines the measures of democratic acceptance and rejection of authoritarianism to form a unified composite index measuring political endorsement for democracy. This composite index spans from a minimum score of 7, representing support for authoritarianism, to a maximum of 21, signifying a strong inclination towards democracy. Figure 1 displays the distribution of composite index scores within the sample. This index is finally discretely converted into four ordinal values (ranging from 1 to 4) based on the predetermined quartiles within the distribution of the composite index.

Figure 1. Support for democracy score distribution
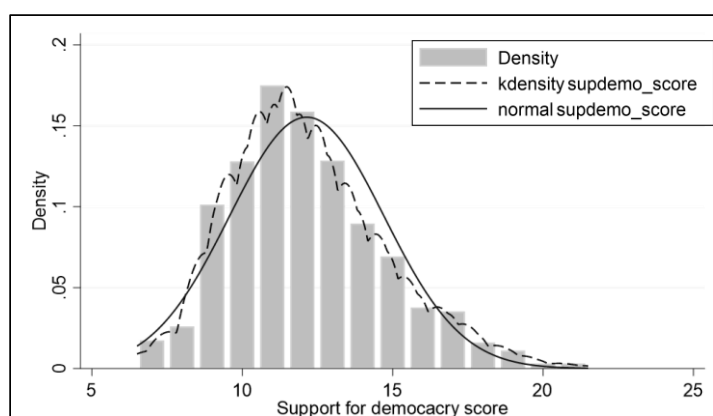
3.3. *Independent variables: Middle class, individual social capital and economic insecurity*

Middle class

The first key variable in the analysis pertains to respondents' middle-class status. Defining the middle class can be complex with limited data. In economics, three main income-based approaches - relative, absolute, and mixed - are used to categorize middle-class households. The relative approach determines middle class based on income distribution, often using measures like median or average income. For example, the middle class can encompass those earning between 75% to 125% of median income (Birdsall et al., 2000) or 100% to 250% of average income (Song et al., 2015). It's commonly defined where poverty ends, often with a lower limit of $2 per capita per day (in PPP), but some suggest $10 (Ferreira et al., 2013). The mixed approach combines absolute and relative boundaries (Birdsall, 2010).

This study's classification relies on responses to questions about monthly household income (Q1015) and whether it's below or above the median income, set at 1600 TND or 520 USD (Q1015A). Out of 2,400 respondents, 459 were excluded due to refusal or inability to provide income information, leaving 1,941 respondents. After excluding 323 inconsistent or aberrant answers, 1,618 respondents remained. Middle-class status is assigned to those earning between 75% of the median monthly household income and twice that amount. By this definition, only 15.4% of respondents are middle class.

Individual social capital

Another crucial factor impacting this study is how individual social capital is measured. Social capital includes multiple aspects like civic engagement, trust, and social norms. To measure it effectively, we use a latent variable approach, combining eighteen potential ordinal measures/questions from the AB Wave VII Survey, excluding social norms due to unsuitable questions. Since these measures are ordinal and have limited categories, traditional exploratory techniques like factor analysis may not be suitable due to sensitivity to skewed distributions. Instead, an alternative exploratory approach capable of handling ordinal data, such as Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), is adopted. SEM considers the multifaceted nature of social capital, addresses measurement errors, and combines survey items measured on different scales.

To establish relationships between observed variables and the latent construct of individual social capital, a measurement model is created. This process involves selecting specific sets of items and restructuring the original numerical codes of each item to form ordered scales for better measurement. Consequently, the individual social capital scale comprises nine items, including two with four categories, one with three categories, and the rest being dichotomous. Table 1 summarizes these items.

Table 1. The indicators of social capital

| Survey question	Item name	Description	Mean	Std Dev
Q404	SC_item1	In general, to what extent are you interested in politics? (3 if very interested or interested; 2 if uninterested; 1 if very uninterested).	1.972	0.834
Q501	SC_item2	Are you a member of an organization or a group or a club? (1 if yes; 0 if no).	0.052	0.222
Q501D	SC_item3	In a typical month, do you volunteer your time to do unpaid work for or support a cause that you care about? (1 if yes; 0 if no).	0.373	0.484
Q266	SC_item4	In a typical month, do you donate money to a charity or those in need? (1 if yes; 0 if no).	0.593	0.491
Q542	SC_item5	In the past year, did you share in, participate in, or attend any online activity whose aim was to solve a problem faced by a community you belong to or a community you care about? (1 if yes; 0 if no).	0.045	0.208
Q532A	SC_item6	During the past year, did you participate in an in-person protest? (3 if more than once; 2 if once; 1 if never participated).	1.143	0.474
Q301A	SC_item7	Did you vote in the last parliamentary elections? (1 if yes; 0 if no).	0.521	0.500
Q301C	SC_item8	Did you vote in the last local elections? (1 if yes; 0 if no).	0.328	0.469
Q201A_7	SC_item9	How much trust you have in civil society organizations? (3 if great deal of trust or quite a lot of trust; 2 if not a lot of trust; 1 if no trust at all).	1.918	0.879

Economic insecurity

This study considers economic insecurity as a subjective construct, recognizing the diverse ways individuals perceive and respond to risks. Following the approach of Dominitz and Manski (1997), economic insecurity is accordingly defined as individuals' perceptions of the likelihood of experiencing economic hardships. Insecurity is then operationalized as the subjective perception of risk across various domains, including potential hardships in meeting essential needs (four items), vulnerability related to unemployment status, limited access to formal financial services and lack of financial cushion (three items), as well as restricted access to quality education, healthcare, and essential services (one item). The variability in economic insecurity is then assessed using eight items, with the questions used to formulate these items presented in Table 2.

Table 2. The indicators of economic insecurity

Survey question	Item name	Description	Mean	Std Dev
Q1015	EI_item1	Monthly household income in local currency is less than 60% of the median income (1 if yes; 0 otherwise).	0.746	0.435
Q112_1	EI_item2	Please indicate whether the following statements were often, sometimes, or never true for you or your household over the past 30 days: We worried our food would run out before we got money to buy more (3 if often true; 2 if sometimes true; 1 if never true).	1.914	0.855
Q112_2	EI_item3	Please indicate whether the following statements were often, sometimes, or never true for you or your household over the past 30 days: The food that we bought did not last and we did not have money to get more (3 if often true; 2 if sometimes true; 1 if never true).	1.873	0.839
Q116	EI_item4	Do you have any savings? [this includes all types of gold or cash—whether or not it is in a bank] (1 if no; 0 otherwise).	0.894	0.308
Q1025	EI_item5	Do you have a bank account? (1 if no; 0 if yes).	0.695	0.460
Q1001C	EI_item6	The respondent describes the neighborhood where he lives as an area that consists primarily of poorer people (1 if no; 0 if yes).	0.330	0.470
Q1016	EI_item7	Which of these statements comes closest to describing your net household income? (3 if net household income does not cover the expenses; we face significant difficulties; 2 if net household income does not cover the expenses; we face some difficulties; 1 if net household income covers the expenses and we are able to save or net household income covers the expenses without notable difficulties).	2.185	0.774
Q1005	EI_item8	The respondent is unemployed and/or looking for work (1 unemployed; 0 otherwise)	0.157	0.364

3.4. Control variables

A range of demographic factors are introduced as control variables in studying their impacts on democracy-supporting attitude. These are gender, rural settlement, age, discontentment with the present system and a compelling call for fundamental transformation (change) and support for Kais Saied coup (support KS coup). The age groups, as depicted in Figure 2 to illustrate their distribution, have been categorized into three distinct life stages: 18-28 years (youth), 29-64 years (reference age-group), and 65+ years (senior).

Figure 2. Age distribution
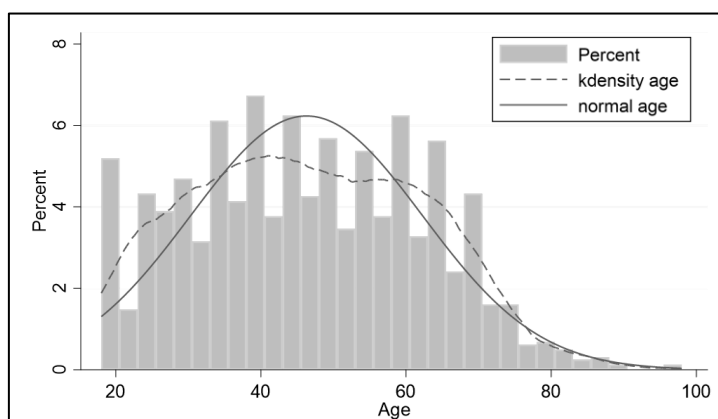
4. Results

In this study, structural equation modeling (SEM) and generalized SEM (GSEM) analysis are employed to elucidate the associations among the variables. SEM/GSEM conceptualize and analyze the considered model in two main perspectives: the measurement model and the structural model. The Measurement Model focuses on the relationship between observed variables and underlying latent constructs, emphasizing the evaluation of observed variables' reflection of underlying constructs via factor loadings. On the other hand, the Structural Model explores the interconnections between latent variables, representing hypothesized causal connections between constructs, assessed by examining the paths (regression coefficients) between latent variables to test hypotheses regarding their influence on one another.

4.1. *Factor structure of individual social capital*

Nine survey items were used to measure social capital (listed in Table 1 above). Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was chosen to empirically evaluate a theoretical model outlining the factor structure of social capital. CFA is a rigorous, theory-driven analysis that assesses the appropriateness of items in representing a construct and offers a comprehensive evaluation of the goodness-of-fit for a proposed model. The CFA was conducted using Stata version 17, which is proficient in handling ordinal data.

The path diagram in Figure 3 illustrates the one-factor CFA model. In this diagram, squares denote the observed variables, while circle represents the latent variable (factor).

Figure 3. Social capital measurement model
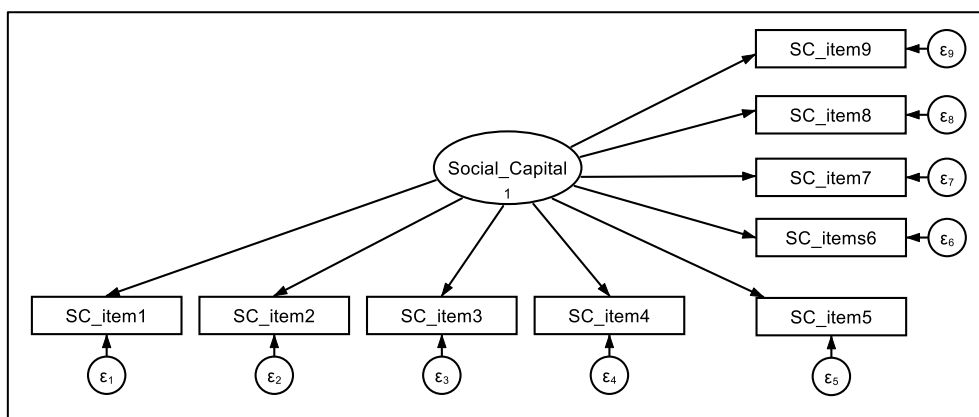
The model's validity was assessed using various fit indices, which encompassed the chi-square likelihood ratio and the chi-square Satorra-Bentler, along with the root mean square of approximation (RMSEA), comparative fit index (CFI), and Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), confirming that the model exhibits a strong fit with the data. Additionally, modification indices offered recommendations for enhancing model fit, which were implemented if aligned with theoretical principles or supported by empirical findings.

The item's estimated standardized factor loadings exposed in Table 3 was found to be modest in magnitude, yet statistically highly significant. Unlike exploratory factor analysis, there is less agreement regarding the minimum factor loading thresholds considered acceptable in CFA.

The Satorra–Bentler scaled statistic, recorded at 24.9 with a p-value of 0.097, and the normal-theory statistic, which stands at 24.3 with a p-value of 0.111, both fall within the significance

level of 0.05. Consequently, we are unable to reject the null hypothesis, indicating a good fit, whether we employ the normal-theory statistic or the Satorra–Bentler scaled statistic. Additionally, the reported RMSEA value of 0.016 is notably below 0.05, signifying a very close fit of the model. Furthermore, the values near unity for both CFI (0.993) and TLI (0.985) are currently accepted as indications of a good fit. In conclusion, these findings affirm that the nine items considered in the study exhibit a theoretical connection, with respondents' responses being attributable to the underlying latent variable of social capital.

Table 3. Standardized factor loadings of items for social capital model (N = 1,618)

Item	Description	Satorra–Bentler Standardized coefficient
SC_item1	Interested in politics	0.4698^{***} (0.0403)
SC_item2	Member of an organization or a group or a club	0.1981^{***} (0.0452)
SC_item3	Doing unpaid work for or support a cause that he cares about	0.2667^{***} (0.0425)
SC_item4	Donates money to a charity or those in need	0.2493^{***} (0.0358)
SC_item5	Share in or attend any online activity whose aim was to solve a problem faced by a community	0.2651^{***} (0.0403)
SC_item6	Participating in an in-person protest	0.2984^{***} (0.0426)
SC_item7	Vote in the last parliamentary elections	0.3583^{***} (0.0466)
SC_item8	Vote in the last local elections	0.4097^{***} (0.0397)
SC_item9	Trust in civil society organizations	0.1452^{***} (0.0372)

Robust to nonnormality standard errors are in parentheses, *** for $p < .001$, ** for $p < .01$ and * for $p < .05$.
The Satorra-Bentler adjusted model involves adjusting the chi-square statistic and the standard errors of model parameters to provide a more accurate representation of the model's goodness-of-fit when dealing with non-normal data. Satorra–Bentler scaled χ^2 statistic is 24.896 with a p-value of 0.097, while the normal-theory χ^2 statistic is 24.9 with a p-value of 0.111. RMSEA = 0.016, CFI = 0.993 and TLI = 0.985

4.2. *Factor structure of individual economic insecurity*

To quantify individual economic insecurity, eight survey items (as listed in Table 2) were employed. Similarly, CFA was chosen as the method to empirically evaluate a theoretical model outlining the factor structure of economic insecurity, with Figure 4 depicting a path diagram illustrating the single-factor CFA model.

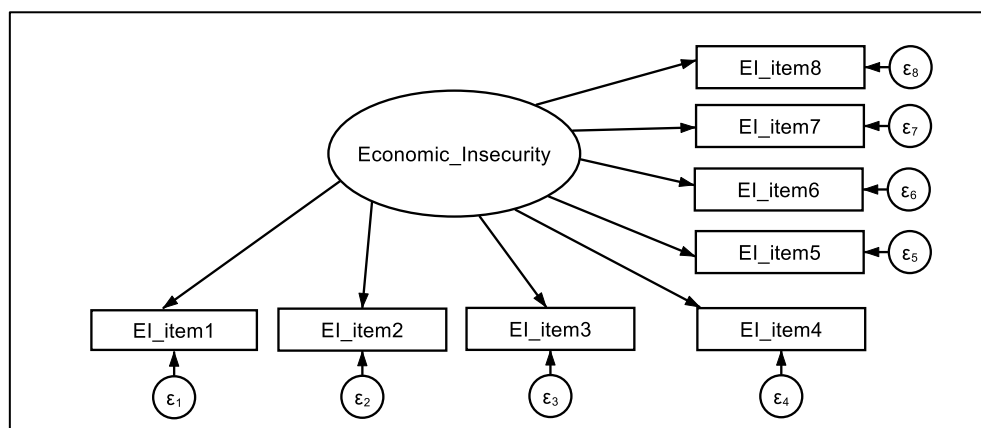**Figure 4**. Economic insecurity measurement model

Table 4 displays the estimation results, demonstrating strong fit statistics, including an RMSEA of 0.016 (90% CI=0.000–0.030), a CFI of 0.996, and TLI of 0.993. The RMSEA evaluates how closely the model fits the data, with values approaching or below 0.05 indicating a robust fit. The Satorra–Bentler scaled statistic, at 24.3 with a p-value of 0.084, and the normal-theory statistic, at 23.03 with a p-value of 0.113, both fall within the 0.05 significance level. Consequently, we cannot reject the null hypothesis, suggesting a satisfactory fit using either the normal-theory statistic or the Satorra–Bentler scaled statistic. All loadings were highly significant, with an average loading size of 0.42. These outcomes affirm that the eight items examined in this study are theoretically interconnected, indicating that respondents' responses can be attributed to the underlying latent variable of individual economic insecurity.

Table 4. Standardized factor loadings of items for economic insecurity model (N = 1,618)

| Item	Description	Satorra–Bentler Standardized coefficient
EI_item1	Monthly household income in local currency is less than 60% of the median income.	0.530^{***} (0.0254)
EI_item2	Worry the food would run out before getting money to buy more.	0.4243^{***} (0.0271)
EI_item3	The food bought did not last and no money to get more.	$0,4971^{***}$ (0,0258)
EI_item4	No savings	$0,3840^{***}$ (0,0302)
EI_item5	No bank account	$0,3142^{***}$ (0,0304)
EI_item6	The neighborhood is an area that consists primarily of poorer people.	$0,3092^{***}$ (0,0269)
EI_item7	The income does not cover the expenses and facing significant difficulties	$0,7331^{***}$ (0,0244)
EI_item8	To be unemployed and/or looking for work	$0,192^{***}$ (0,0278)

Robust to nonnormality standard errors are in parentheses, *** for p < .001, ** for p < .01 and * for p < .05.
The Satorra-Bentler adjusted model involves adjusting the chi-square statistic and the standard errors of model parameters to provide a more accurate representation of the model's goodness-of-fit when dealing with non-normal data. Satorra–Bentler scaled χ^2 statistic is 24.28 with a p-value of 0.084, while the normal-theory χ^2 statistic is 23.03 with a p-value of 0.113. RMSEA = 0.016, CFI = 0.996 and TLI = 0.993.

4.3. *GSEM and path diagram of the structural model*

GSEM extends the traditional SEM framework by incorporating logit, Probit, and other models under a generalized linear modeling framework. This flexibility allows GSEM to estimate effects in structural equation models where endogenous variables are categorical, as is the case with the examination of democracy support in this study. The ordered Probit regression version of GSEM is then implemented to analyze ordinal endogenous variable "support_democracy". Figure 5 displays a path diagram, serving as a visual representation of the proposed causal model, illustrating the hypothesized connections and relationships within the model.

Figure 5. Diagram of interconnected variables in GSEM
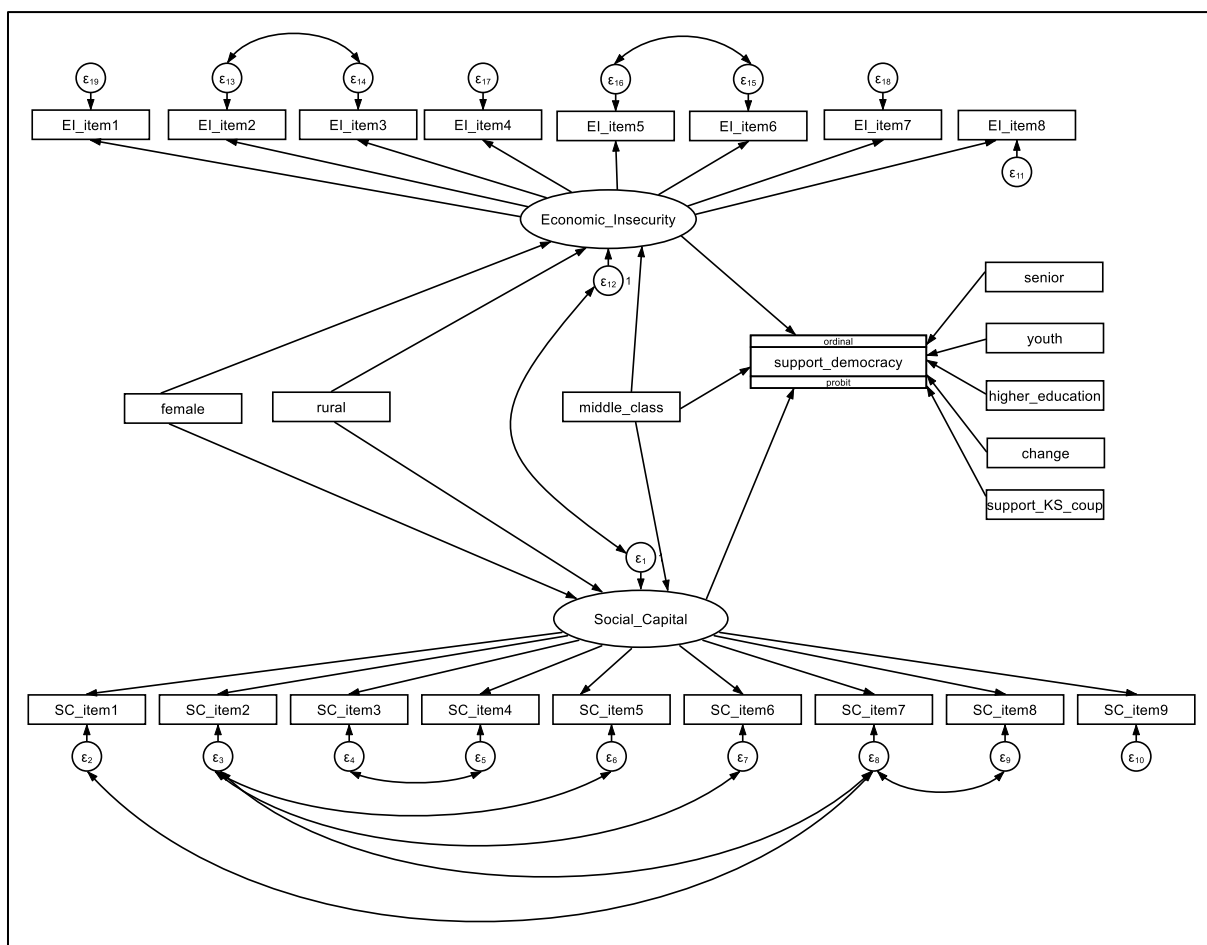
In this diagram, squares are used to represent observed variables, while oval shapes symbolize latent variables (factors), and circles represent errors. Uni-directional arrows signify connections or paths between variables, while curved arrows indicate the presence of correlations between the connected variables (errors). The rectangular box enclosing the dependent variable "support_democracy" is labeled with "ordinal" and "probit" at the top and bottom, signifying that this variable is being modeled using ordered Probit regression.

The results reported in Tables 5 and 6 reveal several significant insights into how various factors affect support for democracy in Tunisia:

1. The analysis delved into the first hypothesis, which posited that among non-higher income Tunisians, those belonging to the middle-class should exhibit more favorable dispositions towards democracy. The results revealed a nuanced relationship between middle-class status and support for democracy. Surprisingly, middle-class status was found to have a significant negative direct effect on support for democracy. This somewhat contradicts the hypothesis, suggesting that being part of the middle-class is associated with lower levels of support for democracy among non-higher income Tunisians. While the initial expectation was that the middle-class might act as a bulwark for democracy due to its socioeconomic stability, the data tell a different story. This finding suggests that the middle class in Tunisia may have specific concerns or grievances that affect their democratic attitudes, highlighting the need for a deeper exploration of their perceptions and motivations.

2. Moving on to the second hypothesis, which proposed that citizens with a high level of individual social capital are more likely to express favorable dispositions towards democracy. The results offered substantial support for this hypothesis, shedding light

on the significant role of social capital in shaping support for democracy. Various aspects of social capital, including interest in politics, membership in organizations, participation in civic activities, and trust in civil society organizations, exhibited positive and significant effects on support for democracy. This implies that individuals actively engaged in their communities and civic life are more likely to support democratic systems. This finding underscores the importance of promoting social engagement and trust in civil society to strengthen democratic values among Tunisians.

3. The third hypothesis explored the idea that the presence of economic insecurity leads to a greater erosion of citizens' satisfaction with democracy and significantly weakens their support for democracy. The results lent support to this hypothesis, highlighting the adverse impact of economic insecurity on democratic support. Economic insecurity, as indicated by various factors such as low income, food insecurity, lack of savings, and unemployment, was consistently associated with reduced support for democracy. This implies that when individuals grapple with economic challenges and uncertainties, their commitment to democratic principles weakens. In a country like Tunisia, where economic concerns have played a pivotal role in shaping political sentiments, these findings underscore the need for policies that address economic insecurity to fortify democratic resilience

Integrating marginal effects at the means enabled to explore further the dynamics of support for democracy across distinct categories, taking into account the ordinal nature of our dependent variable. This approach provided valuable insights, as evidenced by the following key findings:

1. In the case of middle-class individuals, the calculated marginal effects at the means did not display statistical significance across the four-support for democracy categories. This implies that middle-class status does not exert a notable influence on the likelihood of individuals transitioning between these particular categories.

2. Conversely, significant marginal effects were observed among senior and youth individuals. Seniors, when compared to the reference age group, showed a 4.3% increase in the likelihood of falling into the category of minimal support for democracy (category 1) and a 3.3% decrease in the probability of strongly endorsing democracy (category 4). In contrast, youth exhibited the highest levels of support for democracy. Being in this age category led to an 11.4% reduction in the probability of not supporting democracy and an 8.7% increase in the likelihood of strongly supporting democracy. This underscores the substantial influence of age on individuals' democratic inclinations, with seniors leaning towards lower support while youth demonstrate the strongest backing for democratic principles.

3. Higher education levels and perceptions of the need for significant change exhibit a similar pattern to youth, indicating enhanced support as categories advance. Being in higher education level (perceiving the need for significant change) rather than in a non-tertiary education level (not seeing the need for change) decreases the probability of non-supporting democracy by 4.3% (6.1%) and increases the probability of strongly supporting democracy by 3.3% (4.7%). This suggests that education and a desire for change play pivotal roles in bolstering democratic ideals among Tunisians

4. Support for the Kais Saied coup, gender, and rural residence exert varying influences on support for democracy across different categories. These factors contribute to heightened support in the lowest category while diminishing support as categories advance. Specifically, aligning with individuals who support the coup, as opposed to

those who oppose it, increases the likelihood of not supporting democracy by 14.8% and decreases the likelihood of strongly supporting democracy by 11.3%.

Table 5. Results of GSEM analysis: Estimated coefficients

Independent variable	Estimated coefficients	
Support for democracy		
Middle class	0.439**	(0.153)
Senior	-0.132*	(0.077)
Youth	0.350***	(0.075)
Higher education level	0.133*	(0.074)
Support KS coup	-0.457***	(0.081)
System needs major change	0.188***	(0.055)
Female	-	-
Rural	-	-
Social capital (SC)	**0.112****	**(0.042)**
SC_item1	0.283***	(0.025)
SC_item2	0.063***	(0.011)
SC_item3	0.150***	(0.014)
SC_item4	0.115***	(0.014)
SC_item5	0.067***	(0.011)
SC_item6	0.187***	(0.024)
SC_item7	0.134**	(0.016)
SC_item8	0.151***	(0.017)
SC_item9	0.092***	(0.017)
Economic insecurity (EI)	**-0.091****	**(0.037)**
EI_item1	0.227***	(0.010)
EI_item2	0.140***	(0.014)
EI_item3	0.146***	(0.015)
EI_item4	0.054***	(0.007)
EI_item5	0.109***	(0.009)
EI_item6	0.059***	(0.007)
EI_item7	0.194***	(0.016)
EI_item8	0.028***	(0.005)
Social capital		
Female	-0.662***	(0.016)
Rural	-0.250***	(0.078)
Middle class	0.717***	(0.138)
Economic Insecurity		
Female	0.252***	(0.068)
Rural	0.456***	(0.070)
Middle class	-3.681***	(0.203)
Covariance (error SC; error EI)	-0.206***	(0.059)

Robust standard errors are in parentheses, *** for p < .001, ** for p < .01 and * for p < .05.

Table 6. Results of GSEM analysis: Marginal effects

Independent variable	Marginal effects on support for democracy (By category of the dependent variable)							
	1		2		3		4	
Support for democracy								
Middle class	0.008	(0.025)	0.002	(0.025)	-0.003	(0.010)	-0.006	(0.019)
Senior	0.043*	(0.025)	0.007*	(0.004)	-0.017*	(0.010)	-0.033*	(0.019)
Youth	-0.114***	(0.024)	-0.020***	(0.005)	0.046***	(0.010)	0.087***	(0.019)
Higher education level	-0.043*	(0.024)	-0.007*	(0.004)	0.018*	(0.010)	0.033*	(0.018)
Support KS coup	0.148***	(0.026)	0.026***	(0.006)	-0.060***	(0.011)	-0.113***	(0.020)
System needs major change	-0.061***	(0.018)	-0.011***	(0.003)	0.025***	(0.007)	0.047***	(0.014)
Female	0.031***	(0.008)	0.005***	(0.002)	-0.013***	(0.003)	-0.024***	(0.007)
Rural	0.022***	(0.006)	0.004***	(0.001)	-0.009***	(0.003)	-0.017***	(0.005)

Robust standard errors are in parentheses, *** for p < .01, ** for p < .05 and * for p < .10.

5. Conclusion

The post-revolution era has witnessed a notable skepticism among Tunisian citizens regarding democracy as a political system. This skepticism can be traced back to their widespread discontent with the functioning of democracy within Tunisia. The transitional period following the revolution brought about significant challenges, including electoral instability, the presence of political parties with unclear programmatic objectives, and frequent assaults on democratic institutions. Even today, Tunisia continues to grapple with issues such as pervasive corruption, limited government effectiveness, a fragile law enforcement system, and inefficient institutions.

The central argument presented in this paper asserts that these empirical realities, coupled with an unprecedented economic crisis, have a profound impact on the political attitudes of individuals. When these shortcomings in the democratic system become apparent to citizens, it fosters a sense of disillusionment and skepticism toward democracy as a viable political framework.

Additionally, the prolonged period of more than four decades under autocratic rule, especially during the authoritarian rule of Ben Ali, predisposed Tunisians to have a reduced inclination toward democracy. Their exposure to the ideologies, societal norms, and conditions of the totalitarian regime cultivated a sense of familiarity with and acceptance of authoritarianism, paternalism, conformity, and dependency. In contrast, democratic values remained distant and unfamiliar. Furthermore, in the decade leading up to Kais Saied's coup, no substantial efforts were made to address this situation.

This study provides a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted factors influencing support for democracy in Tunisia. While middle-class status among non-higher income Tunisians unexpectedly shows a negative association with support for democracy, emphasizing the need for deeper exploration of their concerns, our study underscores the pivotal role of individual social capital in fostering democratic support, advocating for increased social engagement and trust-building in civil society. Moreover, economic insecurity emerges as a significant threat to democratic resilience in Tunisia, urging policymakers to address economic challenges to strengthen democratic values. Our findings demonstrate the importance of considering temporal dynamics and employing time-series analysis in future research to comprehensively understand evolving support for democracy over time, ultimately contributing to the development of effective democracy-enhancing policies in Tunisia and beyond.

These findings carry significant implications for policymakers, civil society organizations, and scholars seeking to promote and strengthen democracy in Tunisia. Recognizing the diverse influences on democratic support, tailored strategies should be employed to engage different demographic groups effectively. Efforts to enhance social capital, address economic insecurity, and bridge generational divides can contribute to a more resilient and inclusive democratic landscape in Tunisia. Ultimately, this research provides valuable insights into the intricate tapestry of democratic attitudes and offers a foundation for informed policy decisions aimed at sustaining and advancing democracy in the country.

Tunisia's democracy faces serious challenges, but the results suggest a nuanced landscape where multiple factors influence support for democracy. While there are concerns, it's premature to conclude that Tunisia's democracy is on its deathbed based solely on these results.

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