

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Who votes after a coup? Theory and evidence from Egypt

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ABSTRACT

More than half of leaders who come to power through military coups hold elections to legitimate their regimes, yet there is extensive subnational variation in how citizens accept or reject this process. In this paper, we examine district-by-district voting patterns in Egyptian presidential elections a few months following the July 2013 military coup to identify the ecological correlates of three district-level measures of citizen engagement with the electoral process: voter turnout, valid (non-spoilt) ballots, and votes cast for the regime-affiliated candidate. Controlling for baseline measures of these outcomes from the free and fair presidential elections prior to the coup, we find support for the enduring effect of partisanship: districts with higher support for the deposed candidate in pre-coup elections featured systematically lower turnout and rates of valid voting in post-coup elections.

KEYWORDS Egypt; elections; coups

1. Introduction

Military interventions into domestic politics have overwhelmingly negative consequences for the quality of democracy (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Samuel Huntington, 1957; Svoboda, 2012). Yet in the contemporary period, the majority of post-coup rulers hold elections to validate their seizure of power. Scholars of authoritarian rule have explained this by arguing that elections, in addition to displaying the regime's strength, raising costs of defection, establishing methods of power sharing and co-optation, and operationalizing patronage, help post-coup regimes establish international and domestic legitimacy (Grewal & Kureshi, 2019). The legitimacy-granting function of elections may be particularly relevant in military regimes, which tend to be significantly less durable, more likely to face protests, and experience crises of legitimacy at a higher rate than comparable regimes led by civilians or monarchs (Blaydes,

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2010; Brynen et al., 1999; Debs, 2016; Diamond, 2002; Gandhi & Lust-Okar, 2009; Geddes, 1999; Geddes et al., 2014; Lai & Slater, 2006; Lust-Okar, 2006; Magaloni, 2006; Steven & Way, 2002).

Whether elections serve a legitimization function depends in large part on whether and how ordinary citizens participate in these contests. Within the same national context, some sectors of society react to elections held in the wake of a military coup by behaving in ways that maximize the legitimacy of the contests: they dutifully turn out to vote, cast valid ballots, and support the regime-affiliated candidate. Others use the process to delegitimize the new regime: they abstain from participation, intentionally spoil their ballot, or perhaps even vote for the opposition. This variation frames our research question: under what conditions do voters adopt these three options – abstention, spoilage, and opposition voting – during elections held following a military coup?

We investigate this question through a subnational examination of two waves of presidential voting in contemporary Egypt, before and after a July 2013 military coup that ended the country's brief democratic opening and repressive military rule. We match pre- and post-coup presidential elections returns with census data across 325 districts to identify the ecological correlates of three variables broadly measuring citizens' engagement with the electoral process: voter turnout, casting a valid ballot (as opposed to a spoiled one), and a vote for the regime-affiliated candidate. Because elections occurred across the same census districts pre- and post-coup, this design choice permits us to control for a district's baseline levels of turnout and valid voting under democratic conditions, helping estimate the discrete effects of the military coup on participatory behaviour.

Our central hypothesis centres on whether citizens' partisan experiences with democracy, in particular by the extent to which their aggregate political preferences were validated or reversed by the coup, will either support or reject elections offered as part of the post-coup order. Controlling for a number of factors derived from existing literature on authoritarianism and non-democratic elections, which are undoubtedly important for understanding citizen engagement in post-coup elections, such as physical insecurity and disorder, economic ties to the state, and demographic information, we find support for the lingering effects of partisanship: districts with high levels of support for Islamist candidates during the 2012 elections featured systematically lower turnout and rates of valid voting in 2014 than districts where non-Islamist candidates had performed better. Our paper extends recent work on Egyptian politics, including the electoral impact of Islamist parties and the role of the military in politics (Baykan, 2020; Drevon, 2017; Létourneau, 2016; Roll, 2016; Wuthrich & Ciftci, 2020). Beyond implications for Egypt, the paper expands the scope of analysis beyond international

audiences and regime actors as the intended audiences for post-coup elections to explore how citizens grapple with the causes and consequences of a coup.

The paper proceeds as follows: The next section reviews the literature on military coups and authoritarian elections and identifies important control variables as well as our main hypothesis. We then describe the data and our research design, presenting results for our three dependent variables: turnout, valid voting, and pro-regime voting. After discussing the results and potential caveats, we outline the implications of our study for future research into post-coup elections.

2. Theorizing participation in post-coup elections

While scholars have studied when and why elections happen after a coup, including how they may help military regimes solve crises of legitimacy, there is less consideration of who participates in post-coup elections, and what explains variation across types of that participation. Although projecting an image of invincibility to the general public is part of the role of elections in authoritarian regimes, analyses tend to focus on how elections influence the behaviour of elites and party members (Blaydes, 2010; Magaloni, 2006). However, scholars have firmly established that regular citizens are critical for the stability of non-democratic regimes. Both mass support for authoritarian regimes – whether sincere or falsified (Kuran, 1991; Rory & Tavana, 2019) – as well as continued mass engagement with institutions lacking democratic qualities (Geddes, 2005; Steven & Way, 2010) are imperative for the consolidation and survival of non-democratic regimes.

If post-coup elections bestow legitimacy on regimes, it also provides citizens an avenue to make their preferences towards the regime known. In some way this approximates accountability models of voting in democratic contexts, where elections serve as sanction devices that hold politicians responsible for their past behaviour and policies (Fiorina, 1981; Manin et al., 1999). Of course, coups occur without explicit support from the electorate, in direct violation of constitutional procedures, and voting in these elections likely does not turn on the programmatic dimensions this model envisions. Instead, because the quality and nature of democratic institutions dramatically shifts, those who vote in a post-coup election may view it as an opportunity to register their feelings about more fundamental aspects of the new regime.

The quality of elections distinguishes democratic regimes from non-democratic ones (Linz & Stepan, 1996; Schumpeter, 1942). For example, Bermeo (2016) notes how elections may shift from free and fair contests with ex-ante uncertainty over outcomes to more constrained choices, where formal and informal changes in rules, norms, and institutions, decrease

the competitiveness, independent oversight, and accountability of elections. Waldner and Lust (2018) similarly recognize a change in quality of competitive electoral procedures as a core component of democratic backsliding. Participation in post-coup elections likely also means granting legitimacy to the regime from the perspective of voters, rather than expressing preferences or holding the regime accountable for past policies.

We parse the existing literature on when military coups occur, and what drives mass support for non-democratic government, to theorize the conditions under which individuals might participate in elections after a coup. Our main hypothesis builds on the particular dimensions of democracy-ending military coups, in that we focus on partisanship and how it may influence individual decisions to participate in non-democratic, post-coup elections. Consistently, cross-national observational data suggests that those disillusioned with democracy are more supportive of non-democratic government (Booth & Seligson, 2009; Norris, 1999; Rose et al., 2011). We theorize that an important component of disillusionment is the feeling that democracy, simply put, is not worth it when the 'wrong' candidates win (Grewal and Monroe 2019). This partisan dimension, and in particular whether the 'wrong' or 'right' candidate won the prior elections, may influence voters' engagement with less-than-democratic elections that follow. To the extent that military coups offer a reversal of fortune for political groups, turning democratic 'losers' into authoritarian 'winners' (and vice versa), it likely influences patterns of engagement with those institutions.¹

3. Varieties of post-coup electoral engagement

Beyond identifying demographic, economic, and partisan correlates of participation broadly conceived, we attempt to better conceptualize and measure the menu of actions available to ordinary citizens facing the prospect of how to engage with post-coup elections. We focus specifically on three election-related outcomes: turning out to vote (vs. abstaining), casting a valid ballot (vs. intentional spoilage), and voting for the regime-affiliated candidate (vs. voting for the opposition). These behaviours are obviously not exhaustive of how citizens can express their political preferences (they can, of course protest or deploy political violence), but they are exhaustive of ordinary, relatively low-risk electoral choices facing each eligible voter.² We conceptualize post-coup elections as presenting options in a manner most similar to that of a referendum; the main vote choices indicate being in favour or against the new order rather than between candidates with competing platforms.

First, voters can decide whether or not to participate in an election. Turnout is a high-profile quantifiable signal of contentment with the political order. Such public

enthusiasm is particularly edifying for post-coup elections designed to broadcast to observers that citizens find the new regime legitimate. In contrast, low turnout not only broadcasts citizen apathy but also suggests that (some) citizens fundamentally question the validity of the exercise (Blaydes, 2006; Kostadinova, 2003). Turnout is also risky to individuals because, unlike vote choice or intentional spoilage, whether or not a voter shows up at the polls can be easily and directly observed, and thus directly punished. This is all the more true in a place like Egypt, where voting is compulsory and failing to vote can result in a fine or imprisonment.

Our second measure is whether or not a valid ballot is cast, under the assumption that the privacy of the voting booth offers individuals the chance to signal their discontent with the new order through intentionally spoiling their ballot. Examining Bolivia's 2011 elections, Amanda and Nelson (2014, pp. 556–558) find that 'the opposition overwhelmingly chose to spoil their ballots as a signal of discontent with the electoral process and the government more generally'. Scholars have similarly conceptualized spoiled ballots as a form of opposition against authoritarian governments in contexts where compulsory voting rules lead to high turnout but blank and spoiled ballots (Fornos et al., 2004; Power & Timmons Roberts, 1995). Building off of these insights, we may expect this metric to become a suitable choice when abstention is more costly, through either laws on mandatory voting (as in Egypt in 2014) or when monitoring of behaviours through clientelist networks is more prevalent (Stokes, 2005). In our construction, a high percentage of valid votes – regardless of the actual choice on that ballot – is therefore interpretable as a relatively strong support for the political order.

Finally, individuals may register their direct support by casting a ballot for the regime-affiliated candidate. While important, this is a relatively weaker indicator of satisfaction because in these types of non-competitive executive elections the victory of the regime candidate is often beyond question. Additionally, this choice itself is contingent on deciding to turn out and cast a valid ballot, and thus naturally filters out those disenchanted enough with the political order to abstain or intentionally spoil. To some extent, our conceptualization of pro-regime voting follows Zartman's (1990) framework, which focuses on the background decision to participate in regime institutions as a highly consequential decision for preserving regime stability, even if this type of engagement manifests as support for the opposition candidate.³

We conceptualize our three outcome variables as highlighting partially distinct aspects of general support for the regime. More broadly, these options recall Hirschman's (1970) foundational conceptualization about how consumers react to the declining quality of a good, service, or firm. Here, the 'consumers' are voters, and the 'good' is the bundle of governance provided by a military regime. To recall Hirschman's schema, voters 'exit' the

system by abstaining from the polls, ‘voice’ their discontent by spoiling their ballot, or display ‘loyalty’ to the system by showing up and voting to the regime-affiliated candidate. We might also assume a rough ranking of these options in terms of costliness. First, because voter turnout is much more observable than voter choice, abstention will more likely be utilized by the most strident regime opponents and for those who can most afford the costs of being visibly absent from the electoral process (Nichter, 2008). Spoilage and voting against the regime-affiliated candidate, in contrast, are better options for those who cannot pay the cost of public opposition (abstention) but who still want to record their discontent (Geddes, 2005).

4. Timeline of events in Egypt

We test our hypotheses in Egypt, an important contemporary case in which a military coup was followed closely by elections designed to validate it. On 11 February 2011 18 days of sustained protests forced President Hosni Mubarak to resign after nearly 30 years in office. After decades of being denied legal political participation, Islamist movement the Muslim Brotherhood received a licence to operate a formal political party, called the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP). During the 2011–2012 elections for the parliament, the National Constituent Assembly, the FJP-led Democratic Alliance garnered 37.5% of votes, the highest percent won by a single list. In June 2012, Mohamed Morsi, a former member of the Muslim Brotherhood’s highest office and a parliamentarian under Mubarak, defeated former Prime Minister and Air Force commander Ahmed Shafiq with 51.7 per cent of the vote in a two-man run-off, and was inaugurated as Egypt’s first democratically elected president.

Morsi’s tenure was defined by high levels of tension between the Brotherhood and rival political groups. Youth group Tamarod (Arabic for ‘Rebellion’), conspicuously aided by elements of Egypt’s security apparatus, organized massive anti-Morsi protests on the one-year anniversary of Morsi’s inauguration. On 3 July 2013 military officers, led by then defence minister Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, removed Morsi from power, suspended the constitution, and installed an interim government. In the aftermath of the coup, the military oversaw a precipitous decline in the quality of democracy and an escalation of state violence. Military leaders ordered an unprecedented crack-down on organized opposition, activists, and lawyers, among others. In August 2013, the military forcibly cleared two large rallies held in Cairo’s Rabaa and al-Nahda Squares as well as smaller demonstrations in support of the Brotherhood and its ousted president, killing over 1,150 civilians (Human Rights Watch, 2014). Within a year, estimates put the number of detained over 40,000 detentions, the majority being Brotherhood members or supporters.⁴

In the midst of the violent suppression of open dissent, the regime also began to organize a tightly controlled electoral process to both reset relations with key allies in the U.S. and Europe and legitimate itself domestically. Upon approving a new constitution in a nationwide referendum in January of 2014, new presidential elections were set for May of 2014. Eventually, the field was whittled to two, the effective incumbent Field Marshall Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and failed 2012 presidential candidate Hamdeen Sabahi. In the run-up to the elections, el-Sisi's victory was a foregone conclusion due to both the suppression of competitors and the extensive pro-Sisi propaganda campaigns from both official and ostensibly independent media. As a result, debate centred around two key benchmarks the regime desired to hit. The first was 52 per cent turnout, ostensibly supporting claims that these elections rested on at least as much popular buy-in as the 2012 contests. The second benchmark was 13 million pro-Sisi votes, which would surpass the tally of recently-deposed president Mohammed Morsi in the 2012 runoff elections.

However, as participation lagged, the regime began efforts to stimulate participation. For some commentators, the regime's lack of a formal organizational structure, such as a party, and weakly institutionalized ties to other important social actors, for example, businessmen, handicapped their ability to mobilize voters. Instead, the regime adopted a variety of ad-hoc measures to stimulate turnout. The electoral commission surprisingly extended voting a third day (that day was also declared a national holiday to allow state employees to vote), while ticket fees for public transport were suspended to encourage turnout.⁵ According to some reports, the regime leaned on the constellation of smaller parties in its coalition to provide private transportation to voters.⁶ The regime also began to threaten voters who did not participate. Officials pointed to laws that mandated an approximately \$70 fine for abstention, while some voters reported receiving text messages claiming they would be fined if they did not vote.⁷

In the end turnout fell well short of the desired 52 per cent benchmark (with around 47 per cent), although el-Sisi's raw voteshare topped Morsi's 2012 runoff total with nearly 24 million votes. Post-mortem reports identified a number of procedural irregularities; as election observers from Democracy International wrote in their final report, 'although Egypt's constitution guarantees freedom of speech and association, continued suppression of political dissent and restrictions on fundamental freedoms have prevented free political participation and severely compromised the broader electoral environment. This environment made a genuinely democratic presidential election impossible'.⁸

5. Research design

We adopt a research design that allows us to leverage substantial subnational variation in electoral participation in Egypt (Snyder, 2001). We do so for three reasons. First, despite increasing interest in political participation after military intervention in politics, particularly cross-nationally, there have been fewer attempts to explain the often considerable subnational variation in electoral behaviours. Second, national level political processes differentially effect a country's various economic, social, and political groups (Stephan & Kaufman, 1997). This observation allows us to draw conclusions about these experiences and their implications for electoral engagement. Finally, this design allows us to hold constant a variety of other national-level factors theorized to influence political behaviours, including abstention, spoilage, and opposition voting, such as regime type, voting laws (e.g., mandatory voting), electoral system design, or the ballot's physical layout (Barnes & Rangel, 2018).

We analyse variation in electoral engagement across Egyptian census districts (in rural areas the *markaz*, pl. *marākiz*; in urban areas the *qism*, pl. *aqsām*). These are Egypt's second-level administrative divisions and roughly akin to American counties. Egypt's 2006 census included 343 inhabited districts. In the absence of individual-level panel data, this ecological approach offers a worthwhile opportunity to measure patterns for electoral participation and account for shifts in these behaviours following 2013's military coup.

We match these census districts with official election returns for the 2012 (pre-coup) and 2014 (post-coup) presidential elections retrieved from official websites set up by the Egyptian electoral commission for each contest.⁹ As noted in the previous section, the 2012 presidential elections were held in two stages and were widely considered to be free from major irregularities. The first round was held in May 2012 pitting a dozen major candidates against each other. When no single candidate won over 50 per cent of the vote, the second-round contests were scheduled for a month later between the top two vote-getters from the first-round contests, the aforementioned Morsi and Shafiq. On 24 June 2012 Egyptian authorities announced that Mohammed Morsi had won these second-round contests with 51.73 per cent of the vote. Following the July 2013 military coup, General Abdelfattah El-Sisi emerged as de-facto president, and in May of 2014 presidential elections legitimated that status. These two presidential election contests – in 2012 and 2014, bifurcated by the military coup in July 2013 – comprise our comparison set.

Before continuing, note that we follow prior research in using official statistics from non-democratic presidential elections (e.g., Brownlee, 2011), even though it is possible that these statistics may be systematically altered in

some way. Since the outcome in 2014 was not in doubt, Simpson's (2013) work seems particularly relevant, specifically his argument that regimes often tinker with results beyond winning/losing to demonstrate supermajorities.¹⁰ The qualitative evidence above is consistent with this argument. From this perspective, the possibility of systematic, pro-regime fraud would assumedly make detecting any hypothesized partisan effects less likely. Under these assumptions, in other words, the regime would upwardly bias the relevant outcome variables (turnout, valid ballots, and pro-incumbent vote share) in areas where prior partisanship was driving these outcomes downward. These specific assumptions, as well as the potential for broader fraud, should be kept in mind when assessing the results.

5.1. Hypothesis and measurement of independent variable

Our guiding hypothesis concerns the correlation between partisanship and patterns of behaviour in post-coup elections.

H₁: Districts which supported candidates dislodged by a military coup will have lower levels of turnout, valid votes, and pro-regime votes in post-coup elections.

Said differently, voters will engage with the electoral process differently in 2014 depending on whether or not the coup undermined or supported their partisan allegiances as determined from the 2012 first round presidential elections.¹¹ While there are a variety of potentially influential cleavages in Egyptian politics, we pick the most salient during the post-Mubarak period and collapse the vote totals for the two Islamist candidates in the race into a single 'Islamist' bloc: Muslim Brother Mohammed Morsi and former Muslim Brother Abdel Moneim Abu El-Fotouh, who was formally endorsed by the Salafi Hizb al-Nour.¹² We measure partisanship, our key independent variable, as follows¹³:

- Islamist Voteshare (2012 1st Round): (Morsi Votes (2012 1st Round) + Futouh Votes (2012 1st Round))/Total Votes Cast (2012 1st Round).

5.2. Dependent Variables

We include dependent variables measuring three types of electoral behaviour at the district level: turnout, valid ballots, and votes for the regime-affiliated candidate. Each dependent variable is constructed so that higher values indicate more legitimacy for the regime. As noted in a previous section, we conceptualize these behaviours as partially distinct aspects of general support for the regime. These 2014 district-level measurements are straightforward

- Turnout: proportion of registered voters who cast a ballot.
- Valid votes: proportion of valid ballots out of total ballots cast.
- Regime voting: proportion of votes cast for el-Sisi out of total ballots cast.

5.3. Controls

To better account for whether and how ordinary citizens participate in post-coup elections, we include a number of controls. One of the challenges in using electoral behaviours such as turnout and valid voting to make inferences about political preferences is, of course, that individuals stay at home or cast a spoilt ballot for a variety of reasons unrelated to their particular stance on the regime and unrelated to partisan motivations. Some people do not turn out to vote because they cannot take time off of work. Others accidentally spoil their vote because they misunderstand the physical design of the ballot. Because Egypt's district borders remained the same across the two elections of the same type (presidential), we can to some extent parcel out these idiosyncratic reasons for turnout and spoilage by using the baseline measurements of these behaviours from the free and fair 2012 elections. We assume this strategy helps to isolate how the 2013 military coup in particular shaped the specific ways in which citizens interacted with the 2014 elections.

We first adjust for additional variables drawn from the robust scholarly research on voting in non-democratic contexts (Blaydes, 2010; Diamond, 2002; Gandhi & Lust-Okar, 2009; Gandhi & Przeworski, 2007; Geddes, 2005; Magaloni, 2006; Schedler, 2006; Steven & Way, 2002, 2010). We account for variation in demographic characteristics across districts, such as variation in total population from the 2006 census with a log transformed population variable and a dummy indicating whether the district is urban. We expect that both of these variables could potentially influence exposure to various types of insecurity as well as voting behaviour.¹⁴ In addition, we account for literacy, an important demographic characteristic identified as an important determinant of electoral behaviour. In democracies, differences in education shapes patterns of voting behaviour by creating variation in familiarity with the electoral process and the ability to navigate a potentially complicated physical ballot (McAllister and Makkai 1993; Knack and Kropf 2003; Sinclair and Alvarez 2004; Power and Garand 2007; Pachón, Carroll, and Barragán 2017). In authoritarian elections, education may also serve a proxy of difficult-to-observe processes of vote buying. The clientelism of many authoritarian contexts tends to reverse the relationship between education and voting observed in democracies: whereas turnout is associated with higher levels of education in established democracies, in authoritarian contexts, such as Egypt, 'illiterates are twice as likely to vote as those who can read'.¹⁵ Kevin et al. (2016) find similar patterns in Zimbabwe's competitive authoritarian elections in 2008. As a result,

we account for variation in the proportion of illiterate adults in a district. Finally, existing literature also leads us to believe that it is important to systematically account for gender in our analyses. Across variety of Muslim majority nations, there persists a gender gap in political participation, with men displaying higher levels of political activism than women (Coffé & Dilli, 2015). We thus include a measurement of the proportion of female district residents.

Second, we account for a number of economic characteristics that scholars have identified as important determinants of voting behaviour in non-democratic elections. Across a variety of contexts, authors have noted how regimes use control of resources, via clientelism, to produce electoral support (Calvo & Victoria Murillo, 2004; Frye et al., 2014; Gervasoni, 2010; Gimpelson & Treisman, 2002; Remmer, 2007). Public sector employment is a particularly useful way to generate and maintain support (Grzymala-Busse, 2008, p. 659). In autocracies, patronage is supercharged by resource imbalances, whereby regime-affiliated candidates can utilize their control over state resources to effectively co-opt large segments of society (Greene, 2010; Lust-Okar, 2006; Mwenda, 2007). This dynamic is key to the survival of non-democratic regimes and state control of local economies works constraints local political participation (McCann, 1997). This literature suggests the importance of accounting for the dominance of the public sector in the local employment market (proportion of district residents employed in the public sector), with the expectation that a larger share of the public sector will correlate with higher support for the regime representative. In addition, we account for how economic insecurity following the coup may influence whether and how voters to participate in post-coup elections. Economic insecurity, whether measured as unemployment, low or lowered income, or through more subjective items such as personal economic distress, correlates with higher support for non-democratic government and exclusionary policies that target minority groups (Rickert, 1998; Nugent 2020b). Scholars consistently find that economic instability often predates the occurrence of democratic breakdown through military coup (Londregan and Poole 1990; Gasiorowski 1995; Svoblik, 2012). If economic insecurity motivates individuals to support authoritarian regimes and policies, it may similarly drive individuals to participate in elections to support those who frame military intervention as a way to ameliorate those poor economic conditions. Following Attallah (2017), we construct a measure of district residents employed in the tourism industry (food and hotel services) from the 2006 Egyptian census occupation categories. This industry was decimated following the 2011 uprisings, and we reason that those working in this sector most acutely felt economically threatened.

Finally, we account for physical insecurity and exposure to disorder, which may drive influence how voters participate in post-coup elections, particularly when coup leaders position themselves as a source of stability and law and order counterpoised against the supposed chaos of

democratic governance. Psychologists and political scientists have consistently demonstrated that threat generated by insecurity leads to an increase in support for undemocratic politics and policies by activating authoritarian attitudes and personality traits. In turn, threatened voters more strongly support strong leaders and policies at the expense of democratic quality (Albertson and Gadarian 2015; Davis & Silver, 2004; Feldman & Stenner, 1997; Huddy et al., 2005; Marcus et al., 1998; Mirisola et al., 2014; Sales, 1973; Stenner, 2005). Cross-national studies demonstrate that those individuals who fall victim to crime are less supportive of democratic government, more supportive of authoritarian policies and institutions (Fernandez & Kuenzi, 2010), and less satisfied by the performance of democratic governments (Carreras, 2013; Ceobanu et al., 2011). The idea here is that citizens may be ‘voting against disorder’ (Pepinsky, 2017) in voting in support of the regime. In the case of Egypt, Abadeer et al. (2019) find that Egyptians who were exposed to higher increase in crime were more likely to support the ‘strongman’ candidate affiliated with the old regime in the 2012 presidential election. Ketchley and El-Rayyes (2021) similarly find that Egyptians proximate to protest events during the transition came to view democracy as less desirable than Egyptians who were less exposed. Physical threats perceived to emanate from national security crises, terrorism, or other violent attacks can create the same effect (Hetherington & Weiler, 2009; S. Greene & Robertson, 2017). If voters who feel physically threatened are more likely to support authoritarian government and politics, they may also be more likely to participate in elections that cement stronger yet undemocratic rule.

We measure two aspects of physical insecurity and disorder. Our protest measure is a logged count of protest participation compiled by Ketchley (2017). This dataset consists of district-level protest events during the first half of Egypt’s brief democratic interlude during the calendar year 2011. This data is valuable for the way it includes the estimated size of protest events (the estimated number of protestors present), which allows us to roughly approximate how much citizens are exposed to protest. Notably, this data does not include the aims or affiliation of the protestors, and thus should be taken not as a measure of underlying ideology or partisanship (see below), but rather the extent to which the district is exposed to all types of protest mobilization. To examine violent disorder, we download from the Global Terrorism Database at the University of Maryland ¹⁶ a geo-located catalogue of terrorist events including number of casualties, in Egypt from 11 February 2011 to 3 July 2013. We assign each event to a census district and sum the casualties (killed and wounded) and log transform the result.

6. Results: Patterns of electoral behaviour after the 2013 coup

Below we present three OLS models predicting voter turnout, valid votes cast, and pro-regime voting for the 2014 presidential elections as a function of the above variables.¹⁷ We also include in each model fixed effects to account for unobserved governorate-based characteristics.¹⁸

6.1. Turnout

Table 1 presents the results of the variables correlating with voter turnout in 2014. Model one is the baseline, which includes the control variables, as well as the socioeconomic variables suggested by the extant literature on authoritarian elections. Model two controls for protest size, terrorism casualties, and tourism employment, variables we motivated in a previous section as important for assessing patterns of participation in non-democratic contexts. We find that size of protests and number of casualties from terrorism are generally not significant. The percentage of those employed in the tourism industry is positively and significantly correlated with turnout and valid votes in 2014, though it is statistically unrelated to Sisi's voteshare in the same elections. Note that this result is beyond the scope of our analysis but is counter to both our and the literature's expectation that higher percentages of those employed in the decimated tourism industry would correlate with higher levels of dissatisfaction with the regime, and calls for more research into the importance of economic dissatisfaction and whether voters hold the state responsible for economic decline in post-coup elections. Model three includes the relevant variables from the prior period of democratic transition, including the measure of partisanship.

A number of clear trends emerge from the correlations in **Table 1**. Most obviously, a strong predictor of district-level turnout in 2014 was district-level turnout in 2012, confirming the importance of controlling for a baseline level of this activity in this type of analysis. Similarly, **Table 1** indicates support for the classic arguments that clientelism, as well as exploitation of the public sector specifically, is a critical part of authoritarian elections. Two key indicators, district illiteracy rate and pct. public sector employees, show a direct correlation to turnout (although both are only weakly able to reject the null ($p < .10$)). One interpretation of these results is that vote buying – which traditionally targets illiterates – and mobilization of public sector employees was an important factor in getting Egyptians to turn out to vote, and thus demonstrate the legitimacy of the new regime. However, we find support consistent with only one of these mechanisms – public sector turnout – in the qualitative data.

Table 1. District-Level Correlates of 2014 Turnout

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Turnout (2014)	Turnout (2014)	Turnout (2014)
Turnout (2012 2nd Round)	0.189** (0.0635)	0.191** (0.0636)	0.503*** (0.0452)
Population (log)	0.00540 (0.00354)	0.00628 (0.00388)	0.00154 (0.00259)
Pct. Female	-0.0456 (0.124)	0.267 (0.174)	-0.0557 (0.117)
Pct. Illiterate	-0.226*** (0.0431)	-0.162** (0.0505)	0.0610+ (0.0354)
Pct. Public Sector	0.157* (0.0774)	0.239** (0.0818)	0.101+ (0.0547)
Protest Size (Log)		-0.000721 (0.00106)	-0.00178* (0.000706)
Casualties (Log)		0.00238 (0.00729)	-0.00692 (0.00486)
Urban District		0.0150 (0.0115)	-0.00591 (0.00773)
Pct. Tourism		0.352** (0.128)	0.243** (0.0850)
Rd. 1 (2012) Islamist Voteshare			-0.548*** (0.0285)
Constant	0.376*** (0.0756)	0.175+ (0.100)	0.431*** (0.0680)
Observations	327	327	327
AIC	-976.1	-978.9	-1246.3

Standard errors in parentheses

+ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

We find a decidedly inverse correlation based on partisanship. Districts where Islamist candidates performed well in 2012's first round contests were less likely to turn out in 2014. To get a sense of this relationship, [Figure 1](#) shows the marginal effect of shifting Islamist vote shares from 2012's first round on 2014 turnout levels, holding all other variables at their means. Points are weighted by registered voters in that district in 2014.

This evidence is consistent with arguments that patterns of partisanship from the pre-coup period, in our case between Islamists and non-Islamists, remain influential in predicting turnout in post-coup elections. Intuitively this makes sense: having won an election in 2012 and seen that process ended extra-constitutionally by military intervention, those most disenfranchised would likely not participate in the electoral contests designed to legitimate the post-coup political order.

6.2. Valid votes

[Table 2](#) presents the models predicting rates of valid (non-spoilt) ballots in 2014 following the same order for inclusion of variables into the models as for [Table 1](#).

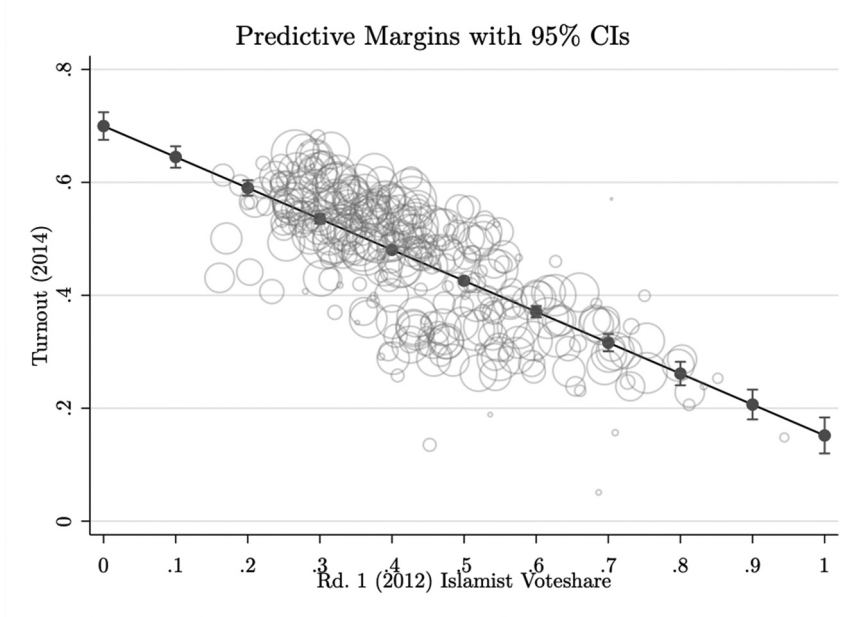


Figure 1. Marginal Effect of District-Level Islamist Vote Share (2012) on Turnout (2014)

Table 2. District-Level Correlates of 2014 Valid Votes

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Valid Votes (2014)	Valid Votes (2014)	Valid Votes (2014)
Valid Votes (2012 2nd Round)	0.150+ (0.0778)	0.159* (0.0791)	0.378*** (0.0671)
Population (log)	0.00235*** (0.000688)	0.00169* (0.000757)	0.000588 (0.000625)
Pct. Female	-0.0478* (0.0240)	0.0247 (0.0335)	-0.0108 (0.0275)
Pct. Illiterate	0.0120 (0.00744)	0.0191* (0.00887)	0.0298*** (0.00730)
Pct. Public Sector	-0.0261+ (0.0148)	-0.0111 (0.0156)	-0.0248+ (0.0128)
Protest Size (Log)		0.000226 (0.000208)	0.000137 (0.000170)
Casualties (Log)		0.00140 (0.00140)	-0.000243 (0.00115)
Urban District		-0.00232 (0.00222)	-0.00544** (0.00183)
Pct. Tourism		0.0730** (0.0247)	0.0500* (0.0202)
Rd. 1 (2012) Islamist Voteshare			-0.0791*** (0.00655)
Constant	0.802*** (0.0764)	0.761*** (0.0777)	0.615*** (0.0646)
Observations	327	327	327
AIC	-2050.7	-2055.6	-2187.0

Standard errors in parentheses

+ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

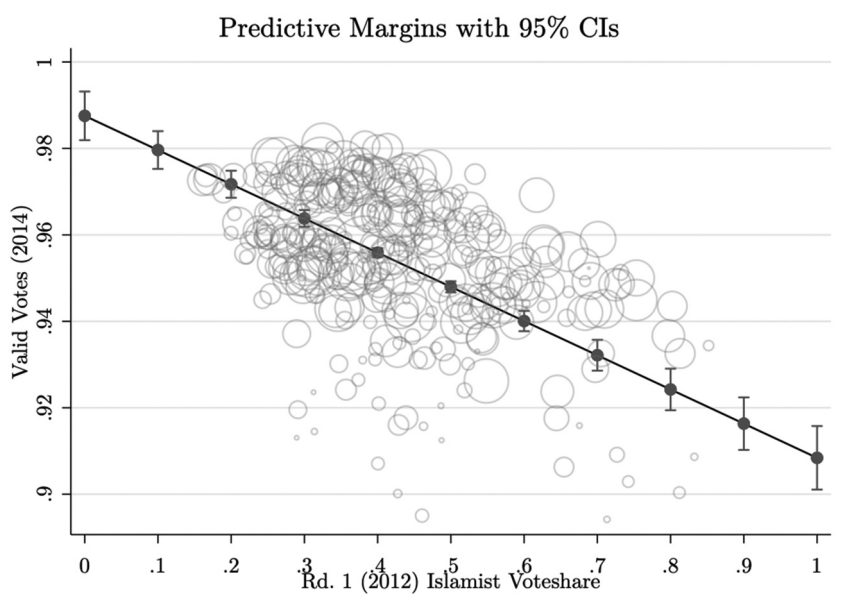


Figure 2. Marginal Effect of District-Level Islamist Vote Share (2012) on Valid Votes (2014)

Similar to turnout, the partisanship variable based on Islamist voteshare is strongly negatively correlated with valid voting. [Figure 2](#) shows the margins plot for Islamist voteshare from 2012, holding all other variables at their means.

Even controlling for rates of valid voting in 2012, the more support for Islamist candidates in a district in that contest correlates to a drop in valid voting in that district in 2014. This again is consistent with the core intuition of the partisanship approach: having been most disenfranchised by the military coup, these voters reject the legitimacy of the new contests by intentionally spoiling their ballots at a higher rate.

6.3. *Pro-Regime voting*

[Table 3](#) presents models predicting district-level voteshare for the regime-affiliated candidate and leader of the 2013 military coup, Abdelfattah El-Sisi.

[Figure 3](#) Shows the margin plot for Islamic voteshare from 2012 on pre-regime voting in 2014, holding all other variables at their means.

Islamist voteshare in 2012 was a strong inverse predictor of turnout and valid voting ($p < .001$), yet here the effect weakens ($p < .05$). This is not entirely unexpected: to the extent that citizens who supported Islamist candidates in 2012 believed that they were acutely disenfranchised by the

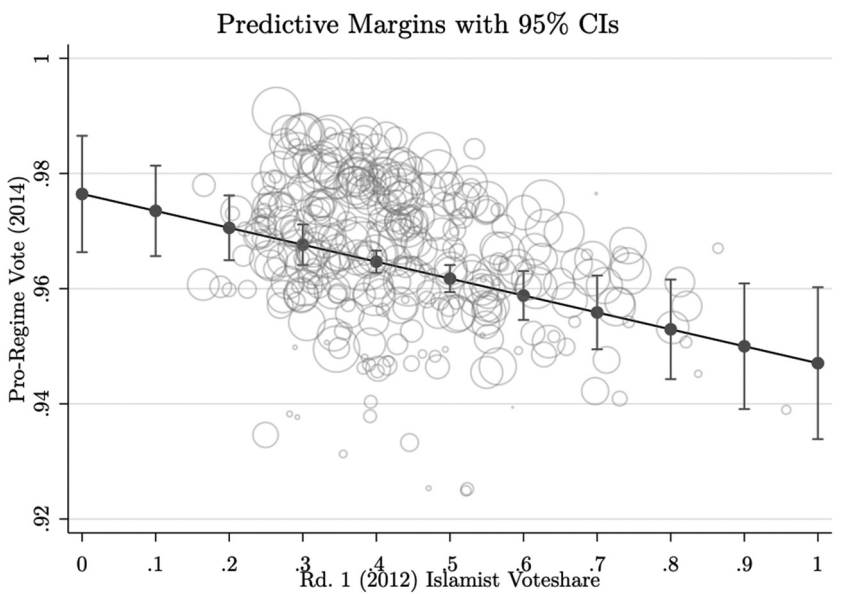


Figure 3. Marginal Effect of District-Level Islamist Vote Share on Pro-Regime Voting (2014)

military coup, we would only weakly expect them to provide a stamp of legitimacy to the subsequent contests by casting a vote for the opposition candidate. Instead of rejecting the new order within the confines of the electoral process, they rejected the process entirely through either abstention or, perhaps where monitoring of turnout made abstention too costly, vote spoilage.

7. Discussion

We begin our discussion by noting again that our approach is ecological; that is, the units of analysis are districts, not individuals, thus our claims can only speak to aggregate patterns of behaviour at a localized level rather than individual electoral behaviour. Our argument has clear implications for behaviour we would witness at an individual level, although at this point panel data to empirically evaluate these implications is not available. That said, our pre-post design benefits from continuity of units, allowing us to control for baseline levels of electoral behaviour under 'normal' political conditions. This provides important insight into subnational variation in post-coup electoral participation.

Table 3. District-Level Correlates of 2014 Pro-Regime Voting

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Sisi Voteshare (2014)	Sisi Voteshare (2014)	Sisi Voteshare (2014)
Population (log)	0.00411*** (0.00104)	0.00423*** (0.00115)	0.00395*** (0.00114)
Pct. Female	-0.0153 (0.0362)	0.0365 (0.0514)	0.0217 (0.0513)
Pct. Illiterate	0.0130 (0.0109)	0.0109 (0.0133)	0.0168 (0.0134)
Pct. Public Sector	0.0167 (0.0225)	0.0290 (0.0240)	0.0243 (0.0239)
Protest Size (Log)		-0.000540+ (0.000313)	-0.000614* (0.000312)
Casualties (Log)		0.000860 (0.00214)	0.000141 (0.00214)
Urban District		-0.00213 (0.00341)	-0.00324 (0.00341)
Pct. Tourism		0.0518 (0.0378)	0.0450 (0.0376)
Rd. 1 (2012) Islamist Voteshare			-0.0294* (0.0117)
Constant	0.916*** (0.0198)	0.893*** (0.0278)	0.916*** (0.0290)
Observations	327	327	327
AIC	-1777.3	-1776.1	-1781.1

Standard errors in parentheses

+ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Our results demonstrate the enduring effect of partisan loyalties. We consistently find that measures of pre-coup voting patterns, in the Egyptian case arrayed along an 'Islamist-Secularist' dimension, strongly predict variation in electoral participation post-coup. The results for the partisanship variable tell a fairly consistent story across three outcomes: districts with more Islamist support during the first-round presidential contests in 2012 show consistently lower voter turnout, valid voting, and support for el-Sisi in 2014.¹⁹ This provides relevant leverage on a variety of behaviour related to post-coup elections. For example, partisanship predicts both public and easily monitored (turnout) as well as private (valid voting and pro-regime voting) forms of political engagement. This supports the intuition driving our main hypothesis: partisan identities that becomes visible in the democratic period are 'sticky' and adhere through the decline in democratic quality represented by a military coup.

We consider that the importance of partisanship for voting after a decline in democratic quality is endogenous to the combined process of democratization and democratic backsliding. On the one hand, individual levels of partisan affiliation and aggregate distribution of affiliation are shaped by long-term processes, and the Islamist-secular divide structured Egyptian politics before the 2011 uprising (Nugent 2020a).

On the other, the combined experience of a democratic period – and the intense mobilization of partisan identities – as well as the nature of the military coup strongly shaped participation in the post-coup regime's legitimization processes. In effect, partisanship became an identity not only through which one sees electoral contestation, but also how one interprets and reacts to changes in broader political processes and regime legitimacy.

Stripping away the proper nouns of Egyptian partisanship, that of 'Islamists' and 'Secularists', helps to consider the role of party affiliations regarding those who benefit from or are more harmed by democratic rollback more broadly. This is because a sharp democratic regression, represented by a military coup, seems to imbue partisan divides with additional meaning that provides highly significant predictive power for subsequent elections. Without such a sharp regression represented by a military coup, in other words, we might not expect partisan preferences to map so closely onto future electoral behaviour. Said differently, had Mubarak simply passed power directly to Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, the social cleavage delineating 'Islamist' from 'Secularist' would likely not have predicted voting behaviour in this way.

Our three outcome variables – turnout, valid voting, and voting for the regime-affiliated candidate – are generally related to the broad concept of legitimacy, and specifically the extent to which citizens actually agree that the new institutional arrangement represents the only valid way to contest power. But they each capture a different facet, and the particular way that an individual chooses among them is likely due to a variety of exogenous factors. For example, the decision to turn out may be influenced not only by attitude towards the validity of the regime, but the likelihood of being observed while abstaining (and thus incurring a cost for public opposition). Similarly, the decision over whether in the privacy of the voting booth to spoil the ballot or vote for the opposition is likely due to the particular degree of disenfranchisement: while spoilage rejects the process entirely, voting for the opposition suggests that the disagreement does not extend beyond the identity of the regime candidate. Future researchers, ideally with individual-level data, will likely find this a productive avenue of enquiry.

Finally, while not the purpose of our study, our results add to the large literature suggesting that clientelism is a key factor in electoral politics of non-democratic regimes. To the extent that illiteracy proxies for poverty – a reasonable assumption, particularly in a context like Egypt – we find evidence in support of clientelist arguments for voting in non-democratic elections; districts with higher rates of illiteracy are

more likely to turn out and less likely to spoil their ballots and more likely to support the regime representative in these regime legitimization exercises.

8. Conclusion

As we noted at the beginning of this paper, leaders who come to power following a military coup are faced with a dilemma: having short-circuited the democratic process to seize power, they are nonetheless faced with pressure to legitimate themselves through the same procedures they have just disregarded. In this paper, we theorize how citizens respond to this dilemma. In one sense, our findings reaffirm classic literature on the determinants of voting in non-democratic contexts: illiteracy – a presumed proxy for poverty – seems to predict a variety of ‘pro-regime’ outcomes, as does the degree of the local economy’s dependence on the state in some specifications. However, our case is unique to this broader literature in one key respect: it was, for a brief moment prior to these authoritarian elections, a flawed but functioning democracy. This points to the novelty of our findings, in that partisan legacies of that democratic period, however fleeting, are important determinants of voting even following a coup and subsequent authoritarian regression.

While in some ways intuitive, our paper is worthwhile because we are able to systematically establish these dynamics in the empirical evidence. It also suggests two key points. First, under certain conditions the axis of contestation in non-democratic elections can be about the partisan identity of the regime itself as much as material disbursements and symbolic politics. Second, just as prior scholars have identified legacies of authoritarian rule as an important determinant of political behaviour during democratization, our work suggests that prior experiences of democratization shape the ways that those living in non-democratic contexts practice politics (S. P. Epstein et al., 2006; Samuel P. Huntington, 1991; Ulfelder & Lustik, 2007). We urge future scholars to consider the possibility of such endogeneity, particularly if (or when) Egypt experiences democratization and competitive elections in the future.

We believe our study offers an important broader contribution to the scholarly literature on the effects of post-coup elections, expanding the scope of analysis beyond international audiences and regime insiders to those citizens living under military governance. Our findings have implications for understanding the role of elections in the declining quality of democracy, not only in the extent to which they measure how much the quality of democracy has declined, but also as a mechanism through which undemocratic rule is supported and, potentially, reversed (Bermeo, 2016).

Two specific avenues for further work are worth highlighting. The Egyptian case is not only a clear example of military intervention in politics, but one in which the military explicitly positioned itself as above politics as a justification for doing so. Yet other examples of authoritarian regression suggest different pathways: non-military ‘outsider’ politicians – such as Kais Said in Tunisia – can similarly position themselves as above the political fray (Albrecht et al., 2021), while in other cases politicians justify their undemocratic manoeuvres explicitly on the basis of partisan identity. Given the increasing interest in the modes and methods of democratic backsliding worldwide, future scholars should expand our work to identify whether and how the precise pathways from democratic rule influence the subsequent cleavages that emerge under authoritarianism.

Ultimately, citizens have choices in post-coup elections. While many citizens legitimate the new regime by participating and voting for the regime-affiliated candidate, they can also use the opportunity to reject it: to withhold their consent through abstention, to express their frustration through intentional vote spoilage, or register political dissent by voting for the incumbent’s opponent. These options entail risking a certain degree of punishment from the regime, which depends to some extent on the appearance of popular support through high turnout and large winning margins. However, abstention and spoilage, particularly when they become widespread, may be the most effective way for citizens to effectively express dissatisfaction non-democratic government, and to indicate to other citizens that opposition exists.

Further explorations of participation in post-coup elections is necessary to better understand these unique types of contests and whether our finding that partisanship is important for post-coup electoral participation is generalizable. We encourage scholars to replicate our analyses in other post-coup electoral contexts. After all, military coups are the most common manner through which democracies die (Svolik, 2012). Systematic analysis of patterns of post-coup electoral engagement is thus an integral component of understanding the process and implications of this prominent form of democratic decline.

Notes

1. We note that feeling like a democratic ‘loser’ need not translate into support for military politics in general, but likely did so in a controlled contest where the military marketed itself as the only effective bulwark against Islamist rule. We return briefly to this implication in the conclusion. See, Holmes and Koehler (2020).
2. See, Brooke and Nugent (2020) and Barrie et al. (2020) for more on this topic.
3. See also, Albrecht (2005).

4. These numbers were reported by *Wikithawra*, an initiative run by the independent Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights.
5. See Hend El-Behary, 'Ministry of Transportation provide free tickets to voters,' *Egypt Independent*, 29 May 2014. <https://www.egyptindependent.com/ministry-transportation-provide-free-tickets-voters/>
6. See Mahmoud Salem, 'Sisi's camouflage campaign unravels in election's final hours,' *al-Monitor*, 28 May 2014. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2014/05/sisi-campaign-failure-turnout-egypt.html>
7. See 'Voter Turnout Low in Egypt Elections,' *al-Jazeera*, 27 May 2014. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2014/5/27/voter-turnout-low-in-egypt-elections>; Hend Kortam, 'Finishing of Abstainers is the Law and Will be Implemented: Mehleb,' *Daily News Egypt*, 27 May 2014. <https://dailynewsegyp.com/2014/05/27/fining-abstainers-law-will-implemented-mehleb/>
8. Final report available online at [http://democracyinternational.com/media/Egypt%20Presidential%20Election%20Observation%Report%20\(ES\)%20-%20for%20web.pdf](http://democracyinternational.com/media/Egypt%20Presidential%20Election%20Observation%Report%20(ES)%20-%20for%20web.pdf).
9. See <http://pres2012.elections.eg/> for results of 2012 presidential elections, and <https://pres2014.elections.eg/presidential-elections-2014-results> for results of the 2014 presidential elections.
10. In the appendix we report a series of tests designed to uncover fraud with inconsistent results. See also the work of Ketchley (2021), who analysed the 2018 Egyptian elections using similar methods and found a series of irregularities in the data.
11. We choose these first round contests for this variable because the field of candidates was wide, which allows us to disaggregate preferences in a very specific way. Other races, for example, the second round contests, potentially aggregate preferences because they reduced the candidates on offer to two: Mohammed Morsi and Ahmed Shafiq. Substituting Morsi's voteshare in the second round, however, does not notably alter the results (see appendix).
12. See David Kirkpatrick and Mayy El Sheikh, 'Support From Islamists For Liberal Upends Race in Egypt,' *The New York Times*, 28 April 2012. Available online at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/29/world/middleeast/conservatives-in-Egypt-back-liberal-to-oppose-brotherhood.html>; Khalil al-Anani, 'Egypt's Blessed Salafi Votes,' *Foreign Policy*, 2 May 2012. Available online at: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/05/02/egypts-blessed-salafi-votes/>.
13. In the appendix, we provide both more narrow (Morsi's 2012 first round vote-share) and broader (Morsi's 2012 second round voteshare) conceptualizations of the independent variable. Neither substantially alters the results.
14. Descriptive statistics and correlation matrix for all variables available in the appendix.
15. Blaydes (2006). Abadeer et al. (2019) find that this pattern reverses in Egypt's 2012 (democratic) presidential elections, where turnout was higher in more educated and urban districts.
16. The Global Terrorism Database is available at <http://www.start.umd.edu/>.
17. In the immediate aftermath of the 2014 elections analysts reported preliminary findings that subnational (governorate and district) patterns of turnout were broadly consistent with the 2012 contests. See Tarek Masoud's tweet at <https://twitter.com/masoudtarek/status/474930998677753856> and Mostafa ElHoshy's tweet at <https://twitter.com/melhoshy/status/475940447463170048>.

18. Governorates are akin to American states, and each contain multiple subunits (qism or markaz), our units of analysis.
19. In the appendix we focus on another aspect of this argument, predicting the three post-coup outcomes not by reference to the disillusionment of democratic winners (i.e., Islamists), but rather the support of the democratic losers, measured by the district share of votes in the 2012 first round for Ahmed Shafiq, who explicitly campaigned on a promise of restoring the pre-2011 authoritarian regime. Across all three outcomes, this variable positively correlates with post-coup turnout, valid voting, and support for al-Sisi.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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