



Determinants of UAE Voters' Preferences for Federal National Council Candidates

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the voting behavior in United Arab Emirates by asking 1,800 citizens about which criteria they used to vote for a particular candidate in the past Federal National Council elections. Using descriptive statistics, the study showed that although patron-client networks played a role in voter's preferences — as existing literature about Middle East voters' behavior has established — they were superseded by personal attributes and the impact of candidates' campaigns. Emiratis voted for candidates based on three groups of factors, namely: 1) personal characteristics of the candidate including: public speaking skills, political experience, age, gender and educational level; 2) impact of a candidate's campaign including electoral promises and content of the campaign; and 3) patron-client networks including having personal and kinship relationship with candidate. The study showed that religious, political, and personal appearance factors were insignificant.

Introduction

Voting in the Middle East is an infrequent activity; and where it seldom occurs, the outcomes can be fairly predictable. This is because such elections are aimed at legitimizing the status quo rather than challenging it. The predictability of elections in many Middle East countries present several challenges to researchers interested in studying the voting behavior and attitudes of the electorates. However, new opportunities for research have arisen in the aftermath of the Arab Spring phenomenon which has led to an increase in the spate of presidential and legislative elections in countries that were directly affected by the revolutions. Even states in the Arabian Gulf Cooperative Council (GCC) that have been traditionally stable politically have deepened existing electoral reforms that are worthy of studying. One such country is the United Arab Emirates which began a path of electoral political reforms even before the Arab Spring by conducting elections in 2006 and 2011 for the Federal



National Council (FNC) a quasilegislative body with advisory role to the executive arm of government.

The first elections to the FNC were held in 2006, resulting in the election of half of the members by an Electoral College. Hitherto, all members of the FNC were directly appointed by the rulers of the various Emirates. In the inaugural 2006 elections, the Electoral College, which constituted those who could run and vote, only comprised of 1% of the UAE population. However, in the sophomore elections in 2011, the college was increased to 129,274 members which represented about 13% of the UAE populace. The government has touted the increment of the Electoral College since 2006 as an attempt by the UAE leadership to improve democratic culture by enhancing more political participation (Gulf news, 2011). In terms of composition, the FNC is made up of 40 members that have been apportioned among the UAE's seven Emirates. Half of the membership of the FNC is elected to serve a 4-year term while the other half is directly appointed by the Ruler's Court of the UAE's seven Emirates (United Arab Emirates Embassy, Washington, DC, n.d).

This research seeks to answer the question on how Emirati members of the Electoral College determine for whom to vote in the FNC elections. Although, the UAE FNC has undergone two major elections — so far — in 2006 and 2011, there is little research on the voting attitudes of the UAE electorate, especially on the evaluative criteria for voting for candidates. Only one major study was conducted by the Dubai School of Government for the UAE Ministry of State for Federal National Council Affairs which aimed to “examine and analyze the experiences undergone by women in the UAE's first election process” (al-Dabbagh & Nusseibeh, 2009:6). The study also sought to assess women's perception about their political participation in the UAE and to outline ways of addressing any concerns for the future. While the research illuminated Emirati women's participation in the inaugural election, its gendered approach calls for further studies — hence this research. The present study seeks to lay a foundation for the attitudinal behavior of voters in the UAE as it embarks on further electoral reforms in the future.

Following the Introduction section, this research is organized as follows: literature review, theoretical framework, methodology, data results and analysis and conclusions.

Review

Research about electoral behavior, is primarily concerned with two issues. The first seeks to explain the outcome of elections through the identification of the sources of individual voting behavior. This illuminates election results by revealing how and why voters voted in a certain way. The second issue focuses on the changing voting patterns of voters over a period of time to determine what electoral results reveal about the direction of the politics of a country. Thus, the focus on the dynamics of electoral results serves as a guide to the present and future of politics in a country. Nevertheless, these two concerns complement each other in spite of the fact that they generate different types of research questions (Prysbly & Scavo, 2005). This



research seeks to answer a research question related to the first concern about electoral behavior by finding out how Emirati citizens decide in voting for candidates to the FNC.

Although in other countries, several factors have been established as influencing how and whom voters vote for in an election, each country has its peculiarities. Generally, the literature shows that the determinants of voters' preferences fall under three categories: public policy orientations, the general evaluation of the government performance, and evaluations of the personal characteristics of candidates (Prysbly & Scavo, 2005; Rosenstone & Hansen, 2003; Teorell, 2006).

In order for policy to affect voting decisions, voters must have opinions about policy issues and must be able to differentiate between candidates on the issues. However, not all voters are able to do this, as some have little information about policy issues, poor political culture, or their opinions are either weak or too unstable to serve as a basis for evaluating candidates. In addition, some candidates may not see significant differences among the candidates on the issues (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Donald, 1960:168–187). Nevertheless, there are voters who will form definite opinions and take clear positions about the candidate differences, especially when candidates draw policy contrast (Nie, Verba, & Petrocik 1976:164–173).

Voters may also vote for a candidate based on the latter's previous performance or evaluate the overall performance of a government before deciding to vote in an election especially if the candidate or government is an incumbent (Erikson & Tedin, 2011). Performance evaluation of a government is an important determinant of voting behavior and its impact should be distinguished from that of policy issues (Fiorina, 1981: 3–16; Miller & Shanks, 1996:370–388).

Voters also take into consideration the personal characteristics of candidates, such as their experiences, morality, honesty, compassion, and perceived leadership abilities before voting for or against them (Miller & Shanks 1996:416). Voters form perceptions about the personal attributes and abilities of candidates which ultimately influences their vote. For example, in seeking a candidate of integrity, voters' perception about the candidates' honesty and trustworthiness become determinants in voting. Similarly, in seeking competency as a desired attribute for candidates, voters are unlikely to vote for a candidate whom they believe lacks the knowledge and experience for the job. In addition, voters weighing leadership ability as a preferred attribute are more likely to vote for candidates perceived as being strong and inspiring. Furthermore, voters seeking compassionate candidates are more likely to consider candidates perceived as caring. The impact of any one or combination of the aforementioned personal traits may vary in every given elections (Miller & Shanks, 1996: 425–427; Siddiki, 2010).

Policy orientations, evaluation of government and the personal characteristics of candidates are further influenced by the attitudinal factors of party identification and general ideological orientation (Prysbly & Scavo, 2005). While the direct influence of party identification on voting is less significant in elections, its indirect influence is



significant because partisan allegiance influences the evaluations of candidates and performance of governments (Abramson, Aldrich, & Rhode, 2003:168–191).

Voters generally lean one way or the other on the ideological spectrum which affects their voting preferences. Although most voters are not ideologically rigid, they are predisposed to a certain political ideology. While some are staunch liberals and conservatives on most issues, others are moderates on most issues. It is not uncommon to find voters who may be liberal on social issues, but conservative on economic issues. All these ideological variations have great influence on voting (Abdulnasir, 2009; Miller & Shanks, 1996:288–294).

Voting Behavior in the Middle East and GCC

There is very scant research on attitudinal behavior of voters in the Middle East or GCC countries. Nevertheless, the few available research provided by such researchers as Blaydes (2006), Lust (2009), al-Ississ and Atallah (2014), and Tesler, Jamal, and de Miguel (2008) all identify patron-“clientalism” as a major criteria for selecting a candidate or participating in elections. There is also a strand of research (Ben-Bassat & Dahan, 2012), that establishes social identity as a basis for electoral behavior in the Middle East. According to Lust (2009), patron-client networks exist in both advanced democracies and emerging democracies and it exerts substantial influence on political processes, bureaucracies, and electoral outcomes. People tend to exchange their loyalty and votes for incumbents to gain material benefits or services, thus creating a cycle of loyalty and patronage.

In the United States, patronage is a powerful force for the political parties in competition, in which the party’s control over patronage jobs can increase the chances for the incumbent party to win future elections. Political parties in the United States tend to use patronage to implant loyal partisans within their clients, to benefit their electoral outcomes (Folke, Hirano, & Snyder, 2011:11–12).

In the Middle East, in which people are governed by monarchs and traditional regimes, such structures have been a fundamental character of politics in the region. With the adoption of somewhat competitive elections in the region, people may tend to vote in favor of the status quo perhaps because they fear change, prefer conservative transition, or for the material benefits that their votes will gain them. (Aljauosi, 2010; al-Enisi et al., 2010). For some, these elections may serve as an opportunity for the clients to gain access to the political elite and state resources. As in other countries, any democratic process naturally means that some people will abstain from participating in elections for various reasons, such as apathy, poor political culture, lack of interest, absence of material benefits, or other reasons (Lust, 2009).

In addition, a high percentage of people in rural areas in the Middle East may participate in elections, due to the personal client-network that they share with their candidate, which makes it easier for them to gain the benefits from their vote (al-



Shaer, 2010; Lust, 2009). High-income people are more likely to gain the benefits of the patron-network due to their personal connection with government figures; thus such interpersonal network increases the voting turnout in the elections. However, people who are not involved in a patron network, may tend to look for other ways to secure their chances for gaining the material benefits (Siddiki, 2010; Tessler et al., 2008).

In Egypt, the first presidential election of 2012, offered a great chance to study the voting behavior of Egyptians. Researchers found that patronage served to benefit the candidate who was linked to the prior government, in which voters were already engaged in client networks. However, in the situation of Egypt, people wanted a transition to democracy, so the pro-change ideology exerted more influence in the election than the patronage network (al-Ississ & Atallah, 2014). Nevertheless, the percentage of illiterate voters' turnout was twice the people who could read, and this is because illiterates can be more easily intimidated by others; additionally, their votes are cheaper to purchase by corrupt candidates (Blaydes, 2006).

Ben-Bassat and Dahan (2012) argue that social structure constitutes a prominent element of individual's self-identification in Arab countries which greatly influences voting behavior and voter turnout in elections. Citizens tend to vote as a part of social, ethnic, or racial groups to ensure that their votes will affect the election outcome. In addition, Ben-Bassat and Dahan concluded that a candidates' last name is one of the forces that influences election turnout as well as political interest. Voters from big social groups tend to vote for "their candidates" to gain access to state's resources. However, even small social groups are more likely to vote for "their candidates" to express their loyalty and affiliation to the group. However, voting in consonance with the social group can be due to social pressure that is exerted by the highest power of the social group (Nisbet, 2011; Zain Eldeen, 2009). As a result of this pressure, voters may vote for a particular candidate, to prevent sanctions that could be imposed on him/her if they did otherwise. Thus, understanding the social group structures and motives is prerequisite to understudying their electoral behavior and political participation.

Another muted factor influencing voters' attitudes in Middle Eastern elections is the role of religion and associated political ideologies as a mobilizing and an evaluative criterion for voters' preferences. Indeed, it has been observed that "Wherever Islamists have been allowed to run for office in Arabic-speaking countries, they have tended to win almost as many seats as the governments have let them contest" (Feldman, 2008:3). Political utilization of religion (Islamist or Islamic political ideology) became a potent factor in some Arab elections, especially after the Arab Spring, where religious-shaped parties gained power by default because they had the mobilizing infrastructure that other liberal minded parties did not necessarily have. Echoing this sentiment, Haass (2003:144) posits that "The reason for such election results is not that such parties enjoy the overwhelming confidence of the population but that they are



often the only organized opposition to a status quo found unacceptable by a growing number of people.” Although the political rise and fall of some religious groups was drastic and they have been outlawed in some countries, such as Egypt, religious-based political parties still have parliamentary seats in several Arab countries thereby giving credence that politicizing religion remains an important factor in some Middle Eastern societies. For example, polarization of religion played a role in the outcome of Saudi Arabia’s local elections in 2005 in spite of government electoral laws aimed at eliminating such influences. Butressing this point, Kraetzschmar (2011) notes that religious platforms in Saudi Arabia were very successful because of candidates’ “skillful appeal to voters’ religious sentiments, all played their part in securing the cross-constituency support necessary to pull-off election victory; a success which the ‘liberal’ current in Saudi politics was unable to rival” (p. 6).

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Research about democratic transitions and consolidation deals with two distinct analytical concerns, namely: political institutions and processes on the one hand, and political cultures which focus on the attitudes and values of citizens, on the other. These two analytical lenses have different foci. While the institutional and process approach focuses on mechanisms for accountability by political leaders, political culture focuses on the political behavior and attitudes of ordinary citizens toward their political systems with the aim of deepening participatory norms (Tessler, 2002:338).

The present study is anchored in the political culture approach rather than the institutional and process approach because as posited by Inglehart (2000:96) “democracy is not attained simply by making institutional changes or through elite level maneuvering. Its survival depends also on the values and beliefs of ordinary citizens.” In addition, the political culture approach has been used successfully to study democracy in a wide range of societies such as Latin America and Asia. For example, Mainwaring attributes the greater success of democratic consolidation in Latin America compared to other transitional societies to the “changes in political attitudes, toward a greater appreciation of democracy” (p. 96). In addition, Chu, et al. (2002:2) attribute the democratic consolidation success of Korea and Taiwan to the “sustained, internalized belief in and commitment to the legitimacy of democracy among the citizenry at large.” Tessler (2002), citing Harik’s work has also concluded that the aforementioned conclusions are applicable to the Arab World because “in the long run, of course, a democratic government needs a democratic political culture, and vice versa” (p. 338). Thus, the political culture approach is applicable to the study of voters’ attitudes in the FNC elections in the UAE as it enables the discovery of attitudes that shape Emirati voting preferences.



Methodology

A questionnaire was used to collect responses from a random sample of 1,800 Emirati members of the Electoral College for the FNC as part of a quantitative study. In all, 1,518 respondents answered the surveys; and the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyze all valid responses from the seven Emirates of the UAE. Univariate analysis was done to answer the research question: How do Emiratis determine who to vote for in the FNC elections? Since membership in the Electoral College can change randomly from one election cycle to another, the sample of the present study was conveniently drawn (2,000 citizens). A special survey was developed in the Arabic language to collect responses to 36 coded single questions. After excluding incomplete ones, a total of 1,518 valid surveys were processed using SPSS.

Demography

The demographic segmentation of the sample was as follows: Gender, Emirate, Employment, Current job, Educational level, and Economic Status. The average age of the respondents was 27 years. Female respondents made up 56% of the respondents, while males made up 40.1%. Respondents came from all seven Emirates of the UAE with an overwhelming majority coming from Abu Dhabi (73.3%), followed by Sharja (7.1%), Ras al-Khaimah (6.3%), Dubai and Fujera (3.8%) each, Ajman (1.6%), and Om Qowain (.8%). Most respondents worked in the public sector (44.8%) while 27.2% worked in the private sector. In terms of educational level, a super majority of the respondents (86.8%) had at least a high school education. Sixty-four percent of the respondents described their economic status as above average while only 1.6% described their status as poor. See Table 1 for more details on the demographic data on the study sample.

Data Analysis

Personal Characteristic: Very Important Criteria

Speech skills of the candidate. The most important determinant of Emirati voters' preferences for FNC membership is the speech making skill of candidates. Nearly 86% of Emirati voters identified a candidate's speech-making skills as a determinant for voting. Therefore, candidates who are gifted speakers and can articulate their views and positions clearly are more likely to attract the votes of their compatriots during elections. In addition, the electorate views effective speech-making skills as a desired qualification for FNC membership, as it enables elected members to effectively contribute toward debates and better articulate the concerns of constituents.



Table 1: Description of the Study Sample N = 1,518

Variable	Average Age	Gender (%)	Emirate (%)	Work (%)	Education (%)	Income Level (%)
Age	27	—	—	—	—	—
Male	—	40.10	—	—	—	—
Female	—	56.30	—	—	—	—
Abu Dhabi	—	—	73.30	—	—	—
Sharja	—	—	7.10	—	—	—
Ras Al Khayma (RAK)	—	—	6.30	—	—	—
Dubai	—	—	3.80	—	—	—
Fujera	—	—	3.80	—	—	—
Ajman	—	—	1.60	—	—	—
Om Al Qowain	—	—	.80	—	—	—
Public sector employees	—	—	—	44.80	—	—
Private sector employees	—	—	—	27.20	—	—
Military	—	—	—	8.80	—	—
Students	—	—	—	8.90	—	—
Others	—	—	—	6.50	—	—
Bachelor or higher	—	—	—	—	45.70	—
Community college or high school	—	—	—	—	41.10	—
Lower than high school	—	—	—	—	9.20	—
Wealthy	—	—	—	—	—	3.70
Rich	—	—	—	—	—	6.20
Average (middle class)	—	—	—	—	—	64
Okay level	—	—	—	—	—	20.40
Poor	—	—	—	—	—	1.60
Other	—	—	—	—	—	.90

Education. The educational level of candidates is a major criterion used by Emiratis in voting for a candidate for the FNC per the response of 81.6%. Generally, voters prefer voting for candidates they perceive as educated maybe because of the assumption that educated candidates are knowledgeable and thus understand the issues of governance than less educated ones. Also, more education can be associated with experience and the ability to do the job better than a less educated candidate. This is not surprising looking at the educational background of the Emirati voters, where 45.7% of them held a Bachelor’s degree, and another 41.1% had some form of post-high school degree. It can be deduced from the highly educated Emirati Electoral College that voters prefer candidates of their educational caliber rather than those of lower educational attainment.

Having an educated electorate voting on the basis of the assessment of the educational attainment of candidates has some normative benefits. According to Duch and Whitten (2003:8), a poorly educated electorate tends to be less informed about politics and policy options and incapable of assessing incumbent performance. Consequently, such voters



Table 2: Important Voting Criteria

Criterion	Percentage (%)
Speech skills of the candidate	85.8
Educational level of the candidate	81.6
Political experience of the candidate	78.1
Election promises given by candidate	62.7
Age of candidate	60.9
Emirate of the candidate	50.5
Scale or size of the campaign of the candidate	49.7
Content of political campaign of the candidate	49.2
Gender of the candidate	47.7
Personal connection or relationship with the candidate	47.3
Kinship with the candidate	43.4
What my friends say about the candidate	41.7
What my relatives say about the candidate	40.7
Appearance of the candidate	21.2

rely on subjective measures instead of assessing the past performance of incumbents before deciding for whom to vote. Therefore, by using the educational attainment of candidates as a voting criterion, Emirati voters are channeling themselves into their candidates with the anticipation that they have what it takes to succeed in the job if elected, at least theoretically. In the future, more studies will be needed to determine whether educated incumbents or former members of FNC have done better or worse than those with less education. Table 2 above captures the important criteria used by Emirati voters in voting for their preferred FNC candidates.

Political experience of the candidate. Emirati voters weigh the political experience of a candidate before casting their votes as evidenced by responses of 78.1% of the voters. The underlying assumption with regards to political experience as a desired qualification for the FNC is that more politically experienced candidates would be better qualified than political neophytes who would be new to the job. This implies that incumbents are likely to be reelected and new candidates more likely to face difficulties in winning the trust and confidence of the electorate. However, more data are needed from future FNC elections to firmly arrive at this conclusion. In addition, because people in the UAE tend to consider high-level public sector jobs, such as deputy minister and general director, as political posts, this criterion could suggest that Emirati voters are considering the prior professional experiences of candidates in general, with candidates having a long public sector experience much more preferred (see Yaghi, 2014a).

Age of candidate. For 60.9% of Emirati voters, age is a major criterion in voting for FNC candidates. Similar to Western societies where age is significant, Emiratis showed that candidates should fit a certain age criteria. However, the present



study did not ask about such preferences. Therefore, one can only speculate that, while youthfulness is a desired trait in political leadership and often associated with vibrancy and new ideas, the opposite may be the case in the UAE, taking into consideration the traditional nature of the local social culture where older people are seen as guardians — wise and fatherly (see Yaghi, 2014b).

For example, in the 2008 U.S. Presidential elections, candidate Obama and his campaign sought to use McCain's old age against him by frequently portraying him as unsteady and out of touch and thus, unfit for the rigors of the U.S. presidency in the midst of serious global financial and security crisis. In fact, many older Western candidates go to great lengths to disguise any physical traits of aging and surround themselves with younger people to appear young and hip. We can further speculate that Emirati voters using age as a criterion for voting, may suggests that they prefer candidates that are not perceived as too youthful or too young. Middle Eastern societies equate wisdom, maturity, experience, and competency in leadership to comparatively older people (see Abdalla & al-Hamoud, 2001; Mohamed, 2005).

Thus, younger candidates may be viewed as untested in life and hence not ripe for leadership. In addition, it is conventional wisdom in electoral studies that younger people are less likely to participate in elections or to become politicians compared to older people. However, more studies will be needed in the future to better examine the role of age, especially the fact that the UAE society is young and it is likely that the opposite of the previous speculation can be true and not unexpected.

Gender of candidate. Ample evidence exists in the literature which demonstrates that gender is a major consideration for voters' electoral choice outcomes. These worldwide considerations, which usually disadvantage women candidates, are based on gender stereotypes and cultural factors (Yaghi & Alibeli, 2013). The findings of a study by Aalberg and Jenssen (2007) about the impact of gender stereotyping on the evaluation of a candidate and electoral outcomes identified each gender with having specific issues. While men were identified with business and economic policies, women were identified with welfare. Such stereotypes diminished the electoral fortunes of women. The study concludes that such stereotypes exist even in liberal democracies, where men are often associated with more positive leadership qualities than women. This is attributable to cultural factors which have great impact on voting attitudes in many societies. While the norm of gender equality in government is deeply embedded in liberal and social democracies such as the Scandinavian countries, the opposite is the case in conservative and religious societies such as Iran and Catholics in Latin America where women are less empowered in the public realm (Norris, 1985).

The impact of the above cannot be lost on more conservative societies such as the UAE where roughly 48% of respondents have also indicated that gender considerations play a role in the determination of which candidate to vote for. And based on



the overwhelming percentage of male candidates so elected to the FNC, it is safe to conclude that most voters prefer male candidates. In particular, in the 2011 election, only one female candidate was elected in Om Al Qowain (see Yaghi, 2014a,b; Yaghi & Yaghi, 2014).

The results of gender as a determinant in voting in this study should be viewed within the context of other studies about UAE public attitudes toward women in public roles. One such study conducted by al-Othman (2013) concluded that although the public generally supported equal women's participation in public affairs, they preferred them in civil societies, volunteer societies, and municipal councils over political and economic participation. The attitude toward women's political participation in the UAE can be attributed to the long held cultural beliefs about gender role (Yaghi, 2015; Yaghi & Yaghi, 2013). Although changing rapidly, these beliefs were much stronger before when they repeatedly placed women in supportive positions rather than in leadership. Since the UAE government adopted aggressive women empowerment policies in 2005, more women have gained political and administrative power as seen in the number of female ministers, deputy ministers, and general directors.

The gender representation at the FNCs is not unique to the UAE, but a global phenomenon where a plethora of structural, social, and cultural factors impedes the political empowerment of women. Nevertheless, to balance gender representation, the executive branch of the government in the UAE has appointed a larger number of women to serve as members in the FNC, thus using the government influence to materialize women empowerment (see UAE National Election Committee, n.d).

Campaign Impact: Very Important Criteria

Election/Campaign promises given by candidate. Public policies' issues continue to be vital in any meaningful election and its absence in elections alarms political scientists. This is because elections are seen as providing an avenue for the electorate to influence governmental decisions by choosing candidates that are aligned with the policy priorities of the electorate. There are often criticisms about an electoral process when candidates are viewed as not promoting policies, and rather focuses more on other issues which are deemed peripheral to elections (Prysby & Scavo, 2005).

In recent times, electoral or campaign promises have become a major voter wooing tool for politicians and it is often used by the electorate as an evaluative tool to assess incumbents on whether promises were kept or broken. The proliferation of social media and the mass media has made it even more precarious for politicians who break promises as these promises could be replayed in campaigns as a point of reference.

Article 52 of UAE Election rules stipulates that a "candidate shall take into account the role required to be played by an FNC member so that his/her election



campaign will not include promises or programs beyond the tasks and powers of an FNC member” (UAE National Election Committee, n.d).

Therefore, FNC candidates have to walk a fine line with their electoral promises so as not to over promise and over step the mandate of FNC members. Nevertheless, 62.7% of Emirati voters still cited election promises as a criteria in voting for a candidate. This finding is particularly revealing because, although both the voter and candidate may or may not be aware of the actual role of the FNC in impacting policy, there is a convergence from both constituencies that talking about the issues are normatively desirable. This is evidenced by strenuous attempts by FNC candidates to promote certain issues in their respective campaigns. Thus, this criterion is an affirmation that the electorate is heading the efforts of candidates and also evaluating them upon electoral promises.

Size of Campaign

Studies about U.S. congressional elections indicate that indeed, the nature and size of campaigns do matter as the electoral preferences of voters are influenced by knowledge and candidate evaluation — both of which are based on the information supplied by campaigns. All things being equal, voters prefer candidates who have stronger name identification over less unknown candidates (Jacobson, 2004; Stokes & Miller, 1962). Therefore, campaigns that increase the level of awareness of candidates through advertising can increase the electoral fortunes of the latter (cf., Lodge, Steenbergen, & Brau, 1995). In the Arab World, Abdalla and al-Hamoud (2001) and al-Dabbagh and Nusseibeh (2009) highlighted the significance of campaign promises to the outcomes of the election. The commentators noted that the scope of such campaigns and the ability of a candidate to reach out to a larger audience can impact his/her success. In line with this, Bani Salama (2009) asserted that one major challenge of democratic elections in some Arab countries is the extent to how realistic yet convincing campaigns can be and how the design and language used can appeal to a wider constituency.

In the UAE, about 50% of voters are swayed by the size of a candidate’s campaign in deciding for whom to vote. However, unlike U.S. congressional elections, where candidates can spend too much money in addition to spending by outside groups, Emirati candidates are restrained by strict campaign rules that minimizes the impact of money in electoral outcomes. For example, Article (48) of the UAE Electoral Controls stipulates that “the ceiling of spending on publicity or promotional campaigns shall not exceed AED2 million (about \$545,000)” (UAE National Election Committee, n.d). It also calls for disclosure of “the sources of financing publicity and election campaigns and submitting the publicity campaign plan to the Election Management Committee for endorsement” (Abdulhameed, 2015; UAE National Election Committee, n.d.). In addition, Article (46) of the Electoral Controls requires that “Each candidate may receive donations from any person or corporate body, provided that these donations shall not exceed the ceiling of spending on



publicity campaigns. The candidate, however, shall submit to the emirate election committee a detailed statement of accounts for these donations” (Abdulhameed, 2015; UAE National Election Committee, n.d).

The above strict campaign finance rules means that the impact of money in the elections of FNC candidates is limited and thus create a level playing ground for candidates. Therefore, the size of campaign as a determinant of voters’ preference might not necessary mean bigger advertising which requires more money, but rather smart and creative advertising that ensures greater returns for limited campaign cash. In other words, Emirati voters are being swayed by candidates who are more visible in their campaign in spite of the campaign finance limitations.

Content of Campaign

The content of a campaign matters to Emirati voters as it was cited as a determinant of voters’ preference by 49.2% of the respondents. Article of 44 of UAE Electoral rules governs the content of campaigns and stipulates that “All candidates are banned from launching any election publicity that involves deception of voters and from using defamation methods against others in the election publicity” (UAE National Election Committee, n.d). Therefore, FNC candidates cannot wage any negative campaign to get elected because they are legally obliged to wage positive campaigns. Under such legal frame work and political culture, the electorate is likely to gravitate toward candidates who positively project their personal attributes and ideas in their campaigns.

Patron-Client Networks Criteria: Moderate Importance

While the scant literature on voters’ attitudes in the Middle East places a high premium on patron-client networks, this study shows that they are a secondary evaluative criteria for Emirati voters and not the main voting determinant. The following responses of Emirati voters could be classified as patron-client network criteria: personal knowledge or relationship with candidate; kinship with candidate; what my relatives say about candidate; and what my friends say about the candidates.

Emirate of the candidate. The Emirate of origin of FNC candidates is major voting criterion for 50.5% of Emiratis. In other words, Emiratis were more likely to vote for candidates hailing from their Emirates and vote against those hailing from different Emirates. This is not at all surprising for a very small populated federal state such as the UAE, where tribal affinity and ties are still very strong, in spite of attempts at creating a modern state that will supplant such primordial tendencies. Part of the calculus behind regional voting and primordial considerations in voting is the belief that regional candidates or the “home boy” is more trustworthy, has a better appreciation of the needs of the region and most importantly, more likely to fight for resources for the electorate and be an effective agent (Patron) for his home region than an outsider.



In the case of the UAE, candidates from the Emirate of Abu Dhabi are likely to have an electoral advantage over their peers from the other six Emirates because of the generous track record of the Abu Dhabi government in redistributing resources to the other Emirates. Thus, candidates hailing from richer Emirates could make better patrons under patron-client considerations for voters. Highlighting Abu Dhabi's political advantage, Van Der Meulen (1997) posits that "the concentration of wealth, in terms of oil resources and the financial profit from them, in Abu Dhabi Emirate allows Abu Dhabi to be by far the dominant actor within the UAE. Abu Dhabi-provided subsidies and benefits paid to the five northern emirates provides Abu Dhabi with unquestioned leadership in the federation" (p. 10). However, it should be noted here that patron-client theory applies to each Emirate separately because according to the UAE election system, candidates can only run within their Emirate and therefore, they cannot influence constituents who reside in other Emirates. Nevertheless, because Abu Dhabi is demographically the most populated, geographically the largest, and economically the richest Emirate, more candidates and more winners can be found in it. Needless to mention, the FNC law stipulates that each Abu Dhabi and Dubai Emirate to have eight seats in FNC, while other Emirates have either six or four seats each.

Personal knowledge or relationship with candidate. According to 47.3% of Emirati voters, personal knowledge or relationship with the candidate factored into whom they vote for in FNC elections. Although this is in line with the literature about the political culture in many societies where patron-"clientelism" and familial considerations pervade the political sphere, it was not as strong as anticipated. Under such a political culture, people vote for people they know or with whom they are familiar. The expectation is that once such people are in power, they could be called upon for personal favors such as lobbying for jobs, contracts or intercede on their behalf in challenging times. Tessler et al. (2008) notes that "one is also likely to favor candidates with the political connections to extract resources from the political system" (p. 15). However, away from this utilitarian argument, one would find personal knowledge important for those voters who seek trustworthiness and credibility. When voters know the candidate on a personal level, they may have better chances to judge the candidate's honesty, sincerity, dedication, objectivity, and so forth. Therefore, it is not unexpected to find such factors significant in many cultures (see, e.g., al-Sulami, 2008; Erikson & Tedin, 2011; Nisbet, 2011; Toros, 2011).

In the case of the UAE, the limited ideological divides in the society creates fertile grounds for voters to vote for people with whom they are familiar rather than a particular platform. However, because the FNC plays only an advisory role in governance with the real power of the purse in the hands of the executive, there is a limitation on the scope of benefits that a successful candidate can deliver to his clients. Nevertheless, in a small closely knit tribal society such as the UAE, it will be almost impossible to ignore familial ties in any form of voting even if there is no expectation



of quid-quo-pro. In this regard, a major consideration for voting one of your own into a major national institution such as the FNC is having a seat at the table ostensibly to look out for the interest of the community and also to ensure that the best representative of the community or tribe or Emirate is available in the decision-making circles.

Kinship with candidate. Emirati voters (43.4%) consider kinship with the candidate before they cast their vote to elect an FNC representative, and although it is comparatively lower than expected, it is still significant. The importance of kinship as a determinant of voters preference can be attributed to the role that tribal and kinship ties plays in the politics of the UAE. Van Der Meulen (1997) posits that, “tribal and kinship considerations dominate the internal struggle for political power in the UAE to a remarkable degree, even in comparison to similar oil-rich, traditional Arab Monarchies” (p. IV). He attributes this to several factors such as the small population, vast oil reserves, the history of the region, and the constitutional provision of regional autonomy for each Emirate which have all combined to allow tribal and kinship ties to play a major role in the politics of the country. Individual voting preferences are influenced by several forces such as group membership or social identity, whereby a voter’s race, religion or ethnicity can shape his/her preferences as well as serve as an evaluative tool of candidates’ political qualifications. Voting may occur more along social lines in Middle Eastern societies with voters more supportive of candidates with whom they share last names, an indicator of common social affiliation. This implies that the sustainability of a candidate’s political career is dependent on his/her social identity (Ben-Bassat & Dahan, 2012). Similarly, in the West such as Canada, both English and French voters support candidates with last names from their ethnic and linguist backgrounds (Kamin, 1958).

Unlike many countries where religious and ethnic heterogeneity makes religion and ethnicity the basis of kinship and thus the basis of electoral politics, the UAE, as a small country, lacks such social peculiarities. Instead, kinship in the UAE is manifested in tribal affiliation and this plays a major role in political participation and distribution of the country’s vast oil wealth. Van Der Meulen, (1997) buttresses this point by stating “that the structure and history of the 42 to 45 Arab tribes which are located wholly or primarily in the territory of the UAE are thoroughly reflected in the political process of the country” (p. 10). Therefore, it is not surprising that kinship with a candidate appeared on the radar among Emiratis as a voting criteria, albeit it a moderate one.

Nevertheless, there is ample evidence that tribal and kinship ties are increasingly becoming less important in Emirati electoral behavior. This is evidenced by the fact that in the 2011 elections, although Abu Dhabi Emirate is home to several tribes, there was no evidence of tribal voting. In fact all the winning candidates came from a nonmajority tribe, which was more of a coincidence rather than by design. Looking back at the previous discussion, we can argue that although social connections



are important, urbanization, advanced education, and mobility of people in the UAE are changing the way people look at public office, thus favoring qualities and criteria that are more objective and relevant to the concerned issues of the community rather than those of personal ties (see al-Dabbagh & Nusseibeh, 2009; al-Shaer, 2011).

What my friends say about candidate. In addition, 41.7% of Emiratis representing more than one-third of the respondents indicated voting based on what friends say about a candidate. Friends, for example, tend to vote for similar candidates and identify themselves along similar social and political lines. Thus, understanding the nature of peer effects can help understand electoral outcomes. This finding dovetails findings from other countries such as Mozambique and Brazil.

In Mozambique, the historical aspect of the country — civil wars — has led to the high influence of in-group decisions, in which voters tend to use their electoral decisions to strengthen their groups' identity and status. However, the high level of political conformity in society has produced negative and positive aspects of peer effects. For example, it has negatively reduced voter turnout and political participation in the country while positively increasing interest and information about politics and elections within people, due to the low-cost and low-effort transmission of information between peers (Fafchamps, Vaz, & Pedro, 2013:34–35).

Furthermore, studies have shown that transmission of voter education in Mozambique is not a result of sharing information, but rather through opinion sharing and social pressure, exerted by peers and family (De Matos, 2012:26–27). In Brazil, the political identification of the group has proven to be of no effect on the individual identification of the person, although, it exerts high influence on the person's political identification. Moreover, the political engagement of the group influences the person to conform to the nature of the group's engagement. This is because of the sharing of information about politics and candidates between the most informed and less informed within a group. This peer impact is a natural result for social interactions rather than political conformity (Campos, Heap, & de Leon, 2013:20).

In general, political behavior, opinion, and attitudes can be transmitted through two channels. The first is via conversation about politics, through which people construct their political identities. Such conversations exert high influence on people even though it may not be informative. The second channel is via individual's political conformity. People tend to follow the political norms and attitudes of their peers and companions for social reasons (Sinclair, 2012:2–3; Yaghi, 2009).

What my relatives say about candidate. More than one-third (40.1%) of Emirati voters cited family influence as a determinant of their voting preferences. This is not surprising because family is considered the first institution contributing to the process of political socialization for new generations. Parents directly and indirectly influence their children's political orientation and preferences. Thus, transmitting their own political ideology to their offspring producing a cycle of similar



attitudes toward partisanship and electoral decisions. However, the family impact on their children's political behavior has not been given its share of studies and experiments, particularly in the Middle East where free, open and periodic elections are rare.

Nevertheless, research has shown that the influence of family members on individual electoral preferences is nearly universally applicable in many societies. Using the cases of British and German voters, Zuckerman, Dasovic, and Fitzgerald (2007) observed that "as most persons live with others, members of their households — usually husbands, wives, parents, and children — influence each other's political decisions" (p. xvi). This also applies to Emirati voters who are more socially and culturally communal than their Western counterparts who are often the subject of most research on voters' behavior. Studies have shown that even in advanced democracies such as America, the political, ideological, and electoral choices of the younger generation of voters turn to mirror that of their parents (Jennings, Stoker, & Bowers, 2009:12–13). A similar research in Denmark showed that the influence of parents on their children's voting preferences outweighed the voting choices of the children and even affected the likelihood of the children voting at all. In fact, young Danish adults were more likely to vote while living in their parents' houses than when living alone (Bhatti & Hansen, 2012:393–397).

In a non-Western setting such as India, the family unit exerts considerable influence on the political behavior of younger voters through informal political discussions and information exchange prior to the elections. The goal is to generate a family consensus to ensure maximum impact on election outcomes as compared to individuals splitting votes (Sircar, 2014:28–29, 32).

The socioeconomic status of a person explains his/her affiliation to a particular peer-network, in which they are joined by similar attitudes, experiences and backgrounds. Whereas a person's emotions explains his/her tendency to conform to the group norms and political preferences in which he/she conforms to feel the personal pride and linkage with the group and avoid the feelings of shame and embarrassment (Suhay, n.d.:13–14).

Least important criteria: appearance of candidate. Research on the connection between candidates' appearance and voters choice indicate that generally, candidates perceived as good looking perform better electorally under certain circumstances. This advantage is particularly profound in situations where the electorate lacks adequate information about candidates and their positions on issues to objectively evaluate or where voters are late comers in the electoral cycle.

Studies in the United States have shown that Americans pay much attention to the physical appearance of their executive and legislative candidates. Especially where candidates who outspend their opponents are more likely to win the votes of naïve voters, even if other information were provided on the ballot, such as the candidate political party and incumbency status. However, American flow of information about



political candidates is high enough to lessen the number of naive voters (Ahler, Citrin, Dougal, & Lenz, 2015:3, 32).

However, in the case of the UAE electorate, the appearance of a candidate is the least important determinant of candidate preference as it mattered for only 21.2%. This could be attributed to the fact that Emirati society and culture is more conservative than their American or Western counterparts and as such, frowns upon marketing or promoting physical appearance as a trump card in elections. Under such circumstances, any attempt by candidates to project physical attributes in elections is likely to diminish their candidacy rather than elevate it.

Missing link: political and Islamic ideology. Political or religious ideology is one of the traditional candidate evaluation tools that was missing from the responses of the members of the Electoral College who were surveyed for this research. Unlike several Arab countries where the ideology of political Islam plays an important role in their respective politics, as captured in the literature review for this research, Emirati voters did not identify any religious or political ideology as an evaluative tool in candidate assessment. This can be attributed to two factors. First, political ideology is often associated with party identification as in the case of conservative or liberal ideologies in the United States and the United Kingdom for example. However, in the UAE, political parties do not exist and FNC candidates may not be motivated to organize along any ideological platforms. Hence, voters are not presented with ideological choices with which to be associated, or from which to choose.

Second, although members of the Electoral College are randomly selected, they may or may not represent those fractions of the wider society within which some ideological or religious preferences can appear. Needless to say that using religion (i.e., Islam) for political purposes or employing it in candidates' campaigns is forbidden according to electoral regulations. In addition, some observers have noted that supporters of a religious tone in politics tend to favor other forms of participatory democracy. In a survey of UAE University students conducted in 1991, al-Suwaidi (1995) observed that while 67.7% of respondents who opposed religious groups supported democratic reforms, 64% of pro-religious groups were less supportive of democratic reforms. He attributes this to the fact that:

Religious groups argue against democracy in favor of *shura* (a religious version of democracy); they consider democratic values an essential part of Western secular culture which must be resisted. . . democracy is problematic for religious groups because it allows for different ideas and opinions to be heard, because it permits various groups to the political process. (al-Suwaidi, 1995:99).

Nevertheless, trying to explain the role of religion in the FNC election remains speculative mainly because the survey itself has not directly asked about this particular element of the election process. Future studies may want to tackle the role of religion or how likely *shura* and democracy merge in the evolving voting culture.



Conclusion

This research article has sought to answer the research question: How do Emirati voters determine for whom to vote in FNC elections? Although the determinants of Emirati voters' candidate preferences are conventional and within Middle Eastern electoral behavior literature which emphasizes patron-client networks, the latter is superseded in importance by personal attributes of candidates and the impact of electoral campaigns. The determinants of UAE voters preferences are candidates' personal characteristics which include: speech making skills, political experience, education, age, and gender. Next in importance is the impact of campaigns as captured by electoral promises, content, and size of campaigns. This is followed by patron-client networks as follows: personal relations and kinship with candidate, Emirate of the candidate and what relatives and friends says about a candidate. The personal appearance of candidates was cited as the least important of all the criteria.

Although, the FNC is an advisory body and its members do not exercise the law-making powers of traditional legislatures, Emirati voters still evaluate the content and size of campaigns of candidates before voting. In other words, Emirati voters expect their candidates to stand for something as evidenced by the electoral promises criterion and to make an effort to project these policies or ideas. Hence, they use content and the size of campaigns as evaluative voting criteria. These criteria offer hope for more competitive elections of ideas and policies that will minimize the influences of patron-client and personal characteristics in future elections. This will be greatly aided by improving political culture, political awareness, and civic engagement in societal affairs. The political empowerment strategy which the federal government adopted in 2005 clearly stipulates that voting for the FNC is only a step toward more political and civic involvement of the people and partnerships between them and their government (Abdulhameed, 2015). As part of this strategy, the government has established the Ministry of FNC Affairs to oversee and coordinate efforts to promote politically healthy traditions such as contacting the government, attending public meetings, sharing ideas, contributing with constructive suggestions, and sensing societal problems and framing issues.

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