

Anti-Americanism and Foreign Aid Preferences Among Political Elites: Evidence from Tunisia

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Abstract

International aid is a key resource for local development, and project implementation is influenced by local political elites. However, we know little about how these

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elites view aid and whether they are more likely to prefer some funding sources over others. We explore elite attitudes toward aid in Tunisia, arguing that local politicians are less likely to prefer development programs funded by the United States compared to other domestic or foreign sources. Through a conjoint experiment embedded on a survey of local Tunisian politicians, we find a strong aversion to local development projects funded by USAID. Analysis of subgroup effects and comparisons to other international donors suggests the negative reaction is driven by ideological rather than material concerns. This research provides insights into elite perceptions of foreign aid in recipient countries and contributes to our understanding of how anti-Americanism can affect policymaking in the Middle East.

1 Introduction

Recent research on public opinion toward foreign aid suggests that the identity of the funder can affect attitudes toward development programs in aid-recipient countries (Gafuri 2024; Kim et al. 2025). People sometimes perceive foreign funding as a signal of program effectiveness (Milner et al. 2016; Winters et al. 2017) but, at other times, distrust the motives of foreign donors (Singh and Williamson 2022). How does the funding source affect the attitudes of local political elites toward development programs in their communities? These local elites play an important role in the implementation of local development projects, drawing on both their positions and networks to exercise influence (Angeles and Neanidis 2009; Andersen et al. 2022; Arnall et al. 2013; Platteau 2004). This influence suggests it is important to understand how and why local elites react to foreign aid and when they are more likely to support aid-funded development programs. However, we know relatively little about elites' attitudes toward foreign aid in recipient countries (Findley et al. 2017), including whether elites responsible for local development will respond more or less favorably to development programs based on the funding source.

This article contributes to our understanding of how local elites perceive foreign aid by studying how local political candidates in Tunisia react to development funding for their communities from both foreign and domestic sources. We argue that ideological perceptions of foreign donors and their political influence will shape reactions to aid among political elites. In the Tunisian case, politicians and the public alike often hold anti-American views that are motivated by an aversion to US policies in Tunisia and the broader Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. As a result, we expect that local elites in Tunisia will be less interested in development programs that receive funding from the US government and international organizations (IOs) aligned with the United States. We evaluate this argument with a conjoint experiment implemented on an original survey of Tunisian political elites who campaigned for office in the country's 2018 municipal elections. This

survey of more than 1,900 candidates (of whom 940 were assigned to this experiment) incorporated local political elites from diverse backgrounds, including candidates from all of Tunisia's governorates and its various political factions. Our experiment asked these political elites to select among local development projects with several randomized features. For our purposes, the treatment of interest is the organization that would co-finance the project alongside the local municipality: a local civil society organization; the national government; the World Bank; the German development agency (GIZ); or the US Agency for International Development (USAID).

As expected, the experimental results show that the respondents express a strong aversion to development projects supported by funding from the US government. Among the Tunisian elites in our sample, funding from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) reduces the likelihood that a project is selected by nearly ten percentage points compared to the local Tunisian funding sources and funding from GIZ and the World Bank. Contrary to our expectations, this penalty did not apply to projects funded by the World Bank, despite its significant connections to the US government. We then perform several subgroup analyses to gauge how plausible it is that anti-American political views are driving the results rather than material factors, including greater local needs and opportunities for accessing rents through links with the ruling coalition. Our analysis shows that the anti-USAID effect is similar or even stronger among political elites in more marginalized areas of Tunisia that have a greater need for development programs and that it does not vary based on political elites' partisan connections to the domestic government, their policymaking and political experience, or their sensitivity to voters' preferences. Insofar as we would expect these subgroups to react differently if material incentives were motivating their responses, we interpret our results as consistent with the argument that anti-American political sentiments are motivating the negative USAID effect. In addition to this survey evidence, we also interviewed five practitioners with expertise and involvement in development assistance in Tunisia and the broader Middle

East. These interviews reinforced the existence of widespread ideological discontent with the US government — rather than material differences associated with the donors — as the most likely explanation for our findings.

The findings make several contributions to the study of foreign aid and local development beyond Tunisia. Because our sample of Tunisian political elites draws from candidates for the May 2018 municipal elections, it captures the attitudes of politicians who could play a key role in partnering with aid agencies and other funders to implement local development projects. By documenting that these politicians react negatively to US funding — but not funding from the GIZ — we show how ideological preferences among decision-makers can have important implications for aid-funded programs, even when strong material interests are at stake. The apparent relevance of anti-Americanism to our findings contrasts with prior literature that focuses on foreign aid as a signal of higher quality and lower corruption in development programs (Findley et al. 2017; Winters et al. 2017). This difference is important, because implementation of aid-funded programs may become more difficult in contexts where local elites respond negatively to this funding out of ideological opposition to the donor.

More broadly, it suggests the need to study further how ideological and political beliefs affect attitudes toward foreign aid in recipient countries (Bush and Prather 2020), which remains an understudied area in this literature. The findings also contribute to research on anti-Americanism by documenting negative reactions among political elites to US involvement even for technical policy realms like development aid (Corstange 2016; Jamal et al. 2015). The results also have implications for public opinion toward international organizations (IOs) active in development, such as the World Bank. Our findings suggest that such IOs will not necessarily reap the same negative reactions as the US government in contexts where anti-Americanism is pronounced, even if they are closely linked to US interests.

The article proceeds as follows. We first review existing research on development aid and anti-Americanism, from which we outline our hypotheses about support for aid among local political elites. We then provide background information on aid funding and local development in Tunisia, before describing the sample and experimental design. Following the presentation of results, we conclude with further discussion of the study's implications for understanding attitudes toward aid in recipient countries.

2 Attitudes toward Development Aid among Political Elites

Foreign aid plays a crucial role in the domestic and foreign political dynamics of many recipient countries. Aid affects how recipient governments distribute public goods and to whom (Jablonski 2014), shapes the ability of these governments to claim credit and bolster their public support (Cruz and Schneider 2017), influences the trajectory of corruption and repression in these countries (Kiyani 2022), and affects their dependency on major foreign powers (Girod 2011), among other effects. Despite these important consequences, much of the literature on attitudes toward aid focuses on donor countries (e.g. Bechtel et al. 2014; Blackman 2018; Milner and Tingley 2011), and there is less research on preferences toward foreign aid in countries that receive substantial amounts of assistance (Milner and Tingley 2013a; Tingley 2010).

More recent work has taken up this call to examine the public's attitudes toward aid in recipient countries (Bush and Prather 2020) and how exposure to aid in recipient countries shapes public opinion (Blair et al. 2022), but there continues to be little research on the opinions of political elites toward aid in these contexts. Studying how elites in recipient countries view foreign assistance is important for understanding the politics of aid as well as the implementation of programs funded by foreign donors. Generally speaking, many recipient countries are governed by autocracies or weak democracies in which public opinion has less influence over policymaking, and elites' preferences have significant influence over policy decisions and project implementation. Indeed, a large body

of work emphasizes that *how* elites engage with development programs, including those funded by foreign aid, influences their effectiveness (Angeles and Neanidis 2009; Mitra 1992). Where elites are predatory and less committed to good governance, foreign aid is more likely to be captured and diverted toward elite interests, and development programs are more likely to fuel corruption (Andersen et al. 2022; Bjornskov 2010; Isaksson 2020; Platteau 2004). Yet, local elite networks can also facilitate accountability (Arnall et al. 2013), as well as increased access to funds for local communities (Merkaj et al. 2020). Despite this important relationship between elites, aid, and local development, there are few studies that explore how elites in recipient countries perceive foreign funding (Findley et al. 2017), particularly with regards to the local elites who are directly involved in the implementation of aid-funded development programs.

As part of the turn toward studying aid attitudes in recipient countries, an important but nascent body of research has examined the mass public's preferences for foreign versus domestic funding of development programs in these contexts. The primary emphasis of these studies is that material concerns motivate citizens in recipient countries to prefer internationally-funded programs because foreign aid is seen as a signal of higher program quality. Research from Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Uganda, for instance, shows that foreign funding of development programs improves the recipient public's confidence that these programs will be implemented effectively and without corruption (Kaplan et al. 2023; Milner et al. 2016; Winters et al. 2017), especially if the donor has a reputation for transparency (Gafuri 2024; Kim et al. 2025). These attitudes are most pronounced among opponents of the government who perceive domestic authorities as corrupt, self-serving, and, therefore, likely to line their pockets if they control funding for development programs (Findley et al. 2017). In the only study of which we are aware that probes these attitudes among elites, Findley et al. (2017) find that Ugandan MPs hold the opposite view, preferring programs funded by the Ugandan government. They interpret this pattern as evidence that elites wield less control over foreign aid-funded programs and therefore

prefer government funding, since they can more easily siphon off resources. If elites dislike aid because they can acquire rents more easily when foreign donors are absent, it is possible that development programs will be more effective when foreign aid is involved.

However, beyond material concerns over quality and corruption, preferences for or against aid in recipient countries may also be rooted in political and ideological factors related to views of foreign donors. Singh and Williamson (2022) illustrate how distrust of Western donors can weaken support for aid and contribute to a preference for development programs funded by the domestic authorities. Drawing on an experimental study conducted in Egypt, they find that Egyptians approve less of public health programs funded by the US and French development agencies compared to the Egyptian government, even when those Egyptians oppose their own government. This disapproval appears to be driven by the perception that these foreign donors are motivated by less beneficial intentions toward the Egyptian public. Similarly, Rhee et al. (2023) establish that foreign aid is viewed less favorably when the donor's motives are perceived as political.¹ In certain contexts, political elites may hold similar views toward foreign funding as citizens, disliking donors because they do not like their politics and distrust their intentions. When opposition to aid is rooted in these political and ideological concerns rather than a desire to engage in corruption, foreign aid-funded programs could be less effective at contributing to development goals because of elite backlash.

For political elites in the Middle East, anti-Americanism constitutes an important ideological tendency that may shape attitudes toward aid. Anti-American sentiments have been well-documented at the popular level throughout the MENA region (Jamal et al. 2015; Corstange 2016; Glas and Spierings 2020), including in Tunisia and other countries.

¹Certain types of foreign aid may be perceived as less political. For example, Kim et al. (2025) suggest that citizens of recipient countries may prefer aid to be distributed by IOs because they view them as less motivated by strategic interests. As Figure 1 below illustrates, survey evidence suggests that the plurality of citizens in Middle Eastern and North African countries perceive US aid as motivated by strategic interests.

In 2017 and 2019, for instance, only one-third of Tunisians reported favorable attitudes toward the United States (Wike et al. 2020). Likewise, in 2014, more than 80 percent of Egyptians and Jordanians disapproved of the United States (Stokes 2014). Recent polling from the Arab Barometer in 2021 and 2022 shows that negative attitudes toward the United States are widespread, including in Tunisia (Feierstein 2023). Research suggests these attitudes are driven primarily by an aversion to US hegemony and its consequences for the region. There is widespread resentment of US involvement in countries’ domestic politics and US support for a regional order that protects Israeli power and preserves dictatorial regimes (Jamal et al. 2015; Tokdemir 2017). Figure 1 demonstrates that the plurality of Arab Barometer respondents believe the main motivation for US aid is to gain influence in their country.

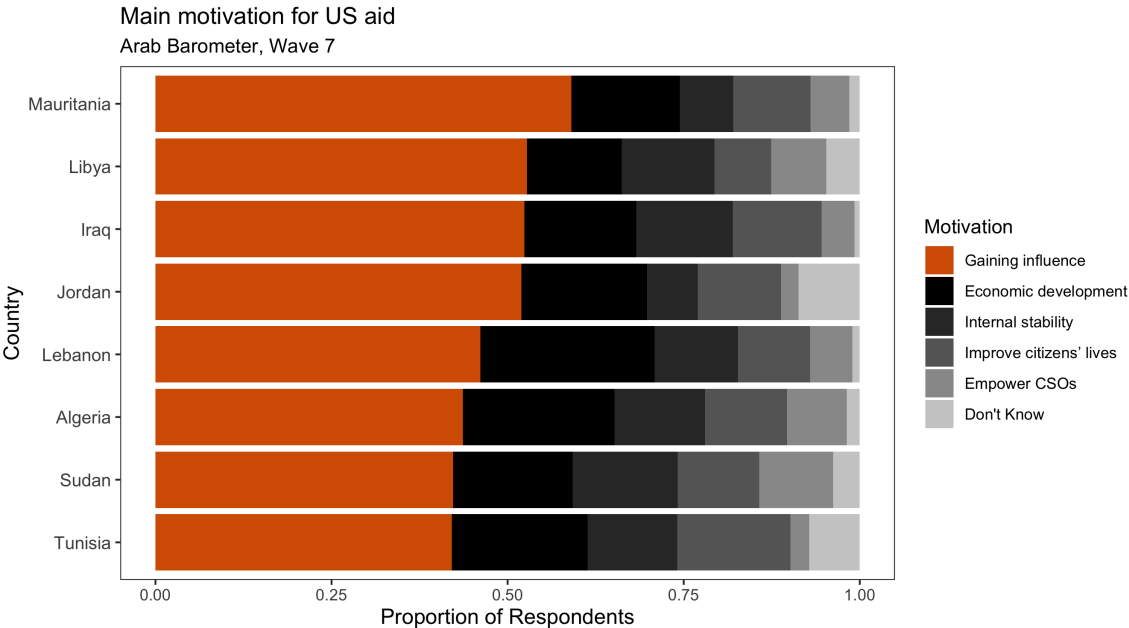


Figure displays responses to a question asking, “Which of these do you think is the main motivation of the United States for giving foreign aid to your country?” (Q701H.1).

Figure 1: Views of US aid in MENA countries, 2021-2022

Anti-Americanism is not just a phenomenon of popular politics but is also prevalent among elites in the Middle East (Blaydes and Linzer 2012). Though anti-Americanism is more pronounced among opposition actors who resent American ties to the region’s

repressive autocrats (Tokdemir 2017), officials in these governments often articulate anti-American views and criticize US interference (both alleged and real) in their countries' politics. In Tunisia, President Kais Saied has responded to Western criticisms of his authoritarian consolidation of power by publicly alleging the US and other "foreign forces" did "everything they [could] to torpedo the country's democratic and social life from within" (Ryan 2022). In Egypt, the military and security elite have stoked anti-American conspiracy theories about US responsibility for the country's 2011 revolution (Koehler-Derrick et al. 2017), and similar theories appear to be believed by political elites in several Arab countries (Al-Sayyid 2021).

Foreign aid from the United States is closely linked to anti-Americanism in the region. The US government spends billions each year on aid for the Middle East, including development and humanitarian assistance, but also substantial amounts of security assistance for the militaries and security forces of the region's authoritarian governments. This spending is motivated in large part by US political and security objectives in the Middle East, such as maintaining peace between Israel and neighboring governments, combating violent non-state actors, and stabilizing international oil markets (Sharp et al. 2020). Because of this connection between aid and these strategic objectives, many of which are deeply unpopular in the region, US aid has often been perceived by those in the region as a hypocritical and unfavorable aspect of US foreign policy that is used to intervene in the region's politics (Katzenstein and Keohane 2007; Singh and Williamson 2022). Public opinion data shows that pluralities of respondents in every country surveyed in Wave 7 of the Arab Barometer (2021-2022) believed that "gaining influence" was the primary motive of US aid in the Middle East (Figure 1). As shown in SI-2, these views are shared among respondents with high and low educational attainment, suggesting that elites may react to US aid similarly to the broader public.

Because of ideological opposition to US hegemony in the Middle East and the perception

that foreign aid helps to facilitate this hegemony, we posit that Tunisian political elites will be less likely to prefer development projects in their communities that receive funding from US-aligned organizations, including USAID and the World Bank. The former has historically been the US government’s principal distributor of foreign aid, whereas the latter is an independent IO, but one in which the US government wields substantial influence.

Compared to these US-aligned sources, we expect that Tunisians will prefer development funding from domestic sources, such as the national government or local civil society organizations. In addition, we expect that Tunisian elites will prefer funding from other foreign sources that are perceived to be more politically neutral, and which therefore engender less ideological opposition. Broader anti-Western sentiments are also present in the country that could reduce support for aid from other Western governments like Germany and France, but these sentiments tend to be less pronounced and less politically defined than anti-Americanism (Devlin 2019), in large part because these other actors do not hold as much political leverage over domestic politics in the region. In Tunisia, for instance, the German and French governments provide more annual development assistance than the US government (US Foreign Assistance 2023). Yet, neither country is perceived to play such a direct and negative role in regional and domestic politics as the United States. As an expert on foreign aid in Tunisia noted in one of our interviews, the United States is still seen as the “global bad guy” that is “too hands-on” in pushing a political agenda.² This difference is visible in data from the fifth wave of the Arab Barometer (2018), in which a plurality of Tunisians (22 percent) cite the United States as the greatest foreign threat to their country’s stability and well-being, while hardly any Tunisians (less than one percent) say the same about the EU.³ As a result, we expect that Tunisians will react more positively to funding from GIZ — the German aid agency — than they will to

²Author Interview 2, July 25, 2024

³See the full table of these results in SI-3.

funding from US-aligned sources. We therefore hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 1 *All else equal, candidates will prefer projects that receive co-financing from (a) a politically neutral organization (local civil society, CPSCCL, GIZ) to those with co-financing from (b) a politically compromised one (World Bank, USAID).*

These foreign aid preferences may result from several different factors. We have posited that negative reactions to US-aligned funding sources will occur because of an ideological aversion to the United States and its policies in the Middle East, but it is also possible that Tunisian political elites would be less favorable toward this US-aligned funding for material, or — in the case of politicians — vote-maximizing reasons. Regarding ideology, the preference might be the result of deeply-held beliefs about the negative role of the United States in Tunisia and the broader Middle East. Considerations of development, corruption, and conditionality may drive material considerations. And, finally, though still aligned with the general importance of ideological factors in shaping responses to foreign aid, politicians may express opposition to US funding if they think this is in line with voters' preferences and will help them to gain future electoral support.

In order to gain analytic leverage on *why* politicians may express lower interest in USAID- or World Bank-funded projects, we adopt a mixed-methods approach, analyzing relevant subgroup effects and complementing this analysis with interviews of individuals who have experience working on Tunisia and the broader MENA region in the foreign aid community.

In terms of subgroup effects, we first assess whether political elites in economically marginalized areas express distinct preferences regarding project funding from those in wealthier areas. Elites from less developed constituencies should face particularly strong economic incentives to accept all possible funding, so if material concerns predominate, we would expect the funding source to have a muted impact on their attitudes. Second, we ana-

lyze whether political elites who are not co-partisans of the domestic government express different preferences than those who are co-partisans. Elites with partisan ties to the government should have more access to rents and corruption from domestic funding, so we should expect them to react more negatively to US aid and other foreign funding if their attitudes are motivated by rent acquisition.

Third, we examine whether more experienced politicians express different preferences from those with less experience. These elites should have more information about the quality or conditionality associated with different funding sources, so if dislike of US aid is motivated by perceptions that US-funded programs are less effective or more bureaucratically onerous, these elites should demonstrate particularly negative reactions. Finally, we examine whether politicians who express a stronger belief in accountability to voters have different preferences than those politicians who do not, since these elites should be more likely to react to funders based on perceptions of public opinion. Our **exploratory sub-group hypotheses** aimed at ruling out the material logics of aversion to US funding are:

Hypothesis 2 *Material explanation – need based:* *Candidates from more developed constituencies will express a relatively stronger preference for projects that receive co-financing from (a) a politically neutral organization (local civil society, CPSCS, GIZ) compared to those with co-financing from (b) a politically compromised one (World Bank, USAID).*

Hypothesis 3 *Material explanation – corruption:* *Candidates from the ruling coalition will express a relatively stronger preference for projects that receive co-financing from (a) a domestic organization (local civil society, CPSCS) compared to those with co-financing from (b) an international organization (GIZ, World Bank, USAID).*

Hypothesis 4 *Material explanation – bureaucracy and efficacy:* *Candidates with government experience will express a relatively stronger preference for projects that receive co-financing*

from (a) an organization not aligned with the US government (local civil society, CPSCCL, GIZ) compared to those with co-financing from (b) a US-aligned organization (World Bank, USAID).

Hypothesis 5 *Vote-maximizing explanation:* *Candidates who are more sensitive to voter accountability will express a relatively stronger preference for projects that receive co-financing from (a) a politically neutral organization (local civil society, CPSCCL, GIZ) compared to those with co-financing from (b) a politically compromised one (World Bank, USAID) than candidates who are less sensitive to voter accountability.*

In other words, if elites from marginalized communities, those without partisan ties to the government, or those with less experience show similar disapproval of US funding compared to those from wealthier areas, those with partisan ties to the government, or those with more experience, we would interpret these patterns as consistent with an important role for anti-American ideology in negative reactions to US funding.⁴ Likewise, if elites sensitive to voter accountability react similarly to those who are less sensitive, it would be consistent with elites' personal views, rather than perceptions of voter preferences, motivating the negative reaction. These analyses cannot rule out the alternative explanations entirely, so we complement them with interviews to understand whether there are specific material concerns that Tunisian politicians raise regarding USAID-funded projects and if anti-Americanism appears to shape reactions to aid among the political class. The interviews were conducted in Washington, DC in the summer of 2024 with four current or former employees of important organizations involved in development assistance in Tunisia and, in March 2025, with an employee of a German aid organization.⁵

We pre-registered our primary hypothesis with Evidence in Governance and Politics (EGAP).⁶ The sub-group analyses were hypothesized before data analysis but were not

⁴We did not pre-register specific analyses to test the political ideology mechanism and do not have direct questions on anti-Americanism in our survey.

⁵We received IRB approval for these interviews from the University of Oxford and Durham University.

⁶The pre-analysis plan can be found here: <https://osf.io/k7qvh>.

pre-registered and should be considered exploratory with the aim of further elucidating the logic behind aid preferences. We evaluate the hypotheses with original public opinion data from a large sample of local political elites in Tunisia. The following section provides background information on the Tunisian case and explains its utility for evaluating our argument.

3 Aid, Anti-Americanism, and Local Politics in Tunisia

Tunisia provides a useful case in which to study the attitudes of local elites toward foreign aid and the extent to which such attitudes are shaped by ideological opposition to the United States. First, in terms of the intensity of anti-Americanism and the characteristics of US aid, Tunisia is relatively standard for the Middle East, resembling similar dynamics in other countries. Second, local political elites have played an important role in the country's development, and the country's more democratic political system between 2011 and 2021 made it possible to access these elites for research.

Regarding levels of anti-Americanism, Tunisia is similar to other countries in the region, with anti-American views common among the public and political elites. As discussed in the prior section, few Tunisians report positive attitudes toward the United States in opinion polls, with only 33 percent claiming to view the United States favorably in 2019 and 44 percent stating they viewed the United States unfavorably (Wike et al. 2020). In the fifth wave of the Arab Barometer surveys, conducted in 2018, the proportion of Tunisians who rated the United States as the greatest threat to their country was comparable to that of many other Arab countries.⁷ As with other countries in the region, large protests targeting the American embassy have occasionally taken place in Tunisia, for instance, during the conflict in Gaza in 2023 or the regional controversy over the Innocence of

⁷The range among countries overall is significant. In Iraq, nearly 30 percent of respondents named the US as the greatest threat to Iraq's stability, while in Lebanon it was only 3 percent who selected the US. See SI-3 for these comparisons.

Muslims film in 2012. The belief that violence against US targets is justified because of US policies in the Middle East remains relatively common in the country, again reflecting regional trends (Yerkes 2019).

These anti-American views appear to be motivated in part by discontent with perceived US influence in Tunisian domestic politics. Following the democratic transition in 2011, it became common for politicians from various parties to charge the US with interfering on behalf of their opponents.⁸ Many Tunisians also dislike US hegemony in the region more broadly, resenting US support for Israel and alignment with authoritarian regimes. For instance, in response to Israeli violence in Gaza in 2023, some prominent Tunisian civil society organizations responded by publicly rejecting US aid funding (Driss 2023).

Different parties across Tunisia's political spectrum have varying reasons for opposing American foreign policy and resisting US aid. Arab nationalist parties, such as the People's Movement and Democratic Current, view the US as an imperialist power whose economic dominance and military interventions threaten Arab unity and sovereignty (Makdisi 2002). Leftist parties, like the Popular Front, see the US as the stronghold of global capitalism and a major obstacle to socialist ideals. Islamist parties criticize US support for anti-Islamist regimes in the region, including the Saudi monarchy and the Egyptian autocracy. Liberal secular parties, meanwhile, condemn US foreign policy as hypocritical, arguing that it fails to uphold its own professed commitments to democracy and human rights. Despite these ideological differences, nearly all parties converge in their opposition to US military interventions — such as in Iraq and Afghanistan — and to US support for Israel (Makdisi 2002).

In terms of its aid relationship with the US government, Tunisia also resembles other Middle Eastern countries. While US aid to the country has been longstanding, it increased

⁸Author Interviews 2 and 3, July 25/26, 2024

substantially after the country's democratic transition in 2011, rising from approximately 20 million per year to 100 million or more for much of the next decade (US Foreign Assistance 2023). As with other countries in the region, this aid includes a mix of economic, political, and military assistance focused on economic growth, democratic reforms, and counterterrorism capabilities (Miller et al. 2020). The split between this development and security assistance was relatively even following the Arab Spring, though the first Trump and then Biden administrations cut more of the former. Regarding total amounts of US aid, as of 2023 Tunisia was positioned squarely in the middle for the Middle East region, with the ninth-highest funding obligations out of the region's 18 countries (US Foreign Assistance 2023).⁹

Where Tunisia differs from other regional countries is in the amount of aid from other international donors. Historically, Germany, France, and the EU all gave more annual assistance than the United States. Since US aid is relatively less dominant in Tunisia compared to some other countries in the region, it is plausible that Tunisian elites may feel less constrained by US interests and less likely to resent US aid. For this reason, Tunisia may provide a regional case in which we are less likely to find that elites react negatively to development programs funded by the United States. As Figure 1 demonstrates, while the plurality of Tunisians believe "gaining influence" is the primary motive for US aid, the proportion of Tunisians holding that view is the lowest among the surveyed countries.

During the democratic period, there were many international donors active in Tunisia, including France, Japan, Korea, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States, regularly among the top ten (Tierney et al. 2011; AidData 2017). Many of these international donors, including USAID, GIZ, and the World Bank, shared broadly similar funding priorities. They focused extensively on programs to improve Tunisia's economic and employment issues. These donors also prioritized programs to strengthen local govern-

⁹See SI-4 for a table of US foreign aid obligations by country in the Middle East for 2023.

ments in the country. For instance, GIZ supported a city planning initiative in a set of Tunisian municipalities (Cities Alliance: Cities Without Slums n.d.). USAID also had several similar projects in the country. At the municipality level, USAID implemented the Tunisia Accountability, Decentralization, and Effective Municipalities (TADAEEM) program, which partnered with 33 municipalities throughout Tunisia between 2017 and 2021 to improve service delivery and local capacity for citizen engagement (Jamaity n.d.). We provide further details about the approach of international donors in SI-9.

The emphasis on local governance during Tunisia's democratic transition is an important aspect of the country's politics that makes it a useful case in which to study the attitudes of local elites toward development aid. In May 2018, Tunisia held its first truly competitive and nationwide municipal elections, which expanded local decision-making powers while replacing appointed officials with elected officials. Decentralization reforms were passed to expand municipal council governments throughout the country's entire territory, including rural areas previously excluded from municipal governance, and to empower councils to play a larger role in local development and service delivery. As such, a number of development projects were pursued at the local level, and local political leaders were directly involved. The aims and financing for these projects varied significantly, covering many types of projects and with funding from both domestic and foreign sources. Potential domestic financing could come from local civil society organizations or Tunisia's Caisse des Prêts et de Soutien des Collectivités Locales (the national Municipal Development Fund or CPSCL). The World Bank, GIZ, and USAID were all important sources of international funding, alongside a handful of other donors that were active in local development initiatives at that time.

Following President Saïed's power grab in 2021, the municipal councils were disempowered and ultimately disbanded in March 2023, months before the five-year term of the council members ended. However, our study was completed prior to this period, when

local politics was both more active and more democratic. Because of the open political environment at the time, we were able to survey nearly two thousand Tunisian political elites at the local level, of whom half answered questions about their attitudes toward development and funding from foreign and domestic sources.

4 Research Design and Data

We employ a conjoint survey experiment embedded in a survey of local political candidates to test our argument about the influence of anti-Americanism on elites' attitudes toward foreign aid as a source of development funding.¹⁰ This survey experiment is designed to estimate which aspects of a local development proposal increase or decrease the probability that a candidate will select it. At the time the survey was implemented, local political elites in Tunisia could expect to be involved in decisions about development programs in their municipalities, so the experiment reflected an exercise with practical relevance to the positions for which the political candidates were competing. Our survey included over 1900 candidates for local office, half of whom were randomized into this development conjoint survey experiment (n=940).¹¹

4.1 Experimental Design

For the conjoint component of the survey, candidates were told they would need to choose between two different development projects for their constituency. The hypothetical proposals varied the following dimensions: (a) which organizations would provide co-financing for the project, (b) the type of good provided, (c) who was supporting the proposed project, and (d) how much the project would cost. We selected these dimensions because

¹⁰Conjoint experiments are increasingly used to understand policy preferences. In the realm of immigration and refugee policy, see Hainmueller and Hopkins (2015); on environmental policy, see Bechtel and Scheve (2013); on foreign aid, see Blackman (2018); and on tax policy, see Ballard-Rosa et al. (2016).

¹¹Half of the survey respondents were randomized to respond to this conjoint experiment (n=940). The other half responded to a conjoint experiment that prompted them to select among constituent requests to prioritize.

they include widely accessible information about a potential project and are highly salient to local politicians. For instance, in terms of sensitivity to cost, recent research found that local politicians in Tunisia were concerned about the limited budget available to the municipal council (Blackman et al. 2025). We also selected these particular levels because they align with the issues on which local politicians and citizens are focused. The primary mandate of the councils includes maintenance of roads and public lighting, trash collection, civil registration, and management of local public buildings (Turki and Verdeil 2015). However, citizens expressed a strong desire for local councils to work on employment issues despite unemployment challenges falling outside of the municipal councils' mandate (Blackman et al. 2025).

Our primary interest is in the project's proposed co-financing partner. The experiment randomly varied whether proposals were funded by a local Tunisian civil society organization, a national Tunisian agency involved in financing of development projects, the World Bank, the German development agency (GIZ), or the US development agency (USAID). As discussed in the previous section, all of these organizations were important sources for funding local development programs at the time of the survey. To evaluate our expectations about the effects of anti-Americanism on attitudes toward foreign aid, we assess whether funding from USAID and the World Bank produces a negative effect relative to the other potential funding sources.

The remaining dimensions capture other aspects of local development projects that are likely to influence the decisions of politicians with fixed resources who are adjudicating between projects, including the goal of the project, the groups in the local community who are supporting it, and the shared cost the municipality would need to pay directly. Table 1 lists all of the potential candidate attributes and their associated values. The values of each candidate profile are fully randomized, and all combinations were permitted. The order of the attributes displayed was also randomized across respondents.

Table 1: Proposal Attributes and Potential Values

Attributes	Values
Co-financing organization:	Local civil society organization The World Bank Caisse des Prêts et de Soutien des Collectivités Locales (CPSCL) Germany's development agency (GIZ) United States Agency for International Development (USAID)
Project	Improve local roads in the poorest area of town Improve local roads in the center of town Improve street lighting in the center of town Improve street lighting in the poorest area of town Provide jobs to people who did not attend university Provide jobs to people who completed university Open a new cultural center
Support: This project was proposed by...	Members of your party or movement Local union leaders Local business association Youth and local activists Over 500 members of the community who signed a petition
Cost: the municipality will have to pay...	5.000 TND 10.000 TND 15.000 TND 20.000 TND 25.000 TND

In this development conjoint, respondents were presented with two potential local development projects and asked to select which they preferred. Respondents repeated the choice task four times. As with the rest of the survey, the conjoint was administered on a tablet. Enumerators were in the room to assist with any issues or questions, but the survey was self-administered by the candidates.

The dependent variable is the forced choice response to the following question:

After you are a member of the municipal council, you will have the opportunity to vote for or against different project proposals for your municipality. Imagine that you are presented with two different development projects for your municipality and can only support one of them. Below you are presented with the details of the two projects. Which project do you prefer for your municipality?

4.2 Candidate Sample

Our candidate survey was an original survey of over 1900 candidates for the elections. We conducted this Local Election Candidate Survey (LECS) between April and May 2018 across 100 municipalities and included questions that measure a variety of candidate characteristics, attitudes, and political experiences.¹² We merge candidate responses with data on the electoral and municipality characteristics to test sub-group hypotheses.

The LECS enables us to collect information on the candidates, including their previous political experience, partisan affiliation, and background prior to candidacy. For the purposes of this paper, we focus on whether the candidate is affiliated with the parties in the national governing coalition and whether the candidate has held public office previously.

4.3 Municipality Data

In addition to the survey experiment, we use data on municipal characteristics to examine how local demands shape politicians' attitudes toward foreign aid. Details on this municipal data are provided in SI-6. These measures include the urbanization rate and local unemployment rate of the municipality.

5 Results

We use the following linear probability model to estimate the average marginal component effect (AMCE):

$$Choice = \alpha + I(Project)\beta_1 + I(Support)\beta_2 + I(Cost)\beta_3 + I(Co-financing\ organization)\beta_4 + \epsilon$$

¹²Further details about the sampling strategy and design of this survey are available in SI-1. The survey is representative of municipalities with different-sized councils, and top-ranked candidates from the two main parties — the Ennahda Movement and Nidaa Tounes. It also includes a substantial number of candidates from independent and other party lists and some lower-ranked candidates.

The standard errors are clustered by respondent as an individual's responses are unlikely to be independent of each other across choice tasks. Following Leeper et al. (2020), we also estimate the marginal means (MM). Figure 2 displays the full Average Marginal Component Effect (AMCE) and Marginal Mean (MM) estimates for the development conjoint (with 95% confidence intervals).¹³

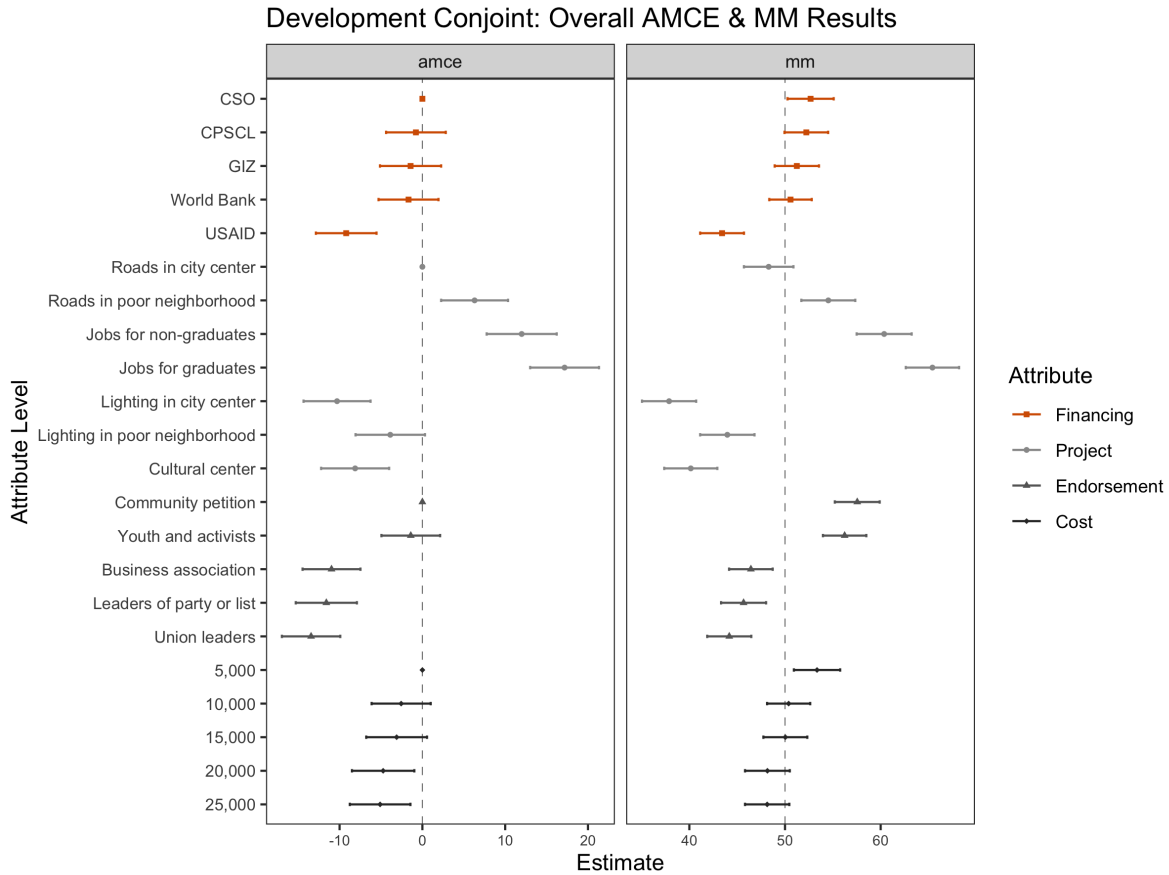
5.1 Main results: Aversion to USAID

The results show that Tunisian politicians are more averse to USAID-funded projects, but not to funding from the World Bank. In terms of co-financing organizations, Tunisian aspirants for public office are largely indifferent between the possible partner organizations, including between domestic organizations, such as a local CSO or CPSCCL, and international organizations, such as the World Bank or GIZ. The one exception is funding directly through USAID. The lack of a negative reaction to the World Bank suggests Tunisian politicians may not perceive the organization as US-aligned, despite the internal influence wielded by the United States.

Substantively, the relative aversion to partnering with USAID is strong. The AMCE shows that local Tunisian political elites are nearly 10 percentage points less likely to select a project that has USAID as the co-financing organization, a substantively and statistically significant decrease compared to the other potential partners. Likewise, the marginal means suggest that USAID-funded programs are selected approximately forty-five percent of the time, whereas programs with the other funders are all chosen over fifty percent of the time. The negative effect of USAID funding is substantively similar to effects for the other significant attributes as well, suggesting that the aversion to US funding is a relevant component of the elites' development project choices. In terms of these other effects, candidates responded more positively to programs focused on jobs or roads to

¹³We show the model with control variables included in SI-5, and the results are the same.

those focused on lighting or culture, and they reacted negatively to programs proposed by business associations, other politicians, or union leaders, in addition to programs that required a higher investment from the municipality.



Data: Local Election Candidate Survey (LECS), 2018).

Figure 2: AMCE and MM estimates for candidates' local development project selection

5.2 Why are politicians averse to USAID?

Next, we analyze subgroup effects to assess whether this aversion to USAID funding is more likely to be motivated by ideological, material, or vote-maximizing concerns. First, we analyze results of the sub-group analysis for elites from marginalized communities. We identify marginalized communities in two ways. The first is whether a community is rural or urban, since Tunisia's rural communities have historically received less attention from the state and are relatively underdeveloped. The second is based on the unemploy-

ment rate in the district, since areas with higher unemployment are more likely to have greater development needs. We acquired data on municipal characteristics for these measures, which are described in additional detail in SI-6. To the extent that local political candidates' preferences are shaped by material concerns, we would expect local political elites from more marginalized areas to place less emphasis on the source of funding and more emphasis on the substance and cost of the proposal than those from more economically developed areas. Instead, Figure 3 shows that political candidates in more rural municipalities express a *stronger* aversion to receiving funding from USAID than those in more urban municipalities, although this difference is not statistically significant. Similarly, the unemployment results, which are reported in SI-8, show that candidates from areas with above mean unemployment react just as negatively to USAID funding as those from areas with below mean unemployment.

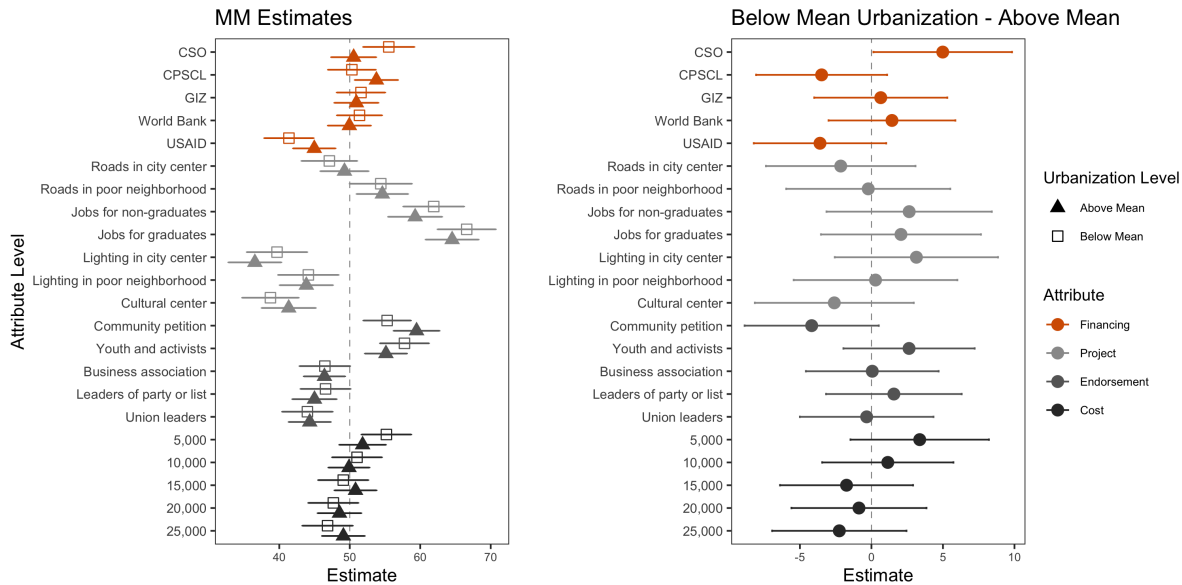


Figure splits the respondents into municipalities that are above or below the mean urbanization rate (53 percent).

Figure 3: Marginal mean and MM differences by urbanization rate

We then look at the subgroup results based on political affiliation, reported in Figure 4. To the extent that preferences for corruption are driving attitudes toward funding sources,

we should see that candidates react more negatively to USAID relative to domestic funding when they are connected to the governing coalition, since these candidates should have more connections, less exposure to investigation, and thus an easier time using development programs for corrupt purposes when they are funded locally. Candidates without this partisan link should have a more pronounced preference for foreign aid-funded programs, which are monitored by foreign donors and should be harder to corrupt (Findley et al. 2017). However, the results indicate little difference based on partisan affiliation, with candidates comparably averse to US-funded programs regardless of their connections to the coalition. Though we cannot rule out a role for material concerns, we interpret these results as evidence that the negative reactions to USAID funding are not driven principally by candidates' considerations of local needs or opportunities for corruption.

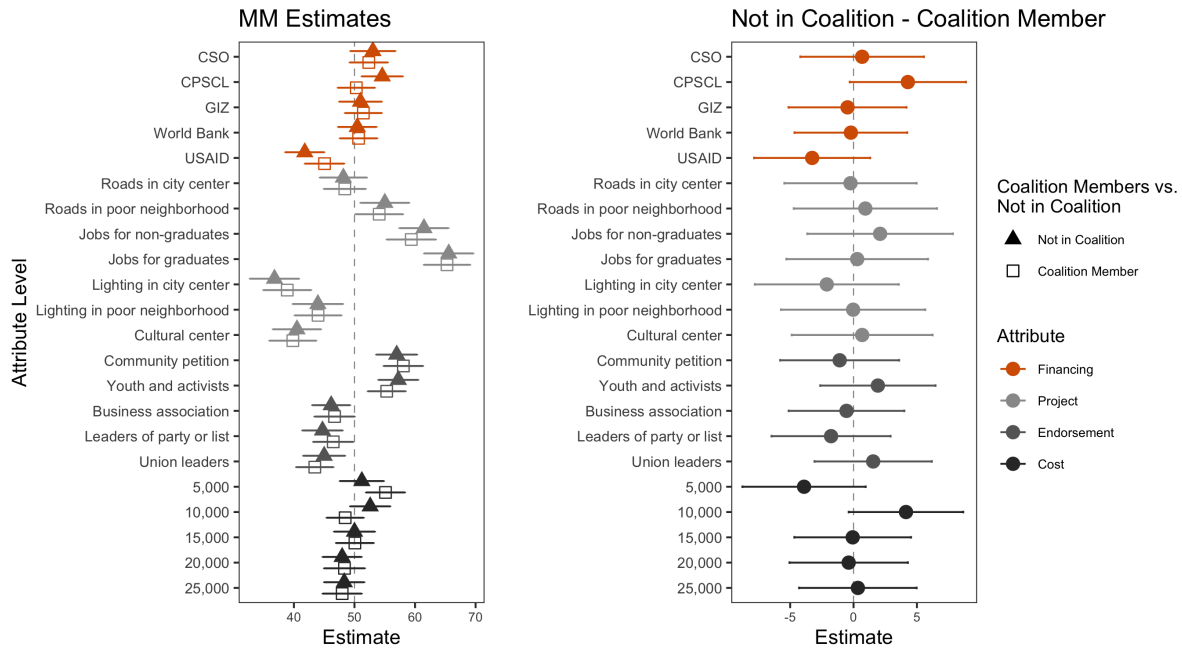


Figure splits the respondents into candidates who are and are not affiliated with the governing coalition).

Figure 4: Marginal mean and MM differences by coalition affiliation

Another alternative explanation is that USAID funding is associated with poor outcomes,

whether because of additional bureaucratic hurdles, less competent staff, or some other feature. Most candidates for local office in our sample were not experienced politicians or policymakers who would be familiar with the details of foreign aid, so it seems unlikely that such a reputation, if it existed, would be widespread. However, to the extent that the negative effects of USAID funding are driven by a reputation for poor quality or onerous bureaucratic work, we might expect that candidates with more experience in local government will be more aware of this reputation and therefore more likely to react negatively. We divide the sample into candidates with and without prior experience in local administration and government and compare their preferences. Figure 5 shows that both sets of candidates are similarly negative in how they respond to funding from USAID.¹⁴ We interpret this pattern as evidence that the negative reactions to USAID are not motivated primarily by concerns about specific bureaucratic hurdles or quality issues.

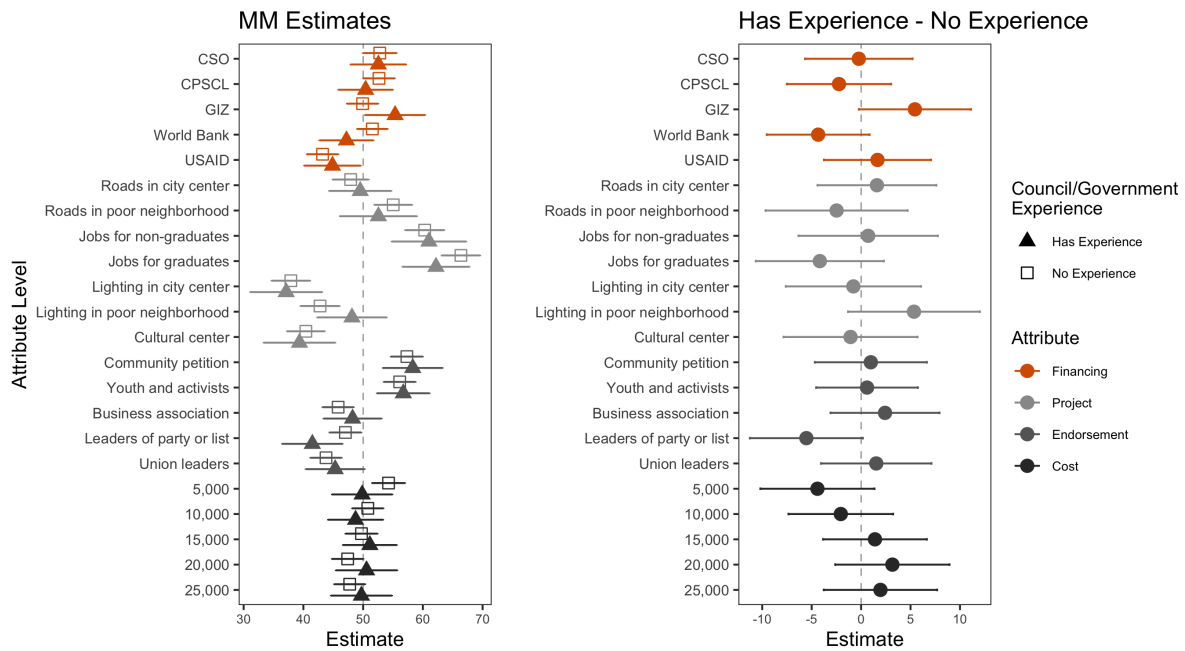


Figure splits the respondents into candidates who have and have not had experience in local administration and politics).

Figure 5: Marginal mean and MM differences by candidate experience

¹⁴There is also no difference among respondents if we use candidate education as an alternate measure of candidate quality. Those results are reported in SI-8.

We also examined whether there is an interaction between the identity of the funder and the cost of the program to the municipality. If a program is costlier, it is plausible political elites would care more about the technical expertise that foreign donors can bring, in which case we might see a decrease in the negative effects of foreign funding. However, the negative effect of USAID funding remains constant across the cost levels. This result is also suggestive of an ideological explanation for the negative reactions to USAID funding. These results are reported in SI-7.

Finally, to examine whether political candidates are motivated by vote-maximization concerns, we look at the results based on the politicians' reported beliefs about voter accountability. The results are displayed in SI-8. We find no differences in preferences for USAID when we compare those with stronger beliefs in electoral accountability to those without. Combined with the descriptive data in SI-2 showing that more educated Tunisians are equally or more skeptical of the motives of US foreign aid compared to those with less education, this finding suggests that negative reactions to USAID are not motivated by voter concerns only but also reflect beliefs held by local political elites.

6 Interviews with Practitioners

We rely on semi-structured interviews to further probe the plausibility of our emphasis on anti-Americanism as the explanation for negative reactions to USAID. As explained previously, interviews were conducted with five practitioners with specific knowledge of Tunisian politics and local development in the Middle East who were employed at the time or had been employed by organizations connected to foreign aid in the region. These interview subjects were identified through connections to the authors, and they included three employees of US organizations active in Tunisian local development; one Tunisia expert who had formerly been employed by a US government agency relevant to foreign aid; and one employee of a German aid organization who has extensive experience working on development projects in the Middle East. The interviews have limitations,

as they cover a relatively small sample and focused primarily on the perspectives of US practitioners; however, they were designed with two goals in mind to provide further insights into the likely mechanism. First, we wanted to assess the likelihood of alternative explanations, particularly that USAID may be viewed as less effective, more challenging to work with, or that politicians are merely responding to voter preferences. Second, we wanted to gauge aid practitioners' perception of anti-Americanism among Tunisian political elites. In each interview, we first asked the subjects to reflect on operational differences between USAID and other international donors active in Tunisia, as well as the extent to which such differences would be salient to local political elites. We then told them our main result and asked them what their primary explanation would be for the negative USAID effect.

The interview subjects described some differences in how USAID and the US government distribute foreign aid in Tunisia compared to GIZ and international organizations like the IMF and the World Bank. For instance, GIZ is more likely to focus on projects like local roads or waste management, whereas USAID places more emphasis on large-scale projects. GIZ also focuses more on building the capacity of local partners to implement projects themselves, whereas USAID will often move more quickly by providing more funding and facilitating implementation more directly.¹⁵ One interview subject noted that the World Bank and IMF can be more flexible in higher-level negotiations about large grants, and that they tend to have fewer people monitoring implementation on the ground compared to USAID and GIZ, though these latter two would operate relatively similarly in terms of oversight.¹⁶ In general, however, the interview subjects did not believe these organizations varied substantially in terms of the intensity of reporting requirements, their overall effectiveness, or their ability to restrain corrupt activities

¹⁵Author Interview 5, March 28, 2025

¹⁶Author Interview 2, July 25, 2024

by their recipients.¹⁷ Furthermore, they generally believed that technical and operational differences between funders were unlikely to be widely known in the country, including among local political elites.¹⁸ One subject speculated that only specific NGOs that routinely received foreign funding, mostly based in the capital, Tunis, would have a nuanced understanding of these differences.¹⁹ Thus, the interviews imply that it is unlikely local candidates would have reacted negatively to USAID because it was perceived as less effective or more restrictive than other potential funders. As an additional check, we also examined reports from USAID, GIZ, and the World Bank about their funding priorities and operations in Tunisia at this time. This review, which is reported in SI-9, highlights key similarities between these three funders.

Furthermore, when we presented the interview subjects with our main result (without having commented on our own interpretation), they did not emphasize material differences between the funders, and all gave responses more consistent with some form of anti-American sentiment rooted in political factors as the most likely explanation. Some of these conclusions were stronger than others. Two of the interview subjects stated directly that the reaction likely reflected dislike of the United States and its foreign policy, including among local elites, even if it did not reflect a visceral dislike of the American people and American culture.²⁰ Another believed that the reaction would capture vote-maximizing behavior, with most elites responding to perceived anti-Americanism among their constituents; however, they also noted that some party elites at the time had been articulating anti-American sentiments that were likely genuine.²¹ The fourth was surprised by the magnitude of the results, because they did not feel that anti-Americanism was especially pronounced in 2018. However, they noted that it was present and that Tunisians

¹⁷ Author Interviews 1,2,3,4,5, July 25/26/31, 2024 and March 28, 2025

¹⁸ Author Interviews 1,2,3,4,5, July 25/26/31, 2024 and March 28, 2025

¹⁹ Author Interview 3, July 26, 2024

²⁰ Author Interviews 2 and 3, July 25/26, 2024

²¹ Author Interview 1, July 25, 2024

felt more affinity toward Europeans despite similar policies from the French and German governments. This same interview subject relayed anecdotes in which Tunisian civil society groups had publicly declared decisions to stop accepting American funding.²² Another also described first-hand experiences with recipients of US funding who made a point to raise their disapproval of US policies in Tunisia and the broader Middle East.²³

Moreover, two interviewees emphasized that the United States, much more so than European funders or international organizations, was seen to interfere in Tunisian politics, spurring anger on all sides of the political spectrum.²⁴ While anti-American sentiments were seen as more pronounced among the public, the interview subjects also indicated that such sentiments appeared to be genuine for at least some of the country's political elites. In addition, the interview subjects were openly skeptical that the findings could be explained by rent-seeking behavior and different expectations of corruption among local Tunisian politicians.²⁵ The employee of the German aid organization reinforced these interpretations. They initially expressed surprise at the negative USAID effect, because they believed respondents would see USAID as a source of more financial resources. However, in their experience, local partners in the Middle East had often expressed having more trust in the Germans than the Americans, which they viewed as a possible explanation for the findings.²⁶ In short, to these practitioners, the results were more consistent with accounts rooted in ideological factors rather than material ones.

7 Discussion

This article uses a survey of Tunisian politicians to study whether and why local elites prefer some funding sources over others for development programs. Our conjoint exper-

²² Author Interview 4, July 31, 2024

²³ Author Interview 3, July 26, 2024

²⁴ Author Interviews 2 and 3, July 25/26, 2024

²⁵ Author Interviews 2, 3, and 4, July 25/26/31, 2024

²⁶ Author Interview 5, March 28, 2025

iment shows that US funding reduced the likelihood that our respondents would choose a local development project by approximately ten percentage points, and this negative effect was relatively consistent in comparison to both Tunisian sources of funding and funding from the World Bank or the GIZ. We argue that anti-Americanism rooted in an aversion to US policies in the region drives this negative reaction among Tunisian elites. We provide suggestive evidence for this mechanism, showing that the negative USAID effect is consistent among local candidates regardless of the level of local development, their personal ability to acquire rents from locally funded programs, their prior experience with local policymaking and politics, the cost of the program to their municipality, and their sensitivity toward voter accountability. Furthermore, it is unlikely that funding from USAID, the World Bank, or GIZ would signal substantial differences in program implementation or corruption, which also suggests that the negative effect of funding from USAID — but not from other foreign donors — is rooted in anti-Americanism among Tunisian political elites. Our conclusions were reinforced by interviews with practitioners who have experience working with foreign aid in Tunisia and the Middle East more broadly.

These findings make important contributions to research on foreign aid. First, there continues to be relatively little work on understanding attitudes toward foreign aid in recipient countries, despite the immense political and economic relevance of aid in these contexts. Scholars have explored in detail attitudes toward aid in donor countries and how aid affects political preferences and behaviors in recipient countries, but there has been substantially less work about when people in recipient countries are more or less likely to support aid and aid-funded programs. Among recent studies exploring this topic, the focus has been on material concerns about quality and corruption, with foreign funding seen as a signal of more effective and better-managed development programs (Findley et al. 2017; Kaplan et al. 2023; Milner et al. 2016; Winters et al. 2017). While these factors are clearly relevant to attitudes toward aid in several recipient countries, it is also impor-

tant to explore further how ideological orientations toward international affairs can affect attitudes toward foreign assistance. Our study builds on work from Bush and Prather (2020) and Singh and Williamson (2022) in demonstrating how anti-Americanism affects support for aid in contexts where the United States is distrusted and its policies are unpopular.

Even fewer studies consider how elites in recipient countries view foreign aid. Yet, elites play a crucial role in aid implementation by deciding which development programs to prioritize and whether to pursue relevant partnerships. To our knowledge, we provide the first study of attitudes toward aid among elites at the local level, who are deeply embedded in processes of local development. We find that these Tunisian elites express an aversion to USAID-funded projects compared to domestic funders and other foreign funders. This could have implications for program effectiveness: negative attitudes toward US funding may undermine the willingness of elites to engage with or prioritize these programs. More generally, it is important to understand the motives behind elite resistance to foreign aid. If this resistance is rooted in preferences for corruption, then foreign aid may contribute to higher program quality relative to domestic funding; alternatively, if it is rooted in ideological opposition to the donors, foreign aid from highly politicized donors may weaken program effectiveness instead.

How much should we expect our results to generalize to other contexts? It seems likely we would find reactions similar — if not stronger — among elites in most other countries in the Middle East and North Africa. As discussed previously, Tunisia appears to be somewhere in the middle among the region's countries in terms of how widespread and intense anti-American attitudes are. One source of potential variation could be the extent to which countries are dependent on US aid or have access to funding from other sources. Jordan, for instance, receives a substantial percentage of its international assistance from the United States, whereas Tunisia receives more European than US aid. On

the one hand, greater dependence on the United States could generate greater resentment among elites; on the other hand, anti-American elites may express more hostility toward US funding when they have other funding sources available in the country. It is also possible that elites in other Middle Eastern countries would react more negatively to the World Bank or other IOs, based on the specific domestic political context surrounding these organizations. Ultimately, however, we expect to find that attitudes toward aid in recipient countries are significantly influenced by perceptions of how foreign donors act in international affairs and how they intervene in the politics of the recipient countries. Future work should explore further when and why both the public and elites are more or less likely to support foreign funding for development programs.

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