

The Social Legacies of Repression: Family, Friends, and Political Participation

Journal of Conflict Resolution

2026, Vol. 0(0) 1–28

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DOI: 10.1177/00220027261493653

journals.sagepub.com/home/jcr

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Abstract

Existing scholarship on the legacies of state violence treats families as the primary vehicles through which repression shapes political behavior. Yet individuals are embedded in multiple social groups; a robust literature shows that both kin and non-kin relationships are consequential for political socialization. This paper examines the comparative effects of direct repression and the repression of family members, friends, and community members on subsequent political behavior. We draw on an original nationally representative survey of 1,200 adult Tunisians, supplemented by a targeted sample of 175 sibling pairs. We find that individuals who reported themselves or family members as repressed under the Ben Ali and Bourguiba dictatorships (1956–2011) are significantly more likely to report protest participation. Those who reported repressed friends and community members are more likely to report both recent protest attendance and electoral turnout. Analyses of the sibling pairs show that the relationship between repression of friends and communities and protest participation remains significant when controlling for unobservable family characteristics. Additional analyses indicate that political discussion with friends is a key mechanism through which repression's behavioral effects are transmitted. These findings suggest that

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Data Availability Statement included at the end of the article.

scholars who focus on familial networks risk underestimating the broader reach of repression's political legacies.

Keywords

repression, political participation, authoritarian politics, Middle East and North Africa, socialization

Introduction

A robust literature demonstrates that repression shapes the political behavior of affected communities, even generations later (Balcells 2011; Bautista et al. 2023; Lupu and Peisakhin 2017; Nunn and Wantchekon 2011; Rodon and Tormos 2023; Rozenas et al. 2017; Rozenas and Zhukov 2019; Voigtländer and Voth 2012; Zhukov and Talibova 2018). Existing studies find that familial political socialization plays a powerful role in transmitting the effects of state violence across generations, leaving indelible marks on political behavior for decades to come. Families are central to this process, but less is known about how agents outside the family unit shape the transmission of repression's effects. Foundational theories in sociology affirm that people form important attachments not only with direct relatives, but also with friends, neighbors, and colleagues (Litwak and Szelenyi 1969). These non-kin "primary groups" significantly contribute to political socialization from childhood through adulthood (Langton 1967; Niemi and Sobieszek 1977).

However, despite their importance, non-kin relationships are largely absent from existing research on the legacy of repression. As a result, the effects of repression on these non-kin groups remain theoretically underdeveloped and empirically unexplored. This article seeks to address this lacuna by examining whether the indirect effects of repression and related socialization extend beyond family members. A wider lens better approximates how individuals are situated within society and more fully captures the range of avenues through which they might be affected by repression. In authoritarian contexts, particularly those in which repression is more widespread, individuals can be exposed to the repression of friends, neighbors, and colleagues, in addition to family members.

We test whether direct repression, as well as the repression of family, friends, and community members, shapes subsequent political behavior in an original survey conducted in Tunisia between December 2021 and January 2022. Tunisia is an ideal context in which to explore the comparative behavioral effects of repression experienced by family members, friends, and community members. The country experienced decades of authoritarian rule following its independence in 1956 and only initiated a democratic transition in 2011 after a popular uprising. As a result, our sample includes individuals who not only have family members who were repressed, but were also old enough to have experienced repression themselves and to have friends and community members who were similarly affected. We combine a

nationally representative sample of 1,200 Tunisian adults with a targeted sample of 175 siblings of the primary respondents. The primary sample allows us to analyze correlations between several degrees of direct and indirect exposure to repression, on the one hand, and various forms of political behavior—including electoral participation and protest participation—on the other. The inclusion of sibling pairs in additional analyses allows us to control for the family of origin, an important influence on political behavior, in order to more precisely measure how exposure to repression through non-kin networks shapes political attitudes and behaviors.

We find that repression mobilized our respondents, whether they were exposed directly or through multiple avenues of indirect exposure. Individuals who reported having been repressed under the Ben Ali and Bourguiba dictatorships between 1956 and 2011 were significantly more likely to report participation in protests during the previous year. Those who reported having family members repressed under these regimes were also more likely to participate in protests. We also find that the repression of non-kin networks matters: those who reported that friends and community members were repressed under the previous dictatorships were more politically active, in terms of rates of electoral turnout and protest participation. Importantly, the effect of friend repression on political behavior is robust and consistently significant. Analyses of the 175 sibling pairs reveal that the effect of having a friend repressed remains significant and positive when controlling for unobservable family characteristics, highlighting the independent role of horizontal, non-kin transmission in shaping political attitudes and behaviors. Additional analyses of the mechanism further demonstrate that political socialization is at work: the effect of having a repressed friend is mediated through political discussion.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. We first review existing research on the effects of repression on political behavior, drawing on insights from the political socialization literature to argue that non-kinship ties play a larger role than previously acknowledged in transmitting repression's effects. We then introduce the case and describe the nature of state violence in Tunisia between 1956 and 2011. Next, we outline our theoretical expectations and empirical strategy before presenting the results of our analyses of the primary and sibling samples. Additional analyses demonstrate that political discussions with repressed individuals significantly mediate the effect of repression on political outcomes. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of our findings for understanding the political legacies of repression.

From Persecution to Participation

A robust literature explores the conditions under which exposure to state violence shapes the political behavior of affected individuals and their communities, not only in the immediate aftermath but even generations later. Political violence encompasses singular acts of large-scale repression such as genocide, armed conflict, and deportation as well as more quotidian repression associated with authoritarian governance. We define repression as state behavior intended to demobilize actors who challenge a regime's beliefs, institutions, and actions, comprising a range of coercive measures

including arrests, beatings, harassment, targeted assassinations, raids, torture, disappearances, mass killings, exile, and forced economic precarity (Davenport 2015, 29).

Repression has important and far-reaching effects on political behavior. A number of studies offer compelling evidence that exposure to violence significantly shapes participation in subsequent elections, though the direction of this effect varies across political contexts. Scholars have found that state violence substantially increases voter registration and turnout in some settings (Bautista et al. 2023; Bellows and Miguel 2009; Blattman 2009), while depressing it in others (Alacevich and Zejcirovic 2020; Jones et al. 2017). In particular, violence tends to reduce participation where there is a credible threat of renewed violence (Rozenas and Zhukov 2019; Zhukov and Talibova 2018). Whether past repression mobilizes voters in new democracies may therefore depend on the political status of the former regime and on credible links between the perpetrator of violence and contemporary political actors.¹

Repression can also influence subsequent protest behavior. Exposure to violence generates grievances against perpetrators, and those grievances in turn fuel mobilization against them or their affiliates (Lawrence 2017; Rozenas et al. 2017). Communities exposed to large-scale violence are more likely to protest in subsequent periods (Berman et al. 2024; Kilavuz et al. 2023), a process driven by the strengthening of affective bonds and the institutionalization of social networks among victimized populations (Gilligan et al. 2014).

Within the literature on the legacies of state violence, an important distinction exists between direct and indirect exposure. Walden and Zhukov (2020) highlight the importance of specifying the mechanisms through which exposure to violence influences political behavior, in order to account for seemingly contradictory findings in prior studies. The authors differentiate between first-order effects, in which an individual is directly exposed to violence, and second-order effects, in which an individual is indirectly exposed through the transmitted experience of someone who was directly targeted. We adopt this terminology of direct and indirect exposure.

This distinction matters because state violence has a differential impact on those who experience it directly and those who experience it indirectly. Direct exposure tends to have a demobilizing effect on political behavior, while indirect exposure tends to have a mobilizing one. At one extreme, certain acts of violence remove those directly targeted from politics altogether, through disappearance or death (Zhukov, 2023). Other forms of state violence, including surveillance, arrest, incarceration, exile, and torture, leave direct victims with lasting physical and psychological scars. Direct exposure to violence is pernicious at the individual level across multiple dimensions (Kendler et al., 2003, 2007; Ogden et al., 2022; Sullivan et al., 2004). Drawing on medical research linking exposure to violence in the home and family with the political violence literature, we argue this is likely because direct exposure evokes particular emotions (Pearlman 2013), alters perceptions of control (Baum et al. 2024), and can produce depression or trauma (Blackman et al. 2022; Landwehr and Ojeda 2021). All of these effects help explain why direct exposure to state violence often can demobilize individuals from political participation. Indirect exposure to repression,

by contrast, tends to have a robust mobilizing effect. The political legacies of violence literature tests precisely these second-order effects by studying repression's long-term influence on later generations (Balcells 2011; Bautista et al. 2023; Lupu and Peisakhin 2017; Nunn and Wantchekon 2011; Rodon and Tormos 2023; Rozenas et al. 2017; Rozenas and Zhukov 2019; Voigtländer and Voth 2012; Zhukov and Talibova 2018).²

The mechanism through which indirect exposure to violence operates is political socialization, typically measured as talking about politics and transmitting information, values, and emotions about the experience to social contacts. These conversations crystallize political attitudes and identities for those indirectly exposed to violence. Those who are directly exposed share information not only about a repressive experience but also about politics more generally, developing their own sense of "linked fate" with others (Blaydes 2018; Lawrence 2017; Lupu and Peisakhin 2017; Rozenas and Zhukov 2019). The second-order effects of exposure to violence through political socialization are how individual exposure to state violence translates into discernible legacies across generations (Walden and Zhukov 2020).

Repression and Political Socialization

In studies of the political legacies of repression, the family is typically assumed to be both the unit of treatment and the setting for subsequent political socialization (Balcells 2011; Charnysh and Peisakhin 2022; Lawrence 2017; Lupu and Peisakhin 2017). That is, repression is treated as a collective experience for the family of the targeted party, with conversations within the family transmitting its effects on political behavior across generations. While many studies measure exposure to violence at the community level using spatially bounded data, their theoretical arguments invoke kinship ties and intergenerational transmission as central mechanisms (Bautista et al. 2023; Rodon and Tormos 2023; Rozenas et al. 2017; Rozenas and Zhukov 2019; Zhukov and Talibova 2018). This disproportionate focus on the family can be attributed to three factors. First, families were often the direct targets of repression in historical episodes of mass deportation, and archival records frequently link individuals to their family members (Charnysh and Peisakhin 2022; Lupu and Peisakhin 2017). Second, focusing on families helps address a causal inference challenge: individuals do not choose their families, making familial exposure to repression a useful quasi-randomized treatment. Third, foundational theories of political socialization emphasize the formative role of the family, observing that individuals develop durable political attitudes in childhood while living in the family home (Campbell et al. 1960; Greenstein 1965; Jennings and Markus 1984; Krosnick and Alwin 1989; Visser and Krosnick 1998).

However, political socialization occurs across multiple social groups and in many different social contexts. Scholars have long recognized the family as one of several primary groups responsible for political socialization. The early political socialization literature (e.g., Dawson and Prewitt 1969; Easton and Dennis 1969; Langton 1969) draws heavily from sociology, which has long established that individuals are influenced by at least three primary groups: family, friends, and neighbors (Litwak and

Szelenyi 1969). The broader literature on political socialization outside the realm of violence explores not only the influence of family but also that of friends and peers (Quintelier 2015), neighbors and community (Cho et al. 2006), and groups encountered at school (Paglayan 2022; Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2014; Wiseman et al. 2011), places of religious worship (Pearson-Merkowitz and Gimpel 2009; Smith 2017), and voluntary associations (Hanks 1981; Van Ingen and Van der Meer 2016). Among these groups, friends play a particularly significant role. Children and adolescents spend much of their time outside the household at school, where they form friendships that shape their political attitudes and behaviors (Campbell 1980). Early studies found that peer groups were often the most effective agents of socialization because they serve as both trusted, intimate contacts as well as conduits for broader societal norms and political culture (Coleman 1961; Langton 1969).

Studies of repression and political socialization that focus too narrowly on the family risk overlooking these wider influences. In many authoritarian contexts, targeted arrests, economic exclusion, or exile are used to punish particular actors, but these repressive experiences reverberate in the individual's social networks, including harassment of friends and known affiliates (Hibou 2011). Those previously arrested face significant challenges accessing the labor market, health care, and universities, an extension of their punishment into all realms of their lives. Accordingly, we expand our analytical lens to account for socialization not only within families, but among friends and neighbors as well.³

Building on the existing literature, we develop theoretical expectations about the comparative effects of direct and indirect exposure to repression on political participation, operationalized as voting in the most recent parliamentary election or attending a protest during the previous year.⁴ We first consider potential differences between direct and indirect exposure to repression. Although prior studies find that repression tends to demobilize its direct victims, this effect appears to depend on the threat of renewed violence. Evidence from post-conflict and post-authoritarian contexts, where that threat has meaningfully subsided, suggests the opposite: past repression can motivate former targets to increase their political engagement as the risk of violence declines. In the context of post-revolutionary Tunisia, the collapse of the former regime may have reduced the perceived threat of renewed repression among those previously targeted. Consequently, we expect direct repression experienced under authoritarianism to be correlated with increased participation in voting and protest during the post-authoritarian period.

Turning to indirect exposure, we expect repression to have a consistent mobilizing effect. This includes the repression of family members, but we also consider the possibility of effects through peer and community groups. Accordingly, we include measures of exposure to repression through neighbors and co-workers in addition to friends. Overall, we expect that those who report having family members, friends, or community members repressed will be more likely to participate in politics—through voting or protest—than those who do not.

In contrast with prior studies, we extend our focus beyond the family of origin to identify pathways of political socialization through non-kin relationships. As described

below, we isolate the influence of peer groups by sampling sibling pairs and analyzing variation in indirect exposure between siblings. We expect that indirect exposure through friends and community members will have an independent effect on participation even when controlling for family-level factors. We further expect that this effect will be mediated through political discussion with non-kin groups. As with studies of family socialization, discussions are an important site of political socialization (Lawrence 2017; Lupu and Peisakhin 2017), and individuals are more likely to transmit issues that are important to them, on which they are politically engaged (Jennings et al. 2009).

Based on these expectations, we propose the following hypotheses for evaluation:

H1: Direct exposure to repression is positively associated with political participation (voter turnout and protest).

H2: Indirect exposure to repression is positively associated with political participation.

H3: Indirect exposure to the repression of non-kin groups is positively associated with political participation independent of family characteristics.

H4: Political discussion with non-kin groups mediates the positive association between indirect exposure to repression and political participation.

Repression in Tunisia, 1956–2011

In January 2011, Tunisia became the first country to witness the resignation of an authoritarian leader in response to sustained popular protests, inspiring a wave of mobilization across the Middle East known as the Arab Spring uprisings. Tunisia's subsequent democratic transition saw a spate of competitive elections and a new constitution but was ended abruptly after a 2021 *autogolpe* by President Kais Saied, a political outsider who rose to power amid widespread frustration with existing political parties. Prior to 2011, Tunisia had been ruled by the authoritarian regimes of Presidents Habib Bourguiba (1956–1987) and Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali (1987–2011). Both regimes allowed limited political contestation through the ruling party, renamed the *Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique* (RCD) in 1988, while simultaneously employing widespread violence against any mobilized political opposition, a pattern that remained consistent throughout six decades of combined authoritarian rule (Jebnoun 2017; Nugent 2020a).

State violence against the opposition was a defining feature of Tunisian politics from independence in 1956 until 2011. Bourguiba's nascent regime moved to eliminate supporters of his nationalist rival, Salah Ben Youssef; they were jailed, killed, or forced into exile, and Ben Youssef himself was assassinated in Germany in 1961 (Perkins 2014; Wolf 2017). The Bourguiba regime continued to jail political opponents throughout the 1960s and 1970s (Charrad 1997; Perkins 2014), including

members of the student opposition movement, *Perspectives*. Over time, a number of opposition parties formed across the ideological spectrum to counter the RCD under both Bourguiba and Ben Ali—both of whom repressed them all (Nugent 2020a, 95–98). After the introduction of multiparty elections in 1981, a loyal opposition consisting of splinters from the ruling party, unified around similar and vaguely socialist platforms, challenged the RCD in electoral contests, though the ruling party continued to win handily. A number of secular opposition parties advocated reform toward a democratic and secular civil state, including leftist parties⁵ and several more centrist parties.⁶ Arguably, the most formidable opposition under both regimes was the Islamist movement, represented politically by Ennahda.⁷ RCD leaders often conflated religious opposition with private religious practice and maintained tight control over all religious activity by stationing police in mosques to monitor weekly Friday communal worship, and explicitly scripting the content of sermons to be apolitical or pro-regime (Rédaction RTBF 2011).

Repression of political opposition continued under Ben Ali. Upon seizing power through a coup in 1987, the new president initially promised democratic reforms and signaled his intention to reverse course on the state's repression of political opponents. Early in his rule, Ben Ali released thousands of political prisoners held under Bourguiba and negotiated a National Pact with several political parties and movements as a demonstration of his commitment to political pluralism (Anderson 1991). Tunisia held multiparty legislative elections in 1989. However, soon after this supposed détente with the political opposition (Anderson 1991), the Ben Ali regime reversed course and arrested opposition activists, beginning with the Islamists. Between 1990 and 1992, around 10,000 Ennahda members, including high-profile leaders, were arrested and charged with crimes related to their political activities (Nugent 2020b). Tunisia's secular political groups faced similar repression throughout the 1990s and 2000s. Leaders and members of leftist and centrist secular parties endured repeated arrests and lengthy prison sentences following political trials, and several persecuted opposition leaders went into self-imposed exile, where they continued to organize. Even loyal opposition parties were surveilled for dissent and regularly detained.

Both Bourguiba and Ben Ali also used coercion against less overtly political threats. While organized political opposition was most clearly targeted, anyone marginally related or involved in an activity that could be construed as a threat to the regime was also subject to repression. Hibou (2011) documents how the friends and family of political detainees were affected by economic sanctions imposed on the detainee, as well as by state efforts to isolate those arrested from their social support networks. For instance, the Ben Ali regime confiscated the ID cards of family members to prevent them from visiting prisons, and there were reports of police searching family homes or pressuring wives to divorce their incarcerated husbands (Hibou 2011, 7).

In addition, both Bourguiba and Ben Ali confronted a vibrant civil society, and the number of recognized civil society organizations (CSOs) grew from around 2,500 in 1987 to an estimated 10,000 by the end of the Ben Ali era (Bellin 2005; Hudáková 2021). These included non-governmental organizations, human rights groups, student associations, the lawyers' syndicate, and some of the region's oldest labor unions. The

limited autonomy granted to CSOs under Ben Ali created space for opposition activism (Cavatorta and Haugbølle 2012), and these organizations served as important “islands of political resistance” (Hudáková 2021, 508). Members faced substantial harassment for their critiques of the regime. The Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH, *La Ligue Tunisienne pour la Défense des Droits de l’Homme*), for example, was a leading human rights organization whose former president Moncef Marzouki was arrested, tried, and exiled for his overt criticism of the regime. Broad-based organizations such as the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT, *Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail*) had a significant presence in Tunisian associational life, though with a more ambiguous relationship to the regime than the LTDH, oscillating between periods of subordination and autonomy (Bellin 2005; Bishara 2020). When members mobilized outside the informal and often shifting boundaries the regime had drawn around permissible labor activism, they were similarly repressed.

A 2018 report by Tunisia’s Truth and Dignity Commission, formed in the aftermath of the fall of the Ben Ali regime in 2011, corroborates this narrative of widespread repression. The commission recorded over 62,000 complaints filed by Tunisian citizens against the state for human rights abuses committed between independence in 1956 and the fall of the regime in 2011, with complainants drawn from across the political, social, and economic spectrum. Tunisia is not only an important contemporary case of mass repression but also an ideal context in which to test the relative effects of direct and indirect exposure to state violence. The country’s average age is just over 32, and the authoritarian period—during which state violence against the opposition was a regular feature of RCD governance—ended only with the 2010–2011 uprisings that catalyzed the Arab Spring protests. As a result, a large number of Tunisians were exposed directly to state violence under the previous regimes and have family members, friends, and community members who were similarly affected, with meaningful variation across individuals.

Empirical Strategy

To examine the relationship between direct and indirect exposure to repression and subsequent political behavior, we conducted an original nationally representative survey of 1,200 Tunisians over the age of 18, fielded by One-to-One for Research and Polling from December 2021 to January 2022. In addition to the primary sample, we collected a secondary sample of sibling pairs. We asked all 1,200 primary respondents for a complete list of their siblings over the age of 18, randomly selected one, and requested contact information for that individual. This procedure yielded 175 complete surveys with siblings of primary respondents. [Appendix section A](#) provides additional details on both samples.

Our first analysis relies on the primary sample. We model the effects of repression on political behavior (i.e., voter turnout and protest participation) as follows:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + R_i'\beta + \mathbf{Z}_i'\boldsymbol{\beta} + g_i + \varepsilon_i$$

where i indexes the respondent, R indicates the individual's exposure to repression (i.e., direct or indirect through a family member, friend, or community member), $\mathbf{Z}$ is a matrix of covariates that account for individual differences, g is a governorate fixed effect that controls for potential population stratification by location, and ε is an individual-specific error term. This model leverages the statistical power of our large survey sample ($n = 1,200$) to identify the relationship between different types of exposure to repression and subsequent political behavior. The limitation of this cross-sectional design is its vulnerability to endogeneity concerns. In particular, drawing on the existing literature, we are concerned that individuals from repressed families may be more likely to face repression themselves or to select into friend and community groups that face higher rates of repression (Lawrence 2017). In other words, the vertical transmission of political attitudes and behaviors through families may shape both subsequent direct exposure and indirect exposure through non-kin contacts. In particular, the family of origin largely determines the social context within which individuals form non-kin relationships (Huckfeldt 1983).

To isolate and better estimate the effects of repression and socialization beyond the family, we turn to our sample of sibling pairs. Family-based designs are widely used across research fields to account for shared genetic factors, family environment, and other unobservable confounders inherent to family units (Sjölander et al. 2022). By comparing siblings who share a family but may have been differentially exposed to repression through other channels, we can isolate the relationship between repression and political behavior independent of family-level influences. We adopt this approach in a sibling-pair survey design that accounts for the family of origin as a major determinant of political behavior, thereby isolating the effects of other exposures to repression. Controlling for the family environment in this way helps mitigate potential omitted variable bias in the relationship between exposure to repression and political behavior. For this analysis, we modify the linear model above to include family fixed effects, as follows:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + R_i'\beta + \mathbf{Z}_i'\boldsymbol{\beta} + f_i + \varepsilon_i$$

where f is a family fixed effect that controls for potential genetic and environmental correlation among family members—other terms are described above.⁸ This modeling approach isolates variation within sibling pairs, effectively controlling for confounding variables specific to the family of origin. By accounting for family-level effects, we can explore the role of indirect exposure to repression through friends—typically viewed as downstream of family-level socialization—in shaping political behavior.⁹

Finally, we explore the role of socialization as a mechanism linking repressive experiences to political behavior. Following the political socialization literature, we use political discussion as an indicator of socialization and consider whether the relationship between indirect exposure to repression and participation is mediated by political discussion with the repressed group. We test this using a traditional analytical

approach that allows us to assess whether the effect of indirect repression on political behavior is mediated through political conversations without experimental manipulation (Baron and Kenny 1986). Beginning with the regression framework specified above, we regress the mediator, *D*, an indicator of regular political discussion with the repressed group, on the independent variable, *R*, expecting to find a significant relationship between the two. We then regress the dependent variable, *Y*, on the mediator, *D*, expecting to find a significant association between discussion and the outcome. Finally, we include both *R* and *D* as predictors of *Y*. We expect the inclusion of the mediator to attenuate the estimated coefficient for repression and reduce its statistical significance. If all of these conditions hold, we interpret *D* as mediating the relationship between *R* and *Y*—that is, the relationship between repression and political participation can be partially attributed to political discussion among different types of social contacts.

Independent Variables

Our main independent variable of interest is *direct* individual exposure to repression. Our primary and secondary surveys included a number of questions designed to measure respondents’ direct and indirect exposure to repression under previous authoritarian regimes. To measure direct exposure, we asked respondents: “Before 2011, were you imprisoned, placed under house arrest, exiled, or punished economically (such as losing a job, losing a contract, or paying a fine)¹⁰ because of your political activities?” Respondents could select all answers that applied.

To measure *indirect* exposure to repression, we asked respondents whether members of various groups to which they belonged had been repressed. To measure exposure through *family*, we asked, “Before 2011, were any of your family members (parents, grandparents, spouse, siblings, cousins) imprisoned, exiled, disappeared, or punished economically (such as losing a job, losing a contract, or paying a fine) because of their political activities?”¹¹ To measure exposure through *friends*, we asked, “Before 2011, were any of your friends imprisoned, exiled, disappeared, or punished economically (such as losing a job, losing a contract, or paying a fine) because of their political activities?” Finally, to measure exposure through *community members*, we asked, “Before 2011, were

Table 1. Prevalence of repression

Exposure to repression	Count	Percent (%)
None	926	77.2
Self	28	2.3
Family	88	7.3
Friend	127	10.6
Community	169	14.1

Note. Primary sample only.

any members of your community (neighbors or coworkers) imprisoned, exiled, disappeared, or punished economically (such as losing a job, losing a contract, or paying a fine) because of their political activities?" As with the direct exposure question, respondents could select all answers that applied. In our primary sample, 2 percent of respondents reported having been politically repressed prior to 2011 (direct exposure). In terms of indirect exposure, 7 percent reported a repressed family member, 11 percent reported a repressed friend, and 14 percent reported a repressed community member.¹² We note that while our survey distinguished between types of repression and different forms of exposure to it, [Table 1](#) shows that few respondents reported direct repression overall, and that those who were repressed tended to experience multiple forms together.¹³ We therefore pool all forms of repression into a single measure for each category.

To measure political socialization, we asked respondents how often they discuss politics with several groups in their social lives, including family, friends, coworkers, and neighbors. Specifically, respondents were asked: "How often do you discuss politics with the following types of people: A. Your family/ B. Your friends/ C. Your co-workers/ D. Your neighbors." Response options included "Never," "Rarely," "Once a month," "Once a week," and "Every day." We code a response of once a month or more as indicating "regular" discussion. For family and friend political socialization, we use responses to items A and B, respectively. The community member variable was constructed using the maximum value across the co-worker and neighbor categories.

Dependent Variables

We use two measures of political behavior as dependent variables in separate analyses. First, we measure *turnout* using responses to a question about whether respondents voted in the parliamentary elections held on October 6, 2019. The variable is coded as 1 if the respondent reported having participated. Second, we measure *protest participation* using responses to the question, "In the last year, have you participated in a demonstration, rally, or sit-in?" The variable is coded as 1 if the respondent answered affirmatively. We employ these two measures of political behavior for both practical and theoretical reasons. First, by the time we fielded our survey,¹⁴ the 2019 parliamentary elections had taken place more than 2 years prior, and there is evidence that recall of electoral participation can change significantly over time ([Sciarini and Goldberg 2016](#); [Selb and Munzert 2013](#)). Second, we are interested in how direct and indirect exposure to repression shapes multiple forms of political participation—not only electoral turnout, but also whether exposure to repression produces dissidents who engage in contentious politics, in line with existing studies of repressive legacies and political behavior.

Controls

Included in our regressions is a set of control variables measuring subjects' age, level of education, religious education (Islamic *kuttab*), income, gender, employment status,

pre-2011 partisanship (membership in the RCD or an opposition party),¹⁵ independent religious practice (daily prayer), and communal religious practice (Friday prayer).

Results

Primary Sample

The first part of our analysis relies on the primary sample. We first provide evidence that repression in Tunisia under the Bourguiba and Ben Ali regimes was a common experience. As Table 1 shows, nearly a quarter of our sample reported either direct repression, indirect repression, or some combination of the two.¹⁶

Regression results indicate that both direct and indirect exposure to repression are associated with increased political participation. There is, however, a notable exception: we find no significant effect on turnout from direct or family-level exposure. Figure 1 visualizes the comparative effects by target of repression and behavioral outcome.¹⁷ Each coefficient is estimated in a separate model containing a single repression variable (i.e., direct, family, friend, or community) and a full set of controls.¹⁸

We first consider the relationship between *direct* repression and participation. The estimated effects are substantively large across both outcome measures and in a positive direction.¹⁹ For turnout, direct repression falls short of conventional significance thresholds, though the coefficient is substantively large (0.14) and weakly

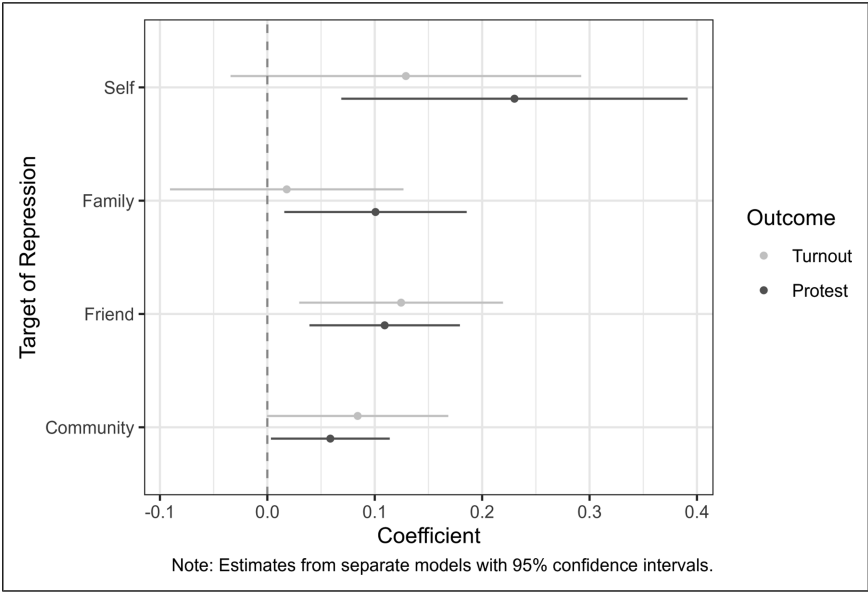


Figure 1. Comparing effects of repression (primary sample).

significant at the 10 percent level. For protest, direct exposure is a significant predictor ($p < .05$), associated with a nearly 25 percent increase in the likelihood of recent participation. Together, these findings provide mixed support for H1: that direct repression correlates with increased political participation in the post-authoritarian period.²⁰

Turning to *indirect* exposure, we find mixed support for H2: that the repression of family, friends, and community members increases political participation. Indirect exposure through friends is the most consistently mobilizing: those who report this type of exposure are significantly more likely to vote and to participate in protest. Notably, multiple forms of repression are positively and significantly correlated with protest participation—direct exposure and indirect exposure through family, friends, and community members are all significant in the individual models. Our results offer clear evidence that the repression of friends has a consistent mobilizing effect, significantly increasing both turnout and protest participation.

Sibling Sample

Our next set of analyses further isolates the relationship between exposure to repression and political socialization through non-kinship ties from family-level influences. These analyses rely on our sample of 175 sibling pairs, collected to control for unobservable family characteristics that matter for political behavior—including not only family legacies of repression but other inherited traits and behaviors. [Figure 2](#)

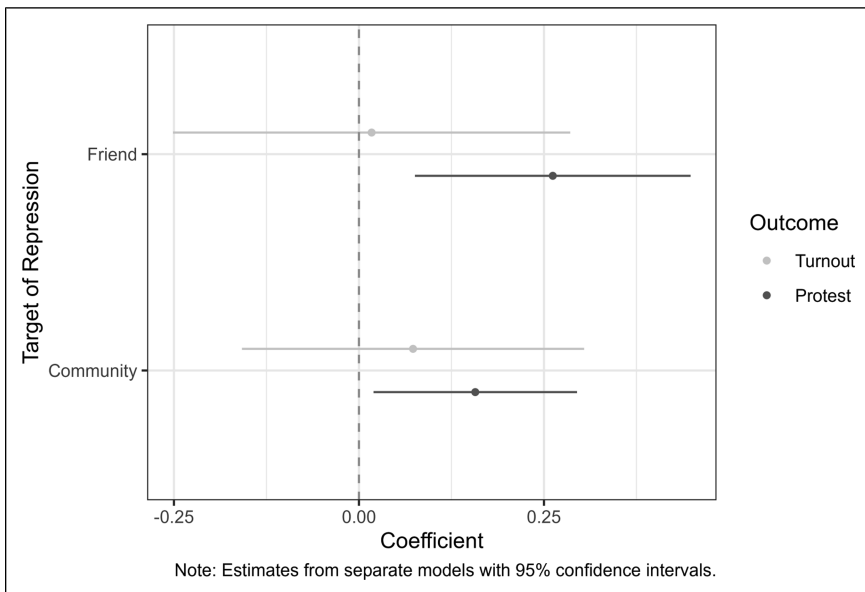


Figure 2. Isolating effects of non-kin repression (sibling sample).

visualizes the effects of friend and community repression.²¹ In these models, we use family fixed effects to isolate variation in exposure to repression within sibling pairs.

Focusing within sibling pairs, we find consistent effects on protest participation: the point estimates for peer repression are similar in magnitude and direction across the primary and sibling analyses. Despite the considerably smaller sample size, the estimates for both friend and community repression remain statistically significant ($p < .05$). We estimate that individuals who had a friend repressed during the authoritarian era (prior to 2011) were 26 percent more likely to have participated in a recent protest (in the previous year, 2021). For the case of a repressed community member, we estimate a 16 percent increase. These results offer strong support for H3: that exposure to repression through non-kin networks has an independent effect on political behavior when controlling for family-level factors.

By contrast, the results for turnout are inconclusive. When isolating within-family variation, we find no significant relationship between exposure to repression and turnout. This could indicate that the family of origin accounts for a substantial share of the explanatory power. If family socialization plays a central role in the formation of political identity and partisan attachments, exposure to repression beyond the family may exert a weaker influence on the decision to vote. Alternatively, the null result may reflect the smaller sample size; our sibling sample is likely underpowered to offer a conclusive test. Overall, we interpret the robust finding on protest participation as confirmation that exposure to repression through non-kinship ties has an independent effect on at least some forms of political behavior.

Mechanism Test: Socialization

Building on the existing literature, we hypothesize that the effect of indirect exposure to repression is mediated through political socialization, operationalized as talking about politics with others. Where we differ from existing studies is in expanding the scope of which groups may serve as agents of socialization, moving beyond the family to incorporate the role of friends and community members. In our primary sample, 37 percent of respondents reported discussing politics regularly with family members, 33 percent with friends, and 25 percent with community members. An interesting pattern emerges when we disaggregate the data further. In Figure 3, we plot respondents' reported experiences of repression across different social groups against whether they regularly discuss politics with that group. Across all categories, respondents are more likely to discuss politics regularly with members of a group when they also report that group having experienced repression.

While a direct test of these mechanisms lies beyond the scope of our analysis, we note two possible explanations for the pattern of increased political discussion with repressed contacts based on our knowledge of the case. The findings may indicate that direct repression makes individuals more likely to discuss politics, particularly with others they know personally. Alternatively, others may feel

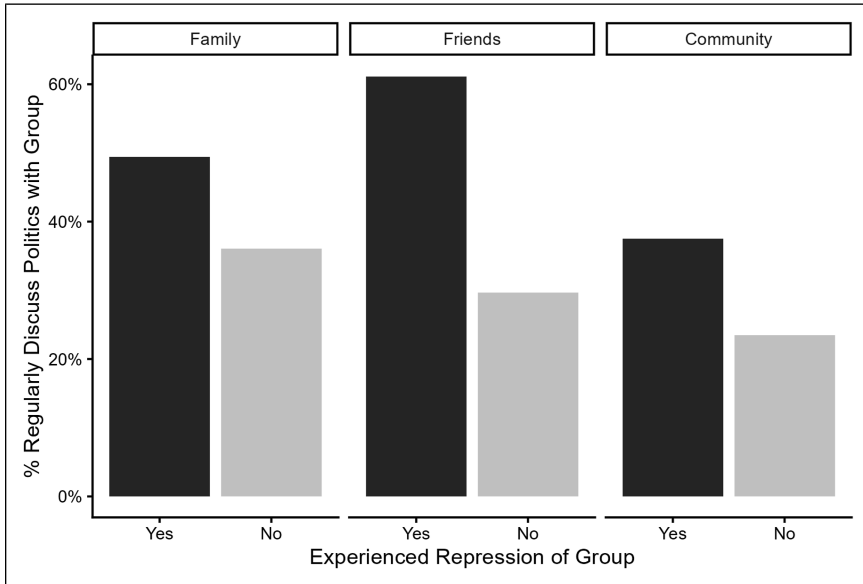


Figure 3. Political discussion by repression exposure (primary sample).

more comfortable discussing politics with someone they know has experienced repression. In this reading, repression serves as a signal of high political interest, political knowledge, or trustworthiness when broaching potentially contentious topics.

Table 2. Effects of friend repression mediated by political discussion

	Discussion	Turnout			Protest		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Repression	0.642*** (0.152)	0.125* (0.048)		0.085+ (0.048)	0.109** (0.036)		0.094** (0.035)
Discussion			0.053*** (0.010)	0.050*** (0.011)		0.029*** (0.007)	0.026*** (0.007)
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
FE: Gov.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Num. Obs.	1,081	1,059	1,055	1,055	1,081	1,076	1,076

Notes. Primary sample only. Heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors.

+ $p < .1$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Our final set of analyses tests socialization as a mechanism connecting exposure to repression with political behavior. Our results, presented in [Table 2](#), suggest that political discussion with repressed groups mediates the effects of repression on political participation (H4). To interpret these results, we follow the mediation analysis approach outlined in [Baron and Kenny \(1986\)](#). We first verify that our independent variable of interest—exposure to repression through friends—is a robust predictor of both the mediator (political discussion with that group, in Column 1) and the outcome (political participation, whether turnout or protest, in Columns 2 and 5). We find a statistically significant, positive association with peer repression. The results show (in Columns 3 and 6) that political discussion with friends in turn predicts both turnout and protest participation. Finally, when we include both repression and discussion with friends in the same model (in Columns 4 and 7), the estimated coefficient for repression is attenuated and its statistical significance reduced. In line with Baron and Kenny, we interpret this as evidence that political discussion with friends mediates the effect of exposure to repression through friends on political participation.

Though we cannot conclusively rule out alternative explanations, this result suggests that indirect exposure to repression through peers encourages political discussion within that group. These discussions subsequently shape political behavior by socializing individuals to participate more actively in political life, not only in elections but also through protest. Taken together, these analyses offer important evidence that exposure to repression through friends exerts an independent influence on political behavior, beyond that of the family, through peer socialization.

Discussion

Our findings both reaffirm and extend existing research on the relationship between repression and political behavior. In line with existing studies, we demonstrate that the legacies of authoritarian repression significantly shape political participation. By examining the impact of repression experienced by friends and community members alongside direct and family-level exposure, however, we reveal a more comprehensive picture of how the legacies of repression diffuse through kin and non-kin social networks.

Contrary to the conventional wisdom that direct repression demobilizes its victims, we find no evidence of demobilization with respect to voting: the association between direct repression and turnout is positive, though it falls short of conventional significance thresholds. Moreover, individuals who reported having been directly repressed under the Ben Ali and Bourguiba dictatorships were more likely to participate in protests in the post-authoritarian period. This finding is notable given the extensive literature documenting the demobilizing effects of direct exposure to repression. The Tunisian case aligns with contexts in which the threat of renewed violence subsides following a democratic transition ([Berman et al. 2024](#); [Kilavuz et al. 2023](#)), freeing former victims to become more politically engaged. This suggests that the fall of a

repressive regime may itself serve as a catalyst for the political mobilization of its former targets.

Regarding indirect exposure, our findings align with the existing literature in showing that individuals who reported having family members repressed under the prior regime are more likely to participate, though we find this is only significant for protest participation. Our study makes a significant contribution, however, by demonstrating that indirect exposure through friend networks has comparably strong and consistently mobilizing effects on political participation. Those who reported indirect exposure to violence through their friends were more politically active across all measures in the post-authoritarian period. This finding points to multiple pathways through which repression's "backlash" effects occur and persist after regime change (Sullivan and Davenport 2017).

Our sibling-pair analysis, which we believe to be a novel study design in this context, provides compelling evidence that peer and community socialization exerts an independent influence on political behavior. When controlling for unobservable family characteristics, the repression of a friend or a community member continues to have a substantively large and statistically significant positive effect on protest participation. This result indicates that political behavior can be shaped by indirect exposure to repression outside the family, extending beyond the vertical transmission mechanisms emphasized in previous studies. Further research is needed into why our results are most significant for protest participation, rather than turnout. One potential explanation is that repression of family, friends, and community members engenders certain emotions such as anger, which in turn mobilize people to contentious politics but not to formal participation (Pearlman 2013; Rosenfeld 2026).

Finally, our mediation analysis highlights the role of political discussion in linking indirect exposure to repression with subsequent political behavior. We find that socialization, measured by the frequency of political discussion with a particular group, mediates the effect of indirect exposure to repression through friend networks. This finding supports theoretical expectations drawn from the political socialization literature, namely that informal political conversations facilitate the transmission of political attitudes and behaviors through horizontal social networks.

Tunisia represents an instructive case for understanding the political legacies of repression, having experienced decades of institutionalized state violence targeting wide segments of society. Unlike studies focused on extreme but relatively rare events such as mass deportations or genocides, our analysis examines the effects of more routine—yet severe—forms of state violence common to authoritarian regimes. Mass deportations of the kind studied by Lupu and Peisakhin (2017) and Rozenas et al. (2017), for instance, number only 129 recorded instances since 1900 (Garrity 2022). Other forms of state violence are more frequent than mass deportations but still rare in comparison to everyday authoritarian repression. While the Holocaust has rightfully received significant attention (Voigtländer and Voth 2012), states perpetrated 201 genocides and other

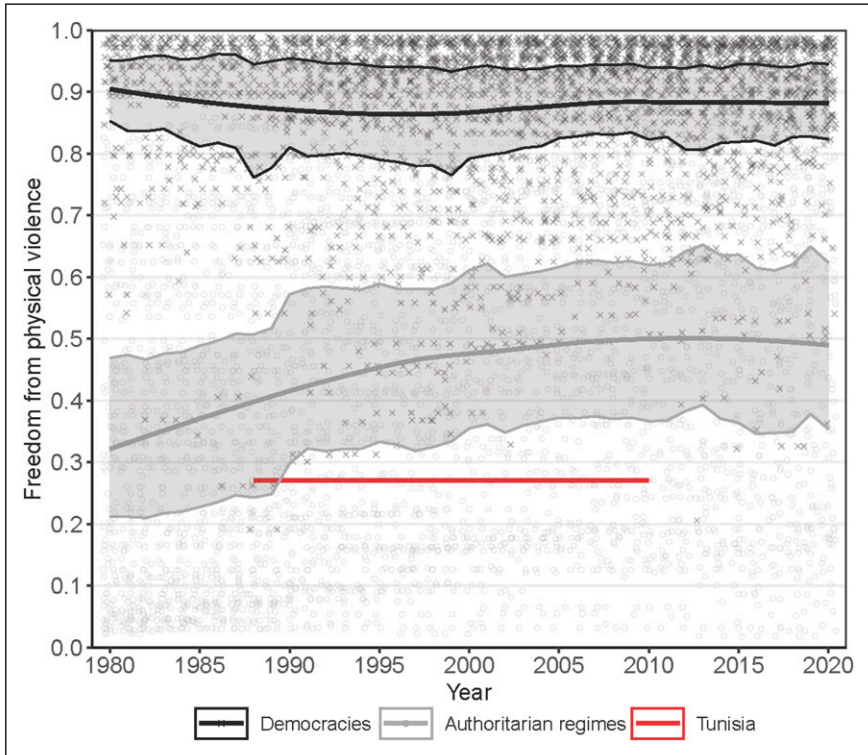


Figure 4. Repression in Tunisia in comparative perspective (Source: V-Dem).

mass atrocities between 1900 and 2013 (Anderton and Brauer 2016). Civil wars, the legacies of which are studied by Balcells (2011), number 268 between 1900 and 2013 (Dixon and Sarkees 2016). By contrast, as Figure 4 illustrates, hundreds of regimes employ quotidian violence against perceived political threats, making Tunisia a representative case from which broader inferences can be drawn.²² As of this writing, over 70 percent of the world’s population lives under such regimes. Moreover, “state coercive behavior has claimed more lives than any other form of political conflict” (Rummel 1997, as cited in Davenport 2007). Our research contributes new evidence that the “everyday” authoritarianism of today will continue to shape the politics of tomorrow through both direct and indirect exposure, of numerous kinds.

Conclusion

Previous studies have shown that the consequences of repression persist long after they are experienced and are transmitted across generations, social and political networks, and salient categories of social difference. Drawing on a nationally representative

survey of Tunisians and a secondary sibling sample, our findings build on this research agenda and provide new insight into the microfoundations of indirect exposure to violence and its effects on subsequent political participation. Existing research focuses predominantly on extraordinary instances of state violence, such as famine, genocide, and civil war, and examines their effects on victims and descendants through the vertical transmission of norms, attitudes, and values within the family. We expand on this work by integrating how experiences of repression reverberate through horizontal networks as well. By distinguishing whether respondents' friends, family members, or community members experienced repression, our findings draw attention to these broader effects. Our novel design—combining a nationally representative primary survey with a sibling-pair analysis—allows us to make new and important inferences about the consequences of repression for political behavior.

While our approach offers several advantages, certain limitations merit consideration. Our survey was conducted after a decade of democratization in Tunisia, including several elections and alternations of power, and only a few months after President Saïed's *autogolpe* but before more significant related episodes of democratic backsliding.²³ Tunisia's break with its authoritarian past provided a unique opportunity to study repression in a context where the long-term autocrat had already been deposed. Conducting this research in a more authoritarian setting would raise both ethical concerns about participant safety and methodological concerns about social desirability bias in self-reported experiences of repression (Harel et al. 2023). Our findings may therefore not be directly replicable outside of transitional contexts, where the shadow of repression remains politically salient but the immediate threat of violence has receded. At the same time, there are reasons to expect the Tunisian experience to generalize to other settings. The Ben Ali regime's pervasive yet low-intensity, everyday repression of ordinary citizens is representative of political control strategies employed across the Middle East and North Africa before and after the Arab Spring uprisings. Given the prevalence of this type of repression, future regime transitions in the region may well produce comparable patterns of political participation.

Our study's design offers advantages over previous approaches by allowing us to disentangle the effects of various forms of exposure to repression while accounting for family-level influences. A growing body of research has established the important role of family socialization in generating and sustaining the legacies of repression, and recent advances in the literature have sought to isolate these effects empirically and situate them in broader comparative perspective. We see our study as a contribution to this expanding research agenda and as a proof of concept for more rigorous studies of non-kin influences on political behavior. Future work should build on the approach adopted here, preferably with larger samples across different contexts, to deepen our understanding of the varieties of indirect exposure, whether and how direct and indirect exposure overlap or diverge to produce compounding or crosscutting effects, and how different types of exposure persist within individuals and across generations. Political discussion appears to be an important consequence of repression, and understanding how violence is transmitted through such narratives will likely require the careful integration of mixed quantitative and qualitative research methodologies.

While substantial research remains, our findings both affirm and challenge current understandings of how families shape political socialization and behavior in the aftermath of state violence. By focusing predominantly on family networks, researchers have overlooked the significant role of friends and peer groups in transmitting the effects of repression, yielding an incomplete picture of how state violence transforms individuals and communities. This narrow focus has likely led scholars to underestimate the far-reaching effects of repression, and we hope our study advances the conversation about how best to theorize and measure the multiple pathways through which individuals are exposed to and affected by state violence.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Christian Davenport, Isabelle DeSisto, Amaney Jamal, Noam Lupu, Leonid Peisakhin, and audiences at the 2020 “Repression in China and the World” Conference at Yale University; the 2023 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association; Notre Dame’s Kellogg Institute for International Studies; the 2024 annual meeting of the Association for Analytic Learning about Islam and Muslim Societies; Comparative Politics Speaker Series at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; and the Comparative Politics Workshop at the University of Chicago for feedback on earlier drafts.

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Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data Availability Statement

A link to the replication files can be found here: <https://osf.io/sd7q2/>.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. Exposure to violence may also shape vote choice in later democratic elections. Several studies find that state violence reduces support for the perpetrator and increases support

for the opposition, with the size of the effect increasing with the extent of exposure (Costalli and Ruggeri 2015; Fontana et al. 2023; Rozenas et al. 2017). Often the “perpetrator” and the “opposition” are not the precise aggressors and victims from the initial violence, but rather logically connected political representatives or affiliates, such as a successor party after the aggressor has been removed from power and remnants of the former organized opposition.

2. The mobilizing effect of indirect exposure is not limited to non-democratic contexts but is also observed in developed democracies. For example, while those directly exposed to the American criminal justice system through arrest experience political demobilization, individuals with indirect exposure are more likely to vote and participate in politics (Walker 2014). In contrast, however, White (2019) finds that household members of an incarcerated individual experience a small decrease in their likelihood of voting, though the effect is short-lived.
3. A significant literature focuses on the relative strength of interpersonal ties. In our survey, we ask about friends generally, though we recognize an important distinction between strong and weak ties. Granovetter (1973) outlines the important role that both types of relationships can play.
4. Our expectations are outlined in a pre-analysis plan dated April 21, 2021, and available at: <https://osf.io/p8fk5>.
5. For example, the Rassemblement Socialiste Progressiste (later renamed the Parti Démocrate Progressiste, known as the PDP) legalized in 1988; the Tunisian Communist Workers Party (Hizb al-’Ummal al-Shuyu’i al-Tunsi, known as PCOT) founded in 1986; the Social Liberal Party (Parti Social-Libéral, PSL) founded in 1988; and the Renewal Movement (Harakat al-Tajdid, known simply as Ettajdid), formed in 1993.
6. For example, the Democratic Forum for Labour and Liberties (Forum Démocratique pour le Travail et les Libertés, known by the Arabic word for Forum, Ettakatol), founded in 1994, and the Congrès pour la République (al-Mu’tamar min ajl al-Jumhuriya or CPR), founded in July 2001.
7. The Islamist movement grew out of a clandestine Islamic association that had pursued religious activism in Tunisia in the late 1960s and 1970s in response to the state’s aggressive secularization program. The movement first attempted to enter elections in 1981 as the Mouvement de la Tendance Islamique or Harakat al-Ittijah al-Islami (the Movement of the Islamic Tendency, or MTI) but was denied permission, and rebranded itself Harakat Ennahda (Renaissance Movement) during the 1989 elections under Ben Ali. The party was only legalized after the 2010–2011 uprising, in March 2011.
8. Here, we exclude exposure to repression through a family member.
9. There are some within-family differences in the reporting of family experiences with repression. Some sibling pairs in our sample gave different answers to the question of whether they had immediate family members who had been repressed. This may reflect several factors: in the case of half-siblings, they may share only some siblings and parents; in other cases, memories may simply differ; and in still others, children may have been informed differently about their relatives’ repression, perhaps based on age or gender. Our modeling strategy accommodates differing recollections between siblings. Our design cannot rule out the

possibility, however, that the downstream forms of political participation we capture in our survey “activated” stronger recall of family-based experiences with repression.

10. In authoritarian Tunisia, paying a fine was often termed “administrative punishment” (Hibou 2011) and tended to accompany imprisonment.
11. Respondents who answered affirmatively were asked a follow-up question about how many family members had been imprisoned, placed under house arrest, disappeared, exiled, or punished economically.
12. Questions about criminal justice involvement are typically viewed as sensitive questions. As such, there are often concerns about under-reporting or bias. Overall, more than 99.8 percent of respondents answered our primary questions measuring exposure to repression. See [Appendix C, Table 5](#). In recent research on criminal justice involvement in the U.S., [Yan and Cantor \(2019\)](#) show that questions on criminal justice do not have notably high non-response rates. Our question wording was selected to address some of the same concerns. We specify that we are interested in repression prior to 2011, when the Ben Ali regime collapsed. After 2011, there was a widespread recognition that the Ben Ali regime relied on coercive institutions to maintain power. As a sign of how experiences in prison prior to 2011 were de-stigmatized, many politicians who came to power after 2011 had spent time in prison ([Nugent, 2020a](#)). We also give concrete examples of activities like imprisonment and exile so that the question is clear, rather than simply asking if someone experienced repression more broadly.
13. See [Appendix C, Table 6](#).
14. Our survey was originally scheduled for March 2020 but was delayed until December 2021 due to COVID-19 restrictions.
15. While rates of pre-2011 partisanship are low, it is a significant correlate of pre-2011 repression. We show the correlates of pre-2011 exposure to repression in [Appendix C](#).
16. [Appendix C](#) presents a breakdown of different combinations of direct and indirect repression. While there is a positive correlation between reporting different types of repression, respondents report all manner of types and combinations of exposure.
17. Regression tables are included in [Appendix D](#).
18. When all four repression measures are included in a single model, the repression variables remain jointly significant. See [Appendix D](#) for Wald test statistics.
19. 14 percent and 24 percent increases in the likelihood of voting and attending a protest, respectively.
20. The small number of respondents reporting direct repression ($n = 28$) and family repression ($n = 88$) may limit our ability to detect effects of the magnitude we observe, and these estimates should therefore be interpreted with caution. The larger samples for friend and community repression provide a more reliable basis for the significant effects we report.
21. Full regression results are reported in [Appendix D](#).
22. The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project’s physical violence index measures the extent to which governments protect physical integrity and preserve “freedom from political killings and torture by the government,” a reasonable country-level proxy for the extent of physical and political repression each year. [Figure 4](#) plots V-Dem scores for each regime over time. For ease of interpretation, we highlight differences across regime types (with bands 0.5 standard deviations above and below the mean) and draw attention in red to

Tunisia's scores during the Ben Ali period. The measures indicate that even among authoritarian regimes, the Ben Ali regime's repression was severe: two-thirds of authoritarian regimes score higher on this index from 1987 to 2010.

23. Many of Tunisia's democratic gains have since been reversed under President Kais Saied, who centralized executive power through a constitutional referendum in July 2022 (Emig and Schumacher 2025; Grubman 2022).

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