1

Introduction

After 10 years, Tunisian democracy collapsed in a rapid self-coup[1] on July 25, 2021. That day, the elected president, Kais Saied, shuttered the parliament, dismissed the prime minister, and began to govern by decree. Surprisingly, Tunisians took to the streets to celebrate his power grab, and public opinion polls reported almost 90% approval.[2] That overwhelming public support proved critical to the success of Saied's takeover, as it deterred Tunisia's civil society, political parties, and foreign powers from more actively resisting the coup. In recognition that incumbent takeovers like Saied's have become a leading cause of democratic breakdown,[3] and that public opinion is a key determinant of their success,[4] this book asks: Why were Tunisians so supportive of their president seizing all power?

The collapse of Tunisia's democracy was particularly puzzling, given that Tunisians had up until that point seemingly done everything right. The overarching prescription from the academic literature on democratization is power-sharing: to share political power with as many actors

[1] Coined after Alberto Fujimori's *autogolpe* in Peru in 1992, self-coups refer to elected leaders seizing more power for themselves, as opposed to military coups where militaries seize more power. I use self-coups interchangeably with incumbent takeovers and power grabs.

[2] Initially, a poll by Emrhod Consulting reported 87% support, and one by Sigma Conseil reported 95%. These companies were criticized for inflating support for the coup, whether due to biases in sampling procedures or respondents facing social pressure to say yes. Yet, a few months later, One to One for Research and Polling, contracted by the Arab Barometer, found a similar 90% approval.

[3] Svolik (2015); Bermeo (2016); Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018); Waldner and Lust (2018).

[4] Dahl (1971); Diamond (1999); Inglehart and Welzel (2005); Norris (2011); Claassen (2020); Weyland (2024). For a critique, see Bermeo (2003).

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as possible, in order to avoid creating spoilers to the transition.[5] Arend Lijphart (1969, 1977, 1991, p. 81), most notably, advocated for grand coalitions, arguing that democracy "requires conciliation and compromise, goals that in turn require the greatest possible inclusion of representatives of [all] groups in the decision-making process." Tunisians followed this advice to the letter. Islamists and secularists set aside their differences to find common ground, creating a grand coalition government in 2011–14, holding an extensive national dialogue, and producing a new constitution through consensus. Structurally, this power-sharing was facilitated by a history of working together,[6] a strong civil society that helped to mediate,[7] a relatively educated population,[8] and a military that stayed out of the fray.[9] Power-sharing between Tunisia's major political actors won them a Nobel Peace Prize in 2015 and helps to explain why its democracy initially became the one success story of the Arab Spring, while its neighbors collapsed into military coups and civil wars.

But Tunisia's power-sharing continued long after establishing the rules of the game. Rather than transitioning toward more competitive politics – normal, democratic politics with a government and an opposition – Tunisia's political parties opted for ever more power-sharing. The major secular and Islamist parties (Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda) formed another grand coalition government between 2015 and 2019, in an attempt to further reduce partisan tensions that they believed still threatened the new democracy. "Democracy in Tunisia is [still] in a transitional stage and cannot handle a return to the conflict between the state and an opposition force," claimed Rached Ghannouchi, the head of the Islamist party, Ennahda, in 2014. "We believe ... that the solution is consensus based on mutual trust between Tunisia's various actors."[10]

[5] This logic underpins most institutional recommendations, whether for parliamentary systems (Linz, 1990; Stepan and Skach, 1993), proportional representation elections (Lijphart, 1991; Reynolds, 1999), federalism and decentralization (Horowitz, 1993; Stepan, 1999; Norris, 2008), consociationalism (Lijphart, 1969, 1977), pacts with the old regime (O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986; Huntington, 1991; Przeworski, 1991), and compromise more generally (Almond and Verba, 1963; Putnam, 1993; Linz and Stepan, 1996).

[6] Stepan (2012); Buehler (2018); Kilavuz (2019); Hassan, Lorch and Ranko (2020); Nugent (2020).

[7] Netterstrøm (2016); Yousfi (2018); Hartshorn (2019); Bishara (2020).

[8] Sanborn and Thyne (2014); Rapanos (2018); Masri (2017).

[9] Bellin (2018); Grewal (2023).

[10] Quoted in Ben Younes (2014).

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In this book, I argue that this continued pursuit of power-sharing in Tunisia in fact sowed the seeds for democracy's demise. Through interviews with Tunisian officials and surveys of the population, I show that the grand coalition between 2015 and 2019 inadvertently produced two dynamics that would fuel public support for Kais Saied's takeover in 2021. First, the extended power-sharing stoked the rise of populism. Voters no longer felt represented by parties who had turned around and formed alliances with their opponents, and made major compromises without their consent. This crisis of representation fed into populist critiques that the parties were corrupt and ignoring the concerns of the masses. Moreover, a grand coalition meant everyone got tainted by the sluggish economy. Accordingly, the grand coalition was defeated in the 2019 elections by several populist outsiders, foremost among them the new president, Kais Saied. Attempts to reduce polarization through a grand coalition thus fueled populism, pointing toward the existence of a dilemma or trade-off new democracies face. Had the parties maintained a level of elite polarization, they might have kept Tunisians invested in the existing party system and stemmed the rise of populism.

Second, although the grand coalition government had been designed to temper polarization, it actually made polarization worse. Moving to the center created space for hardline parties on either end of the spectrum. Had Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda not fractured themselves through their coalition, they might have crowded out these hardline voices and contributed to genuine depolarization among the electorate. Instead, during the 2019 elections, secular-Islamist tensions reemerged stronger than ever, paralyzing the 2019–21 parliament.

In short, the grand coalition in Tunisia, while lauded internationally and consistent with the academic literature's recommendation for power-sharing, unintentionally stoked both populism and polarization. It led the party system to collapse in favor of populists and extremists. Ultimately, Kais Saied would catalyze that hostility toward the political parties (populism) and toward Ennahda in particular (polarization) into public support for his incumbent takeover. Although designed to save the transition, the grand coalition thus contributed instead to its breakdown.

THE PERILS OF POWER-SHARING

The case of Tunisia points toward a broader theory of the dark sides of power-sharing. Power-sharing institutions like grand coalitions can be useful at the start of a democratic transition in order to generate

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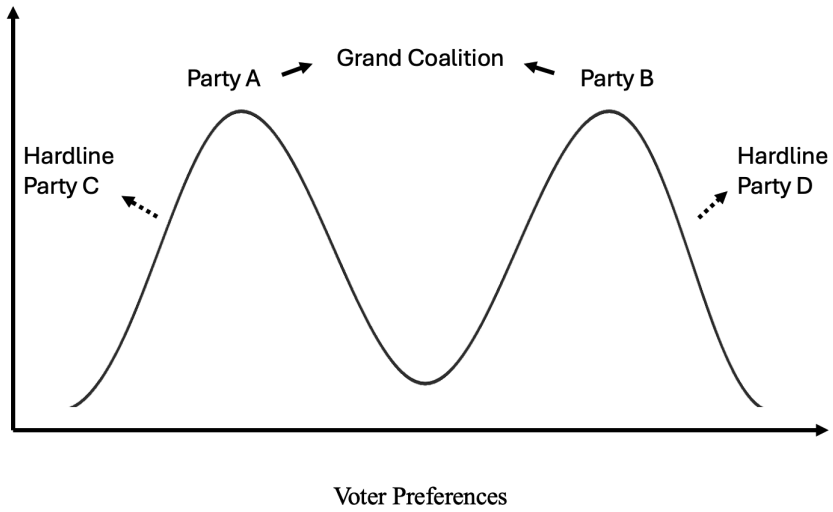


FIGURE 1.1 Grand coalitions worsen polarization

consensus over the rules of the game. But extending power-sharing beyond that point can lead democracy to unravel. Grand coalitions frustrate the voters of each party and risk the party system collapsing in favor of populists and extremists.

First, I argue that in divided societies, grand coalitions are likely to make polarization worse. Spatial models of voting[11] suggest that moving to the center in a grand coalition might net the parties more votes in an unpolarized society where the majority of voters are in the center. But in many cases, society is polarized: Voters are distributed bimodally like in Figure 1.1.[12] In these scenarios, moving to the center in a grand coalition only makes sense if the parties can bring their voters to the center with them.[13] Tunisia's political parties believed that they could. One Ennahda MP told me that "it is the responsibility of the political class to push them [our voters] ... to the zone of full and deep reconciliation."[14]

But this was a miscalculation. When the political parties are relatively new, and partisanship not yet that strong, the parties' cues are unlikely to

[11] Downs (1957); Grofman (2004).
[12] Medoff, Dennis and Bishin (1995); Abramowitz (2010); Dreyer and Bauer (2019); Jones, Sirianni and Fu (2022).
[13] Indeed, considerations of voter turnout complicate the median voter theorem (Riker and Ordeshook, 1973; Adams and Merrill III, 2003; Callander and Wilson, 2007; Oprea, Martin and Brennan, 2024).
[14] Interview with anonymous Ennahda MP, Tunis, December 17, 2018.

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move their voters, especially on the core ideological issues they are polarized over.[15] Their hardline voters are more likely to simply leave the party. By the next elections, political entrepreneurs may then seize that opportunity and form hardline parties to capture those hardline voters. In other words, rather than having two major parties with relatively moderate leaders, moving to the center in a grand coalition is likely to fracture the political landscape and create relatively strong hardline parties on either end. While it may take an electoral cycle to manifest, polarization is likely to get even worse as a result of a grand coalition.

Second, grand coalitions are likely to spark populism. If the major political parties govern together, they will all get tainted as being part of the establishment. This in turn creates the opportunity for a populist outsider to emerge and produce a political realignment along a system versus anti-system cleavage, which elevates the populist outsider as their rhetorical equal. Moreover, forming a coalition across a major ideological divide risks eliciting a break with their voters and leading voters to feel like they have been abandoned by their party elites. This in turn makes more salient the populist critique that the establishment parties are out of touch with their voters, and that they, the populist, will better represent the masses.[16]

Grand coalitions also leave governments more vulnerable to perceptions of corruption, kindling populist sentiment.[17] When voters perceive their party elites as having formed a coalition without their consent, they are more likely to suspect they were driven by some personal interest – a desire to get their share of the spoils. Such perceptions are likely to grow as they realize there is no strong opposition to keep the grand coalition in check. Moreover, when grand coalitions are pursued as a part of a pacted transition, they are likely to even involve offers of immunity to the other side for perceived crimes,[18] heightening public perceptions of elite impunity and in turn a populist frustration with the system.

Finally, both dynamics are likely to be accelerated in times of poor performance. If all of the mainstream parties govern together, they all will get tainted by an unexpected shock like an economic recession or political scandal. It leaves voters no choice but to turn to the new faces – the

[15] Brader, Tucker and Duell (2012); Mullinix (2016); Barber and Pope (2024).
[16] Silva and Wratil (2023); Erol, Ecevit and Kcapinar (2024).
[17] Cheeseman and Tendi (2010); Slater and Simmons (2013); Haass and Ottmann (2017); Slater (2018).
[18] O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986); Hagopian (1990); Karl (1990); Huntington (1991); Przeworski (1991).

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populists and the extremists. If, instead, one of the major, moderate parties leads the opposition, *it* stands to reap the rewards and ride back into power during a crisis. Grand coalitions thus leave democracies more vulnerable to crises.

In short, although grand coalitions may seem like a praiseworthy and inclusive strategy, they are risky. New democracies that continue to govern in grand coalitions even after establishing the rules of the game are likely to fuel both polarization and populism. Rather than artificially trying to mask elite polarization with a grand coalition, parties need to represent their bases and embrace a healthy degree of competition, differentiation, and polarization. Doing so will keep their voters invested in the system, rather than turning to populists and extremists. After establishing the rules of the game, new democracies should privilege minimum-winning coalitions and even minority governments over grand coalitions.

GRAND COALITIONS IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Importantly, Tunisia's story is by no means unique. Elsewhere, decisions to continue forming grand coalition governments have similarly sparked populism, polarization, and in some cases, democratic breakdown. In Germany's Weimar Republic (1918–33), for instance, an initial grand coalition of the center-left Social Democrats, the Catholic Center Party, and the center-right German Democratic Party, brought together 78% of the parliament and facilitated consensus over the drafting of the Weimar Constitution. But continued "Great Coalitions" in 1923 and especially in 1928–30 delegitimized the centrist parties in favor of the extremists, the far-left communists and far-right Nazis, fragmenting and polarizing the parliament in 1930.[19] Moreover, the "opaque" and "cumbersome process" by which decisions were made in the grand coalitions "did little to endear elected politicians to the German public."[20] Most instead "agreed that the crisis-ridden parliamentary system ought to be replaced by a kind of presidial democracy,"[21] facilitating in turn Hitler's seizure of power.

In some ways, history is repeating itself today, with Europe's establishment parties repeatedly banding together in grand coalitions to try to stave off the rise of the right-wing populists, such as the Alternative for

[19] Berman (1997, p. 416) notes that because of the coalitions and compromises, "The traditional parties … seemed to be run by and for an unrepresentative elite … Not surprisingly, [their] vote share … dropped precipitously throughout the 1920s."
[20] Stibbe (2020, p. 81).
[21] Winkler (1990, p. 206).

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Germany (AfD). Yet, initial literature suggests that this strategy has been self-defeating, with voters punishing the coalition members and instead turning even more strongly to the populists.[22] Grand coalitions in Germany and Austria, Jacoby (2017, p. 349) explains, "generate centrist politics that can further spur the growth of populists." Similarly, in Italy, the decision to form a unity government under Mario Draghi (2021–22) tainted each party and paved the way for the landslide victory of Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia in 2022. Meloni had "maintained ideological purity while her fellow right-wingers compromised"[23] by joining the coalition. Romania nearly faced the same, with a grand coalition between the top two parties in 2021–24, fueling the rise of populists Călin Georgescu and George Simion, who won the first round of the 2024 presidential elections and its rerun in 2025, respectively.[24] While the risk of democratic breakdown may be lower in Europe today than in the interwar period, we can observe the same dynamic of grand coalitions paradoxically making populism and polarization worse.

The story resonates in Latin America as well. In Mexico, President Enrique Peña Nieto (2012–18) brought together the three major parties (the PRI, PAN, and PRD)[25] into the 2012 Pact for Mexico, a 95-point plan for reform, creating what Olvera (2016, p. 287) described as "presidencialismo de coalición." As a result of this legislative coalition, however, "the differences among the parties got blurred and even erased."[26] By the end of his term, 45% of Mexican voters believed the three parties represented the same alternative, and 77% believed they constituted a "political mafia."[27] This antiestablishment sentiment led to the collapse of the party system in favor of the new populist party MORENA, which won landslide victories in the 2018 and 2024 elections, threatening Mexican democracy.[28] Similar narratives can be

[22] Lees (2010); Banaszak and Doerschler (2012); Jacoby (2017); Grzymala-Busse (2019); Morini and Loveless (2021).

[23] Ghiglione (2022).

[24] "This grand coalition was an absolute political taboo break for many right-wing liberal voters," wrote Katja Christina Plate (2023). It "led to strong political frustration among the population. Many Romanians … turned to the populist right-wing party AUR," from which Georgescu and Simion hailed.

[25] Institutional Revolutionary Party, National Action Party, and Party of the Democratic Revolution, respectively.

[26] Macip (2024, p. 438). The parties likewise formed a number of electoral coalitions, particularly in 2018 and 2021, further diluting their brands (Prud'homme, 2020; Bruhn, 2021).

[27] Cornejo (2023, p. 100).

[28] Dresser (2022); Zedillo (2024).

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told in Bolivia, Venezuela, and El Salvador, where pacts between the traditional parties fueled populist backlashes in the form of Evo Morales, Hugo Chavez, and Nayib Bukele, respectively, each of whom would undermine their democracies from within.[29]

In more divided societies, scholars and policymakers have long advocated consociational models of democracy that formally divide power among the major ethnic or religious groups.[30] While these types of grand coalitions may be helpful at first for avoiding a relapse into violence, they similarly risk producing disaffection with the system when continued long-term. In Lebanon and Iraq, for instance, consociational systems have over time produced widespread perceptions of elite capture and collusion, and in turn a populist backlash, with both facing mass uprisings in 2019 that called for the overthrow of these regimes.[31]

In Afghanistan post-US invasion, power-sharing similarly contributed to public disillusionment with the system. President Hamid Karzai (2001–14) pursued an informal system of power-sharing where each major ethnic group received representation in his cabinet. Power-sharing then grew even more explicit in 2014 and 2019 when contested elections between Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah led to unity governments between them. But these outcomes frustrated the "rank-and-file supporters on all sides," who came to believe that elections "matter little in determining who gains power."[32] The percent of Afghans saying the country is going in the right direction fell from 55% to 37% with the formation of the 2014 unity government.[33] And without a "stable and healthy opposition capable of providing checks and balances,"[34] corruption ensued, leading many to view the government as a distant and predatory elite.[35] By the 2019 elections, only 18% turned out to vote. Few accordingly sought to defend the government in the face of the Taliban takeover in 2021.[36]

[29] Seawright (2012); Slater and Simmons (2013); Lupu (2016); Meléndez-Sánchez (2021); Lujan and Lombardi (2025).
[30] See, e.g., Lijphart (1977, 1991). Horowitz (1993) likewise advocates for power-sharing but prefers to incentivize intergroup cooperation through the electoral rules.
[31] Fakhoury (2019); Dodge (2020); Halawi (2020); McCulloch and McEvoy (2020); Salloukh (2020).
[32] Bell (2017).
[33] Asia Foundation (2015).
[34] Bose and Ibrahimi (2014).
[35] Coburn (2016).
[36] Murtazashvili (2022).

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In this book, I find that these are not isolated examples. Leveraging a dataset of grand coalitions across all transitions from 1942 to 2020, I show that globally, new democracies that continue to pursue grand coalitions even after establishing the rules of the game are three times more likely to collapse. This correlation holds when controlling for the underlying tensions that may prompt such coalitions, such as economic recessions and political violence. Rather than being a boon for democracies, grand coalitions appear to hasten their demise. After establishing the rules of the game, new democracies must transition to the politics of competition, rather than continued consensus. It is through competition that democracies can keep voters invested in the system, rather than turning to populists and extremists.

CONTRIBUTIONS

This book offers three major contributions to the literatures on democratization, populism, and polarization. First, while the classic texts on democratization privilege power-sharing, moderation, and compromise as key pillars of successful transitions,[37] I show that transitions also require a degree of polarization, differentiation, and competition. An overemphasis on power-sharing can produce a backlash, inciting populism that threatens to overturn the democratic system. This intervention builds off of Slater and Simmons (2013), who show in Indonesia and Bolivia that "promiscuous power-sharing" undermined democratic representation and accountability, producing in turn a popular backlash.[38] To this I add a temporal element: that successful democratic transitions pursue a "Goldilocks" approach of initial power-sharing to produce consensus over the rules of the game, but then a swift transition to healthy competition within those bounds. I show cross-nationally that extending power-sharing beyond this point can instead contribute to democratic collapse. Democratic consolidation requires polarization, which fuels interest and investment in the system.[39]

[37] See, e.g., Almond and Verba (1963); Lijphart (1969, 1977, 1991); O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986); Linz (1990); Huntington (1991); Przeworski (1991); Horowitz (1993); Linz and Stepan (1996).

[38] See also Slater (2004, 2018).

[39] LeBas (2011); Huddy, Mason and Aarøe (2015); Lupu (2015); Torcal and Magalhães (2022); Harteveld and Wagner (2023); Phillips (2024); Janssen and Turkenburg (2025); Kołczyńska (2025).

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Second, beyond new democracies, the book uncovers a polarization–populism trade-off, where too little elite polarization can produce populism.[40] Such a finding is consistent with accounts of populism elsewhere. In Europe, Berman and Kundnani (2021, p. 23) observe that mainstream parties for decades had been "converging to the point where they no longer offered voters clear alternatives," creating space for a populist backlash.[41] In Latin America, Lupu (2016, p. 3) writes that parties in the 1980s "formed strange-bedfellow alliances with traditional rivals," diluting their brands and ultimately leading to their collapse in favor of populist outsiders.[42] In sub-Saharan Africa, Cheeseman and Tendi (2010) show that unity governments have contributed to perceptions of collusion and corruption, fueling populist frustration.[43] And in Lebanon and Iraq, Salloukh (2020) writes that consociational regimes have similarly produced perceptions of elite capture and a desire for populist, revolutionary change.[44] Framing these disparate studies as collectively pointing to a polarization–populism trade-off thus offers the literature a systematic explanation for the origins of populism.

Finally, on a pessimistic note, the book underscores how challenging it is to resolve affective polarization. Tunisia had been among the best positioned to do so, with relatively moderate Islamists, secular leaders willing to negotiate with them, and a strong civil society able to mediate. And yet, even here, power-sharing could not reduce the underlying affective polarization among the population. Rather than elite signals and cues shifting public opinion, elites who reached across the aisle instead saw their popularity crater and their parties fade into irrelevance. While coalitions might alleviate affective polarization in older democracies with relatively more established party systems,[45] they could not in Tunisia,

[40] Populism might in turn create a new cleavage around which to polarize, with initial literature suggesting that populations can be quite affectively polarized along this new, anti- versus pro-system dimension (Roberts, 2022; Selçuk, 2024; Davis, Goodliffee and Hawkins, 2025). My point is that maintaining a healthy degree of polarization on the preexisting dimension might stem the rise of populism in the first place.

[41] See also Jacoby (2017); Grzymala-Busse (2019); Roberts (2022); Erol, Ecevit and Kcapinar (2024).

[42] See also Seawright (2012); Slater and Simmons (2013); Meléndez-Sánchez (2021); Lujan and Lombardi (2025).

[43] See also Jung and Shapiro (1995); Maphai (1996); Sriram and Zahar (2009); LeVan (2011); Johnson (2023); Noyes (2026).

[44] See also Fakhoury (2019); Dodge (2020); Halawi (2020); McCulloch and McEvoy (2020).

[45] Bassan-Nygate and Weiss (2022); Horne, Adams and Gidron (2023); Wagner and Praprotnik (2024); Vanagt and Kollberg (2025). Yet, there also appear to be limits,

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instead fracturing the party landscape and producing more hardline parties that rekindled polarization stronger than before. Tunisia's experience thus raises renewed questions about how affective polarization can be overcome in transitional settings and confirms that power-sharing alone may not only be insufficient but even counterproductive. Rather than attempting to quickly push their bases into full reconciliation with a grand coalition, elites in new democracies should settle for the more gradual and subtle process of toning down their rhetoric while still advancing distinct policy positions.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

This book advances these arguments through seven chapters. The remainder of Chapter 1 surveys the existing literature on democratization, polarization, and populism, highlighting the contributions of the book to each.

Chapters 2–5 then illustrate the theory through the case of Tunisia. Chapters 2 and 3 show how power-sharing initially facilitated Tunisia's transition to democracy, allowing it to become the one success story of the Arab Spring. Chapters 4 and 5, however, show how the continued pursuit of power-sharing led to populism, polarization, and in turn democratic breakdown. These chapters draw upon a wide variety of primary sources, first and foremost 150 interviews with senior government officials prominent in Tunisia's transition. These culminated in multiple interviews with President Moncef Marzouki, Prime Minister Youssef Chahed, and Parliamentary Speaker Rached Ghannouchi, among others. These chapters also leverage three nationally representative face-to-face surveys conducted in 2019, 2020, and 2022, the latter including a preregistered priming experiment.[46] Finally, they incorporate a number of laws, decrees, political speeches, party platforms, court cases, and media reports.

Chapter 2 sets the stage, describing the 2010–11 revolution that kickstarted Tunisia's democratic transition and the initial transitional year that followed. It illustrates the two major axes of polarization that would

with elite cues less able to move co-partisans against their ideological norms and on issues they care strongly about (Mullinix, 2016; Barber and Pope, 2024). Cues are also most effective when parties are in the opposition (Brader, Tucker and Duell, 2012), not in a (grand coalition) government.

[46] The interviews and surveys were approved through Princeton IRB #6749, W&M PHSC-2019-08-20-13810 and W&M PHSC-2022-06-15-15690. All three surveys were conducted by One to One for Research and Polling, an established Tunisian polling firm. The experiments in 2022 were preregistered with EGAP. See https://osf.io/xjh2s.

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define Tunisian democracy: one between the old regime and the revolutionaries and other between the secularists and the Islamists. Either could have derailed Tunisia's transition, particularly in its early years. Yet, the chapter shows how in the wake of the revolution, Tunisia's major political actors chose power-sharing arrangements and governed through compromise and consensus. Interim Prime Minister Beji Caid Essebsi initiated major compromises on the revolution's demands of anti-corruption, security sector reform, and political lustration, finding consensus between the old regime and the revolutionaries. Meanwhile, the winning Islamist and secular parties in the 2011 elections likewise chose consensus, agreeing to govern in a grand coalition. These choices to share power and find common ground facilitated Tunisia's early transitional years, allowing the political elite to rein in polarization and uncertainty and avoid spoilers that may otherwise have thwarted the transition to Tunisia's first-ever democratically elected government in December 2011.

Chapter 3 then describes how this 2011–14 grand coalition government navigated growing polarization in 2012 and especially 2013. That year, two major political assassinations and dueling protests led to fears of a coup or a descent into civil war. But the political elite's norms of power-sharing, compromise, and consensus helped to bring themselves back from the brink of collapse and strike a grand bargain that puts the transition back on track. Through an inclusive national dialogue mediated by civil society, Tunisia's Islamist and secularist forces found common ground over a new, progressive constitution that was approved by near unanimity. Meanwhile, its revolutionary and old regime forces likewise compromised to include the old regime in elections but allow a transitional justice mechanism to hold the worst abusers accountable. Power-sharing thus enabled Tunisia's transition in 2014 to establish a new constitution and electoral law – the rules of the game that would govern its new democracy.

While Chapters 2 and 3 highlighted the positive roles power-sharing played in the transition's early years, Chapters 4 and 5 then illustrate the dark sides of continuing to pursue power-sharing even after establishing the rules of the game. Chapter 4 begins by outlining why the major political parties in Tunisia decided to keep governing together through another grand coalition government between 2015 and 2019, and how these efforts both worsened polarization and sparked the rise of populism. It first shows that the decision of Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda to enter into a grand coalition ceded space for the emergence of hardline parties on either end of the spectrum. Secularists upset with Nidaa

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Tounes for allying with Ennahda and for stifling investigations into the Islamists' alleged crimes turned to Abir Moussi and her Free Destourian Party (PDL), a pro-Ben Ali secular party that called openly for Ennahda's dissolution. Meanwhile, Ennahda's decision to ally with Nidaa Tounes, and in turn its abandonment of security sector reform, transitional justice, and anti-corruption efforts, opened space for Seifeddine Makhlouf's Karama Coalition, a hardline Islamist party that championed revolutionary goals of purging the old regime. Although the leaders of Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda had hoped their coalition might depolarize their voters, their hardline voters simply turned to new, more hardline parties on either end. The grand coalition thus worsened polarization, fueling it to levels that would inhibit governance post-2019.

Second, the extended power-sharing inadvertently sparked populism as well. With the major political parties forming a surprise coalition and making compromises their voters did not endorse, Tunisians started to paint the political parties as corrupt and out of touch – as looking out only for their elite interests rather than the concerns of the masses. The parties' decisions to reconcile and not prosecute each other for their alleged crimes only furthered this image, contributing to perceptions of an elite cartel that had captured the system. Disaffection in the political class manifested itself in the defeat of these establishment parties in the 2019 elections in favor of populist outsiders. Foremost among them was President Kais Saied (2019-Present), who promised to sideline the corrupt political parties and hold them accountable for their supposed crimes.

Leveraging original election surveys conducted in 2019 and 2020, I show that the grand coalition indeed led the party system to collapse, with frustrated voters shifting to populist and extremist forces instead. Had the political parties not entered into a grand coalition, they may have kept Tunisians invested in the two major, moderate parties and staved off the rise of these populists and extremists.

Chapter 5 then shows how both of these dynamics, populism and polarization, in turn drove support for President Kais Saied's takeover in 2021. Populism had only grown further since 2019, with the now fractured parliament producing a paralyzed political class that seemed only to fight among itself – often literally – rather than deliver for the people. Meanwhile, the new extremists in parliament, particularly PDL and Karama, whipped up polarization to new levels, heightening the hatred toward Ghannouchi, who had assumed the position of parliamentary speaker. When disaffection with the political class reached a fever pitch during COVID-19, Saied decided to strike. On July 25, 2021, he froze

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the parliament, lifted the immunity of its members, and began to prosecute the leaders of every major political party. His supporters celebrated the crackdown, particularly on Ennahda, given the renewed polarization against them. "Today, today, Ennahda ended today," Tunisians chanted the night of his coup.[47] Indeed, in a nationally representative, face-to-face survey of 1,200 Tunisians conducted in September 2022, I find that a desire to dissolve all political parties (populism) and to dissolve Ennahda in particular (polarization) were by far the two strongest predictors of support for Saied's takeover, moreso than frustrations with the economy or fears over the COVID-19 pandemic.[48] Experimentally, priming respondents that Ennahda leader Rached Ghannouchi was now on trial increased support for Saied's moves by almost 15 percentage points.

Populism and polarization likewise inhibited the ability of the opposition to challenge Saied's coup. The political parties were divided, with few secularists willing to join forces with Ennahda. "Ennahda is currently radioactive," Prime Minister Youssef Chahed told me.[49] Moreover, although they called for protests against the coup, the parties could only mobilize a few thousand into the streets: Populist frustrations with the political class had undercut their popular support. With the opposition unable to resist, Saied had free rein to consolidate his coup, formally dissolving the parliament in March 2022 and then passing a new constitution enshrining a hyper-presidential system in July 2022. In sum, rather than saving the transition, the continued pursuit of power-sharing produced precisely the populism and polarization that helped overturn it.

Chapter 6 then probes whether the theory travels beyond Tunisia by conducting a cross-national analysis of grand coalition governments across all democratic transitions between 1942 and 2020. Leveraging data on grand coalitions from the "Political Parties, Presidents, Elections, and Governments" (PPEG) project (Krause and Stelzle, 2024) and the Database on Political Institutions (Scartascini, Cruz and Keefer, 2021), it shows that grand coalitions are statistically associated with democratic collapse, even when controlling for the underlying structural challenges that lead to them. The correlation between grand coalitions and democratic breakdown likewise remains when pursuing techniques to address potential confounding, such as propensity score matching, inverse probability weighting, and an instrumental variable model. The data also lend

[47] Amara (2021).

[48] For these alternative accounts, see Marzouki (2022); Khaddar (2023); Ben Jelili (2024); Carothers and Hartnett (2024); Weilandt (2025).

[49] Interview with Prime Minister Youssef Chahed, Washington, DC, February 18, 2022.

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support for both mechanisms, showing that grand coalitions lead to a higher vote share for populists in the next elections and lead to increased mass polarization as well.[50] While grand coalitions in the first few years of a transition have only mixed effects on democratic breakdown, continuing a coalition beyond that makes breakdown far more likely. After establishing the rules of the game, new democracies must transition to the politics of competition, rather than continued consensus.

Finally, Chapter 7 concludes by tracing out the book's contributions to our understanding of democratization. It highlights that while inclusion, consensus, and power-sharing are useful in the transition to democracy, it is differentiation, competition, and polarization that help to consolidate democracy. It highlights how the more successful cases of democratization, like South Africa, pursued grand coalitions only at the very start of the transition, before shifting to normal competition once the constitution was established. The chapter also provides some initial theorization as to what a healthy degree of polarization might look like, introducing the notion of "polarization within bounds," where parties seek consensus only when adjusting the rules of the game, but seek competition within those bounds. Finally, it offers some brief reflections on the state of democracy in the United States and Europe. It argues that the initial strategies of mainstream parties toward populist threats have been self-defeating, and provides some recommendations building on the insights of this book for alternative strategies to deflate populist threats.

DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION AND CONSOLIDATION

Before we proceed, several definitions are in order. A democracy is a "political system [in which the. . .] most powerful collective decision makers are selected through fair, honest, and periodic elections in which candidates freely compete for votes and in which virtually all the adult population is eligible to vote" (Huntington, 1991, p. 7). This definition "implies the existence of civil and political freedoms to speak, publish, assemble, and organize that are necessary to political debate and the conduct of electoral campaigns" (p. 7).

A transition to democracy is a move from autocracy to democracy, and is complete when the first elected government assumes office. Democracy has consolidated once it has become "the only game in town; [. . .] when

[50] Populism and polarization data from Grzymala-Busse and McFaul (2024) and Mehlhaff (2025).

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in the face of severe political and economic crises, the overwhelming majority of the people believe that any further political change must emerge from within the parameters of democratic formulas" (Linz and Stepan, 1996, p. 5), rather than, for instance, seeking a military coup or incumbent takeover. Incumbent takeovers refer to democratically elected leaders undermining democracy from within: rigging elections, restricting freedoms, purging and packing courts, or dissolving parliaments. When performed rapidly, incumbent takeovers are often called "self-coups," *autogolpes*, or power grabs; when performed gradually, democratic erosion or backsliding.[51]

A critical element to whether democracy survives is public support,[52] particularly when it remains mobilized, pushing for democracy.[53] A mobilized public can deter, and if needed, defeat, military coups and incumbent takeovers. Mass protests have helped defeat military coup attempts in France (1961), Spain (1981), the Soviet Union (1991), Venezuela (2002), and Turkey (2016), among others,[54] and helped block self-coups and executive aggrandizement in Guatemala (1993, 2023), Benin (2015), South Korea (2016, 2024), Peru (2022), and Israel (2023), among others.[55] Conversely, overwhelming public support in favor of the coup attempt can prove decisive, allowing generals or presidents to overpower even otherwise strong institutions like legislatures, courts, and civil society organizations.

Why might populations turn against democracy and come to support democratic backsliding or breakdown? Three factors are key: performance, populism, and polarization. First, democracies that fail to deliver on their constituents' demands and expectations are more likely to see disillusionment with democracy.[56] Disillusionment is thus likely to be stronger in contexts of poverty, economic recession, and inflation, as well as in contexts of high crime or insecurity. Given that populations often

[51] Maeda (2010); Svolik (2015); Bermeo (2016); Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018); Waldner and Lust (2018).

[52] Dahl (1971); Diamond (1999); Inglehart and Welzel (2005); Norris (2011); Claassen (2020).

[53] Pinckney (2020); Chenoweth (2021); Kadivar (2022).

[54] Roberts (1975); Gibson (1997); Unver and Alassaad (2016).

[55] Cameron (1998); Laebens and Lührmann (2021); Schwartz and Isaacs (2023); Meléndez-Sánchez and Gamboa (2023); Weyland (2024). However, when possible, institutional strategies may be more effective than protests (Gamboa, 2022).

[56] Lipset (1959); Dahl (1971); Londregan and Poole (1990); Haggard and Kaufman (1995); Norris (1998); Canache (2002); Booth and Seligson (2009); Rose, Mishler and Munro (2011); Svolik (2013); Ballard-Rosa et al. (2021); Diamond (2024); Fukuyama, Dann and Magaloni (2025), though see also Carothers and Hartnett (2024).

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associate democracy with economic growth and security, and sometimes even define it as such,[57] failing to deliver these public goods could induce disillusionment with the system as a whole, leading populations to either exhibit nostalgia for authoritarianism or to at least consider democratic procedures a lower priority than performance. During and after economic and security crises, therefore, surveys suggest that voters might prefer a strong, unencumbered leader who delivers, even if they ignore checks and balances and initiate backsliding.[58]

While an important background condition, not all crises lead to disillusionment with democracy, let alone democratic collapse.[59] Many democracies are able to weather the storm and find solutions from within, such as voting in a (pro-democracy) opposition party. But this may not possible when all of the mainstream parties are governing together – then, there may be no moderate opposition to turn to, only the extremists and populists. It is safer to keep a mainstream party as leader of the opposition in case of unexpected crisis like economic recession. In Weimar Germany, for instance, with all of the major parties in coalition in 1928–30, everyone got tainted by the Great Depression – had one of them remained out, *they* may have reaped the rewards, rather than the Nazis. I argue that grand coalitions thus amplify the effects of poor performance into democratic breakdown.

A second factor thought to threaten democracy is populism: a political framing or ideology that champions the "good people" against the "corrupt elite."[60] If voters begin to view their political class as corrupt, they are more likely to view them as a part of the problem: as the cause of the crisis, rather than as the solution. By delegitimizing the political class, populist sentiment might therefore increase public support for democratic breakdown and even help reframe coups as democratic representations of the people's will against the corrupt politicians.[61] Populist sentiments are thought to be stronger in contexts with higher corruption, and with perceptions thereof,[62] and more generally when voters no longer feel represented by their parties.[63] Both dynamics, I argue, are likely to

[57] See, e.g., Canache (2012); Lu and Chu (2021); Chu, Williamson and Yeung (2024).
[58] Singer (2018); Mazepus and Toshkov (2022); Wunsch and Gessler (2023).
[59] See, e.g., Seawright (2012); Weyland (2024).
[60] Mudde (2004).
[61] Kellam and Berlucchi (2023); Bessen (2024). Grossman et al. (2022) uncover a similar dynamic among "majoritarians."
[62] Seawright (2012); Daniele, Aassve and Le Moglie (2023).
[63] Silva and Wratil (2023); Erol, Ecevit and Kcapinar (2024).

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be heightened under grand coalitions, which leave voters frustrated with a strange bedfellows alliance constructed by party elites.

Third, Polarization may likewise fuel public support for democratic breakdown.[64] Polarization, and particularly affective polarization – the distrust and hate for another party[65] – might lead one to overlook or trade-off the costs to democracy in order to give their party an advantage or to defeat the enemy party.[66] In highly polarized contexts, banning or even violently repressing the out-group could even increase one's public support.[67] Polarization is thought to be stronger in countries with ethnic or religious (rather than economic) cleavages[68] and in countries with presidential and plurality systems that heighten the stakes of elections.[69]

To alleviate polarization, scholars have long advocated power-sharing agreements.[70] The classic model advocated by Lijphart (1969, 1977) was the grand coalition: the inclusion of as many parties as possible into government. Power-sharing could also entail other inclusionary arrangements like quotas for each group in the bureaucracy or military, dispersive arrangements like federalism and decentralization, and constraining arrangements like powerful legislatures and courts.[71] By granting more parties political influence, power-sharing might keep them invested in the system, rather than fueling their support for democratic breakdown. Moreover, by facilitating cooperation between parties, power-sharing might also contribute to perspective-taking and perspective-getting, potentially alleviating affective polarization between

[64] Democratic backsliding may also exacerbate polarization (Riedl et al., 2024; Frantz et al., 2025), highlighting the importance of the survey experiment in Chapter 5.

[65] Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes (2012).

[66] Carothers and O'Donohue (2019); Iyengar et al. (2019); Svolik (2019); Graham and Svolik (2020); Druckman et al. (2021); Kingzette et al. (2021); Fossati, Muhtadi and Warburton (2022); Orhan (2022); Sasmaz, Yagci and Ziblatt (2022); Simonovits, McCoy and Littvay (2022); Schedler (2023). For a critique, see Broockman, Kalla and Westwood (2023).

[67] Lachapelle (2022).

[68] Rustow (1970); Dahl (1971); Horowitz (1993).

[69] Linz (1990); Lijphart (1991); Stepan and Skach (1993); Linz and Valenzuela (1994).

[70] See, e.g., Almond and Verba (1963); Lijphart (1969, 1977); O'Donnell, Schmitter and Whitehead (1986); Linz and Stepan (1996); Reynolds (1999); Noel (2005); Norris (2008); Hartzell and Hoddie (2015); Graham, Miller and Strøm (2017); Bormann et al. (2019); Kelly (2019); Bochsler and Juon (2021); Juon and Bochsler (2022), and Farag et al. (2023). Although power-sharing and consociationalism have been critiqued as nebulous and difficult to operationalize (Barry, 1975*a*; van Schendelen, 1984; Lustick, 1997; Bogaards, 2000; Bogaards, Helms and Lijphart, 2019), grand coalitions have been essential to both concepts.

[71] Graham, Miller and Strøm (2017); Strøm et al. (2017).

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them.[72] Yet, empirical tests of the effects of power-sharing have been mixed. Leveraging a new dataset, Graham, Miller and Strøm (2017) find that only constraining institutions facilitate democratic survival, while inclusionary and dispersive ones exhibit overall null effects. In this book, I show further that once disaggregated, one aspect of inclusive power-sharing – grand coalitions – actually correlates with democratic breakdown.

In passing, other scholars have expressed concerns that power-sharing might have its dark sides. Dahl (1971, p. 120) and Lorwin (1971, pp. 158–59) worried that a system with all parties governing together with mutual veto might lend itself to *immobilisme*, an inability to act and solve major problems. In a similar vein, Karl (1990) warned that democratic pacts between new and old regime forces might later become a barrier, unable to adapt and evolve. My book is consistent with these accounts, highlighting the perils of power-sharing. However, I argue that it is not simply about what grand coalitions are unable to do, but also what they do: The compromises that they make frustrate the supporters of each side, leading to disaffection and disillusionment with the existing party system. There are dark sides to grand coalitions whether they do or do not act.

A second common critique of power-sharing, particularly when sharing power with remnants of the old regime or with former combatants, is that it rewards and empowers bad actors. Hagopian (1990), for instance, argued that by granting the military autonomy, the pacts that led to democracy in Brazil simultaneously inhibited the development of strong democratic institutions. More generally, if power-sharing grants each actor immunity and protects them from transitional justice, it might allow them to undermine democracy from within.[73] I add that even when these actors do not use their power to undermine democracy, the mere act of including them in the system risks tainting the new democracy in the eyes of the electorate, leading them to support populists who pledge to clean up the system.

My critique of power-sharing builds off Barry (1975*a*), van Schendelen (1984), and Lustick (1997), who emphasized that consociationalism

[72] See, e.g., Kalla and Broockman (2022).

[73] See, e.g., Sikkink and Walling (2007); Jarstad and Sisk (2010); Olsen, Payne and Reiter (2010); Albertus and Deming (2021); Nalepa (2022).

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often requires an antidemocratic elite cartel controlling and excluding the masses from meaningful political participation, making it difficult to call them democracies. I take this critique further to argue that even when the elites have benevolent intentions – trying genuinely to create democracy by pushing their voters to moderate – those perceptions of top-down control create ripe conditions for the rise of populist challengers. Power-sharing, as an elite pact imposed from above, lends itself to a populist backlash, even when well-intentioned.

My critique also builds off of Horowitz (1985, 1991, 1993), who warned that consociationalism might reify ethnic differences, rather than allow for their amelioration. Moreover, he warned that a grand coalition that brings together the different ethnic groups would generate "flanking" – the emergence of hardline challengers within each group. I extend this logic by illustrating how this same flanking dynamic will worsen polarization even when the differences are not ethnic or ascriptive, and when power-sharing is not constitutionally mandated. Power sharing is likely to worsen polarization regardless of the nature of the cleavage or the formal or informal nature of the agreement.

Finally, Barry (1975*a*) argued that consociationalism may be epiphenomenal – that what actually matters are the underlying conciliatory elites. "[I]t may be that what mattered was the attitude manifested in the offer and acceptance of a 'grand coalition' and that the same attitude without any consociational institutions could also have produced a stable democratic system" (p. 500).[74] Indeed, I argue that when there are conciliatory elites willing to tone down their rhetoric and reach across the aisle, it is preferable for them to keep their distance and lead the government and opposition, respectively. That way, these moderate leaders retain the popularity to govern in the future, rather than ceding space to populists and extremists. After establishing the rules of the game, new democracies should thus prioritize minimum-winning coalitions, and if needed, minority governments,[75] rather than grand coalitions.

The normal politics of government and opposition is preferable to grand coalitions, because it acknowledges a finding emphasized in recent literature: that a moderate degree of polarization, even affective polarization, might actually be healthy for democracy. An emotional attachment

[74] Bormann et al. (2019) similarly find that power-sharing behavior is more important than the actual institutions.

[75] Minority governments have been found to be both rational and "remarkably successful" (Strøm, 1984; Field and Martin, 2022; Strøm and McClean, 2024).

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to one's party drives up turnout and investment in elections.[76] By increasing investment in the existing party system, I argue that polarization can help stem the rise of populism. While too much polarization can of course be a danger for democracy, too little can, as well.

Although power-sharing may be an ineffective tool for democratic consolidation, it may still be useful in preventing relapse into civil war.[77] These are two "very different challenges"[78] and contexts, such that what works in one may not work in the other. Indeed, while the case of Tunisia suggests that providing blanket amnesties to *ancien regime* figures during democratic transitions might hinder consolidation, the civil war literature finds that such amnesties may reduce the risk of relapse into violence.[79] Still, even in post-conflict settings, scholars are increasingly skeptical of power-sharing as a long-term solution.[80]

[76] LeBas (2011); Huddy, Mason and Aarøe (2015); Lupu (2015); Torcal and Magalhães (2022); Harteveld and Wagner (2023); Phillips (2024); Janssen and Turkenburg (2025); Kołczyńska (2025).

[77] See, e.g., Hartzell and Hoddie (2007); Cammett and Malesky (2012); Bormann et al. (2019).

[78] Cheeseman and Tendi (2010, p. 205). See also LeVan (2011); Sambanis (2023).

[79] Cho (2024).

[80] Roeder and Rothchild (2005); Sriram and Zahar (2009); Martin (2013); Daly (2014); LeBas (2014); Haass and Ottmann (2017); Noyes (2026). Barry (1975*b*) even warned that consociationalism would be less likely to work in post-conflict settings, as each group needs to retain some concern for the other side's well-being.

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